While the oversized personalities of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump tend to dominate global attention on the continuing efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, the peace initiative of South Korean President Moon Jae-in — the man in the middle — is increasingly pivotal to how things evolve among all of the players in this complex diplomatic drama.
The Road Remains Open: Moon Jae-in’s Berlin Speech As a Pathway to Peace
By S. Nathan Park

The speech given in Berlin by South Korean President Moon Jae-in July 2017 provided a roadmap to achieve peace on the Korean Peninsula through denuclearization. Moon was clear that, first, it was necessary to respond with force and sanctions to North Korean provocation, and, second, a durable peace regime could be built through trust, exchanges and negotiations.

Moon’s process was working until the Trump-Kim Hanoi summit collapsed in February, writes S. Nathan Park, but rather than tear up the roadmap, it is time to figure out where the process went off course and resume the journey.

SOUTH KOREAN President Moon Jae-in is known as an excellent player of Go, as good as possible without going pro. In an interview about his game, Moon said the good thing about Go was the process of reviewing an entire previously played game, called bokgi in Korean: “Through bokgi, you can retrace your errors. As you conduct bokgi, you can reflect on why you made such a move, whether there was a better alternative.”

As a crucial mediator between North Korea and the United States, Moon has enjoyed a great deal of success, stabilizing a situation that once appeared headed toward nuclear war. But Moon’s capacity as a mediator has diminished with the failure of the second US-North Korea summit, held in Hanoi in February. Here, then, is the perfect opportunity for Moon — and anyone else who hopes for diplomatic progress — to apply the lesson from Go: retrace the moves and assess which led to success and which to an impasse. The speech at the Körber Foundation in Berlin on July 6, 2017, was Moon’s first major speech as president concerning North Korea and the moment he began his diplomatic game. It has been the roadmap Moon has followed as his brand of diplomacy, which is why the speech is the appropriate place to begin the review.

THE BERLIN SPEECH ROADMAP
In the Berlin speech, Moon made clear what occupies the highest priority in inter-Korean relations: “The biggest challenge the Korean Peninsula is facing is the North Korean nuclear issue.” It is in regard to North Korea’s nuclear program that Moon issued the closest thing to a threat in the speech: “[I]f North Korea does not stop its nuclear provocations, there is no other choice but to further strengthen sanctions and pressure. Peace on the Korean Peninsula and North Korea’s security will not be guaranteed.”

To denuclearize North Korea, the speech proposes a “peace regime,” a new international climate that would fundamentally transform the hostile relationship between North Korea, on the one hand, and South Korea and the United States, on the other, and achieve North Korea’s denuclearization as a part of this transformative process. The peace regime will rely on economic co-operation and regular nonpolitical exchanges between the two Koreas to build trust. With greater trust, the two Koreas would engage in a step-by-step and comprehensive approach toward the complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea. This makes the Berlin speech particularly ambitious, because the vision is not focused on denuclearization alone. Rather, it seeks to change the entire structure within which the two Koreas operate, of which North Korea’s nuclear program is a part.

The Berlin speech, then, can be summarized into two major action plans: first, respond in a reciprocal manner with additional sanctions and a show of force against North Korea’s nuclear and missile provocations; and, second, construct a durable peace regime that would institutionalize peace through regular non-political exchanges, and denuclearize North Korea as a part of this peace process.

Moon would carry out these action plans in three stages: 1) from mid-2017 to early 2018, during which South Korea showed a willingness to respond strongly to North Korea’s provocations with hawkish signaling of its own; 2) from early 2018 to September 2018, during which Moon played a critical role as the mediator to bring the US and North Korea to the negotiating table, setting the foundation for the construction of the peace regime; and 3) from September 2018 and thereafter, during which South Korea faced mixed results in building the peace regime.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BERLIN SPEECH IN THREE ACTS
In the first act, as North Korea escalated tension, Moon displayed reciprocal hawkishness. The North Korean nuclear crisis was already well under way by the time Moon gave his Berlin speech, and the tension continued to increase through early 2018. On Aug. 8, 2017, a month after the speech, US intelligence reports said North Korea successfully produced a miniaturized nuclear warhead capable of being mounted on an intercontinental ballistic missile and fired at the US. On Nov. 28, 2017, North Korea successfully tested the Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile, capable of reaching any part of the continental US.

Those who paint Moon as a dovish figure eager to kowtow to the North Korean regime tend to forget how his administration responded in this period — with a show of force that went toe-to-toe with North Korea’s provocations. In a press conference held on the same day as the Berlin speech, Moon called for an “even greater level of international sanctions and pressure.” At the time, I termed this approach a “Sunburn Policy” — inheriting the Sunshine Policy of South Korea’s liberal predecessors Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, but adding a hawkish edge that would apply pressure to North Korea as necessary. On July 5, 2017, just a day before the speech, Moon ordered his own missile test jointly with US forces in South Korea, saying: “North Korea’s serious provocation is not a situation that can be responded with merely a statement.” Following North Korea’s missile test on July 29, 2017, Moon again took the initiative to conduct joint US-
South Korea ballistic missile testing, as well as a joint air force drill with the US’s B-1B bomber and South Korea’s F-15K fighters. South Korea’s hawkish turn was not a passing phase, as Moon also took long-term steps to improve South Korea’s military readiness. On Sept. 7, 2017, he ordered the full deployment of the controversial US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, a missile defense system intended to protect troops from North Korea’s medium to intermediate range ballistic missiles. Moon also made the largest increase in South Korea’s defense budget in a decade. In addition, he lobbied US President Donald Trump to loosen the restraints placed on South Korea’s military technology. Accordingly, South Korea gained the ability to develop its own missiles with greater range and payload, as well as a nuclear-powered submarine.

This was followed by the second act, what might be called the “maximum engagement” phase — beginning with North Korea’s participation in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics and culminating in the historic summit between leaders of North Korea and the US. In this phase, Moon negotiated with Kim Jong Un to achieve most of the smaller initiatives proposed in the Berlin speech, laying the foundation for more fruitful diplomacy in the future.

Following North Korea’s participation in the Winter Olympic Games, on April 27, 2018, the two Koreas held the third-ever inter-Korean summit at Panmunjom, which resulted in the Panmunjom Declaration: 1) inter-Korean interaction toward reunification; 2) reduction of military tensions; and 3) establishment of a permanent and firm peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. The two Koreas also agreed, as part of the effort toward a peace regime, on “the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.” On May 24, 2018, North Korea demolished its nuclear testing site in Punggye-ri as a sign of its commitment toward denuclearization.

On June 12, 2018, Trump and Kim met for the historic Singapore summit, the first meeting between leaders of North Korea and the US. The two leaders issued a joint statement consisting of four parts:

• The United States and North Korea will establish new relations based on peace and prosperity;
• The United States and North Korea will work toward a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula;
• North Korea commits to work toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula;
• The United States and North Korea will commit to recovering the remains of US soldiers lost during the Korean War.

In addition, Trump scaled back the US-South Korea joint military drills that Pyongyang has long viewed as provocative. Moon rode the success of the Singapore summit into another inter-Korean summit with Kim Jong Un, this time in Pyongyang on Sept. 18, 2018, which resulted in a number of ground-level resolutions to implement the Panmunjom Declaration. With this flurry of diplomatic activity, the foundation for a peace regime appeared to be set.

But in the third act, as the trust-building phase gave way to denuclearization proper, the quest for peace began to face significant challenges. At first, there were positive signs in the lead-up to the second summit between Trump and Kim in Hanoi. On Jan. 31, 2019, the US Special Representative on North Korea, Stephen Biegun, said that the US was prepared to carry out the joint statement from the Singapore summit “simultaneously and in parallel” — a significant shift away from the previous US position. In the week before the second summit, Trump said he was in “no rush” to denuclearize North Korea, fur-
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Since the abortive summit, North Korea has once again resorted to its tried-and-true tactic of escalating tensions. Pyongyang stonewalled its counterparts in Seoul and Washington, even stopping the discussion over recovering the remains of American service members from the Korean War — one of the few gains from the Singapore summit. North Korea also resumed missile testing, albeit at a low grade. On April 17, the Korea Central News Agency announced a “new tactical guided weapons firing test.” Then, on May 4 and 9, North Korea fired short-range rockets and missiles which, while not technically capable of reaching the continental US, pose a significant military threat against South Korea.

Having retraced the diplomatic steps, it is now time for the bokgi: what worked from the Berlin speech, and what did not?

In the first two stages, in which Moon enjoyed significant success, a common thread emerges — setting clear expectations leading to trust-building in both directions. As the mediator, South Korea needed to earn the trust of both the US and North Korea. South Korea built this trust by setting out a clear standard in the Berlin speech and acting consistently within that standard. When North Korea acted belligerently, South Korea responded in kind, thereby earning the trust of its chief ally, the US. When North Korea became conciliatory, South Korea again responded in kind, leveraging the trust that it built with the US to orchestrate the historic US-North Korea summits. But this approach began to falter when the talks focused on denuclearization per se, as Seoul fell short in its efforts to narrow the gap between Washington and Pyongyang.

The Hanoi summit did achieve one thing, which is not insignificant: it clarified the parameters. As a threshold matter, the summit established there is at least a possibility of a deal. North Korea’s foreign minister said the disagreement came down only to “one additional measure,” and its vice foreign minister said Trump was willing to consider sanctions relief on a “snapback” basis in exchange for demolishing the Yongbyon nuclear facility, making the relief reversible if North Korea did not make progress in denuclearization. This is no small thing, especially given that many voices in Washington foreign-policy circles have repeatedly claimed that North Korea will never denuclearize, and all negotiations are futile. The Hanoi summit shows that this accepted wisdom is not entirely true: North Korea is willing to put on the table some level of denuclearization (in the form of Yongbyon dismantlement) in exchange for some measure of sanctions relief. The Hanoi summit also socialized for both North Korea and the US that the “go big” strategy will not work for either party, because each side assigned a different value to what the other has to offer.

The challenge is making the journey from Point A to Point B: from the maximalist positions to a compromise agreement that will inevitably involve some measure of denuclearization in exchange for some measure of sanctions relief. In other words, the diplomatic task is to guide the discussions toward an agreement rather than being diverted by the gyrations caused by each party’s desire to gain advantage in the negotiations.

The twin principles of Moon’s Berlin speech — trust-building through regularized exchanges and reciprocal responses to military provocations — can serve as the strategy to make that journey. To gain leverage, North Korea may well be marching toward resuming nuclear weapons tests or a long-range missile test. In such a case, the disciplined negative reinforcement that South Korea displayed in mid-to late 2017 would be helpful, because it would signal terminally negative consequences for Kim Jong Un without necessarily sparking an armed conflict. This sets the outer limit on the diplomatic course by providing deterrence, lowering the likelihood that the situation suddenly escalates beyond control. Seoul’s setting the outer limits also serves a purpose in trust-building. For Washington, it signals that South Korea remains a faithful ally. For Pyongyang, it signals that South Korea will respond with regularized predictability — an important component in building trust.

The challenge becomes significantly greater beyond this point, as the Hanoi summit’s failure attests. But if the conclusion is that no deal for denuclearization is possible with North Korea, the only remaining options are a military conflict or continuation of the status quo. Neither is acceptable, because it invites a realistic risk of a nuclear war either in the immediate term (on the Korean Peninsula) or in the longer term (through North Korea’s nuclear proliferation). At any rate, the Hanoi summit showed that there indeed is a deal to be had if it can be agreed that the only realistic way forward is for both the US and North Korea to climb down from their maximalist positions and engage in a step-by-step exchange of denuclearization and sanctions relief. The trust-building process that the Berlin speech outlined with North Korea remains the best path forward, if only because all other paths lead to a blind alley.

Applying the Berlin speech’s trust-building process in the context of denuclearization, I believe, should involve a clear statement of how sanctions against North Korea will be lifted. If the purpose of sanctions is to denuclearize North Korea — rather than, say, to gratuitously inflict pain — then it is of paramount importance that North Korea believes the US will indeed lift sanctions when it achieves this purpose. To that end, partially lifting sanctions in the interim can be valuable as a trust-building measure as North Korea and the US reach intermediate objectives. The precise form of lifting the sanctions may be an exemption given to inter-Korean economic projects, or generalized sanctions relief on a snapback basis. The economic co-operation enabled by sanctions relief would further serve to build the trust that would transform the relationship between the two countries, just as the Berlin speech’s peace regime envisioned.

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