While the oversize personalities of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump tend to dominate global attention on the continuing efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, the peace initiative of South Korean President Moon Jae-in — the man in the middle — is increasingly pivotal to how things evolve among all of the players in this complex diplomatic drama.

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It Takes Three to Make a Korean Peace
By Stein Tønnessson

Recent efforts to forge peace on the Korean Peninsula are marked by tantalizing successes followed by inevitable disappointments. In 2017, the North Korea-US situation deteriorated to a point where conflict appeared a real possibility. Subsequent efforts initially raised great hopes but are now at an impasse. In the end, writes Stein Tønnesson, a deal will depend on the individual mettle of Moon Jae-in, Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump together.

The desire shown in 2018 among the leaders of the two Koreas and the US to break out of the long stalemate on the Korean Peninsula and arrive at a peace deal appears to be still alive. Although for different reasons, Moon Jae-in, Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump would all like to arrive at a settlement allowing North Korea to develop its economic and technological potential through integration with the rest of the world. Should these three leaders defy all the pessimism and strike a deal before the US electoral campaign in 2020, they could stand out in history as the trio that allowed Northeast Asia to develop its full potential as the global economy’s main powerhouse.

This would be welcome in Beijing and Moscow, provided that the US and South Korea let North Korea maintain its political system. A settlement would be tolerated in Tokyo also, if the US does not downgrade its security commitments to Japan and South Korea. After the Kim-Trump summit in Singapore in June 2018, the prospect of a Korean settlement seemed closer than at any time since the Korean War. Yet the conditions that Pyongyang and Washington set for agreeing a deal differed widely. While North Korea might have settled for a roadmap toward nuclear disarmament, with verifiable mutual engagements and specific deadlines, it wouldn’t give away its nuclear weapons in one go. This became abundantly clear when the second Kim-Trump summit in Hanoi broke down on Feb. 28, 2019.

Since then, the Korean question has been overshadowed by the ongoing trade war and crisis in Sino-US relations. Does this mean the window of opportunity has closed? No, but it would be a diplomatic sensation if the three leaders could make peace happen.

Moon Jae-in: Architect
Moon is the architect and most consistent proponent of the present rapprochement between the two Koreas. He is also the third South Korean president to seek a lasting settlement with North Korea. He and his administration have studied the results and failures of the two earlier attempts — Kim Dae-jung’s “Sunshine Policy” (1998–2003) and Roh Moo-hyun’s “Peace and Prosperity” policy (2004–08), with inter-Korean summits in Pyongyang in 2000 and 2007. Moon was the key organizer of Roh’s North Korea policy and was determined to make his own attempt when he moved into Seoul’s Blue House in May 2017.

After he took office, when North Korea carried out three nuclear tests and a number of missile launches, and Kim and Trump threw insults at each other, Moon maintained his invitation for Pyongyang to re-engage with Seoul. When Kim finally responded, Moon was quick to seize the opportunity to meet with the North Korean leader and urged Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping and other leaders to meet Kim too.
Kim Jong Un: Audacious Player
Kim has proven himself to be a calculating, audacious and strategic actor with a firm hand on power in Pyongyang. There is reason to think that he takes his byongjin policy seriously, with equal weight on military security and economic development. He knows enough about the world to understand that North Korea cannot sustain itself much longer with its current socio-economic system. It must break out of its isolation, build new industries and infrastructure, and acquire the 21st century’s most advanced technologies. At the same time, he wants to preserve his political system and the Kim dynasty. At first, he challenged the rest of the world with a dramatic escalation of his nuclear arms program. This allowed him at once to claim that he had the capacity to deter attacks by the US and South Korea, thus bolstering his power at home, and to enter into talks with the South Korean, Chinese, American and other international leaders. Kim is likely to realize that he cannot achieve his economic aims without engaging in a process of verifiable nuclear disarmament. Yet, he will at the same time continue to use his nuclear arms to obtain the help he needs to ensure North Korea’s economic development under its present regime.

Moon understood this from the beginning and has reassured Kim that South Korea does not seek regime change in North Korea. He also realized that no rapprochement could happen without the full support of the US. Thus, as soon as Kim was ready, Moon did his best to persuade Trump to meet the North Korean dictator. The Trump-Kim summit in Singapore was the product of a South Korean initiative.

Donald Trump: Deal Maker
Trump is less strategic and less predictable than the two Korean leaders, but has his own motives for engaging in diplomacy with Kim. First and foremost among Trump’s reasons for wanting a Korean settlement is his desire to demonstrate his “art of the deal” to the American electorate. This makes the first half of 2020 his natural target date for a Korean deal and a conclusion of his trade war with China. Trump’s second reason is his desire to reduce costly US military commitments. He does not want a war with North Korea, and he would like to withdraw US troops from South Korea. While this leads to problems in his relationship with the South Korean government and with Japan, it increases his chances of reaching a deal with Kim. Trump’s third reason is his sympathy for young authoritarian leaders such as Crown Prince Salman of Saudi Arabia and Kim himself. Trump has developed a fondness for Kim as a kind of junior apprentice in the art of playing games and reaching profitable deals.

Trump’s three reasons are not shared by any other likely US president, and also not by key members of his own administration and Washington’s elites. They are more ideologically inclined. 

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