

I. North Korean–US nuclear diplomacy

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In 2018 tensions between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) over the latter's long-running programmes to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missile delivery systems began to subside as a result of renewed diplomatic engagement between the two countries. This took place against the background of an emergent peace process between North Korea and the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea).¹ The USA has taken a leading international role in condemning North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes and demanding that it immediately and verifiably halt all activities related to them. It has also been at the forefront of international efforts in the United Nations Security Council to compel North Korea to abandon the programmes through the imposition of increasingly stringent sanctions and other punitive measures since 2006.²

At the end of 2017 tensions between North Korea and the USA appeared to be escalating towards a potential military conflict. During 2017, North Korea had conducted its sixth and largest ever nuclear test explosion, which it claimed was of a thermonuclear weapon ('hydrogen bomb'), as well as 23 test-launches of medium- and long-range ballistic missiles.³ In a departure from previous administrations, the administration of US President Donald J. Trump emphasized the option of launching a preventive military strike against North Korea if it threatened the USA with nuclear weapons.⁴

Renewed dialogue and engagement with North Korea

The year opened with the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, declaring in his annual New Year's Day address that the country had successfully completed the development of its 'nuclear self-defence force', despite the US-led international sanctions and pressure against it. He announced that the country would begin to mass produce and deploy nuclear warheads and

¹ On the emergent peace process between North Korea and South Korea, see chapter 2, section III, in this volume.

² For a summary of UN Security Council sanctions resolutions in response to North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile tests, see Kile, S. N., 'International non-proliferation sanctions against North Korea', *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 330–32.

³ For details about the nuclear and missile tests, see Kile, S. and Kristensen, H., 'North Korea's military nuclear capabilities', *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 280–87. See also Arms Control Association, 'Chronology of US–North Korean nuclear-missile diplomacy'.

⁴ Baker, P. and Choe, S.-H., 'Trump threatens "fire and fury" against North Korea if it endangers US', *New York Times*, 8 Aug. 2017.

ballistic missiles, ‘the power and reliability’ of which had been demonstrated, as a deterrent to ‘military adventures’ by the USA.⁵

At the same time, Kim called for North Korea and South Korea to take ‘decisive measures’ to promote peace and reconciliation in the light of the acute tension on the Korean peninsula. At Kim’s suggestion, South Korea’s president, Moon Jae-in, subsequently invited North Korea to send athletes to participate in the upcoming Winter Olympics to be held in PyeongChang, South Korea, under a joint Korean unification flag.⁶ The so-called Olympics detente paved the way for renewed and intensified inter-Korean engagement on a range of political, economic and cultural initiatives.

Against this background, South Korea took an active role in promoting direct talks between North Korea and the USA. On 8 March, a delegation of senior South Korean officials met with President Trump at the White House to convey a message from Kim Jong Un, with whom they had met in Pyongyang earlier in the week, proposing that the two leaders meet as soon as possible. They reported that Kim had confirmed his commitment to achieving ‘permanent denuclearization’ and had pledged to halt the country’s nuclear and missile tests, including during upcoming South Korean–US joint military exercises.⁷

Following the delegation’s visit, the White House announced that President Trump had accepted Kim’s invitation to hold a bilateral summit meeting.⁸ US administration officials subsequently clarified that the meeting would take place at a time and location to be determined and that ‘in the meantime all sanctions and maximum pressure [on North Korea] must remain’ in place.⁹

On 20 April, in a speech to the Central Committee of the ruling Korean Workers’ Party, Kim Jong Un declared that the achievement of a robust nuclear deterrent meant that the country’s previous ‘byungjin line’—in which the country aimed to simultaneously develop its nuclear weapon capabilities alongside the economy—would be replaced by a ‘new strategic line’—which would focus solely on economic development.¹⁰ Kim also formally announced an immediate halt to further tests of nuclear weapons and intercontinental-range ballistic missiles (ICBM) as well as the imminent shut down and dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear weapon test site. The

⁵ ‘Kim Jong Un makes New Year address’, Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), 1 Jan. 2018.

⁶ Choe, S.-H., ‘North and South Korean teams to march as one at Olympics’, *New York Times*, 17 Jan. 2018.

⁷ The White House, Press Office, ‘Remarks by Republic of Korea National Security Advisor Chung Eui-Yong’, Washington, DC, 8 Mar. 2018.

⁸ Fifield, A., Nakamura, D. and Kim, S. M., ‘Trump accepts invitation to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un’, *Washington Post*, 8 Mar. 2018.

⁹ The White House, Press Office, ‘Statement from Vice President Mike Pence on North Korea’, Washington, DC, 9 Mar. 2018.

¹⁰ ‘Third Plenary Meeting of Seventh CC, WPK held in Presence of Kim Jong Un’, KCNA, 21 Apr. 2018.

latter step was intended ‘to transparently guarantee’ the halting of nuclear tests.¹¹ Kim did not indicate, however, whether he was prepared to accept a verifiable cap on the country’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles as a starting point for denuclearization talks with the USA.¹²

On 27 April, Kim and Moon held a summit meeting in the village of Panmunjom located in the demilitarized zone (DMZ)—the first meeting between the two leaders and the third ever between the leaders of North and South Korea. They issued a joint declaration in which they pledged to take steps to reduce inter-Korean military tensions and to begin a ‘new era of national reconciliation and peace-building’. They also confirmed their ‘common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean peninsula’. The declaration did not specify the steps to be taken to achieve this goal, but it referred to North Korea’s recently announced suspension of its nuclear weapon and missile testing activities as ‘very meaningful and crucial for the denuclearization’ of the peninsula.¹³

US–North Korean summit meeting

Meeting preparations

Following discussions between officials from the USA, North Korea and other governments in the region, an agreement was eventually reached to hold the Kim–Trump summit meeting in Singapore in June.¹⁴ However, preliminary discussions between North Korean and US officials about a prospective summit deal quickly stalled because of underlying disagreements about the meaning of denuclearization in the Korean context.¹⁵

Despite sometimes inconsistent statements, US officials adopted a maximalist position demanding the ‘complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization’ (CVID) of North Korea.¹⁶ This would require North Korea to eliminate, on an expedited basis, all of its nuclear weapons, fissile material and associated production and testing facilities as well as its long-range ballistic missiles. US officials insisted that this was an essential first step by North Korea towards normalizing bilateral relations, including the eventual lifting of sanctions and the conclusion of a peace treaty ending the

¹¹ ‘Third Plenary Meeting of Seventh CC, WPK held in Presence of Kim Jong Un’ (note 10). For details about the closure of the nuclear weapon test site located at Punggye-ri in the north of the country, see chapter 6, section 10, in this volume.

¹² Mount, A. and Panda, A., ‘North Korea is not denuclearizing’, *The Atlantic*, 21 Apr. 2018.

¹³ ‘Full text of joint declaration issued at inter-Korean summit’, Yonhap News Agency (South Korea), 27 Apr. 2018.

¹⁴ ‘Trump–Kim summit to be held on Singapore’s Sentosa island’, BBC News, 6 June 2018.

¹⁵ Fifield, A., ‘North Korea’s definition of “denuclearization” is very different from Trump’s’, *Washington Post*, 9 Apr. 2018.

¹⁶ Stowe-Thurston, A. and Mount, A., ‘What we talk about when we talk about North Korean denuclearization’, NK News.org, 18 May 2018.

1950–53 Korean War. US National Security Advisor John Bolton controversially described CVID as being based on the ‘Libya model’—a reference to Libya’s agreement with the USA in 2003 to disclose and dismantle its nascent nuclear weapon programme, destroy its chemical and biological weapons, and limit the range and payloads of its missiles in return for the subsequent lifting of US sanctions and other restrictions against it.¹⁷ Some analysts warned that by framing CVID in terms of the Libyan agreement, Bolton was creating unnecessary mistrust because of the unexpected turn of events that led to the death of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi following the agreement’s implementation.¹⁸

Bolton’s reference elicited a sharp rebuke from North Korea. A statement attributed to First Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Kim Kye Gwan vigorously rejected the relevance of comparing North Korea, a nuclear weapon state, with Libya, which had been at the very early stages of nuclear weapon development. The statement cautioned that if the USA pursued a strategy aimed at compelling North Korea’s unilateral ‘nuclear abandonment’, then the country’s leadership would reconsider the decision to take part in the summit meeting.¹⁹

Furthermore, the statement explained that North Korea ‘had made clear on several occasions that [its] precondition for denuclearization’ was for the USA to end its decades-old ‘hostile policy’ and to provide ‘security guarantees’.²⁰ This required, first and foremost, the conclusion of a permanent peace treaty between the USA and North Korea that would formally end the Korean War. North Korea had made a potentially significant concession the previous month when it reportedly dropped its demand that US troops be removed from South Korea as a condition for giving up its nuclear weapons.²¹

Singapore summit meeting joint statement

On 12 June 2018 Trump and Kim, accompanied by their respective national delegations, met in Singapore.²² The meeting was the first ever between a sitting US president and a North Korean leader.

After the meeting, Kim and Trump issued a joint statement. In the statement, President Trump ‘committed to provide security guarantees’ to North Korea, and Kim ‘reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula’. The joint statement

¹⁷ Arms Control Association, ‘Chronology of Libya’s disarmament and relations with the United States’, Factsheet, updated Jan. 2018.

¹⁸ Baker, P., ‘Libya as a model for disarmament? North Korea may see it very differently’, *New York Times*, 29 Apr. 2018.

¹⁹ ‘Press Statement by First Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of DPRK’, KCNA, 16 May 2018.

²⁰ ‘Press Statement by First Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of DPRK’ (note 19).

²¹ Landler, M. and Choe, S.-H., ‘North Korea drops troop demand, but US reacts warily’, *New York Times*, 19 Apr. 2018.

²² ‘Trump–Kim summit to be held on Singapore’s Sentosa island’ (note 14).

said the two states would hold ‘follow-on negotiations . . . at the earliest possible date, to implement the outcomes’ of the summit meeting. It also said that the two states would ‘join their efforts to build a lasting and stable peace regime’ on the divided peninsula, including holding talks to reduce military tensions that could eventually lead to a formal peace treaty to end the Korean War.²³ Following the summit meeting, President Trump publicly declared that ‘there is no longer a nuclear threat from North Korea’.²⁴

The joint statement’s commitment to denuclearization received a muted global response. While the leaders of many governments praised it as a positive step towards de-escalating tensions between North Korea and the USA, some noted that concrete follow-up measures were needed to sustain the diplomatic momentum.²⁵

Among US analysts, the joint statement was widely criticized for being unduly vague and insubstantial. There was considerable scepticism about Kim’s commitment to ‘work toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula’—a promise similar to one that North Korean leaders have made during previous international negotiations going back to the early 1990s. Many critics noted that Kim did not commit in the joint statement to take any specific steps towards this goal or agree to a timeline for doing so. Furthermore, the joint statement lacked any reference to the sequencing of the process of denuclearization or to the mechanisms for verifying it.²⁶ The latter omission was of particular concern, given that North Korea was believed to have dispersed and concealed sensitive nuclear weapon production facilities.²⁷

Developments following the Singapore summit meeting

North Korean–US impasse on denuclearization

At the end of the Singapore summit meeting, President Trump predicted that denuclearization on the Korean peninsula would begin ‘very quickly’.²⁸ However, in the wake of the meeting, little substantive progress was made towards achieving this goal.²⁹

²³ The White House, Press Office, Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea at the Singapore summit Meeting, 12 June 2018.

²⁴ ‘Trump says “no more nuclear threat” from N. Korea’, *Yonhap*, 13 June 2018.

²⁵ ‘Praise, optimism, derision: Reaction to Trump–Kim summit from around the globe’, *CBC News*, 12 June 2018.

²⁶ See e.g. Panda, A., ‘Trump’s Singapore summit was a bust—for the US’, *Daily Beast*, 12 June 2018; and Gallucci, R., ‘Reaction to the Singapore summit’, *38North*, 12 June 2018.

²⁷ Nakashima, E. and Warrick, J., ‘North Korea working to conceal key aspects of its nuclear program, US officials say’, *Washington Post*, 30 June 2018.

²⁸ Landler, M., ‘Trump claims progress after historic talks with Kim Jong-un’, *New York Times*, 11 June 2018.

²⁹ On North Korea’s ongoing nuclear activities, see chapter 6, section IX, in this volume.

A key obstacle remained the long-standing disagreement between the USA and North Korea over the scope and sequencing of steps to achieve the stated goal of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula. US officials, led by John Bolton, insisted that North Korea provide a detailed written disclosure of its nuclear weapon stockpile, its nuclear production facilities and its missiles as a demonstration of its commitment to denuclearization. North Korea rejected the idea of making any such disclosure in the absence of a permanent peace treaty. Kim reportedly claimed that to do so would be tantamount to handing an enemy a list of potential military targets.³⁰

A related obstacle was with the Trump administration's insistence that sanctions and other pressure remain on North Korea until it had completely, verifiably and irreversibly eliminated its nuclear weapon and long-range missile programmes. At a meeting of the UN Security Council members' foreign ministers in September, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo credited sanctions with having forced North Korea to the negotiating table. Pompeo vowed that the USA would not agree to ease sanctions until the 'final denuclearization' of North Korea had been achieved.³¹

For its part, after initially pressing the USA for a declaration formally ending the Korean War, North Korea increasingly insisted on the phased lifting of international sanctions as part of a step-by-step process of denuclearization. North Korean state media accused the US administration of 'acting opposite' to its pledge to normalize relations in spite of the fact that North Korea had made a number goodwill gestures, including halting its nuclear and missile tests and returning the remains of US soldiers killed in the Korean War.³² In November, an article attributed to the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned that the country's 'two-track approach' of economic and nuclear weapon development could be revived if the US administration continued to prioritize 'denuclearization first, lifting of sanctions next'.³³

In a rebuff to the Trump administration's position, China and Russia supported North Korea's call for an easing of international sanctions against it. At the UN Security Council meeting in September, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, stated that, in the light of recent 'positive developments', this was an essential step in a phased and synchronized approach to encouraging denuclearization.³⁴ In October, the Chinese, Russian and North Korean deputy foreign ministers met in Moscow to coordinate a trilateral approach

³⁰ Cole, B., 'Kim Jong Un won't tell Trump where weapons are as it gives US a "list of targets for attacks"', *Newsweek*, 11 July 2018.

³¹ Harris, G., 'Pompeo hails talks with North Korea but says sanctions must continue', *New York Times*, 27 Sep. 2018.

³² 'US will get nothing with its "pressure diplomacy"', *Rodong Sinmun*, 6 Aug. 2018.

³³ 'Institute for American Studies of DPRK: Foreign Ministry urges US to abandon foolish daydream', *KCNA*, 2 Nov. 2018.

³⁴ Borger, J., 'China and Russia call on UN to ease North Korea sanctions', *The Guardian*, 27 Sep. 2018.

to the denuclearization process on the Korean peninsula, and called on the UN Security Council to ‘adjust’ the sanctions regime against North Korea.³⁵

Improved inter-Korean relations

The North Korean–US impasse over denuclearization was set against the backdrop of a steady improvement in political and economic relations between North and South Korea, including progress towards forging an inter-Korean peace settlement. This in turn was accompanied by more active South Korean efforts to overcome the denuclearization deadlock.

On 18–20 September Moon and Kim held their third summit meeting in 2018, this time in Pyongyang.³⁶ Among other outcomes, the two states adopted a military-to-military agreement setting out a series of steps to de-escalate tensions along the inter-Korean border and to reduce the risks of accidental or unintended conflict.³⁷ In the concluding declaration, the two leaders agreed to cooperate closely on the process of pursuing the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Kim specifically pledged to dismantle the missile engine test site and launch platform at Dongchang-ri, in North Pyongan Province, under the observation of experts from ‘relevant countries’. He also expressed a willingness to implement additional goodwill measures, such as the permanent dismantlement of the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, if the USA took unspecified ‘corresponding measures in accordance with the spirit’ of the Singapore summit meeting joint statement.³⁸

On 20 November the USA and South Korea launched a working group for ‘regular, systemic and formal’ communication on North Korea policy.³⁹ The move came amid speculation about a possible rift between them on how to handle relations with North Korea. Some observers expressed concern that South Korea’s desire to engage and deepen ties with North Korea appeared to clash with the US goal of eliminating North Korea’s nuclear weapons and related production infrastructure.⁴⁰

³⁵ Lee, J.-H., ‘China, Russia, North Korea call for adjusted sanctions ahead of denuclearisation’, *South China Morning Post*, 10 Oct. 2018.

³⁶ Kim and Moon had a second meeting, arranged at short notice, in Panmunjom on 26 May. Kong, K. and Lee, H., ‘Kim, Moon discuss how to revive Trump summit in surprise meeting’, Bloomberg News, 26 May 2018. See also chapter 2, section III, in this volume.

³⁷ National Committee on North Korea, ‘Agreement on the implementation of the historic Panmunjom Declaration in the military domain’, 18 Sep. 2018.

³⁸ ‘Text of the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018’, *Korea Times*, 20 Sep. 2018.

³⁹ ‘S. Korea, US discuss N. Korea issue in “working group”’, *Yonhap*, 7 Dec. 2018.

⁴⁰ Chandran, N., ‘South Korean peace efforts look “out of sync” with elimination of North Korean nukes’, *CNBC News*, 4 Dec. 2018.

Towards a second summit meeting

In September 2018, there were growing calls for the USA to pursue a more sustainable negotiating process with North Korea, as the Trump administration came under pressure to demonstrate progress with the denuclearization talks. In October, South Korea's foreign minister proposed that the administration drop its demand for an immediate inventory of North Korea's nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles and related production facilities and accept instead the verified closure of the nuclear complex at Yongbyon as a next step in the negotiations.⁴¹

The South Korean proposal echoed the scepticism of several leading US analysts about the feasibility of the Trump administration's demand for North Korea to provide a full declaration of its nuclear weapon infrastructure.⁴² The analysts noted that such a declaration would have to be accompanied by a robust verification protocol, the negotiation of which was not realistically achievable given the lack of trust between North Korea and the USA. Rather than insisting on a full declaration up front, a more feasible alternative would be for North Korea to take significant steps that reduce its nuclear capabilities in return for commensurate movements towards normalization.⁴³ This would involve phased and complete denuclearization—that is, achieving complete denuclearization but on a more prolonged, step-by-step basis, with compensation provided to North Korea at each step of the way. However, such a 'halt, roll back and eliminate' approach could take more than a decade to implement.⁴⁴

On 7 October 2018, Mike Pompeo and Kim Jong Un met in Pyongyang and agreed to hold a second US–North Korean summit meeting.⁴⁵ John Bolton subsequently remarked that a second summit meeting was necessary as North Korea had not 'lived up to commitments made in Singapore'.⁴⁶ Contrary to expectations, US Vice President Mike Pence said that the USA would not insist that North Korea provide a complete list of its nuclear weapons and missile sites ahead of the second summit.⁴⁷ As the year ended, the two sides had not settled on a date or location for the second summit meeting.

⁴¹ Hudson, J., 'South Korea reveals plan to break stalemate in US–North Korea talks', *Washington Post*, 3 Oct. 2018. Among other facilities, the Yongbyon complex is the site of North Korea's plutonium production reactor.

⁴² Hecker, S., Carlin, R. and Serbin, E., 'A comprehensive history of North Korea's nuclear program', Centre for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, 24 May 2018.

⁴³ Hecker, S., 'Why insisting on a North Korean nuclear declaration up front is a big mistake', 38North, 28 Nov. 2018.

⁴⁴ Hecker, S., Carlin, R. and Serbin, E. (note 42).

⁴⁵ Yeo, J.-S., 'US–North Korea summit to take place "soon": Pompeo', *Korea Herald*, 7 Oct. 2018.

⁴⁶ Byrne, L., 'Second summit needed as North Korea not living up to commitments: Bolton', *NK News.org*, 4 Dec. 2018.

⁴⁷ Geddie, J., 'Trump to meet North Korea's Kim in 2019, wants plan to end arms program', *Reuters*, 15 Nov. 2018.