

## **Bargaining and BATNAs: Why Did Moon Jae-in’s Unprecedented *Détente* Effort Nonetheless Fail to Change the Inter–Korean Stalemate?\***

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South Korean President Moon Jae-In pushed harder for a transformational inter–Korean *détente* than any of his predecessors. That his tremendous effort still failed demands explanation. This paper suggests four interlocking reasons, derived from bargaining theory applications in foreign policy analysis: 1) The North Korean Kim Jong Un regime, secure behind its nuclear weapons and domestic repression, preferred its status quo BATNA (best alternative to a negotiated agreement) to the capacious American demand for complete, verifiable, irreversible disarmament. Pyongyang can afford to wait for the Americans to offer better terms. 2) South Korean centrist and conservative ‘veto-players,’ trading on the high popularity of the U.S. alliance in South Korea, blocked Moon from pursuing a Korea—only negotiating track after U.S.–North Korea negotiations stagnated—including a ‘future veto’ threat to roll back Moon’s *détente* when conservatives next won the South Korean presidency. 3) U.S. domestic players, of unique importance in South Korea because of the tight alliance, also resisted. Moon and U.S. President Donald Trump were unable to win over the deeply skeptical U.S. foreign policy community. 4) Cognitively, Trump himself undercut Moon’s effort as much he helped it. Trump’s impatience, disinterest in detail, and general disorganization crippled him as a reliable negotiating counterparty for Moon (and Kim). This paper concludes with a narrative of these causes dynamically interacting to illustrate the collapse of Moon’s initiative.

**Keywords:** *détente*, Moon Jae-In, Donald Trump, North Korea, United States, South Korea, veto players, bargaining, foreign policy analysis, international negotiation

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## Introduction

As Moon Jae-In approaches the end of his term as president of the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), it is increasingly clear that his engagement with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) will not substantially alter the status quo on the Korean peninsula. The failure of yet another rapprochement effort in Korea cries out for explanation, because Moon made a greater effort at a more transformative *détente* than any of his presidential predecessors. Moon even managed to corral a sitting U.S. president into meeting a North Korean supreme leader, a historic first in negotiations with the North and one which raised high hopes.

South Korea's left-liberal presidents—Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003), Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008), and Moon—all sought *détente* and negotiated breakthroughs with Pyongyang. The ROK left is dovish and engagement-oriented regarding North Korea. Each of its presidents had summits with a Northern leader. Moon pursued *détente* more aggressively than Kim or Roh, even risking tension with ROK allies, who are typically more hawkish on the DPRK than South Korean progressives. Moon elevated transformation of inter-Korean relations to the core foreign policy aspiration of his government,<sup>1</sup> spoke routinely of his desire for a breakthrough,<sup>2</sup> and tried to mediate U.S.–North Korea differences.

More broadly, *détente* is a long-standing goal of South Korean progressives.<sup>3</sup> Decades of policy development in major venues—in journals like *Global Asia* or the *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* and think-tanks like the Jeju Peace Institute or the Korean Institute for National Unification—stood behind Moon's effort. And in Donald Trump, South Korean doves had, for the first time, a U.S. president willing to personally negotiate with the DPRK and its leader. Previous U.S. presidents had rejected such summits for fear of legitimizing North Korea, and from moral discomfort over the DPRK's totalitarian politics.<sup>4</sup>

Despite all this, the negotiations between Moon, Trump, and Northern leader Kim Jong Un returned little. The empirical situation on the ground is essentially unchanged. The North Korean People's Army (KPA) is still flush against the South Korean border with its artillery pointed at the ROK capital Seoul. The North resumed missile tests in 2021. It has not relinquished any elements of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program. Human rights in North Korea have not improved.<sup>5</sup> Progressive aspirations such as a peace treaty, end-of-war declaration, and re-opening of the Kaesong Industrial Zone, remain unfulfilled.<sup>6</sup> The Kim family cult-autocracy is unchanged.<sup>7</sup> By almost any metric, there has been little empirical change.<sup>8</sup>

The question, then, of this paper is: why did the Trump–Kim–Moon summitry fail to clinch a deal which genuinely changed the peninsular status quo, despite five years of concentrated effort by the most engagement-oriented president in South Korean history, plus a reasonably cooperative U.S. president for three of those years?

Because the summitry was an international negotiation, this paper answers this

question with the tools of bargaining theory, as applied in the foreign policy analysis (FPA) literature of international relations theory.<sup>9</sup> The paper proceeds as follows:

First, a theoretical review of bargaining in FPA suggests four explanatory variables—three domestic political and one cognitive—for Moon’s failure: domestic ‘veto-players’ in each of the three negotiating countries, plus Trump’s capricious leadership.

The next four sections process–trace each variable in the Trump–Moon–Kim negotiations.

Finally, a ‘narrative’ of these variables synergistically undermining Moon’s effort is presented, concluding with two notes for future research.

## Theory and Argument

Bargaining explanations in FPA frequently begin from structural realist theories of international relations emphasizing the distribution of power.<sup>10</sup> This suggests that the United States, with vastly greater economic capacity and military capability than North Korea, should be able to force its preferences on Pyongyang. Trump, with his belligerent negotiating style, seemed to anticipate this.<sup>11</sup> Yet North Korea made only one mildly concessionary offer (at the Hanoi 2019 summit) on the core issues of DRPK WMD and concordant multilateral sanctions, and showed little evident anxiety over U.S. escalation when Trump gave up on Korea in late 2019. When structuralism underperforms like this,<sup>12</sup> FPA enriches explanation with other theory—international negotiation theory, two-level games analysis, game theory, and so on—which frequently focuses on domestic actors and processes like political coalitions or individual leadership.<sup>13</sup>

An emerging FPA literature on Moon’s *détente* already utilizes these unit-level variables, and this paper fits into that research.<sup>14</sup> Much of it focuses on the particulars of the Hanoi 2019 summit, because there Trump and Kim exchanged their most serious offers. Park Ihn-Hwi<sup>15</sup> particularly argues that a Trump–Kim deal fell through because domestic political anxiety drove both leaders to shrink their “win-sets”—Robert Putnam’s helpful term for a deal’s mix of concessions and gains which negotiators will accept and present at home for ratification<sup>16</sup>—to the point where they longer overlapped. Park argues that Trump faced scandal and investigation in the United States and sought an excessively balance-positive deal from Kim in order to change the subject at home, perhaps by even winning a Nobel Peace Prize. Conversely, Kim felt post–Hanoi pressure from the KPA to negotiate harder, because the Hanoi summit proved the Americans were too demanding. Building on these insights, this paper steps back to look at the larger constraints across Moon’s entire effort.

Douglas Stuart and Yuen Khong counsel FPA research begin with the dependent variable—here, the failure of Moon’s transformative vision—and then search for

relevant independent variables.<sup>17</sup> Khong recommends FPA ‘construct a narrative’ of an outcome with these variables. This paper follows that proposal by identifying four unit-level independent variables for Moon’s troubles, and then weaving them into an integrated causal story:

In brief, the domestic politics of all three countries—North Korea, South Korea, and the United States—tilted against the large concessions, or generous win-sets, necessary for a transformative breakthrough. Unsurprisingly among states with a long history of confrontation, major domestic players in each—such as North Korea’s elite, ROK conservatives, and much of the U.S. foreign policy community—preferred what negotiation theory terms the “BATNA” (best alternative to a negotiated agreement<sup>18</sup>) of the status quo to the uncertainties of the revolution in peninsular affairs which Moon sought. Exacerbating and synergizing all that anxiety was the outlandish behavior and intermittent commitment of American-side negotiator Trump.

These four interlocking variables can be broken out in the language of FPA bargaining theory:

### ***North Korea: No Hurting Stalemate***

International negotiation theorist William Zartman argues that states in conflict choose to bargain after reaching a “mutually hurting stalemate” (MHS)<sup>19</sup> of exhaustion. North Korea—more specifically, the Kim regime—is not at that point. The regime elite is well insulated against pressure, internationally by its nuclear weapons, and domestically by its extensive repression. Plus, it has long experience evading sanctions. So, Kim and the top leadership can afford to hold out for a better offer than Trump’s at Hanoi. The narrow but consolidated autocracy in Pyongyang functions as an elite blocking coalition against its own suffering population, the primary would-be beneficiaries of sanctions relief in a deal.

### ***South Korea: Domestic Veto-Players***

FPA emphasizes the role of veto-players within democracies who prevent leader-negotiators from making credible international commitments.<sup>20</sup> In South Korea, domestic conservatives played this role by hampering Moon’s pursuit of an independent inter-Korean negotiating track when U.S.–DRPK negotiations stagnated. And they threatened to unravel Moon’s effort entirely on re-taking the presidency in the future. The U.S. alliance is very popular in South Korea, and hawks were closely attuned to any Moon freelancing with North Korea which might upset Washington. Hence, Moon lacked the domestic capital to sidestep the Americans and engage North Korea alone. His inter-Korean efforts were locked to the (slow) pace of U.S.–DPRK negotiation, and North Korea gave up meaningfully negotiating with Seoul alone.

### *America: ‘Three-Level Games’ in an Alliance*

Two-level game models<sup>21</sup> position an international negotiator in contention with both another country and his own country’s politics, where a domestic coalition to support her international deal is necessary. Yet tight alliances can introduce a third ‘board’ of contention.<sup>22</sup> Moon not only had to contend with Kim abroad and wary conservatives at home, but he also had to bring the Americans along because of deep support for the U.S. alliance in South Korea. Yet Moon never convinced South Korea’s democratic partners, most importantly the United States, that North Korea was trustworthy. Hence, United Nations (UN) sanctions on the DPRK were never unilaterally loosened. That loosening, Moon hoped, would goad North Korean counter-concessions, in turn igniting the U.S.–DPRK negotiating track, in turn reducing domestic conservative opposition to an inter-Korean track. None of that happened.

### *Trump: Commitment and Cognition*

A focus on Trump is more appropriately a psychological than unit-level or domestic variable. So Trump fits awkwardly with the causal chain presented so far, with its focus on domestic political constraints. But Trump’s cognitive limitations and “bounded rationality”—concepts well developed in the negotiation literature<sup>23</sup>—were extreme and troublesome for Moon (and Kim). Trump was erratic, unfocused, impetuous, and often simply lazy. Given the centrality of the United States to a resolution of Korea’s dilemmas and the scale of the issues to be resolved—Moon’s hoped-for transformation was akin to the 1972 opening of China or the 1978 Camp David Accords—Moon was severely constrained by Trump’s limitations as a statesman. This is also a topic for future research, because the bargaining literature anticipates a negotiator’s basic commitment to process which Trump never demonstrated.

Finally, the unified narrative of these variables, per Khong, would be, in brief: The secure North Korean regime elite felt no strategic need to succumb to America’s capacious demand for complete, verifiable, irreversible disarmament (CVID), crippling U.S.–DPRK negotiations right from the start. This, in turn, crippled Moon’s local efforts. Moon could neither delink South Korea from the United States—because of domestic hawkish opposition and strong alliance support—nor budge the Americans (and Europeans) from CVID and sanctions—because much of the Western foreign policy community was deeply skeptical of the whole process, including of Trump himself. In the end, Moon and his progressive domestic bloc had only Trump as an ally, who, despite being U.S. president, proved to be an inconsistent, unreliable counterparty. When Trump lost interest in Korea in 2019 after his third summit with Kim, Moon could pull nothing more out of the Americans—not even an end-of-war declaration—and the entire effort collapsed.

The next four sections process-trace these four variables in detail.

## North Korea Can Afford to Wait

International negotiation theory<sup>24</sup> focuses on the distance between parties and how to shrink it. Unsurprisingly, the strategic gap between the United States and the DPRK over the latter's WMD programs is yawning. The failure of these two primary parties to strike a meaningful deal overshadowed all of Moon's adjacent efforts.

North Korea and the United States entered negotiations far apart in 2018, and their ostensible goal of a massive breakthrough deal required enormous mutual concessions. Yet the United States came making a demand—CVID—unprecedented in the history of nuclear weapons, while the North, conversely, came unwilling to cede much at all. The parties' BATNA-space was wide, and their ZOPA-space (zone of possible agreement) was narrow.<sup>25</sup> Both brazenly walked away from ostensibly historic talks in Hanoi, strongly suggesting that neither felt Zartman's MHS.

The negotiation literature flags the role of trusted mediators in expanding negotiators' win-sets to create a wider ZOPA.<sup>26</sup> Moon clearly perceived the long Korean deadlock as an MHS<sup>27</sup> in need of resolution. He was willing to make large concessions on the ROK side. Yet as a U.S.–DPRK mediator, he moved neither Kim nor Trump to softer positions. Indeed, they pointedly excluded him from their summits, and Trump made clear his personal dislike for Moon.<sup>28</sup> Moon's failure with Kim is particularly noteworthy given their cultural similarity and the unique opportunity Moon had, in the Moon–Kim summits, to contradict the informational conformity which typically surround autocrats.<sup>29</sup>

North Korea almost certainly perceived America's demand for CVID as a deal-breaker from the very start.<sup>30</sup> CVID is nearly indistinguishable from unilateral disarmament, an extraordinary demand to make of any state, and certainly of a country in North Korea's difficult geopolitical circumstances. The strategic logic for North Korean nuclear weaponization has long been known and understood, certainly before Trump assumed the American presidency.<sup>31</sup> North Korea is a small, economically backward state, surrounded by hostile or indifferent countries, conventionally militarily inferior to those arrayed against it, and with little chance of catching up. Nuclear weapons are a critical military equalizer.

So the American win-set of CVID was almost certainly too much for Pyongyang, which, in turn, hampered everything else. Dovish and realist analysts sensed early that America's high CVID bar would preclude any ZOPA and end negotiations before they began. They encouraged Washington not to fixate on nuclear weapons and to experiment with Moon's wider vision of *détente*.<sup>32</sup> And South Korea has generally fretted less over the North's nuclear weapons than its overseas democratic partners, if only because the DPRK is already a massive conventional threat to the ROK.

Against this large American demand, Pyongyang elites likely perceived their bargaining position, both internationally and domestically, to be reasonably good. The status quo was the Kimist elite's BATNA, and because of high regime security,

that elite could afford to wait for the United States to shift its ZOPA space toward Pyongyang's preferences.

Internationally, American leverage over the North is poor despite apparent asymmetry. Northern nuclear weapons atop intercontinental ballistic missiles mean that U.S. military threats against the DPRK lack credibility. The North can massively retaliate directly against the American homeland, so the United States is unlikely to militarily escalate after a negotiation failure. Similarly, possible Northern conventional or nuclear retaliation against South Korea or Japan—close U.S. allies of many decades—further constrains America's kinetic options. Unlike America's contests with weak adversaries in the Middle East, U.S. military options outside the bargaining table are highly circumscribed in northeast Asia, strengthening Pyongyang's bargaining hand.

Domestically, the Kim regime is also quite secure. There has never been a revolt against Kimist rule in North Korea, and the apparatus of repression is extensive and brutal. The Kims feel no direct pressure from voters or citizens to make foreign concessions to improve domestic living conditions or roll back sanctions. The ruling elite has also long since learned how to push the cost of sanctions from itself onto the population.<sup>33</sup> Nor do the Kims care about the immiseration of their own people as the cost of their bargaining intransigence. That the suffering of their own population does not expand their ZOPA is an extraordinary—and extraordinarily callous—negotiating advantage.

As an autocracy where public opinion is excluded from politics, the narrow but consolidated Pyongyang-based regime effectively acts as elite blocking coalition against the rest of the country, who would benefit from an international deal including sanctions relief. In the language of two-level game theory, North Korea negotiators feel little pressure from the domestic board to make international concessions, nor fear holding fast to a small win-set on the international board.

Despite the Moon government's hope to widen the U.S.–DPRK negotiation aperture beyond WMD, the U.S. demand for CVID has been a bipartisan constant across the presidencies of Trump and Joseph Biden.<sup>34</sup> It is unknown if the North would consider sub-CVID concessions, such as inspectors or weapons limits, as these have not been seriously debated. Instead, the United States and its core allies continue to insist on CVID,<sup>35</sup> which will likely cripple post–Moon negotiations as well.

### **Moon's Minority Coalition**

Much democratic FPA<sup>36</sup> focuses on whether leader–negotiators have enough support at home—in legislatures, relevant bureaucracies, opposition parties, and so on—to achieve acceptance, ideally ratification, of international deals, with more expansive deals requiring more expansive domestic support. Moon struggled here.

Moon proposed a transformation, arguably a revolution, in ROK–DRPK relations, including proposals such as ending the Korean War, some mutual inter–Korean recognition, a “peace regime,” and a “peace economy.”<sup>37</sup> Some of these changes were so considerable that they might even conflict with the ROK constitution’s insistence that the ROK is the sole legitimate government on the peninsula. Given South Korea’s sharp left-right/dove-hawk polarization on North Korea policy,<sup>38</sup> South Korea’s conservatives were likely to oppose Moon’s dramatic reorientation, with centrists skittish as well.

Yet Moon, relying on the broad foreign policy powers of the ROK presidency, made little effort to reach out to his skeptics to build a transpartisan majority—rather than just progressive minority—coalition in support of transformation.<sup>39</sup> That minority progressive coalition was incommensurate with the scale of Moon’s proposed revolution and too narrow to seriously challenge America—given the popularity of the U.S.–ROK alliance in South Korea—over its intransigent CVID win-set.

Specifically, Moon never enjoyed a supportive domestic coalition large enough to either: a) make big, unilateral concessions to the North—on sanctions particularly<sup>40</sup>—to ignite serious give-and-take diplomacy with Pyongyang; or b) break seriously with the Americans to pursue his own inter–Korean *détente* against Washington’s opposition. Moon’s leftist coalition was more skeptical on the U.S. alliance and keen on North Korea engagement than other South Korean partisan positions. Its left–liberal voters might have been willing to damage the U.S. relationship to pursue a North Korea breakthrough.<sup>41</sup> But without wider support, this left–minority coalition would have faced punishing domestic criticism for such a move, not just from conservatives but from centrists too.<sup>42</sup>

Anti-communist conservatives were probably always beyond Moon’s reach, always would-be veto-players in the debate over his policies. Implacably opposed to North Korea on principle, these hard right voters would have likely rejected Moon’s solicitations to resolve the Korean conflict on mixed, rather than strictly Southern, terms.<sup>43</sup> But crucially, and curiously, Moon never bothered to try. He made no serious use of the ROK presidency’s bully pulpit to solicit these voters. No programmatic speeches were made, perhaps at a church given the religiosity of these voters, explaining that he, Moon, understood their concerns about the integrity and sovereignty of the ROK, but perhaps a new way was worth a try after decades of hostility and stalemate. This indifference peremptorily spurned about 30 percent of the electorate,<sup>44</sup> alienated the right from Moon’s North Korea initiative, and sparked conspiracy theories about his intentions.<sup>45</sup> The outcome of this alienation is, in 2022, even worse left-right polarization on North Korea, with Moon speaking of “irreversible”<sup>46</sup> *détente*, while the conservative 2022 presidential candidate defended preemptively bombing North Korea.

Similarly, Moon made no concerted effort to solicit centrist voters. These voters too comprise about 30 percent of the electorate.<sup>47</sup> They are the median voters who

determine outcomes in South Korea's polarized electoral politics.<sup>48</sup> Unlike the hard right, these voters are not automatically ideologically hostile to negotiating with North Korea.<sup>49</sup> But they are nervous about moves which might alienate the Americans and jeopardize the U.S. alliance.<sup>50</sup> Moon never figured out how to finesse the anxiety of these voters with American discomfort over his *détente*.<sup>51</sup> Nor did he address this apprehension forthrightly, leading to repeated instances where he would suggest a new *détente* idea only to face pushback from the Americans and then from unnerved Korean voters and media outlets.<sup>52</sup> Moon's *détente* was a deep personal policy commitment<sup>53</sup> but also remote, with the voters, especially nervous opponents, rarely solicited to shape or invest in it.

In the end, these conservative and centrist veto-players stripped Moon of the breadth of domestic backing necessary to risk antagonizing the Americans by making unilateral concessions to the North. Left-progressives represent approximately 40 percent of the electorate. This is not a national majority and not large enough to make *détente* "irreversible." Indeed, if the right wins the South Korean presidency in 2022, one easy prediction is that it will roll back Moon's progressive agenda, just as it rolled back the Sunshine Policy after the last left-to-right presidential transition in 2008.

More broadly, South Korea's right-left foreign policy polarization makes "irreversible" transformations in its foreign policy difficult and prone to rollback when the opposition re-takes the presidency. North Korea policy now swings sharply after partisan presidential transitions, such as in 1999, 2008, and 2017. Moon's final year emphasis on "irreversibility" is a recognition of this eventuality. He is trying to lock-in or future-proof his efforts against a political swing back to the right. Interestingly, this effort suggests the existence of a future or 'intertemporal veto,' as opposition partisans in a polarized electorate undermine credible international commitments today with threatened reversals tomorrow. This finding is presented in the conclusion as a question for future research.

Polarization is compounded by South Korea's highly presidentialized constitutional architecture.<sup>54</sup> Like France, South Korea has an extraordinarily powerful presidency. This tempts its occupants to reverse the policies of opposition predecessors and sidestep the National Assembly and public opinion. Because the president serves only one term, s/he faces less pressure to solicit the public.

These factors converged in Moon's aloof *détente* effort. As president, he could mostly ignore the National Assembly, and he did. Moon never submitted any of his various agreements with North Korea to the legislature, relying instead on the Ministry of Government Legislation to declare them valid.<sup>55</sup> Because Moon does not face re-election, there was little pressure to make concessions to centrist or conservative voters over his *détente*. Instead, Moon pushed ahead with only his progressive bloc behind him. But he did not seem to anticipate the pull of the U.S. alliance on many voters. Whenever his proposals attracted American criticism, he did not have the nation-wide, transpartisan support to fight it out with Washington.

## **America the Unconvinced**

South Korean leaders face a curious ‘three-level game’: domestic variables in a core alliance partner also constrain them. Given the tight, enduring, and popular U.S. alliance, ROK negotiators must also sway American elites, particularly the foreign policy community, before pursuing transformative ventures.<sup>56</sup> In recognition of the importance of this third ‘board’ in South Korean foreign policy-making, ROK presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye both spoke to the U.S. Congress, and South Korean lobbying expenses in the United States are usually in among the top five lobbying countries.<sup>57</sup>

Moon struggled on this third plane. He was unable to move the United States from its traditional hawkishness on North Korea, particularly its insistence on the capacious, ZOPA–shrinking demand of CVID. Moon sought to cross–pressure the Americans on European trips in 2018 and 2021.<sup>58</sup> This failed; the European Union’s (EU) 2017 statement in support of CVID and sanctions is still EU policy.<sup>59</sup> Worse, American and South Korean hawks began transnationally aligning to resist Moon’s efforts.<sup>60</sup>

Moon never convinced South Korea’s core partners in the community of democracies—the peer community he accepted for the ROK<sup>61</sup>—that North Korea was trustworthy enough to risk a unilateral sanctions rollback, or that rollback would spark negotiations and Northern counter–concessions. He could not dislodge the allied fear that the North would simply pocket any sanctions relief, not meaningfully counter–concede, and then use restored access to the world economy to import in support of its WMD programs.

South Korea’s primary democratic partners in grappling with the North Korea problem are the United States, EU, and Japan. The United States, of course, was Moon’s central focus. It is a formal treaty ally of South Korea. For decades, it has geopolitically backstopped the ROK’s access to the world economy—enhancing its safety as a location of inward foreign direct investment, reducing its borrowing costs in overseas financial markets, making foreign travel and education easier, and so on. This generalized sense of enhanced security and consequent prosperity is likely the reason for the alliance’s popularity and for Moon’s inability, noted above, to bring the ROK population with him in breaking with the Americans to pursue a Korea–only track.

Moon’s suasion on the American alliance board focused solely on Trump, whom he relentlessly flattered.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, it was Moon who likely planted the notion in Trump’s mind that he might win a Nobel Prize for meeting Kim. This appeared to work at first. Trump notoriously declared that he and Kim Jong Un “fell in love” (September 30, 2018), and he directed the U.S. Treasury to relax sanctions enforcement to solicit Kim’s responsiveness.<sup>63</sup> Trump even met Kim personally three times in 2018–19, raising Moon’s hopes that a breakthrough was at hand at last.<sup>64</sup>

Yet Moon and Trump were unable to pull the U.S. foreign policy community along with them. Trump was effectively alone in that community in his desire to embrace the

North, making the entire effort dependent on him personally. Even close foreign policy staff, such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton, sought to inhibit a Trump–Kim deal for fear that Trump was more interested in headlines than strategy.<sup>65</sup> And Moon made surprisingly little effort to win over U.S. foreign policy elites. He made just one speech to a Washington think-tank,<sup>66</sup> and he never sought to address Congress, as his predecessors did, to outline his transformative vision and solicit Congressional support.

The American foreign policy establishment, acting as an informal veto-player, never warmed to Trump’s enthusiasm for Kim, reading it as shallow and media-driven rather than sincere.<sup>67</sup> Trump himself recognized this widespread establishment skepticism. Anticipating continued domestic criticism that he was coddling a dictator, he said after his second meeting with Kim, in Hanoi: “I could’ve signed an agreement today, and then you people would’ve said, ‘Oh, what a terrible deal. What a terrible thing he did.’ . . . You know, I was watching as a lot of you folks over the weeks have said, ‘Oh, we’ve given up.’ We haven’t given up anything.”<sup>68</sup> And in the end, Trump, despite his longing for a Nobel, rejected Kim’s Hanoi offer. FPA identifies treaty ratification protocols as a critical veto-point in democracies,<sup>69</sup> and it is highly unlikely Trump could have won U.S. Senate support for serious concessions to Pyongyang.

Moon and Trump faced a high hurdle in Washington. As Patrick Porter notes,<sup>70</sup> the U.S. foreign policy establishment is broadly committed to a forward, liberal internationalist U.S. grand strategy. In that frame, North Korea is variously a rogue state, Orwellian tyranny, or Marxist relic, and, crucially, that hawkish understanding of the DPRK is bipartisan in America, unlike in South Korea. There is little U.S. policy polarization on the North, and there are few doves. As noted above, both Republican Trump and Democrat Biden cleaved to CVID, reflecting the hawkish, cross-party consensus in the United States regarding North Korea.

Complementing traditional anti-communism on the U.S. right, America’s liberal party, the Democrats, are also hawkish on North Korea. As a presidential candidate, Biden consistently criticized Trump for his dovishness on the North and expressed continuing support for sanctions.<sup>71</sup> As president, Biden’s DPRK policy review did not advocate sanctions relief, further Trump-style summit diplomacy, nor any other serious deviation from the traditional tough U.S. line.<sup>72</sup> Neither Trump’s desire for positive media coverage from a North Korea deal, nor center–left ideological compatibility between Moon and Biden, was enough to win either Trump or Biden over to “irreversible” *détente*. Indeed, no major institution in the U.S. foreign policy network switched or newly swung into support for unilateral sanctions relief or an otherwise more generous win-set during Moon’s presidency.<sup>73</sup>

In short, Moon could win over Trump, however briefly, likely due to Trump’s vanity and desire for a Nobel Prize. But this did not filter down to the crucial player on the American alliance board, the Washington-based foreign policy community, including Biden who had long served on the U.S. Senate’s Foreign Relations

committee. FPA predicts bureaucratic resistance to deeply unpopular presidential initiatives in democracies,<sup>74</sup> and Trump faced that throughout his engagement with Kim. So once Trump, alone in his desire to negotiate with North Korea, lost interest in late 2019, Moon's *détente* stalled for lack of U.S. partners.

## **Trump the Unreliable**

Trump sits awkwardly with the domestic coalitional emphasis of this paper, namely that Moon faced tough oppositional blocs on all three negotiation boards. But bargaining theories unsurprisingly, stress individual negotiators too.<sup>75</sup> And Trump is such an extreme outlier in those theories' expectations of negotiator behavior, that he is impossible to ignore.

Indeed, Moon himself tagged Trump as the primary reason for summitry's failure, against the more political claims made here: "He beat around the bush and failed to pull it through."<sup>76</sup> Despite likely motivated reasoning, Moon's assessment is probably accurate given Trump's famously wandering attention, poor preparation, disinterest in detail, and general laziness.<sup>77</sup> John Bolton's writing on Trump's dalliance with Kim Jong Un broadly supports Moon's characterization.<sup>78</sup> And Trump's angry, denigrating response to Moon—accusing him of being "weak" and "never respected" by Kim—also strongly suggests Moon hit the mark.<sup>79</sup>

It is now fairly apparent from first-hand accounts that Trump's interest in the Korean peninsula flowed mostly from the reputational value of securing a breakthrough, rather than from the strategic or substantive issues themselves. That is, Trump apparently hoped that a deal with North Korea on the order of opening China, or the Camp David Accords, would win him a Nobel Peace Prize, acclaim from the media, and a place in history. Trump did not actually care much about Korea, U.S. power in Asia, or America's network of alliances.

This is a hard case for FPA. In the language of two-level games, Trump played on the international board to win psychic validation on the domestic board, a bizarre psychological inversion of Putnam's expectations and a possibility nowhere considered in Eugénia da Conceição-Heldt and Patrick Mello's review of the two-level game literature.<sup>80</sup> Trump's cognitive biases also ran against the literature's expectations.<sup>81</sup> He scarcely prepared for the summits, despite the complex history and issues at stake and his lust for a Nobel. He loathed his own democratic partners and admired autocrats. He read American partners in transactional, almost mafiosi, terms—they were either "ripping off" the United States, or they had to pay up for American protection. And Trump had a particular loathing for South Korea.<sup>82</sup>

To elaborate:

Trump's commentary and behavior throughout his Korea diplomacy suggest both insouciance for the actual issues and desperation for media acclaim. Trump all but

admitted that he did not prepare for his first meeting with Kim in Singapore.<sup>83</sup> At the press conference for that event, Trump became most animated in claiming that South Korea free-rides on the United States, and about the media coverage he was receiving.<sup>84</sup> He floated a strange idea about building condominiums on the North Korean shoreline.<sup>85</sup> He then claimed on his return to the United States that “there is no longer a nuclear threat from North Korea.”<sup>86</sup>

The press conference succeeding the second, Hanoi, summit strongly suggests that Trump again did not prepare, which Bolton also claims.<sup>87</sup> Trump’s grasp of the issues was again poor, and he was again mostly concerned with the press coverage of the event.<sup>88</sup> In that summit’s run-up came possibly the most surreal moment of the whole ‘peace process.’ Trump claimed that he and Kim Jong-Un “fell in love,” because Kim wrote him “beautiful letters” in which he called Trump “Your Excellency.”<sup>89</sup> Bolton is particularly scathing here, suggesting that Trump swooned before such flattery and was overeager for a deal.<sup>90</sup>

By the third summit, in June 2019, Trump was clearly no longer paying attention. The Trump–Kim handshake at the demilitarized zone (DMZ) had the hallmarks of Trumpian theatricality. The event was thrown together at the last minute with little serious negotiation appended. American conservative talk-show host Tucker Carlson was present with Trump at the DMZ, but Bolton, the national security advisor, was not. Trump took twenty steps inside North Korea, which, as he likely hoped, dominated U.S. news coverage, with right-wing media particularly portraying him as brave and heroic. Unsurprisingly, nothing substantive came of it all, and negotiations faded away that autumn.

Trump’s lack of cognitive commitment<sup>91</sup>—energy, attention, focus—is important, because revolutionizing relations with a long-time opponent like North Korea would predictably generate upheaval among the many domestic actors FPA identifies<sup>92</sup>—staff and bureaucratic factions, foreign policy bodies, legislators focused on foreign affairs and defense, the military, NGOs and think tanks, public opinion, and so on.

But Trump’s cognitive limitations meant no outreach to these elements. He gave no programmatic speeches, including to Congress, on seeking a new path with the North. He sketched no strategy or realignment thinking to put his highly unusual praise of Kim Jong Un in context. Formal statements of U.S. doctrine, such as the *U.S. National Security Strategy*, were not revised around his effort.<sup>93</sup> Trump made no effort to convince his many skeptics, and when he did mention Korea at his political rallies, it was frequently offhand or bizarre, such as when he analogized the DMZ to his sought-after Mexican border wall (March 30, 2018).

President Richard Nixon’s opening of China, President Jimmy Carter’s mediation of the Camp David Accords, and President Bill Clinton’s mediation of the (albeit failed) 2000 Camp David Summit all illustrate the cognitive commitment Trump conspicuously lacked: those presidents read up on the issues and could meaningfully guide and challenge policy evolution; staff factions were tamed as options were

hammered out; the foreign policy community was solicited to build consensus; a basic focus and managerial discipline were maintained. All this was simply beyond Trump and his closest staff.

FPA also emphasizes process; as John Odell and Dustin Tingley write,<sup>94</sup> “negotiations are more successful to the extent that they are efficient by reducing process costs.” Under Trump, managerial costs, chaos even, exploded, perhaps best illustrated by the appearance of a talk-show host in the place of the national security advisor at the DMZ summit. Porter well captures the immaturity that crippled almost every major Trump initiative, foreign and domestic:

They were inept at bureaucratic maneuvering and at the sustained pursuit of goals. This was partly due to the problem that Trump’s presidency functioned like a medieval court, and was organized around personal loyalty, rewarding loyalists and punishing dissidents, with frequent firings and purges overshadowing organizational coherence and disrupting the pursuit of policy aims. It is also partly to do with the ‘showbiz’ modality of Trumpism, preoccupied as it is with televisual spectacle over substance, and declaratory drama over policy execution.<sup>95</sup>

For Moon then, Trump was a double-edged sword. His unpredictability and lust for acclaim opened him to Moon’s flattery, even manipulation, regarding the North. Moon could talk Trump into meeting Kim. But that same fickleness and inattention meant Trump would not work much on difficult or time-consuming negotiations. In the end, Trump flamed out because of the same leadership failures—impetuosity, impatience, ineptitude—which made him easy to persuade to try.

## **Causal Narrative**

This paper argues that Moon’s North Korea *détente* effort failed for four reasons: the North Korean elite’s comfort with its BATNA; Moon and Trump’s inability to win over domestic veto-players in both South Korea and United States; and Trump’s cognitive failure as a negotiator and process failure as a domestic coalition leader.

These variables almost certainly interacted. For example, if Trump had taken the negotiations seriously—by making sustained use of the presidential bully pulpit to persuade skeptical official Washington, for example—then Moon might have been better able to convince his own domestic skeptics, plus the Europeans. Hence, per Khong, the paper’s claims can be woven together into the following dynamic causal narrative:

The strategic utility of nuclear weapons to North Korean security is so high, that America’s capacious CVID demand was likely a nonstarter, crippling deep U.S.–DRPK negotiations before they even began. Moon is not to blame that North Korea’s intense security dilemma strongly incentivizes WMD development, but his personal

rapprochement with Kim was apparently unable to soften him.

Pyongyang entered negotiations from a position of domestic and international strength, allowing it to play ‘hard to get.’ Its BATNA was the status quo because of its regime’s security behind nuclear weapons, domestic repression, and long-practiced sanctions evasion. Curiously, the Americans did not or would not see this, despite a long train of analyst commentary that Pyongyang would never assent to CVID. Trump demanded it anyway, had no leverage to attain such a huge concession, and made no other offer across the three summits.

This stalemate—a U.S.–DRPK ZOPA effectively foreclosed by wildly incompatible win-sets—immediately crippled Moon’s inter-Korean outreach too. Backstopped by a popular U.S. alliance, hawkish ROK domestic players, in conservative political circles and the media, harassed Moon’s inter-Korean efforts, threatening to unravel them after the next presidential election. Curiously, Moon made little effort to recruit or persuade these domestic critics, relying instead on a minoritarian left–progressive political coalition incommensurate with the transformative scale of his proposals. Trump’s wild ramblings on North Korea and open dislike for South Korea undercut confidence that Trump was actually committed to ROK security. Unable to alter the South Korean center–right’s calculus, Moon relied on the ROK’s imperial presidency to push through limited deals with the North.

Without the domestic political capital to challenge the Americans’ rigid insistence on CVID, or to run a Korea–only track against American opposition, Moon next tried cross-pressuring the Americans by reaching out to the EU. But its leaders hesitated, likely unnerved by Trump’s abrupt enthusiasm for an Orwellian dictator, and wary of the deep conservative–progressive split in South Korea over North Korea. Ideological considerations blocked a Moon outreach to Japan.

All that remained for Moon, then, was Trump. As the American president, he was a powerful ally, and Moon was able to achieve the U.S.–North Korea summit long sought by South Korean progressives. The progressives’ logic was that the U.S., ROK, and DPRK leaders could, in coordinated executive action, break the Korean stalemate by pushing change on recalcitrant, vested players, especially in America. But Trump had neither the aptitude nor the diligence for that. He was too lazy and uninformed to make the case for a revolution in North Korea policy to the deeply skeptical U.S. foreign policy community. He lacked the managerial discipline to learn the issues himself, educate the public, or control his feuding subordinates. And his unabashed lust for acclaim and obvious disinterest in the actual issues of Korea unnerved other relevant actors—the South Korean opposition, wary Europeans, the U.S. foreign policy community. When Trump ultimately dropped Korea in fall of 2019, all of these skeptics silently assented in relief, and the whole cacophony just faded away.

This collapse is not solely Moon’s fault. It is unclear how much he could have expanded North Korea’s win-set toward greater concessions. And Trump was such a wild card that Moon is lucky that he got the summits out of him at all. Moon’s

real missed opportunity lay with the hawkish domestic factions of South Korea and the West. As a committed dove and progressive, Moon was well-placed to solicit these hawks to re-think their North Korea policies and to forge a wider, ideally more transnational, coalition for deep *détente* than now exists, particularly given the growing synchronicity between American and South Korean hawks. Surprisingly, Moon did not even try.

## **Future Research**

This paper suggests two lines of future FPA research, broached in passing above:

First, Trump is a massive outlier in bargaining theory. Most of its tools do not well explain his negotiating behavior beyond banal observations that his cognitive limitations were vast, or that he was almost gleefully ‘bounded’ in his rationality. Trump’s use of international diplomacy as a personal vanity project is particularly challenging, but conceivably other celebrities-turned-politicians might act this way. Trump will likely be a hard case for FPA, especially if he is re-elected.

Second, both Moon and Trump faced hawkish domestic veto players who exploited the deep polarization of their societies to make ‘future veto’ threats, beyond normal, day-to-day political contestation. That is, Biden and South Korean conservatives both threatened to undo Trump and Moon’s efforts should they take power in the future. And given the pendulum swings of polarized, tightly contested elections in both countries, future partisan transitions are obviously feasible. As noted above, this is likely why Moon kept emphasizing the “irreversibility” of his *détente* in his final year.

FPA does not have standing theory for such an ‘inter-temporal veto.’ But if an international opponent can see a deal-rejecting opposition looming in the future, that would presumably undercut a negotiator’s contemporary deal-making credibility.

Applying that to North Korea, would Pyongyang even believe a generous deal tabled by Moon or Trump if hawks back home were promising to unravel it as soon as they returned to office, much as ROK conservatives rolled back the Sunshine Policy on retaking the presidency in 2008? This is a potentially fruitful emendation to international negotiation theory for polarized democracies like the United States and South Korea.

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