

North Korea-U.S. Summit: Assessment and Outlook

Online Series

2018. 06. 14. | CO 18-27

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One of the most important achievements of the North Korea-U.S. summit on June 12 is that it has left a great foothold to successfully put an end to 70-years of hostilities, build bilateral trust, and normalize relations. The absence of “CVID” in the joint statement cannot degrade or downplay the achievements of the summit as the statement rightly includes the phrase, “complete denuclearization.” Although it failed to specify concrete measures and deadline for implementation, the two leaders had an in-depth discussion on detailed measures for denuclearization and the security guarantee of the North Korean regime. Rightly, there filled with positive prospects for upcoming follow-up negotiations, which will address how to implement the agreement in great detail. Regarding the results of the summit, neighboring countries have shown various responses as follows: 1) China, while welcoming the outcomes, puts an emphasis on its role to play as a stakeholder of issues on the Korean peninsula; 2) Japan is expected to promote a dialogue with North Korea to resolve the abduction issue; and 3) Russia raises its voice on the importance of the six-party talks. The results of follow-up negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea will decide the progress of inter-Korean relations and preparation for inter-Korea economic cooperation. South Korea, as a driver to realize peace on the Korean Peninsula, is required to play a moderator and facilitator role for the success of North Korea-U.S. follow-up negotiations and to gradually expand the scope and depth of engagement policy on North Korea. In doing so, hopefully, inter-Korean relations can lead the promotion of peace on the peninsula and the swift implementation of what North Korea and the U.S. agreed upon.

On June 12, 2018, all eyes of the world were on the North Korea-U.S. summit in Singapore that was held for the first time in history. The “summit for peace” was finally realized between North Korea and the U.S. overcoming 70-years of severe confrontations and recent brink-of-war crises. Primary concerns of Chairman Kim Jong-un and President Trump at the summit were denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the security guarantee of the North Korean regime, and normalization of relations. The two leaders reached a comprehensive agreement on those issues as reflected in their joint statement and promised to swiftly hold high-level meetings for its implementation. This paper aims to: 1) make a general assessment on outcomes of the summit; 2) review the reaction of neighboring countries and how the summit outcomes will affect the inter-Korean relations; and 3) discuss the challenges ahead.

1. Overall Assessment

Establishing Foundation for Trust-building and Normalization of Relations between the U.S. and North Korea

One of the most important achievements of this summit is that it has left a great foothold to settle the long-lasting hostility between the U.S. and North Korea. The two leaders engaged in a dialogue on pressing issues with mutual respect for each other in the summit, which has laid a foundation for building trust between the two countries that had witnessed 70 long years of confrontation and enmity. Chairman Kim Jong-un and President Trump reaffirmed their willingness to improve bilateral relations while showing favorable impression and respect for each other. They made it clear that the North Korea-U.S. relations will start a new chapter. Such affirmation is well stipulated in the first paragraph of the joint statement as a “commitment to establish new U.S.-DPRK relations.” This paragraph is placed before any other paragraphs, such as the building of a lasting and stable peace regime and denuclearization, showing that the summit dealt with the trust-building and the improvement of relations as more fundamental issues.

Such meaning is reflected in the following phrase that “the establishment of new U.S.-DPRK relations will contribute to the peace and prosperity of the Korean Peninsula and of the World, and recognizing that mutual confidence building can promote the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” which is placed before other agreed paragraphs. The Singapore summit was successful in that a comprehensive agreement was reached on “building a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula” and “complete denuclearization,” stated in paragraphs 2 and 3, respectively. What makes this summit more significant, however, is that the two parties have come to regard the trust-building and improvement of relations as fundamental issues and agreed to implement them. Previous North Korea-U.S. negotiations all resulted in failure mainly due to hostility and lack of trust. Considering this pattern, this summit holds a great significance as the agreement affirmed the building of new relations for peace and prosperity and the promise to hold follow-up summits in both Washington and Pyongyang as an opportunity to further facilitate the trust-building process. The paragraph 4 of the joint statement stipulates that the two parties “commit to recovering POW/MIA remains, including the immediate repatriation of those already identified,” which will not only contribute to addressing the unresolved legacy of confrontation but also to building new relations and trust with the continuous promotion of exchange of people and goods.

Absence of CVID

The joint statement of the summit includes the phrase “complete denuclearization,” but does not mention CVID (Complete, Verifiable and Irreversible Dismantlement). This has brought about criticism in some media and foreign policy circles in the U.S. That criticism is understandable considering that CVID had been one of the critical goals stressed by U.S. Secretary Pompeo even up until the night before the summit. However, the absence of CVID neither provides a reason to depreciate the overall success and outcome of the summit, nor is it right to argue that the result is unilaterally favorable to North Korea. In fact, CVID can be interpreted as an infinite and coercive concept in the scope and method of nuclear

dismantlement and verification. It is questionable whether such CVID is feasible without interfering North Korea's state sovereignty. Whether North Korea can be provided with an "irreversible" measure for the security guarantee of the regime is also put into question. In this sense, the absence of unrealistic concept, such as CVID, can be considered desirable for the sake of more productive results anticipated in the follow-up negotiations. In order to have CVID, under the assumption that it is a feasible concept, rightly accepted in the negotiation process, there should have been discussions and exchange of opinions on concrete measures for irreversible nuclear dismantlement/verification and actions to guarantee the irreversible safety of the regime. This summit might have been held without enough preparation for all that. As Trump clearly stated, Kim Jong-un's firm and unwavering commitment to "complete denuclearization" would be enough for serving that goal. In addition, the lingering concerns on the level of verification and reversibility can naturally be resolved in the process of implementing the statement, which constitutes a de-facto realization of CVID.

Absence of Concrete Measures and Deadline

A comprehensive agreement is contained in the statement but without an inclusion of concrete measures and deadline for implementation. One possible assumption is that while the two parties sweat over whether to insert or omit CVID (which may be nothing but a mythical concept) in the statement, they failed to discuss detailed measures for denuclearization and security of the regime as well as to set a timetable for implementation. The statement lacks more advanced measures than previous agreements on North Korea's nuclear issue and the implementation deadline, which can be seen as limitations of the joint statement as a remaining task to be dealt in the follow-up negotiations. Despite such limitations, however, it had created fruitful results that clearly differentiated itself from prior negotiations: the outcome is not only produced by the first historic North Korea-U.S. summit but also because it holds a binding power at a whole new different level compared to previous meetings. A comprehensive agreement reached between the two leaders can become

a critical force to drive follow-up negotiations for implementation of detailed measures. Moreover, as explained above, the summit provided an opportunity for the two leaders to have a direct dialogue, build the foundation for trust, and mutually affirmed their commitment to denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, the security guarantee of the North, and the improvement of relations. In addition, as revealed in the Trump's press conference held after the summit, both Kim and Trump seemed to have an in-depth discussion on diverse and concrete measures regarding the denuclearization and the security guarantee of the North Korean regime, although they were not included in the joint statement. His remarks are well supported by North Korea's announcement to destroy its missile engine test stand. In return for North Korea's decision, the U.S. announced that it would pursue declaring an end to the War, signing a peace treaty, and suspending the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise during a period of negotiation in reciprocating North Korea's good-will gesture. Should the U.S. decide to suspend the joint military exercise drill, it can surely induce North Korea's actions corresponding to preemptive measures for denuclearization. The North Korea-U.S. summit holds a great significance in the aspect of peace on the Korean Peninsula even with the absence of detailed measures and their implementation deadline specified in the statement.

Outlook for Follow-Up Negotiations

The two leaders agreed upon a full and expeditious implementation of the joint statement. And a high-level negotiation is expected to follow shortly. Although still cautious, prospects for post-summit situation are evaluated as bright enough. What makes such positive outlook possible is, together with the achievements mentioned above, the fact that the two sides showed a huge satisfaction on the summit and intention of establishing a new relation. Rodong Sinmun newspaper of North Korea wrote an article about the summit that leaders of the two states "showed expectation and conviction on the advent of an era of new bilateral cooperation," which was an extensive coverage, including the full text of the joint statement,

leaders' official invitation for mutual visits, and 33 photos. In addition, the U.S. President, right after landing back on the White House, tweeted that read "before taking office, people were assuming that we were going to War with North Korea... North Korea was our biggest and most dangerous problem. There is no longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea." He did not forget to criticize fake news coverage that degrades or downplays the achievements of the summit. After the summit, Trump has continued to convey his growing trust on Kim Jong-un. To be clear, both Chairman Kim Jong-un and President Trump have clear motives to successfully implement their agreement. Kim Jong-un clearly recognizes that denuclearization is a precondition to normalize its relations with foreign countries and to succeed in implementing its plan on building the economy with all-out-efforts. President Trump also acknowledges that building a new relation with North Korea, providing measures to guarantee the regime security, and promoting denuclearization are a crucial pathway to reinforce his political foothold in the upcoming mid-term elections scheduled in November and to take on an advantageous position in the preparation for the 2020 presidential election. Such motives would serve as a positive facilitator for successful follow-up meetings. However, one cannot exclude the possibility where the myth on COVID holds the two countries back, or one or either of them make additional demands, making the negotiation more difficult. This scenario is less likely, however, when considering motives of the two leaders that back the positive prospects.

2. Reaction from Neighboring Countries

China: Emphasis on Its Role to Play as Stakeholder on the Korean Peninsula Issue

Regarding the joint statement for the North Korea-U.S. summit, China stated that it is a result of historic decision and concession of the two leaders and "a great step toward denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula." Especially, the possibility of suspending the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise was interpreted as a positive

change in the political landscape of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. In the process of implementing the agreement between North Korea and the U.S., China is expected to put an emphasis on its role as a stakeholder on the peninsula issue and as a “stabilizer in the Northeast Asian region.” In doing so, China will attempt to strengthen its influence on the Korean Peninsula and the region. Among others, regarding the “security guarantee of the North Korean regime,” the U.S. is likely to discuss the methods of security guarantee with China that has traditionally maintained a friendly relation with North Korea. Or China can step up to suggest specific methods of security guarantee both to the U.S. and North Korea. In addition, China may insist on undertaking a critical role in the inspection and verification process for denuclearization. North Korea already dispatched its delegation to China to learn lessons from Chinese economic reform, which illustrates that China is going to play an active role in the future. Moreover, China is a party to the armistice agreement and wants to be a part of declaring an end to the War and signing a peace treaty. In fact, China may accept a declaration of an end to the War if it is signed by the two-Koreas and the U.S. considering the importance of resolving the long-lasting hostilities among them. However, Beijing is expected to highlight the need to participate as a party in the course of signing a peace treaty and to actively seek their role.

Japan: Promotion of North Korea-Japan Dialogue to Resolve Abduction Issue

Regarding the joint statement of the North Korea-U.S. summit, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe positively reacted and “welcomed Kim Jong-un’s written commitment to complete denuclearization.” Abe thanked the U.S. President for bringing up the issue of Japanese abducted by North Korea. For Japan, the abduction issue is an important precondition together with denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula for opening a dialogue with North Korea. Now that the U.S. successfully came up with such issue in its summit with North Korea, Japan seems to have secured a drive for the North Korea-Japan summit to discuss the abduction issue. For Japanese Prime Minister, the summit with North Korea is worth promoting to stabilize

its power in the face of falling approval rating caused by recent cabinet scandal. That attempt was made in the midst of strong backlash from his traditional support — the conservative. For the U.S., which mentioned that there will be economic supports from South Korea and Japan once North Korea dismantles its nuclear weapon, resolving the abduction issue is a must in order to earn economic support from Japan. Up until now, the so-called “Japan Passing” was frequently discussed but Japan has been patiently waiting for its turn to open a summit with North Korea. During the North Korea-U.S. summit, Kim Jong-un showed positive intention to meet Abe. And the abduction issue was already approved by both South Korea and the U.S. Japanese Prime Minister is expected to actively promote an opportunity to hold a dialogue with North Korea.

Russia: Welcoming the Suspension of ROK-U.S. Joint Military Exercise and Insisting on Holding Six-Party Talks

Russia, while welcoming successful outcomes of both inter-Korean summit and North Korea-U.S. summit, has put an emphasis on a role that it has to play when discussing the future of the Korean Peninsula. It has continuously insisted on holding the six-party talks that include Russia as one of the parties, arguing that this formation is the most suitable to discuss the denuclearization issue on the Korean Peninsula. After the North Korea-U.S. summit, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia posted a comment that normalization of North Korea-U.S. relations is a key to comprehensively resolve issues on the Korean Peninsula, including denuclearization. The ministry announced that President Trump’s remarks on the possibility of suspending the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise is evaluated to be optimistic. Russia figured that currently developing situation opens up the feasibility of implementing a roadmap (stage 1) that Moscow jointly suggested along with Beijing back in July, 2017 to peacefully resolve the Korean Peninsula issue. This roadmap, in its first stage, demands double freeze of North Korea’s nuclear and missile test and the U.S. joint military drill with South Korea. Then, the second stage describes normalization of relations through direct dialogues between the two Koreas and

between North Korea and the U.S. The third stage lays out the signing of a multilateral agreement to deal with both denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula and a regional security architecture in the Northeast Asian region. A commentary from Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggests that the first and second stages of the roadmap are already underway. Through a commentary, the ministry urged relevant countries to prepare for the third stage. Russia argues that a key to resolving North Korea's nuclear issue is providing an assurance to the regime safety. Russia is expected to continue its close coordination with China. By doing so, it will work on easing sanctions against North Korea and reviving trilateral economic cooperation projects among South Korea, North Korea, and Russia, thereby expanding its role on the Korean Peninsula. Moscow seems to continuously persuade relevant countries to have the six-party talks on denuclearization issues, which can be expanded into a broader agenda of establishing a security architecture in the Northeast Asian region.

3. Impact on Inter-Korean Relations

Follow-up Negotiations of the Singapore Summit and Its Impact on the Speed of Progress in Inter-Korean Relations

The result of the North Korea-U.S. summit will inevitably affect the progress of inter-Korean relations. Above all, the outcome of North Korea-U.S. summit is line with the two recent inter-Korean summits. The contents of the agreement are also linked with the denuclearization and peace regime initiative of the Moon government. Especially the ROK government's vision for policy on North Korea — peace and prosperity — is well reflected in the joint statement of North Korea-U.S. summit and culminated by the paragraph 3 that “reaffirming the April 27, 2018 Panmunjom Declaration, the DPRK commits to work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” After the South Korea-U.S. summit on May 22, 2018, key officials of the Trump administration made a transition from a “grand bargain” to “gradual approach” for denuclearization. Considering such

transition, it can be interpreted that a “complete denuclearization” model agreed between the two Koreas became a guideline for the North Korea–U.S. agreement. However, things did not go according to the following expectation: a complete denuclearization principle could be agreed upon at the inter–Korea summit; and the North Korea–U.S. summit could draw a nominal agreement on practical and concrete denuclearization methods. Now, the ball is passed to the upcoming high–level meetings between Pyongyang and Washington to reach an agreement on measures and implementation — the result of which will inevitably influence the speed of progress in inter–Korean relations.

Momentum for Preparation on Economic Cooperation

Meanwhile, as President Trump agreed on building new relations with North Korea and positively recognized North Korea’s plan for economic construction, inter–Korean discussion on economic cooperation is also expected to gather more momentum. President Trump said that “there is no limit to what North Korea can achieve when it gives up its nuclear weapons.” Currently with all UN sanctions remaining in place, it is difficult to resume economic cooperation projects in full scale. However, the environment could be drastically changed in favor of economic cooperation depending on the speed of improvement of the North Korea–U.S. relations, which will give a boost to preparations. International financial organizations can also review the eligibility of North Korea for membership or become interested in launching development projects in North Korea.

4. Future Tasks

A comprehensive agreement reached at the North Korea–U.S. summit made South Korea’s driver role all the more important for peace on the Korean Peninsula. Even when follow–up negotiations between North Korea and the U.S. are full of rosy prospects, one needs to remember that there is always uncertainty lurking around the corner. The two parties successfully built a foundation for trust but such

foundation is still very weak. Distrust can be amplified when the two sides start to add additional demands or a negotiation can face an unexpected deadlock due to misunderstanding. South Korea has contributed a lot to the reversal of the U.S. initial decision to call off a summit and its success by communicating directly and closely with North Korea as well as the U.S. As such, the ROK should continue to play a moderator and facilitator role in follow-up negotiations so that concrete measures can be agreed upon and implemented for denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Above all, now is the time to closely cooperate with the U.S. and North Korea to make a timely declaration of an end to the War. In addition, the four-party talks (two Koreas, the U.S., and China) to sign a peace treaty need to be planned and led by South Korea.

South Korea needs to utilize the inter-Korean relations in playing the driver role on the Korean Peninsula. It means that any progress made in the inter-Korea relations can add a realistic aspect to an abstract agreement made by the U.S. and North Korea. Challenges ahead include military, sports, and Red Cross meetings to expand the scope of engagement policy toward North Korea. As for military meetings, the ROK needs to draw feasible measures to build military trust without provocations and setting a maritime peace zone, thereby alleviating lingering doubts of the international community on Kim Jong-un's strategy on external affairs. This will mark an important starting point to lead to the declaration of an end to the War and a peace treaty. Not only that, sports and Red Cross meetings need to work out not only the Asian Game and reunion of separated families but also non-political exchanges. That will provide North Korea with a chance to take part in the international community as an equal and responsible member.

In the past, North Korea used the inter-Korean relations only as a means of improving relations with the U.S. or tried to adjust the level of progress with South Korea in line with that of improvement in its relations with the U.S. Considering such history, the inter-Korean relations need to be "synchronized" with the North Korea-U.S. relations so that they can move along with each other. For the time being, the entire landscape surrounding the improvement of inter-Korea relations will be formed within the boundary of the North Korea-U.S. negotiation on



denuclearization. There is, however, a slight possibility that a radical and remarkable improvement in the inter-Korean relations becomes a significant momentum for the North Korea-U.S. relations depending on a situation. ©KINU 2018

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