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European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

APRIL 30, 2018

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01.05.2018

The Korean Breakthrough

The agreement signed between Kim Jung-un and South Korean president Moon Jae-in, which by a stroke of the pen ends the Korean War, is of incalculable significance. Those who are pooh-poohing it or raising cynical questions about Pyongyang's motives do not understand. It represents among other things a joint effort by the two Koreas to deny an unhinged U.S. president threatening to "annihilate" North Korea any pretext to do so.

CNN talking heads are saying that Trump deserves some credit for the agreement. So isn't it strange, they say, that he's not boasting about it in a tweet but focusing on the problems of his personal lawyer?

(Oh, he just did; he must be watching us, the anchors note. early Friday morning.)

What they mean is that his threats last year in response to Pyongyang's nuclear and ballistic missile tests forced Kim to make concessions (and so represent the good Trump, presidential, responsible, willing to use horrific violence to "defend national security" or "maintain regional stability") while the bad Trump is the petulant tweeter beset by a gathering array of scandals and legal problems.

The "liberal" media has cheered Trump when he dropped the MOAB on Afghanistan or twice ordered missile strikes on Syria. Now it cheers him as the virtual author of the Korean agreement. Their sense of historical causality is confused.

In the 1990s the Clinton administration engaged in talks with North Korea concerning its nuclear program. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang; a high-level DPRK delegation visited Washington. An agreement was signed for the North

Koreans to shut down their existing reactors and accept light-water reactors to be built and financed by the U.S. and South Korea. Congress resisted the agreement and then the Bush/Cheney administration scuttled it entirely. George W. Bush stupidly included North Korea in an imaginary “Axis of Evil” along with Iraq and Iran. While John Bolton in the State Department openly advocated regime change in Pyongyang, North Korea reacted by expanding its program and leaving the Nonproliferation pact in 2003.

The goal has always been to protect the country from regime change. One can interpret this narrowly (as most pundits do) as the Kim clan’s instinct for self-preservation. But this interpretation ignores the larger issue of the North Korean people’s instinct for self-preservation. About one-fifth of all North Koreans were killed during the 1950-1953 war. The country was leveled. It however recovered, quite remarkably, and enjoyed a higher standard of living in the 1960s and 70s than the south. Natural disasters in the 1990s, following the withdrawal of Soviet aid, produced widespread hardship and hundreds of thousands of deaths from starvation. But the regime proceeded with its nuclear weapons program as its best defense from attack.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq, based on lies, intended to impose regime change in 2003, and the U.S.-led destruction of Libya in 2011, after Gadafy had surrendered his weapons of mass destruction, surely lent the North Korean effort an extra degree of urgency. In 2017 no fewer than 16 missile tests were conducted, each producing western consternation and threats. But the North Koreans calmly proceeded, no doubt thinking that China’s historical role as Korea’s protector and the U.S. indebtedness to China would preclude a U.S. “preemptive attack” on DPRK facilities.

So while Trump engaged in saber-rattling, the Dear Leader got on the phone and arranged for North Korean involvement in the PyongChang Olympics. Then a visit of over 100 musical performers from the south to the north. Then a high level visit of South Korean officials to Pyongyang, resulting in their delivery to Trump Kim’s personal invitation for a summit, which Trump spontaneously accepted (to the South Koreans’ relief and delight). Now this surprise summit at the DMZ, and the signing of a statement declaring the state of war between the two countries over and declaring the goal of the denuclearization of the peninsula through negotiation with China and the U.S.

Touché. Not only the North Koreans but the Koreans in general are saying to Trump: back off, let us handle this, we are family here, we fear you and your threats of annihilation. We know you want to keep 23,000 of your troops in the south, and Kim has indicated his willingness to accept that if the joint military exercises are scaled back. The Chinese and

Russians have advocated a trade: a nuclear freeze for suspension of the military exercises. South Korean popular opinion favors this.

“A new history begins now,” wrote Kim in the Panmunjon guest book. CNN’s Korean consultant Gordan Chang calls it “breathtaking.” Some other respected commentator says “this is legacy-building for Trump” as though these events are mainly driven by Trump’s wild expressions of belligerence, whose efficacy we only now realize in the wake of the Koreans’ summit.

Trump, they say, deserves a Nobel Peace Prize if all goes well. That’s the spin. Trump took up the white man’s burden and by threatening the north made it reach out to the south, resulting in this agreement to end the state of war. The sheriff on the white horse gets the credit.

I would say rather that Kim and Moon might deserve a prize for deftly managing the crisis produced by the election of an unpredictable U.S. president who has expressed before the UN General Assembly his criminal willingness to “annihilate” North Korea.

Trump now says he’s succeeded while his predecessors have all failed to resolve the Korea issue. I doubt that he understands the first thing about Korean history, or that his State Department has crafted a plan on Korea. The point is, the mounting sanctions on Pyongyang as applied by China in consultation with Washington, plus the crazy threats of the president, plus the fear of South Koreans that Trump might do something nuts, led to this juncture. In particular, the successful North Korean nuclear weapons program led to this juncture.

To credit the president with some sort of unprecedented wisdom (and attributing this breakthrough to him) is to validate his crude menacing rhetoric—which should in fact be no more admired than his misogynistic or racist pronouncements—as the impetus for a positive historical change. But it is not Trump who accomplished this. It was accomplished by Koreans united in fear to the threat he poses to all of them. May it presage the overdue withdrawal of U.S. troops in South Korea (such as planned by Jimmy Carter but sabotaged by the Pentagon in 1977), formation of a loose confederation of two states, mutually beneficial trade and investment ties, and coordinated Korean engagement with the surrounding powers as Trump’s influence in the world in fact shrivels, and U.S. policy meanders, and a multipolar world mercifully takes shape due to or despite this clown.