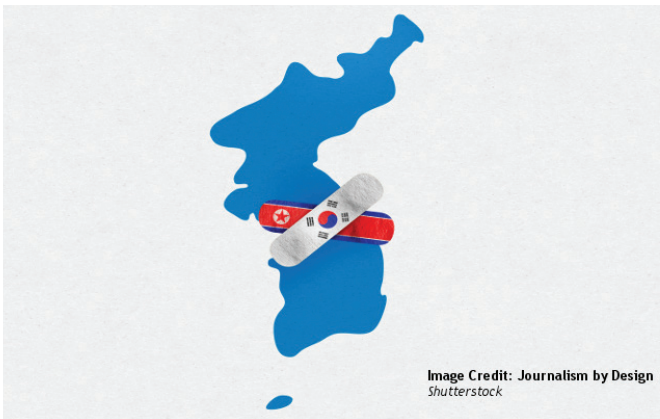


Sustaining Dialogue on the Korean Peninsula:

Seizing the Window of Opportunity for Peace



Caroline Kearney gives her views on the diplomatic process on the Korean Peninsula and how to sustain the momentum of peacebuilding. Tracing the origins and developments of the peace process, she argues that the current position of all engaged partners is too valuable to allow to collapse.

The 2018 inter-Korean summits and the U.S. - DPRK Singapore summit were opportunities that were built on the culmination of domestic political events over the past several years, and carried forward by the leadership in each country. This recent diplomatic opening is a window of opportunity that must be seized, as each leader's mandate to engage in this peace process is likely to expire in the near future. While the diplomatic process between the two Koreas is moving forward at a considerable pace, its speed is constrained by a faltering process between the DPRK and the U.S.

The immediacy of the issue can be seen with a closer look at domestic politics in each country. In the U.S., the result of Congressional midterm elections in November could diminish support for President Donald J. Trump's approach towards the DPRK. In the ROK, President Moon Jae-in's approval rating has dropped rapidly due to domestic issues, which could have a negative impact on his foreign policy mandate. And

in the DPRK, Chairman Kim Jong Un may need to choose maintaining support and saving face with his citizenry, over tolerance for unilateral demands from the U.S.

A review of the domestic political events in each country that have led to the recent summits between heads of state emphasizes the importance of this moment. Furthermore, an understanding of the fragility of present negotiations demonstrates the need for the U.S. and the ROK to make significant and irreversible progress towards the normalization of diplomatic relations with the DPRK as soon as possible.

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Democratic People's Republic of Korea: A Path Towards Peace for Economic Advancement

While some economic reforms were introduced under General Secretary Kim Jong Il, many were reversed. Under Chairman Kim Jong Un, the economy has seen major changes and economic reforms have accelerated. In 2013, Chairman Kim announced the byungjin line, a parallel pursuit of nuclear weapons development and economic advancement. In subsequent statements, the DPRK further stated that once the nuclear weapons program was complete, the country's main focus would shift to economic advancement. While the byungjin line concentrated a large portion of GDP towards the weapons program, it also improved the economy overall, particularly in Pyongyang. Under Kim, the DPRK has invested heavily in improving the standard of living in Pyongyang; created and expanded special economic zones to experiment with economic models; and implemented agricultural reforms to increase incentives for farmers and provide more decision-making rights to managers in state-owned enterprises.

However, the DPRK can only improve its economy and raise the standard of living for North Korean people to a certain extent without foreign income. Less than 20 percent of land in the DPRK is arable, which is not a sufficient amount to grow crops to feed a population of 25 million people. Furthermore, international economic sanctions block its primary exports, including coal, iron, ore, seafood and textiles. The DPRK will not be able to lift international economic sanctions, and further advance its economy, without improving diplomatic relations with the U.S. and the ROK, which in turn depends on progress on the nuclear issue.

Consistent with the byungjin line, the DPRK declared the nuclear weapons program a success in November 2017, and one month later, began to engage in diplomacy with the ROK. Kim offered dialogue in his 2018 New Year's Address by calling for improvements to the inter-Korean relationship and proposing to send a delegation to the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang. The Moon administration accepted this as an offer and proposed discussions to be held days

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later on the DPRK's participation in the 2018 Winter Olympics. The successful diplomacy of the Olympics led to the inter-Korean Summit held in Panmunjom on April 28, 2018, the first summit between Kim and Moon and the third inter-Korean summit ever held. The progress made between Kim and Moon led to the U.S. – DPRK Summit in Singapore on June 12.

Furthermore, in April 2018, Kim declared the byungjin line a success and announced a new strategic line, a policy that would shift the country from a dual approach to one primarily focused on economic construction and development. The declared shift to the economy has also been highly publicized by the government for both domestic and foreign audiences. Articles released by state-owned media such as the Korean Central News Agency and Rodong Sinmun highlight Kim's frequent visits to factories and farms to encourage efficiency and productivity. Also, during parades and mass games to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the DPRK on September 9, 2018, slogans encouraged building a strong socialist economy, as opposed to past slogans which focused on strengthening the military.

The significance of the timing of the DPRK's decision to engage in dialogue can also be understood by comparing past attitudes towards dialogue with the present attitude. For example, Moon offered dialogue to the DPRK from Berlin in July 2017, before the nuclear program was complete, and the DPRK did not accept. Also, in the past, the slightest aggression from the U.S. or the ROK could derail talks. But even after President Trump threatened to cancel the Singapore summit, the statement from the first vice-minister of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK released on May 25, expressed patience, stating that they “have willingness to offer the U.S. side time and opportunity” and that they “have the intent to sit with the U.S. side to solve problems regardless of ways at any time.”

At present, it is in the DPRK's advantage to keep negotiations going while they determine the level of security guarantees and economic incentives that the U.S. is prepared to offer in exchange for denuclearization. However, the leadership's level of patience and eagerness to engage will not be open-ended. Within the DPRK, there are those in opposition to, or skeptical of, Kim's engagement with the U.S. and the ROK. Therefore, Kim will need some reciprocation from the U.S. to justify the need for ongoing negotiations. The DPRK leadership also closely observes the levels of public support for Trump and Moon in their respective countries, and if their policies of engagement lose popular support, and the U.S. has not reciprocated with tangible offers, Kim may decide to end negotiations instead of heading towards certain failure.

The Republic of Korea: A Desire for Peace and Government Reform

In the summer of 2016, frustration grew over former ROK President Park Guen-hye's handling of certain domestic matters, such as neglect during the sinking of the Sewol Ferry and allegations of influence-peddling, as well as a failing foreign policy of confrontation towards the DPRK. South Korean citizens took to the streets to demonstrate their disapproval. These peaceful protests evolved into the infamous Candlelight Revolution, involving millions of South Korean citizens. It became the largest protest in the nation's history and one of the most well-respected protests witnessed in recent decades due to its size, non-violent nature and

ability to directly impact government action.

The scale and momentum of the Candlelight Revolution influenced the National Assembly to pass an impeachment motion which was later upheld by the Constitutional Court. Sixty days later, Moon Jae-in was elected as president based on his campaign promises to improve inter-Korean relations, weed out corruption in the government and revitalize the domestic economy.

Since his election, Moon has worked tirelessly to pursue engagement with the DPRK and to convince Trump of the importance of doing the same. Moon laid months of groundwork to encourage DPRK participation in the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang. Together with the president of the International Olympic Committee and the governor of Gangwon province, the Moon administration quietly delivered invitations and messages to the DPRK to encourage their participation.

With Trump, Moon employed skillful diplomacy by taking steps to maintain the U.S.–ROK alliance while simultaneously making clear his administration's stance to improve relations with the DPRK. During their first meeting in June 2017, Moon secured a phrase in the U.S. – ROK official statement that the U.S. would support the ROK's “leading role in fostering an environment for peaceful unification of the peninsula.” And later in the year, Moon congratulated Trump's effort for making America great again and then entered into a weapons purchasing agreement with the U.S.

As inter-Korean diplomacy began, Moon was able to balance the relationship between the DPRK and the U.S., even at times of heightened tension. When Trump announced the cancellation of the U.S. – DPRK summit, two weeks before it was scheduled to take place, Moon met with Kim and helped to clarify the miscommunication. The Singapore summit was back on days later. Just last week, Moon revived the stalled U.S. – DPRK process again. The Pyongyang Joint Declaration was signed on September 19, and on the same day, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the resumption of talks by inviting his DPRK counterpart to meet on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting to take place from Septem-

ber 25 to October 1, 2018.

Following three successful inter-Korean summits, the Moon administration has moved forward rapidly with inter-Korean cooperation. Reunions between separated Korean families have restarted, designated areas of the DMZ will be demilitarized, an inter-Korean liaison office has been opened and inter-Korean sports exchanges continue. While there has been some push-back from the U.S., such as a block by the Commander of U.S. Forces Korea for a joint railway inspection, the ROK is determined to rebuild the inter-Korean relationship.

While Moon has attained the mandate to engage with the DPRK, over time, the patience of South Korean citizens will also be tested. Recent opinion polls show that Moon's approval rating has dropped from a high of 83 percent, after the signing the Panmunjom Declaration, to below 50 percent, just before the third inter-Korean summit was held in September. This drop is largely due to domestic issues, particularly the still-sluggish domestic economy. Without improvements to the economy, as well as progress between the U.S. and the DPRK, Moon could soon lose the popular support needed to continue inter-Korean diplomacy and cooperation.

The United States: "America-first" Foreign Policy and a President's Desire for History-Making Diplomacy

One of the primary reasons that Trump won the 2016 U.S. presidential election is because many Americans were dissatisfied with former President Barack Obama's domestic and foreign policies. As far as foreign policy is concerned, many of the Americans who voted for and continue to support Trump, promote a self-interested foreign policy which places America's interests first and significantly less importance on nurturing the relationships of the nation's traditional allies.

Trump's mandate to negotiate with Kim comes from this desire of his base supporters for an "America-first" foreign policy. Within this frame, Trump has explained that his diplomatic engagement with the DPRK is in the U.S. national interest. He has stated that diplo-

macy with the DPRK has reduced the nuclear threat towards the U.S., can lead to additional cancellations of joint U.S. – ROK military exercises which will be a cost-saving measure for the nation's military, and may lead to the prospect of bringing home some U.S. soldiers from the peninsula at some point in the future. This justification, along with his supporters' trust, allowed him to move forward with the Singapore summit, and likely a second U.S. – DPRK summit in the coming months.

While Trump's rhetoric towards the DPRK has not been consistent, his administration did begin negotiations with the DPRK almost immediately after he assumed office. Joseph Yun, former U.S. Special Representative to North Korea, was sent to the DPRK two months after Trump became president. Yun went to the DPRK to deliver the message that the U.S. does not intend to be a threat but that denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is essential. Negotiations continued at this level with some progress, such as securing the release of one of the U.S. prisoners in the DPRK. Following the ROK's diplomatic leadership and success, the U.S. was able to transition lower-level negotiations into talks at the highest levels of the U.S. government.

In regards to personal motivations, Trump's negotiations with Kim are based on his desire to negotiate a history-making deal that no other president has made before and to achieve a deal that Obama, in particular, was not able to obtain. For example, Trump's attempt to destroy the Iran deal is contradictory to his administration's diplomatic efforts with the DPRK, but in line with his wider goal to reverse Obama-led policies.

Trump has made an investment in diplomacy with the DPRK, and particularly so since the high-profile nature of the Singapore summit. For this reason, he is not likely to pull out of negotiations easily, but U.S. – DPRK negotiations face multiple domestic obstacles, such as hardliners in Washington, upcoming midterm elections and the ongoing Mueller investigation.

There are members of the Trump administration, U.S. Congress and government-supported think tanks, who are not in favor of improving diplomatic relations with

the DPRK, are working to hold the process back. One of the most influential of these is National Security Advisor John Bolton. Bolton has a long-standing tense relationship with the DPRK and continues to try to oppose engagement with the leadership. He provides the president with daily briefings, which could be detrimental to talks.

Furthermore, in November of this year, U.S. Congressional midterm elections will be held and Republicans are predicted to lose the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives, and a loss in the U.S. Senate is possible. Without a Republican majority in the House and Senate, Trump may not have sufficient political capital to spend on negotiations with the DPRK.

And beyond the midterm elections, the U.S. Department of Justice is conducting an investigation into alleged attempts by the Russian government to influence American voters prior to the 2016 presidential election. It also includes an investigation into possible links between Trump's campaign and the Russian government as well as the right to investigate other unrelated crimes discovered during the investigation. The result of the investigation could implicate Trump for wrongdoing, and if serious enough, this could result in his removal from office. In this scenario, Vice President Mike Pence would become the U.S. President. Based on his snub of senior DPRK government officials at the 2018 Winter Olympics, and aggressive remarks about the DPRK since, negotiations will only become tougher and likely to collapse altogether.

A Peace Process Too Valuable to Allow to Collapse

Over the past several years, the domestic political events in the U.S., ROK and DPRK have provided these nations' leaders an opportunity to move this peace process forward for the first time in 11 years. While they have taken the initial steps, their mandate to continue negotiations will have an expiry date, thus concrete actions should be taken now.

The DPRK has already taken several steps to move negotiations forward. They have imposed a moratorium on missile and nuclear tests and dismantled entrances to a nuclear site and a satellite-launching site. They also

returned the remains of 55 U.S. service personnel killed during the Korean War and released three U.S. prisoners. Since the signing of the Pyongyang Declaration, they have also committed to dismantling a missile engine test site and its launch pad under the observation of international experts. The declaration further states that they are willing to take additional steps, such as the permanent dismantlement of nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, if the U.S. also takes corresponding measures.

To date, the U.S. has canceled one joint military exercise. This places the onus on the Trump administration to break the current impasse. The U.S. should fulfill its promise from the Singapore summit to provide the DPRK with security guarantees and to build a peace regime on the peninsula. The DPRK states that these include a commitment to sign a declaration to end the Korean War and to engage in confidence-building activities.

If the U.S. is willing to provide substantial concessions, the DPRK should be prepared to do the same. The DPRK could respond by halting the production of new nuclear weapons and missiles. They can start by suspending production of fissile material and providing a declaration of the location of the production sites.

The DPRK's request for a simultaneous, reciprocal negotiation process is reasonable. And while Pompeo did announce the resumption of talks with the DPRK on September 19, his announcement, along with the statement by White House Spokesperson Heather Nauert the following day, are concerning. Both focus on the need for the DPRK to take steps towards denuclearization first, and show no indication that the U.S. understands the DPRK's need for security guarantees and reciprocal measures. This demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding by the U.S. of the DPRK's security needs and their repeated statements about ways to move the process forward. This is not an encouraging sign for the sustainability of negotiations.

However, the 73-year division of the Korean people is too tragic, the breakout of war too risky and peaceful relations on the Korean peninsula too valuable to allow negotiations to collapse. The Korean people cannot afford to wait an indefinite amount of time for the next window of opportunity.