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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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After their unprecedented summit in Singapore last April, President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) agreed to meet in Hanoi on Feb. 27 and 28 for round 2. In their joint statement in Singapore, the two leaders agreed to establish new U.S.-DPRK relations. The new relationship would include building a lasting peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, committing DPRK to work toward “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” and recovering the remains of U.S. soldiers missing in action (MIA) from the Korean War. Their joint statement also noted that Trump “committed to provide security guarantees to the DPRK” although what exactly these would be was left unspecified.

However, not much has happened since the Singapore summit, particularly on the road to denuclearization. Trump has boasted of “great progress” because North Korea has not tested any more nuclear warheads or missiles. But North Korea does not have to, because as Kim declared, it already has a credible nuclear weapon capability to hit Seoul or Tokyo, if not the continental U.S. For some time, the U.S. had insisted on “complete verifiable and irreversible denuclearization (CVID)” of North Korea’s nuclear forces. This phrase more recently morphed into “final, fully verified denuclearization (FFVD)”, perhaps admitting that nothing in nuclear weapons technology is irreversible. On Dec. 20, the official (North) Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reminded the U.S. and the rest of the world that, for North Korea, the Korean Peninsula includes both the northern and southern parts of the peninsula. Thus, denuclearization of the peninsula means “removing elements of nuclear threats from the areas of both north and south of Korea and also from surrounding areas from where the Korean peninsula is targeted.” The article maintained that the U.S. must remove all its nuclear threats to the DPRK before North Korea eliminates its own nuclear weapons, which Kim described last year as “a powerful treasured sword for defending peace”.

Denuclearization

The Singapore summit took place without any prior discussions. However, in the run-up to the Hanoi summit, the U.S. and DPRK have had what hopefully may be substantive working-level talks regarding the way forward. On the nuclear side, many issues remain to be resolved, including the definition and scope of denuclearization. No one knows the number or location of North Korean warheads, the number or location of mobile North Korean missile systems, or the size of North Korea’s fissile material stockpile, containing both enriched uranium and plutonium. All is pure speculation. Indeed, while there have been no further nuclear tests, at least for the time being, North Korea has also made no commitment to stop production of fissile material, something most observers believe continues full-bore. There are also reports that North Korea may be moving and widely hiding its nuclear assets to ensure that they cannot be subject to any potential decapitation strikes.



Verification

To get a handle on the unknowns listed above, any credible denuclearization agreement will require robust verification measures, the “trust but verify” mantra of any serious arms control and disarmament agreement. Verification will require on-site inspections, something that the Hermit Kingdom will have considerable difficulty accepting, given that North Korean casualties from the Korean War remain a state secret. Last year, the main nuclear test site was apparently demolished (or perhaps mothballed), but only a handful of non-expert foreign journalists witnessed the controlled demolition. North Korea had also offered to dismantle a missile test site but suspicions remain that the country may be creating nuclear warhead and missile test facilities elsewhere. According to Moon Chung-in, South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s special adviser for foreign affairs and national security, Kim gave the president his personal assurance that North Korea’s primary nuclear facility at Yongbyon, which produces fissile material, would be permanently and verifiably dismantled. As part of an earlier dismantling process, all five nuclear facilities in Yongbyon were shut down in 2007 and a cooling tower demolished in 2008. By 2009, however, North Korea had started to reactivate and expand its nuclear facilities. At issue now, of course, is whether other such production facilities exist elsewhere.

Kim’s reported promises to allow international inspectors to inspect closed test sites remain just promises. While International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) experts would be key to verifying the status of any North Korean nuclear fissile-material facility, other experts in missile and nuclear warhead technology would be needed to confirm the dismantling of North Korean nuclear forces. It is doubtful that DPRK would agree to have U.S., Chinese or Russian experts snooping around.

Timeline

Any coherent denuclearization roadmap would presumably include a clear timeline. After the failure of various attempts to negotiate with North Korea, the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations adopted a policy of strategic patience. Trump, however, argued that strategic patience simply allowed North Korea to test and perfect its nuclear and missile arsenals. After his short-lived “fire and fury” tantrum in 2017, Trump settled for a combination of increasing UN and U.S. sanctions in response to DPRK’s nuclear and missile tests, while urgently pushing for CVID. Then, the Singapore love-in occurred. Immediately after the Singapore summit, Trump declared that “[t]here is no longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea.” The collective U.S. intelligence community begged to differ and continues to do so. Then, on Feb. 19 at a White House press scrum, Trump gave Kim a pre-summit gift by stating “... We need denuclearization ultimately ... I’m in no particular rush, the sanctions are on ... I’m in no rush; there’s no testing. As long as there’s no testing I’m in no rush. If there’s testing that’s another deal ... I hope that very positive things will happen.” Trump’s off-the-cuff comments probably caught his negotiating team off-guard. The comments seem to imply that the U.S. no longer views North Korea’s denuclearization as the end goal. Of perhaps greater concern is Trump’s apparent



acceptance of North Korea as a *de facto* nuclear weapon state as long as it does not test. A similar situation existed with both India and Pakistan throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s.

UN and U.S. Sanctions

North Korea wants UN and U.S. sanctions lifted. North Korea has argued that it should be rewarded for dismantling its nuclear test site and for abstaining from further testing. It has argued that the U.S. should reciprocate action for action by easing sanctions. UN sanctions are already wobbly, mostly thanks to China and Russia and to North Korean expertise in evading sanctions for decades. The country has illegally sold its missile technology, engaged in money laundering and has used its diplomats to smuggle gold. While exceptions to UN sanctions have been made for humanitarian purposes, U.S. bilateral sanctions have hurt North Korea the most because they are aimed at financial institutions that deal with North Korea, including Chinese banks. In Hanoi, Kim will be expected to push Trump hard to ease sanctions and Moon will assist him in this.

South Korea's Role

As chief cheerleader for U.S.-DPRK rapprochement, Moon has worked hard on his vision of North-South peaceful co-existence through co-prosperity. Moon has met Kim three times, including in Pyongyang, and has advocated the re-connection of North/South roads and railways, the resuscitation of economic joint ventures and the sharing of South Korean technical expertise. During his telephone conversation with Trump on Feb. 18, Moon reiterated his willingness, according to Korean reports, “to take on any role, from inter-Korean rail projects to inter-Korean economic cooperation if requested by President Trump, and that could lessen the burden on the US.” The U.S. and South Korea had just agreed to a cost-sharing formula, bizarrely for one year only, to finance the presence of U.S. troops. Moon wants U.S.-DPRK action-for-action rapprochement to continue but is conscious of businessman Trump’s inclination to view U.S. foreign policy in terms of financial costs (vide Syria, Afghanistan and NATO). Moon’s vision of co-prosperity fits in well with Trump’s idea of turning North Korea into “a tremendous economic power”.

Security Assurances

The recent North Korean demand, via KCNA, for the removal of U.S. nuclear threats to North Korea from surrounding areas is nothing new. Indeed, as part of the 1994 U.S.-DPRK framework agreement, the U.S. undertook to “provide formal assurances to the DPRK against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the US.” But this recurring issue does raise questions of U.S. commitment to extended deterrence over South Korea and Japan at a sensitive time. It can



call into question U.S. defence agreements and even the presence of U.S. troops in both countries.

At the Singapore summit, Trump surprised his military advisers and South Korea by announcing the suspension of major annual military exercises with South Korea. Perhaps Trump meant this gesture as a confidence-building measure, but he also noted how expensive these exercises were. Parallel to U.S.-DPRK discussions, North and South Korea signed a detailed agreement whose aim is to ease military tension and build confidence between the two sides. Measures being implemented include the withdrawal of some guard posts within the demilitarized zone (DMZ), some mine clearance, recovery within the DMZ of remains of soldiers from the Korean War and agreement to demilitarize the Joint Security Area in Panmunjom where official North-South talks occur. For the Hanoi summit, there has been speculation that, with Moon's support, Trump and Kim may agree to a declaration that would officially end the Korean War. The current 1953 armistice simply agreed to the cessation of hostilities. An end-of-war declaration would be a political gesture reflecting better relations between the two Koreas and the U.S. There is concern, however, that even such a political gesture would put more pressure on the U.S.-South Korea defence agreement, including raising questions about the presence of U.S. forces on the peninsula.

Weather Vanes

While the above issues will be central to the outcome of the Hanoi summit, other related elements should also be monitored as weather vanes for future progress. These include:

Future North-South family reunions

Since the warming of North-South relations last year, one set of family reunions took place in August 2018. In September 2018, Moon and Kim agreed to open a permanent facility for family reunion meetings and also to hold meetings via video. Neither of these initiatives has happened, apparently because they require exemptions to UN sanctions. In the past, North Korea has held family reunions hostage to the state of North-South relations.

Ongoing return of U.S. MIAs

Of 7,800 U.S. MIAs from the Korean War, some 5,300 are believed to have died in North Korea. As a result of the Singapore summit, North Korea did turn over 55 boxes of remains in July 2018. Apparently, in the past, DPRK officials have indicated that they possess as many as 200 sets of remains. Presumably, discussions are ongoing for the repatriation of the remaining sets and the modalities to continue searching for more MIAs. As in the past, North Korea may calibrate how much it wants to co-operate.



New U.S.-DPRK relations

New U.S.-DPRK relations presumably will eventually require the establishment of reciprocal diplomatic liaison offices in Washington and Pyongyang.

Human rights

North Korea's egregious human rights record has been rarely mentioned in the context of warming relations. In 2007, then-South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun and North Korea's former leader Kim Jong-il agreed that neither country would "interfere in the internal affairs of the other". This meant that human rights issues would not be raised. In April 2017, Moon and Kim Jong-un agreed to improve inter-Korean relations "by fully implementing all existing agreements and declarations adopted between the two sides thus far." This has meant no discussion of human rights. Trump has also followed that course.

In the longer term, more fundamental issues may have to be addressed. These include the possibility of a treaty that ends the Korean War and whether North and South unification will ever happen. In the meantime, however, all eyes will be on the Hanoi summit and its results.

► About the Author

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