While the oversize 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.

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Searching for the ‘Korean Solution’: Moon’s Government Needs a Bolder Approach
By Wooksik Cheong

The efforts of South Korean President Moon Jae-in to achieve peace on the Korean Peninsula, and to facilitate dialogue between North Korea and the United States, have drawn both criticism and praise. Wooksik Cheong argues that while there is much to applaud in what Moon is seeking to do, his government needs to be bolder and more innovative if it hopes to achieve its ambitious goals. He outlines how that might happen.

ASSESSMENTS of South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s path toward peace on the Korean Peninsula run to extremes. Some conservative media, inside and outside South Korea, denounce Moon as too accommodating. The right-wing Liberty Korea Party has called him “Kim Jung Un’s chief spokesman.” North Korean leader Kim Jung Un himself, meanwhile, condemned the Moon government as “nosey, a so-called arbiter, facilitator” in a speech in April. US President Donald Trump has often described Moon as “chief negotiator.”

Considering that the Moon government’s main objective has been Korea-US co-operation, to refer to Moon as Kim’s chief spokesman is absurd and politically offensive. Similarly, Kim calling Moon “nosey” the moment the Hanoi talks broke off earlier this year, despite having previously thanked him for helping achieve the first US-North Korea summit in Singapore last year. This was followed by a clash of opinions, one side arguing for the suspension of joint military exercises to continue, and the other for a resumption, pointing to a possible “security vacuum.” South Korean and US military authorities subsequently announced they would hold reduced joint military exercises from 2019 onward. However, what Trump had promised Kim and made public in Singapore was a “suspension” of these military exercises rather than a “reduction.” While South Korean and US military authorities might have regarded reduced exercises as a show of thoughtful consideration toward North Korea, Pyongyang saw this as a breach of a promise. Kim demanded a complete suspension of the exercises in his New Year’s address, and when that didn’t happen, he expressed his “discontent” in an assembly speech later. In early May, North Korea even engaged in launches of two projectiles in the context of this issue.

Although North Korea’s firing of projectiles were “reduced” in size from earlier full-range intercontinental missiles — was unfortunate, South Korea and the US also failed to put themselves in Kim’s shoes. After all, the South Korea-US alliance certainly wouldn’t accept North Korea engaging in reduced nuclear tests and ballistic missile firings, so it should come as no surprise that North Korea would object if joint military exercises continued, no matter their reduced size. Pyongyang has actually made this clear multiple times. With this in mind, Moon’s government should have discussed the issue of suspending joint military exercises with the US “while the talks with North Korea were going on,” using Trump’s announcement at the Singapore summit as a lever.

The problem, in fact, is not limited to joint military exercises. In 2018, the two Koreas put in place a number of arms control measures over the course of three summit talks, based on a promise to relinquish war. Despite this, other policies carried out by the Moon government clashed with the aim of these agreements — notably, a significant increase in the defense budget and weapons purchases. The government raised the defense budget by 8.2 percent in 2019 and pledged to strengthen the military by investing 270 trillion won ($230 billion) by 2023. This goes against the objective of the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration, which included an agreement on “phased disarmament.” In particular, Seoul’s military strengthening includes the integration of the “invisible fighter jet,” the US F-35, into South Korea’s air force, a move that is particularly sensitive for North Korea.

Within the Moon government, there is a strong belief that South Korea must bolster its own military capabilities in order to reclaim wartime operational control. Concerns also exist about a backlash from the “arms seller” Trump in the event of Seoul deciding to reduce planned imports of American arms. Some insist that South Korea ought to prepare for an arms buildup in neighboring countries — China and Japan, for instance. But the Moon government must remember that a continued arms buildup will unfavorably impact inter-Korean relations. Pushing North Korea to carry out military reductions while simultaneously increasing the South Korean defense budget to a level that reaches to around double what it was during the governments of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye is definitely ill-considered.

In addition, in the area of economic co-operation and humanitarian aid, there has been a lack of forward thinking and progressive approaches. Although South Korea put forward several promising blueprints, such as the “new economic map of the Korean Peninsula” and “northern economic co-operation,” nothing much has been put
into practice. Part of the reason is the tight constraints of US-led sanctions against North Korea, but one could also criticize the Moon government for paying too much attention to US views. Humanitarian aid is a prime example. Despite international sanctions on North Korea, in 2018, Switzerland, Sweden, France and Canada provided North Korea with a total of US$33 million in aid. In contrast, the Moon government, despite having budgeted US$8 million, did not provide any humanitarian support until April 2019. This is a noticeable shift from the earlier liberal governments of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, when South Korea took the lead in providing aid to North Korea, which claimed that “humanitarian support should be separate from political issues.”

The issue of re-starting inter-Korean economic co-operation also provides a basis for severe criticism. In Moon’s March 1 Independence Movement Day address, he said: “We will consult with the United States on ways to resume tourism in Mt. Kumgang and the operation of the Kaesong Industrial Complex.” Three days later, the Ministry of Unification made the following statement: “We will try to identify ways to promote key projects under the inter-Korean joint declarations” and “will draw up measures to prepare for discussions with the US on reopening the Kaesong Industrial Complex and resuming tourism at Mt. Kumgang within the boundary of sanctions.” These views drew considerable interest because they came right after the Hanoi no-deal. But once the US rejected the idea, the Moon government took a passive turn. This was when North Korea’s verbal hostility toward South Korea took force. Seoul might as well have not said, “We will try to resume inter-Korean economic co-operation within the boundary of sanctions,” considering the harsh outcome it brought about when it failed.

**BEYOND COMMON SENSE**

The absence of a “Korean solution,” despite the Korean Peninsula peace process entering a critical phase, is quite unfortunate. The Moon government, which should aim to mediate between North Korea and the US and seek more creative and bold approaches, is instead leaning toward the US. On April 9, just before the summit talks between South Korea and the US, a senior Blue House official said: “In this summit, South Korea and the United States will confirm and reconfirm that the two are on the same page regarding the end state and the roadmap of complete denuclearization.” Moon himself reaffirmed that stance at the South Korea-US summit.

But the “end state of complete denuclearization” presented by the Trump administration is beyond the scope of common sense, going further than the dismantling of North Korea’s nuclear weapons, materials, related facilities and nuclear warhead-equipped missiles. It extends to the abandonment of all ballistic missiles, biochemical weapons and dual-purpose facilities. Added to this is the Trump administration’s roadmap, which includes North Korea completely declaring its arms, ensuring full access to inspectors and handing over nuclear weapons and materials. North Korea has vehemently opposed this, calling it “robbery,” an “unrealistic proposal” and a “demand for disarmament.”

Looking at the situation, the Moon government should have asked the US to make a choice and focus on it. But if Seoul says “South Korea and the United States agree upon the definition, end state, and roadmap of denuclearization” when the US is unwilling to budge from its position, one can reasonably assume the South Korean government approves of the US position. Amplifying such concerns is the fact that the White House revealed that the two leaders “discussed ways to attain FFVD” — “final, fully verifiable denuclearization” — after a call between Moon and Trump on May 7. This is not a run-of-the-mill situation. If South Korea agrees to the US demand for FFVD when North Korea is strongly against it, the Moon government’s possibility of playing its part — whether as arbiter or driver — in the non-nuclear peace negotiations on the Korean Peninsula is likely to diminish more and more.

When points of agreement between North Korea and the US fade and differences grow, South Korea’s role should be to build up the consensual factors by generating a Korean solution. In other words, South Korea must use caution when making its choices, to avoid being stuck in boundaries set by the US.
with neighboring countries that have been relatively neglected, such as China, Japan and Russia. With these premises in mind, the following are three proposals regarding a Korean solution.

1) Define Denuclearization. The first and most important task of a Korean solution is drafting a document to define denuclearization. The outcome of the inter-Korean summits included the phrase “no nuclear weapons or nuclear threats on the Korean Peninsula.” This has aspects in common with the US views on both “complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement” (CVID) and FFVD. When asked about the difference between North Korean and US definitions of denuclearization, the right answer should be “none.” But this attitude is still far off in the distance. The summit in Hanoi showed just how far apart the two nations remain. Now is not the time to talk not only about denuclearization, but how to construct the ideology and goals that will yield mutual benefits. It can eventually become a model for turning the Korean Peninsula into a “no nuclear weapons zone.” Leaders from North Korea and South Korea could arrange the agreement, and invite participation from China, Russia, and the US. Achieving this requires the following conditions.

First, it must be considered as the best possible outcome to the North Korea nuclear issue, because even if it were to eliminate all current nuclear weapons, this deal would also prevent it from obtaining them in the future. As a result, nuclear materials, facilities and scientists would be most effective. North Korea would not only accede to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), but also set up an inspection mechanism with South Korea. North Korea would then enter into denuclearization agreements bound by international law. Sanctions could be quickly re-imposed if Pyongyang commits any violations. As this process would be unprecedented for any US administration, Trump, who is determined to achieve a deal with North Korea, would likely support this method.

The second critical aspect is for the US to pursue the most realistic denuclearization process. North Korea and South Korea cannot possibly change the nuclear posture of the US or request that it eliminate its nuclear weapons, so it must rely on assurances that come from establishing a nuclear weapon free zone. This requires the US to make a legally binding guarantee to North Korea that it will not use nuclear weapons, and will not use the Korean Peninsula to install, store or even allow nuclear weapons to pass through. The most sensitive subject of this agreement would be the status of the US military presence in South Korea. However, this can actually contribute to the enforcement of the agreement. The US military presence without nuclear assets on the Korean Peninsula could be beneficial to all parties.

The third point is for the agreement to become a cornerstone of Northeast Asian multilateral security. Japan would be pressured to participate in any agreement to turn the Korean Peninsula into a nuclear weapons free zone. A 3+2 regional architecture would put the two Koreas and Japan in the nuclear weapon-free category, with Russia, China and the US in the other. As states possessing nuclear weapons, they would have less influence on the affairs of the other three states. Particularly if the US and Russia go ahead with exiting their bilateral Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, the US might be tempted to install mid-range missiles in the region, and Japan and South Korea would be ideal host countries. If the three states not possessing nuclear weapons carry out their agreement, it would make it difficult for the US to install missiles in the region.

2) Get to a Nuclear-Free Zone. In order for the Moon administration to achieve this nuclear weapon free zone on the Korean Peninsula, effectively ushering in the end state of denuclearization, it will need to go to great lengths to persuade both the US and North Korea to participate. North Korea must be convinced that a bold deal for comprehensive denuclearization is the best path forward. The central focus of a bold and comprehensive solution would essentially be the final step of quickly agreeing to remove nuclear weapons and nuclear materials for suitable corresponding measures within a time limit. If North Korea were to agree to send its nuclear weapons and nuclear materials to a third country, ideally Russia or China, it could facilitate a simultaneous peace-regime agreement, as well as lead quickly to establishing formal relations with the US.

South Korea must request “choice with focus” from the US. The comprehensive “big deal,” which includes North Korea dismantling its biological weapons and ballistic missiles on top of denuclearization, is too big to grasp. The Trump administration is carrying out UN sanctions, but these are out of proportion with the situation. The UN Security Council sanctions were imposed in response to North Korea’s nuclear weapons development and ballistic missile tests. Pyongyang’s biological weapons are not included. While the sanctions include requests for North Korea to remove both its biological weapons and ballistic missile programs, this can be approached in a flexible manner from a diplomatic standpoint. The US has refused and violated sanctions based on its own judgements before.

This is not to say that North Korean ballistic missiles and biochemical weapons should be disregarded. These are better dealt with in the final stage of peace regime-building, based on “phased arms reduction” in the inter-Korean Panmunjom Declaration and the signing of a Korean Peninsula peace agreement. Since North Korea is a part of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), one could demand compliance with the convention’s terms. One could also consider adding a clause to the peace agreement in which North Korea pledges to join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). This, perhaps, could be a point the Moon government could convince the Trump administration to accept.

Then there is North Korea’s preferred “step-by-step” solution. With a little innovation, this can be fused with Trump’s steadfast “big deal.” This should involve pursuing an agreement that establishes targets for North Korean denuclearization in exchange for economic sanctions relief, a formal peace regime, a military drawdown and normalizing diplomatic relations. The first step can center on thoroughly dismantling Yongbyon in exchange for sanctions relief. This would reflect North Korea’s good faith, and the US displaying some flexibility by putting sanctions relief on the table.

However, suspicions about uranium enrichment taking place outside of Yongbyon could still pose a problem. At the post-summit press conference in Hanoi, Trump was asked about the second uranium enrichment site, to which he replied that the North Koreans were surprised when the American side brought it up. In fact, this may be the key to solving the nuclear problem. If Trump knows about the location of the second uranium enrichment site, foreign experts can verify this through direct visits. If it really is a uranium enrichment site, Pyongyang should thoroughly dismantle it and agree to reveal other sites. This would be an ideal situation to apply “snap-back” sanctions.

3) Be an Active Player. The third aspect is for South Korea to break out of its mediation role and become an active player. One of the hard truths of the “no-deal” outcome of the Hanoi summit was that there is a clear limit to negotiations between...
North Korea and the US. Moon may have been an outside mediator up to this point, but the outcome was unexpected. Although the official word from the North Korea-US talks and the South Korea-US talks was that the sides enjoyed close co-operation, the truth is the three could not break the stalemate when it mattered most.

Accordingly, the Moon government should clarify its position as a “negotiating party” and propel multilateral talks in parallel with US-North Korea bilateral talks, be it Four-Party talks with South Korea, North Korea, the US and China or Six-Party talks, including Russia and Japan. South Korea must create a structure in which it can participate, so that it can sometimes act as a “field mediator” and sometimes as a leader presenting the big picture. Time is not on our side and the uncertainty of US-North Korea negotiations is too great. South Korea must build a framework to engage as a negotiating party.

TOWARD A HAPPY ENDING

The solution to US-North Korea talks that began in 1993 can be compared with mountain climbing: Each step can be seen as building confidence and strength with the hope of eventually reaching the top. But along the journey, the path and the accompanying parties have changed. In the middle, the climbers stopped to quarrel over trivial matters such as what exactly the summit is. As energy drains, there have been instances when one party quits, telling the other to head up first. Also, there have been times when one refuses to go along with the other. There have been people standing in the way and inclement weather has also impeded the journey. This explains the past 25 years and possible future relations also.

To reach a happy ending, a new method is needed. Conquering the mountain entails studying ways to quickly reach agreements on North Korean denuclearization and eliminating nuclear materials, and corresponding US sanctions relief, a formal peace regime, and normalization of relations between Pyongyang and Washington. In other words, a big deal that actually works.

What might work? While there are various possibilities to consider, the most effective would be for North Korea to immediately accede to the NPT and transfer its nuclear weapons and other materials to Russia for dismantlement by 2020. The moment its weapons and other nuclear materials cross the border, it would mean that North Korea has completed denuclearization according to the agreement. The US and North Korea can then immediately proceed to sign peace accords and begin sanctions relief, as well as normalize relations in an action-for-action manner. This would be proper denuclearization by North Korea, with Russia having played a pivotal third-party role.

Today, disagreement clouds the US-North Korea nuclear issue, one of which is denuclearization. In May 2018, US National Security Advisor John Bolton suggested that North Korea hand over its nuclear material to the US, and Pyongyang flatly refused. When Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited North Korea as a follow-up to the first US-North Korea summit, it described his requests as “chief-like.” At the Hanoi summit, Trump asked Kim to pledge to hand over all nuclear weapons and materials. Kim responded in his Supreme Assembly speech, saying the US had come to the summit with “its head in the clouds and a completely unrealistic proposal.”

The author has closely examined the process in which the US and Russia co-operated to dismantle the Soviet Union’s nuclear weapons, which can be seen as a groundbreaking and practical way to break through the current stagnant dialogue. Naturally, this includes mediation mechanisms to determine corresponding measures by the US. On Jan. 31, 2019, Stephen Biegun, the US Special Envoy for North Korea negotiations, told an audience at Stanford University that the perfect scenario would be one where sanctions are lifted as the last nuclear weapon is gone from North Korean soil and the two sides raise their flags at each other’s respective embassies under a peace regime. This objective can promote North Korea transferring materials to a third party, sanctions relief, normalization of relations and a peace treaty, all within a set time.

The result and aftermath of Hanoi has yet to be written, in large part because of the US demand that North Korea hand over its nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, biological weapons and dual-use programs. North Korea did not regard this as appropriate for denuclearization and did not accede to it, so it cannot be free from blame for the outcome of the summit. When combining these circumstances, there are ways to approach it realistically.

Now is the time to publicize a creative and bold solution. Here, the solution discussed can be worth considering in that it reflects factors and methods that can satisfy both parties.

The ideal story might go like this: “July 27, 2020, at Panmunjom, North and South Korea have gathered to finalize a peace regime.” The summit would then move to Vladivostok, where President Putin would welcome the leaders as Russian trains bring the last of North Korea’s nuclear program across the border. At the same time, the UN Security Council lifts sanctions on North Korea. Back in Vladivostok, President Trump announces a normalization of North Korea-US relations, to which Kim Jong Un responds with the following address: “This is how 70 years of relations between enemies transforms into peace, and nuclear powers complete the historic task. I proclaim that our country is completely rid of nuclear weapons.”

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