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North Korea has US hawks and doves all aflutter, but few know what they're squawking about

Tom Plate says a big obstacle to resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis is that policymakers in the US lack basic information and seem confused over how to proceed

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(Neither US policy hawks nor doves know much about North Korea. Illustration: Craig Stephens)



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America is now more confused than ever about North Korea. And it's not all President Donald Trump's fault. Neither can America fairly say it's all China's fault.

For as long as I have been writing about Asia, North Korea has been the black hole of American foreign policy. To right-wing hawks, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is a monster mash-up of Stalin, Hitler and Godzilla, for which humanitarian mercy has no place. To left-wing doves, North Korea is nothing more than the brutally

mismanaged half of a broken peninsula on which someday the sun will shine, slow-melting frozen halves into holistic happiness.

Into this disarray strides the mercurial Trump with a pressing problem – the Russian connection – and possibly with only one way out of the Russian box: some spectacular success. Is he perhaps musing, “Thank heavens for Kim Jong-un. He scares Americans even more than special counsel Robert Mueller scares me”?

Even so, may a serious-minded Trump-Kim summit proceed apace, though with cautions galore. US relations with North Korea have been abominable, so there is no mutual trust or social capital on which to build, and less-than-perfect technical means of verifying a hoped-for denuclearisation protocol. And – one worries – might Kim actually be a dim bulb? Our best experts are rightly modest about what they claim to know about this young authoritarian, his governing elite and its Workers’ Party of Korea, and his underdeveloped country. At a recent pair of policy-wonk meetings held by the think tank RAND and at an awards dinner organised by the Pacific Century Institute, former diplomat Robert Gallucci, who was America’s chief negotiator during the temporary settlement of the Korean nuclear crisis of 1994, put this out as his bottom line: neither hawks nor doves in the ideological aviary know what they are squawking about.

Neither knows much about anything North Korea, was his point. Did the Kim regime fast-forward its missile programme to put in motion a game plan to unite all Korea under the flag of Pyongyang? Or did the regime grind out more missiles and cook up more nuclear weapons out of the sheer terror of being made toast by the West, as per Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi? Or is it that Kim (wily, not dim) desperately needed to gain full control over the military by buying off those generals, who couldn’t simply be eliminated, by letting them have their macho missile launches? Is Kim now in a position to be dovish? Or is it still the house of cunning communist hawks?

Reasonably informed answers to such questions would help American policy avoid guesswork and increase the odds of avoiding unintended consequences. Never negotiate out of fear, but never fear to negotiate – unless you lack basic facts. And we have so few, and we fill the embarrassing vacuum with pompous perspectives that

confuse the public. As Gallucci, who for years was the dean of Georgetown University's Foreign Service School, pointed out: maybe there is a price to be paid that could bring down or slow down the build-up? Under what circumstances, if any, would it be in North Korea's interest to coexist in a nuclear-free peninsula? Or maybe North Korea is as confused and muddled as the US is so that no price could ever fill the bill?

China is incessantly labelled by our hawks as the puppet-master of Pyongyang. But from true experts such as Gallucci, as well as Dr. Richard Haass, the president of the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations, the government of President Xi Jinping receives more subtle treatment. Not unlike US-ally Tokyo, for example, Beijing, though for different reasons, might not wax so ecstatic over visions of a unified Korean peninsula, and (not unlike maybe about half of all South Koreans) might well prefer the status quo – especially if somehow Kim can be induced into chummier transitional cosmopolitanism. The Chinese would then get to keep their North Korean buffer zone, and Japan wouldn't have the worry about the prospect of a united Korea thinking to settle old scores. But denuclearisation is a threat to no one; a nuclear arms race is.

As for America, perhaps Trump – after rounds of annoying ping-pong Twitter with Kim – embodies the very personification of Richard Nixon's vaunted "madman" theory of a president. This is one whose utter unpredictability freezes foreign "troublemakers" in their tracks. Might Hamlet Trump superficially engage Kim, depart angry, fire off another tweet storm, and publicly order his generals to load up the guns? This would satiate the president's political core and maybe even push the Mueller inquiry off centre stage, while the president seeks to mimic John F. Kennedy's "cool" handling of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

Domestic politics aside, the moral of this wild new turn in peninsular diplomacy, as per Gallucci and Haass, is that America really doesn't know what it is doing, and at the same time North Korea may not really know where it is going. A summit may never happen, or it might. The shrewd Kim may act humbly, or he may not. The mercurial Trump may prove quite the negotiator, or he may hoist himself on the petty petard of his machismo and embarrass everyone. Wherever they meet – Hiroshima would be my preference, but that's obviously not going to happen – they need to put their egos and

red nuclear buttons aside and do the right thing for this tense area of the globe. China and Japan would surely applaud.

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