

**THE 2018-2019 SUMMITRY PROCESS AND PROSPECTS FOR
DENUCLEARIZATION OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA**

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Summary

With dialogue on the Korean peninsula stagnating and the United States preoccupied with the upcoming presidential election later this year, any major progress towards resolving the crisis in the region is unlikely over the next few months. In such a situation, the guiding principle is “do no harm” – in other words, the priority should be to avoid any escalation that would pose additional obstacles for new active diplomatic efforts. In this context, with regard to a future diplomatic re-opening on the Korean peninsula, a multilateral approach appears to be the most promising as it can make the negotiating process more flexible and the potential progress more sustainable. One of the possible dialogue formats is P3+3, involving three permanent Security Council members (China, Russia, and the United States) and three regional powers (the DPRK, ROK, and Japan). Of the latter trio, Tokyo has yet to prove its relevance for this format and its readiness to play a positive role in the negotiating process.

Key takeaways from the 2018-2019 Summitry Process

First, the diplomatic efforts undertaken in 2018 and 2019 have demonstrated that engagement is an effective means of reducing tensions on the Korean peninsula and making progress towards denuclearization. The DPRK moratorium on nuclear tests and ICBM launches, as well as the closure of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site, have served to limit the development of North Korea's nuclear and missile capability. At the US-DPRK summit in Hanoi, the two delegations also discussed dismantlement of all the facilities at the Yongbyong Nuclear Research Center. Had such an agreement been reached and implemented, Pyongyang would have been forced to freeze its thermonuclear weapons program, because of the end of its tritium production. It would also have substantially reduced its production of weapons-usable fissile materials and completely ceased the production of plutonium.

Second, the 2018-2019 dialogue on the Korean Peninsula has also demonstrated that engagement of other countries besides the United States and the DPRK helps to make that dialogue more productive. In that context, let us recall that, despite the initial opposition of Pyongyang, the issue of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was eventually included on the agenda of the talks between the North and the South. This was reflected in the joint declaration made after the September 2018 summit in Pyongyang.¹ Seoul has played an important role in Pyongyang-Washington contacts. Also, despite numerous differences on other issues, there have been fairly regular interactions on the Korean issue between Russia and the United States in recent months, including mutual visits to Moscow and Washington. That is especially important in view of the regular diplomatic contacts between Russia and the DPRK, as well as the somewhat less systemic exchanges between the Russian and DPRK military. The same can be said of contacts between the United States and China. It would be fair to conclude that the DPRK's recent policy of avoiding any escalation in the region can be attributed in part to Pyongyang's dialogue with Moscow and Beijing in bilateral and trilateral formats, as well as Russian and Chinese initiatives for the Korean peninsula.

Third, there is a widely held view in some capitals and offices that Pyongyang never abides by its commitments. Nevertheless, the DPRK has abided by its unilateral moratorium on nuclear tests and ICBM launches for almost two years now.

Where and how we can go from here?

Not everyone may be happy with the idea of adjusting their plans to the US electoral cycles. Nevertheless, that is what probably should be done in the context of the Korean peninsula. Pyongyang is unlikely to agree to any new arrangements with less than nine months remaining until the next US presidential election – especially since the DPRK views the continuity of US foreign policy (or lack thereof) as the main challenge facing any deals with Washington. That is why, in the short term, the central task should be escalation avoidance and damage control. In other words, for the rest of this year, all the parties involved should try not to create any fresh obstacles

¹ Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018, September 19, 2018, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/09/103_255848.html .

to future dialogue on the Korean peninsula, and “do no harm” should be adopted as the main principle.

Regular dialogue is unlikely to resume before the first half of 2021, but once it does, a multilateral format appears to be the most promising. There have been several precedents of Washington withdrawing from nuclear arrangements in recent months, so the bilateral formats that were used more often in the past may no longer be suitable. There are signs that over the past two years, Pyongyang has worked hard to figure out how to ensure the sustainability of any new deal if and when it is reached. During some contacts, North Korean diplomats referred to the so-called nuclear deal with Iran (known as the JCPOA) and were trying to understand how multinational negotiations can make arrangements more sustainable. The irony for the Trump administration in this context is that keeping the JCPOA alive could help the prospects of a deal on the Korean Peninsula.

Should the parties choose to pursue a multinational dialogue, South Korea, China and Russia, if they become involved in the negotiations, would “enrich” the talks with Pyongyang, each in its own way. And, if Tokyo is ready to play a positive role at the talks, we could return to the six-party format that was used in 2003-2008. If some of the capitals are allergic to the term “Six-Party Talks”, the name could be changed to “P3+3” in reference to the participation of three permanent UN Security Council members and the three Northeast Asian states. The United States and the DPRK would play the leading role in any such talks, and some issues could be discussed in bilateral, trilateral, or other formats as appropriate.

A successful outcome of the negotiating process would require a fundamental review of the parties’ positions, including their willingness to accept major compromises. What is on the table is Pyongyang’s potential willingness to relinquish its nuclear capability, which it has worked hard to achieve for over four decades, and is seen as a guarantee of the existing North Korean system’s survival. The other parties involved in the talks should be prepared to pay a high price, figuratively speaking, for a denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. It will take a strong political will to reach compromise-based solutions and to defend those solutions in domestic political arenas.

It is worth emphasizing that the progress achieved in the region over the past two years was essentially based on the concept of “security steps in return for reciprocal security steps”. That should form the basis of any future steps towards denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. The past record suggests that an approach based on “security steps in return for economic steps” is not sustainable and fails to address the fundamental problems that exist in the region. Pyongyang did not initiate its nuclear program for the sake of economic advantage; it was driven primarily by security concerns. In recent months, DPRK representatives have repeatedly stressed the importance of the US and South Korea suspending major joint military drills on the Korean peninsula.

Economic issues should not be the central element of any future deal – but they should follow security steps and create a favorable climate for improving relations. The parties should also be prepared for a phased easing of sanctions in response to concrete steps by the DPRK. The lack of dynamics in that area (or any signs that such dynamics are even possible) was one of the greatest obstacles to further progress

during 2018-2019. The earliest areas of sanctions relief should include humanitarian cooperation with the DPRK and the use of DPRK labor in foreign countries. The utility of using North Korean labor as leverage to hold back the development of the DPRK nuclear and missile program is greatly exaggerated. For example, sometimes it is claimed in some capitals that the DPRK budget earns up to 8 billion dollars per year from North Korean labor working abroad – but for that assessment to be accurate, over one fourth of the entire DPRK adult population would have to work regularly in other countries. More broadly, we should recognize that sanctions have failed to achieve the key goal of preventing Pyongyang from acquiring nuclear capability.

As a first step, all state parties to future talks should reiterate that denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is the long-term goal. The first practical goal is to cap the DPRK nuclear and missile capability. The expectations of the parties involved should be realistic; there is no point expecting steps that no country would ever contemplate without first suffering a heavy military defeat. Realistic steps might include maintaining a moratorium on ICBM launches and nuclear tests, as well as verifiable restrictions on the production of nuclear material. We should also think about further DPRK steps towards signing the CTBT, which would seem a logical continuation of Pyongyang's moratorium on nuclear tests. But the key principles for any future talks should be a step-by-step approach and reciprocity.

To build trust, it is important to achieve tangible practical results, preferably within a reasonable time frame after the talks commence. Such early arrangements would also allow each party to determine how serious its counterparts are about reaching a fair deal.

Other measures that could be agreed at the early stages of the talks might include joint steps in such areas as risk reduction, capacity building programs, and dialogue on verification, including IAEA safeguards. We already have some fairly successful past experience of various discussions on the topic of safeguards that involved IAEA experts, including events supported by the Australian Safeguards and Non-Proliferation Office (ASNO).

Even though the multilateral dialogue that the present author advocates is unlikely to commence before 2021, we should without delay begin preparations for it and lay the ground for its initiation. The expert community and think tanks can make major contributions in the form of creative ideas, out-of-the-box thinking, and new dialogue channels that are currently in such a short supply to engage all interested parties in informal discussions on the format and details of possible future negotiations.