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by DANIEL WARNER  
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## *Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump: Why Should We Believe Either of Them?*



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In times of rapid change, what was true yesterday is not necessarily true today. For example, the leader of North Korea has threatened to wipe out Seoul and reduce it to rubble while the government of South Korea has confirmed it has a plan to assassinate President Kim Jong-un. Nonetheless, on April 26, 2018, amid lingering handshakes and

embraces, the leaders of North and South Korea promised to establish “lasting peace” by formally ending the Korean War of 1950-53 which divided the peninsula 65 years ago.

Never to be outdone in a war of words, President Trump has constantly ridiculed Kim Jong-un, calling him “a madman who doesn’t mind starving or killing his people,” and the Little Rocket Man. (The latter insult was repeated at the Von Braun Centre for Science & Innovation in Alabama, which was named after the German aerospace engineer who was leader of the team that developed the devastating V-2 ballistic missiles for the Nazis during World War II.) Trump also threatened North Korea with “fire and fury like the world has never seen.”

In the most recent turnabout, appropriate to the *modus vivendi* of his administration, President Trump said North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has been “very honorable” so far in the build-up to an announced summit between the two leaders. “Things have changed very radically from a few months ago,” Trump said at a press conference with Chancellor Merkel in responding to a question about the status of North Korean/US relations.

Wipe out Seoul or promise lasting peace? Assassinate or shake hands and hug? Madman or honorable? “Fire and fury” or summit diplomacy? There have indeed been marked changes since belligerent threats dominated the headlines during North Korea’s 23 missile tests in 2017.

This radical change in words as well as the meeting of the two Korean heads of state and the diplomatic planning for the Kim Jong-un/Trump summit show how quickly situations can evolve. Remember how questions were being asked about a possible nuclear war with similarities drawn to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

I imagine that we are all pleased that tensions seem to be lessened and that what has been an unstable Korean situation for 65 years appears to be near some form of resolution. But a different set of questions arises from the optimism of the moment. Are we consistent with what we say and do? Do we keep to our promises? What is the relation between then and now?

The Roman concept rendered in Latin as *Pacta sunt servanda* is the basis of civil and international law. It translates to “agreements must be kept.” As such, it represents the understanding that when someone agrees to something, that person will adhere to that agreement in good faith. The only exception to keeping an agreement is if there has been a compelling change of circumstances, a “force majeure.” This change of circumstances could be something such as a war or, understood in legal terms, as an “act of God,” such as a hurricane, flood or earthquake.

Saying something is not the same as signing a contract. Diplomats are famously supposed to lie for their countries. But public pronouncements by political leaders are more than just personal asides or diplomatic negotiation positioning. Given the impulsiveness of Donald Trump and the general acceleration of time, we are no longer surprised by changes. In a CNN world of continuing “Breaking News,” change has become our only constant. Part of our fascination with today’s news is its inconsistency. We are never sure what is going to happen from day to day; there are no discernible patterns.

But there is a cost to living in a world of constant change. The concept of good faith has been lost. Any notion of what was said or promised before becomes invalid if each situation becomes contingent on the moment. What was once a “force majeure” is now any change of circumstance. What was once considered “an act of God” has become whatever either party feels at the moment. The level of acceptable change has been reduced to the subjective; the bar for keeping one’s word has been significantly lowered.

One can no longer say to someone: “You said the exact opposite yesterday,” because the easy answer will be, “Yeah, but that was yesterday.” For political leaders, long-term policy decisions become ad hoc improvisations; tactics and strategy become intertwined.

We are all breathing a sigh of relief at the possibility of peace on the Korean peninsula. There were enough threats of a dangerous confrontation. At the same time we are thankful for the positive news, however, we should not forget that *Pacta sunt servanda* is not only the basis of civil and international law, it is also the basis of civilized behavior. If we cannot count on people to act in good faith, what can we count on?