

Joint ROK-Japan Workshop

From Peace on Korean Peninsula to North East Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone

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Diplomacy in deadlock

One year after the start of dialogue, the peace process on the Korean peninsula has reached stalemate. The summit meeting in Hanoi in February 2019 revealed the fundamental differences between Washington and Pyongyang concerning the process of solving their decades-long conflict. The leaders’ meeting at the inter-Korean border in June 2019 has shown their re-commitment to working level negotiations; the probability of a substantial future agreement is still ambiguous.

The US administration insists on a “big deal”, a grand bargain of North Korea’s disclosure and dismantlement of all its nuclear facilities and WMD capabilities in return for lifting sanctions. The regime in Pyongyang, however, has no interest in such a transformational deal. It insists on a step-by-step process that incorporates several smaller and reciprocal agreements. Considering regional security dynamics, reasons for North Korea’s nuclear weapons pursuit, and taking a look at its past and present negotiating behavior, insistence on a one-deal solution to the conflict is ill-advised.

From North Korea’s perspective, nuclear weapons are ultimate weapons, politically as well as militarily. Irrespective of economic hardships or spirals of tensions, Pyongyang views its possession of a viable, indigenous nuclear deterrent as the sole guarantor of its independence and sovereignty, territorial integrity and regime security. The regime does not trust its neighboring greater powers, China and Russia, to come to its rescue in the case of war; its Juche ideology reveals the deep-seated mistrust and political psychology of self-reliance. Furthermore, as the state of war on the Korean peninsula since 1950 remains unchanged, US-ROK alliance activities and deployment of assets in the theater confirm the regime’s perceptions of hostile encirclement and fears of looming intervention. Recent international examples (e.g. Libya, Iraq) have taught Pyongyang to view US persuasion attempts for unilateral disarmament with great skepticism; lessons from its own negotiations with Washington have left North Korea with the impression of tough talk and no interest (or ability) to fulfill promises. Against this background, (unilateral) denuclearization and disarmament cannot be jump-started, but require an arduous process and the willingness to compromise and commit over the long term. Political steps that change the political status quo, mitigate threat perceptions and build normalized bilateral relations are crucial in such a process.

Pyongyang's behavior, such as its willingness to enter dialogue with Washington and Seoul, is not a mere result of its fear of invasion or the effectiveness of sanctions. The regime showed interest in inter-Korean talks only after it had tested a nuclear explosive device (in September 2017) and intercontinental ballistic missiles (in July and November 2017). Irrespective of technological precision and survivability, North Korea has attained nuclear deterrence capabilities due to technological advancements and inherent strategic ambiguity. This self-perception has allowed it to answer Seoul's offers for dialogue as well as to announce unilateral moratoria on testing nuclear devices and long-range missiles. In the multi-dimensional conflict on the Korean peninsula, international sanctions and isolation play a role in the entanglement of diplomacy and confrontation. Sanctions also play a role in Pyongyang's domestic narratives referring to the necessity to retain strategic assets for protection and to balance economic vulnerabilities with political-military prowess. North Korea has experienced sanctions to an increasing degree over the past six decades; it is thereby practiced in circumvention and in living in political, military and economic states of emergency.

Inter-Korean détente on hold

Due to the two-track approach to diplomacy with North Korea, inter-Korean dialogue is linked with US-North Korean talks. The no-deal summit of Hanoi and the consequent stalemate between Pyongyang and Washington have therefore resulted in an inter-Korean hiatus. Additionally, the North Korean regime has shown its discontent with this coupling and its disappointment regarding the Moon administration's efforts to move inter-Korean rapprochement forward. The personal convictions and policy priorities of President Moon Jae-in, most notably his emphasis on peace-building and delay of rapid reunification as pronounced in his Berlin speech July 2017, have laid the groundwork for an end to war rhetoric and diminished risks of war. Over the course of 2018, inter-Korean dialogue has, among other things, resulted in political détente and military confidence building measures on the peninsula. Many promises made between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong Un, however, remain unfulfilled; among them, inter-Korean economic projects as well as US willingness to accommodate North Korea's security concerns. Seoul's efforts to mediate between Pyongyang and Washington have revealed its limits to this role. Without changes to US attitude to accept a peace and denuclearization process including reciprocal and small interim steps, dialogue with North Korea as a whole is on hold.

The current South Korea government, despite its proclaimed intentions to do so, is viewed as incapable of brokering a compromise and of making changes in *Realpolitik* on the peninsula. Pyongyang has increased its criticism of Seoul's empty promises and dependence on Washington; it has lost its trust in President Moon's commitment to inter-Korean cooperation and peace. It is therefore imperative to rebuild trust and commitment between both Korean states, to resume cooperation in order to resolve the fundamental problems underlying tensions in the region. Fundamental problems point to the state of war on the peninsula, the unchanged claim of each Korean state to be the sole representative of a Korean nation, as well as the tendency to (military) block-building in Northeast Asia. A declared end of the Korean War, an inter-Korean and legally binding basic agreement, as well as inter-regional dialogue and cooperation are interim steps to lasting peace regime on the peninsula. Such mutual *de jure* recognition and institutionalized forms of cooperation and joint crisis management are urgently needed. In order to start this arduous process and resume dialogue with Pyongyang, Seoul needs to prove its commitment to inter-

Korean *détente* and emancipation from Washington's policy priorities. Pursuing economic projects such as re-opening the Kaesong Industrial Complex are examples of South Korea fulfilling inter-Korean commitments.

Outlook

Change within North Korea cannot be actively promoted nor expected. The decades-old state of war on the peninsula serves as the source of legitimacy for armament and the military's strict control of the country. Without changing the political fundamentals to the deep-seated conflict, no change within North Korea, be it its foreign policy behavior, arms policies or domestic policies, will occur. It should thereby be the utmost priority to declare the end of the Korean War and start a process of reconciliation and recognition to allow for sustainable peaceful coexistence and normalized interactions between former foes. Political steps are needed to encompass a change of security dynamics and to move towards trust as well as a negotiated solution to the conflict.

Korean reunification is an important topic in Korea, but a greatly complicated issue in itself. Reunification cannot be actively promoted nor expected; active reunification strategies by either Korean state appear in fact as regime change strategies and do not ameliorate the situation. Declaring to pursue lasting peace first and leaving doors open for reunification later are part of the only viable pathway for continued inter-Korean *détente*. Future generations, ideally having experienced some decades of peace and stability, will decide whether to pursue reunification, in whatever form or extent. For now, President Moon Jae-in's call for prioritizing reconciliation, cooperation and peace with the North is laudable and the only viable approach to a negotiated solution.