

If the US military withdraws from Korea, China will be a big loser

Michael Heng says while Beijing has good reason to be wary of American hegemony in the region, it must realise that a US military withdrawal would encourage unwanted developments - nuclear-armed neighbours in a unified Korea and Japan.



The Kim-Trump summit in Singapore has reduced the danger of armed conflict on the Korean peninsula. It is good for peace in the near future and it calms stock markets.

At the same time, it is a big media event for Kim Jong-un. It will no doubt boost his international standing and strengthen his position at home. North Korea is the biggest winner, thanks to the calculating Kim and the disappointing Donald Trump. The immediate gain is the likely relaxation of economic sanctions against the country.

Other than these two points, one has to fall back on faith in Trump's instinct that North Korea is earnest in denuclearisation on the Korean peninsula. He seems to have taken a sudden liking to Kim, someone he described as a "madman" after the death of American student Otto Warmbier, who was imprisoned during a visit to North Korea.

Somehow, Trump has forgotten that, in politics, interests are more decisive than personal relationships. But that is understandable as he is more a showman than a politician.

The joint declaration merely reaffirms the same commitment to denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula that North Korea has repeatedly made since 1992.

As *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof has observed, there was “nothing about North Korea freezing plutonium and uranium programmes, nothing about destroying intercontinental ballistic missiles, nothing about allowing inspectors to return to nuclear sites, nothing about North Korea making a full declaration of its nuclear programme, nothing about a timetable, nothing about verification, not even any clear pledge to permanently halt testing of nuclear weapons or long-range missiles”.

If this is not disturbing enough, Trump announced after the summit that he wants to remove all US troops from South Korea, a major strategic move which the Pentagon had rejected outright for years despite Pyongyang’s repeated demands. Trump’s seemingly offhand announcement has perplexed American allies, particularly South Korea and Japan, and confused its own military establishment.

Why is the announcement so disturbing? Consider the following scenario. Supreme Leader Kim, aware that Trump’s current term of office would end in 2½ years, could embark on a cosmetic programme of denuclearisation, obliging Trump to respond by withdrawing the US military presence in South Korea.

Meanwhile, Trump’s successor could be boxed in by his vague agreement with Kim.

The retreat of US military forces would set alarm bells ringing in Japan. Political realities are more important than promises and treaties. If Japan were threatened, what should Tokyo do? The responsible thing would be to rely on itself, to build up its military and create a home-grown nuclear umbrella.

Can Abe get Japan back into the North Korea diplomatic game?

The biggest loser in the new situation would be South Korea. A nuclear-armed North Korea would easily impose demands on a South Korea without American

military protection. The demands could range from reunification on Pyongyang's terms to generous economic assistance from Seoul.

A US departure from South Korea would weaken South Korea to the extent that it may have to give in to the terms dictated by North Korea on reunification. A reunified Korea may well turn out to be a second reunified Vietnam, but with nuclear warheads. Taking either a short or long view of history, there is very little reason to believe that such a Korea would prove to be a friendly neighbour to China.

Even if Trump-Kim summit clicks, Koreans might never

Therefore, another big loser would be China, North Korea's supposedly good friend. If Kim Il-sung, the grandfather of Kim Jong-un, could at times prove unpredictable for Beijing, the current supreme leader has exhibited features of a 21st-century Frankenstein. His modus operandi has often proved to be beyond the understanding of Chinese President Xi Jinping, a seasoned world-class political player.



Kim and Xi discuss a 'new future' and 'true peace': North Korea

It is an open secret that there has been no real fraternal relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and the Workers' Party of Korea, as evidenced by

the years of estrangement.

The recent summit in Singapore has not produced any substantive conditions to inspire real confidence that the North Korean leader will follow through on his claimed denuclearisation programme. North Korea's failure to dismantle its nuclear weapons would represent a persistent nuclear threat on China's doorstep. However, this is contrary to the view expressed by retired US Navy admiral James Stavridis, in a Bloomberg article: "For Beijing, the best outcome would be an agreed framework that puts off any actual relinquishment of North Korea's nuclear weapons into the distant future. This will ensure the long-term survival of the Kim regime and the continuation of a divided peninsula."

Added to this is the possibility of the emergence of Japan as a nuclear power in the wake of a US military withdrawal from South Korea. Japan, with its remarkable technological base, can rebuild its military to beyond its proclaimed self-defence needs and produce more deadly warheads and powerful delivery systems than North Korea within a short period

Beijing is right to be wary of the hegemonic schemes of Uncle Sam, especially in view of the latter's track record during the cold war period. But that does not mean a total US military withdrawal from South Korea and Japan would always be in China's best interests.

The fact of the matter is that US hegemony has produced two benign by-products for China. Number one is that Japan has stuck very close to Article 9 of its constitution and remains non-nuclear. Number two is that the US foiled attempts by Chiang Kai-shek to build nuclear bombs in Taiwan.

The Chinese have a wise saying, *ju an si wei*, which means to be on guard against possible dangers in times of peace. A series of missteps in the wake of the Singapore summit could lead to northeast Asia degenerating into a powder keg. That is certainly not in the interests of China and the rest of Asia, or, for that matter, in the interests of world peace.

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