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The Breakdown of the US-North Korea Summit Meeting and Future Prospects: An Analysis from the Structural Factors of “Denuclearization”

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The breakdown of the second US-North Korea summit meeting in late February came as a considerable surprise to the international community, including Japan and the US. Accounts on how the summit ended in a surprise failure appeared on various media, which quoted US, North Korean and South Korean government officials. However, a rational structural analysis of the issue of “denuclearization” shows that the ultimate breakdown of these US-North Korea talks was at the very least one projected outcome. That this outcome astonished so many people can be attributed to the overly high expectations prompted by advance reporting and President Trump’s tweets. The fact is that there was an unbridgeable rift between the two countries on the goals to be pursued through the denuclearization process and the degree to which sanctions would be lifted. The bewilderment felt by many observers despite this gap stemmed in great part from early press reports that made it seem an agreement was possible based on President Trump’s extremely optimistic attitude, and on speculation that Chairman Kim would not have left North Korea for several days and travelled all the way to Vietnam unless he were confident that he would be bringing home some token of success.

Rather than examining the summit proceedings or the interactions during meetings, this paper will seek to understand the structural principles of a “deal” for denuclearization, above all the technological and political makeup of denuclearization, and to discuss what must be done in future to advance the cause of denuclearization.

Striking a balance between an interpretive gap over denuclearization and a deal

Judging from the advance press coverage, the prevailing view was that the US was not looking for a one-shot package deal encompassing complete denuclearization, a lifting of sanctions, and a declaration to end the war, but would instead accept a deal calling for denuclearization by stages while asserting complete denuclearization as its ultimate goal. In the actual negotiations, however, President Trump proposed a “big-for-big deal” that would trade complete denuclearization for a lifting of a substantial part of economic sanctions. This was reportedly rejected by North Korea ([statement by President Trump’s National Security Advisor John Bolton](#)).

It would be reasonable to believe that North Korea did not accept this “big-for-big deal” because it had

intended for the time being to hang on to its existing nuclear weapons capabilities and was not prepared to meet demands for abolishing these capabilities at the current stage. As if to reinforce this reading, a report presented by Secretary-General Amano to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors Meeting on March 4, 2019 noted that, despite the shutdown of the graphite reactor at Nyongbyon for the past few months, [there were signs that the light-water reactor remains in operation](#). Suspicions have thus arisen that what North Korea intended by “closing the Nyongbyon nuclear facilities” was not in fact to close(*) all of the facilities but instead to selectively differentiate between the facilities to be closed and those to be retained (perhaps, for instance, by asserting that the enrichment facilities are being operated for peaceful purposes and keeping them online). (* What “close” means is also subject to definition. In the past, North Korea claimed that it had “shut down” a graphite reactor, but this meant a temporary, recoverable disablement of the facility.)

According to recent press reports ([JoongAng Ilbo](#)), the US pointed out the enrichment facility concealed underground at Pungang in northwestern Nyongbyon and requested that it be included among the Nyongbyon nuclear facilities to be closed. North Korea apparently had not anticipated that the US would mention this facility. While this point is quite interesting as a matter of intelligence, it is also important in surmising North Korea’s intent. The fact that Chairman Kim lacked an adequate counterproposal for continuing the negotiations (or, in the final stages, precluded complete denuclearization but withdrew his insistence on lifting sanctions across the board) after President Trump demanded the inclusion of another enrichment facility other than the one in Nyongbyon suggests that he had essentially tried to conceal this facility in hopes of preserving a certain degree of nuclear weapon manufacturing capability. Even though North Korea has on a number of occasions expressed a willingness to denuclearize, the absence of any clear-cut mention of nuclear warheads, stockpiled nuclear materials (enriched uranium, plutonium, and tritium), nuclear material production facilities other than Nyongbyon, or its missile program would seem to indicate that North Korea had been aiming not for “complete denuclearization” but rather denuclearization by closing already-known facilities in the Nyongbyon area, i.e., “symbolic” and partial denuclearization.

These “symbolic” denuclearization tactics were meant to demonstrate to the US, South Korea and the international community that North Korea had no hostile intent by taking symbolic measures to abolish some of its capabilities without revealing the full extent of its nuclear program, endeavoring to lessen its negotiating partner’s perception of North Korea as a threat even as the latter clung on to its nuclear capability, at least for the time being. This approach aimed to establish with the US a relationship similar to the nuclear arms control regime achieved between the US and the USSR (Russia) during and after the Cold War, one that presumes possession of nuclear weapons by both the US and North Korea and thereby guarantees North Korea’s national and regime security. Such a relationship may well be North Korea’s ultimate objective in pursuing the “denuclearization” process but, at the very least, this would be unacceptable to Japan and the US. One piece of collateral evidence that this might indeed be North Korea’s policy was its statement that the Nyongbyon shutdown was to be verified by the US. Calling for verification by the US rather than verification (inspection) by the IAEA was likely another indication that North Korea wanted to follow a path resembling confidence-building between nuclear-armed states on the

principle of “trust but verify” used in the US-Russia nuclear arms control regime.

This wide gulf in thinking between the US and North Korea applied similarly to the lifting of economic sanctions. Responding to President Trump’s remarks at a post-summit press conference that no agreement had been reached because North Korea had demanded that all sanctions be lifted, the North Korean side, in the person of Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho, countered that North Korea had only requested a lifting of the sanctions connected with five UN Security Council resolutions passed since 2016. Certainly, this number of resolutions would constitute only a partial and not a full lifting of sanctions, but lifting the ban stipulated in these five UNSCRs, including one on coal and refined petroleum product imports, would be of extreme importance in maintaining the North Korean economy. Above all, a lifting of the Security Council resolutions would open the way for Chinese and Russian companies – entities not subject to the US’ unilateral sanctions – to officially resume trading with North Korea. Even if not all sanctions were lifted, it is thought that allowing economic activities with Chinese and Russian companies by removing just these sanctions would be sufficient to keep the regime in power.

From the US’ standpoint, such a move would as a practical matter mean letting go of the “stick” of sanctions and, with the future objective being not just a halt of operations at Nyongbyon but complete denuclearization, this would be too disproportionate an exchange for the closure of Nyongbyon.

While details of the negotiating process, such as whether Trump’s “big-for-big deal” proposal or North Korea’s proposal on lifting sanctions came first are not clear, it does seem clear that the differing expectations of the two sides and the results they were seeking with respect to the denuclearization measures to be carried out by North Korea as well as the degree to which sanctions were to be lifted by the US made an accord at the recent meeting extremely improbable.

Three conditions for achieving progress in negotiations

What is needed to advance future talks? Broadly speaking, three conditions must line up: (1) the two parties need to agree on the definition of “denuclearization”, (2) the deal needs to be politically sustainable, and (3) an appropriate balance needs to be found between progress in denuclearization measures and incentives granted to North Korea.

While the breakdown of the recent talks can be regarded as the price of having gone ahead with negotiations without nailing down a definition of “denuclearization”, it is questionable that the US and North Korean leaders would even have managed to meet up again if the definition of “denuclearization” had been stipulated as the starting point of negotiations. Nevertheless, the collapse of these latest talks has taught North Korea that establishing itself as a de facto nuclear-armed state through symbolic denuclearization and ensuring its own security through a nuclear arms control regime with the US will pose serious challenges, and it will be compelled to rethink its future negotiating strategy. Whether “complete denuclearization” leading to an abolition of nuclear weapons can even be accepted by North Korea is very

much in question.

This point is also linked to how US should approach the issue of defining “denuclearization”. North Korea obviously believes (at least at the present stage) that “complete denuclearization” puts its own security at great risk. Accordingly, a one-shot “big-for-big deal”, no matter how desirable in implementing a principle of “complete denuclearization”, cannot be seen as a realistic negotiating strategy for moving forward in the face of North Korea’s wariness about the security risks posed by a drastic “complete denuclearization”. It would be a different matter altogether if the US were to abandon the idea of denuclearizing North Korea and instead determine to take military action against North Korea as a nuclear-armed state itself posing nuclear threats but, as long as complete denuclearization remains the objective, there seems little choice but to adopt a staged (step-by-step) approach of one form or another.

If a step-by-step approach is adopted, then it will have to encompass sharing with North Korea “complete denuclearization” (including the dismantlement of nuclear warheads and of nuclear fissile material for nuclear weapons) as a final goal, and setting and managing benchmarks and deadlines to ensure the process moves forward. Naturally this should also entail declaring all nuclear materials, nuclear activities, and nuclear facilities, which will establish a baseline for assessing the implementation of denuclearization, and build confidence. While denuclearization will most likely include the abolition of reprocessing facilities, difficulties will undoubtedly be faced in pushing for a complete halt to enrichment, given the blurred line of demarcation between peaceful and military use in nuclear fuel cycle activities. Kazakhstan, for example, has uranium mines but outsources enrichment to Russia, but it is hard to say if North Korea would find such a model acceptable. Under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran is permitted to maintain enrichment and centrifuge production capabilities, albeit reduced in scale to the research level. If Iran is allowed such capabilities, then it would hardly be surprising for North Korea to contend that it should be similarly permitted such capabilities, claiming that it would help its economic development. In the meantime, the different stances the US has taken toward North Korea and Iran would seem to indicate that such a request would not be entirely unacceptable to the US.

It is anticipated that the US and its allies such as Japan would claim that missiles will be included as part of “complete denuclearization” (or, if they fall outside the scope of denuclearization, at least incorporated into an overall package deal). Opinions could still differ between Japan and the US on whether this would be limited to ICBMs or extend to intermediate-range forces as well, so close coordination between Japan and the US will be required.

It goes without saying that adopting a phased approach implies co-existence for some time with a nuclear-armed North Korea. This is also closely linked to the second condition: “the political sustainability” of the deal at the next stage and of the subsequent process. Political sustainability will require support in three political contexts – US domestic politics, North Korean domestic politics, and alliance politics – over the medium to long term.

Security officials in the US and in Japan can be frequently heard commenting that it was rather a good thing for achieving the goal of North Korea's complete denuclearization that a half-baked deal was not reached at this latest summit. Any deal made with North Korea must not harm the US' national interests (including nuclear non-proliferation) or the security interests of its Asia-Pacific allies, most importantly Japan. A tepid deal with no clear prospect for moving the process forward would count as a loss for President Trump as he goes into the next presidential election (although North Korea is admittedly not a major issue in domestic politics) and give his political enemies further ammunition.

In view of the fates of the JCPOA as well as the Agreed Framework and other deals with North Korea, any new deal must be able to endure a change of administration in the US, now the greatest risk to international pledges made by the US. North Korea has little incentive to conclude a deal that might be broken after a change of government in the US. Above all, the fact that Chairman Kim Jong-un himself traveled to Vietnam only to return to Pyongyang empty-handed could well make Chairman Kim as well as the North Korean negotiators in a position to advise him very wary about the next summit meeting with the US.

It does appear that North Korea had high hopes that a summit talk would be the best approach for making a deal between the two countries as no prior conclusion had been reached at the working level. However, these expectations were ultimately betrayed. Some may recall that years earlier, President Clinton's plan to visit North Korea was scuttled when the gap between the US, which was intent on drawing up an agreement between the two leaders beforehand, and North Korea, which had placed its bets on discussions between the leaders and had rejected reaching a working-level conclusion in advance, proved too wide. This latest summit constitutes an important lesson in the significance of advance negotiations.

For Japan, a half-hearted deal would have meant fixing in place for the time being a security environment requiring Japan to co-exist with a nuclear-armed North Korea with no good prospects for eradicating the nuclear threat posed by North Korea. In terms of a capability-based assessment of the threat, this would not have meant any major changes from the status quo. However, if a deal, even a bad deal, had been put together, there is an undeniable possibility that the US (and, above all, President Trump, who likes to boast of his political accomplishments) would lose interest in further negotiations and even adopt a policy of cutting spending and troop strength that should go to maintain security in East Asia. A bad deal that only addressed ICBMs and kept intermediate-range missiles out of the agreement, leaving North Korea still in possession of its nuclear warheads, would also leave Japan facing security concerns even as economic sanctions were lifted, and naturally any call to provide economic assistance to North Korea would catch the Japanese government in the middle between its relations with the US and its accountability to the Japanese public. Without going into detail on the matter, it should also be said that efforts to resolve Japan's concerns over the abduction issue is a key variable for sustainability in the context of Japan-US alliance politics, as well as of domestic politics.

Looked at from a different angle, the success of this phased approach and political sustainability will

depend on designing a scheme for denuclearization and incentives (compensation) that will grant the security guarantees and economic benefits (a lifting of sanctions and economic cooperation) sought by North Korea in stages as appropriate in keeping with the progress made in denuclearization. The third condition, therefore, is that the US, North Korea and the other stakeholders concerned find the right equilibrium point between implementing and rewarding denuclearization measures, as well as the right timing for implementation. From North Korea's standpoint, there is nothing to be gained from carrying out denuclearization measures without some form of payback. Offering up its own nuclear weapons capabilities only heightens its vulnerability, so some form of compensation in terms of security will be needed, as will tangible economic benefits within the country. Both excessive and insufficient compensation would adversely affect continuation of the process, so an incentive scheme must be formulated satisfying the requirements that North Korea (1) understand the US' determination to achieve "complete denuclearization", (2) receive sufficient economic compensation and security guarantees to encourage it to continue the process, and (3) not be given excessive lump-sum compensation that might make it feel little need to proceed any further. This is no simple task, given the differing perceptions of the final goal of negotiations (denuclearization) between the US and North Korea and the degree of risk that the leadership of the two countries must assume to bridge that gap (by concluding a major agreement).

Conclusion: The Importance of Intra-alliance Dialogue

As the US presidential election draws ever closer, President Trump should (ordinarily) be expected to become more cautious about making a bold deal that would entail taking risks. Chairman Kim in North Korea will not so readily jump onboard the "big deal" premised on "complete denuclearization" that the US is presenting, but he is faced with the dilemma of wanting to avoid a repeat of the bewildering circumstances that saw him personally take part in negotiations that did not go well. Since North Korea has much more to lose than the US from a failure of negotiations, it must be said that a more challenging process awaits it. In view of the inherent difficulties of finding a suitable equilibrium point for a deal between the two countries against this political backdrop, the US and North Korea must make more thoughtful preparations, undertake preparatory negotiations and move ahead to the next stage.

It is only natural that, as sovereign states with different geopolitical circumstances, Japan, the US and South Korea would even as allies have differing threat perceptions (i.e., differing priority rankings of issues), but the various processes leading up to the latest summit have exposed the hard truth that these natural differences have been glossed over by the framework of an "alliance". Most important for South Korea was North-South reconciliation, for Japan the neutralizing of North Korea's nuclear weapons capabilities (including missiles), and for the US president the successful conclusion of negotiations that none of his predecessors had achieved. Despite these divergent priorities, the advance coordination between the US and South Korea or between Japan and South Korea could hardly be said to have been adequate. Whether it be on negotiating tactics vis-à-vis North Korea or on forming a security order for East Asia regardless of the progress made in denuclearization, close communication is essential for sharing

ideas on the roles of the alliance and US involvement as well as a vision for the future regional order.
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