



## On the Way to the Third US-North Korea Summit: South Korea's Diplomatic Task for 2019

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This year has emerged as an important period as North Korea has set a deadline for negotiations for one year after the collapse of the Hanoi negotiations. If the third summit between the US and North Korea does not go smoothly early next year, 2020 will prove to be a difficult year in the process of North Korea's denuclearization. North Korea has already test-fired short-range ballistic missiles, signaling it will return to building up its nuclear arsenal if denuclearization negotiations do not go smoothly. The regime is also likely to focus on ensuring stability both domestically and among its allies as it works actively with China and Russia, as well as continuing to pursue independent economic development strategies. It is hard to imagine that President Trump will be willing to take bold and preemptive measures attempting to persuade North Korea to denuclearize as the US political situation heats up ahead of the 2020 presidential elections. Past experiences teaches that while a failure in negotiations with North Korea is a major detriment to American presidential approval ratings, successful negotiations do not play a decisive role in the outcome of domestic American politics. If the next year passes with no breakthrough in the current standoff between the US and North Korea, the mid to long-term situation will be determined by the level of North Korea's nuclear growth and the next president's strategy on North Korea, whether that is Trump or someone else.

Ultimately, how this year is spent will determine whether or not there will be a successful third US-North Korea Summit. At the 14<sup>th</sup> Supreme People's Assembly, Kim Jong Un appeared to continue his efforts to stabilize the regime following his generational succession to the leadership, placing a relatively reduced emphasis on the strength of the military and a greater focus on building

up the economy, science and education. At a political level, the regime has stabilized, but it is anticipated that only remarkable economic achievements after the declaration of its successful rise to the status of nuclear state will allow it to maintain stable governance in the long run. The denuclearization of North Korea is a process that guarantees the stability of the regime and its system externally, and economic development will solidify the legitimacy of Kim Jong Un's leadership through tangible results.

The US continues to put pressure and impose sanctions on North Korea in the current state where a complete halt to the North's nuclear ambitions is not guaranteed. Talks in Hanoi went nowhere after a massive lead-up, but it is inevitable that further negotiations will take place as it is certain that North Korea will continue to develop its nuclear and missile capabilities. Complete and verified denuclearization will move forward only if both sides present and agree upon objectives for the denuclearization process and pledge to adhere to proper verification procedures for freezing North Korea's nuclear facilities. Many US strategists also insist that the agreed-upon denuclearization concept include a denuclearization implementation procedure that is as compressed as possible.

The problem is that these processes require each party to go through a period of trust-building and seeking of rational alternatives. No firm agreement or clear progress emerged from the DPRK-US summit in Hanoi, the ROK-US summit, or the DPRK-Russia summit. That does not mean there have been no achievements. North Korea's denuclearization process by definition involves a variety of summit-level conversations, and is currently in the middle of exploring how realistic the alternatives are and what level of negotiations can be agreed upon internationally. Off-the-table negotiations are therefore still a meaningful part of this process. If done well, they could succeed in building trust between all parties involved.

What efforts should be made now to ensure that this year's apparent lack of clear progress leads to trust-building and the search for reasonable alternatives? First, the basic principles of the denuclearization roadmap should be reaffirmed. Denuclearization and the creation of a peace regime must be pursued in parallel as they are both key to guaranteeing North Korea's regime, and it is only through such a guarantee that North Korea can realize denuclearization. The peace regime lies at the very heart of concluding a peace treaty, but is a far more comprehensive process. Trust between the two Koreas, the United States, and China must be built first, and this will inevitably be based on long-term mutual negotiations and successes. Various factors such as confidence building and arms reduction, which are essential elements for a peace regime, proceed differently according to the trust-building process.

Second, full-fledged discussions and negotiations are required to provide the North Korean regime with the security it needs. Although North Korea's denuclearization will take place amidst a full declaration of nuclear assets, verification, and the easing of economic sanctions, ultimately, political, military and security guarantees for North Korea will emerge as the most important agenda. Last year, North Korea demanded a military security guarantee in advance of beginning the denuclearization process. This demand was made within the frame of security vs. security, such as the declaration of the end of the war and the complete suspension of ROK-US military exercises. However, now that the declaration of the end of the war has stalled, the framework has shifted to one of security vs. the economy, with North Korea focusing its demands on the lifting of economic sanctions. North Korea hopes to gain not only economic benefits, but also through this process intends to verify the sincerity of the ROK-US response and gain a sense of security. After this period, it will eventually demand security-security and military-security guarantees. Even if the complete dismantling of the Yongbyon nuclear facilities and the partial demobilization of North Korea's other nuclear facilities were to have occurred through a small deal in Hanoi, the government would have demanded a physical security guarantee, or a verifiable withdrawal of the hostile policy towards the North after a certain period of time. In the absence of any satisfactory regime guarantee, North Korea will cease negotiations after it reaps economic rewards in the wake of the termination of sanctions, which will be perceived by the United States as a violation of the terms of negotiation and by North Korea as an inevitable consequence of imperfect regime guarantees. Therefore, the conditions for guaranteeing political, military and security systems should be thoroughly discussed in parallel in order to establish a long-term peace regime.

Military agreements between South and North Korea are not sufficient to dismantle all existing nuclear weapons and to ensure safety. A security guarantee mechanism in Northeast Asia, including the US and China, is essential. Moreover, at a time when the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China is accelerating, the government must consider how to guarantee the security of North Korea's military internationally. South Korea should engage in multilateral and multidimensional strategic dialogues with the US, China, and other Northeast Asian countries regarding what a peace regime in North Korea would look like. Currently, the North Korean nuclear issue is rapidly declining as a priority in the US due to Venezuela and other complicated domestic factors ahead of the presidential elections, and the North's missile launches are once again raising skepticism over Kim Jong Un's true willingness to denuclearize. While the voices calling for stronger sanctions are expected to grow, South Korea is increasing the urgency of its effort to create an overall roadmap for denuclearization. It is particularly necessary to engage in strategic dialogues

with US strategists who are insisting on realistic negotiations with North Korea.

Third, even at the current stalled stage of denuclearization, measures must continue to be taken towards North Korea to build trust. There is not necessarily a conflict between maintaining economic sanctions against North Korea and providing humanitarian aid and social and cultural exchanges. It appears that a fundamental distrust of the international community is driving North Korea to seek military means to respond to the unwillingness to ease sanctions. To counter this, measures that do not conflict with the existing sanctions must be found and implemented.

A pressing question is what will incentivize North Korea at this stage. It is clear that vague rhetoric about the country's bright future and the realization of its economic potential are not persuasive to the regime. Thus, a package of visible and specific strategic engagement should be prepared. Alternative options such as the North Korea Fund proposed by Gen. Vincent Brooks, the former commander of the USFK, could be helpful. This proposal aims to strengthen trust by collecting substantial funds at an international level, creating an aid fund through a highly visible process to show North Korea that the international community is willing to make an effort.

Fourth, the close connection between denuclearization, the improvement of inter-Korean relations, and South Korea's diplomacy with great powers must be recognized. Currently, South Korea's diplomacy faces the criticism that it is overly focused on North Korea policy, losing sight of regional power politics. Of course, the government has been carrying out diplomacy toward neighboring countries as well. The problem is the relative pace of how preemptively South Korean diplomacy reads and responds to changes at a time when the diplomatic landscape in Northeast Asia and Asia is being reshuffled around US-China competition. If the ROK government does not act fast enough, their efforts will not be fully recognized.

Some may think that South Korea will obtain a great deal of political and diplomatic capital if denuclearization is achieved. But such capital will not be decisive amid the changes in the Asian landscape. Rather, the denuclearization issue is likely to lose its regional significance and become isolated as the US alliance remains centered on the Indo-Pacific strategy, alliances shift, and the strategies of neighboring countries approach a level of confrontation in response to China's BRI strategy. We must realize that South Korea's failures in its diplomatic efforts toward neighboring countries translate into the setting adrift of the delicate denuclearization process. When regional diplomacy in Asia and diplomacy with neighboring powers is carried out wisely, it is possible to push ahead with denuclearization as well. South Korea's strategy toward denuclearization and regional power politics are not in a zero-sum relationship, and both diplomatic horizons and diplomatic means must be broadened and strengthened.

Ultimately, the key factor which requires attention is what must be prepared now in order to ensure that an agreement that goes beyond the intermediate stage of denuclearization is reached in the first half of next year. We cannot produce tangible results immediately. South Korea must systematically strengthen diplomacy towards neighboring countries while also building the basis of trust with North Korea and leading international and working-level dialogues to ensure the security of North Korea's regime. In order to completely denuclearize North Korea, South Korea must spend this year figuring out how to combine a roadmap to the full declaration of nuclear assets and a nuclear freeze and verification with an appropriate degree of rewards from South Korea and the US and the provision of a roadmap to guarantee the regime's security.

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