

TIME FOR PEACE

INTER-KOREAN SUMMIT



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The idiom ‘well begun is half done,’ perhaps fits best for what the world witnessed last week. The two Koreas seeking to put the past behind and give peace a chance. The big step literally, was taken by North’s Chairman Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in blurring the military demarcation line, dividing the two countries, long apart since 65 years. Indeed, April 27 inter-Korean Summit at the border truce village of Panmunjom is history in the making, at least for the people of the Korean Peninsula, who till a few months ago were living under the fear of a ‘nuclear war’.

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Kim Jong-un of Nord Korea and US President Donald Trump have been threatening each other for several months. “With two crazy guys threatening each other, of course I am happy if they talk. Don’t you see it is we who will get the first hit if they press the button,” is what a young woman told me in Seoul in early March, when news of the two leaders willing to meet started hitting front page headlines.

Peace finally

While the big question remains on the success of Trump-Kim Jong-un summit expected later this month, it seems the Korean leaders’ dialogue has laid a foundation for future, more than just good will. Unquestionably, other than getting a commitment from Kim Jong-un for ‘complete denuclearisation’, which was a pre-condition for talks, Moon has given his people reason to believe there will not be another war, and the peace treaty finally will be signed since the 1950-53 Korean war ended. One more issue to discuss will be of “reunification”.

Of course, it is going to be a long haul and the only way out is to negotiate, had emphasised Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-Wha all through in the run-up to get Kim to the dialogue table and put a halt to provoca-

tions. That has been achieved pretty fast to a large extent with the historic summit and the credit must go to Moon as he has been ‘consistent and persistent’ with the goal he spelt out when he took over the presidency: “Will do everything I can to build peace on the Korean peninsula”. This is clearly visible by the moves he has made since i.e. getting the North Korean team (with Kim’s sister) to participate in the Winter Olympics, sending special envoys to Pyongyang and getting a North Korean leader to be the first to step across the DMZ line, followed by the first ever meeting between the two leaders in over a decade.

However, Moon seems to be magnanimous in passing on the credit to the US President and flattering him by declaring post-summit that Trump “should win the Nobel Peace Prize”. There may be takers, and Trump may himself work for it. I do recall Foreign Minister Kang disagreeing with me that Trump’s outburst were muddying the water and make it difficult for S Korea to pursue its goals. On the contrary, she explained Obama’s years had been of non-action termed ‘strategic patience’ but Trump has changed all of this by demonstrating the will to resolve the issue once and for all.

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At the same time, an additional factor for Kim to come out and engage has been the pressure by the international community together to implement the UN Security Council's sanctions. Apparently, old ally China enforcing the sanctions would have hit North Korea the hardest, as it not just shares the border, but it is the most important economic of Kim's regime. At the same time, China is also the largest trading partner of S Korea and Seoul is the third largest trading partner of China and 30,000-odd people are flying between two countries daily! And, perhaps this also explains the recent surprise visit by Kim Jong-un to Beijing to meet up with President Xi Jinping prior to the inter-Korean summit and the upcoming one with Trump. Besides, China too has ensured it wasn't left out and re-injected itself into the negotiation process, which was seen to be slipping out of its control.

Economy, stupid!

Further, it's obvious that after having proved to the world his military capabilities, which may at the end fail as rumours suggest the programme collapsed, Kim needs to turn his attention on economic development. As of now his regime has had limited ability

to engage economically with the outside world.

"The number one job for a political leader is to feed the people. If people are starving, to develop nuclear weapons simply doesn't make sense. And while N Korea is toying with nuclear tests, the poverty levels are extreme and human rights' situation is pretty bad." A top business editor of Chosun daily Woosuk Kenneth Choi couldn't have explained the prevailing conditions in North Korea better to a group of journalists from across the globe attending the World Conference of Journalists hosted by the Journalists Association of Korea early March. He recalled how a film, which went viral, showing last November's incident where doctors who operated on a soldier, who had escaped from the DMZ line and defected, found many parasites in his body, one 27 cm long worm, had shocked the S Korean youngsters.

They couldn't believe a leader would have his people starve. "While no one wants a war in this country (my son is in the army), if there was one, we would blow them apart, our economy is bigger, 50 times richer, our human resources are bigger and we will win but there will be a heavy cost..." Fortunately, a month later these thoughts would have

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become passé. However, the talk of 'reunification' has at a section of the younger generation wary.

"South Korea is richer, it has nice apartments, assets etc. and if a beggar comes and says give me this and that, an obvious response would be stay away from me", said Choi. While there was much fanfare for the Winter Olympics, the younger people were peeved that they were actually subsidising the North's team-- \$3 million were spent on it! Choi also confirmed what I had gathered during the week-long visit that the educated youth don't have jobs and sense an insecure future. "They don't want to pay for peace from their own pockets."

South Korea has indeed shown remarkable economic growth, rising from the ashes of a war to take centre stage globally. Statistics provided state: 50 million people have GDP exceeding \$24,000, which is 11th in the world; it is 7th among world's 10 economies in terms of foreign reserve--\$355.8 billion; its exports are 7th in the world worth \$559.6 billion and has a total trade of \$ 1.08 trillion (8th globally); OECD ranks it as top five post-secondary graduation rate in the 25-34 age group and 65% highest post-secondary graduation, with Japan, Canada, Russia and Ireland following. Bloomberg

accorded it the most innovative country in world status in 2014, which was confirmed by a visit to the Samsung Innovative Centre, the Sejong city, soon to become the new administrative capital of S Korea and Incheon' first free economic zone, among others.

Re-unification

The concerns are not limited to the country alone, but the world too. If Trump chooses to carry out his threats of surgical strikes, Choi cautioned the global economy would be hit hard as 80% of DRAMs produced in world is controlled by Korea, and "if we go down we wouldn't be able to supply these...the banking sector will collapse as it needs to be refurbished now and then; we are also the 6th largest producer of cars...war would wipe out 2% of the world's GDP... it is suicide..." For the time, there can be sense of relief, and all eyes would be how the Trump-Kim summit pans out.

But till then the focus remains on what steps the two Koreas take following their joint declaration. Moon said: "...It is necessary to make it possible for the two Koreas to live together peacefully without interfering with each other or damaging each other." Whereas Kim Jong-un said: If all North and

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South Koreans can travel freely on the path I took today, if Panmunjom becomes a symbol of peace, not of painful division, the two Koreas with their one blood, one language, one history and one culture will prosper for thousands of generations.”

The big question is unification. Will the older generation get to see a ‘united’ country back in their lifetime or will the North eat into the South’s pie of development, as feared by the younger generation? It will be in place to look at Germany’s example. It took the East and West long years to unite, the differences still remain but nevertheless the united country became again a global power.

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Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2014, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

