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Korean peninsula

Kim-Trump meeting brings fragile hopes of peace

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Relations between Washington et Pyongyang were radically modified during the Singapore summit of 12 June 2018, and it is good news. The dominant tone of the "serious" US and British press and the English language regional press was completely different. For the first, the Singapore summit was a disaster, indeed "treason" on Trump's part. For the second, it was an unanticipated turn of events: the threat of war was lifted, leaving the possibility of a lasting peace in the peninsula.

It's better to listen to those directly affected, namely the Korean, than bellicose blowhards, even those deemed to be on the left. It is certainly too soon to break out the champagne, but the relief is evident. The South Korean president Moon Jae-in presented his "heartfelt congratulations" and hailed "the success of the historic North Korea-United States summit". Regional, local and municipal elections (together with more than a dozen partial elections of deputies) took place in the midst of the summit. The governing party scored a crushing victory, while the opposition parties, the far right and militarists who had railed against Moon's pacifist policy suffered a debacle.

In late 2017, the tension was extreme in Korea and nothing ruled out a drift towards a murderous, indeed nuclear, conflict. The absolute urgency was to start de-escalation, and this has been done, beyond what could then have been envisaged. The Singapore summit should first be judged in this light.

The Seoul-Pyongyang initiative

The de-escalation began from January 2018 with the Seoul-Pyongyang tandem throwing Washington off balance. Moon reiterated the offers of dialogue previously ignored by Kim, which led to the spectacular participation by North Korea in the Winter Olympics held in the South.

Meanwhile, Kim implemented a series of measures from halting the firing of missiles to the destruction of a nuclear test site. The will for normalisation of relations between the two regimes was strikingly manifested at the Panmunjom summit on April 27, on the North-South demarcation line.

Blind to this dynamic and to the changes underway in North Korea, Trump for a long time pushed a hard line, convinced that international economic sanctions and military pressure would make Kim yield: no negotiation, a surrender! Unconditional denuclearisation which would be rapid, complete, and verifiable; the handing over to Washington or destruction of the documents and the exiling of scientists so that nuclear know-how itself would be eradicated. The objective was clear: regime change, a knockout victory.

The big turnaround

The toughening of sanctions and the military threat have probably weighed strongly on the recent political decisions of Kim Jong-un, but not to the point of making him surrender or lose his capacity of initiative. He made a personal visit to Beijing to meet Xi Jinping and re-establish conditions for cooperation with China, then met the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergueï Lavrov. He confirmed that he was ready to negotiate on the question of denuclearisation and sent regime heavyweight Kim Yong-chol to Washington.

Effectively, at the Singapore summit, Donald Trump accepted the framework Kim Jong-un proposed: a process of negotiation concerning the denuclearisation of the peninsula (and not just North Korea), aiming at the signature of a peace agreement (there has not been one since 1953, at the end of the Korean war) without any prior regime change. Trump also recognised, during the press conference, the "provocative" character of the joint military manoeuvres periodically carried out by Washington and Seoul off the North Korean coasts - taking up the terms usually employed by Pyongyang.

The public presentation of the summit was the occasion for a careful staging placing the two heads of state on a basis of equality: same number of flags exposed and same number of steps of the presidents while walking towards each other. Here again, Kim attained his objective, a formal recognition in the international arena.

Why did Trump change his tune in such a way? His motivations are certainly multiple and only Trumpologists can untangle them - also, we don't yet know the secret part of the negotiations underway. If we seek a geopolitical rationale, we can say respond: because the international pressure for a military de-escalation in Korea was very strong; because the main enemy is Beijing; because US military hegemony has been re-established in the north Pacific; because henceforth the main sites of tension in the region are Taiwan and the South China sea. The showdown is no longer centred on the Korean peninsula.

State of war and human rights

The North Korean regime remains a brutal dynastic dictatorship, undoubtedly, and the burning question of human, social and democratic rights cannot be ignored - but the permanent threat of war imposed on the country since 1953 has helped Pyongyang to justify the maintenance of a permanent state of repression against all potential opposition, as well as against the population.

Such a question cannot be settled by an imperialist intervention. It does not constitute a necessary condition for de-escalation and the opening of a peace process. It should not be forgotten that Democrats who criticise Donald Trump are not pacifists, far from it. Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton notably waged a particularly aggressive policy on the Korean front, which Trump prolonged then amplified.

The question of human, social and democratic rights can only be approached in the specific context of the Korean peninsula, interactions between North and South and local popular mobilisations. By downplaying the military threat, the Singapore summit can contribute to creating this space.

Concretely, in the Korean situation, initiating a dynamic of peace is a necessary condition for the fight for basic liberties in the peninsula - and not the opposite.

Centrifugal and centripetal dynamics

We are however only at the very first step of a process which remains very unpredictable. The regime in Pyongyang is no longer the "hermit kingdom" of yesterday. The tolerated development of a market economy has created a social élite aspiring to "normalisation" and if possible a "Chinese" transition towards a new capitalism is on the agenda - giving Kim still more reason to negotiate peace. Nothing ensures however that such a transition is possible without a major crisis.

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China and Russia will try to weigh on the course of negotiations and defend their own specific interests. Until now, Japan preferred a state of war to peace, allowing prime minister Abe to continue his militarist and hyper-nationalist policy. Seoul supports the process but is worried that Trump had not felt the need to inform it in advance of his decision to suspend the joint US/South Korean air and sea manoeuvres.

Only two parties are involved in the negotiations: Washington and Pyongyang. According to how they develop, they can favour centrifugal as well as centripetal dynamics. Kim can both strengthen his cooperation with Beijing or Moscow and increase his independence in relation to his powerful neighbours.

Immediately, the Singapore summit was the opportunity for Xi Jinping to return to the diplomatic game, after a long period of tension where he had lost the initiative. As shown by the trip made by Kim Jong-un to Beijing on June 19, 2018, a week after his meeting with Donald Trump.

The North and South Korean regimes have opened a very progressive policy of rapprochement, rejecting a "German" model of brutal unification. That can help them to continue to act in concert to consolidate the dynamic of peace. However, the position of Moon Jae-in on the implications of a denuclearisation of the peninsula remains ambiguous - the issue of the THAAD anti-ballistic missile system or the use by the US 7th Fleet of the naval base on the island of Jeju are explosive. Kim could be tempted to act alone in negotiating deals with Trump going beyond what Seoul wishes.

In late 2017, Kim interrupted his nuclear programme just before it became truly operational, by downsizing the warheads sufficiently to place them effectively on intercontinental missiles (which can pose unresolved technical problems). To what point is he now ready to denuclearise the North and in exchange for what guarantees? For now, the Singapore declaration remains very vague on this question.

There are many question marks! And Korean geopolitics is of global importance. One to be followed, then...

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