

How to Approach the Coming Inter-Korean and North Korea-US Summits, and Future Challenges for South Korea

Chaesung Chun

Translated by Hyejung Suh and James Dongjin Kim

THERE IS A HIGH CHANCE THAT THE NEXT THREE MONTHS WILL mark an important moment in history: a moment that will change the future of the Korean Peninsula. Since the Cold War ended, North Korea has been searching for a way to ensure its survival and sounding out the possibility of negotiations with the US. Throughout the history of the bilateral contact between North Korea and the US, which started with the meeting of Kim Yong Soon and Arnold Kanter in January 1992, there have been several significant moments that came close to settling the tension between North Korea and the US, including North Korean military Vice Marshal Jo Myong-rok's visit to Washington DC and former US Secretary of State Albright's visit to Pyongyang, both in 2000. After eighteen years of relations at a standstill, a new opportunity for breakthrough has emerged.

Agreements to hold dialogues between South and North Korea as well as between North Korea and the US are the result of structural developments among the relevant stakeholders. This reasoning holds that once the exhaustion of all other options than negotiation is understood among the players, the moment of sincere negotiation is bound to happen. The agreement to hold the summit can also be credited to the efforts of the South Korean government to take a cautious approach aimed toward the root of the North Korea issue. North Korea has attempted to obtain various advantages by developing ballistic missile capabilities that enable them to strike the continental US. However, this has only brought about

a strengthening of sanctions against the North and diplomatic isolation, significantly reducing the potential for Kim Jong Un's *Byungjin* line to succeed. China has been proactively participating in sanctions against the North with close cooperation with the US and the international society. South Korean efforts to impose sanctions on North Korea and strengthen the alliance with the US have been steadfast despite a more liberal administration taking office. It is now certain that the North Korean economy will worsen rapidly in the next year or two. While the US has proposed a military option, North Korea's military might make it entirely difficult to realize the option and the US cannot but focus on a continuation of sanctions and political isolation vis-à-vis North Korea. This desirable end state of North Korea's nuclear issue is quite clear: North Korea's denuclearization with its regime survival

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Edit and Typeset: Hyejung Suh, Natalie Grant

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 04548, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr



guaranteed, and peace on the Korean Peninsula. The more important question has been when and how off-the-table negotiations, which are a necessary precursor to enable on-the-table negotiations among relevant stakeholders to succeed, would end. The nature of the North Korean nuclear problem is such that its resolution has only become clear as circumstances have grown worse and more serious.

Now it is up to South Korea to make sure that the cycle of the unresolved North Korean nuclear problem does not end with catastrophic destruction. The Moon Jae-in administration has emphasized peace and evoked the importance of a diplomatic resolution as the circumstances surrounding the Peninsula have worsened. With the current lack of basic trust among the relevant stakeholders, the problem will not resolve itself if left alone. The Moon administration has repeatedly promoted dialogue as a way to gain North Korea's trust despite skeptical views expressed by the international community, the US, and domestic conservatives. We may interpret Moon Jae-in's approach as a strategy to increase audience costs by building trust at the expense of political costs. In other words, North Korea only began to believe that South Korea was sincere after observing the Moon administration willingly making political sacrifices to establish trust from domestic and also international audiences.

A high-level South Korean delegation to Pyongyang announced a set of six agreements with North Korea. Among these, three (an inter-Korean summit, the creation of a hotline between the leaders, and an exchange of sports and cultural programs) appear to be relatively easy to implement. The remaining three are more challenging: a clear signaling of North Korea's willingness to denuclearize, a North Korea-US summit, and a halt to future nuclear missile tests by the North. If an immediate stop to additional nuclear missile tests by the North can be agreed upon as a starting point for further negotiations, then the discussion may proceed as to how North Korea can clearly signal its willingness to denuclearize and the

specifics of a North Korea-US summit. At the end of last year, North Korea announced the completion of its nuclear missile program and specified its intent to focus on economic development this year. Under the *Byungjin* line, economic development is to be pursued while maintaining nuclear status. It is extremely difficult to find out once and for all whether or not North Korea has, in the two months since Kim Jong Un's New Year's address, decided to change its position on maintaining its nuclear status, which is one pillar of the parallel strategy, and instead pursue a new strategy based solely on economic development. It is realistically impossible to determine if North Korea has suddenly decided that it can no longer sustain the costs of maintaining its nuclear missile program due to strengthened economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, and thereby concluded that it should negotiate its nuclear missile program for the highest value and instead concentrate on economic development.

North Korea still has the alternative option of advancing its nuclear missile program further. In his New Year's address, Kim Jong Un mentioned the mass production of nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles for operational deployment. If North Korea confirms its ability to hit US territory with a nuclear strike through valid tests, the US will not be able to launch a preemptive strike against the North for fear of nuclear counter-attack on the mainland. Furthermore, if this ability is confirmed, US public opinion will likely favor making a deal, giving North Korea a greater amount of leverage at the negotiating table. Currently, North Korea seems amenable to negotiation because of the difficulties that economic sanctions and maritime interdiction are posing to its development of ICBM re-entry technology. If North Korea can improve its economy and secure technological development beginning in April, it is only logical for North Korea to break off the current talks in order to build additional leverage for future negotiations. The biggest economic obstacle for North Korea is China's participation in sanctions. If China softens its stance on sanctions



against the North and works to strengthen North Korea-China relations as North Korea-US talks progress, the need for North Korea to conclude negotiations in the current round will be reduced. In sum, if sanctions are lessened, the blockade of port traffic, and maritime interdiction are lifted, North Korea can continue to develop its nuclear capabilities and will be better off postponing negotiations.

US bureaucrats and experts who are well aware of this situation are also wary of the possibility that President Trump might make too many commitments at the planned North Korea-US summit in May. There is a growing concern that the US should not agree to summit talks if substantial action is not taken towards North Korea's denuclearization as a precondition, and that the potential wins from negotiations will be reduced if practical negotiations fail after the summit. In addition, if North Korea is determined to be untrustworthy following the summit, the US will begin to consider military options more seriously than diplomatic alternatives. The American public may begin to pressure the US government to attack North Korea, especially before North Korea secures the capability to attack the US mainland.

The South Korean government's greatest task now is to ensure that every country recognizes that a failure in the upcoming April negotiations will harm everyone by reducing the possibility of diplomatic compromise. Whether or not North Korea has made strategic decisions to abandon its nuclear weapons in favor of economic development is surely an important issue, but policy should not be established solely based on North Korea's intentions. These intentions will shift in line with their capabilities, and a change in the situation may prompt them to make a different decision. Even if North Korea is only agreeing to negotiations in the hope of earning some time and profit, we must try to change and form the intention of Kim Jong Un. Hoon Suh, Director of the National Intelligence Service, said in an interview with the *Chosun Ilbo* during the recent visit to the US that,

“When you negotiate, you do not make judgments according to your opponent's will or intention. It is more important to draw meaning from their words and make them put this into practice.” This comment clearly demonstrates the nature of the negotiation process very well in that the most important thing in the negotiation process is to form and change the opponent's intention. Director Suh also mentioned that North Korea has not specified what it will require in return for denuclearizing, and this is an area in which future negotiations have to make progress. Even if North Korea is still looking for opportunities to develop nuclear missiles, if the benefits of nuclear abandonment outweigh the costs, their intentions may change and new prospects emerge during the negotiation process.

To achieve this goal, it is necessary to shift from a pressure-oriented strategy to the parallel pursuit of pressure and engagement. The international community has followed the US in pursuing maximum pressure and engagement, but the engagement in this policy has ended in seeking only a basic diplomatic solution. The international community has vaguely explained that Pyongyang will face a bright future if it abandons its nuclear weapons program, but failed to provide specific and concrete incentives for halting nuclear development from North Korea's point of view. In the September 19 Joint Statement, Russia, Japan, the US, South Korea, and China suggested supplying energy, providing economic cooperation, and discussing a peace regime in separate forums, but a detailed plan for engagement with North Korea did not materialize. South Korea's Kim Dae Jung administration pursued the Sunshine Policy, but North Korea's take away from this was that removing its metaphorical clothing under South Korea's 'sunshine' would lead to North Korean regime collapse.

The key point to any discussion of an exit strategy for North Korea in terms of denuclearization is the type of future that will await the regime on the other side of the door. Kim Jong Un will work toward a scenario in which North Korea is treated as a normal



member of the international community, given a concrete blueprint for economic development, and he is able to keep his domestic political foundation intact even without the nuclear weapons. In fact, Kim Jong Un's maintenance of power and North Korea's growth will not necessarily be complementary, as economic development will inevitably lead to social change within North Korea and domestic criticism of the regime will intensify. The abandonment of nuclear weapons will mean that Kim Jong Un must manage not only external, but also internal threats.

South Korea and its neighboring countries need to understand these concerns of North Korea and clearly spell out the extent to which they can provide North Korea with incentives. Since the North Korean nuclear issue has remained ongoing for the past 20 years, North Korea may already be well aware of the content and trustworthiness of any guarantees that South Korea and its neighbors can provide. Thus, careful and precise preparation is required. If a concrete and authentic engagement policy is clearly conveyed to North Korea, it is likely that North Korea will shift its intentions to participate in denuclearization negotiations.

The inter-Korean summit will be a place to discuss bilateral issues, but it will also confirm South Korea's capacity and position as leader of the international community's strategy, especially that of the US. It will be impossible to agree on specific programs to mitigate sanctions on North Korea and improving inter-Korean exchange and cooperation before the North Korea-US summit. Therefore, it is more important to communicate with North Korea about the concrete engagement strategy that will be led by South Korea and the future that North Korea will face after denuclearizing. As most of the preparatory contact between North Korea and the US will be achieved during the preparation for the inter-Korean summit, South Korea should closely discuss this future program with the United States at this time.

The United States-North Korea summit will be a

starting point for the denuclearization of North Korea and the normalization of the United States-North Korea relationship. During the summit, there will be a basic agreement proposed for the complete denuclearization of North Korea that guarantees the North Korean regime's safety. The roadmap for denuclearization has been discussed since the beginning of the North Korean nuclear problem. The real issue is that the United States is not ready to provide a clear roadmap to guarantee the safety of the North Korean regime. In fact, it is unclear exactly what a 'safety guarantee' will entail. It may mean a simple prohibition of US military activities against North Korea; a full transition from the armistice agreement to a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula; a separate system to maintain a peace regime; a guarantee to normalize North Korea as a member of the international community and support their economic development; or support for Kim Jong Un's continued dictatorship. Without knowing exactly what they will ask for, it is impossible to guess at the US response.

It is also difficult to guess what President Trump's individual goals and methods of negotiation will be. President Trump prioritizes the interests of the United States, but he also would like to achieve a complete resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue through negotiation in order to have a visible political win. It is difficult to say what price he is willing to pay for denuclearization. South Korea is worried about President Trump's "North Korea card" in addition to the long-standing obstacles of how to balance the sequence of denuclearization-regime safety guarantee and economic support and the "words for words" and "action for action" problem. With the majority of American post-Cold War policy in a state of radical flux, including the US-centered alliance-based global security system, the liberal international economic order supporting the long-term interests of the United States, ideological diplomacy emphasizing human rights and the expansion of democracy, and careful coexistence with other major powers, it is hard to



predict President Trump's policy on the North Korean nuclear issue.

The most important issue with regards to North Korea is, from the perspective of the interests of the United States, to eliminate the nuclear missile threat to the US mainland. It is hard to guess exactly what demands the United States will accept in exchange for eliminating such a threat. The worst case scenario would be a guarantee of North Korea's military regime in exchange for a weakening of the ROK-US alliance and elimination of the North Korean nuclear threat to the United States. This would amplify the security anxiety of both South Korea and Japan. If the United States places great emphasis on the security of its allies and is committed to continuing to support South Korea and Japan in the future East Asian security framework, it will consider ways to guarantee North Korea's regime safety that do not weaken the existing ROK-US and US-Japan alliances. The topics discussed during the previous Four-Party Talks: how the international community can guarantee a peace regime, the normalization of US-DPRK relations, and peace on the Korean Peninsula, will be also discussed at the summit, and China's strategy will be a very significant variable. It is very likely that the Six-Party Talks will be used as the main forum for discussion, and the geopolitical cooperation of the four neighboring powers will be necessary in order to effectively establish a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea's immediate desire is to solve the North Korean nuclear issue and guarantee a peace regime. Ultimately, however, South Korea wishes to establish a sustainable peace regime, improve inter-Korean exchanges, and achieve reunification. To do this, from a security perspective, the establishment of a peace regime as well as the future direction of North Korean development are both essential. The conditions for unification will be established when North Korea maintains political stability for a certain period and gradually develops an open system as a member of the international community. South Korea's

main task is to integrate the current denuclearization dialogue into a long-term roadmap.

When South Korea cooperates with the United States, South Korea must first thoroughly discuss this roadmap as a joint proposal to be shared during the working-level talks after the United States-North Korea summit. South Korea must communicate closely with the United States so that the United States develops a response to North Korea's denuclearization that also protects South Korea's security interests. Second, it is necessary to be prepared for the possibility that negotiations may halt or run into difficulties as in the past due to the difference of opinion between the United States and North Korea. The possibility of a diplomatic solution must be maximized so that mutual trust and the agreement on basic principle do not collapse regardless of what happens. In particular, South Korea must lay the foundation for continued cooperation with China. Third, South Korea must create multiple opportunities to persuade the United States, especially President Trump, of the need for a long-term solution that goes beyond denuclearization or a short-term guarantee of safety for the North Korean regime. The division of the Korean Peninsula is very difficult to resolve within the current geopolitical structure, but a route to unification must be made clear in consideration of South Korea's national interest. Lastly, even if denuclearization is achieved, South Korea's diplomatic difficulties will remain the same owing to the competition between the United States and China. In the process of denuclearization, South Korea's regional strategy must be linked to the Korean Peninsula strategy as a whole so that denuclearization becomes a successful case of strategic cooperation between the United States and China. In that way, the mechanism of the United States-China cooperation and South Korea's intervention capabilities will extend to other security issues in East Asia. ■



——— *Chaesung Chun* is the Chair of the International Relations Studies Center at the East Asia Institute. He also serves as a professor of the department of political science and international relations at Seoul National University. Dr. Chun received his Ph.D. in international relations from Northwestern University.

——— *HyeJung Suh* is Associate Director of the Research Planning Department at the East Asia Institute.

James Dongjin Kim is Research Associate of the Research Planning Department at the East Asia Institute.

