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European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

OCTOBER 4, 2018

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05.10.2018

## Trump's Strategy on North Korea Unplugged



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From “fire and fury the likes of which the world has never seen before” to “He wrote me beautiful letters. We fell in love”. From calling Kim Jong-un of North Korea “the Rocket Man” to “Chairman Kim”. Trump is changing tack from Maximum Pressure to Charm Offensive. Will that endear Trump to Kim and soften the DPRK leader up to make a deal on American terms?

Despite his youthfulness, Kim is not a babe in the woods or a fool. He knows exactly what he wants, and with China having his back, won't settle for less.

Except for the village idiot, everyone knows Trump needs a victory in foreign policy badly, even desperately. The victory, or more precisely, bullying of Mexico and Canada into a revised NAFTA now renamed USMCA, is of little significance beyond North America. That isn't going to impress and intimidate China into conceding defeat in the intensifying trade war between the two largest economies in the world. The combined GDP of Canada and Mexico is only one-quarter of China's. Both Mexico and Canada depend on the US market for almost three-quarters of their total exports. By comparison, America accounts for less than one-fifth of Chinese exports.

Trump agreed to have a summit with Kim earlier this year, something no other US President dared to tread before. And it's not because Trump genuinely desired or wanted peace in the Korean peninsula, but because he wanted to show that he, The Great Negotiator bar none, could strike a denuclearisation deal no US President before him could pull off. Even though the joint statement issued after the Summit was wishy-washy, it was very good optics and hence, politics.

It's a longstanding policy of Washington to maintain the status quo in the Korean peninsula. Truth be told, Washington fears peace breaking out in Korea. Peace would put pressure on American troops to withdraw from South Korea. That, in turn, could mean no more military bases across the Yellow Sea to contain China, the real *raison d'état* for the US military presence in South Korea.

There's only so much and so far Trump, a swamp creature himself, could stray from the Washington policy. Trump had to sack Tillerson, who openly and vehemently opposed the Trump-Kim Summit. Another detractor Bolton was sidelined and told to shut his trap, in exchange for having more say on the policy towards Iran.

It's therefore no surprise that Pompeo, a more pliable Secretary of State, has failed to move denuclearisation negotiations forward despite having made several trips to Pyongyang. Pompeo basically dictated the terms requiring DPRK to give up its nuclear weapons completely first without any reciprocal incentives from the US in the interim. North Korean senior minister called Pompeo's conduct gangster-like. Instead of admitting his approach had failed, Trump accused Chinese President Xi of sabotaging the talk and then called off further visits by Pompeo to Pyongyang.

With the Americans out of the way, the two Korean leaders continued their one-on-one talks and made much progress after the Summit. With his personal legal woes and the trade war on China not going well, Trump seized on the tentative agreements reached between the two Koreas and wanted a second Summit with Kim. That's when his Charm

Offensive began in earnest, with Trump announcing at a rally that he and Kim have fallen in love!

So, what could we expect from the Second Trump-Kim Show if it materializes? More of the same is the most likely scenario. Kim isn't going to destroy his nuclear weapons without America giving something in return. He isn't going to make the same mistake as his father, who signed on Bill Clinton's Agreed Framework, which was later torn up by Dubaya Bush without keeping America's side of the bargain. Kim is also wary and worried about what happened to the Iran Nuclear Deal or JCPOA which Obama entered into and Trump has torn to shreds. The plain truth is that America can't be trusted to honour any international agreement.

As far as Kim is concerned, no deal is better than a lousy deal. The denuclearisation talk can go on forever. The good thing is that the on-and-off talk reduces tension on the peninsula. That's what Kim wants and needs, so that he can turn his attention to economic development.