



## U.S.-NORTH KOREA DENUCLEARIZATION NEGOTIATIONS: AN IRRESOLVABLE ISSUE?

*Sangsoo Lee*

The June 2018 Singapore Summit between President Trump and Chairman Kim brought renewed hopes of breakthrough on North Korea's denuclearization as well as ending decades of enmity between the two nations. However, in the past two years, diplomatic efforts have stalled with no sign of resolution. Placing the recent nuclear diplomacy in the context of past processes and failed agreements, this essay identifies some of the key challenges to finding a sustainable breakthrough on the nuclear issue as well as suggesting what next steps the U.S. and North Korea could take.

### Series on Peacebuilding on the Korean Peninsula

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### Introduction

Despite previous efforts, the North Korean nuclear issue has remained unresolved for six decades since the country, with the assistance of the Soviet Union, began constructing nuclear facilities at Yongbyon in the early 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Over the past decades, each U.S. administration, from Clinton to Trump, has concluded its own agreement either bilaterally or multilaterally with Pyongyang: notably the Agreed Framework of 1994, the Joint Statement of September 19 of the Six Party Talks in 2005, the short-lived "Leap Day Deal" of February 29, 2012, and the latest Singapore Joint Statement in June

2018. Despite these achievements, after extensive negotiations and partial implementation, eventually all past agreements collapsed.

After the failure of each negotiation, Pyongyang strove to further advance its nuclear development, most recently declaring that it had completed the development of its state nuclear forces in November 2017 after launching an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).<sup>2</sup> While the subsequent flurry of bilateral summit diplomacy between the U.S. and North Korea and South and North Korea witnessed raised hopes of a new breakthrough on the nuclear issue, the current stalemate in negotiations has led to

Pyongyang announcing its intention of pursuing a “new path” by warning of the resumption of nuclear and long-range missile tests if the U.S. fails to meet its demands.<sup>3</sup>

In this regard, the future development on the Korean Peninsula appears worrisome with the risk of a return to a vicious cycle of confrontation amidst a narrowing window of opportunity for diplomacy. There is therefore an urgency to resume nuclear negotiations between the principle parties, namely Washington and Pyongyang, for which there is a need to find a way out of the current impasse characterized by both sides’ inflexible negotiating positions.

Briefly outlining previous diplomatic initiatives first, this essay considers the recent negotiation process between the U.S. and North Korea since 2018. It then examines some of the key factors which have hindered progress before outlining suggestions and approaches for the future resumption of talks.

## **Diplomatic Initiatives for Denuclearization**

The past three decades on the Korean Peninsula have seen periods of heightened tensions followed by negotiations to try and resolve the crises. North Korea’s withdrawal from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in March 1993 precipitated the so-called first nuclear crisis, which saw the Clinton administration prepare to use cruise missiles and F-117 stealth fighters to strike North Korea’s Yongbyon nuclear reactor.<sup>4</sup> Crisis paved the way for negotiations leading to the Agreed Framework in 1994, which stipulated North Korea’s freezing of its nuclear reactors and related facilities in return for the provision of light-weight reactor (LWR) power plants, as well as 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil annually.<sup>5</sup>

When President George W. Bush took office in 2001, he pursued a harder line toward Pyongyang, characterizing North Korea, along with Iraq and Iran, as part of an “axis of evil.”<sup>6</sup> U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly was dispatched in October 2002 to Pyongyang where he confronted his North

*The Institute for Security and Development Policy is an independent, non-partisan research and policy organization based in Stockholm dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs.*

*For enquiries, please contact: [info@isdp.eu](mailto:info@isdp.eu)*

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Korean interlocutors over American suspicions of a covert program.<sup>7</sup> After Kelly’s visit, the U.S. claimed that Pyongyang had admitted to efforts to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons. This resulted in the termination of the Agreed Framework and North Korea’s withdrawal from the NPT in January 2003 (it subsequently restarted the reprocessing of 8,000 nuclear fuel rods), prompting the second nuclear crisis.<sup>8</sup>

Diplomatic efforts were resumed in August 2003, this time with China chairing the Six Party Talks involving South Korea and North Korea, United States, China, Japan, and Russia. These led to the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement in which North Korea pledged to abandon nuclear weapons and the U.S. stated that it had no intention of attacking North Korea. This was followed by the February 13, 2007 agreement, which outlined an action plan for disabling the Yongbyon nuclear reactor, providing energy aid, and normalizing relations.<sup>9</sup>

The Six Party Talks petered out in 2009 after the delivery of heavy oil was delayed and North Korea refused the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) from accessing nuclear sites for verification.<sup>10</sup> Despite renewed attempts to shut down Yongbyon and suspend nuclear and long-range missile tests with the so-called Leap Day Deal of 2012, it quickly collapsed after North Korea launched a missile it claimed was a satellite.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. under the Obama administration adopted a policy of strategic patience

that sought to increase diplomatic and economic pressure on North Korea whilst waiting for it to return to the negotiation table.<sup>12</sup> North Korea, for its part, focused on accelerating its nuclear and missile programs, conducting four nuclear tests between 2013 and 2017. The UN Security Council responded through applying increasingly punitive sanctions.<sup>13</sup> This led to what can be called the third nuclear crisis.

## Return to Negotiations

With escalating military tensions and rhetoric in 2017, South Korea, which feared an outbreak of a second Korean War, successfully sought to initiate a peace overture. The two Korean leaders held an unprecedented three summits in 2018 in which many different areas of inter-Korean relations and cooperation were discussed. President Moon Jae-in also played an important mediating role by connecting diplomatic channels between the U.S. and North Korea.<sup>14</sup>

One of the positive gestures through initial diplomatic contacts between the U.S. and North Korea was that Pyongyang released three American detainees.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. reciprocated by scaling down joint military exercises with South Korea in April 2018.<sup>16</sup> In the same month, then CIA director Mike Pompeo travelled to Pyongyang for preparatory talks on a summit meeting between President Trump and Chairman Kim.<sup>17</sup> Additional confidence-building measures were North Korea's self-declared moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests, its demolition in May of its nuclear testing ground at Punggye-ri in front of selected observers, as well as the partial dismantlement of an important rocket-testing site in Dongchang-ri.<sup>18</sup>

The first ever summit between serving leaders of the U.S. and DPRK took place in Singapore on June 12, 2018. The summit resulted in a Joint Statement which set out the long-term goals of complete denuclearization, establishing new bilateral relations, and creating a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, the commitment to recovering POW/MIA remains from the Korean War also constituted a symbolic confidence-building measure.<sup>19</sup> Trump further announced the suspension of large-scale

military exercises during the press conference after the summit, despite it not being included in the Joint Statement.<sup>20</sup>

## ***Stop-start negotiations subsequently failed to make any headway on implementing the Singapore pledges as Kim preferred to deal directly with Trump.***

However, the Joint Statement constituted a symbolic declaration of principles rather than an action plan. As such, it was vague and short on substance. For example, that the “DPRK commits to work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula”<sup>21</sup> did not give much indication in which order measures would be sequenced; nor did it mention sanctions and at what stage of denuclearization they would be lifted. How the U.S. and North Korea would build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula was left similarly unclarified. Accordingly, the summit was evaluated by many as only an initial step for what would be a long and protracted negotiation process.<sup>22</sup>

Stop-start negotiations subsequently failed to make any headway on implementing the Singapore pledges as Kim preferred to deal directly with Trump. Following top nuclear negotiator Kim Yong Chol's two visits to Washington, during which he hand-delivered letters from Kim to Trump, arrangements were made for a second summit in Hanoi on February 27-28, 2019.<sup>23</sup>

However, the summit came to an abrupt end with no agreement made. As reported, North Korea demanded the lifting of five UN sanctions resolutions in return for the dismantlement of the Yongbyon nuclear reactor.<sup>24</sup> Trump countered, however, that Yongbyon, “while very big...wasn't big enough” to justify removing sanctions. The U.S. side additionally requested the inclusion of a clandestine uranium-enrichment facility that North Korea has never publicly acknowledged.<sup>25</sup> Both sides accordingly

failed to find a middle ground with each side blaming the other for the impasse.

***Negotiations have failed to achieve denuclearization or the concomitant building of a sustainable peace regime.***

A further opportunity for progress came amidst working-level negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea in October 2019 in Stockholm, hosted by the Swedish government. However, both sides again failed to narrow down the gap in positions.<sup>26</sup> With negotiations deadlocked, much doubt exists regarding the sincerity of North Korea's commitment to denuclearization, and, from North Korea's perspective, the U.S. commitment to normalize relations.

In sum, whereas this and previous rounds of negotiations have served to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula and slowed or delayed North Korea's nuclear development, ultimately they have failed to achieve denuclearization or the concomitant building of a sustainable peace regime. The next section considers some of the key obstacles and challenges experienced during the most recent negotiation process between the U.S. and North Korea.

### **Gap in Positions**

Although the U.S. and North Korea agreed in principle at the Singapore Summit on realizing the long-term goals of complete denuclearization and establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, there exist large gaps between them regarding the definition of both terms as well as the scope and sequencing of measures to achieve these objectives.

Washington has adhered to the definition of complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization (CVID), or alternatively final, fully verified denuclearization (FFVD), which entails the supervised demolition of all nuclear weapons as well as their means of production and delivery.<sup>27</sup> North Korea, on the other hand, may hold not only to a less all-encompassing

definition of its own denuclearization, but also views denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as including the withdrawal of U.S. strategic assets in and around South Korea and the removal of the U.S. nuclear umbrella.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Pyongyang views a peace regime as entailing military security guarantees from the United States, which include not only a peace treaty but also an end to joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises and the reduction or removal of U.S. troops from South Korea.<sup>29</sup> Failure to find common definitions of important terms fuels distrust as well as prevents the establishment of a roadmap.

Further compounding negotiations is that Washington has demanded that North Korea first commit to significant denuclearization measures before it provides corresponding measures, such as sanctions relief. North Korea's proposal during the Hanoi Summit only addressed the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon. However, its dismantlement would still leave North Korea with a nuclear weapons stockpile and its ballistic missiles, and the capability to produce weapons-grade uranium at secondary sites.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, for the U.S. a key priority in negotiations is to confirm North Korea's willingness for full denuclearization first. The U.S. is concerned about the outcome of a "bad deal" with North Korea which could fail to meet the international standards of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT), allowing it to maintain a covert program. The U.S. therefore has so far favored holding out for a one-shot "big deal" for complete denuclearization while North Korea prefers a more gradual approach that trades away elements of its nuclear program in return for concessions.<sup>31</sup>

From North Korea's perspective, the process of denuclearization is not just a unilateral commitment on its part, but is contingent on parallel measures by the U.S. in lifting what it calls the "hostile policy" of diplomatic, military, and economic pressure.<sup>32</sup> North Korea claims it has already taken some steps toward denuclearization, such as the demolition of nuclear sites and moratoriums on nuclear and ICBM tests, but that the United States has not made any concessions in return.<sup>33</sup> In January 2020, former North Korean chief nuclear envoy Kim Kye-



gwan stated that dialogue with the U.S. could only resume when Washington fully accepts Pyongyang's demands.<sup>34</sup>

These different perceptions and positions have hindered the resumption of negotiations. In other words, both sides see it as incumbent on the other to make the first move in demonstrating credible commitments on their core demands. This is furthermore exacerbated by a severe trust deficit regarding each side's intentions.

### Increasing Leverage

A contributing factor to the positions identified above is that both sides are unwilling to risk compromising too cheaply on what they view as their main sources of bargaining power.

North Korea's nuclear capabilities have developed at high speed by conducting a number of incrementally more powerful and sophisticated nuclear and missile tests in recent years.<sup>35</sup> It has conducted at least 35 missile tests alone (only one of which appears to have failed in flight) since resuming tests in May 2019.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, South Korean intelligence sources have found evidence of submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) activities at a North Korean shipyard in Sinpo.<sup>37</sup> During his 2020 New Year's Speech, Kim Jong Un asserted that the country would "steadily develop necessary and prerequisite strategic weapons" in the coming year; he stopped just short of announcing an end to a self-declared moratorium on nuclear and ICBM testing.<sup>38</sup>

Arguably, the international community has underestimated North Korea's nuclear ambitions and motivations. Each test conducted has steadily advanced North Korea towards consolidating its nuclear status, and consequently, the harder it will be to coerce or convince it to denuclearize. Pyongyang would appear to believe that a balance of power based on strong self-defense is the only feasible option for it to pursue for its long-term strategy to deal with the U.S.<sup>39</sup>

Accordingly, the context today is different than

was the case in negotiation processes from previous decades. Most notably, Pyongyang likely believes that with its recently bolstered nuclear capacity and purported ability to target the U.S. mainland with an ICBM, it has gained enough deterrence to rebalance power on the Korean Peninsula. As such, it seems to believe that future negotiating conditions should be made based on its upgraded nuclear capability.

**North Korea's demands have risen in line with the perception of its increased leverage.**

Whereas previous negotiations focused on the provision of energy aid and food assistance, in return for the halting of operations at the Yongbyon nuclear reactor, these alone are unlikely to suffice in persuading Pyongyang to commit to denuclearization measures. Since the Hanoi Summit, Kim Jong Un, in his meetings with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, has called instead for security guarantees.<sup>40</sup> In so doing, North Korea's demands have risen in line with the perception of its increased leverage.

While Washington has continued to signal that the door for dialogue remains open, it would seem that Trump is not interested in providing concessions to Pyongyang. Preoccupied with other issues, not least the handling of the coronavirus, the Trump administration seems to have adopted a strategy of waiting for Pyongyang to return to the negotiation table whilst maintaining economic and military pressure.

Although the U.S. and South Korea have halted their large-scale military exercises to support diplomacy with Pyongyang in the past two years, following the recent missile launches by North Korea the U.S. has strengthened strategic deterrence with the increase of deployments to deter further North Korean provocations. The U.S. delivered F-35A stealth fighter jets to South Korea in March 2019 for the first time under a plan to deploy a total of 40 fifth-generation jets through 2021.<sup>41</sup> U.S. B-52 bombers also made a

rare training flight with the Japanese Air Self-Defense Forces over the Sea of Japan/East Sea in October 2019.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the United States and South Korea resumed their joint air exercise on April 24, 2020, as part of the two countries' annual exercises which had been skipped in 2019.<sup>43</sup>

The impasse in denuclearization negotiations has seen both sides adopt a kind of strategic patience, bolstering their leverage and deterrence over the other without resorting to the brinkmanship of 2017. It remains to be seen how sustainable such a situation is, however, with a real risk of a return to a state of heightened military tensions.

***Chinese support and the general lack of effective sanctions enforcement has lessened the urgency for Pyongyang to secure sanctions relief from the U.S.***

### **Lack of International Coordination**

Another factor thwarting progress in denuclearization negotiations is the lack of coordination among the major stakeholder nations.

There is a lack of consensus in the UN Security Council on the scope and sequencing of concessions to North Korea, especially the lifting of sanctions. While Russia and China have informally drafted a proposal for sanctions relief, this has been pushed back on by other members notably the U.S. as well as the UK and France.<sup>44</sup> Failure to find a common position or institute a multilateral mechanism to coordinate approaches lessens the pressure on Pyongyang to denuclearize as well as hinders the framing of a potential roadmap.

Growing geo-strategic competition between the U.S. and China also prevents headway in denuclearization

negotiations. It is probable that Kim's renewed focus on demands for security guarantees is supported by Beijing and Moscow who have a common interest in reducing U.S. military influence in Northeast Asia. In particular, Beijing may be using North Korea to demand the suspension of military exercises and the withdrawal of U.S. strategic weapons from the Korean Peninsula.

Recently improved relations between China and North Korea, whose leaders have met five times since March 2018, have also allowed Pyongyang to maneuver to gain political support and economic benefits from Beijing, not least through the income generated by large-scale Chinese tourism to North Korea; the tourism sector is largely overlooked by the UN sanctions regime, albeit has been suspended since the outbreak of COVID-19.<sup>45</sup>

Chinese support and the general lack of effective sanctions enforcement – as identified in the recent UN Panel of Experts report<sup>46</sup> – has lessened the urgency for Pyongyang to secure sanctions relief from the U.S., or to seek a deal from a position of weakness. It can therefore prepare to bide its time awaiting a change in approach from this or the next U.S. administration.

### **Breaking the Deadlock**

The gap in positions between the U.S. and North Korea, the focus on maintaining leverage and deterrence, as well as the lack of international coordination, especially between the U.S. and China, do not bode well for the success of future denuclearization negotiations. Nevertheless, this next section identifies some constructive approaches for breaking the current deadlock.

### ***Creating a Conducive Environment for Negotiations***

Existing approaches pushed by rivalry and hostile relations have made a narrow window of opportunity for diplomacy even narrower. The resumption of dialogue between the DPRK and the U.S. may now only be possible under the condition of one or both

sides' concessions, which currently looks unlikely. In the meantime, following stalemated negotiations, a return to military tensions appears probable.

Although there has been no resumption of nuclear and long-range missile tests by North Korea, or large-scale U.S.-ROK military exercises, this cannot be taken for granted. It is almost certain that additional missile tests and military exercises will be conducted in coming months. These could close any window of opportunity for negotiations to resume. As such, there is a need to maintain a conducive environment by refraining from crossing each other's redlines.

The urgent issue for the Trump administration is to maintain North Korea's moratorium on nuclear and ICBM tests, which the administration has sought to brand as a success of its diplomacy.<sup>47</sup> However, North Korea has already warned the U.S. that it may resume nuclear development, including new ICBM tests. Furthermore, while downplaying North Korea's series of short-range projectile launches that did not pose direct threats to the U.S. mainland, Trump is now under a growing pressure as its allies South Korea and Japan, as well as the U.S. military bases in the two countries, have increasingly been threatened by North Korea's short-range missiles and strategic weapons.<sup>48</sup>

While not conducting ICBM missile tests, North Korea has continued missile technology development. Most of the weapons North Korea has tested recently were ballistic missiles or artillery shells with solid-fuel.<sup>49</sup> With this in mind, the regime is likely working to expand its solid-fuel missile capabilities, which can be used for a long-range delivery system. Continuation and especially the ramping up of testing, including also multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) and SLBMs, will likely elicit a strong U.S. response, especially if Trump perceives it to be damaging to his re-election chances in the lead up to presidential elections in November.

In a situation where North Korea's nuclear program is motivated by a perceived external military threat, there is a need to put greater focus on military and

security-building measures. It is clear that North Korea has long bristled at South Korea and the U.S. conducting joint military exercises and bringing strategic military assets to the South. Pyongyang has accordingly asserted that it will not return to the negotiating table until Washington withdraws what it calls its "hostile policy" against the North.<sup>50</sup>

Although the U.S. and South Korea canceled the latest joint military drills due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in South Korea, North Korea has argued that the drills should be permanently terminated. This appears to be aimed at demanding security assurances by calling for a suspension to such joint military exercises while pressing Washington to change its calculation method in future nuclear talks.

***There is a need to institute robust working-level discussions between the two sides.***

To prevent a return to a vicious cycle of tensions and to support a conducive environment for the resumption of negotiations, therefore, one option could be a broad moratorium of all missile tests, including short-range missiles by North Korea, in return for a suspension of joint U.S.-ROK military exercises. (The tricky issue of North Korea's own military drills as well as the exercises required by South Korea to achieve OPCON transfer would also require consideration). A cessation of the next joint military exercises could be viewed by the North Korea as a commitment to lifting part of what it views as a hostile policy, while a suspension on nuclear and missile tests can be seen by the U.S. as North Korea's serious intention for a long-term denuclearization process.

### ***Need for Working-level Negotiations***

A top-down diplomacy has been favored by President Trump and Chairman Kim, which in the history of nuclear negotiations between their countries represent a new dynamic. However, the summit-driven, top-

down process has proven insufficient for resolving what are a very complicated set of technical issues which require much preparatory work.<sup>51</sup>

The past two years have also proven that the two leaders overestimated their own personal ability to persuade the other to make concessions. There is therefore a need to institute robust working-level discussions between the two sides. This requires both sides to empower their nuclear negotiators and a sustainable format for working-level talks.

Such talks would need to focus on clarifying existing perception and definitional gaps between the parties on key issues, namely denuclearization and establishing a peace regime. Working-level talks could also help to narrow down the potential zone of bargaining by exploring what concessions or incentives each side might be willing to offer contingent on certain steps. It would also help to communicate expectations in regard to how each side envisages the implementation of mutual commitments, including the thorny and technical issue of verifying North Korea's denuclearization.

***Achieving denuclearization and building a peace regime cannot be viewed as separate objectives and need to be mutually constituting.***

Factoring in these considerations, both sides should resume and sustain working-level negotiations rather than pressing each side to first meet their respective preconditions. Before any potential future summit takes place between Trump and Kim it is essential that such meetings narrow the gap in definitions and approaches regarding their objectives. While leader-to-leader meetings have been symbolically useful, it is evident that they can achieve little unless backed up by a more substantive working-level negotiation process.

### ***Action for Action Approach***

Both the U.S. and North Korea also need to show greater flexibility in approach and move away from maximalist positions which overestimate their leverage. In particular, a one-sided focus on North Korea's denuclearization is unrealistic without addressing Pyongyang's security concerns.

To find sustainable solutions requires a positive cycle complemented by trust-building measures. A process contingent on both sides implementing smaller, reciprocal steps as part of an agreed roadmap is more likely to achieve results than issuing unilateral demands.

As past negotiations have shown, establishing the parameters of diplomatic give-and-take requires identifying and agreeing on levels of reciprocity in terms of corresponding measures as well as how these should be sequenced. It is therefore necessary for both sides to find entry-points into what will inevitably be a long-term process.

In fact, despite the U.S. demands at Hanoi, there appears to be recognition in the U.S. administration that taking incremental steps and a parallel approach by providing a corresponding measures in exchange for actions for denuclearization could be more effective than immediate and unilateral denuclearization demands.<sup>52</sup>

However, significant steps are still needed by Pyongyang to be perceived as "serious" in Washington, and vice versa. In all likelihood, at a minimum North Korea would need to first credibly commit to a complete and verifiable freezing of its production of nuclear fissile material. In return, the U.S. should seriously consider what kind of sanctions relief and security guarantees it could provide in return.

In this context, it would also be essential to address issues of contention between the U.S. and China that prevent a long-term solution of the situation on the Korean Peninsula and for all sides to reaffirm that the end goals remain full denuclearization of the



Peninsula and building a long-term peace regime in Northeast Asia. In sum, achieving denuclearization and building a peace regime cannot be viewed as separate objectives and need to be mutually constituting.

## Conclusion

Diplomatic initiatives provide a way of resolving conflicts peacefully rather than through military means. This is not to say that other measures such as sanctions and political pressure do not have a role to play. Indeed, the Trump administration credited its policy of “maximum pressure” of sanctions as well as political and military leverage for forcing North Korea to return to the negotiation table in early 2018. A strong signal was therefore sent to North Korea that its nuclear and missile programs were unacceptable to the other parties and applied pressure on the regime by raising the costs of continuing to develop its programs.

However, pressure alone is rarely a good tool for addressing deeply rooted causes of conflict or fully dealing with complex issues if they are not complemented by diplomatic engagement. Accordingly, failure to engage Pyongyang in dialogue would risk further isolating the regime which in turn would entrench its nuclear ambitions and exacerbate a vicious cycle of military tensions in the region. Past experience shows that to find sustainable solutions requires long-term diplomatic engagement entailing a commitment and willingness to find compromises among all parties.

The diplomatic initiative in early 2018 between the U.S. and North Korea cannot be underestimated as it created a window of opportunity to move forward towards denuclearization and new peaceful bilateral relations. Nevertheless, the process of “reconciliation” was short and has ended in stalemate. Summit talks were ultimately built on a fragile foundation as there was a lack of detailed agenda and common definition of the key issues.

Two years have passed since the Singapore Summit

with both sides having imposed a number of preconditions for the resumption of negotiations – preconditions which have turned out to be unacceptable for both sides. Looking ahead to coming months, North Korean brinkmanship with military provocations and possible countermeasures by the U.S. and South Korea look likely as tensions and mistrust remain stronger than the political will to engage in diplomatic contacts. It may be the case that Pyongyang will bide its time to engage until after U.S. presidential elections in November. Furthermore, great power rivalry and lack of coordination between parties have also negatively impacted on the prospects for resolution.

Considering the current deadlocked situation, initial steps for diplomatic engagement can be considered as potentially paving the way for a more conducive environment for resuming negotiations. First, both the U.S. and North Korea should reduce their inflexible and maximalist positions, as well as the overestimation of their leverage. Second, there is the need to focus on potentially easier steps – the components of which are already on the table, for example a moratorium of missile tests and military exercises. Third, there is the need to set up a clear operational roadmap and sequencing of corresponding steps for building a peace regime and denuclearization. With a narrowing window of opportunity, a major concern is that time may be running out to regain momentum for future talks. ■

## Author Bio

Dr. Sangsoo Lee is Head of the ISDP Korea Center in Stockholm. The views expressed here are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of ISDP.

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The ISDP Korea Center seeks to promote informed understanding and constructive dialogue on issues of peace, security, and sustainable development on the Korean Peninsula. It also serves as a hub to advance knowledge, exchange, and cooperation between Korea and the Nordic region.

## Endnotes

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