

## II. North Korean–United States nuclear diplomacy

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In 2019 tensions persisted between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) and the United States over the former's ongoing programmes to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missile delivery systems. North Korea had dismantled its nuclear test site at Pyunggye-ri in 2018 and it continued to adhere to the moratorium on the testing of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles declared by its supreme leader, Kim Jong Un, in April 2018.<sup>1</sup> However, during 2019 North Korea conducted multiple flight tests of short-range ballistic missiles in contravention of a United Nations Security Council resolution demanding that it halt all missile tests.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, North Korea and the USA remained locked in a diplomatic stalemate over their political commitments made the previous year to work towards establishing peaceful relations and achieving the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. The impasse coincided with the breakdown of peace and reconciliation efforts between North Korea and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) initiated in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

This section reviews developments in North Korean–US nuclear diplomacy in 2019. It first describes developments at the bilateral summit in Hanoi in February and then looks at the aftermath of the meeting.

### **The second North Korean–US summit meeting**

#### *The outcome of the Singapore summit meeting*

The year 2019 began with no tangible progress towards implementing the commitments made by Kim Jong Un and US President Donald J. Trump at the June 2018 summit meeting in Singapore—the first ever between a sitting US president and a North Korean leader.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the meeting, the two leaders had issued a joint declaration in which, among other things, Trump committed to provide security guarantees to North Korea and to normalize bilateral relations, while Kim reaffirmed his 'firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula'.<sup>5</sup> The two leaders pledged to hold follow-on negotiations 'at the earliest possible date' and to work jointly 'to build a lasting and stable peace regime' on the peninsula.

<sup>1</sup> Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), 'Third plenary meeting of seventh CC, WPK held in presence of Kim Jong Un', 21 Apr. 2018.

<sup>2</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1718, 14 Oct. 2006, paras 5, 7.

<sup>3</sup> On North Korean–South Korean dialogue see chapter 4, section I, in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> See Kile, S. N., 'North Korean–US nuclear diplomacy', *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 363–65.

<sup>5</sup> North Korean–US Singapore Summit Meeting, Joint statement, 12 June 2018.

The Singapore joint declaration did not address long-standing disagreements between North Korea and the USA over the definition of denuclearization and the scope and sequencing of steps for achieving that goal. US officials, led by the secretary of state, Michael R. Pompeo, and the national security advisor, John R. Bolton, continued to insist that North Korea provide a detailed, written disclosure of its nuclear weapon stockpile, its nuclear fuel cycle and related production facilities, and its ballistic missile delivery systems at the beginning of a denuclearization process. However, Kim Jong Un had repeatedly rejected the idea of his country making any such disclosures in the absence of a permanent peace treaty, arguing that doing so would be tantamount to giving an enemy a list of targets.<sup>6</sup>

A related obstacle was the USA's insistence that all international sanctions on North Korea remain in place until it had completely, verifiably and irreversibly dismantled its nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programmes. For its part, North Korea continued to insist that the USA agree to a phased lifting of international sanctions as part of a step-by-step approach to denuclearization.

In his New Year's Day speech on 1 January 2019, Kim stated that he was prepared to have a second summit meeting with President Trump 'anytime' to discuss denuclearization.<sup>7</sup> However, he warned that he would seek an unspecified 'new way' if the USA persisted with its policy of sanctions and pressure against his country. Kim also reiterated a list of steps to be taken by the USA before North Korea would proceed with denuclearization measures. These included the halting of joint military training between the USA and South Korea, the withdrawal of US nuclear forces based on or near the Korean peninsula, and the conclusion of a peace treaty formally ending the 1950–53 Korean War.<sup>8</sup>

On 18 January the White House announced that President Trump would have a second summit meeting with the North Korean leader before the end of February. The location of the meeting was not identified.<sup>9</sup>

Following the announcement, an informal working-level meeting between North Korean, South Korean and US special envoys was convened near Stockholm, Sweden, on 20–22 January.<sup>10</sup> The purpose was to consider measures for implementing the commitments agreed by Kim and Trump in

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), 'New Year address of Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un', 1 Jan. 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) (note 7); and Sanger, D. E., 'Kim and Trump back at square 1: If US keeps sanctions, North will keep nuclear program', *New York Times*, 1 Jan. 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Nakamura, D., Hudson, J. and Gearan, A. 'Trump to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in late February, White House says', *Washington Post*, 18 Jan. 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Tanner, J., 'US, South Korean diplomats attending NKorea talks in Sweden', Associated Press, 20 Jan. 2019. The meeting was co-organized by the Swedish Government and SIPRI.

the Singapore joint declaration. Afterwards, the lead South Korean negotiator said that the trilateral discussions had proceeded smoothly and set the stage for diplomatic advances at the upcoming summit meeting.<sup>11</sup> In an apparent easing of US demands, the US special representative for North Korea, Stephen E. Biegun, indicated that North Korea's submission of the detailed disclosure of its nuclear weapon and ballistic programmes demanded by the US side would be acceptable 'at some point' in the denuclearization process and not necessarily at the outset.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Hanoi summit meeting*

On 27 February 2019 Kim and Trump, accompanied by their respective national delegations, gathered in Hanoi, Viet Nam, for the second summit meeting.<sup>13</sup> This came against the background of mounting speculation about whether the two leaders could agree on concrete steps for implementing the denuclearization and peacebuilding commitments made in Singapore.<sup>14</sup> However, the meeting ended abruptly on 28 February, with the two delegations departing without issuing an expected concluding communiqué or joint declaration.

The primary cause of the meeting's breakdown was a disagreement over sanctions relief for North Korea.<sup>15</sup> There were contradictory accounts about the nature of the disagreement. During a news conference, President Trump said that North Korea had demanded the lifting of all sanctions against it in return for shutting down and dismantling its main nuclear material production facility, located at Yongbyon. Trump noted that such a deal would have left untouched North Korea's arsenal of nuclear warheads and ballistic missile delivery systems.<sup>16</sup> Pompeo cautioned that, in addition to the Yongbyon plant, there were a number of suspected undisclosed nuclear fuel production sites around the country.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, the North Korean minister of foreign affairs, Ri Yong Ho, explained that his country had in fact sought the 'partial' removal of sanctions in return for dismantling its Yongbyon nuclear site.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, North Korea

<sup>11</sup> Yonhap News Agency, 'S. Korea's chief nuclear envoy sees "rapid progress" for future US-NK talks', 23 Jan. 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, J., 'US envoy to North Korea warns of "Asia-Pacific nuclear weapons challenge" but softens demand for list of arsenal', *Japan Times*, 1 Feb. 2019.

<sup>13</sup> 'Trump and Kim start Vietnam summit with dinner', BBC, 27 Feb. 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Denyer, S., 'The grand bargain in Hanoi takes shape, but can Trump and Kim close the deal?', *Washington Post*, 25 Feb. 2019; and Choe, S., 'Trump and Kim may declare end of war at summit, South Korea says', *New York Times*, 25 Feb. 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Lemire, J., Riechmann, D. and Klug, F., 'Trump, Kim end summit with standoff over easing US sanctions', Associated Press, 28 Feb. 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Rucker, P., Denyer, S. and Nakamura, D., 'North Korea's foreign minister says country seeks only partial sanctions relief, contradicting Trump', *Washington Post*, 1 Mar. 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Associated Press, 'North Korea disputes Trump's account of talks breakdown', *Asahi Shimbun*, 1 Mar. 2019.

<sup>18</sup> 'DPRK FM Ri Yong Ho disputes Trump reason for summit collapse', *People's Daily*, 1 Mar. 2019.

had requested the lifting of five UN Security Council sanctions resolutions passed in 2016 and 2017.<sup>19</sup> The sanctions targeted North Korea's mineral and food exports as well as its fuel imports and, according to Ri, were damaging the livelihoods of the North Korean people.<sup>20</sup> In return, North Korea would permanently dismantle all of the nuclear material production facilities at Yongbyon, including for plutonium and uranium, with the participation of US experts.<sup>21</sup> Ri emphasized that North Korea was seeking an incremental approach that exchanged North Korean steps on denuclearization for US action to lift sanctions against North Korea and address its security concerns.<sup>22</sup>

### **Developments after the Hanoi summit meeting**

#### *North Korea's deadline for a new US approach*

The immediate public reactions of both Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un to the collapse of the Hanoi summit meeting were restrained. They emphasized their cordial personal relations while seeking to minimize the persisting differences in the countries' respective approaches to denuclearization.<sup>23</sup>

Kim subsequently expressed growing frustration over the alleged unwillingness of the USA to consider the relaxation of sanctions against North Korea as part of an incipient denuclearization process. Trump had described international sanctions against North Korea as being at a 'fair level'.<sup>24</sup> Speaking before the Supreme People's Assembly (the North Korean Parliament) on 13 April, Kim stated that it was 'essential for the US to quit its current calculation method and approach us with new one' if it were genuinely interested in pursuing denuclearization talks.<sup>25</sup> Kim said that he was open to having another summit meeting with Trump, but he set the end of 2019 as a deadline for the US administration to offer mutually acceptable terms for an agreement to continue talks.

<sup>19</sup> On the 9 UN Security Council sanctions resolutions on North Korea's nuclear weapon and ballistic missile activities, see Kile, S. N., 'International non-proliferation sanctions against North Korea', *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 386–88.

<sup>20</sup> 'DPRK FM Ri Yong Ho disputes Trump reason for summit collapse' (note 18).

<sup>21</sup> For a non-governmental assessment of the implications of dismantling the Yongbyon facilities, see Samore, G., 'How significant is the dismantlement of Yongbyon?', 38 *North*, 11 Mar. 2019.

<sup>22</sup> 'DPRK FM Ri Yong Ho disputes Trump reason for summit collapse' (note 18).

<sup>23</sup> Associated Press (note 17); and Yonhap News Agency, 'N. Korea refrains from criticism of US despite breakdown of Trump summit', 5 Mar. 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen, Z., 'Trump says sanctions on North Korea are at a "fair level"', CNN, 12 Apr. 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), 'Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un makes policy speech at first session of 14th SPA', 13 Apr. 2019; and Smith, J. and Lee, J., 'North Korea's Kim Jong Un gives US to year-end to become more flexible', Reuters, 13 Apr. 2019.

On 4 May, North Korea test-launched a new type of solid-fuel short-range ballistic missile as well as two multiple-launch rocket systems.<sup>26</sup> The launches marked North Korea's first ballistic missile test since 2017. There were conflicting assessments among analysts about North Korea's motivations for resuming the tests, with some speculating that it was seeking to force a breakthrough in the stalled negotiations with the USA.<sup>27</sup> During 2019, North Korea conducted multiple tests of short-range missiles and artillery rocket systems, including several new types.<sup>28</sup>

### *A breakdown of renewed talks*

The prospects for renewed North Korean–US nuclear diplomacy improved in mid-2019. While on a visit to Seoul hosted by South Korean President Moon Jae-in, President Trump accepted an invitation from Kim Jong Un to have an impromptu meeting in the demilitarized zone (DMZ) along the intra-Korean border.<sup>29</sup> During the meeting, Trump became the first sitting US president to cross into North Korean territory. The two leaders said afterwards that they had agreed that their negotiators would meet within the next few weeks to resume discussions about implementing the commitments made in the Singapore joint declaration. They did not indicate whether they had discussed specific steps and measures.<sup>30</sup>

Following protracted diplomatic exchanges, on 4–5 October North Korean and US negotiators held a working-level meeting in Stockholm hosted by the Swedish Government.<sup>31</sup> The two sides came away with sharply diverging assessments of the talks. According to a spokesperson of the US Department of State, there had been 'good' discussions at the meeting.<sup>32</sup> He said that the US negotiating team had brought new proposals to address the goals laid out in the Singapore joint declaration.

However, North Korea's chief nuclear negotiator, Kim Myong Gil, declared that the talks had 'not fulfilled our expectations'. They had, in fact, broken down 'entirely' because the US side had not 'discarded its old stance and attitude' towards the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and had come to the negotiating table with an 'empty hand'.<sup>33</sup> Kim stated that the two coun-

<sup>26</sup> Kim, D. and Hanham, M., 'North Korean missiles: Size does not matter', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 15 May 2019. See also chapter 10, section IX, in this volume.

<sup>27</sup> Panda, A. and Narang, V., 'Why North Korea is testing missiles again', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 May 2019.

<sup>28</sup> CNS North Korea Missile Test Database, Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), 31 Mar. 2020.

<sup>29</sup> BBC, 'Trump in North Korea: KCNA hails "amazing" visit', 1 July 2019

<sup>30</sup> Crowley, M. and Sanger, D. E., 'In new talks, US may settle for a nuclear freeze by North Korea', *New York Times*, 30 June 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Hotham, O., 'North Korea, US to begin high-stakes preliminary working-level talks in Sweden', *NK News*, 4 Oct. 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Ortagus, M., 'North Korea talks', Press statement, US Department of State, 5 Oct. 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Tanner, J. and Lee, M., 'North Korea decries breakdown of talks US says were "good"', Associated Press, 6 Oct. 2019. See also Hotham, O., 'North Korea-US talks in Sweden fail to reach a deal, chief DPRK negotiator says', *NK News*, 5 Oct. 2019.

tries could discuss the next denuclearization steps only if the USA ‘sincerely responds’ to the steps that North Korea had taken in good faith to improve bilateral relations, in particular, the halting of its nuclear and long-range missile tests and the dismantling of its nuclear test site at Pyonggye-ri.<sup>34</sup> He did not mention specific steps that the USA should take to move forward with denuclearization talks.

The negotiator’s remarks were followed on 10 October by a statement from the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs warning that the country was prepared to resume long-range missile tests in the light of the USA’s failure to respond with concrete proposals.<sup>35</sup> It accused the USA of having instigated a joint statement issued by the five European members of the UN Security Council—Belgium, France, Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom.<sup>36</sup> In response to North Korea’s recent test of a new submarine-launched ballistic missile, the European states had condemned the test and a series of short-range ballistic missile launches in the previous weeks as violations of Security Council resolutions and called on North Korea to abandon its nuclear and missile programmes.<sup>37</sup>

On 3 December, a North Korean vice-foreign minister issued a statement warning that, if the US administration did not offer a more constructive proposal for relaxing sanctions and scaling down confrontation by the year-end deadline, it could expect an unwelcome ‘Christmas gift’.<sup>38</sup> This was widely interpreted by analysts and US government officials as a euphemism for a long-range missile test or possibly another nuclear weapon test by North Korea.<sup>39</sup>

#### *The meeting of the Central Committee of the Korean Worker’s Party*

Against the background of the rising tensions between North Korea and the USA, a plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the ruling Korean Worker’s Party (KWP) was held in Pyongyang on 28–31 December 2019 under the chairmanship of the party’s leader, Kim Jong Un.<sup>40</sup> The four-day meeting adopted new policy guidance on a range of military, economic and internal

<sup>34</sup> Tanner and Lee (note 33).

<sup>35</sup> North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Spokesperson for DPRK Foreign Ministry denounces US moves against DPRK’, 10 Oct. 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Kim, H., ‘N. Korea threatens to resume nuke, long-range missile tests’, Associated Press, 10 Oct. 2019.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Condemnation of North Korea’s nuclear missile tests’, Joint statement by Belgium, Estonia, France, Germany, Poland and the UK, 8 Oct. 2019; and Panda, A., ‘European States on UN Security Council issue statement on North Korean missile tests’, *The Diplomat*, 9 Oct. 2019.

<sup>38</sup> North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘DPRK Vice Foreign Minister for US Affairs issues statement’, 3 Dec. 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Denyer, S., ‘North Korea warns United States of an unwelcome “Christmas gift”’, *Washington Post*, 3 Dec. 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), ‘Fifth plenary meeting of seventh Central Committee of Workers’ Party of Korea held’, 1 Jan. 2019.

administration issues. It also set out a 'new path' for 2020, which included a de facto return to the country's *byungjin* policy line, which prioritizes the simultaneous development of nuclear weapon capabilities and the domestic economy.<sup>41</sup>

In a report of the meeting carried by state news media, Kim emphasized the urgent need to take 'offensive measures to reliably ensure the sovereignty and security of our state' and to 'shift to a shocking actual action' in response to the USA's continued hostile policy towards it.<sup>42</sup> The measures included placing the country's nuclear deterrent on 'constant alert' and continuing to develop its nuclear arsenal. Kim said that North Korea would reveal a new strategic weapon 'in the near future'.

Kim also called into question his commitment to North Korea's self-declared moratorium on tests of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. He warned that, having halted the tests while receiving only perceived provocations from the USA, 'there is no ground for us to get unilaterally bound to the commitment any longer'.<sup>43</sup> However, Kim appeared to moderate his message by not formally declaring the end of the moratorium. He said instead that a decision to do so depended on the USA's 'future attitude' towards North Korea.<sup>44</sup>

In addition, Kim left open the possibility for further negotiations with the US administration over peacebuilding and denuclearization issues. He emphasized that this could happen only if the USA 'rolls back its hostile policy towards [North Korea]' and a 'lasting and durable peace-keeping mechanism' is built on the peninsula.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, he indicated that he was prepared for a protracted stalemate with the USA, as the latter showed no willingness to abandon its 'provocative political, military and economic maneuvers to completely strangle and stifle [North Korea]' despite its professed interest in a diplomatic dialogue.<sup>46</sup>

The initial reactions to Kim's speech from President Trump and other senior US officials were restrained. According to the US national security advisor, Robert C. O'Brien, the administration had 'reached out to the North

<sup>41</sup> The *byungjin* policy line adopted in Apr. 2013 had been replaced by a 'new strategic line' focused solely on economic development at the Apr. 2018 plenary meeting of the Central Committee. Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), 'Third plenary meeting of seventh C.C., WPK held in presence of Kim Jong Un', 21 Apr. 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), 'Report on 5th plenary meeting of 7th C.C., WPK', 1 Jan. 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) (note 42).

<sup>44</sup> Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) (note 42).

<sup>45</sup> Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) (note 42).

<sup>46</sup> Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) (note 42); and Scott, B. and Lee, J., 'Kim Jong Un gives up on Trump, prepares to endure US sanctions', Bloomberg, 2 Jan. 2020.

Koreans' to request the resumption of diplomatic negotiations to reach a denuclearization agreement.<sup>47</sup>

## **Conclusions**

In 2019, North Korean–United States negotiations made no progress towards implementing the commitments to denuclearization and peacebuilding agreed by President Trump and Kim Jong Un the previous year. There was, however, a shift in the negotiations as the two sides began to move the talks from the head-of-state level to a working-group process. The latter involved small-format meetings intended to allow the negotiating teams to discuss specific measures that could then be adopted by the two leaders during a summit meeting. However, the negotiations remained stalled by the unwillingness of either side to adjust their positions on the scope and sequencing of steps for denuclearization, in particular, on the lifting of international sanctions against North Korea as part of the process.

Rather than a single grand bargain on denuclearization, a series of small agreements might allow the declared goal to be reached incrementally. However, as the year ended, there were few indications that North Korea and the USA were prepared to move away from their respective demands in order to allow such agreements.

<sup>47</sup> Swan, J., Talev, M. and Treene, A., 'Exclusive: Trump tells Kim Jong-un he wants to resume talks', *Axios*, 12 Jan. 2020.