On the “Korean Issue” in the Book Rage by Bob Woodward

The upcoming US presidential election is yielding a series of books designed to analyze how Donald Trump has performed and, more often than not, put forth a rationale why everything went wrong during his tenure. The book Rage occupies a notable place among those; the author is Robert “Bob” Woodward, who is an American cult journalist and an associate editor at The Washington Post.

The cornerstone for the book was comprised of both 18 interviews that Woodward had with Trump from December 2019 to July 2020 and other sources. In particular, Woodward managed to get his hands on 27 letters that Kim and Trump exchanged (25 of which were never released to the public), and which he quotes copiously.

Analyzing this correspondence, Woodward notes that the language used by both leaders does not seem like what is traditionally used in diplomacy, and more resembles “a declaration of personal loyalty that the Knights of the Round Table would utter.”

For example, on June 15, 2018, three days after they met in Singapore, Trump writes that “the media outlets did a fantastic job for you and North Korea”. In response, on July 6 Kim writes: “This significant first meeting with Your Excellency, and the joint statement we signed together in Singapore 24 days ago, really marked the start of a meaningful journey”.

On September 6, 2018, Kim starts talking about the specifics: “We are ready to take further significant steps, one at a time, in stages, such as completely shutting down the Nuclear Weapons Institute, or the satellite launch area, and irreversibly closing our nuclear material production facility.”.

On December 25, Kim writes that he cannot “forget that historical moment when I had the opportunity to firmly squeeze Your Excellency’s hand in that beautiful, sacred place, while the whole world was watching us with great interest”, as well as “I am very humbled by the opportunity to establish a wonderful relationship with an individual such as Your Excellency”. However, he does get down to business quickly: 2019 is approaching, we have to meet, and it will be “a historical meeting, like a scene from a science fiction film”; people are already working, and it is necessary to definitively determine the meeting place for working negotiations. Kim Jong-un hopes that “Your Excellency will once again demonstrate a high level of resolve, and excellent leadership qualities, for the sake of achieving results during the second summit” and “the objectives set by Your Excellency will result in enviable fruitfulness”.

And, even though the summit in Hanoi was not successful, both sides still bowed and scraped before each other. On March 22, 2019, Trump writes to Kim: “Thank you again for making such a long journey to Hanoi. As I told you when we parted ways, you are my friend, and always will be”.

On June 10, Kim writes “a letter of verbose flattery”: “Just as during the short time we spent together a year ago in Singapore, every minute we shared 103 days ago in Hanoi was a jubilation that left precious memories... I am convinced that our strong and special friendship will become that magical force which will unfetter progress in relations between the DPRK and the United States, and will clear all the obstacles for us on the way to achieving our joint goals”. “I assure Your Excellency that my respect for you will never wane”.

However, in this author’s opinion, flattery is not as important as the passage that states “without new approaches and the needed resolve, the prospects for solving problems will only diminish” and “sooner or later, one fine day, to give our mutual trust yet another chance, we will sit down together and turn our grand intentions into reality”. 


In response, on June 12, 2019 Trump writes: “Only you and I, working together, can solve the problems between our two countries and end nearly 70 years of hostilities, bringing an era of prosperity to the Korean Peninsula that will exceed our highest expectations - and you will be the one in charge”.

After the June 2019 summit at the DMZ on June 30, 2019, the parties exchanged several more letters - and then, on August 5, Kim expresses outrage over the joint US-South Korean military exercises. “I thought that these provocative joint field training exercises would be either canceled or postponed until the start of working-level negotiation between our countries, where we will continue discussing important issues... I am clearly offended, and do not want to hide this feeling from you. I am truly deeply offended.”

Woodward believes that the US President fell for crude flattery and the fact that he was called Your Excellency, noting that Trump often called Kim’s letters beautiful, although in response to similar accusations made by John Bolton, Trump explained that he was just being sarcastic.

But we are more interested in what new things we can learn about the underlying reasons for some actions. First, it seems that this author’s assumption is correct that Trump understood that the nuclear issue of the Korean Peninsula cannot be solved, but can be handled by putting the process of exacerbation on hold. For example, Woodward describes how US officials, including senior intelligence officials, have warned that North Korea is unlikely to ever give up its nuclear weapons, and that Trump’s approach may wind up being ineffective. Trump, however, told Woodward that he is filled to the brim with resolve to stay this course, and that the CIA has no clue how to communicate with Pyongyang.

But, at the same time, Trump states that for the North Korean leader nuclear weapons are the same thing as a house that he cherishes, and therefore will not sell. And that during the summits he “did not give anything away”. And that if North Korea resumes its long-range missile tests then it will face “big problems. Big, big problems. Bigger than anybody’s ever had before”.

Second, it confirms the speculation that in 2017 the United States came very close to a war with North Korea. “Much closer than anyone would know. Much closer”. Furthermore, to counter a possible attack by North Korea, the United States considered the possibility of “using up to 80 nuclear weapons against the North”.

That last retort even prompted a comment from the presidential administration that the United States cannot use military force on the Korean Peninsula without consent from Seoul, and the use of nuclear weapons is not stipulated in the operational plan (OPLAN 5027), which describes the actions allies would take in the event North Korea invaded the South.

Along with that, according to Trump Kim Jong-un told him that he believes that war with the US is unavoidable, and is completely ready for it. It goes without saying that Trump emphasizes how if President Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton were in power, war would have already started, and for the fact that it did not happen he highlights his “excellent” relationship with Kim.

The DPRK leader made a huge impression on him, and allegedly was so sincere with him that he spoke in detail about the execution of his uncle, Jang Song-thaek. It turns out that Jang was beheaded, and his body was on display on the steps of a building used by high-ranking North Korean officials.

Third, Woodward notes that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un never once, directly or indirectly, raised the issue of withdrawing American troops stationed in South Korea, even though he was very upset by the joint field training exercises: “Even less do I like the fact that the US military is engaging in these paranoid and hypersensitive actions with the South Korean people”.

Based on this, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, according to Woodward, came to the conclusion that the North may actually want US troops to remain in South Korea to help keep China in check.

The description of why the summit in Hanoi failed is also interesting. Trump is not as much heaping blame on Bolton as he is claiming that he said that closing down the Yongbyon Nuclear Science and Weapons Research Center was insufficient, asking Kim Jong-un to go for closing the “big deal”. Kim was supposedly ready to eliminate one of his nuclear facilities, but he had five. However, the North Korean side refused to make any further concessions, which was the reason for Trump’s statement that it was “unwilling to negotiate”.

Naturally, this book is not only about the DPRK. Woodward reproaches Trump for “not feeling responsible for the anger and pain” experienced by black Americans, and for not believing there is systemic racism in America. He is
surprised at Trump’s train of thought about a new US nuclear weapons system that nobody in the world has ever heard of, including Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping. He quotes the president’s son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner: “the most dangerous people around the president are arrogant idiots.”

He described how some senior administration officials contemplated resigning, and how US Defense Secretary James Mattis went to the Washington National Cathedral to pray for the country’s future under Trump as commander-in-chief, even going to bed in his uniform to prepare for a possible emergency. According to Woodward’s book, Mattis once told then-Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats that Trump was dangerous, and unfit to be the president, and there might be a time when “we have to take collective action”. Also, Mattis allegedly told Coats that the president “does not have a moral compass”, and Coats agreed: Trump does not know the difference between truth and lies.

But let us recap the “Korean section”. On one hand, Woodward does believe that Trump conceded too much to Kim, postponing and then wrapping up the joint US-South Korea field training exercises, which have long angered the North, and giving Kim the international status and legitimacy that the North Korean regime has long craved. And it is no coincidence that almost every article in the South Korean media devoted to the book has ended with the rejoinder that “North Korea has not yet returned to the negotiating table with the United States”, or that “the negotiations, as before, have come to a dead end”.

On the other hand, although in 2017 many were convinced that a person like Trump would immediately start to wage war, it was the interaction between the US President and the North Korean leader that prevented the escalation of tension.

“We didn’t have a war, and you [...] have to give him his due” - that assessment is clearly praise, given that it comes from an author who believes that Trump is not the right person to serve as the country’s president.

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