

## THE ART OF THE SUMMIT DEAL

Talk at RECNA Moscow May 31, 2018

Leon V. Sigal

Director, Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project  
Social Science Research Council, New York

- North Korea has tested a thermonuclear warhead but it may need another test or two to validate its performance. It has test-launched mobile intermediate-range missiles and ICBMs to deliver them but has yet to perfect a reentry vehicle, its guidance, or longer-range solid-fuel missiles. It is churning out plutonium and highly enriched uranium at a rate of five or six bombs' worth a year.
- “North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the United States,” President-elect Donald Trump tweeted a day after Kim Jong Un’s New Year’s Day speech last year. “It won’t happen.”
- By stopping nuclear and missile testing just short of having a proven thermonuclear weapon and an ICBM to deliver it to all of the United States, Kim Jong Un has made it possible for President Trump to achieve his wish – but only if dialogue continues and the U.S. is prepared to negotiate in earnest and live up to its commitments.
- Washington believes that the pressure of sanctions and the threat of war brought Kim to the negotiating table. Yet Pyongyang signaled the current changes in policy more than three years ago. Demanding that Pyongyang suspend nuclear tests without getting anything in return had only delayed diplomatic give-and-take for five years, enabling it to add to its nuclear capacity and boost its bargaining leverage in the meantime. Trump, by dropping those preconditions, opened the way to the summit.
- Kim may be willing to commit to denuclearize, Trump’s ultimate goal, but in return for a commitment to denuclearize Kim will want Trump to pledge to end enmity. These reciprocal commitments could form the basis of a summit declaration. Trump has spoken in favor of a peace treaty and normalization of relations, key elements of reconciliation.
- An end to U.S. enmity has been the Kims’ aim for thirty years. Throughout the Cold War, Kim Jong Un’s grandfather, Kim Il Sung, had played China off against the Soviet Union to maintain his freedom of maneuver. In 1988, anticipating the Soviet Union’s collapse, he reached out to reconcile with the United States, South Korea and Japan in order to avoid overdependence on China. The North need has become greater as China’s power grew.
- From Pyongyang’s vantage point, that aim was the basis of the 1994 Agreed Framework, which committed Washington to “move toward full normalization of political and economic relations,” or, in plain English, to end enmity. That was also the essence of the September 2005 Six Party Joint Statement which bound Washington and Pyongyang to

“respect each other’s sovereignty, exist peacefully together, and take steps to normalize their relations subject to their respective bilateral policies” as well as to “negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.”

- For Washington, the point of these agreements was the suspension of Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs. For nearly a decade under the Agreed Framework, when it had no nuclear weapons, the North shuttered production of fissile material and stopped test-launches of medium and longer-range missiles. It did so again from 2007 to 2009. Both agreements collapsed, however, when Washington did little to implement its commitment to reconcile and Pyongyang reneged on denuclearization.
- Trump’s willingness to hold a summit meeting with Kim Jong Un did not come as a complete surprise to the North Koreans. They were aware of his repeated expression of interest in negotiations during the presidential campaign. They noted his willingness to go ahead with token flood relief – the first U.S. humanitarian aid in five years – which President Obama had authorized on his last full day in office. They welcomed Trump’s receptivity to open talks in the New York channel in March. They did not miss his May 1 interview with *Bloomberg News* when, after saying that “under the right circumstances I would meet with [Kim],” Trump was remarkably respectful: “If it would be appropriate for me to meet with him, I would absolutely. I would be honored to do it.” And they appreciated his dropping preconditions for talks.
- Pyongyang saw Trump’s ominous tweets as weapons of mass distraction. As KCNA said on September 26 as the crisis intensified, “U.S. imperialist warmongers are bluffing.”
- Although Washington and Pyongyang repeatedly issued deterrent threats, the drumbeat of war was mostly bluster. Briefings by the Joint Chiefs of Staff made clear that preventive war would be catastrophic, as JCS Chairman Joseph Dunford and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said repeatedly. In Mattis’ words, it would be “more serious in terms of human suffering than anything we have seen since 1953.” That is the generals’ way of saying, Don’t go there.
- War talk may be catnip – or click bait – to the news media, as Trump knows, but if the talk had any purpose beyond drawing attention to himself or arousing his political base, it was to intimidate Pyongyang or stampede Beijing into putting more pressure on in the mistaken belief that China is the key to dealing with North Korea. If so, it failed.
- Why? As Beijing well understands, on four occasions when China and the United States cooperated in the U.N. Security to impose tougher sanctions – in 2006, 2009, 2013, and this fall, North Korea responded by conducting nuclear tests in an effort to drive them apart.
- Washington’s preoccupation with getting Beijing to impose tougher sanctions overlooks the fact that it is North Korea, not China that the U.S. needs to persuade. Pyongyang’s desire to end enmity could yield Washington much greater leverage than further sanctions.

That is the significance of the cancellation of B-52 flights by the U.S. and ROK military and Trump's rejection of the Libya model pushed by Bolton.

- While Washington does not want a prolonged negotiation, Trump has backed away from his demand for rapid denuclearization: "It would certainly be better if it were all in one," he said on May 22. "Does it have to be? I don't think I want to totally commit myself." He noted, "There are certain conditions that we want, and I think we'll get those conditions. And if we don't, we don't have the meeting. ...If it doesn't happen, maybe it will happen later." Secretary of State Pompeo also hinted at a willingness to reciprocate if the North took "credible steps."
- Both sides held out the prospect that a summit could still be held. In calling off the June 12 date Trump wrote Kim, "I feel it is inappropriate, **at this time**, to have this long-planned meeting," adding that "**ultimately, it is only that dialogue that matters.**" The North held out the prospect of a summit. Speaking on Kim Jong Un's authorization, First Vice Minister Kim Gye Gwan affirmed that "we remain unchanged in our goal and ... we have the intent to sit with the U.S. side to solve problem regardless of ways at any time."
- That past is prologue. Now is the time for secret negotiations, perhaps brokered by Seoul, to pin down credible steps by both sides. U.S. steps to end enmity and normalize relations is in the works could help to induce the North to suspend production of fissile material. If the North were to disclose the location of its suspect enrichment facility, that would allow its shutdown to be monitored remotely, but delaying suspension to negotiate detailed verification would allow time for more Pu and HEU to be produced and more missiles to be fielded in the interim.
- In return, the U.S. could offer diplomatic normalization, relax Trading with the Enemy Act sanctions imposed before the nuclear issue arose for yet a third time and have South Korea resume energy assistance it unilaterally halted in 2008.
- Such a standstill agreement would give President Trump the success he wants. If he demands too much, however, he could torpedo the summit, an outcome he would prefer to avoid.
- A starting point for verification would be for the North to declare how much Pu and HEU it has produced and how many nuclear weapons it has. That declaration would be subject to subsequent verification. In turn, that will require further steps to end enmity, including the start of a peace process in Korea, a commitment to diplomatic recognition starting with an exchange of liaison offices, energy aid, and reciprocal inspections in South Korea.
- The chances of persuading North Korea to go beyond another temporary suspension to dismantle its nuclear and missile programs are slim without movement by Washington and Seoul political and economic normalization, a peace agreement or treaty for a formal end to the Korean War, and negotiate regional security arrangements, among them a nuclear-weapon-free zone that would provide a multilateral legal framework for denuclearization or ultimately an alliance with Washington.<sup>1</sup>

- The peace process can begin with a peace declaration by the U.S., South and North Korea. To replace the Military Armistice Commission, the U.S., North and South Korea could establish a “peace mechanism,” a joint military committee to negotiate confidence-building measures in the West Sea like a joint fishing area, a shipping lane for North Korean vessels, and mutual reduction of artillery nearby, as well as other measures to avert deadly clashes. The resolution of border disputes and further thinning out of forces along the DMZ could open the way to a formal agreement or treaty under U.N. auspices to end the Korean War. China might be a signatory, as well as Russia and Japan as guarantors.
- Whether Kim may be willing to disarm and what he will want in return is mere speculation. Concrete proposals for reciprocal steps and diplomatic give-and-take is the only way to find out.
- Dismantling production facilities and disarming will take several years. So will convincing steps toward reconciliation. Only then will we learn whether Kim is willing to give up his weapons.
- If negotiations fail to stop North Korean arming, the U.S. and its allies can continue to rely on deterrence. Yet some steps each side takes to bolster deterrence raise the risk of deadly conflict, as the March 2010 sinking of the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* in retaliation for the South’s shooting up of a North Korean naval vessel the previous November and the subsequent exchange of artillery fire in the West Sea show. So even then, we will need to complement deterrence with diplomatic engagement to reduce the risk of war, just as it took the Cuban missile crisis to get the United States and the Soviet Union to negotiate in earnest.

---

<sup>1</sup> A version of such a comprehensive settlement is sketched out in detail at <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/general-roadmap-and-work-plan-for-nuclear-diplomacy-with-north-korea/>