

Regaining Momentum on North Korea Negotiations: One Year on from the Singapore Summit

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AS WE APPROACH the one year anniversary of the Singapore Summit held between President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un, the denuclearization of North Korea remains an elusive and exasperating target. But rather than writing the North Korea question off as too difficult, it is imperative that the United States and its allies take a clear-eyed view of why recent negotiations have not borne fruit and figure out how to regain momentum. Several key factors need to be addressed to help break the impasse and see the current negotiation process through: the creation of a more credible foundation for negotiations; the parallel pursuit of both denuclearization and a permanent peace regime; and the appropriate engagement of all of the other Six-Party Talks nations. In particular, it is time for Japan to come off the diplomatic sidelines and attempt to resolve the abduction issue and also play a constructive role in developing a comprehensive resolution to the North Korean nuclear conundrum.

The Current Situation with North Korea

The June 2018 Singapore Summit was criticized for failing to establish a concrete agreement on how to denuclearize North Korea. This criticism missed the bigger picture, namely that a sitting US president met with a North Korean leader for the first

time, despite the deep distrust that still permeates relations between the two countries. The Singapore joint statement, which identified the establishment of credibility and confidence building as a first priority, along with the establishment of a permanent peace regime and the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, was a positive step to kick-start the negotiation process.

The February 2019 Hanoi Summit, however, was a misstep. Some sort of progress in negotiations should have been made to justify a second Trump-Kim meeting. North Korea demanded that the denuclearization process be carried out step-by-step rather than being a one-shot deal. As a first step, the North Koreans offered to completely dismantle facilities at the Yongbyon nuclear complex, where fissile materials for nuclear weapons are produced, in exchange for the removal of UN Security Council sanctions that “hamper the civilian economy.” The United States seems to have accepted the necessity of a step-by-step approach, but decided that North Korea’s proposal would not be feasible until a denuclearization roadmap with all steps listed can be negotiated. This US decision seeks to avoid the risk of giving up too much leverage too early in the process.

Many speculated that the early timing of the Hanoi Summit was precipitated by domestic politics

in the United States, as President Trump faced pressure from FBI Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller's investigation. As the release of the Mueller Report appeared imminent at that point, President Trump may have been hoping that a big win on foreign policy would deflect domestic attention. In the aftermath of the report, the pressure on President Trump for a diplomatic victory has lessened, but it is not difficult to imagine that, given President Trump's mercurial tendencies and his hope for a win on North Korea, this may emerge as a priority once again during the lead-up to the 2020 election.

At the same time, North Korean behavior seems to be influenced by a concern over President Trump's unpredictability given that he lacks knowledge, criteria for action, or firm principles on foreign affairs. This fear has led North Korea to return to its traditional playbook of trying to sow divisions among the regional powers that surround it. Since the failed Hanoi Summit, North Korea has pulled closer to both China and Russia. A summit meeting between Kim Jong-un and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe may be in the offing. And South Korean President Moon Jae-in looks anxious to promote economic cooperation with North Korea as the South Korean economy falters.

Key Elements for Successful Negotiations

Against this backdrop, the ability of negotiators to reach a sustainable agreement will depend on three key elements.

First, the United States and North Korea need to undertake a range of confidence-building measures to start to overcome their deep mutual mistrust and establish the credibility of the negotiating process. To kick-start confidence building, North Korea should recommit to its moratorium on missile and nuclear testing under the Singapore joint statement—a moratorium that, although not technically broken, was certainly pushed to its limits with Pyongyang's testing of short-range ballistic missiles in May 2019, which did violate UN Security Council resolutions. Whether intended as a show of strength to the domestic DPRK audience or to US negotiators, the incident was a step backward rather than forward in the trust-building process.

Meanwhile, the United States and Japan should explore opening liaison offices in Pyongyang. Given the two countries' lack of formal diplomatic relations with North Korea, liaison offices could provide a

critical venue to maintain the open and constant dialogue needed to sustain confidence-building efforts.

Second, we need to come to agreement on parallel roadmaps that lay out step-by-step approaches for both denuclearization and the establishment of a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Past agreements, such as the Joint Statement of the Fourth Six-Party Talks (September 2005), ultimately failed due to their lack of a precise roadmap for carrying out the agreed measures, including details on the sequencing of steps and the methods of implementation.

For denuclearization, the roadmap must include verification of each step by experts from both the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the United States, as was agreed to by North Korea in its Yongbyon dismantlement proposal in Hanoi.

The roadmap to convert the current Korean War Armistice Agreement into a permanent peace treaty, meanwhile, must include steps to normalize relations between North Korea and both the United States and Japan. Normalization negotiations should cover a broad range of topics beyond the establishment of embassies, including economic cooperation, mutual non-aggression security assurances, and, in the case of Japan-DPRK negotiations, the resolution of the abduction issue.

The simultaneous and linked implementation of these two roadmaps is extremely significant given US concerns about whether North Korea truly intends to denuclearize and North Korea's suspicions that the United States will pursue denuclearization today and regime change tomorrow. Linking the two roadmaps on an action-for-action basis can help overcome the trust deficit.

Third, a permanent peace regime will be more sustainable in the long run if it includes all relevant countries in the region. For that reason, once US-DPRK negotiations make sufficient progress and establish precise roadmaps, the two parties must encourage broader international engagement in the process through the Six-Party Talks framework. The ongoing international verification of denuclearization will be less susceptible to accusations of misplay if the process is multilateralized. And the provision of economic assistance to North Korea will require funds not easily raised by any single country. This international participation should aim not just at denuclearizing North Korea in the short term but at enriching the regional security environment through the long-term transformation of North Korea so that

it does not feel it needs to keep nuclear weapons or isolate itself from the international community in order to survive.

A Role for Japan

In early May, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe indicated that he is prepared to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un without preconditions. This represents a significant shift as the Abe government has been exerting maximum pressure—refusing to meet with or provide assistance to North Korea without a full resolution to the issue of the abduction of Japanese citizens by North Korea. It is also a welcome step forward given that Prime Minister Abe is the only leader of the Six-Party Talks countries not to have met with Kim Jong-un since the current regional diplomatic process kicked off with South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s “Olympic diplomacy” in February 2018. At the same time, it has become clear that North Korea perceives the abduction issue as part of the broader situation and its fight for survival and it is thus unlikely to address it outside of the wider regional diplomatic process.

Before Abe first came to office in 2006, Japan had pursued a comprehensive approach to North Korea, as seen in the Pyongyang Declaration that was announced by former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in 2002. The Pyongyang Declaration was then followed by the Joint Statement of the Fourth Six-Party Talks (September 2005). The approach outlined in these statements called for the international community to provide North Korea with economic assistance, normalize US and Japanese diplomatic relations with North Korea, and convert the Korean War Armistice Agreement into a permanent peace treaty in exchange for North Korea’s denuclearization. The abduction issue was to be resolved within this framework as part of Japan-DPRK diplomatic normalization talks.

The possibility of an Abe-Kim summit provides an opportunity for Japan to return to a more comprehensive approach. At the same time, the realization of an Abe-Kim summit will require careful planning in order to avoid any confrontation or worsening in Japan-DPRK relations and to establish a credible basis for further negotiations and cooperation. To this end, such a summit should prioritize the establishment of liaison offices between Japan and North Korea as a first step toward the opening of negotiations on diplomatic normalization, which would include addressing the abduction issue.



The international community is now at a crossroads with North Korea. The lack of progress at the Hanoi Summit raises the risk that the opportunity created by the Singapore Summit may be squandered. In order to break the current impasse between the United States and North Korea, it is critical that all parties work to ensure that key elements are in place for successful negotiations: a credible basis for negotiations, parallel and precise roadmaps for both denuclearization and a peace regime, and the buy-in of the other Six-Party Talks countries. Japan must stop standing on the sidelines, play a more active role in this diplomatic process, and address the abduction issue within the framework of a comprehensive resolution. For North Korea to agree to a complete denuclearization, it is essential that the United States, Japan, and other countries in the region follow these steps and work to transform North Korea into a country that no longer perceives a need for nuclear weapons to guarantee its survival.

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