



South Korea's Denuclearization Policy: A Never Ending Story?

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After the breakdown of the second US-North Korea summit, many people regarded the South Korean government as the biggest failure. It is rather apparent that the South Korean government did not anticipate the sudden rupture in the negotiations; there were reports that South Korean President Moon Jae-in and his senior staff had even planned to gather to watch the signing ceremony of the agreement in Hanoi on TV at the Blue House. On the other hand, Japanese media reports said that Prime Minister Abe Shinzo had been informed by the US government that there was a chance of a walkout because the US had prepared three options, including “no agreement.” It is uncertain whether the South Korean government had the detailed US negotiation plan or not. But it is very clear that it had high expectations the summit would end in some kind of agreement between the US and the DPRK.

It is no secret that the ROK and the US have different perceptions and approaches to the denuclearization of North Korea. The South Korean government does acknowledge the importance of sanctions on North Korea, yet it keeps emphasizing that sanctions alone are not the ultimate goal; rather, they should be used to induce meaningful denuclearization measures. In other words, sanctions can be relaxed even in advance as an incentive for North Korea's actions. On the other hand, the US government has emphasized the necessity and importance of sanctions and reiterated its intentions to maintain them until complete denuclearization has been achieved.

The US government perception on the importance of sanctions has been reinforced since the Hanoi summit. With growing suspicion over North Korea's willingness to give up its nuclear program, the US sense of the effectiveness of sanctions was confirmed when Chairman Kim

himself accidentally revealed North Korea's weakness during the summit, saying "we don't have time." However, the South Korean government has maintained an obsession with sanction relief, and is clearly chafing to resume inter-Korean projects such as the Geumgang Mountain tours and operation of the Kaesong industrial complex. On March 6, right after the Hanoi summit, South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Ambassador Lee Do-hoon met with United States Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun in Washington. The main purpose of the visit was to hear the full results of the Hanoi summit and discuss possible next steps. However, it is also known that Ambassador Lee brought up the subject of resuming inter-Korean projects, because despite the breakdown of the Hanoi summit, President Moon vividly expressed his willingness to "consult with the United States on ways to resume tourism to Geumgang Mountain and the operation of the Kaesong Industrial Complex" in his address made on March 1st, South Korea's Independence Movement Day. However, the US high official who met Ambassador Lee had an unplanned press briefing right after the meeting and said that the administration was "not" reviewing exemptions from sanctions for the Kaesong Industrial Complex or tourism of Mt. Geumgang. This is just one episode where the ROK has deviated from US denuclearization policy.

More fundamentally, the ROK and the United States have different perceptions on the definition of denuclearization. Special Representative Biegun mentioned on January 31st that "there was no detailed definition or shared agreement of what denuclearization entails" between the US and the DPRK. US National Security Adviser John Bolton stated that one major reason that the US gave a "big deal" document during the summit was to deliver the American definition of denuclearization in written form. On the other hand, it is well-known that the DPRK's definition of denuclearization is not the denuclearization of North Korea alone, but the denuclearization of the entire Korean Peninsula, which demands the removal of the US nuclear threat first, according to commentary from the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) made on December 20th 2018. In spite of the explicit discrepancy between the US and DPRK, the South Korean government keeps mentioning that there is no difference in the definition of denuclearization between the US, North Korea, and South Korea, as most recently reiterated by ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa in March after the summit.

There is no doubt that in order to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea, very close cooperation between South Korea and the US is imperative. For that purpose, the South Korean government needs to have a "principled denuclearization policy." Going back to the presidential election in 2017, then-candidate Moon Jae-in and his party suggested a two-stage approach of

freezing and abandonment as a method for North Korean denuclearization. It was an approach that put a freeze on the nuclear program as an initial step and complete denuclearization as the exit point at the final phase. After the US decided to have a summit with North Korea in March 2018, the South Korean government's denuclearization policy shifted to an "all-in-one" approach. This approach puts everything in a box and comes up with a solution at once. Within a certain time limit, if North Korea should dismantle all of its WMDs first, the US would meet that with corresponding measures including the lifting of all sanctions and the normalization of relationships with the North at the end of complete denuclearization. However, when this approach faced vociferous opposition from the North, the South government suggested an approach of "comprehensive agreement and phased implementation." This is a compromise between the all-in-one approach favored by the US and the phased and synchronized approach advocated by the North. The US and the North need to agree on a road map with a clearly defined end state and a defined concept of denuclearization; yet, the implementation of actual denuclearization measures must be phased and include corresponding compensation measures.

During the Singapore summit when the US agreed with the North's approach to denuclearization, which is a synchronized and phased approach, the South Korean government also swiftly supported it. Especially after the Pyongyang inter-Korean summit in September 2018, the South Korean government has focused on the dismantlement of the Yongbyon facility with an emphasis on a lifting of sanctions as a corresponding measure. In October, ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa mentioned the possibility of lifting the South's unilateral sanctions, i.e. the May 24th measures, in the National Assembly.

However, after the Hanoi summit in February 2019, the South Korean government once again changed its denuclearization policy with symbolic words such as "good enough deal" and "early harvest." This is an approach that is similar to the South's previous suggestion of a "comprehensive agreement and phased implementation." During the Hanoi summit, the US demanded "a big deal or a grand bargain" with "a total solution." The South Korean government has considered US demands of an all-or-nothing type of approach to be unrealistic, and insisted on a compromise between the US and North Korea. According to a South Korean senior official, "in order to see meaningful progress in the denuclearization talks, there should first be trust-building measures, which I will call an 'early harvest'." Moon Chung-in, a special adviser for foreign affairs and national security, has explained South Korean government policy as "a compromise such as a comprehensive agreement on the exchange of FFVD for what Pyongyang wants, one that is implemented incrementally based on a mutually acceptable road map."

As usual, the current South Korean government's approach has invited another round of debate. Some argue that since it is far from what the US has pursued, it will widen the gap between South Korea and the US. Others insist that it is inevitable to have step-by-step implementation even if the US and the North agree on the road map that includes a definition of denuclearization and the end state of the process.

Considering the complexity of the North's denuclearization and the various unpredictable factors which will be difficult, if not impossible, to control over the coming years during the process of denuclearization, it is very difficult to come up with a singular, fixed approach. However, it is this very complexity which makes the best approach one that goes back to the basics. Because the South Korean government has continually changed its approach to reflect fluctuating circumstances, it places the South betwixt and between. Seoul has been criticized by both Washington and Pyongyang. The US government implicitly expressed its grievance that the South has not actively put pressure on the North to accept a total solution. The North Korean government has insisted that the South should not be a mediator but a player together with the North to compete against the US.

It is time to end the "never ending story" of South Korea's denuclearization policy making. Although there a perfect, complete, and impeccable approach does not exist, the South must strive to at least lead the situation, not be led by outside circumstances. Previous EAI commentators have suggested a comprehensive policy for the North's denuclearization (Global NK Commentary, March 6 2019, November 14 2018), and hold that just remembering the basics vis-a-vis denuclearization will be sufficient to start the process in earnest. The definition of denuclearization should be clarified first. Without that, no matter what fancy words people use, the situation will end by accepting the North as a de facto nuclear weapons state. The North's nuclear program should be frozen right away. The moratorium on testing is not an actual step towards denuclearization. A road map that includes reporting, verification, and dismantlement should be agreed upon as the end state. "Not a word, but a deed" needs to be implemented in the early stages. The North should carry out their promised dismantlement of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site and Tongchang-ri missile site with verification.

At the same time, it is unrealistic to believe that denuclearization can proceed without any corresponding measures being taken by the US and the South until the denuclearization process has been completed. The best way is to divide the whole denuclearization process into two phases. In the first phase, with the agreed-upon road map that includes a definition and end state of denuclearization, the North should give up and dismantle its essential capabilities. Upon verification, the North needs to receive some corresponding measures, including a partial lifting of sanctions.

The second stage is to complete the denuclearization of the North and come up with a peace regime for the Korean Peninsula.

It is time for the South Korean government to stop trying to follow and to develop a “Seoul Process” for denuclearization of the North in a way that will last, and finally, to lead the process.

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