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Diplomatic Deadlock: Can U.S.-North Korea Diplomacy Survive Maximum Pressure?



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South Korean President Moon Jae-in's meeting with North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un on September 18-20 culminated in the signing of the Pyongyang Declaration, which marked a significant advance towards peace and heralded a welcome warming in relations. Since that time, however, contradictions within the Trump administration's North Korea policy threaten to forestall further progress and test the patience of its South Korean ally.

Among the measures outlined in the Pyongyang Declaration, the two sides agreed to “expand the cessation of military hostility in regions of confrontation such as the DMZ,” with the goal of removing the danger of war “across the entire Korean Peninsula.”

[1] North and South Korea quickly moved to begin to implement the plan, shutting down some border guard posts and initiating the removal of landmines from the Joint Security Area. Plans are also afoot to establish a no-fly zone over the DMZ, and communication procedures are being established to prevent armed clashes.

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, the formal name for North Korea) committed to dismantling its missile launch platform and test site “under the observation of experts from relevant countries.” North Korea promised that it would “take additional measures, such as the permanent dismantlement of the nuclear facilities in Yongbyon, as the United States takes corresponding measures in accordance with the spirit of the June 12 U.S.-DPRK Joint Statement.” [2]

For Koreans on both sides of the border and in the diaspora, the Pyongyang Declaration was an encouraging development on the path to peace and reconciliation. The mood in Washington, though, was far from celebratory.

Livid over South Korean plans to establish a no-fly zone and demilitarize the inter-Korean border, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo phoned South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha before the Moon-Kim summit and harangued her, accusing her of not knowing what she was doing. Korean media suggest that Pompeo used foul language in expressing his displeasure to Kang. Pompeo was particularly upset at not being briefed beforehand. A second call to Kang later in the day was more conciliatory, after Pompeo had learned that the South Korean government had informed U.S. officials, but no one within the Trump administration had bothered to notify him. [3]

Alarmed at the prospect of an improvement in relations between the two Koreas, as soon as the summit was over the U.S. Treasury Department emailed several South Korean banks and warned them not to engage in business with North Korea. It also conducted conference calls with Korean banks on two consecutive days to drive home its point. The Treasury Department said it was aware of inter-Korean discussions on plans for joint economic projects and asked the banks if they had any plans to proceed. It emphasized that U.S. and UN sanctions remain in force, and warned that the banks risked incurring secondary sanctions. [4]

South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Hyung-wha fed American fears that its South Korean ally was not behaving in a sufficiently subservient manner when she told the National

Assembly that a review of the sanctions that former president Lee Myung-bak had imposed on North Korea “is underway.” She noted that since the majority of the sanctions overlapped with those of the UN, this would not necessarily mean a “substantive” change was in the cards, and this was a matter “to be reviewed in comprehensive consideration of South-North relations.” [5]

As mild and conditional as Kang’s remarks were, Washington’s reaction was swift and insulting. “They won’t do that without our approval,” Trump said. “They do nothing without our approval.” Trump’s blunt language was revealing. In Washington’s mindset, the alliance with South Korea is a master-servant relationship. Although many Koreans were rightly offended at the language dismissing South Korean sovereignty, the government’s response was overly obsequious. Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon was quick to correct the impression left by Kang’s remarks, promising that “no detailed review has been made,” and asserted that his government’s position is that it is too early to discuss easing sanctions. [6]

At the same time, Moon sought to assuage worries in Washington that the threat of peace on the Korean Peninsula would not mean an end to the U.S.-South Korean military relationship. “I will further strengthen the Republic of Korea Navy so that it may go beyond the Korean Peninsula and contribute to peace in Northeast Asia and the entire world,” he announced at an international naval review at Jeju Island. [7] Moon’s meaning was clear: South Korea can be counted on to meet U.S. expectations that it play a more significant role in U.S. military operations outside of the Korean Peninsula.

The current impasse in U.S.-North Korea negotiations is due entirely to Washington’s expectation that North Korea complete nuclear disarmament in exchange for nothing more than vague promises of future improved relations. North Korea experienced the annihilation of all of its towns and cities by U.S. bombers during the Korean War and in the decades since then the U.S. has regularly conducted military exercises rehearsing a repeat attack. The fate of Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya presented North Korea with the vivid object lesson that a small nation relying on conventional forces alone is virtually defenseless against the world’s foremost military power.

By the time it announced a freeze on nuclear weapons and ballistic missile testing, North Korea had nearly completed development of its nuclear weapons program, lacking only final testing of a reentry vehicle. By placing his nuclear weapons program on the table, Kim Jong-un is engaging in a sort of high-wire act in international relations without the benefit of a safety net. He is gambling that reciprocal measures by the United States will

ensure his nation's security, negating the need for a nuclear deterrent. In that context, the Washington establishment could not be more mistaken in its firm belief that North Korean disarmament is achievable through sanctions alone. North Korea has security concerns that must be taken into consideration.

We are often told that North Korea's failure to provide the United States with a complete list of its nuclear materials and facilities is proof that it is "not serious" about nuclear disarmament. Unmentioned is that once North Korea produces such a list, U.S. military planners would be able to plot the bombing coordinates of each facility. From a North Korean perspective, this step is suitable for a later stage in negotiations, during which the United States is providing compensating security assurances. It is an unreasonable upfront demand.

The standard narrative in the U.S. media is that the mere act of talking with North Korea is an excessive concession and it is now up to the DPRK to unilaterally disarm. A report by CNN in the days leading up to the Singapore Summit between President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un was a typical expression of that mindset. The report claimed that Kim Jong-un would "achieve the longstanding dream of his family dynasty – a face-to-face meeting with a sitting U.S. president." [8] The not so subtle implication was that basking in the glorious presence of a U.S. leader is reward enough for anyone. This, CNN's headline misinforms us, is Kim's "ultimate aim." That such wrong-headed concepts persist in the U.S. media and Washington think tanks is indicative of the narrow and willfully blind perspective that also infects the Trump administration.

After the Pyongyang summit, Moon Jae-in travelled to the United States to act as an intermediary in hopes of getting negotiations back on track. Combat in the Korean War came to a halt with the signing of an armistice agreement in 1953, and the original plan to follow that up with a peace treaty never materialized. The DPRK regards the long overdue signing of a peace treaty as one leg in a comprehensive security arrangement; perhaps not the most reliable component, in that a treaty would do nothing to deter the United States from launching an attack if it chose to do so. Nevertheless, the entire Washington establishment is adamantly opposed to a peace treaty, fearing that it might encourage the Korean people to demand the closure of U.S. bases and put at risk an important geostrategic position in the military encirclement of China. The fear is without basis, because nowhere is the presence of U.S. bases predicated on the wishes of the people in host nations. For that matter, Moon has offered repeated assurances that U.S. forces are in Korea to stay.

Kim suggested to Moon that if the United States were willing to adopt a corresponding measure, North Korea would shut down its Yongbyon nuclear facility. It was a significant proposal, which all too predictably met with a dismissive response from Washington. “Nothing can happen in the absence of denuclearization,” U.S. State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert declared. “Denuclearization has to come first.” [9]

Moon is keen on trying to change that narrative so that progress can resume. “It all comes down to whether the U.S. is ready to provide corresponding measures in a swift way,” he said in an interview on Fox News. “The U.S. promised to end hostile relations with North Korea to provide security guarantees and work toward new U.S.-North Korea relations – these actions need to be taken in parallel.” [10]

But when it came to specifics, Moon suggested essentially meaningless measures, such as a political declaration on the end of the Korean War rather than a peace treaty, the provision of humanitarian aid, and art performance exchanges. [11] “When we are talking about corresponding measures, it doesn’t necessarily mean relaxing economic sanctions,” Moon added. Worse yet, the White House issued a statement after the meeting, announcing that “the two leaders agreed on the importance of maintaining vigorous enforcement of existing sanctions.” [12]

The emptiness of Moon’s suggestions, coupled with the unfortunate call for maintaining strong sanctions on North Korea, could be interpreted as a tacit admission that nothing more can be expected from the Trump administration. Moon may be hoping that in the interests of peace, North Korea will settle for nearly worthless diplomatic trinkets. Or perhaps he is hoping that any concession from the United States, no matter how minor, would establish a starting point from which something more substantial could develop.

However, in discussions with Moon, Chairman Kim was quite clear about what he is looking for from the United States. Quite rationally, the corresponding measures he is seeking for nuclear disarmament are security guarantees and progress towards normalization of relations. [13]

Speaking at the United Nations General Assembly on September 29, DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho announced that his government’s commitment to the Singapore Declaration signed by Trump and Kim “is unwavering.” However, denuclearization “should also be realized along with building a peace regime under the principle of simultaneous actions, step-by-step, starting with what we can do and giving priority to

trust-building.” Ri noted that the U.S. reliance on “coercive methods” is “lethal to trust-building.” [14]

It appears to have eluded general attention that even if the Trump administration agrees to reciprocate, there is a decided imbalance in actions. North Korea would abandon its nuclear deterrent, the only solid assurance it currently has against attack. For its part, the United States would not relinquish anything. Agreeing to an objective statement of fact, that combat in the Korean War ended decades ago, imposes no obligations on the United States. Aside from that, corresponding measures from the U.S. side would entail reducing and eventually eliminating the amount of punishment it inflicts on the North Korean people. The United States loses nothing in dropping sanctions and no longer pressuring other nations to isolate the DPRK. Meanwhile, the U.S. military would remain firmly ensconced on the Korean Peninsula in close proximity to China, and efforts would continue to integrate the South Korean military in U.S. strategic planning.

The Trump administration has yet to concede a need to offer North Korea anything in exchange for disarmament. What it has provided instead is to pile more sanctions on the beleaguered North Korean people. “Maximum pressure” must continue, we are repeatedly told, to encourage North Korea to negotiate. Somehow the point seems to be missed that North Korea *is* negotiating. Moreover, it is not the DPRK that has been recalcitrant in recent years. Throughout the eight years of the Obama administration and Trump’s first year, North Korea regularly reached out to the United States and asked for negotiations, only to be rebuffed each time. If the rationale for maintaining sanctions is to encourage cooperation and dialogue, then the more appropriate target for sanctions would appear to be the United States. It was only Kim Jong-un’s major unilateral concessions this year, backed by Moon Jae-in’s openness to dialogue, that brought about a diplomatic opening.

The Trump administration is ratcheting up pressure on North Korea. The U.S. Department of Treasury regularly adds new sanctions on North Korea, and early this month a U.S. official visited Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand to emphasize the importance of the “DPRK pressure campaign” and “the need for full implementation” of UN sanctions. [15]

The Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign even extends to shutting down humanitarian projects. UN sanctions on the DPRK aim at imposing near-total economic isolation and dislocation, inevitably producing severe hardship for ordinary citizens. Humanitarian organizations provide the only external support to partially offset the deprivation imposed by sanctions.

Applications from several NGOs to visit North Korea have been repeatedly turned down by the U.S. State Department. “The denials are pretty much across the board,” revealed one source. “It really is unthinkable...and very, very disturbing.” Behind-the-scenes pressure from the U.S. government was a factor in the Global Fund deciding to shut down its healthcare programs in North Korea. A statement issued by Keith Luse, executive director of the National Committee on North Korea, observed, “It has become clear that the Trump administration regards the provision of humanitarian assistance to the North Korean people as a legitimate target for its maximum pressure campaign. Indeed, a line has been crossed.” [16]

South Korean Health Minister Park Neung-hoo told the National Assembly that the United States was preventing his nation from supplying medical aid to the DPRK. Although his ministry wished to provide medicine, “We are only at a preparatory stage due to various international restrictions.” Later in the session, concerned that his remarks may be construed as being critical of the U.S., he asked to have his remarks deleted from the record and pointed out that the U.S. “is blocking not just medical aid, but generally everything.” [17]

Opposition to Washington’s intransigence on sanctions is starting to stiffen. Chinese and Russian foreign ministers quarreled with Pompeo at the UN Security Council on September 27, as they advocated a gradual easing of sanctions while denuclearization proceeds. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov proposed that the UN permit exemptions on joint economic projects with the DPRK, to send a positive signal. “Negotiations are a two-way street,” he pointed out, adding that tightening sanctions while the situation is improving is illogical. [18] With veto authority in the UN Security Council, however, the U.S. is in a position to ignore Chinese and Russian pleas for reasonableness. North Korean, Chinese, and Russian foreign ministry officials met in Moscow on October 9, to coordinate policy on denuclearization. The three sides issued a joint press release which stated that issues on the Korean Peninsula should be resolved in a peaceful and diplomatic manner. Denuclearization “should be of a step-by-step and synchronized character and accompanied by reciprocal steps of the involved states.” Along those lines, “the UN Security Council should start in due time revising the sanctions against North Korea,” the statement declared. [19]

In an apparent and welcome challenge to Washington’s maximum pressure campaign, South and North Korea agreed on October 15 to reconnect rail and road links between the two nations. Onsite rail surveys are scheduled to take place around the end of the month,

and groundbreaking ceremonies are planned for about a month later. [20] The Trump administration wasted little time in making its displeasure known, and that same day a State Department spokesperson reiterated the position that “improvement in relations between North and South Korea cannot advance separately from resolving North Korea’s nuclear program.” Sanctions will remain in place until nuclear disarmament has been completed. “We expect all member states to fully implement UN sanctions.” [21]

Last August the commander of U.S. Forces Korea, acting in his role as head of the UN Command, blocked an inter-Korean joint rail inspection project. The State Department spokesperson’s message clearly indicated that Washington’s position had not shifted in the meantime, and the U.S. would not allow the two Koreas to carry out the agreement they had signed with each other.

Seeking to shore up what it perceived as wavering support for its policy of unremitting opposition to genuine diplomacy, and in the light of Moon’s visit to France to seek support for his more flexible approach, Washington announced that it would dispatch envoy Stephen Biegun to France, Belgium, and Russia to discuss relations with North Korea.

[22]

The October 15 inter-Korean agreement may prove to be a test case for South Korea. Is it willing to behave as a sovereign nation and act in its interests, or will it cave in once again to Washington’s demands? The enormous economic power of the United States, however, gives it the ability to impose harsh discipline if a small nation such as South Korea fails to take orders.

Following Mike Pompeo’s recent trip to Pyongyang, diplomacy of a sort has returned to the agenda, and a summit between Kim and Trump is anticipated to occur by the end of the year. The essential sticking point remains unresolved, however. Washington perceives talks as a surrender mechanism, whereas the DPRK is looking for normal diplomatic give-and-take. There is no bridging the two concepts. The conventional view of diplomacy in Washington is that cooperation is a sign of weakness, and results can be produced through punishment alone. It is to be hoped that in time the Trump administration will come to recognize the futility of that approach and heed the advice of its international partners and seize the diplomatic opening offered by the two Koreas. The United States has nothing to lose from engaging in genuine diplomacy, and the peoples of Northeast Asia much to gain.

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Notes.

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