



After the Pyongyang Talks

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Executive Summary

- * The profound gap between the US and the DPRK - a gap concealed by vague yet optimistic rhetoric in Singapore - burst to the surface in the aftermath of the visit to Pyongyang by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.
- * While both sides agreed to talk again - both Pyongyang and Washington are cognizant there is actually very little to talk about. Three core-issues are at the crux of the US-DPRK crisis and there is no compromise in sight.
- * Meanwhile, the US-PRC Trade War has just started. For Beijing, this war is more than an economic issue. The escalating trade war gives Beijing the greatest impetus to harness the region's other two great economies - Japan and South Korea - away from US influence and into inflicting the maximum damage on the overall strategic-economic posture of the US. The future of the Korean Peninsula will be a key theater.

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Analysis

The profound gap between the US and the DPRK¹ - a gap concealed by vague yet optimistic rhetoric in Singapore - burst to the surface in the aftermath of the visit to Pyongyang by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Arriving in Tokyo on 7 July, Pompeo struck an optimistic note. Pompeo told the pool reporters that he had “very productive” talks in Pyongyang, and that Kim Yong-Chol and he spent “a good deal of time” discussing “a time-line” for the denuclearization of North Korea. “These are complicated issues, but we made progress on almost all the central issues,” he explained. “Some places, a great deal of progress; other places, there’s still more work to be done.” Pompeo expects the high-level direct discussions and negotiations to continue.

Official Pyongyang was aghast by the overall character of the talks. Indeed, Kim Jong-Un did not meet Pompeo as a clear demonstration of Pyongyang’s deep displeasure with Washington.

The moment Pompeo left Pyongyang, the KCNA published a lengthy bitter statement attributed to “a spokesman of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs”. The spokesman accused the Trump Administration of pushing a “unilateral and gangster-like demand for denuclearization” that was a blatant deviation from “the spirit of Singapore” particularly in relation to the verification regime. Pyongyang warns that the outcome of the just-completed talks is “very concerning” because it ushers in a “dangerous phase that might rattle our willingness for denuclearization that had been firm.”

The spokesman asserted that the DPRK “expected that the US side would bring itself with a constructive proposal which would help build up trust true to the spirit of the DPRK-US summit meeting and talks.” The DPRK was “also thinking of doing something which corresponds with it [reciprocal measures]. It was, however, so regretful to mention what the US side had shown in its attitude and stand at the first DPRK-US high-level talks,” the spokesman added.

There was a stark contrast between the policies for conflict resolution articulated by both sides. “The DPRK side, during the talks, put forward the constructive proposals to seek a balanced implementation of all the provisions of the Joint Statement out of its firm willingness to remain faithful to the implementation of the spirit and agreed points of the DPRK-US summit meeting and talks. These include taking wide-ranging proactive steps of simultaneous actions in a respective manner such as realizing multilateral exchanges for improved relations between the DPRK and the US,” the spokesman explained. In contrast, “the US side came up only with its unilateral and gangster-like demand for denuclearization just calling for CVID, declaration and verification, all of which run counter to the spirit of the Singapore summit meeting and talks. The US side never mentioned the issue of establishing a peace regime on the Korean peninsula which is essential for defusing tension and preventing a war. ... The issues the US side insisted on at the talks are all roots of troubles, which the previous [US] administrations also had insisted on to disrupt the dialogue processes, stoke the distrust and increase the danger of war.”

Pyongyang is extremely disappointed and worried by this turn of events. “The results of the talks can’t but be so apprehensive. We thought that the US side would come with a constructive proposal which accords with the spirit of the DPRK-US summit meeting and talks. But expectation and hope of ours were so naive as to be

¹ For background, see: Yossef Bodansky, The Trump-Kim Summit: What's Next?, ISPSW Issue No. 560, July 2018; Yossef Bodansky, The Korean Crisis: Kim’s New Posture, and the US Position, ISPSW Issue No. 509, September 2017; and Yossef Bodansky, After the Era of the Kims?, ISPSW Issue No. 481, April 2017



foolish.” Pyongyang suggests that the US delegation violated the agreements reached in Singapore. The spokesman emphasized that “President Trump himself said he would move towards resolving the DPRK-US relations and the issue of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula in a new way.” The spokesman warned of the potentially dire ramifications of such a development. “If both sides at the working level reneged on the new way agreed at the summit and returned to the old way, the epoch-making Singapore summit would be meaningless, which was held thanks to the determinations and wills of the two top leaders to open a new future for the interests of the two peoples and peace and security of the world. The first DPRK-US high-level talks this time brought us in a dangerous situation where we may be shaken in our unshakable will for denuclearization, rather than consolidating trust between the DPRK and the US.”

The spokesman blamed Washington for the emerging crisis. In particular, the US sought to exploit the commitment of the DPRK. “In the last few months, we displayed maximum patience and watched the US while initiating good-will steps as many as we can. But, it seems that the US misunderstood our goodwill and patience. The US is fatally mistaken if it went to the extent of regarding that the DPRK would be compelled to accept, out of its patience, the demands reflecting its gangster-like mindset.” Washington would do better by paying attention to the comprehensive and phased approach of Pyongyang, the spokesman explained. “A shorter way to denuclearization on the Korean peninsula is to remove deep-rooted mistrust and build up trust between the DPRK and the US. For this, both sides should be bold enough to be free from old ways which had only recorded failures and resolve the problem in a fresh manner which is never bound by the existing ways. A shortcut to [conflict resolution] is also to take a step-by-step approach and follow the principle of simultaneous actions in resolving what is feasible one by one while giving priority to creating trust.”

Pyongyang, the spokesman conceded, is close to losing faith in the US and negotiations process. He warned that “if the US, being captivated in a fidget, tries to force upon us the old ways claimed by the previous administrations, this will get us nowhere.” The spokesman warned of the dire ramifications of the US failing to adopt the North Korean approach and instead attempt to stall the current progress. “Should the headwind begin to blow, it would cause a great disappointment not only to the international society aspiring after global peace and security but also to both the DPRK and the US. If so, this will finally make each side seek for another choice and there is no guarantee that this will not result into yet another tragedy.” Not everything is doomed. Pyongyang still has hope in the personal chemistry created between Kim Jong-Un and Trump. “We still cherish our good faith in President Trump,” the spokesman asserted.

Thus, while both sides agreed to talk again - both Pyongyang and Washington are cognizant there is actually very little to talk about.

Chinese experts concur with the pessimism of their North Korean counterparts. There is good reason to believe Pyongyang’s warnings that “its willingness to denuclearize may falter,” they concluded, because “the US demands” were “rapacious, extremely troubling” and thus unacceptable to any self-respecting sovereign state. They hailed the North Korean “firm, steadfast” resolve to withstand the “gangster-like” demands of the United States.

Three core-issues are at the crux of the US-DPRK crisis:

1. The US insistence on the immediate, concrete and unconditional denuclearization of North Korea while the DPRK insists on symmetrical phased process where sanctions are gradually lifted in advance, and lavish foreign aid provided, so that Kim Jong-Un can justify the ongoing concessions.



2. The US insistence on the denuclearization under a strict verification regime led and dominated by the US (including the removal of the DPRK's nuclear warheads) while the DPRK insists on the participation of, and concrete support from, friendly countries, as well as greater US trust in data provided by North Korea.
3. The US is focusing on the denuclearization of ONLY North Korea, while the DPRK insists on "the complete denuclearization of the entire Korean Peninsula" - a term that appears in the Trump-Kim communique - that includes the removal of US weaponry and troops from South Korea, Japan and adjacent ocean spaces. Although US negotiators have repeatedly stressed that these issues are unacceptable, even inconceivable, for Trump's Washington - Pyongyang would not budge.

Thus, the US has little maneuver room. Indeed, the Trump White House is considering desperate measures to break the deadlock. The steps studied include bringing Kim Jong-Un to New York for a second summit during the UN General Assembly in September in order to highlight the personal friendship and trust between President Trump and Kim Jong-Un. The focus on such personal relations is being reinforced by the fact that Kim Yong-Chol handed Pompeo a personal letter from Kim Jong-Un to President Trump. "Chairman Kim Jong-Un expressed his expectation and conviction that good personal relations forged with President Trump and his sentiments of good faith built towards the latter at the Singapore summit and talks would be further consolidated through the process of future dialogues," explained the North Korean spokesman. Such improving personal relations, the Trump White House will argue, are more important than the seeming crisis and mistrust in the formal talks. At the same time, however, President Trump has announced repeatedly that he is willing to walk away from the negotiations process should they prove futile - and this might be the only viable option for him other than caving in to the demands of Kim Jong-Un.

The US quandary is because the situation in the region has drastically changed since spring 2018. North Korea is increasingly integrated into the regional economic sphere. South Korea is committed to the legitimization of the Kim regime, as well as detente, integration and economic cooperation, virtually at all cost. Hence, America's partners are loath to permit the US to spoil everything by going to war, or even threatening war, should the denuclearization process fail. Indeed, several most senior South Korean politicians and officials privately question the efficacy of maintaining the alliance with the US if it harms, let alone prevents, the reconciliation and rapprochement on the Korean Peninsula.

Moreover, numerous polls (even if of various political movements and hence with discernable taints in precise numbers) point out to a very clear trend in South Korea since early 2018. There is a steadily growing majority of South Koreans who prefer rapprochement and amity, let alone unity, with North Korea over an alliance with the US. This majority has risen significantly since the Trump Administration began to threaten to impose tariffs and demand renegotiation of bilateral economic and trade agreements.

Simply put, official Seoul can safely walk away from the close relations with the US in order to secure the new era of relations with North Korea without the fear of major political repercussions at home. The opposite - that is, reversing or cancelling the rapprochement with North Korea in order to preserve the alliance with the US - will be politically catastrophic to any government or leader in Seoul.

Under such conditions, the likelihood of South Korea and Japan permitting the US to threaten, let alone strike, North Korea from bases on their soil is nonexistent - notwithstanding their formal treaties with the US. Both China and North Korea are cognizant of this reality. Hence, both China and North Korea persevere on their



consistent decades-old regional strategies without any fear of American repercussions. Moreover, official Beijing anticipates a growing role for China and Russia in defusing the crisis. “In efforts towards denuclearization and lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula, China has proposed a ‘dual-track’ approach, urging both Washington and Pyongyang to meet each other halfway. Russia also advocated normalization on the Korean Peninsula and has made efforts with the respective countries to produce a settlement of disputable issues on the peninsula,” explained a Chinese senior official.

Meanwhile, Kim Jong-Un’s Pyongyang is convinced that they are on the right track to further consolidating their power and strengthening the DPRK. Pyongyang is also convinced that there is no reason to deviate from the long-standing tenets of their policies toward Seoul. Forty-year Pyongyang watcher Bradley Martin warned in early July that South Korean and American officials “have it wrong when they imagine that the Kim family regime has changed, fundamentally, to the extent it is no longer bent on ruling over the South.” Despite all the declared commitments to denuclearization and peace, Martin insisted, “the [Kim] regime retains the option of Plan B - another invasion, whenever favorable circumstances might permit it, in case peaceful maneuvering should fail to do the trick.” Russian and Chinese senior officials concur that Pyongyang did not, and will not, abandon its core policies and doctrine.

Indeed, official Pyongyang returns to traditional themes regarding reunification of the Korean Peninsula. On 5 July, the *Rodong Sinmun* published a lead article by Pak Chol-Jun titled “Immortal Program for Independent Reunification”. The article commemorates the 46th anniversary of the publication by Kim Il-Sung of “the three principles of independence, peaceful reunification and great national unity” that still guide Pyongyang’s approach to national reunification. Kim Il-Sung’s key tenet is for the two Koreas to work jointly on their own - free of foreign interference and influence - toward reconciliation and reunification. The Kim Il-Sung declaration “was a great national historic event that dispelled the dark clouds of division and confrontation and gave all the fellow countrymen optimism and hope for national reunification.” Indeed, these principles and guidelines remain “a treasured sword helping the Korean nation settle the issue of national reunification by itself in conformity with its demand and basic interests and a sure guarantee for pressing ahead with the national reunification movement along the orbit of independence in any storms and stress.” Presently, Pak Chol-Jun concludes, Pyongyang and Seoul should ignore the US position and instead jointly focus on “laying a firm foundation for the accomplishment of the cause of national reunification.”

This conviction in the unstoppable ascent of the DPRK is also reflected in the just announced plans for demonstrating the country’s new posture in early September 2018 - the 70th anniversary of the founding of North Korea.

The ideological theme of the celebrations of the anniversary were articulated on 4 July in an Editorial of the *Rodong Sinmun*. “It is the bounden duty and obligation of all our people to most grandly and significantly celebrate the 70th founding anniversary of the DPRK.” The Editorial stressed that “the DPRK is the only country where everything serves the people who are regarded as Heaven and all the policies of the Party and state have been pursued to realize dreams and ideal of the people on the principle of attaching top priority to them.” Although the grandeur of the DPRK is first and foremost the legacy of the founding leaders, the Editorial explains, recent developments - to be attributed to Kim Jong-Un - have markedly accelerated the ascent of the DPRK. “It will be a very significant event to celebrate the 70th birthday of the DPRK, the socialist country which is the greatest patriotic legacy of President Kim Il-Sung and Leader Kim Jong-Il and the eternal cradle for the generations to come. The first half of the year strikingly showed our people’s revolutionary will



to greet the 70th anniversary of the DPRK with high political enthusiasm and proud labor successes. We should push ahead with the general offensive, not slackening the elated spirit even a bit. ... We will surely emerge victorious as there are the wise leadership of the great Party and the army and people with inexhaustible strength enough to flatten even a mountain and empty a sea if the Party wishes.”

Pyongyang is planning an international tour-de-force with Chinese President Xi Jinping and several other world leaders in attendance. Xi Jinping is to be accorded unique honor as the leader of the great power patron and savior of the DPRK - from the revolutionary struggle during the Second World War, through the Korean War, to this very day.

Meanwhile, the US-PRC Trade War has just started. For Beijing, this war is more than an economic issue. “The US trade war with China indicates a hegemonic mentality,” explained Zhang Hong of the *People’s Daily*. “This super power has become arrogant enough to resort to a trade war ... and has [also] hyped up the ‘China threat’.” Indeed, official Beijing promised to take “all necessary countermeasures” to the US trade war - not just tit-for-tat tariffs. “China promised not to fire the first shot, but in order to defend our interests, we are forced to make necessary counterattacks,” explained Chinese senior officials. Thus, the escalating trade war gives Beijing the greatest impetus to harness the region’s other two great economies - Japan and South Korea - away from US influence and into inflicting the maximum damage on the overall strategic-economic posture of the US. The future of the Korean Peninsula will be a key theater.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

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