



# North Korean Nuclear Diplomacy

Andrew Yeo (The Catholic University of America)

North Korean nuclear diplomacy has stalled since the second Trump-Kim summit held in Hanoi one year ago. Although President Trump and Chairman Kim may still surprise the world with an unexpected third summit meeting, a breakthrough in nuclear diplomacy is unlikely to occur prior to the US presidential elections in November 2020. Given domestic political realities, what are the prospects of US-North Korea relations under a potential second Trump administration or a new Democrat administration?

Drawing on recent public statements from the leading Democratic presidential candidates during interviews with the [New York Times](#) and [Council on Foreign Relations](#) (CFR), this essay evaluates the likelihood of diplomatic engagement with North Korea under different post-2020 election scenarios. The US foreign policy establishment overall remains [skeptical](#) on improved US-North Korea relations. However, assuming that the North Koreans return to the diplomatic table, renewed negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington appear more likely if a progressive Democratic candidate enters the White House than under either a moderate Democrat or a second-term Trump administration.

## The Progressive Democratic Candidates

Among the candidates for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, Senator Elizabeth Warren and Senator Bernie Sanders appear most open to diplomatic engagement with North Korea than others. When the [New York Times](#) asked candidates in December 2019 whether they would

continue the personal diplomacy begun by President Trump with Kim Jong-un even without significant nuclear concessions, Warren and Sanders were the only two candidates to respond in the affirmative. Warren distinguished her approach from President Trump by stating such diplomacy would not be part of a “vanity project” but would have to be “part of a clear strategy, with substantive agreement already reached at the working level, and developed in close coordination with our allies and partners.”

The two progressive candidates were more open to lifting economic sanctions in return for limited concessions from North Korea. Sanders and Warren stated they would not tighten sanctions, and both would offer sanctions relief in return for a North Korean freeze on fissile material development. For both candidates, sanctions relief did not require the North Koreans to make substantial progress on disarmament upfront.

Sanders articulated a “step-by-step” approach to rolling back North Korea’s nuclear program, stating that peace and disarmament must move in parallel. Sanders also advanced the goal of building “a new peace and security regime on the peninsula” and working “in close consultations with our South Korean ally.” Warren also offered a stepwise approach stating, “A pragmatic approach to diplomacy requires give and take on both sides, not demands that one side unilaterally disarm first.”

Warren clarified her position on sanctions by further stating that she would consider “partial, time-limited sanctions relief and other confidence-building measures in exchange for a strong, verifiable agreement that freezes North Korea’s nuclear and missile activities.” Warren is also the only candidate to explicitly mention the importance of inter-Korea dialogue moving in tandem with denuclearization negotiations as a means of working towards “a stable security architecture” for the Korean peninsula.

### **The Centrist Democratic Candidates**

In contrast to Sanders and Warren, none of the centrist Democratic candidates stated they would continue President Trump’s personal diplomacy with North Korea—at least not without gaining significant nuclear concessions from Pyongyang first. Former US vice president Joseph Biden and former New York City mayor and businessman Michael Bloomberg appeared tougher on sanctions than their progressive counterparts. Biden supported tighter sanctions on North Korea. Bloomberg did not favor increasing sanctions. However, he signaled reluctance to remove sanctions unless North Korea placed a freeze on its missile program in addition to fissile material production.

The use of military force to pre-empt a North Korean nuclear or missile test also remained an open option for Biden and Bloomberg.

Similar to Bloomberg, Mayor Pete Buttigieg remained open to an initial freeze agreement with North Korea in exchange for halting nuclear and missile tests (in addition to freezing its nuclear program). Buttigieg proposed “targeted sanctions relief, which could be reversed if the North Koreans did not uphold their end of the bargain.” But like Biden, and in contrast to Sanders and Warren, Buttigieg argued that substantial disarmament is needed before offering any sanctions relief. Likewise, Senator Klobuchar’s campaign released a brief response in line with Buttigieg’s remarks in that she is “prepared to offer incentives for positive actions, but these must be tied directly to verifiable and irreversible steps toward denuclearization.”

## **The Trump Administration**

To their credit, the Trump administration did not completely abandon diplomacy after the failed Hanoi Summit. In October 2019, US and North Korean officials held working level discussions in Stockholm. And as late as December 2019, the special U.S. envoy for North Korea, Stephen Biegun, traveled to Tokyo and Seoul in hopes of resuming denuclearization talks with North Korea before the end of the year. Unfortunately, the Stockholm meeting ended abruptly, and the North Koreans rejected further negotiations without first seeing a [change in attitude](#) from the Trump administration.

Despite efforts at building trust and finding a package acceptable to North Koreans in return for denuclearization, the Trump government will unlikely reduce sanctions without North Korea taking further steps towards declaration, verification, and dismantlement of its nuclear program. This position has been articulated repeatedly by the Trump administration since 2018. Barring some major provocation or concession from Pyongyang, there is no reason to believe that President Trump will deviate from his current position if re-elected, despite having four more years to build on a potential major foreign policy legacy should denuclearization (and the normalization of US-North Korea relations) be realized.

## **Prospects for US-North Korea Relations**

From conflict with Iran to his own impeachment trial, other international and domestic crises have overshadowed diplomacy with North Korea making it unlikely that Trump will restart

negotiations with Pyongyang prior to the November elections. It is possible that Kim Jong-un may reach out to President Trump again should he be re-elected in November. This is particularly true if Kim believes Trump can be flattered into lifting partial sanctions for a minimal freeze. However, two previous high stakes summit meetings with Trump did not produce any sanctions relief.

From North Korea's vantage point, the prospects for US-North Korea relations look more promising under a Sanders or Warren White House as both have essentially stated their openness to dialogue without placing an emphasis on preconditions. When considering multilateral negotiations, Sanders and Warren's position may find greater standing in Beijing which has also encouraged a phased approach to denuclearization with the broader aim of establishing a peace regime. Beijing may therefore encourage (or pressure) Pyongyang to resume talks with Washington should it find the US position more amenable to its own.

To North Korea, the position of the more moderate Democratic candidates, Biden and Bloomberg in particular, may not look all that different from past administrations. Thus under a moderate Democrat White House, US-North Korea relations may remain largely unchanged unless a major shift in external conditions prompt a policy shift.

One point worth mentioning is the consistent position all Democratic contenders have taken in declaring their support for maintaining US military presence on the Korean peninsula, and working closely with US allies on North Korean denuclearization. Unfortunately, only one candidate, Michael Bloomberg, chose to address US-North Korea relations in more comprehensive terms (at least when prompted to discuss a denuclearization strategy). In response to the CFR questionnaire, Bloomberg stated, "the scope of U.S. sanctions on North Korea should be tied to the country's behavior – on human rights, on cyber-crime and, most importantly, on its expanding nuclear and ballistic missile programs." Biden was the only other candidate to mention human rights, but only in the context of critiquing Trump's approach to North Korea.

It is still too early to tell which Democratic candidate will secure his or her party's presidential nomination, or whether any Democrat can successfully challenge Donald Trump, the Republican incumbent for the White House. Regardless of who wins, the next president will certainly face challenges in restarting negotiations with North Korea. Flexibility and patience, and coordination with US allies and regional actors, are some of the lessons the next administration, whether Democrat or Republican, might learn from past success and failures in negotiating with North Korea.

*Note: This commentary does not serve as an endorsement for any particular candidate, but provides an analysis of US-North Korea relations based on public position statements of presidential candidates and the incumbent US administration.*

- *Andrew Yeo* is an associate professor of politics at the Catholic University of America in Washington DC and currently a Fulbright visiting research fellow at the University of the Philippines Diliman. He received his Ph.D. in Government from Cornell University. His publications include *Asia's Regional Architecture: Alliances and Institutions in the Pacific Century* (Stanford University Press, 2019), *North Korean Human Rights: Activists and Networks* (Cambridge University Press 2018); *Activists, Alliances, and Anti-U.S. Base Protests* (Cambridge University Press 2011); and *Living in an Age of Mistrust: An Interdisciplinary Study of Declining Trust in Contemporary Society and Politics and How to get it Back* (Routledge Press 2017). His research interests include international relations theory, Asian security, narratives and discourse, the formation of beliefs, ideas, and worldviews, civil society, social and transnational movements, U.S. grand strategy and global force posture, Korean politics, and North Korea.

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

"North Korean Nuclear Diplomacy"

Date of Issue: 24 February 2020

979-11-90315-57-9 95340

Typesetting: Jinkyung Baek

For inquiries:

Jinkyung Baek, Research Associate/Project Manager

North Korea and National Security Research Group

Asia Democracy Research Group

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 209)

j.baek@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute

#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,

Seoul 04548, South Korea

Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697

Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr