



Looking Ahead After the U.S./North Korea Summit

The historic summit between the U.S and North Korean leaders in Singapore ended with impressive imagery. Slated as more of a “get-to-know” encounter, the summit left little room for disappointment and, indeed, the joint statement by President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un was general in language and short on details. In addition to a reaffirmation of North Korea’s commitment “to work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” the statement also contained President Trump’s commitment “to provide security guarantees to the DPRK” and specifically committed to the recovery and repatriation of POW/MIAs. Most significantly, the statement formally set future negotiations within this broad framework.

As such, the statement did little to change the deeply-embedded views of skeptics and optimists. Those in the “we-have-been-here-before” camp might say that the summit was a diplomatic “thud” based on the following perceptions:

- NK will never give up its nuclear arsenal.
- Its ultimate goal of regime survival can be assured only by the possession of a nuclear deterrent.
- NK suffers from a serious credibility gap (having reneged on all similar past denuclearization pledges).
- The U.S. again risks being played by an experienced and untrustworthy NK nuclear negotiation team whose goal is to extract concessions to their country’s economic and diplomatic benefit.

Those in the “this-time-is-different” camp would likely advocate the following:

- The U.S. has learned from past experiences and will not make unnecessary concessions, economic or otherwise.
- The current U.S. team is not hampered by past negotiation failures or diplomatic décor.
- Hawks in the U.S. administration know better than to be played by NK negotiators.
- The current sanctions regime (or its escalation, if necessary) will remain in place until NK makes “real progress towards denuclearization.”
- The U.S. has been able to convince China to comply with the UN sanctions regime (unlike in past instances) and apply pressure on NK to return to the negotiating table with the U.S.
- NK’s economic incentives from denuclearization are too appealing to cast aside, and the U.S. is ready to provide security to the regime in exchange for denuclearization.

The upcoming negotiations should help resolve the divide between the two camps. In our view, for negotiations to have a chance of success, it is critical that UN sanctions remain in place, which was a point President Trump emphasized in his press conference. President Trump’s agreement to cease joint U.S.-South Korean military drills (announced in the same press conference, to the surprise of some) may also contribute to the success of the negotiations. However China, as the key enforcer of the harsher sanctions regime, has already called for those sanctions to be “eased to reward NK’s commitment to peace.” This increases the risk that compliance with NK sanctions regime ends up woven into a more general trade-policy agenda. Spiraling trade dynamics between the U.S. and China could consequently derail the denuclearization process itself.

The summit could also result in favorable regional dynamics. NK’s commitment to “complete denuclearization” makes strides towards redressing Japan’s security concerns from NK’s nuclear arsenal. For South Korea, a successful negotiation process could facilitate reaching a peace treaty and ushering in a new era of economic and political cooperation with its Northern neighbor. China, in turn, would secure significant long-term diplomatic, political, and economic returns given its ultimate objective of keeping a denuclearized NK under its security and economic sphere of interest. This would be a break with the past when China favored long, open-ended, preferably multi-party negotiations on NK denuclearization in an apparent effort to ensure that NK remained a counterbalance to the U.S.-South Korea alliance. China could also reap the geo-strategic benefit of an eventual withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea.

The Singapore summit marks a first step in the NK denuclearization process. Whether it will succeed, or once again end in failure, depends critically on NK’s willingness to outline concrete details about its denuclearization—which ideally would be “complete, verifiable, and irreversible.” The speed with which these details are announced will likely hinge on the maintenance of robust sanctions as well as the nature and sequence of the U.S. response on concessions. An early yardstick of success would be North Korea’s declaration and disclosure of its full nuclear and ballistic missile arsenals and admittance of international inspectors.

Trending...

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