A Miracle in a Day
The Moon-Kim Summit and Prospects for Peace in Korea

By Chung-in Moon

What a difference 12 hours can make. The summit between the leaders of North and South Korea in the village of Panmunjom on April 27 appears to have radically altered the dynamics of efforts to denuclearize North Korea and bring peace to the Korean Peninsula.

It also laid the foundations for the historic summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korea’s Chairman Kim Jong Un in Singapore on June 12. But the challenges ahead are fraught with difficulties that will require deft diplomacy, writes Chung-in Moon.1

THE RENOWNED South Korean novelist Han Kang contributed a moving column to the New York Times on Oct. 7, 2017, entitled “While the US Talks of War, South Korea Shudders.” Her choice of words aptly reflected the sentiments of many South Koreans. During the course of that year, South Korea’s somber geopolitical reality seemed to be marked by a never-ending sequence of crises — there was a “crisis of April,” a “crisis of August” and a “crisis of October,” all triggered by North Korean provocations or US belligerence. Foreign correspondents rushed to Seoul to report on the potential escalation of military conflict on the Korean Peninsula, and news on North Korea was the lead item on broadcasts in the US night after night. Foreigners might have enjoyed watching the thrill and suspense of such news reports, but South Koreans shuddered and preferred to block out the darkening reality.

Indeed, the Korean Peninsula was back at the crossroads of war and peace. We had not stood this close to no return since the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement in July 1953. Kim Jong Un’s reckless military provocations, Donald Trump’s offensive rhetoric and military maneuvers, China’s harsh position over the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea and sharp domestic polarization in South Korea trapped newly inaugurated President Moon Jae-in in a security dilemma with grave implications. However, the inter-Korean summit that was held in Panmunjom on April 27 — only the third summit between leaders of the North and South since 2000 — completely changed the geopolitical landscape on the Korean Peninsula from the brink of crisis and war to a new hope of diplomacy, peace and common prosperity.

DISSECTING THE PANMUNJOM DECLARATION
Twelve hours in Panmunjom — a location that symbolizes division, war and protracted conflict in Korea — produced an unexpected peace miracle on Friday, April 27. Moon and Kim adopted the Panmunjom Declaration, which proclaimed “there will be no more war on the Korean Peninsula and thus a new era of peace has begun.” As epitomized in the slogan of the South Korean government, “Peace, a New Start,” the two Koreas have now embarked on a daunting odyssey to end the state of war between them and build a lasting peace. After witnessing the signing ceremony for the declaration in person, Kim Yo Jong, the sister of the North Korean leader, said: “it is hard to believe we made it.” Given North Korea’s military actions and the acute sense of crisis that haunted South Koreans throughout last year, such a miraculous reversal indeed looks surreal.

After having myself attended all three of the summits between the two Koreas, I dare to conclude that this third summit was the most successful in both substance and symbolism. Let me first highlight some tangible achievements. The summit was successful in restoring normal inter-Korean relations. The two leaders agreed to “hold dialogue and negotiations in various fields, including at a high level, and to take active measures to implement the agreements reached at the summit.” In that context, it was agreed to establish a joint liaison office in the Kaesong region with resident representatives from both sides. More active cooperation, exchanges, visits and contacts at all levels were also encouraged in order to rejuvenate a sense of national reconciliation and unity. Most important, they agreed to proceed with reunion programs for separated families on the occasion of National Liberation Day on Aug. 15 this year. Also, practical steps are expected to connect and modernize the railways and roads on the eastern transportation corridor as well as between Seoul and Sinuiju, as agreed in the October 4 Declaration of 2007.

The Panmunjom Declaration stipulates that both Koreas “make joint efforts to alleviate the acute military tension and practically eliminate the danger of war on the Korean Peninsula.” Both leaders agreed not only to completely cease all hostile acts against each other in every domain — land, air and sea — that are the source of military tension and conflict, including the transformation of the demilitarized zone into a peace zone, but also to adopt a practical scheme to turn the areas around the Northern Limit Line in the West Sea into a maritime peace zone to prevent accidental military clashes and guarantee safe fishing activities. They also agreed to military measures to ensure active mutual cooperation, exchanges, visits and contacts, and frequent meetings between military authorities, including the Defense Ministers Meeting.

The two Koreas agreed to establish a permanent and solid peace regime on the Korean Peninsula by ending the current unnatural state of armistice. As part of these efforts, they agreed to carry out disarmament in a phased manner through the reduction of military tensions and confidence-building measures. They also decided to pursue three-party meetings involving North Korea, South Korea and the US, or four-party meetings involving North Korea, South Korea, the US and China within this year, which marks the 65th anniversary of the armistice. The aim would be to turn the armistice into a peace treaty, ultimately leading to a permanent peace regime. Most important, the South and North Korean leaders confirmed the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula.

AN AUDACIOUS SUMMIT
The summit is significant on several accounts. First, its goal is bold and audacious, because it expresses the desire of the two leaders to end the Korean War and begin a new era of peace and prosperity. Past agreements and declarations never included such a bold statement.
Second, the leaders narrowed a perpetual gap in mutual negotiations. Previously, South Korea favored a functionalist approach based on the logic of “economy first,” while North Korea always insisted on “military-political issues first.” This was the first inter-Korean summit that converged on the primacy of military-political issues. Third, and equally critical, is the adoption of a written agreement on complete denuclearization. In the past, North Korea consistently refused to accept the nuclear issue as an agenda item in any inter-Korean talks, arguing that it was a matter for discussion solely between the US and North Korea. But this time, Kim made a written commitment on complete denuclearization, which was even reported in the Rodong Sinmun, an unprecedented action by the official daily of the Korean Workers’ Party. There was another sign of Kim’s commitment to complete denuclearization, in which he told Moon that North Korea’s nuclear test sites in Punggye-ri were still usable, but that he would close them in May in a transparent manner by inviting experts and journalists from the US and South Korea to witness the occasion. Although he did not invite experts, Kim did demolish the test sites on May 24 in the presence of foreign journalists, signaling a good start toward complete denuclearization. Fourth, contrary to common understanding, Kim was pragmatic and realistic. He mentioned neither a reduction and withdrawal of US forces in South Korea nor the status of the South Korea-US alliance as a precondition for North Korea’s denuclearization. It was quite amazing to hear him say that “once we start talking, the US will know that I am not a person to launch nuclear weapons at South Korea, the Pacific and the US.” And he identified to Moon what he wants from the US: frequent meetings, building trust, ending war and establishing a non-aggression treaty. He then added, “[if these conditions are met,] why would we have nuclear weapons and suffer?” That is why he wanted to link denuclearization to the process of ending war and building a peace regime. As the declaration says, if the process of ending the Korean War and transforming the armistice into a peace treaty occurs, his efforts to denuclearize will correspondingly be expedited. Finally, realizing that past agreements and declarations were not implemented, both leaders pledged to implement what they agreed to. Such a commitment from them will make the agreements more binding than ever before. Equally interesting is that specific dates for major meetings and events were identified in the declaration in a very concrete manner. High-level talks and a general-level military meeting were scheduled for May. The reunions of separated families will take place on Aug. 15. And Moon is scheduled to visit Pyongyang in the fall. Such specific dates for follow-up events were rare in the past.

The Panmunjom summit also deserves credit for its symbolism. Kim Jong Un was the first North Korean leader to set foot on South Korean territory as he crossed the Military Demarcation Line (MDL). The moment after Kim crossed, Moon told him: “I have never been to the North.” Kim replied, “Why don’t you cross the line now together with me?” He then led Moon into North Korea. Some might see this as trivial, but its implications were profound. As the North Korean media reported, it was an act that demolished the artificially drawn demarcation line. That impromptu gesture by Kim moved all Koreans.

To be sure, Kim has suffered from a bad reputation in South Korea and around the world since the purge and execution of his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, and the murder of his half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, in Kuala Lumpur. He was portrayed as a mystical, spoiled, irrational and even impulsive young leader. However, his performance during the summit dramatically diluted or changed that image. He was charismatic in his outlook and spoke in a low-toned, appealing voice. The way he conducted the discussions and negotiations revealed a dynamic and decisive decision-making style as well as mastery of the issues. During the banquet, he was friendly, accessible and enter-

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The composition of the North Korean delegation was also important. In the previous two North-South summits, Chairman Kim Jong Il displayed a kind of one-man-show leadership style. This time, the young leader was different, accompanied by a large delegation composed of representatives from the defense, foreign-policy and inter-Korean affairs establishments. Defense was represented by the Chief of Staff of its People’s Army, Ri Myong Su, and Defense Minister Pak Young Sik; and foreign policy by Ri Su Yong, Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers’ Party, who is in charge of overall foreign policy, and Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho. This can be seen as a more institutionalized style of decision-making that reflects a consensus among the party, the cabinet and the military.

The announcement of the joint statement in front of domestic and foreign media was nothing short of astonishing. In the past, it was inconceivable for the North Korean leader, who is an absolute ruler, to stand before the media and announce such a statement. The dinner banquet after the ceremony adopting the declaration was also memorable. Unlike any other North-South banquets, it was amicable and lively. The two leaders and their spouses got closer, and the personal trust and amity between them were visible. No vestige of distrust and hostility could be detected throughout the banquet, and endless exchanges of toasts among them cemented human networks, signaling a bright future for inter-Korean relations.

It is this substance and symbolism that characterized the twelve-hour miracle in Panmunjom. What, then, we might ask, made this remarkable success possible? First, Kim’s strategic decision to engage mattered as a push factor, because he initiated and engineered it. The summit would have never been possible without his initiation. He might have presumably wanted it partly because of economic needs and partly because of his desire to employ Moon to secure access to the Trump administration. As he emphasized in his New Year speech, the ultimate motive must have been economic—he is willing to push for economic development even at the expense of nuclear weapons. Second, Moon’s sincerity, open-mindedness and willingness to play the role of honest broker between Pyongyang and Washington—which he showed during the North Korean delegation’s visit to Seoul during the PyeongChang Winter Olympics—served as a crucial pull factor. And Seoul’s officials worked very hard to persuade their North Korean counterparts through numerous clandestine contacts. Finally, US President Donald Trump was a pivotal facilitating factor. A subtle combination of his maximum pressure on Kim and timely encouragement and endorsement of Moon’s approach to North Korea was a magic touch in bringing the two Korean leaders together.

**CHALLENGES AHEAD AND THE FUTURE OF A NUCLEAR DEAL**

As several observers have aptly pointed out, the Panmunjom Declaration seems too good and too comprehensive to be real. Indeed, a rocky road is ahead. It will not be easy to transform the long-standing Korean conflict into a lasting peace in a short period of time. Reduction of military tensions, confidence-building and arms reduction are challenging tasks. The same can be said of the North Korean nuclear quagmire that has lasted since 1993. This is more so because denuclearization involves a lengthy and painful process that includes a freeze, declarations, inspections, verification and irreversible dismantling of facilities, materials and bombs as well as ballistic missiles. The most critical factor is whether Kim is truly willing to get rid of his nuclear facilities, materials and bombs in a verifiable and irreversible way. Skeptics contend that he might adopt an as-usual salami tactic by insisting on the principle of action for action based on incremental, synchronized denuclearization. This is more so because of domestic uncertainties. No matter how tamed the North Korean military may have become under Kim’s ruthless grip on power, it might prove very difficult for the military to accept Kim’s agreements on complete denuclearization. Neither Seoul nor Washington can accept the salami tactic, and the entire deal could easily be endangered if North Korea pursues that approach, reviving the old pattern of stop and go, as well as crime and punishment. Such a development would surely lead to another round of crises with the great possibility of military action and war on the Korean Peninsula. Aware of this possibility, Seoul and Washington have sent a clear message to the North, and it is not likely that it will return to this old practice.

South Korea laid the groundwork for the Trump-Kim meeting in Singapore on June 12 by obtaining North Korea’s explicit commitment to “complete denuclearization” in the Panmunjom Declaration. Now the ball is in the US court. Trump needs to work out the details of denuclearization with Kim. A compromise is needed between Washington and Seoul’s comprehensive one-shot deal and Pyongyang’s incremental, synchronized approach. Thus, Trump might have to come up with a more realistic, flexible and creative approach to handling North Korea to save the deal.

The US-North Korea summit in Singapore was a remarkable success. After a precarious rollercoaster ride to get there, Trump and Kim reached a historic agreement on how to resolve the protracted North Korean nuclear quagmire. While Kim made his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, Trump reciprocated by committing himself to a security guarantee. For all the drawbacks such as the absence of an explicit statement on complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization (CVID) and related timelines, the prospects for a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem have now become all the more certain, while the danger of a military crisis has faded away.

Because Trump and Kim agreed on not only denuclearization, but also a robust and lasting peace regime, South Korea’s Moon is now in a better position to expedite inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation as well as his plan to produce a tripartite declaration by Seoul, Pyongyang and Washington to proclaim an end to the Korean War and pave the way to a permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula.

**CONCLUSION**

The Panmunjom summit represented an epoch-defining event with positive chain reactions leading to more summit diplomacy. But advancing from making commitments to implementing them is a daunting challenge. Furthermore, implementation of the Panmunjom declaration is tied to that of the Singapore agreement. Without a major breakthrough on denuclearization, the Panmunjom pledges cannot be implemented. Normalization of inter-Korean relations will not be possible without a relaxation or lifting of United Nations Security Council sanctions on North Korea. Reductions in military tensions, confidence-building, and phased disarmament would be inconceivable without progress on denuclearization. In a similar vein, formally ending the Korean War, signing a peace treaty and forging a peace regime will not be possible without concrete steps toward denuclearization. Hazards and challenges remain ahead on the path to a peaceful, nuclear-weapons-free Korean Peninsula.

A peaceful, nuclear-weapons-free Korean Peninsula was a cherished goal of Moon long before his election to the presidency. The third Korean summit has created a historical moment to fulfill his dream. But shaping a new history of peace will not be easy. Moon himself is acutely aware of the various constraints and challenges awaiting him on his path to a peaceful, nuclear-weapons-free Korean Peninsula. He will be approaching his goal with prudent and patient stewardship.

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