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Stepping Back from the Brink: A Comparative Analysis of Ripeness Theory and Readiness Theory in the U.S.-North Korea Crisis of 2017–2018

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Abstract

This study assesses the usefulness of two theories, ripeness theory and readiness theory, in explaining de-escalation in intense crisis, when adversaries move toward formal negotiations. The U.S.-DPRK crisis in 2017–2018 serves as a case study for examining how each theory can contribute to our understanding of the fundamentals that facilitate a crisis de-escalation process. The study finds both theories instructive for understanding the U.S.-DPRK episode, but points to readiness theory as more insightful. Considering the multiple sources at play in the non-linear pre-negotiation phase, and specifically the central role played by a third party in moving the process forward, readiness theory provides a more profound and detailed understanding of the forces, their interplay and the gradual changes that led the parties to change their policy. This unique contribution of readiness theory can offer conflict parties and practitioners insights applicable to similar events in the future.

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The intense U.S.-North Korea crisis in 2017 marked "a change in saliency" (Zartman, 2005, p. 167) in a conflict that had simmered in the Korean Peninsula for seven decades. The escalation in the parties' relations came against the backdrop of nuclear achievements by North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and U.S. efforts to convince the DPRK to renounce its nuclear militarization. In this crisis, both parties took steps of increasing severity, in several dimensions, to retaliate and pressure the other party to change its behavior (Faure & Zartman, 2005; Zartman & Faure, 2005). This dynamic brought the parties to the brink of nuclear war. However, the escalation began to reverse in early 2018, leading to a U.S.-North Korea summit meeting in June 2018 in Singapore, where the leaders of both sides declared their intentions to explore ways to peacefully resolve the conflict. This study applies two theories – ripeness theory and readiness theory – to analyze the de-escalation of the U.S.-North Korea crisis in 2018, examining how each theory can contribute to our understanding of the fundamentals that led toward direct, formal negotiations. We ask which of the two theories best describes the sources of change in the adversaries' approach – from unilateral, coercive strategies and tactics to the bilateral option of diplomatic negotiation.

The two conceptual frameworks of ripeness theory and readiness theory outline variables and causal effects that brake escalation and move conflict parties "out of escalation into negotiation" (Faure & Zartman, 2005). For over three decades, *ripeness theory* (Zartman, 2000; Zartman & de-Soto, 2010) has dominated the academic and practical discourse on the right timing for negotiation. The theory identifies mutual perceptions of hurting impasse as the impetus for the parties to begin de-escalation and embark on negotiation, and highlights two necessary (and insufficient) conditions of mutually hurting stalemate and a way out for the productive inauguration of negotiation (Zartman, 2000; Zartman & Faure, 2005). Implicitly applying the logic of the theory elaboration approach (Fisher & Aguinis, 2017) to the ripeness theory construct, Pruitt (2005, 2007) formulated *readiness theory* as a theoretical advancement that improves ripeness theory by elucidating multiple causal factors that influence the process of ripening (Pruitt, 2005). According to Pruitt, readiness to settle a conflict is affected by two psychological variables – motivation to end a conflict and optimism – that determine the degree of the leaders' readiness to attempt to resolve their conflict through negotiation. Motivation and optimism are influenced by several antecedents.

Two methodological comments should be noted. The first concerns the selection of this case study for exploring both theories' value in discerning the forces underlining de-escalation processes. Recognizing that the intense disruption of relations that brought the U.S. and North Korea to "a nuclear collision course" (Jackson, 2019) in 2017 could happen again in this intractable conflict, and in similar ones, there is utmost importance in identifying the contextual and intervening variables that facilitated the transition from escalation to de-escalation and enabled the parties to avoid catastrophe, even though ensuing negotiations failed to produce any agreement in this case. The second comment concerns the need to acknowledge the fragility of the data available on the North Korean side for developing the analysis presented in this paper. Both theories applied in this study, ripeness and readiness, address perceptions and behaviors. Yet, it is a challenging task to discern North Korea's intentions because most of the data available on North Korea's perceptions is actually based on American conjectures about those perceptions.[1] While bearing this in mind, this study draws conclusions about North Korea's perceptions and intentions by analyzing its leadership's public speeches and official statements, and by observing the state's actual behavior.

The paper comprises four main sections. A discussion of ripeness theory and readiness theory is presented in the first section, which also includes the research questions guiding the analysis of the case. The second section includes an overview of the U.S.-North Korea crisis. The third section examines – first

[1] I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this comment.

through the lens of ripeness theory and then from the perspective of readiness theory – the underlying causes of the changes in the conflict dynamics that led the U.S. and North Korea to shift from escalation to diplomatic dialogue and negotiation. Finally, the fourth section presents insights from the application of both theories and explain why readiness theory more accurately explains the empirical observations from the case studied. A table summarizing the analysis according to the two theories is presented in the appendix.

Two Theories about the Antecedents of Negotiation in a Crisis: Ripeness Theory and Readiness Theory

The analysis in this paper is based on assessing the usefulness of the arguments outlined by two competing theories (George & Bennett, 2005), ripeness theory and readiness theory. Each theory attempts to explain the elements involved in the process of convincing leaders of conflict parties in crisis episodes to abandon their unilateral approach and negotiate to resolve their conflict peacefully.

Ripeness Theory

Ripeness theory discusses the initiation of negotiation at a ripe moment that is "favorable for timing de-escalation strategies" (Aggestam, 2005, p. 271). The theory suggests that conflict parties seek to negotiate a way out of the conflict when they "find themselves in an uncomfortable and costly predicament" (Zartman, 2000, p. 225) and perceive their unilateral strategies as no longer effective (Zartman, 2000). Ripeness theory outlines two necessary but insufficient conditions underlying a party's decision to climb down the escalation ladder and initiate negotiation: mutually hurting stalemate (MHS) and way out (WO). These two conditions are the building blocks of ripe moments, without which the search for an agreed outcome in negotiation, whether bilateral or mediated, cannot begin (Zartman, 2000).

The perception of mutually hurting stalemate, a deadlock condition, from which the parties see no exit, can result from various causes, including cognitive, relational, contextual, structural, or processual ones (Faure & Zartman, 2005, p. 297). In the ripeness discourse, a deadlock indicates that "a system has reached a state of equilibrium" (Faure, 2005, p. 26), which serves as "a point of reversal in an escalation process" (Faure, 2005). Indeed, studies exploring the transition from escalation to negotiation reinforce the centrality of stalemate as a precondition for the initiation of negotiation (Faure & Zartman, 2005; Zartman, 2000; Zartman & de-Soto, 2010). According to ripeness theory, this condition is optimally associated with an impending, past or recently avoided catastrophe (Zartman, 2000).

The sense of a potential way out is the second condition stipulated by ripeness theory. The theory postulates that the perception of MHS triggers the search for alternatives to the unilateral track, or a "way out" (Zartman & de-Soto, 2010). This element refers to the perception of both parties "that they and the other party are willing to look for a joint solution" (Zartman & de-Soto, 2010, p. 23). A way out can be assessed mainly by subjective indicators. That is, it "depends on each party's perception of the other party's intentions" (Zartman & de-Soto, 2010, p. 23). In particular, the actions of the other party must be perceived as "an encouragement to talk" (Zartman & de-Soto, 2010, p. 23). However, WO can also be assessed by objective indicators as an "an action or statement by one party" (Zartman & de-Soto, 2010, p. 23).

A third party is not an integral part of ripeness theory. However, since a "ripe moment needs to be turned from a passive situation into an active process for de-escalation and negotiation to occur" (Aggestam, 2005, p. 273), Zartman (2000) stresses that moments must be perceived as such and seized by the parties themselves or by a third party.

Table 1

Ripeness and Readiness Perspectives on the U.S.-North Korea De-Escalation Process

Ripeness Theory Analysis		**Readiness Theory Analysis**	
MHS and Perception of Looming Catastrophe		**Sources of Increase in Motivation**	
U.S.	**North Korea**	**U.S.**	**North Korea**
1. Sanctions were ineffective 2. U.S. frustration with China's conduct 3. Unfeasibility of U.S. preventive attack 4. Risk of unintentional catastrophic war	1. Cost of sanctions 2. Risk of sliding into a devastating nuclear confrontation	The unfeasibility of current tactics: 1. Sanctions were ineffective 2. Growing U.S. frustration with China's approach 3. Unfeasibility of U.S. preventive attack 4. Increased likelihood of an unintentional catastrophic war	1. Cost of sanctions 2. Growing risk of war 3. Pressure from China
WO		**Sources of Increase in Optimism**	
U.S.	**North Korea**	**U.S.**	**North Korea**
By June 2018, the U.S. had learned about North Korea's intentions and expectations in messages exchanged via South Korea and China and in bilateral discussions	By June 2018, North Korea had learned about U.S. intentions and expectations in messages exchanged via South Korea and in bilateral discussions	Growing perceptions of working trust and light at the end of the tunnel effected by: 1. Third-party mobilization: South Korea's engagement since January 2018 and China's engagement since March 2018 2. Information gathering 3. Testing the waters 4. Wishful thinking	1.North Korea's confidence in countering the U.S. and blocking its military options 2. Growing perceptions of working trust and light at the end of the tunnel effected by: 2.1 Third-party mobilization: South Korea's engagement since January 2018 2.2. Information gathering 2.3 Testing the waters

Readiness Theory

The second theory used to process and analyze the dynamics of the current case study is readiness theory (Cantekin, 2016; Pruitt, 2005, 2007, 2015; Schiff, 2014, 2019a, 2019b; Stimec et. al., 2011), which is a modification and elaboration of ripeness theory (Pruitt, 2005). Aiming to make it more useful, Pruitt changed the structure of the core ripeness theory to create a new theory that looks at "the motives and perceptions that make up ripeness on each side separately rather than focusing attention on joint states of mind such as a mutually hurting stalemate" (Pruitt, 2005, p.6). Readiness theory treats the psychological states of the leaders (reflected in their perception of MHS and a WO according to ripeness theory) and their antecedents as variables (Pruitt, 2005). Thus, readiness theory is viewed as "a strong move towards a psychological view of ripeness" (Stimec et al., 2011, p. 147).

Readiness theory applies the concept of readiness as a characteristic of a party to a conflict that reflects its leadership's thinking about the conflict (Pruitt, 2007). Readiness is affected by two necessary psychological variables: motivation to escape the conflict and optimism. Both must be present to some degree for any conciliatory behavior to be initiated, yet they may vary in intensity. Thus, readiness fosters a wide range of conciliatory behaviors, each dependent on the level of readiness. A low level of readiness generates moderate conciliatory gestures. As the readiness level rises, the party's behavior becomes more conciliatory and may take the form of a ceasefire or an agreement to enter negotiations. The greater the readiness on both sides, the more likely they are to negotiate (Pruitt, 2005, 2007, 2015). Thus, conflicts that result in negotiation usually exhibit a growing level of readiness on both sides.

An important feature of readiness theory is that it postulates a number of antecedents and mechanisms that give rise to motivation and optimism. Motivation can derive from any or all of the following: a sense that the conflict is unwinnable (that is, a perception of losing creates greater motivation), a sense that the conflict is generating unacceptable costs or risks, and pressure from a powerful third party. While the first two antecedents of motivation roughly parallel ripeness theory's perceptions of hurting stalemate and impending catastrophe, the third source of motivation – third party pressure – is not part of ripeness theory (Pruitt, 2005).

The second necessary antecedent of readiness is optimism. It refers to the possibility of concluding negotiations with an agreement that is acceptable to both sides. It requires a certain degree of faith that the final agreement will satisfy each side's goals and aspirations without exorbitant costs (Pruitt, 2007); that the negotiator on the other side is, in fact, authorized to make a commitment; and that the other side will indeed adhere to the agreement (Schiff, 2019a, 2019b). This source of readiness is parallel to the perception of a way out, as described by ripeness theory. However, readiness theory also outlines the sources of optimism about a way out, postulating that optimism derives from three states of mind (Pruitt, 2005, 2007): lower aspirations, working trust (a belief that the other side is also motivated to settle the dispute, will work hard and make concessions) and a sense of a "light at the end of the tunnel" (the perception that an acceptable agreement is taking shape and that the other side is prepared to make the necessary concessions). The third state of mind leads to a higher level of optimism (Pruitt, 2007).

In the initial stage, when considering the option of negotiation, optimism reflects a conviction that the other side is serious about ending the conflict and is willing to make the necessary concessions at the negotiating table. Preserving this optimism requires a belief that a formula can be achieved that bridges the parties' opposing positions and is acceptable to both; the greater the perceived distance between the parties, the lower the level of optimism (Pruitt, 2005).

Readiness theory further observes that motivation and optimism are mutually related in a number of ways (Pruitt, 2005, 2007). Most relevant to our discussion is the assertion that motivation to end a conflict can trigger a number of mechanisms that foster optimism about the success of negotiations, engender new thinking about the rival and generate a confidence-building cycle and conciliatory spiral that leads to negotiations (Pruitt, 2005, 2007). These mechanisms include third-party mobilization, moderation of the

parties' demands, accumulation of information that challenges pre-existing states of mind, and testing the waters – that is, sending conciliatory signals or seeking clandestine contact with the other party. Information gathering and testing the waters mechanisms, if taken seriously and reciprocated by both parties, can lead to a conciliatory spiral and the flourishing of optimism (Pruitt, 2007).

Third-party mobilization occurs when a third party discerns motivation in the disputing parties to end a conflict. This boosts the third party's optimism about resolving the conflict and thus encourages it to bring the adversaries to the negotiating table. Such third-party efforts can generate optimism on both sides and eventually lead to full negotiations. Another mechanism postulated by the theory is wishful thinking, which is triggered by motivation to end a conflict and is a catalyst for optimism (Pruitt, 2005). This mechanism allows for the discovery of selective evidence of the other side's logic or motivation to end the conflict (Pruitt, 2005). According to readiness theory, optimism and motivation are further related because each variable can compensate for a shortage of the other (Pruitt, 2007, 2015).

The research design in this paper employs two clusters to assess the value of ripeness theory and readiness theory in explaining the de-escalation dynamics of the North Korea-U.S. crisis episode. The first cluster addresses ripeness for negotiation as the dependent variable and asks whether mutual hurting stalemate and way out can explain the transition from escalation to negotiation in this crisis. In the second cluster, readiness for negotiation is viewed as the dependent variable. This includes an assessment of the impact of the motivation and optimism variables on the parties' readiness to embark on the de-escalatory sequence that enabled negotiations to begin.

The Crisis in the Korean Peninsula (2017–2018)

The tension between North Korea and the U.S. is a major dimension of the intractable conflict in the Korean Peninsula, a conflict that has simmered since the division of the Korean Peninsula in the 1950s, centering on issues the North Korea and the Republic of Korea (ROK) (South Korea) perceive as incommensurable (Wertz, 2018). For the last seven decades, North Korea-U.S. relations have featured a Cold War mentality and zero-sum game perceptions, including a strong sense of victimization on the North Korean side (Faure, 2019). The North Korean regime has viewed the U.S. and its military alliance with South Korea as an existential threat. From North Korea's perspective, the U.S. is liable to invade at any time (as it did in June 1950) and is an obstacle to the unification of the peninsula under its hegemony (Jackson, 2019; McGuire, 2018). This sense of insecurity has fueled North Korea's drive since the 1950s to develop a credible nuclear deterrence to guarantee the survival of its regime (Jackson, 2019; McGuire, 2018; Wertz, 2018). North Korea also views its nuclear program as an important source of pride and prestige, which accords it status and agency in international affairs (McGuire, 2018).

North Korea's nuclear proliferation efforts over the decades have spawned an ongoing debate in the international community on how to mitigate the threat of nuclear war in the Korean Peninsula (Jackson, 2019). The two major attempts at diplomacy by the U.S. and the international community – the Agreement Framework (1994) and the Six-Party Talks (2003–2009) – culminated in North Korea's declaration in 2009 that it was no longer bound by earlier agreements and that it would not return to the negotiating table (Davenport, 2020). Since North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, the UN Security Council has imposed increasingly tough sanctions on North Korea to pressure it to denuclearize (Tweed, 2019). These efforts have failed to contain North Korea's proliferation.

Under Chairman Kim Jong-un, who rose to power in 2011, North Korea has even accelerated its ballistic missile program and bolstered its arms arsenal (ICG, 2018b). Kim's announcement of his intention to test an intercontinental ballistic missile in early 2017 (Wertz, 2018), followed by a series of long-range missile tests demonstrating North Korea's nuclear capacity, provoked a spiral of heightened tensions between North Korea and the Trump administration, with rounds of actions and counteractions (Davenport,

2020). By the end of 2017, North Korea had launched at least 20 missiles. The situation was further aggravated by reciprocal inflammatory rhetoric from Kim and President Trump, with both leaders demonizing each other (Faure, 2019). North Korea announced in September 2017 that it had successfully tested a nuclear hydrogen bomb and declared in November that its enhanced ICBM capability was capable of hitting the U.S. mainland (Landler, Sang-Hun, & Cooper, 2017; Spetalnick & Brunnstrom, 2017). Viewing North Korea's behavior as unacceptable, the U.S. responded with a coercive strategy of "maximum pressure", indicating that its top priority vis-à-vis North Korea was to convince it to comprehensively denuclearize and manage the crisis through diplomacy (Jackson, 2019; Pennington, 2017). The strategy "relied on escalating the pain the Kim regime felt until it changed its views about its own nuclear weapons" (Jackson, 2019, p. 104). This included an economic downturn that would force the regime to recalculate the costs and benefits of simultaneously pursuing nuclear proliferation and economic development (Albert, 2019b; Belfer Center, 2018). The U.S. stepped up its campaign against North Korea, in the second half of 2017, pushing for harsher economic and financial sanctions and for UN Security Council condemnation of North Korea's nuclear activities (ICG, 2018b).

The U.S. and its allies, including Japan, South Korea and the EU, imposed sanctions in 2017 that went beyond the UN measures in restricting economic activity with North Korea and targeting a longer list of North Korean individuals and businesses (Albert, 2019b; Tweed, 2019). At the same time, this strategy included "coercive signaling" of Washington's readiness to resort to military force "rather than just give up on denuclearization" (Jackson, 2019, p. 104) by preparing for a preventive military attack against North Korea. As North Korea further accelerated its tests in the fall of 2017, the Trump administration declared that it would not allow North Korea to achieve a nuclear strike capability against the United States (ICG, 2018a; Wertz, 2018) and stepped up its military preparations for a preventive strike against North Korea aimed at delaying its nuclear program (Jackson, 2019). Pyongyang responded by warning that in the event of a U.S. attack against its strategic nuclear capabilities, it would not hesitate to retaliate (Bishop, 2018).

As things heated up in 2017, the U.S. administration officially ruled out negotiating with North Korea until it ratcheted down its provocations and agreed to denuclearize. At the same time, however, the State Department stressed that "diplomatic channels are open for Kim Jung Un for now" communication (Watkins, 2017). These efforts did not bear fruit (Sanger, 2017). In backchannel discussions conducted between North Korean officials and various American figures in the last two months of 2017, North Korean officials rejected a U.S. offer to engage in direct talks. As a precondition for negotiation, North Korea demanded a halt to hostile U.S. policy, including joint military exercises with its allies in the region, which North Korea viewed as a threat to its existence (Davenport, 2020). Furthermore, Pyongyang reportedly questioned the value of such talks since "only Trump can speak for Trump" (ICG, 2018b).

The first sign of some change in North Korea's approach in this crisis came with Kim's New Year's address on January 1, 2018. After more than two years without any high-level contacts between the two Koreas, Kim proposed collaboration between the two countries to alleviate tensions and bring peace and stability to the peninsula; he also raised the possibility of North Korea participating in the Winter Olympics (Belfer Center, 2018; Kim, 2018).

South Korea

South Korea aimed to resolve the conflict in the peninsula peacefully in the broader context of building economic cooperation and reconciliation, with the hope of eventually reunifying the two Koreas. It saw the initiation of direct dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea as a key first step for achieving the formal end of the Korean War (Campbell, 2018; M. Lee, 2018). Thus, while South Korea supported tougher sanctions against North Korea throughout 2017 and promoted the U.S. deployment of a defensive system,

it maintained that sanctions and pressure alone would not stop North Korea's nuclearization and that it could only be halted through direct dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea (M. Lee, 2018).

Noting the Olympic détente message in Kim's speech, South Korea facilitated communication between North Korea and the U.S., and South Korea-U.S. military exercises were put on hold until March 2018 (Johnson, 2018). Both sides, the U.S. and North Korea, expressed their willingness, in principle, to engage in dialogue. Yet, in January and February of 2018, the parties were not ready to consider the other's preconditions for negotiations. From the American perspective, North Korea would need to take steps towards denuclearization before any talks could commence. The U.S. insisted that the ultimate result of dialogue with North Korea must be its denuclearization and that this issue must be discussed in talks with Pyongyang (Johnson, 2018; Oliphant, 2018). North Korea, on the other hand, rejected any preconditions for negotiation and asserted that its nuclear program, which it pursued as a deterrent to invasion, was non-negotiable (Johnson, 2018).

In early March, a South Korean envoy visited North Korea and brought back an invitation from Kim to Trump to meet and discuss the permanent denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (Davenport, 2020). Trump accepted Kim's invitation and preparations for the leaders' summit began (Helsel & Kim 2018). Following a diplomatic crisis in May that led Trump to cancel the planned summit, direct talks between the U.S. and North Korean officials resumed at the end of May in New York and, in parallel, in South Korea and Singapore (M. Lee, 2018). On June 2, Trump announced that the summit would take place as planned (He-suk, 2018).

At the Singapore Summit on June 12, 2018, Trump and Kim agreed to start negotiations on the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, normalization of relations and a formal end to the Korean War. At the end of the meeting, which concluded the pre-negotiation phase, the two leaders signed a document outlining broad objectives for the ensuing negotiation process, including a commitment to work together on establishing peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, along with its complete denuclearization (Berlinger & Yeung, 2018).

China

China's collaboration in the strict enforcement of the international sanctions regime was viewed by the U.S. as crucial in the effort to isolate North Korea and force it to denuclearize (Delaney, 2017; Perlez, 2017; Vitkovskaya, 2018). China was North Korea's sole political ally and economic lifeline, accounting for 90% of its trade (Jeong-Ho, 2018). In 2017, China officially implemented and backed the U.S. strategy of economic coercion (Huifeng, 2018; Sun, 2018). Beijing viewed Kim's accelerated nuclear pursuit as adventurous and as endangering China's geostrategic and economic interests, and stressed the economic cost of what it viewed as North Korea's ongoing provocations (ICG, 2018a; Myers & Perlez, 2018). China had no desire to have a nuclear state on its borders that would foment instability on the Korean Peninsula, and it sought to improve its relations with the U.S. and de-escalate the trade war between the two countries. Trump promised China a better trade deal if it cooperated on North Korea and threatened punishments if it failed to comply with the Security Council's sanctions against North Korea (Sun, 2018). Nonetheless, China continued to informally trade items along its border with North Korea (Albert, 2019a) and the overall ties between China and North Korea only grew stronger in 2017 (though trade declined due to the sanctions) (Albert, 2019a; Cohen, 2019; Lu, 2017; Perlez, 2017; Silberstein, 2019). In December 2017, China joined Russia in opposing U.S. efforts to tighten sanctions further and advocated for the easing of sanctions (Snyder & Byun, 2018).

In 2017, the U.S. made intensive efforts to convince China to pressure North Korea to change its behavior (Jackson, 2019). Until the beginning of 2018, however, China remained preoccupied with its internal struggles over political power and reforms, and was reluctant to exert diplomatic pressure on North Korea to stop its nuclear testing and return to the negotiating table (Sang- Hun, 2017). This changed in early 2018

with China's increasing need to secure its interests in the discussions on possible direct negotiation between the U.S. and North Korea, mediated by South Korea. China resumed warm relations with North Korea after six years of tense relations. The rapprochement began with two meetings between the Chinese president and the North Korean leader. The first was convened by Xi Jinping on March 26, 2018, within ten days of Trump's agreement to meet with Kim; the second was held in April 2018 prior to a meeting between Kim and Moon in Panmunjom, (ICG, 2018a; Myers & Perlez, 2018). In these meetings, China encouraged North Korea to pursue negotiation with the U.S.

Analysis

Ripeness Theory and the De-Escalation of the U.S.-North Korea Crisis

The "escalations to call" (Faure & Zartman, 2005, p. 178) spiral in U.S.-North Korea relations in 2017 engendered perceptions of mutual stalemate on both sides. Both parties applied coercive strategies and destructive dialogue between the leaders in an effort to "match the level of power actions of the opponent" (Faure & Zartman, 2005, p. 302) and pressure the other to abandon its unilateral strategies. Yet, by the end of 2017, the parties realized that their bargaining strategies had put them in a situation in which they had matched each other and could "go no further" (Zartman, 2005, p. 168) – that is, they could not escalate their way out of the conflict. The U.S. realized that sanctions were not achieving the anticipated results and that it had failed to convince China to strictly comply with the international sanctions and pressure North Korea to stop its nuclear pursuit. North Korea was suffering under the burden of the sanctions, and its nuclear expenditure further strained its economy. Both parties' perceptions of potential catastrophe substantially increased the costs of pursuing the current track and risks of sliding unintentionally into nuclear war. The recognition of mutually hurting stalemate and both parties' fear of a devastating war that no one really wanted sparked both parties' intensive search for a way out of the impasse during the first six months of 2018.

Perceptions of MHS and Looming Catastrophe

The United States

In late 2017, the U.S. came to realize that unilateral tactics had failed to yield the expected results and had in fact increased the likelihood of an unintentional catastrophic war. Three elements contributed to the U.S. predicament: the failure of sanctions to achieve the anticipated results, U.S. frustration with China's approach and the impracticality of a U.S. preventive attack.

The Sanctions were not Achieving the Anticipated Results. By the fall of 2017, the U.S. realized that the international sanctions aimed at blocking North Korea's economic development had not achieved the anticipated results (ICG, 2018b). North Korea's response to the tightening of sanctions was to continue testing and expanding its arsenal. As noted, North Korea claimed that the U.S. mainland was now within its missile range and announced the successful testing of a nuclear hydrogen bomb (Landler et al., 2017; Spetalnick & Brunnstrom, 2017).

Frustration with China's Conduct. The difficulty of convincing China (Jackson, 2019), North Korea's biggest trading partner and sole ally, to strictly comply with the international sanctions and cooperate in influencing North Korea to pursue the diplomatic track, led to growing frustration in Washington. China's

trade with North Korea expanded in mid-2017, with exports of grain up 400 percent from January to April 2017 relative to the previous year (Jackson, 2019, p. 123). By the end of 2017, China's reluctance to fully enforce the stringent sanctions demanded by the Security Council generated diplomatic tensions between the U.S. and China. Trump admitted that the U.S. had tried to apply all its leverage with China (Associated Press, 2017; Cohen, 2019; Delaney, 2017; Korte, 2017).

The Unfeasibility of a U.S. Preventive Attack. After bringing the U.S. mainland within its missile range, the situation had become what Zartman describes as "a moment when the upper side slips and the lower hand rises, both parties moving towards equality" (Zartman, 2000, p. 228). By late 2017, the U.S. had become increasingly fearful that military options would incur very high costs. In response to the debate in the U.S. on military options, Pyongyang had warned that in the event of a U.S. attack, it would not hesitate to retaliate (Bishop, 2018). The absence of communication between U.S. and North Korea following Trump's speech at the UN in September, which North Korea viewed as a declaration of war, led to growing concern in the U.S. about sliding into military confrontation, intentionally or unintentionally (Davenport, 2020). A military confrontation was seen as likely to result in a huge number of deaths, mass displacement, and reconstruction that would take a generation to complete (Jackson, 2019; Mullany, 2017; Nakamura & Jaffe, 2018).

North Korea

The change in North Korea's approach in January 2018 was influenced by three main inter-related elements: the cumulative cost of sanctions, the perception of the "lower hand" rising (Zartman, 2000) and the risk of sliding into a nuclear war. These contributed to North Korea's perception of stalemate and fear of impending catastrophe.

The Burden of the Sanctions. The North Korean economy was showing signs of distress, shrinking by 3.5% by the end of 2017 (Kim, 2018; Kim & Herskovitz, 2019; Schoff, 2019). This trend stood in stark contrast to the signs of economic progress North Korea had shown since the start of Kim's rule, despite being under international sanctions (Jeong-Ho, 2018). North Korea's major acceleration of its costly nuclear program in 2017, along with international sanctions of unprecedented severity, which aimed to cut off the country's energy supplies and access to hard currency, had a devastating impact on the North Korean economy (Kim, 2018). In September 2017, in an attempt to improve its relations with the United States, China banned textile and seafood imports from North Korea, in addition to its exports of certain petroleum products, iron, and coal – moves that were increasingly affecting the North Korean economy. Thus, in January 2018, as North Korea was entering its third year of Kim's five-year strategy for national economic development, the lifting of the sanctions became critical for economic recovery (Kim, 2018). Kim realized that this recovery would be impossible as long as the country remained in economic isolation (Jeong-Ho, 2018).

The Risk of Sliding into a Devastating Nuclear Confrontation. In view of the rising military tensions between two nuclear powers, Kim called in his New Year's speech for a renewal of inter-Korean dialogue (after two years with no high-level contacts) to look for a diplomatic way out of the predicament and to avert a "holocaust of a nuclear war forced by outside forces" (Kim, 2018).

The U.S. and North Korean Perceptions of a Way Out

As noted, the U.S. and North Korea began to intensively search for a way out of the impasse during the first six months of 2018. This followed their recognition of mutually hurting stalemate and fears of a

potentially devastating war. In this timeframe, North Korea and the U.S. clarified their intentions and expectations in messages exchanged via South Korean envoys. Major milestones in the creation of way-out perceptions occurred in early March 2018 and in the wake of the diplomatic crisis in late May that year. In March, Kim invited Trump to meet and discuss the permanent denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (Davenport, 2020). He expressed his openness to negotiate the future of his nuclear arsenal, conditional upon guaranteeing North Korea's security in line with a five-point agreement drawn up between Kim and South Korean officials (Davenport, 2020). The messages exchanged via South Korean intermediaries in early March included a commitment by Kim to refrain from conducting nuclear or ICBM tests during the talks with the U.S., and North Korea's call for a gradual elimination of nuclear weapons in return for a commensurate lifting of sanctions (Davenport, 2020). Following the diplomatic crisis in May that prompted Trump to cancel the planned summit, Kim sent messages via South Korean envoys reaffirming his commitment to complete denuclearization. The American perception of North Korea's intentions in pursing negotiation was further supported by similar communications from Kim, delivered by China, following Xi and Kim's meetings (Haas, 2018; Kyodo, 2017; Mullany, 2017; Sang-Hun, 2017).

The direct discussions in preparation for the U.S.-North Korea summit, now back on schedule, contributed to Washington's perception of a way out. Though conspicuous gaps emerged in the parties' positions on the dismantling of North Korea's nuclear weapons program and the security guarantees it would receive in return (U.S. Department of State (DOS), 2018), by the end of the direct discussions the Americans believed that if North Korea received the right assurances it would agree to terminate the program (Sang-Hun, 2018). By convincing North Korea of the bright future that awaited it after denuclearizing, and by granting Kim the international legitimacy he had long sought, the U.S. hoped to entice Pyongyang "to invest in change" (Jackson, 2019, p. 185). Thus, the perception of a way out was taking shape. At the end of the summit preparation meetings on May 31, Secretary of State Pompeo stated that real progress had been achieved in the discussions and expressed confidence that the parties were moving in the right direction (DOS, 2018).

In the days leading up to the summit, North Korea described the Singapore Summit as an event marking the end of hostile relations with the U.S., which would help foster "a radical switchover in the most hostile [North Korea]-U.S. relations" (McCurry, 2018). A key element in North Korea's perception of a way out was China's approval and support for Kim's direct dialogue with the U.S. on step-by-step denuclearization in return for economic rewards and the gradual lifting of sanctions (Albert, 2019a; ICG, 2018a; Myers & Perlez, 2018).

The in-depth exchange of opinions during the Singapore Summit on issues pertaining to the new North Korea-U.S. relationship (Rosenfeld, 2018) reinforced the perception of a way out, as expressed in Kim's assent to Trump's request to return the remains of American MIAs from the Korean War and in Trump's consent to suspend U.S.-South Korea military exercises, which North Korea viewed as a belligerent threat (Berlinger & Yeung, 2018).

In closing, the case reveals how ripe moments, originating in mutually hurting stalemate and combined with the specter of looming catastrophe, led both parties to search for a way out, change their unilateral approach and negotiate an end to their conflict. Further to Faure and Zartman's seminal study (Faure & Zartman, 2005), this research illustrates how the escalation dynamics in the North Korea-U.S. crisis exhausted the parties' ability to further escalate the conflict without a serious risk of sliding into all-out war. The increasing costs of escalation and the fear of brinkmanship dynamics produced a turning point in the crisis, convincing both sides to actively explore the negotiation option. This, in turn, fostered perceptions of a way out.

Readiness for Negotiation in the Context of Crisis

In the previous section, we discussed how perceptions of mutually hurting stalemate and a way out, as described by ripeness theory, contributed to the de-escalation process in the U.S.-North Korea crisis. Here, we trace the same events through the lens of readiness theory, focusing on the sources of the parties' readiness to negotiate an agreement – specifically, their motivation to end the conflict and optimism.

The U.S. and North Korea demonstrated increasing readiness to pursue the bilateral path of negotiation in the months leading up to the Singapore Summit. The motivation to settle the crisis via diplomacy grew steadily on both sides since the end of 2017 as they recognized the unfeasibility of their current tactics. The increasing severity of the crisis created perceptions of unacceptable risks and costs in both Washington and Pyongyang. Both sides came to realize that the conflict was unwinnable with the coercive strategies they had pursued. In the case of North Korea, these elements were reinforced by the leverage wielded by China, its ally. Since the beginning of 2018, the strong motivation of both parties encouraged a modest increase in optimism that the final agreement would meet their goals without incurring exorbitant costs (Pruitt, 2007). This slight change in the level of optimism was generated through several mechanisms, including third-party mobilization, bilateral testing of the waters, information gathering, and wishful thinking. It is noteworthy that the increase in optimism that paved the way toward formal negotiations was not a linear process. In mid-May 2018, as the diplomatic crisis was evolving, the level of optimism receded for a while. Optimism then began to rise again, thanks to the intensive engagement of a third party (South Korea) and a series of actions initiated by both parties. These elements induced the slight change in their assessment of whether it was possible to achieve their goals through diplomacy.

Sources of Motivation

The United States

As the U.S. came to realize that the sanctions imposed on North Korea were ineffective and that a preventive military attack was unfeasible, it became more motivated to intensively pursue diplomacy as an option for dealing with North Korea's military provocations (Sanger, 2017). Washington's growing frustration with China's approach was also a contributing factor behind this growing motivation. Furthermore, the "on the brink" escalation dynamics that emerged by the fall of 2017 led to growing U.S. awareness of the likelihood of an unintentional catastrophic war. Thus, by the end of 2017, it was increasingly clear to the U.S. that a change in tactics was needed.

Ineffectiveness of Sanctions and Unfeasibility of Preventive Attack. Though indicators showed that international isolation and the tough sanctions on North Korea in 2017 caused economic harm (ICG, 2018b), its nuclear program continued unabated; it was clear that international pressure was not producing the expected results (Spetalnick & Brunnstrom, 2017). At the same time, the U.S. had become convinced by the end of 2017 that the military option of a preventive attack against North Korea, aimed to stymie its nuclear program and force it to the negotiating table, was no longer feasible (Delaney, 2017; Perlez, 2017). In light of Pyongyang's warnings that it would not hesitate to retaliate, and given the lack of communication channels between the U.S. and North Korea following Trump's speech at the UN in September (which North Korea viewed as a declaration of war), there was growing concern in the U.S. that a miscalculation could drag the parties into a devastating war (Bishop, 2018; Jackson, 2019).

Growing Frustration with China's Approach. As the crisis escalated in 2017, the U.S. became frustrated by its inability to compel China to pressure North Korea and strictly enforce the international sanctions against North Korea, or to coax China into using its special ties with North Korea to encourage restraint and convince Pyongyang to abandon its missile program and turn to negotiation (Delaney, 2017;

Jackson, 2019; Korte, 2017). In April 2017, China told the Trump administration not to expect it to exert pressure or participate in international sanctions that could lead to instability and possible regime collapse in its "neighbor and ally" (Perlez & Huang, 2017). In response to Trump's attempts to convince it to collaborate with the U.S. (Jackson, 2019) in pressing North Korea to engage in diplomatic dialogue with Washington, China claimed that the U.S. was overestimating China's influence over North Korea (Snyder & Byun, 2018). In the summer of 2017, the U.S., convinced that China was easing its restrictions on North Korea and not doing enough to help, stepped up its pressure on China and imposed secondary sanctions on Chinese individuals, companies, and banks that maintained ties with North Korea (Cohen, 2019; Lu 2017). The diplomatic tension between China and the U.S. peaked in December 2017 when China refused to enforce the stringent sanctions demanded by the latest Security Council resolution (Snyder & Byun, 2018). By the early months of 2018, it was clear that the overall ties between China and North Korea had grown (Cohen, 2019).

North Korea

The cumulative effect of three elements account for Kim's increased motivation to "create a peaceful environment" (Kim, 2018) with the U.S.: the cost of the sanctions imposed on North Korea in 2017, the growing risk of sliding into a catastrophic war, and the leverage wielded by China, its ally.

The Costs of Increasing Sanctions. By the end of 2017, the North Korean economy was showing signs of distress due to the unprecedented severity of the sanctions, which culminated in new sanctions imposed by the UN and by the U.S. and its allies following North Korea's sixth and largest nuclear test (Jeong-Ho, 2018; Kim, 2018; Kim & Herskovitz, 2019). As Kim stated in his 2018 New Year's address: "Last year the moves of the United States and its vassal forces to isolate and stifle our country went to extremes, and our revolution faced the harshest-ever challenges" (Kim, 2018). Thus, in January 2018, as North Korea was entering its third year of Kim's five-year strategy for national economic development, the lifting of sanctions was viewed as critical for economic recovery (Kim, 2018).

The Growing Risk of a War. As military tensions increased in late 2017, North Korea feared the specter of what Kim (2018) called the "holocaust of a nuclear war forced by outside forces." Consequently, at the beginning of 2018, Kim called for an immediate improvement in inter-Korean relations to "prevent the outbreak of war and ease tension on the Korean Peninsula" (Kim, 2018).

Pressure from an Ally. China's leverage over North Korea, which it applied by wielding hard and soft power, served as another major source of North Korea's motivation to pursue negotiation. The economic coercion strategy of China, officially backing the U.S. "maximum pressure" strategy in 2017, played a major role in fomenting the economic crisis in which North Korea found itself at the end of 2017 (ICG, 2018b; Jeong-Ho, 2018; McCurry et al., 2017; Sun, 2018). In early 2018, the dialogue mediated by South Korea on direct negotiation between the U.S. and North Korea induced China to secure its interests by changing its coercive approach to North Korea to a geostrategic embrace. Soft power was now added to the hard power in leveraging North Korea. In the meetings Xi and Kim held in March and April 2018 in China, Chinese officials exercised this soft power by underlining China's historical and cultural bonds with North Korea and the importance of Chinese legitimation and approval of Kim's engagement in direct dialogue with the U.S. (Aall, 2007; ICG, 2018a; Myers & Perlez, 2018).

At the same time, reward power (Aall, 2007) was applied in the form of incentives offered to North Korea for improving diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties between the two countries. Kim sought China's support for an agreement with the U.S. on incremental denuclearization in return for economic benefits, including a lifting of sanctions (Albert, 2019a). Xi told Kim that if he wanted China's help, he must "meet

regularly at the level of decision-makers, communicate early and often, prioritize economic development, promote people-to people exchanges, and agree to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as a long-term goal" (ICG, 2018a, p. 3). Indeed, in the inter-Korean Panmunjom Declaration, held following Xi and Kim's second meeting, Kim reaffirmed North Korea's commitment to peninsular peace and denuclearization.

While China was using economic and diplomatic leverage to press North Korea to comply with its interests, relations between the two countries continued to improve. After the Singapore Summit in June 2018, China eased the sanctions imposed at the start of 2018 (McGuire, 2018; Silberstein, 2019; Sun, 2018).

This analysis of China's approach highlights its essential, albeit insufficient, role in motivating both North Korea and the U.S. to de-escalate their conflict. In the context of heightened tensions in the fall of 2017, Washington's growing frustration with China's inability to encourage a change in North Korea's nuclear pursuit motivated the United States to look for diplomatic channels with North Korea to achieve this goal. China's leveraging of hard power (throughout 2017) and soft power (since the beginning of 2018) vis-à-vis North Korea was a contributing source of North Korea's motivation to turn to negotiation and thus comply with its ally's wishes.

Sources of Optimism

The strong motivation of the U.S. and North Korea triggered several mechanisms that influenced the development of some optimism on both sides – that is, the perception that negotiations might yield greater benefits than the status quo offered. These include the mobilization of strongly motivated third parties, particularly South Korea. China played a more modest role in this respect. Two other mechanisms involved information gathering and "testing the waters," starting in January 2018. This entailed direct dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea, as well as dialogue facilitated by third parties and conciliatory steps both parties applied. These three mechanisms led to an increase in working trust and some perception of light at the end of the tunnel, boosting some optimism on both sides. Yet, as discussed below, neither side perceived that the other had moderated its aspirations, which is another state of mind (one of the three) which leads to an increase in optimism, according to readiness theory. Instead, in our case study, a fourth mechanism – wishful thinking – encouraged the increase in optimism. All of these sources of optimism reinforced the parties' strong motivation, as necessary conditions for the increase in the parties' readiness to begin negotiation. Yet, as the following analysis shows, the development of some optimism on the part of North Korea – that is, its belief that a final agreement might satisfy its goals and aspirations without demanding an exorbitant cost – was also based on another source, of a more structural nature: North Korea's confidence in its nuclear deterrence and its ability to stop the U.S. from pursuing a unilateral path.

The increase in optimism that was necessary for the parties to agree to start formal negotiations was not a linear process. In mid-May, there was regression in the working trust and perception of the light at the end of the tunnel, on both sides. However, by the end of the month, optimism was restored through intensive third-party mobilization efforts, as well as bilateral testing of the waters and information-gathering mechanisms.

Third-party Mobilization

South Korea. South Korea sought to leverage its hosting of the Winter Olympics in February 2018 to re-engage with North Korea after more than two years without any high-level contacts between the two Koreas, and used secret channels to invite North Korea to participate in the games (Friedman, 2018; Johnson, 2018). Kim's response came in his New Year's address on January 1, 2018, when he proposed collaboration between the two Koreas to alleviate tensions and bring peace and stability to the peninsula, and indicated the possibility of North Korea participating in the Winter Olympics (Kim, 2018).

Against the backdrop of this Olympic détente, South Korea conducted shuttle diplomacy between North Korea and the U.S., applying facilitative and formulation strategies as the major third party in the pre-negotiation process. South Korea played a key role in prodding the U.S. and North Korea toward direct negotiations, encouraging both sides to believe that the final agreement might satisfy their goals. Its activities cultivated working trust and perceptions of a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel on both sides (Friedman, 2018; Johnson, 2018).

In the pre-negotiation stage, South Korea urged both parties to lower the threshold for engaging in direct talks (Johnson, 2018). During the months of early 2018, South Korea worked hard to convey each side's position and to bridge the gap between them on denuclearization. The South Koreans attempted to persuade the Americans that, in spite of all their apparent hostility, the North Koreans were, in fact, willing to seriously consider denuclearization, if offered sufficient security guarantees and economic rewards (Friedman, 2018).

South Korea's contribution was particularly salient in two major episodes. The first was in March 2018, when South Korea facilitated the agreement to convene a summit meeting between Kim and Trump. The second involved Moon's intensive engagement in late May 2018, when he managed to salvage the summit meeting after Trump had announced its cancellation (Campbell, 2018; J. Lee, 2018).

When talks about direct negotiations between North Korea and the U.S. reached an impasse in March 2018, South Korea immediately engaged in building the positive atmosphere required for the parties to reconsider the negotiation track. As tensions between North Korea and the U.S. rose with no diplomatic breakthrough in sight, South Korea felt that its "entire future was at stake." The fact that the U.S. was preparing to resume military exercises with South Korea dampened North Korea's willingness to engage in direct dialogue (Myers & Perlez, 2018). South Korea sent a high-level delegation to North Korea in an effort to break the impasse and this effort succeeded: Kim issued an invitation to Trump, delivered by President Moon's special envoy, to meet and discuss the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (Campbell, 2018; Snyder & Byun, 2018). The South Korean envoy also reported to Trump that Kim had expressed his readiness to begin negotiations and discuss the future of his nuclear arsenal if North Korea's security was guaranteed in line with a five-point agreement formulated by Kim and two South Korean officials (Davenport, 2020). Kim's commitment to refrain from conducting nuclear or ICBM tests during the talks with the U.S. was also conveyed. After receiving these messages, Trump promptly accepted Kim's invitation to discuss permanent denuclearization and preparations for the June 12 summit in Singapore began (Davenport, 2020; Helsel & Kim, 2018).

Moon further played a critical facilitation role in resolving the diplomatic crisis between the U.S. and North Korea in late May. Heated rhetoric was brewing on both sides, reinforcing the doubts about the other party's sincerity in exploring the negotiation option (Rucker et al., 2018). A North Korean delegation cancelled a meeting with top South Korean officials in protest over the ongoing U.S.-South Korea military exercises, which Pyongyang called provocative, and representatives from North Korea also failed to show up at a meeting with top U.S. officials in Singapore without any explanation (Jackson, 2019). Under these circumstances, and with North Korea threatening to walk away from the planned summit, Trump decided to cancel the summit before Kim could preempt him and cancel it himself (Rucker et al., 2018). Moon, who was caught by surprise by Trump's move, accelerated his mediation efforts, shuttling between the two parties in an attempt to clear up miscommunication, salvage the summit and prevent military escalation (J. Lee, 2018; Yonhap News Agency, 2018b). Moon and Kim held an urgent meeting and exchanged ideas on the U.S.-North Korea summit (Bishop, 2018; Kim & Smith, 2018). Moon, who had met with Trump just a week before, reassured Kim that the U.S. was ready to end its hostile relationship and advance economic cooperation if North Korea abandoned its nuclear ambitions (Friedman, 2018; M. Lee, 2018; Yonhap News Agency, 2018b). Following this meeting, Moon reported to Trump that Kim had reaffirmed his commitment to complete denuclearization and that "the real issue for Chairman Kim is not his firm determination for the complete

denuclearization. Chairman Kim is worried about whether he can trust that the U.S. will end the policy of hostility and guarantee the stability of his regime after denuclearization" (Kim & Smith, 2018). The South Korean leader's effectiveness in mitigating the crisis is reflected in the fact that talks between American and North Korean officials in preparation for the summit resumed a day after Moon's meeting with Trump.

China. China was another important channel for gathering information and gauging North Korea's intentions during the pre-negotiation phase (Kyodo, 2017; Mullany, 2017; Sang-Hun, 2017). Following the meetings between the leaders of North Korea and China, Xi relayed Kim's position to Trump, including Kim's willingness to negotiate and his expectations about the negotiations. China's official news agency quoted Kim as stating that "as long as relevant parties abolish their hostile policies and remove security threats against the DPRK, there is no need for the DPRK to be a nuclear state and denuclearization can be realized" (Haas, 2018). Kim was further reported to be hoping "to build mutual trust with the U.S. through dialogue" (Haas, 2018). This led Trump to note that "relationships and trust are building" (Haas, 2018).

As this analysis demonstrates, the facilitation strategies of third parties – with South Korea clearly playing a leading role, complemented by China's facilitation in the first half of 2018 – provided a source of optimism that prodded the two sides toward rapprochement.

Bilateral Information Gathering, Testing the Waters, and Wishful Thinking

In addition to the pivotal role of third-party mobilization, the U.S. and North Korea, both strongly motivated to alleviate their strained relations, conducted bilateral information gathering and tested the waters. This included conciliatory signals from both sides, which created a conciliatory spiral (Davenport, 2020). By the end of the Singapore Summit, these mechanisms had generated two of the three states of mind described by readiness theory: working trust and some perception of light at the end of the tunnel. This, in turn, generated some increase in optimism during the pre-negotiation stage. However, there was no substantial indication of lowered aspirations, which is the third state of mind the theory describes as conducive to optimism (Pruitt, 2007). Instead, it appears that both parties focused during the pre-negotiations on their shared desire to take advantage of what Pompeo referred to as the unique opportunity that the "two leaders have created through their visions of the future" (DOS, 2018). Under these circumstances, it appears that the process was influenced by wishful thinking and by the Trump administration's tendency to find evidence that the other party is reasonable and motivated to resolve conflicts (Pruitt, 2005).

Bilateral Information Gathering and Testing the Waters. Both parties' actions in early 2018 contributed to the development of working trust and perceptions of light at the end of the tunnel, thus contributing to optimism. These actions included trips to North Korea by Pompeo and his return to the U.S. with the three detained Americans, North Korea's announcement of the suspension of its nuclear and long-range missile tests on April 21, and Trump's response to this step: "very good news for North Korea and the World — big progress! Look forward to our Summit" (Helsel & Kim, 2018). The invitation of foreign journalists to witness North Korea dismantle a nuclear test site on May 24 can also be considered a signal of North Korea's intention of de-escalating the tense relations.

Another conciliatory step occurred on May 25, immediately after Trump's abrupt cancellation of the summit, when a North Korean official stated that Kim was still ready to sit with Trump and resolve issues (Haas & McCurry, 2018). This message was then welcomed by Trump, who called it "warm and productive" (Yonhap News Agency, 2018a) and noted that he was open to resuming the summit.

The preparation talks in late May between U.S. and North Korean officials were important for information gathering (Yonhap News Agency, 2018b), especially in the wake of the May crisis that had left

the parties unsure of whether the summit would actually take place. These meetings focused on exploring what the planned summit could achieve (DOS, 2018; He-suk, 2018). Encouraged by these discussions, the U.S. secretary of state noted that "the North Koreans appear to be contemplating a path forward where they can make a strategic shift, one that their country has not been prepared to make before" (DOS, 2018) and that the discussions had made "real progress in the last 72 hours toward setting the conditions … putting President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un in a place where we think there could be real progress made by the two of them meeting" (DOS, 2018).

From the perspective of readiness theory, we can argue that working trust was emerging between the parties. A close confidant of the North Korean leader came to the White House (the highest ranking North Korean official to visit in nearly two decades) to personally deliver a letter from Kim to Trump (He-suk, 2018), and the U.S. president responded by announcing that the summit would take place as planned. This emerging trust was reflected in Trump's note on these developments: "a lot of good will … the relationships are building, and that's a great positive" (He-suk, 2018). Trump also sent a conciliatory message to North Korea stating that he would no longer use the term "maximum pressure" and that no new sanctions would be implemented unless the talks broke down (He-suk 2018).

There were also emerging signs attesting to the development of some working trust and perception of light at the end of the tunnel on the North Korean side, thus leading to some optimism in Pyongyang about the outcome of negotiation. The planned Singapore Summit was described by North Korea as an event marking the end of hostile relations with the U.S., which would help foster "a radical switchover in the most hostile [North Korea]-U.S. relations" (McCurry, 2018).

The conciliatory spiral continued during the Singapore Summit with a detailed exchange of views on the future of North Korean-U.S. relations (Rosenfeld, 2018). Kim granted Trump's request to return the remains of American troops from the Korean War and Trump reciprocated by suspending the U.S.-South Korea military exercises slated for August. The two leaders seemed to enjoy warm relations during the meeting (Berlinger & Yeung, 2018).

Though these developments attest to the emergence of some working trust and perception of light at the end of the tunnel on both sides, it appears that no substantial scaling down of goals was evident on either side during the pre-negotiation stage. The fact that neither side had tempered its ambitions suggests that the state of mind of lowered aspirations, which according to the theory leads to optimism (Pruitt, 2007), did not exist. Thus, though Pompeo cited real progress in the discussions with North Korea in late May, he also described the conversations as difficult, underscoring the gaps between the two sides (DOS, 2018). The U.S. demanded verifiable and the irreversible dismantling of North Korea's nuclear program as a precondition for lifting sanctions, while North Korea rejected unilateral nuclear disarmament and insisted on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and all neighboring areas, in addition to U.S. security guarantees (Sang-Hun, 2018). The U.S. sought an agreement that would require substantial denuclearization by North Korea and peace in return for economic and diplomatic normalization, while North Korea envisioned an incremental denuclearization process in return for economic rewards and the gradual lifting of sanctions, leading ultimately to a more comprehensive accord. The Americans realized in these discussions that bridging the gaps between the parties would not be a simple task (DOS, 2018; He-suk, 2018) and thus framed the forthcoming Singapore Summit as the beginning of a process "to work our way through" (DOS, 2018).

Wishful Thinking. The case material further suggests that Washington's strong motivation triggered the wishful thinking mechanism that engendered a slight increase in optimism about the success of the process (Pruitt, 2005). Wishful thinking (or "grasping at straws") (Pruitt, 2005) entails searching for evidence that the other side is ready to resolve the conflict. In the direct discussions between the U.S. and North Korea in late May, it was clear to the U.S. that seemingly insurmountable gaps existed between the two countries

(DOS, 2018), yet Pompeo described the forthcoming summit as a historic opening and warned that it would be "nothing short of tragic to let this opportunity go to waste" (DOS, 2018). The U.S. secretary of state portrayed Kim as the type of leader who is capable of making bold decisions that could change the future of both countries. He noted, however, that the upcoming summit and negotiations would be an "opportunity to test whether or not this is the case" (DOS, 2018). Washington's assessment was that Pyongyang viewed its nuclear program as providing vital security and that it would need to receive the right assurances before agreeing to terminate the program (Sang-Hun, 2018). The U.S. thought that it would need to convince North Korea of the bright future that awaited it after denuclearizing. Indeed, in the pre-negotiation discussions, the U.S. administration considered ways to entice North Korea to work toward an agreement by addressing Kim's hope for a more prosperous future for his people. This included an emphasis on the economic benefits the process offered (He-suk, 2018; Hjelmgaard, 2018; Kim, 2019; Yonhap News Agency, 2018c), as well as the opportunity for North Korea to become "integrated into the community of nations" (DOS, 2018). This was the message conveyed in a video presented by the U.S. delegates to Kim and his delegation at the beginning of the summit meeting, illustrating two potential outcomes: "one of moving back and one of moving forward" (Hjelmgaard, 2018).

North Korea's Confidence in Blocking U.S. Military Options. As noted, readiness theory asserts that optimism results from three states of mind: lowered aspirations, working trust, and perceived light at the end of the tunnel (Pruitt, 2007) and that motivation encourages these states of mind through several mechanisms. However, one can argue that another element, not indicated by the theory, played a key and role and prerequisite for North Korea's reassessment of whether an agreement with the U.S. could satisfy its aspirations. This element was North Korea's confidence, galvanized by the end of 2017, that it could block a U.S. military option, leaving the U.S. with no alternative other than negotiation.

The secret exploratory talks between American and North Korean officials in November 2017, aimed at establishing dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea, were not able to spur mutual optimism about the viability of the negotiations. Nevertheless, there were some indications that North Korea was indeed ready for dialogue, though not yet ready for direct talks with the United States – possibly because Kim first wanted to make more progress with his nuclear program (Wertz, 2018). Indeed, Kim became willing to change his approach toward negotiations only after he gained confidence in North Korea's nuclear capabilities (Kim, 2018). Thus, after deterring a U.S. military attack by bringing the U.S. mainland within its missile range, North Korea felt confident to change its unilateral approach and pursue economic development through conciliatory gestures and diplomatic dialogue (Jackson, 2019). In January 2018, Kim stated that North Korea's nuclear strength was its "national defense capability for reliably safeguarding our country's sovereignty" (Kim, 2018). North Korea had perfected its "national nuclear forces … which no force and nothing can reverse," and was now "capable of thwarting and countering any nuclear threats from the United States" (Kim, 2018). In February 2018, North Korea announced it would halt missile tests during U.S.-North Korean talks (Davenport, 2020) and expressed readiness to gradually eliminate its nuclear weapons in return for a lifting of sanctions.

To sum up, the application of readiness theory to this case study shows that an increase in motivation and optimism on both sides was a necessary condition for the increase in the parties' readiness for the de-escalatory process and negotiation. The strong motivation to negotiate and manage the crisis via diplomacy grew steadily toward the end of 2017 and was, in fact, the salient feature of the process. The increase in motivation on both sides in 2017 and early 2018 stemmed from the growing sense that the ongoing pursuit of unilateral tactics was too risky and costly, and offered no prospect of extracting concessions from the other side. North Korea's motivation was rooted in all three antecedents of motivation outlined by readiness theory. The growing motivation of North Korea and the U.S. served as fertile ground for optimism, as reflected in the parties' perceptions of the possibilities encapsulated in pursuing the direct negotiation

option. This optimism grew, albeit moderately, on both sides in the first six months of 2018 through the mechanisms discussed. As the parties became more optimistic about the possibility of achieving their goals through diplomacy, they decided to engage in negotiation.

Conclusion: Ripeness or Readiness for Negotiation in Crisis?

The study shows that both ripeness theory and readiness theory shed light on the factors underlying a state's change of policy from escalation to negotiation in crises, such as the crisis in U.S.-North Korea relations in 2017–2018. The study highlights the utility of ripeness theory's concise two-layer construct of perceptions of mutually hurting stalemate and way out in assessing the state of mind that led the parties to the negotiating table. However, it also indicates that ripeness theory falls short of reflecting the reality in this kind of non-linear and volatile episode, which involved conciliatory bilateral steps applied by both parties and intensive third-party engagement that helped and encouraged the parties to engage in diplomatic dialogue and stay the course. This is where readiness theory stands out with its unique contribution as a dynamic and deeper version of ripeness (Pruitt, 2005). The U.S.-North Korea case demonstrates that the concept of growing readiness, including a mapping of the gradual changes in the parties' readiness for negotiation, can lead to a more profound understanding of the fundamentals contributing to crisis management and negotiation. Such analysis of the complex fundamentals at play in the process that induces parties to replace unilateral and coercive strategies with diplomacy and negotiations can yield practical insights for parties that find themselves in similar episodes and for third parties mediating conflicts with high risk of escalating into military hostility.

Ripeness Versus Readiness: Two Outlooks

Analysis of the U.S.-North Korea de-escalation dynamics through the two conceptual frameworks of ripeness and readiness involves a focus on the perceptional elements required on both sides in the case of ripeness, and a focus on changes in complex multi-variable processes that occur separately on each side in the case of readiness. Ripeness theory is useful in examining the perceptions of MHS and WO as essential prerequisites for the parties' commitment at the Singapore Summit to work towards the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and to establish new relations for building a lasting and stable peace. Readiness theory, on the other hand, provides a deeper and more detailed analysis of the interplay of conditions that induce the processes leading to the changes in the motives and perceptions that constitute ripeness. In our case study, these processes were non-linear, included crisis episodes and were not necessarily symmetrical on both sides (Pruitt, 2005). They included: changes in the U.S. assessment of its ability to pressure North Korea to abandon it nuclear pursuit through coercive diplomacy; the influence of an ally, China, on North Korea; the changes in Kim's perception of North Korea's ability to counter the U.S. with its nuclear deterrent; the bilateral steps taken by the parties in a conciliatory spiral; and the mechanisms through which third parties (South Korea and China) influenced the behavior of North Korea and the U.S. Readiness theory's ability to elucidate and trace these multiple components and processes over time improves our understanding of the factors that drive de-escalation dynamics and lead parties to the negotiation table in the wake of severe crisis.

The Role of Third Parties in Fostering Readiness for Negotiation

The valuable and necessary role third parties played in the dynamics that led the parties to de-escalate their conflict and eventually sit at the table is one of the major findings highlighted by readiness theory analysis. This finding supports the assertion of Faure and Zartman (2005) that readiness thinking

introduces other elements (in addition to the two elements of ripeness) that are useful when ripening is needed, including the use of a third-party mediator (Faure & Zartman, 2005, pp. 304–305). Yet, the analysis of the case from the perspective of readiness theory goes beyond illuminating the third-party strategies that facilitated the transition from escalation into negotiation.

As suggested by Faure and Zartman (2005), our case study indeed sheds light on the crucial roles third parties can play in alleviating a crisis by facilitating communication and influencing the rivals' cost-benefit calculations. The application of readiness theory helped to identify the pressure applied by third parties, including UN sanctions and China's application of hard power, as a motivating factor for North Korea to adopt a more conciliatory stance. The study underlined facilitation strategies applied by South Korea and China that encouraged a certain degree of faith in both parties that the other side was serious about ending the conflict at the negotiating table. It also illustrated how China applied its soft power sources to prod North Korea to pursue the diplomatic track. However, the application of readiness theory also offers an in-depth understanding of the interplay of the multiple sources affecting the de-escalation process, including the impact of third-party interests, pressure and mobilization strategies, and the interplay of these elements with the other antecedents of the parties' readiness to negotiate an agreement. As demonstrated, South Korea's facilitation and ability to boost the parties' optimism occurred against the backdrop of increasing motivation (of both parties and of South Korea), and China's pressure complemented the other two sources of motivation indicated by the theory (that is, a sense that the conflict is unwinnable and a sense that the conflict is generating unacceptable costs or risks) in influencing North Korea. All three sources of motivation outlined by readiness theory served as necessary influences in convincing North Korea to adopt a conciliatory approach. Prospective third parties might consider this finding in future crisis episodes.

In this respect, readiness theory's view of South Korea's role in the case studied also exemplifies the usefulness of the concept of "readiness to intervene," a variant of readiness theory (Pruitt, 2005) that helps to explain "when and how third parties intervene in a conflict" (Pruitt, 2005, p.14). Motivated by a sense of urgency stemming from the risk of military escalation and by its need to prevent a second Korean War, South Korea was a crucial mediator in the pre-negotiation process, employing facilitative and formulation strategies (M. Lee, 2018). South Korea engaged in a hectic to and fro with the two parties in an attempt to put them back on the path of mutual trust building and help them identify areas of possible agreement between their divergent positions (J. Lee, 2018; Yonhap News Agency, 2018b).

False Optimism?

The application of readiness theory to the case study gave rise to an interesting observation that may help explain the fruitless U.S.-North Korea negotiations that followed the Singapore Summit. The analysis indicates that the strong motivation of the U.S. and North Korea to ease tensions triggered several mechanisms that influenced the development of some optimism: third-party engagement, bilateral testing of the waters, and information gathering. These mechanisms, in turn, led to an increase in working trust and some perception of light at the end of the tunnel, two of the three states of mind identified by the theory as engendering optimism. However, the analysis underlines the absence of the third state of mind the theory cites as conducive to optimism: lowered expectations. That is, there was no substantial indication of lowered aspirations on either side during the pre-negotiation stage in the first half of 2018. Thus, although there were signs of increased optimism as the crisis de-escalated, the absence of this third state of mind provided fertile ground for the development of wishful thinking, at least on the American side. In fact, the term "false optimism" may best describe the U.S. administration's belief that it could actually convince North Korea to denuclearize completely, and North Korea's belief that the U.S. and South Korea were ready to agree to peace on its terms, which included the complete de-nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Perhaps this false optimism explains, among other factors, why the negotiation process was largely unproductive. Did the

U.S. understanding of Kim's hopes for a brighter, more prosperous future reflect a real understanding of Kim's motivations, or rather a serious misperception of Kim's motivations based on Trump's approach? This observation on the emergence of false optimism and its influence on the U.S. decision to attend the Singapore Summit suggests the need for additional research on how the absence of one of the three states of minds affects the dynamics of the pre-negotiation stage and the parties' decision to negotiate. Future research should assess whether all three states of mind outlined by readiness theory are preconditions for generating some real optimism (as opposed to "false" optimism) about the possibility of reaching a mutually acceptable agreement with the other side. The original readiness theory does not address this question.

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