The Quest for a Denuclearized North Korea

Jong Seok Lee
A possible future on the Korean Peninsula of peace and mutual prosperity is visible now, but it will take much hard work yet to get there.

John Nilsson-Wright
A recent Chatham House conference on North Korea evinced some pessimism that remains valid despite upcoming summits.

Binoy Kampmark
A gathering in Seoul in December offered pointers for the issues that will remain to be solved after the Trump-Kim meeting this May.
From Peace Olympics to Olympic Peace
By Jong Seok Lee

The PyeongChang Winter Olympics allowed for a spectacular diplomatic turnaround in relations between North Korea, South Korea and the United States. With two bold summits — North Korea-South Korea, then North Korea-US — scheduled within weeks, we can now see a possible future on the Korean Peninsula of peace and mutual prosperity, writes former South Korean Unification Minister Jong Seok Lee.

But to get from bold ideas to lasting peace will take hard work, compromise and most importantly trust.

HELD PEACEFULLY and spectacularly, the PyeongChang Winter Olympics gave Koreans a precious gift — the possibility that the quagmire of conflict and confrontation on the Korean Peninsula may be coming to an end. PyeongChang offered the two Koreas room for diplomacy and a glimpse of a possible future of dialogue and peace. The peaceful PyeongChang Olympics may open the way to peace on the peninsula after the Olympics.

The Korean Peninsula, recently on the brink of war due to North Korea’s aggressive nuclear and missile tests, found a path toward dialogue as a result of Pyongyang’s decision to participate in the Olympic Games. Because of this opening, there is an agreement to resume inter-Korean dialogue and the stunning announcement of a planned North Korea-US summit in May.

This startling turn of events began when Kim Jong Un, the chairman of the State Council of the DPRK, dispatched a high-level delegation to South Korea to convey his congratulations on the PyeongChang Olympics. He appointed his sister and close aide, Kim Yo Jong, as a special envoy and a member of the North Korean delegation. Having arrived in Seoul, Kim Yo Jong met with South Korean President Moon Jae-in and delivered a handwritten letter and verbal message from Kim Jong Un, expressing his desire to hold an inter-Korean summit. Taking this opportunity, President Moon dispatched his envoys to North Korea. The special envoys confirmed Kim Jong Un’s resolve to denuclearize and agreed to an inter-Korean summit in late April. After Pyongyang, the South Korean envoys flew to Washing-
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INTER-KOREAN SUMMITRY AND NEGOTIATION

South Korea’s delegation to North Korea achieved an important outcome with their determination that Kim Jong Un’s commitment to denuclearization is sufficient enough for the US to accept an invitation for dialogue with North Korea and for both Koreas to agree to their own summit. First, with regard to the issue of denuclearization, the delegation uncovered important clues from Chairman Kim that can make productive dialogue possible where only military conflict seemed to be on horizon not long before. Kim Jong Un has moved forward on the following four points:

• Willingness to accept conditional denuclearization — meaning there is no reason to possess nuclear weapons should the US military threats against North Korea be removed and the safety of the regime guaranteed.

• Willingness to engage in a candid dialogue on denuclearization between North Korea and the United States.

• Willingness to refrain from strategic provocations such as additional nuclear tests and missile launches while engaged in talks with the US.

• Signaling an acceptance of the US-South Korea joint military exercises planned for April.

If North Korea has changed its positions this much, there is no reason for the US not to accept an offer of dialogue. Although some may be repelled by the idea of conditional denuclearization, it has had broad acceptance in the past, and now the international community, centered around the US, must provide corresponding compensation to North Korea if it is to renounce nuclear weapons.

Concerning US-South Korea joint military exercises, Kim Jong Un said, “I understand [the exercises] are conducted annually.” This remark was taken to mean that North Korea itself has removed an obstacle that it had insisted was the greatest hindrance to a North Korea-US dialogue. This led to the conclusion that North Korea’s desire for real dialogue is closer to truth than deception. Indeed, I believe President Trump readily accepted Kim Jong Un’s summit proposal after being briefed by the South Korean envoys because he deemed North Korea’s willingness to accept denuclearization credible.

Another important achievement by the South Korean special envoy’s visit to North Korea is sufficient enough for the US to accept an inter-Korean summit in late April, something that would have been very difficult to predict before the visit. Why did President Moon consent to the proposal for early talks from North Korea? This is likely due to the strategic assessment that it is better to start early promoting the conditions for progress on both North Korean nuclear issues and inter-Korean relations.

The fact that the inter-Korean summit is scheduled to take place at Peace House in Panmunjom on the demilitarized zone (DMZ) is also startling. This means that Kim Jong Un must cross the DMZ line to attend the summit just south of the border. It seems that North Korea made the decision out of consideration that the first and second inter-Korean summits were held in Pyongyang, Panmunjom, of course, is a symbol of the Korean conflict, with the Peace House administered by the United Nations Command. Nevertheless, the rationale behind choosing the Peace House for the summit seems to be that Kim Jong Un wants to show his resolve to end the era of inter-Korean confrontation. This could be a sign that if peace is realized, North Korea would not mind the presence of the United States Forces in Korea (USFK), which has been a habitual stumbling block.

The other meaning of the Panmunjom inter-Korean summit is that the two leaders have shown a willingness to throw out a complicated summit format and to focus on the content of negotiations. In late April, we may see the two leaders conduct an earnest and business-like meeting at Peace House, seriously discussing issues and the future of the Peninsula, accompanied by close sides but without ceremonial fanfare.

Exceeding everyone’s expectations, President Moon agreed to the early summit because of his assessment that talks were possible with Kim Jong Un. He has already won a considerable concession with the dispatching of the diplomatic delegation to North Korea. Since he assumed power in December 2011, no top foreign leader has met with Kim Jong Un. Six years have passed with no summits or talks. In this context, the April inter-Korean summit carries great significance.

Considering President Moon’s commitment to consolidate a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, he is likely looking for the April summit to be a turning point. In particular, it seems that he will try to forge an agreement that creates conditions for the success of the North Korea-US summit meeting which would decide the destiny of the Korean Peninsula. If it works, peace will come to the Korean Peninsula and a new era of common prosperity between the two Koreas can begin.

Meanwhile, the fact that the two Koreas have agreed to set up a hotline between their leaders to allow for close consultations and a reduction in military tension is also an important step forward. This direct-line link between the Blue House (Cheongwadae) and Kim Jong Un’s office in the headquarters of the Worker’s Party of Korea, which the two sides will inaugurate before the summit, is a crucial step toward preventing an accidental confrontation. It should also demonstrate that issues can be resolved through direct talks between the leaders; it
may even help facilitate further dialogue that can include President Trump. From this, we can infer that Kim Jong Un, unlike his predecessors, is seeking a normal relationship in accordance with international standards. He wants to lessen confrontation and pursue an active interest in a military détente between South and North Korea.

THE NORTH KOREA-US SUMMIT

The North Korea-US summit meeting scheduled for May is a seismic event that can fundamentally change history. This summit meeting, which President Trump immediately accepted, brings together the two central players in the axis of conflict surrounding the North Korean nuclear issue and the armistice system on the Korean Peninsula. If the summit succeeds, there is a high possibility that the current confrontational structure on the Korean Peninsula may be transformed into a peaceful structure.

Although some have predicted that North Korea would seek a settlement on its nuclear weapons as a precondition for talks with the US, that seems highly unlikely. Both the inter-Korean summit and the North Korea-US summit came about as a result of Kim Jong Un’s desire to hold early summit meetings with the leaders of both countries. In addition, the agreement to suspend nuclear and missile tests and the quiet acceptance of the US-South Korea joint military exercises in April were suggested first by North Korea to create the conditions for dialogue, rather than as a result of South Korean pressure.

We are now seeing a Kim Jong Un who seems serious about dialogue and can even offer concessions ahead of talks. This is in stark contrast to his father, Kim Jong Il, who barely pursued diplomacy and conceded little. Had the special envoy to North Korea not been able to confirm a commitment to denuclearization from Kim Jong Un, neither President Moon nor President Trump would have accommodated the proposed summit meetings.

The core topic of the North Korea-US summit is the nuclear issue. If the summit is successful, there is a good chance for a comprehensive agreement where the US guarantees North Korea’s regime security and provides it with what it needs to become a normal country; in exchange, North Korea must renounce its nuclear capability. Even if a comprehensive agreement is achieved, it will take a long time for working-level officials to create a roadmap to follow. And in diplomacy, the devil is always in the details, so the implementation of the agreement may be delayed or even breached if conflict emerges during the process.

This time, however, the talks are taking a top-down approach, where a comprehensive agreement between the leaders would be made first, with working-level officials following up with concrete measures. This presumably allows for a higher possibility of implementation than if working-level officials had to hammer out a comprehensive agreement first. With Kim Jong Un and Trump betting on a political win from the summit, typical obstacles at a lower working level might be eliminated in the push for a successful deal.

Furthermore, with the new inter-Korean hotline in operation, the leaders may be able to deal with challenges more efficiently. It would be great if a hotline between President Trump and Kim Jong Un could also come about as a result of the North Korea-US summit. If not, Washington and Pyongyang can always use the good offices of President Moon as a mediator if there are serious problems at later working-level negotiations. Simply put, the hotline adds greatly to the chances of a successful outcome.

In the meantime, the fact that the two summits will take place almost consecutively boosts the prospects for a grand transformation on the Korean Peninsula. If a grand agreement is reached through the summits, it means that the two main sources of tension on the Peninsula can be solved simultaneously in a virtuous cycle that moves toward an organic conclusion involving all three countries.

To be sure, there will be many difficulties in drawing up a roadmap of concrete measures to follow up a grand agreement between the leaders. To overcome those difficulties, there must be a process that accumulates trust at the working-level. In other words, as time goes by, the negotiations should become more solid. However, it is quite challenging for countries who have suffered from extreme suspicion toward each other to build trust. But mutual trust is a precondition for any grand bargain to result in a long-term program.

In reality, distrust will constantly interrupt the implementation of an agreement even if a grand bargain is made at the summit. The US will fear North Korean “deception” during the lengthy process of waiting for Pyongyang to give up its nuclear capabilities. North Korea will be frustrated if sanctions are not greatly eased at an early stage after a grand agreement is reached.

In order to solve this problem, it will be necessary for North Korea to promise several tangible measures that can confirm its commitment to give up its nuclear capabilities while the US should promise to open a road to ease sanctions at an early stage. Meanwhile, North Korea should recognize the status of the US on the Korean Peninsula, and the US should send a signal to North Korea by accepting its right to exist as a way to build trust.

For example, if North Korea does not publicly oppose the presence of US forces in South Korea and if the US tones down its hostile policy stance toward North Korea, it will greatly impact the American perception of the situation. Indeed, in 1992, North Korea already unofficially signaled its intent along these lines, a sentiment that was confirmed by Kim Jong Il during the first inter-Korean summit in 2000. Should Kim Jong Un officially take such a position in May, it would signal that North Korea will not use the issue of the withdrawal of US forces in South Korea as a way to block progress toward a peace treaty that moves beyond denuclearization.

Additionally, if the US promises to establish a diplomatic mission in Pyongyang early on, that would be a catalyst for improving North Korea’s trust toward the US. One of North Korea’s constant complaints is that the US does not recognize its leader and system. In other words, the US denies its existence. The establishment of a US mission in Pyongyang could become a crucial foundation of trust between North Korea and the US. Eventually, if the leaders of North Korea and the US reach a grand agreement on a comprehensive settlement, trust-building measures at an early stage will be vital to guide and strengthen the process.

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