



# No Way Out?: US-North Korea Denuclearization Negotiations

Won Gon Park (Handong Global University)

Since the surprise meeting between President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un in Panmunjom on June 30, US-DPRK talks have halted. Immediately after the meeting, President Trump proudly stated that working-level talks between the US and DPRK would take place “within two to three weeks.” However, North Korea has chosen not to engage in further talks, and instead has resumed military provocations by launching ballistic missiles and rockets.

North Korea denounced the ROK-US joint military drill in August and used it as an excuse to continue testing new weapons. President Trump, meanwhile, continues to insist that those tests by the North are “not a violation of promises” and showed off a letter from Chairman Kim that included a “small apology” for the testing and a promise to re-open talks after the ROK-US joint military exercise is finished.

However, as of early September, North Korea has refused to hold any kind of talks with the US. Using state media, North Korea keeps blaming the US for this refusal. On August 31, North Korea’s Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui railed against US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo’s remark that Pyongyang was guilty of “rogue behavior” as “just improper language, which the US administration will surely regret.” She also warned that “hopes for talks with Washington are fading and the US should not put (North Korea’s) patience to the test any longer.” A week before Choe made this statement, DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho released a similar statement calling Secretary Pompeo a “diehard toxin” who only complicates denuclearization talks and insisting that the North is “ready for both dialogue and a standoff.” It is also known that Ri will not attend the United Nations General Assembly in New York this September. If he were to attend, it

could lead to a meeting with Pompeo. However, North Korea has deliberately refused any kind of meeting with the US so far.

North Korea's intentions for denuclearization talks are becoming clear— they do not want to have the promised working-level talks unless the US changes its “grand bargain” to a “total solution” and accepts North Korea's synchronized and phased approach. It is a well-known fact that North Korea would prefer a summit over working-level talks. After the failed Hanoi summit, several American participants expressed frustration over the difficulties in proceeding in negotiations with their North Korean counterparts at the working level because, simply, they kept saying “they do not have any authority to negotiate about denuclearization issues. Only their supreme leader can decide.” As the US has maintained a consistent policy since Hanoi, North Korea knows that it cannot get what it wants in working-level talks. North Korea has actually denied high-level dialogue as well. The aforementioned Ri and Choe are two possible counterparts for Pompeo, yet they are clearly showing that they have no intention of talking with him. This means that the only remaining option for the North vis-à-vis dialogue with the US is another summit. Because President Trump is an unconventional leader whose style is without precedent in the US, it seems that the North is betting on him alone.

North Korea has not retreated from the position that it took in Hanoi. North Korea wants to have corresponding measures to accompany the dismantlement of the Yongbyon nuclear facilities. There is just one difference that can be noticed after Hanoi in terms of compensation, which is an emphasis on security guarantees. Following Chairman Kim's statement in his state address on April 12 that “we will no longer obsess over lifting sanctions imposed by the hostile forces,” in his meetings with Russian and Chinese counterparts, he has continued to call for security guarantees in return for denuclearization. North Korea's recent criticisms of the ROK-US joint exercises and deployment of strategic assets on and around the Korean Peninsula can be understood in light of its demands for security guarantees.

So far, President Trump has delivered at least two failed messages to the world about the US dialogue with North Korea. He announced that the North would come to the working-level negotiation table after the Panmunjom meeting in June, and stated the same once more after the ROK-US joint military drill finished in August. President Trump also echoed Chairman Kim's argument about the joint drill, saying that it's “a total waste of money.” The US Congress and diplomatic and security communities, as well as US media, have criticized Trump's attitude and policy toward North Korea. The North may have expectations that if it continues to refuse talks with the US and conducts limited provocations, President Trump will change his policy and come

up with a more flexible approach to denuclearization because of domestic pressures, which could have a negative impact on his re-election.

However, there are no signs that the US will change its policy on the denuclearization of North Korea. National Security Advisor John Bolton said on August 14, “what President Trump called the big deal...is to make that strategic decision to give up nuclear weapons, and then implement it and then all kinds of things are possible after that.” The US still wants North Korea to make a strategic decision to give up nuclear weapons by agreeing to the US definition of denuclearization; freezing all nuclear and missile development; and agreeing to a roadmap including reporting, inspections, and dismantlement. The US also demands that the North dismantle not only the Yongbyon nuclear site, but also other facilities that produce highly enriched uranium. Sanction lifts will follow after North Korea has implemented meaningful denuclearization measures.

Chairman Kim said on April 12, “if the United States proposed holding a third round of summit talks after finding out with a proper attitude a methodology that can be shared with us, we would be willing to try one more time.” He also stated that “we will be patient and wait till the end of this year to see whether the United States makes a courageous decision or not.” These statements imply that he “may be compelled to find a new way of defending the sovereignty of the country and the supreme interests of the state and for achieving peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.”

The problem is that if the US does not change its policy by the end of this year, North Korea will take “a new way,” yet there is no real alternative for the North. The North Korean economy has been deteriorating since 2016. The North had -3.5% economic growth in 2017, and -4.1% in 2018, according to the Bank of Korea. The current economic sanctions promise to deplete North Korea's foreign currency reserves in the not-so-distant future. Another challenge that the Pyongyang leadership faces is rising expectations. Because North Koreans have witnessed a series of summits, it is not unlikely that they may have higher expectations of getting out from under the economic sanctions and enjoying a better quality of life. The higher the expectations, the greater the frustration when such hopes are not fulfilled. If North Korea chooses to resume its nuclear and ICBM tests as its “new way,” the Trump administration will once again return to the strategy of maximum pressure, including military options. China and Russia will not be able to actively protect and support North Korea if this occurs as both have their own issues with the US. On top of that, although President Trump will face serious criticisms if the North resumes its tests, it has been shown already in numerous cases that Trump does not mind blaming others and rapidly changing his policies.

As a result, time is not on North Korea's side. If the US continues to impose sanctions,

North Korea's new way could lead to meaningful denuclearization steps. Yet one important variable that we should be cautious about in this process is Trump's tendency towards unilateral decision-making when it comes to security matters. As mentioned previously, North Korea wants the US to provide security guarantees in the form of the permanent suspension of ROK-US joint military exercises and the end to the deployment of strategic assets in South Korea. Trump has expressed very negative views on this issue several times. It is expected that the ROK and the US will have very tough negotiations on burden sharing in the coming months. The termination of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) by the South Korean government also has a negative impact on the ROK-US alliance. Under the circumstances, the possibility that Trump will use important security matters for South Korea as corresponding measures to denuclearize North Korea should not be excluded. The South Korean government should be aware of this and exercise caution so as not to place the country in a fragile security situation.

- *Won Gon Park* (wonpark@handong.edu) is a professor at the School of International Studies at Handong Global University. He is also a member of the Policy Advisory Board of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Unification for the Republic of Korea.

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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