The potential of summit diplomacy to break deadlocks in seemingly intractable problems in international relations was on full display earlier this year, with summits between the leaders of South Korea and North Korea, and the historic summit in June between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, reversing, for now, what seemed to be a collision course between Washington and Pyongyang. The hard work, however, lies ahead.

ESSAYS BY
Introduction 8
Richard Feinberg & Stephan Haggard 10
Bridget L. Coggins 18
Jeffrey Lewis 24
Kuyoun Chung 30
Chae-Jin Lee 36
Toshihide Soeya 42
Three North-South Summits and Singapore: Moon Jae-in’s High-Stakes Diplomacy

By Kuyoun Chung

In late 2017, there was talk of the US and North Korea being on the brink of war. By the end of 2018, with three inter-Korean summits and the US-North Korea talks in Singapore behind us, the threat has receded and all parties seem eager, at least on some level, to keep talking.

Much of the credit for this changed reality must go the administration of Moon Jae-in’s adroit summitry, which helped ease tensions enough for Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un to meet. But Kuyoun Chung cautions that the difficult issues still lie ahead and the process must face a shifting political reality in Washington to go with the always tricky politics of the Korean Peninsula.

GIVEN THE PRECARIOUS situation in late 2017, when the US seriously considered a “bloody nose” attack against North Korea, North-South summitry and the Singapore summit between the US and North Korea clearly altered the narrative on how to address the North Korea issue. President Moon Jae-in’s Olympic diplomacy even sparked debate over an end-of-war declaration and peace treaty on the Korean Peninsula. The series of summits between the two Koreas was designed to relieve the threat perception with respect to Pyongyang and thereby sustain the momentum for US-North Korea denuclearization negotiations.

It was, of course, a risk for Seoul to give a positive interpretation to North Korea’s decision to rebalance its Byungjin (parallel development) policy to put more emphasis on economic development over nuclear weapons and consequently attempt to build confidence with Pyongyang. However, in the long term, South Korea expected that peace-building efforts would reinforce denuclearization negotiations, and vice versa, allowing the two Koreas and the US to maintain stability on the peninsula. But the core issue of denuclearization remains unresolved, raising the question of how summits can be translated into a verifiable denuclearization plan.

REBALANCING NORTH KOREA POLICY

Moon’s North Korea policy basically rebalances those of previous administrations. South Korean conservatives prefer to strengthen the US-South Korea alliance while disregarding inter-Korean relationships, as progressives typically attempt to improve inter-Korean relations at the expense of the US-South Korea alliance. Moon has shown strong reactions to North Korea’s military provocations while mapping out his peace initiative, indicating that South Korea will not attempt to unify the peninsula unilaterally or to seek the collapse of the North Korean regime, and it has committed to resolve the nuclear issue in a peaceful manner.

Moon’s rebalancing has maintained momentum because of a perception that North Korea’s strategic policy guidelines have also been rebalanced. Indeed, during a plenary session of the Party Central Committee in March 2013, North Korea emphasized a Byungjin policy of economic development and nuclear weapons. With this guideline, the Kim Jong Un regime tied its nuclear deterrent to economic development through the expectation of gradually diverting budgetary funds from the military sector to the civilian sector as it completes its nuclear capability. In other words, nuclear weapons were regarded as a necessary shield behind which North Korea could survive and develop its economy.

During his New Year speech in 2018, Kim Jong Un again repeated the previous strategic policy guidelines. Boasting the deterrent capability of its country’s nuclear weapons, he also argued that the “US would not dare to start a war against himself and North Korea” and ordered that “the nuclear-weapon research sector and the rocket industry should mass-produce nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles.” There was little signal that Pyongyang would switch its priorities from nuclear weaponry to economic development.

However, just a few months later, during the 3rd plenary meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the Worker’s Party on April 20, North Korea declared that it would 1) suspend intercontinental ballistic missile testing; and 2) shut down the nuclear test site. According to the regime, these measures would serve as important steps toward the worldwide trend of nuclear disarmament. North Korea also declared that it is now a “militarily strong state” and is moving forward to develop a “socialist economy.”

Why Pyongyang changed its strategic policy guidelines is debatable. Most North Korea watchers seem to have converged on one of two interpretations: that the US-led campaign of economic sanctions has been effective in persuading North Korea back to the negotiating table; or that completing its nuclear capability has let it stand in a more equal position in relation to the US.

Because of such changes in strategic policy guidelines, the framing of the security-security tradeoff has now been posed. The security-security tradeoff refers to an exchange in which US concern over North Korea’s nuclear weapons is traded off against North Korea’s security concern about a potential strike from the US. Pyongyang has recently emphasized the following five conditions in return for denuclearization: 1) withdrawal of the US nuclear arsenal from South Korea (although there are no weapons currently positioned there); 2) suspension of US-South Korea military exercises on the peninsula; 3) renunciation of nuclear and conventional attacks against North Korea; 4) conclusion of a formal peace treaty ending the Korean War; and 5) diplomatic normalization.

But North Korea also argues that the two sides should take simultaneous steps to the final outcome: the denuclearization of North Korea and the end of the hostile US policy toward it. How such a deal can be reached remains unclear, but it is worthwhile to note that North Korea’s threat perception can only be explored to the extent that the narrative on the issue has been altered.
ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE NORTH-SOUTH SUMMITS

As argued above, each North-South summit was responding in part to Pyongyang’s concerns about the Trump administration’s approach. The first summit proved instrumental in easing tensions on the Korean Peninsula after the nervousness in late 2017. The underlying logic was that improving inter-Korean relationships would improve the US-North Korea relationship, and thus would ultimately contribute to denuclearization. It was indeed the risk taken by the Moon administration to build confidence that set the summit process in motion.

The two parties agreed to declare there would be no more war on the Korean Peninsula, which is essentially equal to an end-of-war declaration. They would resume high-level military talks, cease hostile acts along the land border and devise a practical scheme to prevent conflict on the maritime border in the West Sea, transforming it into a maritime peace zone. These moves paved the way for the US-North Korea summit in June 2018.

This top-down approach toward denuclearization negotiations has probably been helpful in focusing the attention of Kim Jong Un as well. Given the nature of the regime in North Korea, in which only one individual has the power to make a decision, it was arguably necessary to generate agreement between leaders before it was possible to move to working-level negotiations.

The second North-South summit was also instrumental for US-North Korea negotiations. In May, John Bolton, Trump’s national security advisor, mentioned the “Libya model,” by which he meant a process that would allow the US to fully trust and verify any denuclearization process. However, the remark was misunderstood by Pyongyang as a threat to topple the North Korean regime. It reacted aggressively, and Trump unilaterally canceled the summit with a letter to the North Korean public. Against this backdrop, North Korea asked South Korea to hold a second meeting at Panmunjom, confirming its commitment to denuclearization. After this second summit, Moon emphasized the importance of assurances for North Korea that its regime wouldn’t be replaced. Again, the frame of a security-security tradeoff was reaffirmed, and the momentum was revived for further negotiations between the US and North Korea.

The third North-South summit was held in September, after the US-North Korea summit and after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo canceled his fourth visit to Pyongyang, probably because of the perception on the part of Trump that little progress had been made. Again, the top-down approach of North Korea was also revealed in this process. Before the third summit, Kim Jong Un sent a letter to Trump that included his commitment to denuclearization and trust in Trump and suggesting a time frame for complete denuclearization before 2021, before the end of the first Trump administration. This statement demonstrated that North Korea depended on Trump to improve the US-North Korea relationship and to change its strategic policy guidelines in return for denuclearization.
The third North-South summit, therefore, had to accomplish two goals: Make practical progress based on the Panmunjom declaration from the first summit; and facilitate the denuclearization negotiations. Accordingly, the two sides agreed to adopt the “agreement on the implementation of the historic Panmunjom declaration in the military domain” as an annex to the Pyongyang declaration to prevent accidental military clashes and relieve the threat perception of North Korea.

Specifically, the two sides agreed that the Korean Peninsula should be free from nuclear weapons and nuclear threats, and in this context, North Korea suggested that it would permanently dismantle the Dongchang-ri missile engine test site and launch platform under the observation of experts from relevant countries. It also suggested that it was willing to take additional measures, such as the permanent dismantlement of the Yongbyon nuclear facility, if the US takes “corresponding measures” in accordance with the June 12 US-DPRK Joint Statement. These agreements between the two Koreas thus contained a broader consensus to ease military tensions across the peninsula and served as a stepping-stone to relieve threat perceptions from North Korea.

Of course, the North Korea-South Korea summits have been criticized because they were organized in a way that advanced the South Korean agenda to encourage inter-Korean exchanges and co-operation. Some believe that the military agreement from the third summit was an unnecessary concession that might have backfired in terms of US military readiness on the peninsula. However, North-South summitry was designed to provide a more secure environment in which North Korea could maintain its commitment of denuclearization and continue negotiations with the US.

TRUMP AND HIS ADMINISTRATION
What remains to be seen is whether Trump will sustain his willingness to negotiate with North Korea in the manner outlined in the Singapore statement. Facing the November midterm elections, Trump had little choice but to prioritize domestic issues over foreign policy, including the North Korean question. While the issue has receded as a priority for American voters, the two Koreas remain concerned that a changed majority in the US House could result in a loss of momentum for negotiations. The US foreign-policy establishment, high-level cabinet members and the majority of lawmakers are mostly skeptical of North Korea’s rhetoric and the sincerity of its commitment to denuclearization. The Republican Party’s loss of control in the House of Representatives could change the narrative on North Korean issues. The top-down approach might eventually be weakened as well.

At the moment, the US and North Korea continue to disagree about whether an end-of-war declaration is equivalent to North Korea’s initial steps, such as dismantling the Dongchang-ri test site. Another issue would be setting the time frame for the exit strategy of economic sanctions upon North Korea. Whether the sanctions will be eased or relieved in accordance with North Korea’s corresponding denuclearization effort remains an issue of contention and needs to be co-ordinated tightly between the US and South Korea. Last but not least, the issue of verification would be another hurdle for all three parties. But successful consideration of implementation steps will be necessary to strengthen the momentum of negotiations.

Kuyoun Chung is a professor in the political science department, Kangwon National University.