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With China and the US invested in a divided Korean peninsula, South Korean president Moon Jae-in is on his own as peacemaker

Tom Plate says South Korea's president is carrying on with the work of reconciliation with the North almost alone, because China and the US seem to have more to gain from a divided Korean peninsula

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Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in at the truce village of Panmunjom in the demilitarised zone dividing the Korean peninsula. Photo: AP



Tom Plate

With friends like China and the United States, it might seem that North and South Korea would have no need for enemies; but then again, of course, they also have each other, and then again it might be said that each is its own worst enemy.

For many Americans, the Korean peninsula seems quite far away, while for many Chinese, it seems all too close. This double diplomatic helix of symmetry and asymmetry has produced one of the greatest geopolitical despairs of our time. But diplomatic history over the centuries does offer the lesson, easily forgotten, that little is forever. What if things did change?

Would the Sino-American relationship – tense, roiling – benefit from a new peninsular calm? My sense is that the gain would be enormous, but, according to a stunning new book of revelatory scholarship (*A Misunderstood Friendship*, by Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia), “Chinese policy toward North Korea is trapped in a dilemma.”

Beijing has always regarded North Korea almost like a sliding door it controls, as a geopolitical border buffer. It cannot bring itself to see why it might be worth jeopardising that breathing room just to improve Korean lives.

For its part, Washington, the so-called defender of democracy, has always adored South Korea as a military-and-intelligence super base, peeping northwest towards Beijing as well as north towards Pyongyang. A less conflicted Korean peninsula might undermine the stated reason for US boots on its ground – a development to be passionately avoided, the Pentagon would surely feel.

Yes, it is a kind of *Game of Thrones*. In North Korea this past weekend, a military extravaganza for the 70th anniversary of the Democratic People’s Republic was offered as a fearful feast for outside eyes, not to mention for home consumption. What a wonderful, bold gesture of peninsula demilitarisation it would have been to the world if the young Kim Jong-un had cancelled this parade.

But it was not to be. Even so, the intercontinental ballistic missiles and associated nuclear glitter were [left in the barn](#), giving some symbolic comfort. It was also something of a consolation that, in Washington, US President Donald Trump got strong domestic pushback on his demand for a [ridiculous military parade of his own](#).

As a second Trump-Kim summit is uncertain, it is against this backdrop that a special man with a special opportunity should come on stage and raise hope. Let us

helicopter over to the Blue House in Seoul, where – shrugging off discouragement, weighed down by poisonous dog-eat-dog South Korean politics – President Moon Jae-in soldiers on in search of a breakthrough.

The former human-rights lawyer has met the North's Kim more than once, and he was a [force behind June's Singapore summit](#), though he stepped back so Trump could have his one-on-one with the Pyongyang peacock. A devotee of the late Kim Dae-jung's "sunshine policy" on reconciliation with the North, Moon is a man on a mission, but to a destination that might as well be Mars.

He has a strong team, particularly his Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha, the first woman to hold that position in South Korea and a mentee of former UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon. But how much help can be expected from erstwhile ally America?

The Washington establishment seems to expect some sort of miraculous overnight capitulation of the North, without giving it the kind of rock-solid security insurance policy that would cover a move like unilateral nuclear disarmament.

It is unclear how long Trump will remain in the White House. Whatever his motives are, he has said he wishes to continue the Singapore process. But his presidency is shaky, or as Arthur Miller has said better in *Death of a Salesman*: "He's a man way out there in the blue riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back – that's an earthquake."



North Korea's Kim Jong-un shakes hands with US President Donald Trump in Singapore. South Korean President Moon Jae-in was a force behind the Trump-Kim summit. Photo: AP

So Moon Jae-in and his very good foreign minister are rather alone out there. The divide in the Korean peninsula will not be bridged by those who draw comfort from its continued division. The game now belongs to the leaders of South – and, for that matter, North – Korea to win or lose. In December, the Nobel Committee in Oslo will announce its 2018 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Moon is not known to be on the shortlist, but he should be.

If the quiet man in the Blue House does bring a measure of humane common sense to the peninsula, neither Washington nor Beijing may fully grasp the profound impact his effort might have on their relationship. Like better weather, better diplomacy can be a powerful force that can change things overnight.

Right now, Moon's sunshine policy may be the best elixir out there for Beijing and Washington, even though they may be among the last to realise this. The foreign policy establishments of the two superpowers should very carefully calculate whether this great South Korean foreign-policy visionary is getting enough of their help.

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