



Online Series

2019. 07. 01. | CO 19-12

From Hanoi to Panmunjeom:

Assessment and Prospects for DPRK-U.S. Denuclearization Negotiations

Cho, Han-Bum

(Senior Research Fellow, Unification Policy Research Division)

The unexpected meeting between President Trump and Chairman Kim in Panmunjeom will provide momentum for denuclearization negotiations and positive implications for inter-Korean relations. Upcoming working-level dialogue will be crucial since such a hurried and short DMZ meeting was probably unable to narrow the gap in denuclearization negotiations between the two countries. In this regard, both sides should consider an approach that combines a comprehensive agreement with a gradual implication process. In this approach, as a response to North Korea's denuclearization measures, South Korea and the U.S. should provide corresponding economic and political measures. This combination could be a practical alternative for the early stages of the denuclearization process.

1. Kim Jong Un's Moves after Hanoi

Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the National Defense Commission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), remained silent after the DPRK-U.S. summit in Hanoi dealt him a huge blow. On April 12, however, he announced his position on the future of denuclearization talks with Washington during a speech at the first meeting of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly. In the remarks, he set an end-of-the-year deadline,

declaring that he will no longer stick to having economic sanctions lifted and that he would not resume dialogue unless the U.S. adopts “a new way of calculation.” By calling it “nosy mediator,” Kim Jong Un also conveyed his discontent with the South Korean government. It is likely that he may have had his grievances, as his decision to dismantle nuclear facilities in Yongbyon, stipulated in the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018, failed to induce desired outcomes from the U.S. in Hanoi.

In the wake of Hanoi, many expected North Korea’s supreme leader would visit China for a 5th summit. Against the expectation, he went to Vladivostok, Russia to meet with President Putin on April 25. Given that no joint statement or noteworthy news reports came out of the DRPK–Russia summit, it could be interpreted that Russia has a limited role on the Korean Peninsula issues. Still, to Chairman Kim, the meeting with Putin was a significant diplomatic card to shake off the aftermath of Hanoi. It is because despite his four times of visit to China, he had been unsuccessful in securing a promise of significant aid or cooperation for the relaxation of sanctions from a traditional ally.

In a military provocation targeting Washington, Kim observed the North Korean armed forces’ launch of short-range projectiles and missiles on May 4 and 9. The provocation was cautious in nature with the regime choosing short-range projectiles and missiles to avoid crossing a red line while pressuring the U.S. In a bid to prevent the situation from escalating, President Trump commented that the Kim regime tested “some small weapons.” In fact, the UN, which prohibits all kinds of launches by the DPRK that involve ballistic missile technology, does not sanction short-range missiles. In late May, in an effort to continue pressuring the Trump administration, Chairman Kim went on an intensive tour of Chagang Province, a home to many military factories.

The negotiation stalemate had a turnaround with an exchange of letters between leaders of the DPRK and the U.S. On June 11, a day before the first anniversary of the DPRK–U.S. summit in Singapore on June 12, President Trump revealed that he had received a “beautiful letter” from Chairman Kim. On June 23, North Korean media outlet reported the arrival of a letter from Trump. According

to the media, Kim was “satisfied” with the letter and would “contemplate on the interesting content.” Meanwhile, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the DPRK for the first time on June 20–21, showing off cooperative ties between the two countries. The 5th DPRK–China summit, however, appears to be arranged to satisfy China’s needs more than those of North Korea. Arguably, Beijing organized Xi’s visit to Pyeongyang as part of efforts to de-escalate the trade conflict with the U.S. and the unrest in Hong Kong.

Given Kim’s recent moves, his strategy for denuclearization talks seems largely unchanged despite the disappointing results of Hanoi. It is notable that after Hanoi, the United Front Department of North Korea appears to be losing its power as the de facto leading government agency for American affairs to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, since the Ministry’s key negotiators including First Vice Minister Choi Sun Hee have maintained their position or risen as dominant players. The Kim regime has repeatedly condemned the ROK or the U.S. for months; however, it is unlikely that it intended to break the dialogue phase with those offensive words. Pyeongyang has mostly targeted Trump’s advisors and working-level officials rather than the U.S. President himself. In addition, its criticism of the ROK government was intended to urge the South to be more active in inter-Korean relations. For example, Kwon Jong Gun, the Director-General of Department of American Affairs of the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said on June 27 that the South Korean government should not intervene in the dialogue between the U.S. and DPRK. His statement lacks a strong rationale, as the Moon administration played an important role in the previous two Trump–Kim summits. His words would make more sense when interpreted as Pyeongyang indirectly asking Seoul to take its sides in the U.S.–DPRK negotiations.

2. Assessment of Trump–Kim Meeting in Panmunjeom

On June 30, President Trump held a historic meeting with Kim Jong Un during his visit to Panmunjeom. It was the first encounter at Panmunjeom between the leaders of the U.S. and North Korea and the first time a sitting U.S. president had

ever crossed the border into North Korea since the signing of the armistice agreement. As South Korea's President Moon Jae-in joined the two leaders, the world witnessed the first-ever trilateral meeting among the leaders of South Korea, North Korea, and the U.S.

Trump's visit to Panmunjeom is significant in several aspects. First, his meeting with Kim signals reconciliation between the two countries and can be considered a symbolic end-of-the-war declaration. It is also noteworthy that Trump became the first American president to set foot on North Korean soil. Hostility and the lack of trust between the two countries are the root cause of pressing nuclear issues of the North. Therefore, a summit-level meeting in Panmunjeom, the very scene of military confrontation, could be considered as major progress towards the normalization of diplomatic ties between the U.S. and North Korea.

The Panmunjeom meeting is also evaluated as having provided new momentum to a denuclearization negotiation. Trump and Kim talked without any entourage at the Freedom House of Panmunjeom for 53 minutes, which makes the encounter a de facto 3rd DPRK-U.S. summit and signals a green light for denuclearization talks. Considering that Washington and Pyeongyang have struggled to make concrete progress after Hanoi, the Panmunjeom summit has its significance. By inviting Kim to the White House, Trump also opened the door for future summits between the two leaders.

The DPRK-U.S. meeting in Panmunjeom has arguably allowed the South Korean government expand maneuverability in future Pyeongyang-Washington talks and inter-Korean relations. It is meaningful that the U.S. and the two Koreas held a trilateral summit meeting for the first time and that the Trump-Kim meeting also took place in the Freedom House, a building located in South Korean territory. The government of the Republic of Korea (ROK) had an experience in organizing a meeting with Kim Jong Un in Panmunjeom thanks to Inter-Korean summit at the 'Peace House' at Panmunjeom on April 27, 2018. Seoul took full advantage of accumulated experience and expertise to quickly sort out complicated logistical issues such as protocol and security planning in preparing the Trump-Kim meeting. This again showed that while the U.S.-DPRK dialogue is bilateral, Seoul has its own role in

negotiations since last year. Moreover, now that President Moon spontaneously met with Chairman Kim in Panmunjeom, Pyeongyang may change its attitude from expressing its dissatisfaction with the Moon administration to adopting a more friendly tone.

Having materialized in such a short span of time, the Panmunjeom encounter has certain inherent limits. It started with a previous morning tweet by President Trump from the G20 summit in Osaka, Japan. His tweet gained a favorable response in five hours from Choi Sun Hee, First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Korea. Despite the short time, the U.S. President successfully pulled off drawing the world's attention to him and the Korean Peninsula. His surprise encounter with Mr. Kim shadowed a host of issues ranging from previous day's G20 summit, U.S.-China relations, and the U.S. Democratic Party's presidential primary. Since the 2020 U.S. presidential race has begun, events in Panmunjeom on June 30 created a convention effect for Trump, arguably gaining most from the meeting.

Given a clear gap between the two sides' respective understanding of denuclearization and the complexity of working-level issues, Trump's short and impromptu summit with Kim could not possibly resolve or address all the critical issues. Until Panmunjeom, negotiations remained in deadlock mostly because of their different stances, and not their lack of will. Therefore, chances are slim that any breakthrough was created during the Trump-Kim meeting, which was not preceded by significant working- or high-level meetings. Obviously, the symbolic bilateral and trilateral summits in the DMZ secured momentum for a future top-down approach in U.S.-DPRK denuclearization talks. Yet, there still remain challenges ahead.

3. Different Positions on Denuclearization

The Hanoi summit revealed the underlying problems of U.S.-DPRK negotiations on denuclearization. The problems originated from the first Trump-Kim summit in Singapore last year. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), from which Washington withdrew last year, contains both comprehensive and highly specific details on denuclearization of Iran. The Joint Statement at the Singapore

Summit, by contrast, elaborates no further than stating that the two sides will “work toward complete denuclearization on the Korean peninsula.” Lacking a complete definition of denuclearization and concrete agreements for implementation, the vague joint statement heralded difficulties for further working-level talks.

Both sides provided explanations on why Hanoi ended in a failed agreement. Pyeongyang proposed the inspection, verification and permanent dismantlement of Yongbyon nuclear facilities in exchange for some sanctions being lifted. In response, Washington demanded denuclearization measures beyond Yongbyon, which led to eventual disagreement. In a sense, North Korea’s proposal represents progress from the past, since nuclear facilities in Yongbyon are at the core of the Kim regime’s nuclear fuel cycle and nuclear material production. However, in exchange for Yongbyon, Pyeongyang demanded five of the UN sanctions be lifted, which are effectively all the sanctions imposed on the North. To Washington, Yongbyon is something that the DPRK had already agreed to dismantle in the past. It is also possible that the regime has other highly enriched uranium (HEU) production facilities outside Yongbyon. The U.S. could not overlook the nuclear materials, nuclear warheads, and ICBMs that Pyeongyang has already produced. As a result, the American side must have found it difficult to accept the North’s proposal because it did not include a freezing of the entire nuclear program as a precondition.

The breakdown of the Hanoi summit does not represent a critical crisis since the U.S. and DPRK have had dissonance on the specifics of denuclearization for quite some time. The true problem with the disappointing results of the summit was that it was held before working-level negotiators could resolve the complicated and technological issues pertaining to denuclearization. Trump and Kim’s top-down approach has provided much-needed momentum for dialogue; however, both Singapore and Hanoi summits proved that the top-down approach alone cannot close the deal. Whether the two sides will reach an agreement on specifics will be critical in future talks.

4. Recommendations on New “Way of Calculation” in Denuclearization

After the historical meeting in Panmunjeom, Trump said that working-level teams will be designated in two or three weeks to restart negotiations. He also confirmed that the two leaders agreed to start comprehensive negotiation and consultation. Therefore, chances are high that working-level negotiations will resume soon. If both sides stick to the old positions of Hanoi, they might reach another deadlock. That is why the current situation calls for a creative solution.

The combination of a comprehensive agreement and gradual implementation arguably could become a realistic solution for denuclearization. In this approach, comprehensive agreement means an agreement that defines denuclearization in detail with an established timeline and roadmap. Gradual implementation refers to dividing the denuclearization process into multiple phases to reflect the long-term nature of the process. The key is to secure mutual trust early in the process. Currently, the U.S. refuses to lift sanctions, while North Korea offers to dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear complex. Both positions need to be considered to create an effective alternative approach. Dismantling the Yongbyon complex may not completely prevent North Korea from producing highly enriched uranium (HEU) in other parts of the country. Still, the end of Yongbyon indicates the end of plutonium and tritium production in the DPRK, permanently undermining the Kim regime’s nuclear program. If so, the ROK and U.S. can offer corresponding measures in exchange for Yongbyon as compensation. The equation could be: corresponding political measures (by the U.S.)+ corresponding economic measures (by the ROK)=Yongbyon’s denuclearization (by the DPRK). The precondition, however, is that North Korea must freeze its entire nuclear program and suggest concrete and specific plans to dismantle nuclear facilities in Yongbyon.

The first paragraph of the Joint Statement at Singapore Summit is about the normalization of relations between the two countries. The North Korean nuclear crisis originated from mutual hostility; therefore, improving U.S.-DPRK ties is a task of higher level than resolving the nuclear issue. As for corresponding political measures, America has some options to consider, such as opening liaison offices

in the two countries, providing humanitarian aid or lifting the ban on travel to North Korea. Liaison offices are a crucial first step to normalize relations and build trust between the two adversaries. Now that Kim and Trump held a surprise meeting at Panmunjom, the end-of-the-war declaration or a declaration of peace could fall into a category of a potential candidate that qualifies as a corresponding political measure. It may be possible to relax the ban on dispatching North Korean workers overseas, a provision subject to sanctions, if Washington decides to allow humanitarian aid and people-to-people exchanges. In fact, the ban on dispatching North Korean workers overseas infringes on individual basic rights.

South Korea needs to accept North Korea's demands to a certain extent in the form of corresponding economic measures. Such measures may include expanding humanitarian support, resuming the operation of Mt. Geumgang tourism, reopening the Gaesong Industrial Complex, and lifting the May 24 measures. Large-scale food support might come as practical leverage. International organizations projected that this year the DPRK would suffer from 1.36 million tons of shortage of food. Given that the North Korean population consumes around 10,000 tons of food per day, it is impossible that the Kim regime will be able to overcome the forecasted shortages on its own. Therefore, massive food aid should be considered to offer practical support for the country.

Mt. Geumgang tourism, the Gaesong Industrial Complex, and the May 24 measures are not a subject of international sanctions but unilateral measures imposed by South Korea. In particular, resuming tours to Mt. Geumgang will be relatively easy because tourism is not subject to sanctions. North Korea will welcome the return of South Korean visitors to the mountains since it has been developing Wonsan and Mt. Geumgang as international tourism zones. However, restarting the Gaesong Industrial Complex will require a creative solution, as it is subject to sanctions. Regarding the May 24 measures, Seoul can immediately lift three of the measures without violating current sanctions: bans on North Korean vessels sailing in South Korean waters, prohibiting South Korean citizens' traveling to the DPRK, and restrictions on South Korean citizens' contact with North Korean residents. Whether the rest of the measures will be relaxed—bans on trading with North Korea, bringing

goods into or out of the DPRK, and making new investments in the country—largely depends on changes in circumstances.

Those corresponding economic measures are subject to Seoul’s unilateral decision when accompanied by an endorsement from Washington and the UN. The Trump administration will feel less burdened over the relaxation of sanctions if the ROK government provides corresponding economic measures. It might be an appealing alternative for the DPRK that brings both progress in its relations with America and its own direct economic benefit. However, for South Korea, to offer corresponding economic measures to the DPRK is to add political responsibilities and new burdens. The Moon administration will be under criticism at home and abroad if the Kim regime engages in another provocation or if U.S.-DPRK negotiations break down. However, such risks are necessary in order to sustain inter-Korean relations under any circumstances, which is one of the ROK government’s main policy goals. The South Korean government is committed to promoting denuclearization and settling a permanent peace on the peninsula by forging sustainable ties with the North. One cannot achieve such a goal without taking some risks.

The Trump-Kim meeting and trilateral meeting in Panmunjeom were significant in that they gave momentum to denuclearization negotiations. Now, the ball is in the court of working-level negotiators. The results of their efforts will decide the future of denuclearization. Since the Hanoi summit, Pyongyang has repeatedly urged the introduction of a “new way of calculation.” It is possible for this request to be addressed in the form of a comprehensive agreement and a practical plan in the early stages of denuclearization. From Singapore to Hanoi to Panmunjeom, the Moon administration has played a crucial role in the DPRK-U.S. dialogue. Going forward, it will need to concentrate on reaching a practical agreement on North Korea’s denuclearization. [©KINU 2019](#)

* The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).