

Outlook for the Implementation of Denuclearization and Peace Process after the US-DPRK Summit¹

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Denuclearization Process between the US and North Korea

The first-ever summit between leaders of the US and North Korea held significance in that it was a turning point toward the dismantling of the last remaining Cold War structure. At the summit, Chairman Kim reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. But the statement fell short of codifying the US demand for “complete, verifiable and irreversible” dismantlement (CVID), and some may argue that the statement could have included more specific commitments. President Trump said in the lead up to the summit that if the denuclearization talks with Kim are not successful, he will leave the meeting room, but it appears that Trump had to take into account the political situation in the US, namely the upcoming mid-term election. More than half of Americans have positive views of Trump’s historic meeting with Kim at the moment, which will provide Trump with a leverage to improve his approval rating down the road.

The US continuously insists on North Korea’s acceptance of CVID. What the Trump-Kim joint statement contains is generic principles, so more specifics will be made in the upcoming working-level talks.

President Trump’s press conference after the summit outlined what the two leaders discussed. To begin with, there was no more mention that North Korea should first ship out its nuclear weapons to the United States. Prior to the summit, Washington demanded Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear warheads, nuclear materials and intercontinental ballistic missiles and move them out of North Korea, also referred to as the ‘Libya model’, but neither Trump nor US Secretary of State

Mike Pompeo mentioned it afterwards. President Trump's remarks in his post-summit press conference indicate that the original goal of seeing complete denuclearization by 2020 is modified. Given the extremely lengthy process of achieving the CVID of North Korea's massive nuclear weapons, President Trump said his administration hopes a major progress toward North Korea's CVID by 2020. He also added that once 20% of the denuclearization process gets underway, the process would become irreversible. His remarks indicate the uneasy path towards the CVID of North Korea, but at the same time makes the goal of denuclearizing North Korea quite vague. North Korea seems to be taking a different stance from the US, according to the Rodong Sinmun reports published in the wake of the June 12 summit. The North says "the improvement of the US-North Korea relations will lead to the lifting of the sanctions against the regime, and the two leaders had agreed to" abide by the principle of step-by-step and simultaneous approach in achieving peace, stability and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, all of which shows the difference of views on the path to negotiation. At anyhow, current denuclearization process being implemented by the two sides leans towards the principle of step-by-step and simultaneous approach requested by the North.

What could possibly pose challenges to the future negotiations is the fact that Washington and Pyongyang define the next steps toward North Korean denuclearization differently. Trump said the suspension of US-South Korea joint military drill would be the next step following North Korea's suspension of nuclear and missile tests and explosion of its nuclear test sites, and the US is now waiting for the North's denuclearization measures. North Korea, on the other hand, is expecting the US to declare the end of war and give security guarantees upon Pyongyang's returning of the remains of American soldiers and dismantling of its missile engine test and launch sites. The US views that an important task at the moment is to expedite the steps for denuclearization — declaration, inspection, verification, disablement and dismantlement. But given the absence of CVID from the Trump-Kim joint statement, the scope of verification work during the working-level negotiation remains uncertain. Once North Korea declares all of its nuclear programs, inspectors are sent for verification. But it is yet to be known whether North Korea will accept random inspections anywhere in the country. That is why the working-level negotiations between the US and North Korea down the road are likely to face a rocky path.

Geopolitical Change in Northeast Asia in the wake of Renewed US-North Korea Relations

In the June 12 summit, the issue of establishing a new US-North Korea relationship was regarded as important as the denuclearization issue. If North Korea's denuclearization leads to the establishment of new relations between Washington and Pyongyang, it would not only be about ending hostilities and normalizing the relations between the two countries, but also be about bolstering bilateral ties. This would include US investment in North Korea, and the regime will no longer be a threat to the US. The trust between the two sides will thus be restored, which will not only herald a shift in the landscape on the Korean peninsula but also alter the geopolitics of Northeast Asia.

The New York Times used the term 'Nixon effect' to emphasize the significance of US-North Korea summit, and stated that Trump's posture to North Korea echoes Richard Nixon's embrace of Communist China in the early 1970s, which marked a remarkable diplomatic shift in the US' containment of the Soviet Union. So if China's traditional buffer zone – North Korea – tilts towards the US, Washington would be able to increase its pressure on Beijing. Most of the commentators in the US, of course, observe that such an effect would be minimal as North Korea is not as powerful as China used to be back in the 1970s. Trump is also unlikely to share the same view, but his recent approach to North Korea could still cause a significant change in the geopolitics of Northeast Asia.

China is often sensitive about the North strengthening ties with the US. Since the early days of his term, President Xi Jinping has tried to keep China's relationship frozen with North Korea while strengthening ties with South Korea. In other words, he wanted the entire Korean peninsula to act as a buffer zone for China. But an interesting scenario is now being observed in the region. That is, the US is continuing with its so-called 'China-bashing', trying to complete the deployment of THAAD in South Korea and even approaching to North Korea to bolster ties with the regime. Some say that the situation currently unfolding in the region is an indication of the Korean peninsula gradually acting as a buffer zone for the US.

It is expected that China will try to maximize its strategic interest at the current stage by weakening the South Korea-US alliance, achieving denuclearization on the Korean peninsula and bolstering China's relationship with North Korea. In the wake of Trump's comment about suspending the US-Korea joint military drill, China started to mention that changes could be made to the role of the US troops

playing in South Korea. Likewise, Beijing is expected to employ stronger measures to counterbalance the US strengthening its ties with North Korea while providing economic assistance to the North Korean regime.

Road map for Denuclearization and Peace Process: Importance of Balanced Implementation

In the end, balanced implementation of the denuclearization/peace process on the Korean peninsula will be important. Problems may occur if the denuclearization and peace process, or one of them hits roadblock or gets delayed. For instance, if the denuclearization process builds slow progress, Seoul and Washington may face obstacles in their North Korea policies. Against such a backdrop, South Korea and the US would try to maintain the current atmosphere to keep the momentum for improved inter-Korean and US-North Korea relations, while barring any serious repercussion from domestic politics. The South Korea-US alliance will also have to factor in prolonged suspension of US-Korea military drills. Also, if providing security guarantees to North Korea builds slow progress, North Korea could put an end to its denuclearization measures and try to gain economic benefits by improving its ties with China.

Therefore, a quick progress in the US-North working level negotiations should be made to ensure a smooth implementation of the road map for denuclearization and peace process. The good news is that the US and North Korea do not wish to break the ongoing negotiations. North Korea has imposed a temporary moratorium on nuclear and missile tests and shut down its nuclear tests sites, and has begun to shut down its missile engine test sites. It also has returned the remains of US soldiers. During his third visit to North Korea, Secretary Pompeo demanded full declaration of North Korean weapons of mass destruction stockpiles, and setting a timeline for denuclearization. From now on, in response to declaration of the end of the Korean War, Washington and Pyongyang will have to come up with ideas for the timeline for denuclearization. North Korea should propose more detailed, concrete measures to denuclearize, and the US needs to quickly suggest comprehensive measures for regime security of North Korea. The two sides have to reconcile different views in order to make strides toward North Korea's denuclearization, through the end-of-the-war declaration demanded by North Korea. In this case, the South Korea-US alliance may have to move in a positive direction, and efforts will be made to forge an alliance to deal with a nuclear-free North Korea. In other words, the alliance between Seoul and Washington needs to take into account new roles.

The South Korean government should actively try to secure national interest and continue with its policy direction. The inter-Korean détente and the implementation of the peace process will eventually change the landscape in Northeast Asia, and North Korea's denuclearization would be an essential part of this process. Denuclearization and peace process on the Korean peninsula are closely linked to one another. If we fail to make headway in one, the other will be affected. In order to speed up the implementation of North Korea's denuclearization process and declare the end of the Korean War, it is imperative that South Korea acts as an active mediator between the US and North Korea.³

Notas

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