

North Korea's Nuclear Problem

A More Pragmatic Approach Will Help

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If 2017 was the year of a serious military crisis on the Korean Peninsula, 2018 may be marked as the year of summit diplomacy for denuclearizing North Korea. There were numerous rounds of summit meetings; three inter-Korean, one U.S.-North Korea, and three China-North Korea summits. According to media reports, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's visit to Seoul and the second U.S.-North Korea summit are expected by early 2019.

This was an important turn toward a positive direction. For example, three inter-Korean summit meetings have made a significant contribution to reducing military tension and opened the road to peace-settlement between the two Koreas. However, there was not much progress in terms of denuclearization of North Korea since the historic U.S.-North Korea summit in Singapore last June.

The reason for the little progress is the clash between the U.S. position and North Korea's position on the formula of denuclearization. U.S. policy-makers are demanding North Korea to give up its nuclear program or make irreversible steps for denuclearization before it receives substantial return from the U.S. For instance, the U.S. demands North Korea to declare the whole inventory of its nuclear program upfront and to come to the negotiation table to discuss a concrete timeline and roadmap for denuclearization.

In contrast, North Korea is arguing that establishing a normal U.S.-North Korea relationship is the first thing to do. North Korean negotiators claim that now is the

Despite the historic U.S.-North Korea summit in June, little progress was made on denuclearizing North Korea due to the clash between the U.S. and North Korea on the formula of denuclearization. Both sides are demanding the other to do its work upfront. Due to the inability to resolve this dilemma, North Korea's nuclear problem has gotten worse during the last three decades. In order to make a breakthrough, North Korea needs to come to the table as soon as possible recognizing that the political momentum for a negotiated solution in the U.S. may not last long due to President Trump's domestic problems. The U.S. needs to take a more pragmatic approach. While keeping the pressure with economic sanctions, it needs to take concrete measures of political engagement toward North Korea. This would contribute significantly to raising mutual trust and providing a more favorable political environment for negotiating a solution.

U.S.' turn to match North Korea's concessions such as freezing on nuclear testing and missile launching, dismantling Punggye-ri nuclear test site, etc., by beginning to lift economic sanctions. And they are declining the U.S. request to have working-level talks, for example, between Steve Biegun, the U.S. special representative, and Choe Son-hui, North Korea's vice foreign minister.

The U.S. high-level officials are suspicious of the intention of the North Korean authorities. They think that North Korea has taken just a few unimportant symbolic actions instead of taking critical measures to denuclearization. In the eyes of U.S. policy-makers, North Koreans want to have their cake and eat it too, that is, they want economic sanctions lifted, political relations normalized, without giving up their whole nuclear program.

The same dilemma, that is, one side demanding the other to do its work upfront, has always been there since the beginning of the nuclear crisis in the early 1990s. The inability of the international actors to resolve this dilemma was the reason why North Korea's nuclear problem has gradually worsened during the last three decades. The only exceptional case of freezing, if not rooting out, the North Korean nuclear program for 8 years, was achieved by the Clinton administration. The Clinton administration produced the Geneva Agreed Framework in October 1994 and engaged North Korea politically during 1999-2000.

With mutual distrust between the U.S. and North Korea being so high, it was almost impossible to reach an agreement without engaging North Korea politically. In that regard, President Trump's political engagement of North Korea and its product, the Singapore Agreement, marked an important shift of the U.S. policy toward a positive direction. However, the remaining issues are how to translate President Trump's declaration of political engagement into more concrete U.S. actions toward North Korea and how to make North Korea take substantial measures toward denuclearization. In this regard, a few recommendations might be considered.

Firstly, North Korea needs to come to the negotiation table as soon as possible. The North Korean leaders may think they can bypass the lower-level U.S. bureaucrats and achieve their goals by directly talking to President Trump. However, they will soon recognize

that the American political system does not work that way. In the last several months after the Singapore summit, the U.S. side has become more flexible and ready. Also, North Korean policy-makers had better keep in mind that this momentum for a negotiated solution may not last long due to President Trump's domestic political problems. In other words, the window of opportunity for North Korea to achieve its newly defined national goal, that is, economic development through a negotiated solution of the nuclear problem, may not be open for long.

Secondly, the U.S. policy-makers need to take a more pragmatic approach in pursuing denuclearization of North Korea. Demanding North Korea to declare its nuclear inventory upfront may not produce a successful result. In this regard, the past history of 30 years of nuclear diplomacy is telling. Due to the high level of mutual distrust, North Korea could regard the U.S. demand as pressure to submit a target list. Even in the case that North Korea makes a declaration, debates on the veracity of the declaration will probably stall the whole process of negotiation.

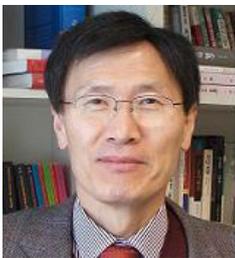
Instead, it would be more realistic for the U.S. to take North Korea's suggestion of dismantling Yongbyon nuclear facilities while pushing the demand for North Korea's declaration. This will make the real negotiation start and mark an important beginning of the long process of denuclearization. Some say that Yongbyon nuclear facilities are no longer valuable, which may not necessarily be the case. In addition to dismantling the biggest symbol of North Korea's nuclear program, international inspectors will be able to get important information about the current state of plutonium, uranium enrichment, and hydrogen bomb projects.

Finally, the U.S., while keeping the pressure with economic sanctions, needs to take more concrete political measures of engaging North Korea. This would contribute significantly to raising mutual trust and providing a more favorable political environment

for negotiating a solution. Another beneficial measure may be producing a declaration of the end of the Korean War. Some experts worry that the declaration would become a slippery slope and lead to the weakening of the U.S.-ROK alliance. But that will be so only when both allies let it happen. If not a peace declaration, establishing a liaison office in Pyongyang, as former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper recommended, would be another meaningful measure for the U.S. to take.

Encouraging dialogue between the North Korean policy-makers and the leaders of international financial institutions for exchanging information, discussing North Korea's future membership and inviting North Korean performers or sports teams to the U.S. would be regarded as other important gestures of good will. Raising the level of mutual trust through these measures will contribute significantly to a successful negotiation.

About the author



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