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In the end, peace in Korea will rest on Koreans themselves – not the US or China

Tom Plate says whatever the success or failure of Chinese and US diplomacy, the North Korean nuclear crisis will end only when the Koreans themselves choose change, and build on Moon Jae-in's vision and the North Korean people's longing for better days

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*It may be getting close to the moment when the two Koreas begin to fully accept that a brighter future is to be found mainly in their own stars and in no one else's heart.
Illustration: Craig Stephens*



[Tom Plate](#)

To appreciate the *sageuk* drama unfolding on the Korean peninsula, understand that not just two Korean entities have starring roles in history's cast, but three. The first is the [Republic of Korea](#) of the south – developmentally accomplished, politically volatile. The second is the Korea of the north – dead-pool polity, cultish culture.

But there is a third: the formal entity, the [Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#), UN member-state, diplomatic primate. For this Korea, negotiating a deal with the [United States](#) may prove impossible. But in developmentally stunted Korea Two – 25 million souls

or so – many might now be sensing that going it alone for much longer is impossible, that it is time to “re-tribalise”, that the agony must be eased. Something has to give.

And something just might happen, in part due to the strategic vision and emotional largesse of [Moon Jae-in](#), South Korea’s president, and his growing fan base. Yes, Korea One is not dramatically more unified politically than the Korean peninsula: it appears to be split between those who prefer to keep what they have, and those who are willing to share. So, yet again, the fate of the peninsula is linked to the political will and heart of outsiders.



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un (left) prepares to shake hands with South Korean President Moon Jae-in over the military demarcation line in Panmunjom, in the Demilitarised zone, on April 27. Photo: Pool via AP

In the end, they may not turn out to be of decisive help. Neighbouring [Japan](#) comes up problematic, with its history of occupation of Korea negating its potential contributions. [Russia](#) is never irrelevant, but [Vladimir Putin](#), its president, is focused elsewhere, and will keep out of the path of China. From the US perspective, the unwavering belief is that big China can yank little Pyongyang around at will.

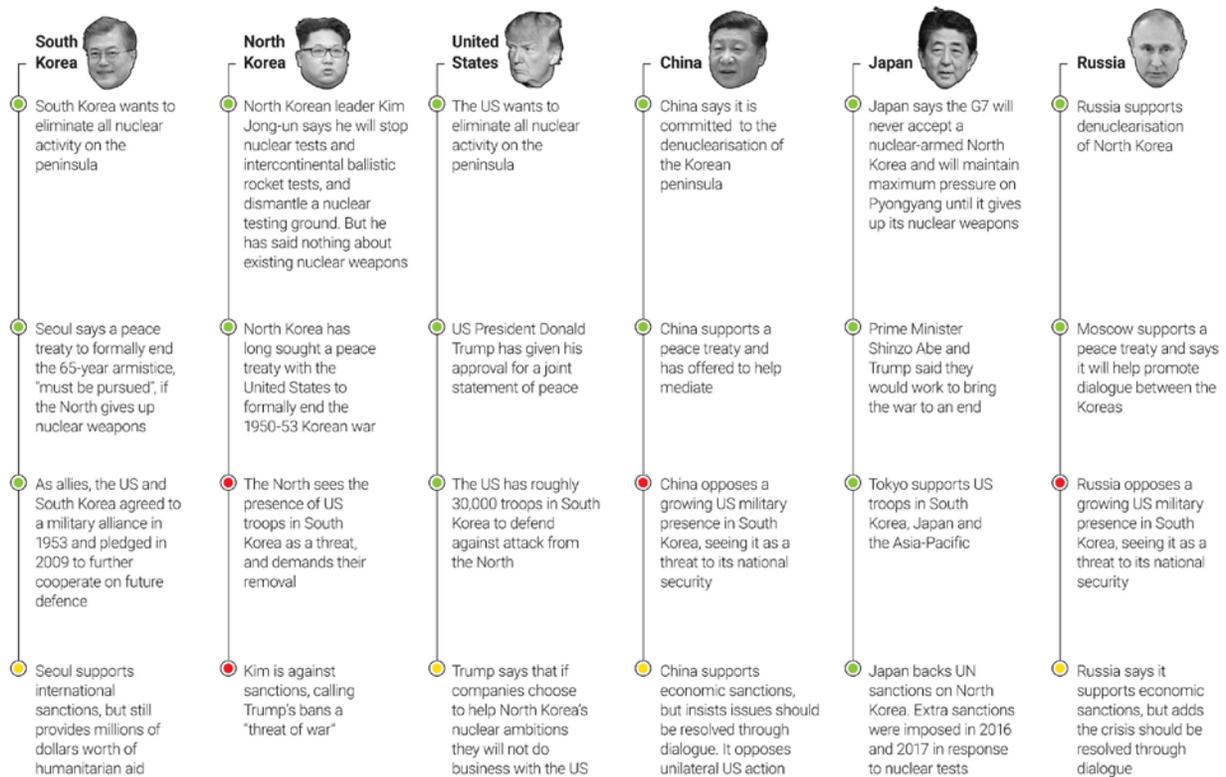
If Washington’s suspicion is right – in fact, it’s questionable – then, ironically enough, the key outside player here is not President [Donald Trump](#) (who is only a tweet or two shy of being self-nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize): after all, the experienced American real-estate mogul is dreadfully inexperienced in international matters. His instincts are brassy and cinematic, not careful and diplomatic; his advisers are less the cream of the US foreign-affairs crop than a clamorous kennel of barky attack dogs and preening show dogs. If

anyone can poop on a potential peace party, is it not growly [John Bolton](#), now the national security chief?

Why do we go to extremes to appear tough, when the whole point of toughness is to avoid extremities? Trump would be better off attending the [US-North Korea summit](#) with only First Lady Melania and a suitcase of his better instincts. Leave the hounds behind, and when you need advice, run it by [Singapore](#)'s experienced prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong.

What's at stake?

● Agree
 ● Mostly agree
 ● Disagree



On his visit to Beijing last year, Trump [said](#) the US is committed to the "complete and permanent denuclearisation" of North Korea. "China can fix this problem easily and quickly ... I know one thing about your president: if he works on it hard, it will happen. There's no doubt about it."

Trump may be foolish to believe that Xi's snapping fingers can so blithely bring the missile-nuclearised North Korea to its pacific senses. (The pat notion that the ideology of communism blurs borders and automatically makes irrelevant national interests is sophomoric.) But he is not a fool to hope there is something out of the ordinary about Xi ("a very respected man," Trump actually says).

On some level, Trump must be aware that [he is no Xi](#). It is the latter's genetic lineage and lifetime of hard learning and thorough training that served to put him at the top of the new colossus.

In the matter of Korea, in fact, this could be Xi's moment of self-definition – and who knows, a more glorious peacemaking moment for him may never emerge, no matter how many terms he serves. Great leaders step into a crisis because they know someone has to; political poseurs and bumbling bureaucrats will duck and scurry.

Even so, China's president is burdened by past Chinese diplomacy that in style and substance has been so subtle and cautious as to risk being null. Can Xi – perhaps behind the scenes – pull off the impossible: help seal the beginning stage of a serious deal in Singapore, should the much-hyped summit take place?

Under his government, China's mandarin-nerd approach in diplomacy is giving way to one with more pop. This is apparent at the [United Nations](#) and other international venues, such as the [World Economic Forum](#) in Davos. Having cooperated in the sanctions against Pyongyang, Xi could now help organise, very quietly, a blockbuster bailout and security guarantee via a condominium-like agreement with Washington, all the current tension notwithstanding.

“Optimism and Korea go together as rarely as sunshine and Chongqing”

His government would certainly have credibility. Political advisers of the mettle of [Wang Qishan](#) or [Wang Huning](#) might whisper in his ear that the beleaguered Trump might hand over a very nice return indeed for a Nobel Peace Prize set-up.

The optimist in me likes this scenario, but optimism and Korea go together as rarely as sunshine and Chongqing.

This takes us back to Koreas One and Two and the return of tribalism. History tells us that outside powers do not worry excessively about providing probity for smaller powers. In this analysis, [Kim Jong-un](#)'s most likely saviour or guarantor is not Beijing or Washington but Seoul. Moon is eagerly waiting to deal for real (nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize).

It may be getting close to the moment when the two Koreas begin to fully accept that a brighter future is to be found mainly in their own stars and in no one else's heart. It may be impudent, but it is also necessary to ask: who really, sincerely cares about Korea besides Koreans?

Columnist Tom Plate, the Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, has been writing about Asia since 1996. He has interviewed South Korean presidents and is the author of the “Giants of Asia” book, “Conversations with Ban Ki-moon”

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