

2017 year. Ready for Peace or War: Escalation on the Korean Peninsula.

The DPRK Foreign Ministry senior diplomatic officials listening from us in Pyongyang in November, 2017 that several prominent US experts put the probability of a military strike at 50 percent, their faces became sterner but they calmly replied: “We are ready for peace or war.” Of course, Pyongyang was extremely serious about this scenario and is not bluffing when it says that “only one question remains: when will war break out?” and that “North Korea does not want war but will not hide from it, either.”

A sense that the face reconnaissance has already begun was hovering over the Korean Peninsula. We were told in Pyongyang that “North Korean soldiers have long been sleeping with their boots on.”

On December 1, 2017 Russian Security Council Chairman Nikolai Patrushev

- told a Russian news agency that Russia was assessing the consequences of the possible use of military force to resolve the North Korean problem and was making preparations for that even though it believed in a political-diplomatic solution. “We are calculating this and making preparations. It will not come as a surprise to us,” Patrushev said.
- The Russian-Chinese Foreign Ministers statement on July 4, 2017, launched the proposal on a double freeze and a three-stage plan to settle the Korean problem.

The Korean Peninsula. U-turn from War to Peace

Compared to 2017 fall, in 2018 the situation on the Korean Peninsula has changed dramatically, as if at the wave of a magic wand, shifting from alarmist expectations of an all but imminent war between the US and the DPRK that dominated the second half of 2017 to a spectacular improvement in relations between the main protagonists: Pyongyang and Washington, and Pyongyang and Seoul.

The U-turn reasons.

- This U-turn gave rise to numerous questions, including on its causes, agenda and venue. Each party has come up with its own interpretation.
- Washington predictably presents Kim Jong-un's initiative as its own victory and a result of sanctions and US military and political pressure, which eventually scared the DPRK leaders and forced them into what amounts to a capitulation.
- On the one hand, the US was seriously concerned over the success of DPRK's missile and nuclear program and believes that it can deliver a nuclear strike against the North American continent.
- Simultaneously Washington was disappointed to see both its Far Eastern allies – Shinzo Abe's conservative Japan and Moon Jae-in's "liberal" South Korea – are adamant in their rejection of any suggestion of a US military operation against DPRK. It has obviously dawned on Washington that if it ignores the allies' strictly negative attitude and does deliver a military strike against DPRK in line with the "Bloody nose" concept peddled by the Trump administration hawks in recent months, it will not only drastically damage relations with Tokyo and Seoul but may also lose them as allies. As is only natural, this reality has restricted Washington's room for maneuver.
- More than that, the unexpected and dynamic progress in inter-Korean relations that was achieved, against Washington's will, in January-March 2018 has given Pyongyang some leverage with the United States.

How it was done.

- The most incredible news was, of course, that preparations for a US-DPRK summit had begun. This event seems all the more unique since it was prepared by both countries' intelligence services, which operated in strict secrecy without informing their respective foreign ministries or other national agencies. A New York Times article described in detail how the US, DPRK and ROK intelligence heads had cooperated behind the scenes and pointed to the waning role of the US State Department with its dearth of competent staff, including in its Korean division.

The USA - DPRK Summit on June 12, 2018

- The main achievements so far have been the Singapore summit and the joint statement by the two leaders. This brief document contains just four basic items, and instantly came under the fire of criticism within and outside of the US, with some claiming that it was shallow, etc. However, we believe this document is the most that could be achieved at this stage. This document sets the main directions for developing bilateral relations in the future.
- Trump's many critics were quick to accuse him of giving in, and handing a victory to DPRK. The conservative right in the US, as well as in South Korea and Japan, were also shocked by some of the statements made by the US president during his news conference in Singapore. Specifically, Trump said that the annual large-scale military exercises by the US and South Korea were tremendously expensive, while also very provocative in terms of the relations with Pyongyang.

Pyongyang Intentions.

- Pyongyang demonstrated its good will and the sincerity of its intentions by taking unilateral practical steps instead of engaging in rhetoric to limit its nuclear and missile capability. Since April 2018, the country has unilaterally imposed a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests, has blown up Punggye-ri, its main nuclear test site, and has begun dismantling its most up-to-date Sohe rocket-space complex. In August 2018, in accordance with item 4 of the Singapore statement, Pyongyang sent the remains of US service personnel who died in the 1950-1953 Korean War to the US.

President D. Trump personal role.

- Encouraging fact is that the current US president, unlike any of his recent predecessors, is sincerely interested in maintaining positive momentum in his dialogue with Pyongyang and seeing the nuclear deal through. It seems as if his original views are shifting, including the widespread belief among Americans that anything can be done quickly. Trump is becoming increasingly aware of the multi-layered and complex nature of efforts to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula and that it cannot be done overnight. If Trump withstands the immense pressure coming from the influential right in the US, this would keep the prospects for establishing constructive relations between the US and the DPRK alive.
- Donald Trump has deeply involved himself into the dialogue with Kim Jong Un. So it would be uneasy for him to give up the process.

Summit Diplomacy

- Summit Diplomacy was the Korean Peninsula's face in 2018 year.
- “Summitry” has become a business card characterizing the state of affairs on the Korean Peninsula today. Three summits have been held between the leaders of the Republic of Korea and the DPRK, four meetings between Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping including the last one during January 7-10, 2019 and the history – making summit took place between US President Donald Trump and the “Supreme Leader” of the DPRK Kim Jong-un in Singapore on June 12. There are reasons for expecting that a new US-DPRK summit is just around the corner as well as Kim Jong Un return visit to South Korea. A meeting between Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin is also is being planned, apparently, by the two countries’ protocol services.

Inter-Korean breakthrough

- During the triumphant visit to Pyongyang by the Republic of Korea President Moon Jae-in from September 18-20, 2018, when the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018 was signed, including many significant agreements in various spheres and even an extremely important one in the military field, what struck Korea watchers was the fact that the theme of inter-Korean solidarity sounded even louder than before. Seoul and Pyongyang stressed more resolutely than previously the priority of the Korean nation’s independence and self-determination, and a commitment to solve their national problems and affairs themselves.
- The DPRK Ambassador in Moscow remark done on January 11, 2019 in course of discussion with leading Russian Korean studies related scholars. He emphasized that DPRK leadership consider the whole set of the concluded in 2018 year Panmunjom Declaration, Pyongyang Declaration and the Military Agreement signed by the ranking military officials of the two Koreas on 19.09.2018 in course of the third Inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang as de-facto the "Non-Aggression Treaty".

Refusal to sign the Korean War Completion Declaration can lead to Washington Strategic Solitude.

- Pyongyang stresses that by refusing to sign the Declaration to End the Korean War, the US does not want it to end, still considering the DPRK an enemy.
- Taking part at the numerous track 2 and track 1.5 working meetings last year we could see that DPRK position this point succeeded to receive understanding and more or less clear support among all participants except American ones.

Donald Trump - Kim Jong Un Second Summit

- The preparatory job for the second summit is doing now. To our mind the main obstacle in the USA and DPRK approaches is the following. White House working team headed by National Security Advisor John Bolton argue that Donald Trump should escape from signing any kind of documents imposed some commitments on the USA. Contrary Pyongyang is striving for signing the road map containing fixed obligation of each side related to every stage of the process.

The Korean Peninsula Security Perspective.

- If the 2018 positive trends concerning both Inter-Korean cooperation and the USA-DPRK relations gradual improvement would continue a new type of inter-Korean ties may start to be formed and American-DPRK and American-South Korean relations may start being modernized in a substantial way. This may provide the basis for a renewed structure of international relations on the Korean Peninsula and around it, a structure in which the intra-Korean factor would play a much more independent role.