



A WAY OUT FROM THE US-DPRK DEADLOCK:

TOWARD NORTH KOREA'S DENUCLEARIZATION

Han Yong-sup

This Issue Brief focuses on three points essential to the resumption of denuclearization talks. First, this paper will analyze North Korea's unique status as a de facto nuclear weapon state in relation to its nuclear policy and strategy. Second, it will conduct a critical assessment of the Trump-Kim summits to draw lessons for future talks. Lastly, it will explore a possible way out of the current deadlock. This paper concludes that, amidst current tensions, the establishment of a collective diplomatic effort devoted to confidence and trust-building that revolves around an early warning and arms control mechanism to reduce tensions and avoid crises is necessary. The objective should be the creation of both a collective burden-sharing mechanism and an action-for-action system to achieve North Korea's denuclearization.

Introduction

There is growing concern and a greater focus on North Korea's denuclearization due to the recent missile tests in the North. After the debacle at the Hanoi Summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un, North Korea intensified its missile and defense-capability buildup. To date, the chances to halt North Korea's missiles testing and nuclear production through US-DPRK talks are slim. US-DPRK denuclearization talks are currently at a stalemate due to Pyongyang's refusal to accept action-level meetings that the US Biden administration proposed after the change of leadership in the US.

Furthermore, South Korean President Moon Jae-in's last-ditch efforts to revive inter-Korean and US-DPRK dialogues through the proposal of an end-of-war declaration result in draining attention away from the fulcrum of the US-DPRK-ROK conundrum, the resumption of denuclearization talks. Thus, it is timely and policy-relevant to examine how to get out of the current deadlock from a holistic and historical perspective rather than narrowly focusing on the difficult task of reviving the US-DPRK talks.

Kim Jong Un Entered the Third Nuclear Age

Kim Jong Un paved the way for North Korea to enter the small club of nuclear-weapon states, kickstarting the third nuclear age. International relations scholars and nuclear experts used to classify a nuclear era into two ages: the first identified five nuclear-weapon states, the US, the USSR (now Russia), the UK, France, and China, and the second saw the addition of Israel, India, and Pakistan to this grouping.¹ Later, North Korea had been included in the category of the second nuclear age. However, North Korea is different from Israel, India, and Pakistan in many ways, as described below. Notably, North Korea is the only country that has been a member of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty from 1985 until 2003, and, after pulling out from it, has developed nuclear weapons, putting the blame on US' hostile policy. Therefore, North Korea can be reasonably classified into the third nuclear age. Thus, the world needs to pay more attention to the North Korea's nuclear issue, to take a different and prudent approach in order to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea.

“North Korea intends to make people in South Korea believe that there is a plausible linkage between the elimination of the US hostile policy and North Korea's denuclearization.”

First, North Korea is unique in claiming that its major threat comes from the US. While Israel, India, and Pakistan pointed to their neighboring countries as threats, North Korea argued that their archenemy is the US, located tens of thousands of kilometers away and involved in the Korean Peninsula only through the US-ROK security alliance. North Korea has insisted that it had no alternative but to

develop nuclear weapons to expedite US withdrawal and defend against Washington's preemptive attack.

Moreover, North Korea contended that it would never give up its nuclear weapons unless the US comes to nuclear disarmament talks with North Korea on an equal footing. North Korea's demand for one-on-one nuclear disarmament negotiations with the US poses a dilemma for the latter because once it enters direct talks with DPRK, Washington will be unwillingly recognizing North Korea as a *de facto* nuclear-weapon state.

Second, North Korea, as early as 2003, has been utilizing US hostile policy to justify its nuclear weapons development.² At the time, Pyongyang used the US's invasion of Iraq to justify the development of a nuclear deterrent against the US. After the debacle at the Hanoi Summit, Pyongyang included US involvement in the division of the Peninsula of 1945 and the Korean War of 1950 as another indicator of a US hostile policy.³ This illustrates that the North's deep-rooted animosity against the US and its perceived hostile policy have been used as justifications for their nuclear weapon development and as part of its anti-American propaganda.

However, it is not clear what the US hostile policy really is. In 2016, North Korea indicated that elimination of the US hostile policy includes the termination of joint US-ROK military exercises, the removal of UN sanctions, withdrawal of US deployed troops and strategic assets on the Korean Peninsula, the replacement of the Armistice Agreement with a Peace Treaty, and the dismantlement of the US-ROK alliance.⁴ In essence, North Korea intends to make people in South Korea believe that there is a plausible linkage between the elimination of the US hostile policy and North Korea's denuclearization. Along with this logic, China and Russia used to argue that the United States should make some concessions to mitigate North Korea's security concerns before asking for North Korea's concessions on denuclearization.

Third, regardless of this rigmarole, it can be inferred that the actual reason behind nuclear weapons

development is the Kim family's need to ensure the continuation of its rule.⁵ Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un have uniquely placed their top priority on developing nuclear weapons in order to legitimize and strengthen their grip on power. Kim Jong Un is acclaimed as a world-class strategist and a historical hero who miraculously created a nuclear weapon state within the shortest time in history.⁶ To consolidate his power and to mobilize North Korean people's unity and loyalty around him, Kim Jong Un, as a young leader, revised North Korea's Constitution to codify that North Korea had become a nuclear weapon state, mainly under his leadership.

Fourth, North Korea is the first and only country in the world that threatened to use nuclear weapons against the United States by showing its operational plans to strike targets in the United States.⁷ North Korea is able "to hit all the American military bases in the Pacific Ocean," and "anywhere in the US with its ICBMs and with its Hwasong long-range ballistic missiles."⁸ Such messages not only destabilize the peace and security of the Korean Peninsula but also pose serious challenges to the US extended deterrence credibility in South Korea.

Fifth, under Kim Jong Un, North Korea's framing of the nuclear-peace logic for dual purposes has been continuously reinforced. Domestically, nuclear capability is believed to ensure regime's stability by bolstering people's loyalty and unity against US pressures.

Internationally, Pyongyang believes that its status as a *de facto* nuclear power brings peace and security in Northeast Asia by curbing US assertiveness, as Kim Jong Un managed to achieve after Trump's threat of war. Along with this logic, Kim Jong Un insists that South Korea should appreciate North Korea's nuclear weapons and thus should not side with the US, who, they claim, only disrupts peace and security of the Korean Peninsula through the use of force.⁹ This logic is also used by Pyongyang to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington.

Sixth, accepting North Korea's status as a nuclear weapon state not only endangers the NPT regime

but also generates a proliferation domino effect which may influence South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan to go nuclear in Northeast Asia. This domino effect will become more serious when and if China decides to pit North Korea against the US in the wake of intensifying rivalry between Washington and Beijing.¹⁰ As Pyongyang leans toward Beijing, China could use North Korea as a strategic asset and use the North Korean card to undermine the US-South Korean alliance and the US Indo-Pacific strategy. It is not a coincidence that North Korea claims that it has consolidated solidarity with Beijing and Moscow.¹¹

Considering all the above shows how multi-faceted North Korea's challenges to peace and security in Northeast Asia and the NPT regime are. Therefore, the task of North Korea's denuclearization requires a fundamentally different approach other than only resuming the US-DPRK talks.

“North Korea is the first and only country in the world that threatened to use nuclear weapons against the United States by showing its operational plans to strike targets in the United States”

The Kim Jong Un Era: Reexamination of the US-DPRK summits and their Aftermath

In light of the considerations above, the next section will reassess the US-DPRK summits. Comparing the Denuclearization Agreement of the Korean Peninsula of 1992, the Geneva Agreed Framework of 1994, and the September 19th, 2005, Joint Statement of the Six Party Talks with the Singapore Joint Statement reveals striking differences in terms of denuclearization. The three previous agreements differ from the Singapore Joint Statement in two

points: (1) the Singapore Joint Statement has nothing specific on North Korea's denuclearization issue per se, (2) the Singapore Joint Statement has no clause at all regarding nuclear inspections as opposed to the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework which stipulated full-scope IAEA inspections be implemented at the time of provision of light-water reactors to North Korea by Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization. Further analysis of the US-DPRK summits will disclose what has been achieved and what has not been achieved to provide valuable lessons for future talks.

“US officials and Trump himself were not a unified front [...] gave space to Pyongyang to employ wedging tactics between Trump and his administration”.

Moreover, two further differences can be extrapolated from the results reached with the Joint Statement as

opposed to previous agreements. First, as summarized in the Party Congress of January 10th of 2021, North Korea contends that it received recognition as a nuclear weapon state by President Trump, later being criticized for granting legitimization to Pyongyang by presidential candidate Joe Biden.¹² Second, US officials and Trump himself were not a unified front throughout negotiations with the North. This gave space to Pyongyang to employ wedging tactics between Trump and his administration. The former wanted any kind of a deal, while Bolton, among many others, wanted a CVID (complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization) over North Korea's entire nuclear program and facilities.¹³

Due to a general lack of understanding of North Korea's strategy and diplomatic practices and Trump's overconfidence in his own abilities as a negotiator, he underestimated Kim Jong Un and overestimated the value of Washington's proposal to trade North Korea's denuclearization with US economic assistance. Furthermore, some of Trump's decisions exasperated the US administration's internal division. For instance, in May 2018, when Kim Young Chol visited the White House, Trump did not allow Bolton to sit with the North Korean General Kim and even showed his willingness

The June 2018 Singapore Summit:

	DPRK	United States
Negotiation Goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving relations with the US Lifting sanctions Suspension of joint US-ROK military exercises Deferring actual denuclearization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuation of North Korea's moratorium on nuclear and missiles tests Establishing high-level talks for denuclearization
Negotiation Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Driving a wedge between Trump and Bolton to stop Bolton's CVID approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By showing a video of North Korea's economic development after denuclearization, Trump wanted to get Kim Jong Un to commit to denuclearization
Negotiation Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trump's pledge to cancel joint military exercises Ambiguous commitment to denuclearization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kim Jong Un's ambiguous commitment to denuclearization Concession on joint military exercises

to propose the cancelation of the US-ROK joint military exercises at the Singapore Summit.¹⁴

In Hanoi, North Korea's intention to strike a 'small deal' – Pyongyang would shut the Yongbyon nuclear complex down in exchange for sanctions relief – collided with US' push for a 'big deal' – North Korea should submit a complete list of its nuclear programs and facilities for a full and finally verified denuclearization (FFVD) to the United States.¹⁵ Washington had decided to change negotiation goals and strategy to reflect the fact that there had been no tangible progress on North Korea's denuclearization since the Singapore Summit. This resulted in a no-deal and caused Kim Jong Un to be frustrated at Moon Jae-in's inability to persuade Trump to accept a 'small deal' and general disappointment on all sides.

After various preparatory meetings throughout February 2019, Trump envisioned two scenarios for the Summit: (1) The US pushes North Korea to accept the big deal to obtain sanctions' lifting; (2) North Korea insists on the small deal, causing Trump to walk away from negotiations.¹⁶ In Hanoi, Trump opted for the latter, knowing that Kim Jong Un was adamant about a small deal, while Kim Jong

Un argued that Washington's demands for FFVD or CVID violated the Singapore Joint Statement.¹⁷

Subsequently, Kim Jong Un blamed the failure on Moon Jae-in, partly to shame Moon for his inability to persuade Trump to accept the 'small deal' and partly to continue to develop his missile capabilities. Shortly after, Kim Jong Un began to test-launch ballistic and cruise missile capabilities, short of ICBMs.

“In Hanoi, North Korea's intention to strike a small deal [...] collided with US' push for a big deal.”

The Moon government had also been shocked by the impasse. Seoul had been preparing follow-up steps to advance inter-Korean relations, assuming that North Korea and the US would have reached a compromise. At the time, the South Korean political debate revolved around two possibilities: 1) North Korea will forgo nuclear weapons during negotiations to concentrate on economic development, 2) North Korea will focus more on

The February 2019 Hanoi Summit:

	DPRK	United States
Negotiation Goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreeing to a small deal: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shut-down of Yongbyon nuclear facilities in exchange for US sanctions relief 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> North Korea's complete denuclearization through FFVD Requesting North Korea to submit a complete list of its nuclear programs and facilities
Negotiation Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As agreed in the North-South Pyongyang Joint Statement, Kim Jong Un persuaded Trump accept a small deal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Without North Korea's submission of a complete list of nuclear programs and facilities, Trump threatened to walk away from the negotiation table
Negotiation Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No deal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No deal

economic development while continuing its nuclear weapons development in a low profile.¹⁸ The Moon government misinterpreted North Korea's intention, as shown later in North Korea's announcement of January 2021 that they have been developing nuclear weapons and sophisticating nuclear and missile capabilities.¹⁹

Overall, the various instances of nuclear talks leave us with a few lessons worth remembering to go forward. Firstly, it is critical for the US to reach a comprehensive denuclearization agreement, including verification clauses from the initial stages of talks. Otherwise, Washington will find it considerably harder to convince Pyongyang to accept comprehensive verification agreements at the later stages of negotiation. Past endeavors have shown that North Korea tends to drag the denuclearization process out if no denuclearization sequencing procedures are agreed upon in the beginning.

“The objective [...] the creation of both a collective burden-sharing mechanism and an action-for-action system to achieve North Korea's denuclearization.”

Secondly, North Korea continues to develop its nuclear and missile programs, despite its commitment to denuclearization, to create problems for the NPT regime and, consequently, force the US to come to direct talks with North Korea.

Lastly, North Korea, pursuing its own national interest, attempts to drive a wedge not only between South Korea and the US but also between doves and hawks in Washington, whenever possible.

The Aftermath: US-DPRK Deadlock and ways to get out of it

As noted above, there were no specific agreements on North Korea's denuclearization when Trump ceded

the cancelation of US-ROK joint military exercises to Kim Jong Un, which had been one of North Korea's wishes for a long time.

However, Kim Jong Un, to manage the damage the debacle caused to him personally, as the top political figure in North Korea, proclaimed a new path which was a reversal of negotiating approach with the US.²⁰ North Korea demolished the South-North Joint Liaison Office while repeatedly condemning president Moon and his followers. Furthermore, North Korea is continuously advancing missile and cyber technology, including long-range artillery and hypersonic weapons, even testing some of them giving negative signals to the US, despite the latter's appointment of Sung Kim as special envoy to North Korea. On the contrary, Pyongyang has sided with Beijing more and more in the last year bashing US meddling in Chinese national issues and the US spearheading of AUKUS. Currently, US-DPRK relations, inter-Korean relations, and regional dynamics tied to the Peninsula have become so stale that there is little hope for full normalization.

However, there are two ways to get out of the current US-DPRK nuclear negotiation deadlock and kickstart an amelioration process. First would be the resumption of US-DPRK talks through North Korea's acceptance of the US special envoy. Second would be the recommencement of the Six Party Talks at a higher level, namely at a ministerial level. The first route is closed because North Korea keeps on demanding summits to the US, to which president Biden showed a negative attitude.²¹ Therefore, the remaining option is to restart the Six Party talks. Given the current state of affairs, it is safe to assume that US efforts and pressure will not be sufficient to push North Korea toward denuclearization. China and Russia will have to participate fully in the Six Party talks. The objective would be the creation of both a collective burden-sharing mechanism and an action-for-action system to achieve North Korea's denuclearization.

Looking back at 2003, a year after the Geneva Agreed Framework between Washington and Pyongyang had broken down, the Six Party Talks, through

China's constructive and mediatory leadership, restarted constructive engagement between the US and North Korea.

Similar to 2003, today, the Six Party talks could become a collective and cooperative platform for Northeast Asian states to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue. The Six Party Talks could even go beyond this limited scope and promote the establishment of regional and multilateral security cooperation mechanisms to reduce tension and to control the ongoing arms race in Northeast Asia.²² As it did in 2003, China could be a proactive mediator to broker consensus between nations in Northeast Asia. This role, in turn, would invoke China to stop violating the implementation of the UN sanctions regime. Furthermore, through the Six Party Talks a burden-sharing mechanism could be established toward the responsibility for strengthening the NPT regime. Economic and security incentives could be packaged so that a tight linkage between those who are willing to pay for the package deal and North Korea, which will take concrete steps toward denuclearization, can be established. The Six Party talks could be utilized as a political and multilateral institution to resolve conflict issues further. Lastly, the Six Party talks could provide face-saving methods to North Korea and the United States as well.

However, caveats are in order. It is noteworthy to point out that the Six Party talks in 2008 failed due to North Korea's unwillingness to agree to the verification of nuclear materials and programs through site-sampling and on-site inspections. Therefore, the institutionalization and operationalization of a verification system where the six countries and the International Atomic Energy Agency can be involved should be agreed upon in the earlier phase of negotiation. In addition, the Six Party talks must establish a dialogue and crisis-management mechanism where the six countries can discuss and set limits around the issue of the ongoing arms race in Northeast Asia. The arms buildup worsens adversarial perceptions between Northeast Asian states; therefore, a collective diplomatic effort devoted to confidence and trust-building that revolves around an early warning and arms control mechanism to reduce tensions and avoid crises is necessary more than ever. ■

Authors - Dr. Han Yong-sup is Professor Emeritus of Korea National Defense University in the Republic of Korea and a member of APLN (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament). He launched the Korea Nuclear Policy Society and served as its first President (2012-15). Moreover, he has been Vice President of KNDU (2010-12), and President of Korea Peace Research Association (2007-10), and also directed the Research Institute for National Security Affairs of Korea National Defense University (2005-08).

He has got a BA and MA from the political science department of Seoul National University from 1978 and 1982. And he has got Masters in Public Policy at Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (1987) and Ph. D. of Security Policy of RAND Graduate School of RAND Corporation of the United States (1991).

© The Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2020.
This Issue Brief can be freely reproduced provided that ISDP is informed.

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the inter-relationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

www.isdp.eu

Endnotes

1. Andrew Futter, *The Politics of Nuclear Weapons*, (London, UK: SAGE publications Ltd., 2015), p.58.
2. KCNA, DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman's address, June 18, 2003.
3. KCNA, January 9, 2021. On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at Eighth Party Congress of WPK. https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kju_8th_party_congress_speech_summary.pdf#file_view
4. KCNA, May 9, 2016. Kim Jong Un Makes Opening Address at Seventh Congress of WPK. https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/publications/KJU_Speeches_7th_Congress.pdf
5. David W. Shin, *Kim Jong-un's Strategy For Survival: A Method to Madness*, (London, UK: Lexington Books, 2021), pp.221-279.
6. KCNA, January 9, 2021. On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at Eighth Party Congress of WPK. https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/publications/KJU_Speeches_7th_Congress.pdf
7. Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).
8. John Shilling, "North Korea Finally Tests an ICBM," 38 NORTH, July 5, 2017. <https://www.38north.org/2017/07/jschilling070517/>; Rodong Sinmun, September 6, 2017; Rohdong Sinmun, November 30, 2017. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20171130001351315>
9. Rodong Sinmun, March 10, 2018; KCNA, January 9, 2021. On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at Eighth Party Congress of WPK. North Korea used to rebuke the United States for undermining and disrupting peace and security of the Korean Peninsula, while defending its nuclear weapons for self-defense and deterrence against the US attack.
10. For example, see "Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un hold talks in Beijing," Xinhua, March 28, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/28/c_137070598.htm.
11. KCNA, January 9, 2021. On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at Eighth Party Congress of WPK. On this day, Kim Jong Un stressed that North Korea could open a new chapter in the DPRK-China relations and in the DPRK-Russia relations with socialism as its core as result of summits between him and his counterparts.
12. KCNA, January 9, 2021. On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at Eighth Party Congress of WPK. https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kju_8th_party_congress_speech_summary.pdf#file_view
13. John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), pp.77-83. Because Bolton mentioned the need for applying the Lybian model to North Korea's denuclearization, North Korea denounced Bolton and threatened to cancel the summit; BBC news 16 May 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44134910>
14. John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, pp.93-101.
15. Before the Hanoi summit, the United States government used to demand CVID to North Korea but after the Singapore summit, the United States government changed the term from CVID to FFVD probably to put an emphasis on verified not verifiable after considering the fact that North Korea may have possessed 30-50 nuclear weapons.
16. John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, pp.319-331.
17. Statement by Spokesman of DPRK Foreign Ministry, July 7, 2018. The North Korean Foreign Ministry released a statement after the Pompeo's visit to Pyongyang U.S. proposals characterizing as "unilateral and robber-like denuclearization demands such as CVID and declarations and nuclear inspections," further claiming that they "go against the spirit of the North-U.S. summit meeting."
18. The National Committee on North Korea, DPRK Report on the Third Plenary Meeting of the Seventh Central Committee, KCNA, April 21, 2018.
19. KCNA, January 9, 2021. On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at Eighth Party Congress of WPK.

20. *December 2019 Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the KWP, Chairman's statement. Report of the Fifth Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK (Kim Jong Un's 2020 New Year Address)* https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kju_2020_new_years_plenum_report.pdf/file_view.
21. *President Biden's press conference on May 21, 2021. Biden rejects Trump's approach to North Korea, says he won't give Kim Jong Un 'international recognition.* <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/21/biden-rejects-trumps-approach-to-north-korea.html>
22. *Masako Ikegami, "Missile Arms-Racing and Insecurity in the Asia-Pacific," August 2021, IISS, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/research-paper/2021/08/missile-arms-racing-asiapacific>.*

