



A RESET FOR U.S.-DPRK RELATIONS: THE PATH AHEAD

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A hugely anticipated meeting of longtime adversaries, the June 12 Summit in Singapore between President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un combined momentous gravity with theatrical spectacle. Resulting in a vision statement of a new peaceful future for U.S.-North Korea relations, it nonetheless leaves much of the detail regarding its implementation for subsequent negotiations. This policy brief identifies the key issues and challenges to be ironed out on the path ahead.

The summit meeting on June 12 in Singapore between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un – the first between a serving U.S. president and North Korean leader – was an historical event and the culmination of several remarkable months of shuttle diplomacy. At times, it had seemed as the summit would not occur as both sides pushed back, appearing to leverage their negotiating positions. Much credit has to go to South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who has played an instrumental role as mediator and facilitator.

But despite the symbolism, the recent summit, and the joint statement signed, represent only the beginning of what is likely to be a long and complicated denuclearization/peace process. The challenges cannot be underestimated. Trust still remains in short supply magnified by the failure of previous agreements. Differing perceptions and expectations may yet prove immovable stumbling blocks. Many hurdles will emerge in the implementation phase. Geopolitical tensions between the U.S. and China complicate the picture. However, none of these are insurmountable if the political will exists on all sides to truly resolve what, for many decades, has remained an intractable conflict. Indeed, just as there are obstacles, there are also new opportunities.

Looking ahead, this policy brief identifies five key issues and challenges (written before the summit) that ultimately need to be addressed if any negotiated process is to prove successful. The outcome of the recent summit is then analyzed through this “framework” to assess what it achieved,

its potential weaknesses, as well as what lingering question marks remain.

The Art of Making a Sustainable Deal: Key Issues

Narrowing the Gap: Objectives and Expectations

For any negotiation process to be successful, there needs to be clear objectives and agreement found on a mutually acceptable outcome. This entails narrowing the gap between the expectations and demands of each side. Threatening to derail the summit had what appeared to be an almost unbridgeable gulf between Washington’s unconditional demand for complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization (CVID) and what Pyongyang expected in return, including lifting of sanctions, normalization of relations, and the provision of security assurances. While not shifting on its denuclearization stance, the Trump administration seemed in the days leading up to the summit to adjust its position in terms of acknowledging the need to also meet Pyongyang’s demands.

In spite of this, in keeping its cards close to its chest, much ambiguity has existed over the scope and scale of North Korea’s conditionality for its complete denuclearization. For Pyongyang’s part, a degree of vagueness has been useful to get to the negotiation table, as well as to “probe” how the U.S. perceives the relative bargaining power of its nuclear weapons. A long-held, if implicit, objective of



North Korea is to see the dismantlement of the U.S.-ROK alliance – on which it may yet ultimately condition its nuclear disarmament. With both Seoul and Washington having drawn a red-line at this, however, a more likely scenario in return for denuclearization is a reduction of U.S. forces and removal of strategic assets from the peninsula, including a refrain from exercising these assets close to the peninsula.

Accordingly, a key issue is each side having a clear mutual understanding on the objectives of a negotiated process, what the parameters of any “zone of bargaining” are and setting realistic expectations in this regard that do not exceed any one party’s red-lines.

Sequencing and Reciprocity of Measures

A further key issue concerns that of process, that is, sequencing and reciprocity. Prior to the summit, voices within the Trump administration, namely National Security Advisor John Bolton, had mooted the so-called “Libya model,” whereby North Korea would fully disarm all its nuclear assets within a short timeframe, and that only once it had done so, would pressure and sanctions be lifted. This was in striking contrast to North Korea’s articulated position of a more phased, action-for-action approach in which measures for denuclearization would be traded for benefits. While it would appear that Washington has come to the realization that denuclearization will have to be a process rather than a “one-shot” deal, there are still likely to be significant divergences.

In fact, denuclearization will inevitably comprise several stages ranging from a freezing of nuclear and missile tests and capping the production of nuclear material (highly enriched uranium and plutonium) to a dismantlement of nuclear and ICBM-related facilities and, finally, the wholesale extraction of nuclear weapons from North Korean territory. This will likely prove a long-term process that could potentially take years. An additional question remains how chemical and biological weapons will be treated.

A key issue is therefore how measures by the U.S., and others, in terms of economic aid, lifting of sanctions, and provision of security guarantees will be weighed and sequenced against measures for denuclearization. If these are perceived to be too little and/or are back ended, North Korea may not feel sufficiently incentivized to reciprocate. If, on the other hand, these are front loaded, there will be substantial criticism for “rewarding” North Korea and thus

potentially weakening its commitment to complete and irreversible denuclearization. Striking a balance, and one that is acceptable to all parties, could prove a difficult task.

A complicating factor, furthermore, is what can be called a “tyranny of timetables.” Both the U.S., and to a lesser extent South Korea, are eager to complete denuclearization as quickly as possible ahead of future elections which may reduce time, resources, and, importantly, their mandate to implement any deal. North Korea, on the other hand, with no such constraints, will likely not be in any rush and could seek to prolong any process.

Verification and Implementation

Denuclearization is a highly technical process that will require intrusive and comprehensive inspections to monitor and confirm North Korea’s denuclearization. This will require a large degree of transparency to enable inspectors to visit not only declared facilities, but also to visit suspected sites or other places of interest. This process will require mutual agreement on the composition of the verification teams involved, for example the International Atomic Energy Agency, and the scope of their mandate. Similarly, North Korea may in turn also demand full access to sites in South Korea to ensure there are no nuclear assets as per the recent Panmunjeom Declaration on a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.

Furthermore, previous agreements have been undermined by vague language and commitments, allowing a large degree of interpretation by the parties involved. A case-in-point was in 2012 when North Korea fired what it called a satellite for peaceful use of space, while the U.S. and international community saw it as covertly testing ballistic missile technology that constituted a violation of agreements. For implementation to be successful, therefore, there will ultimately need to be detailed action plans outlining the commitments by relevant parties accompanied by clear stipulations of what constitutes non-compliance and its consequences. Failure to do so could run the risk of ambiguity and misinterpretation, intentional or not.

Trust and Confidence Building

As already stated, the ongoing peace process will inevitably be a long process amidst what remains a lack of trust, transparency, and confidence between the U.S./South Korea



and North Korea. As such, confidence- and security-building mechanisms (CSBMs) will be important as supporting mechanisms to any process in order to maintain stability and manage tensions, especially should it run into difficulties. These may be of particular relevance in the heavily militarized “border area” between the two Koreas, including in the de-militarized zone.

A process towards a peace agreement and lasting stability would most likely also need to include some form of reduction and/or re-deployment of conventional weapons. Such arms reductions and re-deployment activities could also benefit from independent supervision. Currently the Armistice Agreement from 1953 is the only multinational agreement on the Korean Peninsula that at least to a degree addresses issues related to transparency, confidence building, and stability in the border area. It is currently implemented daily by the United Nations Command and the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission on the southern side of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), and by the Korean People’s Army on the northern side of the MDL. However, if and when a peace treaty is signed, the Armistice Agreement will no longer be valid.

To replace the current Armistice arrangement with some form of international, independent organization tasked with arms reduction/arms control and CSBMs could be an important element in a comprehensive approach towards a future peace agreement and de-nuclearization. Such an organization would preferably draw on the expertise and knowledge of countries with experience from supervising the Armistice Agreement in its current context. Examples may also be drawn from other conflict resolution processes, such as the Multinational Force and Observers deployed between Israel and Egypt after the signing of the peace agreement in 1976.

The introduction of conventional arms control mechanisms and CSBMs could also alleviate some of the real security concerns from both parties over non-nuclear security issues. In sum, failure to address the need for CSBMs and arms control could in the long run jeopardize the overall peace process.

Inclusivity

Denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula is obviously not just a bilateral U.S.-North Korea issue. Ac-

cordingly, the past two months have witnessed not only two inter-Korean summits, with President Moon also playing a key mediatory role shuttling back and forth between Washington and Pyongyang, but also meetings between Kim Jong Un and Chinese President Xi Jinping as well as senior Russian representatives. Only Japan would appear to have felt somewhat sidelined.

For the successful continuation and eventually a fulfillment of the key objective of lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula, the inclusion of all major stakeholders will be crucial. This is particularly pertinent to consider where President Trump has based U.S. foreign policy decisions on national security interests and seems less inclined towards valuing aspects of multilateral international agreements, notably the Iran nuclear deal. Yet the failure to account for the roles, interests, and inclusion of other parties runs the risk of them becoming spoilers instead of supporters of any process.

As noted, one of many difficult issues to resolve is how to extend credible security guarantees to North Korea and its current leadership. The full support of countries such as China, Russia, and Japan could prove to be very valuable in this regard. China, as a signatory to the still valid Armistice Agreement from 1953, will most likely have to be included in any future formal peace agreement. Furthermore, such a peace agreement would likely need the support of the United Nations Security Council, where both China and Russia hold decisive roles. Even the issue of lifting nuclear-related sanctions would need to find consensus in the Security Council.

Another area where the international community, including potentially the EU, will be of critical importance is economic support to North Korea. In fact, a key objective of its peace initiative seems to be the economic re-vitalization of its domestic economy. Not only will a massive multinational aid package be needed – requiring an effective coordinating and control mechanism – but neighboring countries would also play instrumental roles in supporting North Korea’s regional economic integration. A case-in-point is President Moon’s plan for an inter-Korean economic community, which envisions trade and transportation corridors connecting the entire Korean Peninsula with China and Russia.



What Did the Summit Achieve?

The main achievement of the joint statement is that both parties reached a preliminary agreement on an ambitious agenda, if short on details, towards realizing the long-term goals of complete denuclearization, establishing new bilateral relations, and creating a durable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Importantly, commitment to denuclearization on the part of North Korea, and provision of security guarantees on the part of the U.S., reflect the core demands of both sides. The commitment to recovering POW/MIA remains from the Korean War also constitutes a symbolic confidence-building measure.

By furthermore committing to “follow-on negotiations” for the statement’s implementation demonstrates that both sides envisage the statement as just a necessary starting point. This also indicates a more realistic narrowing of the gap between the two sides in terms of achieving their objectives through a cooperative longer term process. That the four-point vision document is far from comprehensive (contrary to President Trump’s assertion) and offers no timeline or detailed action plans further underlines the fact that there will be much to iron out in subsequent and much needed talks, including those issues and challenges highlighted in this brief.

There are, however, a number of items for concern in that it fell short of expectations in details and clarity:

- The third point of the statement on the “DPRK commits to work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” leaves much space for interpretation, omitting the terms “irreversible” and “verifiable” as well as raising the issue of what denuclearization steps will be demanded by North Korea on the southern side. The Trump administration will likely face much domestic criticism for being perceived to have been too “soft” and potentially compromising on a strict definition of CVID.
- Furthermore, the declaration does not give much clue in which order measures will be sequenced, and nor does it mention sanctions and at what stage of denuclearization they would be lifted. While it recognizes the need for security guarantees and mutual confidence building, it again falls short on specifying steps for such.
- It also omitted many important issues such as human rights and the status of North Korea’s chemical and biological weapons. It seems there was “not enough time” to discuss or agree on many issues, which will be left for future negotia-

tions.

- There was also little or no acknowledgement in the declaration of the international community and the role of other actors. Even if this was a bilateral summit meeting, and the first of its kind, the situation on the Korean Peninsula has global consequences and some of the key regional actors will be very important in securing this agreement.
- President Trump’s subsequent press conference also served, in part, to increase ambiguity rather than clarify issues. For instance, by stating that U.S.-ROK “war games” would be halted as they were “expensive” and “provocative” will potentially alarm South Korea, Japan, and others, about U.S. alliance commitments. There is, therefore, an ever present danger of mixed messaging by the Trump administration that could sow doubts and confusion on its intentions.

Conclusion

Given the high stakes of failure for the summit, its outcome through the joint statement reflects the fact that the door of diplomacy remains wide open and the risk of armed conflict now vastly diminished. Yet assessing the outcome in terms of the five areas described in this paper, the statement is still full of ambiguity and runs the risks of becoming stalled, once the details are being worked out. It remains therefore only the beginning of a long process that will require much political will, focus, resources, and support. However, despite the challenges, the bold decision to hold the summit shows that opportunities can be created for resolving issues if followed with skillful dialogue and diplomacy. Perhaps most remarkably, however, the summit has conferred legitimacy on North Korea and boosted Kim Jong Un’s status as a world leader. Nobody could have predicted such just six months ago. These may just be remarkable times where anything, including achieving a lasting final deal, is possible. Only time will tell.

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