



Seoul Seizes the Initiative

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Executive Summary

- * Seoul has seized the initiative in consolidating a new regional order embracing Pyongyang while Washington is relegated to the role of an increasingly irrelevant irritant. Moon Jae-In is convinced that he has in Kim Jong-Un a soul-mate who is also committed to fulfilling the vision of inter-Korean rapprochement.
- * Both Beijing and Moscow have committed to encouraging Seoul and Pyongyang to ignore the impasse with Washington over the denuclearization, and instead implement the dramatic breakout in the form of inter-Korean transportation and energy projects and their integration into the Eurasian BRI. Both Beijing and Moscow also vow to shield Seoul and Pyongyang from Washington's inevitable wrath and sanctions.
- * The Northeast Asian railroad community of the six countries of East Asia as proposed by Moon Jae-In can indeed transform the entire region and integrate Kim Jong-Un's DPRK into the family of nations. Left to be seen, though, is how will Washington react to the ensuing marginalization of the US.

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Analysis

Seoul has seized the initiative in consolidating a new regional order embracing Pyongyang while Washington is relegated to the role of an increasingly irrelevant irritant. Both Beijing and Moscow are shielding Seoul and Pyongyang from a possible retribution by Washington.¹

Seoul comprehends the regional dynamics and aspirations, and concluded there is no alternative for a breakout. Hence, President Moon Jae-In decided to undertake such an audacious move. As well, Seoul is ready to shoulder the financial burden of seeing this breakout through. Seoul's fateful decision is the result of sophisticated enticing and prompting by Pyongyang, while demonstrating the growing irrelevance of Washington. Meanwhile, Pyongyang continues to demonstrate knowledge how to appeal to Seoul and reinforce Moon's commitment. Both Beijing and Moscow cheer Moon's initiative and will shield both Seoul and Pyongyang from Washington's failed attempts to stir the dynamics in its favor.

Although Pyongyang launched its initiative to win over President Moon Jae-In's Seoul back in mid-June, the region-wide disappointment with Trump's Washington did not burst into the open until early August.

Having failed to move the US into some flexibility, and recognizing the long-held and -declared positions of the DPRK, Pyongyang publicly expressed its displeasure and disappointment on 9 August. The entire North Korean media – in both Korean and foreign languages – carried a lengthy and terse “Press Statement of Spokesperson for DPRK Foreign Ministry” accusing the US of reneging on the commitments and understanding reached in Singapore. “At the first historic DPRK-US summit meeting and talks, the top leaders committed to work together toward putting an end to the extremely hostile relations through confidence building and establishing new DPRK-US relations in favor of the requirements and interests of the peoples of two countries and to make active contribution to peace, security, and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and over the world.”

The statement stressed that while the DPRK started unilateral acts of denuclearization – the US did not undertake reciprocal measures either in the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, or in lifting some of the sanctions. Instead, the US only kept demanding that the DPRK undertake additional unilateral measures. Even when North Korean leaders protested the lack of reciprocity, “the US insisted on its unilateral demand of ‘denuclearization first’ at the first DPRK-US high-level talks held in Pyongyang in early July.” Nevertheless, the DPRK fulfilled its promise to repatriate US POW/MIA remains. Alas, the US and its allies only kept imposing additional sanctions on the DPRK and its friends. Worse, the US is now pressuring friendly countries “not to send high-level delegations to the celebrations of the 70th founding anniversary of the DPRK.” This is a direct and unpardonable insult to the entire Kim dynasty – both the dead and the living.

Pyongyang stresses that the US policy of pressure is an exercise in futility. “Expecting any result, while insulting the dialogue partner and throwing cold water over our sincere efforts for building confidence which can be seen as a precondition for implementing the DPRK-US joint statement, is indeed a foolish act that amounts to waiting to see a boiled egg hatch out.” The statement warned of potentially far reaching and adverse consequences of the US policy. “As long as the US denies even the basic decorum for its dialogue partner and clings to the outdated acting script which the previous administrations have all tried and failed,

¹ For background, see: Yossef Bodansky, *After the Pyongyang Talks*, ISPSW Issue No. 561, July 2018; 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



one cannot expect any progress in the implementation of the DPRK-US joint statement including the denuclearization, and furthermore, there is no guarantee that the hard-won atmosphere of stability on the Korean Peninsula will continue." Still, Pyongyang did not close the door completely. "We remain unchanged in our will to uphold the intentions of the top leaders of the DPRK and the US and to build trust and implement in good faith the DPRK-US joint statement step by step. The US should, even at this belated time, respond to our sincere efforts in a corresponding manner."

By mid-August, Chinese and South Korean senior officials defined the relations between Pyongyang and Washington over the nuclear talks as "a standoff" that could quickly erupt. Pompeo's efforts to revive the talks on US terms were going nowhere. The Chinese and South Korean senior officials concurred that the US and the DPRK were "deadlocked over details" of the denuclearization time-line, the status of the DPRK's ballistic missile and nuclear programs, as well as the North Korean intentions regarding the future of their nuclear arsenal.

Still Pompeo keeps trying to set a summit meeting in Pyongyang for late August. Washington informed both Seoul and Pyongyang that "Sanctions will remain in full effect should North Korea fail to denuclearize" in accordance with American terms and diktats. Pyongyang is not cooperating and did not even reveal whether Kim Jong-Un would meet Pompeo this time. Trump's Washington is desperate to have this summit and toward this end coerced Moon to postpone his planned visit to Pyongyang – visit that would benefit North Korea greatly – until the second half of September.

In response, on 17 August, Pyongyang formally accused Washington of "impeding inter-Korean cooperation" in pursuit of its own narrow interests. The DPRK labeled the US as "the root cause of evil" oppressing the national sovereignty of all Koreans throughout the peninsula. "While we [North Koreans] are taking preemptive measures to achieve a complete denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, the United States is repeatedly making unilateral demands, instead of taking measures comparable to ours," said a communiqué of the North Korea's Pan-Korean Alliance for Reunification. "The core spirit of the Panmunjom declaration is national sovereignty," the communiqué proclaimed. "It is simply not possible for the declaration, cooperation with foreign states, and American occupation to exist at the same time."

Kim Jong-Un joined the criticism of the new sanctions and threat. During an inspection visit to the construction site of the Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist area, Kim Jong-Un attributed recent economic and development setbacks to "an acute standoff with hostile forces trying to stifle the Korean people through brigandish sanctions and blockade" that would be defeated by "a do-or-die struggle to defend the prestige of the party and a worthwhile struggle for creating the happiness of the people." Kim Jong-Un vowed the ultimate "surpassing the world's advanced level at such a difficult time as now" due to "the strength of the single-minded unity of the party, army and people [that] will be displayed to the whole world once again" through major development programs.

Ultimately, the US effort to redirect the contacts with the DPRK to focusing on US priorities and one-sided denuclearization will not work. Washington fails to comprehend the emotional and psychological commitment of Moon and his inner-circle. Moon remains committed to the original vision of his revered mentor – the late President Roh Moo-Hyun. For Moon, as for Roh a decade ago, the improvement of inter-Korean relations, both economic and political, has a far higher priority than denuclearization. And Moon will not let the US reverse these priorities and stifle the inter-Korean rapprochement the way the US did in 2007, causing the despaired Roh to commit suicide.



Moon is convinced that he has in Kim Jong-Un a soul-mate who is as committed to fulfilling the vision of inter-Korean rapprochement of his late father Kim Jong-Il as Moon is committed to realizing the vision of Roh. The conviction of Moon was dramatically reinforced in mid-June as a result of a bold gesture by North Korean military negotiators. Back in 2007, while in Pyongyang, President Roh Moo-Hyun planted a tree in a gesture of peace and reconciliation. He did so together with Kim Jong-Il. On 14 June 2018, during the General-level inter-Korean military talks at Panmunjom's Unification House, Lieutenant General Ahn Ik-San (the head of the North Korean delegation) presented his Southern counterpart a photograph of the tree Roh planted and noted that it was "alive and well." The 16 August round of military talks announced the completion of the inter-Korean military communication lines and that communications between the two militaries were fully restored in accordance with the agreement reached back on 14 June. During the talks, the North Koreans reminded of the tree again and expressed hope that Moon and Kim Jong-Un will be able to plant another tree during the forthcoming summit in Pyongyang. Moon expressed his enthusiasm.

On 16 August, Moon Jae-In delivered a major speech during a ceremony in central Seoul marking Korea's independence from the Japanese colonial rule of 1910-1945. Moon asserted that inter-Korean reconciliation not only takes precedence over the US-DPRK negotiations, but actually facilitates them. "Advancing inter-Korean relations is not a secondary effect from achieving progress in North Korea-US relations. Rather, it is advancement in inter-Korean relations that provides the energy promoting the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," Moon stated, using a term used by Kim Jong-Un. "This is borne out by our historical experience: when inter-Korean relations were good in the past, the North Korean nuclear threat diminished and we were able to achieve a denuclearization agreement." Moon emphasized that the real key to stability and end of hostilities are inter-Korean lasting peace and economic cooperation. "Even if political reunification remains far away, true 'liberation' for us comes through establishing peace between South and North, freely coming and going and estimating a single economic community." For Moon, the future lies in the "dream of a peace economy and an economic community." Moon promised that once in Pyongyang he "will help build a relationship based on deeper trust between the two Koreas and simultaneously lead efforts to promote dialogue on denuclearization between North Korea and the United States." Moon made his priorities clear.

In this context, Seoul is also pushing hard the revival of joint projects agreed upon during President Roh Moo-Hyun's visit to Pyongyang in 2007. For example, Kim Young-Choon, the Minister of Oceans and Fisheries, proposed the designation of "a joint fishing zone on the western sea border" between the North and the South as a first step toward creating the "maritime peace zone" originally envisioned by Roh Moo-Hyun and revived by Moon Jae-In. "Designating the NLL as a joint fishing zone between the two Koreas is a different matter from making a maritime peace zone," Kim Young-Choon explained, and both Koreas can "hold talks on the maritime peace zone in the future."

In mid-August, Moon announced a target of "holding a groundbreaking ceremony within the year" for the myriad of bilateral and regional "railway and road cooperation projects." He is adamant on having irreversible facts on the ground within less than a year. Moon noted that Item One of the Panmunjom Declaration commits both Koreas to "reconnect the blood relations of the people and bring forward the future of co-prosperity" that, in Moon's opinion, will be best implemented with the railway and road cooperation as a key foundation. Moon let it be known that Seoul would not let this breakout be "stymied by the UN and US's North Korea sanctions."



The crux of Moon's vision for the future is the creation of "a Northeast Asian railroad community" comprised of "the six countries of East Asia" – South Korea, North Korea, China, Japan, Russia and Mongolia – as well the US (as a perfunctory mentioning). "This community will extend our [both Koreas'] economic horizon into the lands to the north and will become the principal artery of coexistence and co-prosperity in Northeast Asia. This will lead to an energy community and economic community in East Asia and will be the starting point for a multilateral peace and security system in Northeast Asia," Moon explained. He emphasized that the re-connecting of railroads between the two Koreas will facilitate the movement of goods and people "as far as into the European continent" – thus affecting global economy. Moon is also convinced that these immense undertakings would bring to South Korean companies "huge progress in addition to the numerous jobs created." Seoul expects the "Northeast Asian railroad community" to be fully integrated into the Chinese BRI and the Russian Trans-Siberian arteries. Indeed, South Korean experts have already presented concrete plans and studies covering these issues. "It is the goal to hold groundbreaking ceremonies within this year for the reconnection of railroads and roads as agreed to in the Panmunjom Declaration. The reconnection of railroads and roads is the beginning of mutual prosperity on the Korean Peninsula," Moon declared.

Beijing is enthusiastic about the latest developments on the Korean Peninsula, particularly the prospects of the September Kim-Moon summit in Pyongyang. The authoritative Xinhua editorial of 13 August declared that the anticipated agreement between the two leaders will be "a new occasion" to further "the easing of tensions on the Korean Peninsula" to the benefit of all regional countries. "Such an achievement between South and North [Korea] is worth welcoming," Xinhua stated. "If the Pyongyang summit is realized, the trend of dialogue between the two Koreas will continue, and each side will show their will to resolve issues through dialogue."

However, Beijing is also apprehensive about the extent of the challenges ahead and particularly the extent of US opposition. "The biggest challenge to the infrastructure project is the US, which wants to maintain economic sanctions on Pyongyang to force the country to give up its nuclear weapons," Hu Weijia wrote in *The Global Times*. "We don't think Seoul can persuade Washington to change its strategy on North Korea. Although Moon has invited Washington to join the railway project by creating a Northeast Asian railroad community with six countries including the US, Washington is unlikely to unconditionally accept the olive branch Moon has extended." Hu Weijia observed that China and Russia support the proposal to link railway networks in Northeast Asia via North Korea. "Beijing is a staunch supporter of economic integration, but whether South Korea can push forward its railway initiative depends on Seoul's courage and sincerity. This can be taken as the epitome of today's situation in Korean Peninsula. The US has a major stake in resolving the Korean Peninsula issue, but that issue can hardly be resolved without a reduction or withdrawal of US troops from South Korea. Whether South Korea can achieve peace and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula depends on Seoul's courage and sincerity," Hu Weijia concluded.

Also in mid-August, Beijing advanced the preparations for the major visit to Pyongyang by President Xi Jinping. On 9 September, he will be Kim Jong-Un's guest of honor in the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of North Korea. Beijing plans for the upcoming visit by Xi Jinping to Pyongyang to serve as a clear endorsement of the bilateral inter-Korean rapprochement as pushed by Kim Jong-Un and Moon Jae-In.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin is also encouraging Seoul and Pyongyang to persevere with their bilateral rapprochement. The main venue was an exchange of messages between President Vladimir Putin and "Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un" that included a Russian invitation for an urgent summit meeting with Putin.



This latest invitation comes on top an earlier invitation by Putin to the annual economic forum to be held in Vladivostok in September. At the time, Pyongyang committed to holding a summit before the end of 2018.

On 15 August, Kim Jong-Un sent a message to Putin on the occasion of the 73rd anniversary of the liberation of Korea by the Soviet Armed Forces and Korean communist fighters. The message “noted that the valuable tradition that the peoples of the two countries struggled shoulder to shoulder against the common enemy in the arduous anti-Japanese war is the strong roots of the DPRK-Russia friendly relations and serves as a driving force to continuously develop the bilateral relations as required by a new era.” Kim Jong-Un “sincerely wished [Putin] greater success in his responsible work for building powerful Russia.”

The same day, Putin sent “Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un” a congratulatory message. “Russia appreciates that the DPRK remembers in humble reverence the soldiers of the Red Army who fought shoulder to shoulder with the Korean patriots for freedom and independence of Korea,” Putin wrote. He then focused on the current situation and the challenges ahead. Moscow intends to remain a key player in the regional dynamics and, toward this end, Putin expects soon a visit by Kim Jong-Un to discuss the implementation of the regional projects Putin agreed with Moon during their 23 June meeting in Moscow. “I am satisfied with the fact that the relations between our two states have friendly and constructive characters. I am convinced that we will continue to develop reciprocal cooperation including the realization of the tripartite project involving Russia, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea through joint efforts. I affirm that I am ready to meet you at an early date to discuss urgent issues of bilateral relations and important matters of the region,” Putin wrote. On 17 August, the Kremlin confirmed that Kim Jong-Un committed to a summit in the very near future.

Thus, both Beijing and Moscow have committed to encouraging Seoul and Pyongyang to ignore the impasse with Washington over denuclearization, and instead implement the dramatic breakout in the form of inter-Korean transportation and energy projects and their integration into the Eurasian BRI. Both Beijing and Moscow also vow to shield Seoul and Pyongyang from Washington’s inevitable wrath and sanctions. The Northeast Asian railroad community of the six countries of East Asia as proposed by Moon Jae-In can indeed transform the entire region and integrate Kim Jong-Un’s DPRK into the family of nations. Left to be seen, though, is how will Washington react to the ensuing marginalization of the US.

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



About the Author of this Issue

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He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.

