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North Korea: what latest defection tells us about hopes for peace on peninsula

Lim, Sojin

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North Korea: what latest defection tells us about hopes for peace on peninsula

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News broke in early January that North Korea’s acting ambassador to Italy, **Jo Song-gil**, is in hiding and reportedly is seeking asylum in an “unidentified Western country”. The possible high-level defection came as a surprise, especially as US president Donald Trump recently confirmed his desire to have a second US-North Korea summit, and South Korean president Moon Jae-in is soon expecting a visit from the North’s leader, Kim Jong-un. At time of writing, the North Korean leader was in China on an unannounced visit to see president Xi Jinping.

When Kim Jong-un sent handwritten letters to Moon and Trump on New Year’s Eve, he seemed to be promising that the three countries could continue their dialogue over the Korean peninsula’s peace process. But why is Jo Song-gil seeking asylum if Kim Jong-un really is open to change in North Korea? Is he making his escape for personal reasons – or is it an

Author



Sojin Lim

Senior Lecturer in Korean Studies, North Korean Studies MA & Asia Pacific Studies MA Courses Leader, Deputy Director of the International Institute of Korean Studies, University of Central Lancashire

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indication that things are as bad as ever in Pyongyang?

Whatever the reason, Jo Song-gil's defection could impact the ongoing negotiations. He could, for example, share sensitive information with the US and South Korea about the real denuclearisation situation in North Korea – and this could make Kim Jong-un less willing to engage.

And the negotiations are already fragile. Over the past 12 months, there have been repeated promises – and cancellations – made by all sides. It certainly remains to be seen whether the three countries will meet as suggested – and whether it will amount to any more than “gesture politics” if they do.

On one level, things do look different to the past, when little tangible progress was made. South Korea's Moon Jae-in is a proactive leader, and Kim Jong-un is young, ambitious and eager to make his own mark. Both Kim Jong-un and Trump are also deeply unpredictable, however.

But there are other factors to consider, too, not least North Korea's sharp economic downturn. This has, in fact, given many North Koreans wider access to information from outside the country, partially thanks to a growing number of defectors communicating with those who remain and the outside world. Kim Jong Un's “equal emphasis” (Byungjin) policy, which focuses on both military and economic development, has also given impetus to his willingness to talk with Moon and Trump.

But even if the willingness is there, North Korea's regime cannot upend nearly 70 years of history in a day. It will be a long process.

Bargaining chip

Although Kim Jong-un's current performance on this issue is occasionally more promising than that of his father or grandfather, the truth is that he cannot abandon his nuclear programme until he can see an alternative way of guaranteeing the security of his regime.

After all, North Korea's nuclear programme has so far worked well as a bargaining chip in international negotiations – although the current UN sanctions are an exception. Indeed, North Korea's nuclear threats and long-range missiles have strengthened the county's hand against the US, while without them, North Korea has almost nothing to offer as a concession.

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Tense: a South Korean soldier takes part in a military exercise. EPA Images

Nor should we forget the role the North Korean media plays. By showing images of Kim Jong-un shaking hands with world leaders, it has become part of his survival strategy, bolstering his strongman image among both ordinary North Koreans and his government. Any meeting Kim Jong-un agrees to should, at least partly, be seen in this light.

Ultimately, there have been no significant changes in North Korea's nuclear programme (besides demolishing some old or disused facilities). Nor will it be possible to achieve completely irreversible denuclearisation as long as North Korea retains its theoretical nuclear know-how. At the same time, while North Korea tends to highlight its will to halt rather than dismantle its nuclear capability, the US wants more before it invests economically.

So how to move forward? And how can negotiators overcome the current chicken-or-egg dilemma: denuclearisation first or economic support first?

The answer is twofold. First, we need something truly imaginative. Perhaps the US can find a solution by transforming the nuclear sites in North Korea into special industrial clusters and providing some of its military capability in exchange for nuclear disarmament. In this way, North Korea can attract private investment from the US, while easing its security concerns.

In the end, however, foreign policy objectives on the peninsula will need to be realistic. As mentioned before, a truly denuclearised North Korea will never happen as it will retain its theoretical nuclear knowledge. It will be far more practical, then, to find a common ground of mutual interests.

Accountability

Second, there needs to be a sense of “mutual accountability”. The

traditional definition of accountability has three stages: responsibility, answerability, and enforceability.

The “responsibility” stage can take the form of policy dialogue and trust building. Plenty of dialogue occurred during the six-party talks held intermittently since 2003 between North Korea, China, the US, South Korea, Japan and Russia – but they appeared to fail to build any meaningful trust. The latest rounds of dialogue between the US and the two Koreas will also fall at this hurdle unless they find a novel way forward.

Consequently, the dialogue must be based on mutual understanding and openness. The rest of the world must understand that North Korea is a fragile state, which cannot overcome the denuclearisation problem on its own – especially given its vulnerable financial situation. After all, it’s not just the US that doesn’t trust North Korea; North Korea doesn’t trust the US either, especially following the toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya.

But that is just the first step. The “answerability” stage will require much greater information sharing and transparency. The international community is so suspicious of the sincerity of Kim Jong-un’s denuclearisation process because of that country’s poor level of openness and the limited access to solid information from within North Korea. Once North Korea opens its borders, there will be simultaneous achievements in terms of both denuclearisation and economic development.

All parties need measurable and transparent indicators of progress. But if agreements aren’t kept, a move can be made towards “enforceability”, including convening inspection panels or enforcing a compliance review process. Kim Jong-un’s father and predecessor, Kim Jong-il, for example, faced international sanctions along with the removal of food aid even during a famine period when he left the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003.

2019 may yet bring a way forward. But unless there is a foundation of mutual understanding, defectors such as Jo Song-gil may offer the only tangible insight into what’s really going on in North Korea.

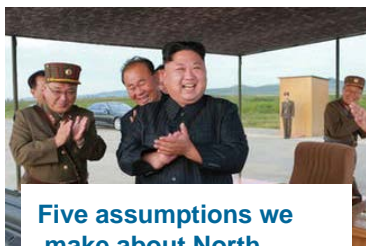
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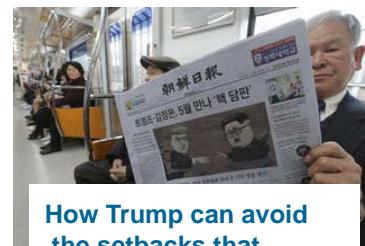
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