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THE UNCERTAIN RESULTS OF THE SINGAPORE SUMMIT AND THE ROLE OF CHINA

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Today, Friday 6th of July, Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, has visited North Korea for trying to have a follow-up of the commitments agreed between the United States and North Korea after the historical meeting between President Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un, that took place on the past 12th of June in Singapore. The summit, the first one between incumbent leaders of the two countries, seems to have laid the groundwork for a possible normalization of the relation between the International Community and North Korea, after it has been deteriorated due to repeated nuclear tests conducted by Pyongyang in the last three years. The joint declaration signed by Trump and Kim, in fact, should pave the way for defusing the nuclear threat in the area and for a stabilization of the security environment in Northeast Asia.

However, nothing has been clearly defined so far and several question marks are still pending. Even if the two leaders easily agreed on the basic principles for reviving the bilateral relation, the negotiators' task could be more complicated, as they will have to shed the light on the schedule, procedures and, above all, the required concessions from both sides to turn the political declarations into a long-lasting program. In particular, the biggest troubles in implementing the deal could come from the two issues that have been at the base of the concord between Trump and Kim: the denuclearization and the security guarantees for the North Korean leader.

The dismantling of Pyongyang's atomic program is indispensable for carrying on the new diplomatic season inaugurated at the beginning of the year that reached the diplomatic peak in Singapore. In the past, the attempts made during both the Clinton Administration and the Bush Administration failed because of North Korea's lack of success in keeping its commitments of giving up the nuclear capabilities. Although the issue is part of the final declaration of the summit, not only the practical details, but also the interpretation that the two leaders have given to this process have to yet be made clear. It will be to clarify whether the commitment to eliminate any atomic facilities concerns only North Korea, as Trump pointed out, or the Korean Peninsula, as reported in the final text. This

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difference, in fact, leaves open the possibility that the renunciation of military nuclear capability by Pyongyang goes hand in hand with the definitive withdrawal of US strategic capabilities from the region, thus putting an end to that nuclear umbrella with which Washington had so far exercised a deterrence in favor of its Japanese and South Korean allies.

Likewise, the sustainability of the dialogue in the near future will also depend on the security guarantees that President Trump has pledged to provide to North Korea, to allay any fear of a possible regime change attempt against the Kim's family. Having suspended the military drills with South Korea, which had been one of the reasons of North Korean government's disappointment few weeks from the summit, the Trump Administration will now have to evaluate if and how to transform what has just been a sign of relaxation so far in a real rethinking of US presence in the region. Although it is unlikely that the White House agrees to completely withdraw US Forces from the Korean Peninsula, even a possible downsizing of numbers would represent a factor of profound change for both the equation with the allies and for the more general balance across the area.

In such an unsettled scenario, with several thorny pending issues, the US legitimation of a negotiation with North Korea differs from the Trump Administration's intransigent attitude in defining the condition for an appeasement with Pyongyang in the previous months. The softening of the US position seems to have been the result not so much of a Kim's demonstration of strength, who approached the White House with an acquired nuclear capacity, but rather the need to take into account the presence and interests of a third fundamental actor in the equation, that is China.

Although Beijing has not played a leading role in Pyongyang's process over the past six months, the current situation seems to have been shaped by its long-hand. The Chinese President, Xi Jinping, in fact, has always called for a diplomatic solution to the tensions that brought the region to the brink of a nuclear crisis only six months ago. The Chinese government has always refused the US

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approach of taking into consideration a preemptive attack for neutralizing North Korea's threat, as it was in China's interest to prevent a military conflict just outside its border. On the one hand, because North Korea has always been an indispensable pad to keep US forces stationed in South Korea below the 38th parallel. On the other hand, because a sudden collapse of the neighbor could have generated an uncontrolled flow of refugees, with effects for Beijing both in humanitarian costs and internal security.

The inauguration of a new season of dialogue with Pyongyang, therefore, could be the result of traditional Chinese pragmatism. Indeed, Beijing could have supported a solution that would allow it to balance the need to ensure the survival of its neighbor with the interest in re-dimensioning the negative externalities produced by Kim's politics, which have created problems and embarrassments for China itself on several occasions. The relationship between Xi's China and Kim's Korea has always been based on a necessary cohabitation rather than on a desired alliance. Linked by economic and commercial reasons, over the last four years the two countries have progressively cooled their political relationship, so much so to reduce the already sporadic opportunities for dialogue to a minimum. There are several reasons for the strain of the relationship. First of all, the execution of Kim's uncle, Jang Song-thaek, China's interlocutor in Pyongyang and supporter of a reform inspired by the Chinese model. The charge of conspiracy and the sentence to death not only closed the channel of direct communication, but also created a feeling of distrust between the two governments and cooled down the diplomatic relations. Secondly, the North Korean regime's nuclear ambition and the development of the missile program have triggered an escalation of tensions with the surrounding countries totally unpopular to the Chinese government. The repeated provocations from North Korea, in fact, have allowed South Korea and Japan to turn to the United States to strengthen their defense devices, as well as the Pentagon itself to deploy more military assets in the area, both for deterrence and as a form of protection for the allies. Such arms race has been in contrast with China's interests, for which a greater US presence as well as an increase in

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Seoul's and Tokyo's defensive capabilities represent a dangerous change in regional balances. Especially at a time when China's projection of influence is pushing its rivals to try to contain its rise, the escalation of tensions caused by North Korea has attracted too much attention and too much pressure on Beijing behind its borders. The strong controversy that arose with the South Korean government for the installation of the THAAD anti-missile system was the most striking example of how the North Korean threat directly affected the Chinese government's perception of security.

The attitude of the North Korean regime, therefore, has significantly changed the balance of interests that in the past had led China to give a hand to its neighbor, in order to ensure its stability and survival even in conditions of international isolation. This change and China's restiveness toward Kim's policy appeared when Chinese government agreed on the new sanctions imposed by the United Nations against the regime, interrupting or resizing its trade relations with North Korea. Beijing's alignment with the International Community and the Chinese government's crackdown on illicit trafficking between the two States seem to have been fundamental for increasing the efficacy of the sanctions. Lost its traditional protector and the smuggling activities, that had allowed it to resist international sanctions in the past, the North Korean government has looked at the possibility of opening a dialogue to prevent any dangerous malcontents from emerging within the system.

It is hard to assume that Pyongyang managed alone the resumption of contacts with the surrounding countries, too. On the contrary, it seems that China exerted a discrete but substantial influence, which has allowed it to remain on the sideline while being fully aware of the outcome of the events. In fact, Kim visited Beijing before the two historic meetings with the South Korean President, Moon Jae-in, and with Trump (on March 27th and May 8th respectively), which inaugurated what should be a new season of relations between North Korea and the International Community. The two meetings, which were the first visits of Kim Jong-un in China since he took over the regime,

seem to suggest that Kim wanted to confer with Xi before these important events and that the Chinese President could have somehow advised the younger neighbor on how to handle such a sensitive issue.

Despite the results of this new opening are still rather vague, the process seems to be going, so far, in a direction that could prove to be beneficial for China. First of all, because the will to start a dialogue could in the short term justify a lifting of the sanctions that are still in force against Pyongyang. Although Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has ruled out any relief before a complete denuclearization, the complexity of the negotiation, as already highlighted, could make unsustainable the choice of not granting any concession for encouraging the convergence on common points. Indeed, it would risk endangering any further consultation. A possible opening in this direction could favor the resumption of trade exchanges between the two countries and would allow China to resume the import of mineral resources and fish products, which are crucial for the national economy. If this would result in an indisputable but limited benefit, the most important results could emerge in the medium-long term, once the dialogue between Pyongyang and the International Community has been structured.

North Korea's opening to external relations through negotiations, in fact, would allow Beijing to have important windows of opportunity for trying to take advantages from a rebalance in the region. Firstly, from a political point of view. The reintegration of North Korea into the international environment would allow China to have a new interlocutor on whom it could exert considerable influence and to include it in the alliances Beijing has for consolidating its status as the epicenter of a new global governance order. If until last year the connections with the North Korean regime created more embarrassments than benefits for China, to date Kim has been officially recognized as a legitimate leader of a sovereign State, which seems to be interested in getting into a new era of modernity.

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inspiration for creating a socialist system oriented to growth and economic development, in order to recreate with Pyongyang the link that the two countries had until the previous generation and that could be fundamental in redefining regional balances. In the Northeast Asian environment, where the condemnation of the North Korean regime has always been a common point for China, Japan and South Korea, despite their opposing interests, the normalization of relations with the Kim family could now have an important weight in regional relations. A politically stronger North Korea, in fact, would inevitably have a role in defining new relations within the Korean Peninsula and, consequently, in the whole area. For this reason, an influence exerted north of the 38th parallel could allow Beijing to find a new shore to manage the new balance of power.

Furthermore, the normalization of North Korea's relations with the other countries could have positive repercussions for China also in the field of security. If the negotiation set out in the final Declaration of the Singapore summit would actually lead to a reshape of the US presence in the Pacific, China would undoubtedly benefit from it. Indeed, this would allow Chinese government to easily carry on the maritime claims in the South China Sea. The possible normalization of relations with North Korea could make US military presence in the region less justifiable. This downsizing would allow China to act more freely for increasing its influence in the disputed waters. If the military forces deployed by the United States in the area have restrained China from forcing its hand so far, the lower availability of US assets would allow Beijing to carry out the construction of islands beyond the Strait of Malacca and to be more assertive in the fortifications of outposts in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, the lack of US deterrence would represent for the Chinese government a benefit that could be spent in the long run. Indeed, it would not only give China more space of maneuver, but it would especially exclude the United States from an important theater of the competition in the Pacific.

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