

# Engaging North Korea after the Singapore Summit

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ON JUNE 12, 2018, US President Donald Trump and North Korean Workers' Party Chairman Kim Jong-un met in Singapore for a historic US-DPRK summit. Expectations in the lead-up to the meeting were high, as Trump had bragged that he would get a great deal and his supporters suggested he deserved a Nobel Peace Prize. When the moment arrived, however, the joint statement signed by Trump and Kim simply committed North Korea to "work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" and failed to mention a CVID (complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement) approach. There was also no mention of a concrete roadmap to guide the denuclearization process. As a result, an atmosphere of disappointment surrounded the post-summit commentary and the joint statement was criticized as an empty document.

While I too share a healthy dose of skepticism, as one of the few diplomats who has engaged in intensive negotiations with Pyongyang, I am struck by the fact that the summit has changed the dynamics surrounding North Korea in a way that gives us a rare chance to peacefully settle the nuclear threat and other pressing issues. Certainly, it must be acknowledged that the tensions surrounding the Korean Peninsula have been reduced as a result of the summit. Rather than focusing on the exact

wording of the joint statement, then, I believe that the priority should be on taking advantage of the post-summit détente to achieve the objective of CVID over the long term. The process by which that is achieved must be based on a gradual development of trust between the United States and North Korea. Conversely, rushing to conclude a watertight document at this stage could prove counterproductive since it would make any small hiccups that would inevitably occur along the way appear that much more dramatic, which could derail the fragile trust-building process.

This approach of putting trust before the process was also taken by former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and then North Korean leader Kim Jong-il when they concluded the 2002 Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration. Japan should now return to the framework of that declaration and avoid being left on the sideline. The ongoing, broader regional diplomatic process, which began with South Korea's Olympic diplomacy, has so far seen Kim Jong-un hold meetings with ROK President Moon Jae-in, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, as well as President Trump. This provides an opening for Japan to deepen its strategic thinking and take the initiative to begin talks with North Korea.

## North Korea's Rationale

Since Kim Jong-un took over the leadership of North Korea from his father, Kim Jong-il, in December 2011, he has emphasized the so-called *byungjin* (parallel development) line to simultaneously develop the nation's economy and nuclear weapons. In his first speech, Kim confirmed this policy shift and declared that the North Korean people would not have to tighten their belts again. Subsequently, North Korea intensified its missile and nuclear weapons testing. There are some doubts about the actual capability of North Korea's nuclear weapons, such as its nuclear warhead miniaturization and the ability of its ICBMs to withstand re-entering the earth's atmosphere. Yet North Korea rapidly improved its nuclear capabilities to the point that Kim Jong-un was able at the end of 2017 to declare that his country had become a nuclear power.

Realizing the second element of the *byungjin* line—developing the economy—will be impossible so long as North Korea continues to be subject to tough economic sanctions and to fear for its survival. At the same time, actually using its nuclear devices as a weapon of war is not particularly useful for North Korea. War would not only risk the lives of millions of South Koreans in Seoul and tens of thousands of US military personnel stationed in South Korea but, given the ROK-US Combined Forces' overwhelming military strength, it would be an act of suicide for the Kim Jong-un regime. Nuclear weapons are only useful for North Korea as a deterrent mechanism or as a bargaining chip as they seek robust security guarantees—especially from the United States—and economic aid and cooperation from relevant countries around Northeast Asia. Even as a deterrent, it is doubtful whether North Korean nuclear weapons would be effective vis-à-vis the United States given the vast differences in the actual nuclear capabilities of the two countries. As such, Kim Jong-un appears to have little choice but to use North Korea's nuclear capability as a bargaining chip.

This North Korean strategic thinking may not be compatible with rapid denuclearization in one stroke, but it does accord with a longer-term, phased, action-for-action approach. Thus there is scope for North Korea to denuclearize in good faith if the international community can guarantee its post-denuclearization survival. Moreover, while Kim Jong-un has often been castigated as an irrational madman, his foreign policy is quite rational when

viewed in the broader context of North Korea's security situation and the grim fate that would surely await North Korean leaders under a collapse or unification-by-absorption scenario.

## Establishing a Roadmap

Follow-through is needed now by both the United States and North Korea based on the platform set by the Singapore summit. The success of Trump's decision to meet with Kim Jong-un and engage North Korea will hinge on the continuing negotiations led by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Vice-Chairman of the Workers' Party of North Korea Kim Yong-chol. These negotiations—the first step in establishing a roadmap toward denuclearization—should keep a number of key elements in mind.

First, trust-building momentum between the United States and North Korea must be maintained. To this end, the commitment expressed in the Singapore joint statement on the recovery and repatriation of POW/MIA remains represents low-hanging fruit that is ripe for picking. Building trust will smooth the road toward establishing a sustainable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula as well as achieving CVID. An emphasis on building trust can also help mitigate the chance that North Korea will renege on its denuclearization pledge.

Second, there needs to be a long-term view of the denuclearization process, understanding that it may take five years or more. North Korea should be encouraged to take some substantive actions toward denuclearizing early on in this process to show its sincerity. The demolition of tunnels at North Korea's Punggye-ri nuclear test site in May was a welcome step. A good next step would be for North Korea to make a comprehensive declaration of all its nuclear facilities and assets. This will then enable meaningful conversations about establishing procedures for an inspection regime by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Third, a potential roadmap will need to lay out plans for security guarantees and a sustainable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula to demonstrate to North Korea that, so long as it denuclearizes, it will be permitted to survive and be integrated into international economic institutions. President Trump announced that US-ROK military exercises will be suspended and no new sanctions will be implemented so long as negotiations with North Korea continue in good faith. This will help to build trust between

the United States and North Korea and to demonstrate sincerity on the part of the US administration in establishing robust security guarantees for North Korea's post-denuclearization survival. This is particularly significant given that the Korean Peninsula has historically been a geopolitical crossroads where great power rivalries have played out and North Korea has always felt pressed on all sides by more powerful nations. The United States should also consider the quick establishment of a liaison office in Pyongyang as a stepping-stone to normalized diplomatic relations. This is a relatively small and easy concession to make considering that many countries—including many in the West—have normalized diplomatic relations with North Korea already.

Fourth, cooperation and coordination with Northeast Asian countries is needed as part of the process to provide security guarantees to North Korea and establish a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Such a buy-in from all stakeholders is the best way to ensure the long-term stability of any agreement. From this perspective, the unilateral manner in which the suspension of US-ROK war games was announced was regrettable. As US-DPRK negotiations progress beyond trust building and toward substantive movement on establishing a peace regime and security guarantees, it may be appropriate to reconvene the Six-Party Talks as a venue to coordinate discussions among stakeholders. Denuclearizing North Korea is certain to be an expensive process, and President Trump's statement that South Korea and Japan must bear the financial burden is further evidence of the need for deeper consultations. Denuclearizing North Korea benefits not just the region but the international community as a whole, and appropriate burden sharing will have to be coordinated in due course.

### Japan's Role

When Japan and North Korea concluded the Pyongyang Declaration in 2002, both countries resolved that solving the abduction issue, realizing denuclearization, and building cooperative bilateral relations was in the national interest of both countries and would contribute to regional stability. Mutual recognition of these tenets was to provide the basis for Japan and North Korea to begin diplomatic normalization negotiations. At the same time, Japan also pledged to provide North Korea with economic assistance after Japan and North Korea normalized their

diplomatic relations. Thus Japan has the potential to play an important role in contributing to the economic dimension of security guarantees for North Korea's post-denuclearization survival.

Japan should now return to the framework set out in the Pyongyang Declaration. To this end, Japan should begin a dialogue with North Korea that can eventually lead to a summit between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Kim Jong-un and the re-opening of negotiations on diplomatic normalization. The abduction issue should be addressed and resolved as part of these negotiations.

At its core, the abduction issue—which saw a number of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea from Japan in the 1970s and 1980s—is a bilateral issue that requires a bilateral solution. In particular, a joint investigation into the missing abductees that includes officials from both countries needs to be established in order to ascertain precise details regarding the number of abductees, their fates, and the fates of their family members. Only in this way can Japan and North Korea facilitate a credible resolution and begin to forge a relationship built on trust. The Japanese government should also consider establishing a liaison office in order to facilitate regularized dialogue with North Korean authorities and invigorate negotiating momentum. It is important, however, that Japan keep in mind the big picture of facilitating a sustainable peace for the Northeast Asian region.

### Strategic Foundations

In order to ensure the credibility of the ongoing regional diplomatic process with North Korea, a "P3C" approach—pressure, coordination, contingency planning, and communication channel—is needed as a strategic foundation. Continued quiet **pressure** in the background is needed to demonstrate to North Korea that if it abandons diplomacy, sanctions can be increased and that the international community will not allow it to develop its economy while it possesses nuclear weapons. **Coordination** between the United States, South Korea, Japan, and China is needed to ensure that North Korea is not given room to drive wedges between these four actors and win premature sanctions relief outside the current diplomatic framework. **Contingency planning** is needed given the possibility that tensions on the Korean Peninsula could suddenly return. This joint contingency planning needs to prepare for a worst-case scenario on the Korean Peninsula, including plans to secure North

Korea's nuclear weapons as quickly and efficiently as possible in the event of a collapse as well as plans to deal with possible refugee flows. Finally, keeping a **communication channel** open with core officials in the North Korean power structure is essential in order to maintain negotiating momentum, to avoid misunderstandings that could derail the diplomatic process, and to present North Korea with the united message from the international community that it will be permitted to survive and be integrated into international economic institutions only if it denuclearizes.



The first-ever summit between the leaders of the United States and North Korea was a positive step forward for regional peace. Now, serious work is needed to sustain that momentum. Ultimately, the success or

failure of the summit will depend on the next phase of diplomacy and particularly on the parties' ability to maintain the fragile trust-building process, to negotiate a concrete denuclearization roadmap, and to consult consistently and substantively with regional allies and partners, particularly with regard to providing security guarantees to North Korea. If this process succeeds, it could move the region substantially closer to the goal of establishing a sustainable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

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