The Road Ahead to Denuclearize the Korean Peninsula

Mel Gurtov
Was Trump’s true Singapore summit agenda to cool North Korea tensions to gain space to launch a harsher policy on Iran?

Philip Zelikow
An exclusive focus on denuclearization is fraught with difficulties, so how should Korean Peninsula peace efforts be pursued?

Rajaram Panda
After the summits, the reality. The road ahead, if it ever leads to denuclearization and a peace regime, will be a long and hard one.
The burst of optimism about the possibility of denuclearizing North Korea and achieving a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula that culminated in the June summit in Singapore between US President Donald Trump and North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un, has faded. In its place have come growing doubts and a growing realization that the road ahead, if it ever really leads to those outcomes, will be a long and hard one, writes Rajaram Panda.

THE CONUNDRUM over North Korean denuclearization following the Trump-Kim summit on June 12 in Singapore is getting murkier by the day. To begin with, conflicting claims over its outcome are being made by both sides — something that analysts tend to see as pregnant with even greater danger than the situation prior to the summit. The different stakeholders involved are also unwilling to compromise, choosing instead to interpret things to suit themselves. The US, Japan, South Korea, Russia and China are not necessarily on the same page, because their respective strategic and economic interests are at variance with one another. The reality is that North Korea’s denuclearization, over which so much hype was generated after the Singapore summit, seems to be a non-starter.

There are several imponderables in seeking what Washington has been insisting on — “complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement” of North Korea’s nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Only under these circumstances would North Korea be welcomed into the world community. Japan virtually parrots that US stance, but is pushing for the focus to remain on missiles of all ranges rather than merely intercontinental ballistic missiles that could reach the US mainland. It is also seeking a resolution of the issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea. Despite the euphoria generated by the Singapore summit, Japan remains cautious about North Korea’s intentions. China and Russia, meanwhile, are at odds with Washington and Tokyo, and take a softer line toward Pyongyang. For its part, South Korea seeks peace by any means, because it would be the immediate adversary in any conflict situation.

In the midst of all these conflicting perceptions, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made his third visit to Pyongyang in early July to work toward denuclearization. Not only did that visit end with virtually no outcome, there was a bit of acrimony after Pompeo claimed the talks were productive, while Pyongyang described them as “regrettable.” To make matters worse, a planned visit by Pompeo to North Korea in late August was called off by US President Donald Trump, because of perceptions that the circumstances weren’t promising enough.

IS KIM SINCERE?
This raises the question of whether Kim Jong Un is really sincere about keeping the promises he made in Singapore, or whether other factors are preventing him from doing so. One possible reason may lie in the fact that Kim has decided to prioritize economic development, which is why he is willing to talk about giving up nuclear weapons. Pyongyang’s hardline stance after Pompeo’s visit in early July gives rise to speculation that Kim is facing resistance to his economic development plan from hardliners in the military. According to some unverified reports in the Korean media, Kim expressed his frustration about the hardliners when he met South Korean President Moon Jae-in on April 27 in Panmunjom. If this indeed is the case, optimists expecting peace to dawn on the Korean Peninsula might have to revisit their position.

There is also speculation that hardliners are working secretly on the North’s nuclear activities, despite official claims that dismantling the country’s nuclear program has already partly begun. Given Pyongyang’s past record of breaking promises, the issue of a trust deficit is not going to go away easily, irrespective of Kim’s intentions. This could also be one reason why denuclearization negotiations between the US and North Korea remain stalled.

Does this mean that Kim does not have full control over the military? There is speculation that Kim may soon replace Kim Yong-chol, vice chairman of the Central Committee of the North Korean Workers’ Party, with Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho as the counterpart to Mike Pompeo. If this comes true, then worries that Kim may be losing control over the military could be real. Kim Yong-chol had been Pompeo’s opposite until the June 12 summit between Kim and Trump. However, the joint statement issued at the end of the summit stated that Pompeo and an unnamed “relevant high-level North Korean official” would seek follow-up talks, implying that his counterpart could change. Kim is aware that Kim Yong-chol, with his military background, holds hardline views toward the US. It is possible that the conservativens in Pyongyang do not feel comfortable that Kim Jong Un has opted for a softer stance on the country’s nuclear program. They worry about the regime’s future in this possible changed scenario. These unnamed “internal voices of military hardliners” are cited as one of the reasons why denuclearization talks have not made much progress. However, there could be other views as well. For now, Kim Yong-chol remains in place.

MORE FUEL PRODUCTION
The arguments and counter arguments above stem from information gathered by US intelligence sources that North Korea is engaged in making more fuel for nuclear weapons despite ongoing talks. US intelligence agencies cite “unequivocal evidence” that North Korea has continued production of nuclear fuel at multiple secret sites in recent months and may try to hide these as it seeks sanctions relief from the US. If true,
then Trump’s boastful announcement after the June 12 summit that “there is no longer a nuclear threat from North Korea” needs to be viewed differently. Obviously, a scenario in which North Korea is stepping up production of enriched uranium, while at the same time engaging in nuclear diplomacy with the US, is not ideal for achieving denuclearization. The suspicions gain credence because North Korea may have more than one secret nuclear site in addition to its known nuclear-fuel production facility at Yongbyon. This leaves room for concerns that Pyongyang is deceiving the US. For now, the presence of additional nuclear facilities is unknown. The confusion arises because the joint statement issued in Singapore gave no details on how or when Pyongyang might surrender its nuclear weapons. Ahead of the Singapore summit, North Korea had rejected unilaterally abandoning an arsenal that it views as an essential deterrent against US aggression. There was a virtual volte face in Singapore, where it was announced that it would give up its nuclear weapons if its security were guaranteed. Trump claimed this as a victory and announced that Pyongyang was planning to blow up four of its big test sites, thereby starting the denuclearization process. According to the Washington-based North Korean monitoring project, 38 North, this was not the case.

Amid all this confusion, while diplomacy continued with Pompeo’s third visit to Pyongyang, Japan’s Kyodo news agency reported on July 6 that Kim was eyeing a second summit with Trump in Switzerland. The surprise report cited multiple diplomatic sources saying that a team of North Korean diplomats was sent to Geneva, Bern and Davos to look at conference halls and hotels as potential venues for talks with the US. No mention of such plans was made, however, during Pompeo’s July visit to Pyongyang. The Kyodo report also said that North Korea could be considering multilateral negotiations with the US, South Korea and China in the remaining months of 2018 and through 2019.

It may be recalled that Kim Jong Un studied at a junior high school in Bern, and Switzerland had expressed an interest in the past in hosting talks between North Korea and the US. If true, a second Trump-Kim summit in Davos, coinciding with the annual World Economic Forum, could be a possibility.

POMPEO’S THIRD VISIT

Did Pompeo succeed when he made his third trip since April to Pyongyang on July 7, his first since the Singapore summit on June 12, to discuss denuclearization? The visit was to seek clarity on how Pyongyang was planning to dismantle its nuclear program, in addition to how the remains of US troops missing from the Korean War would be recovered. Kim Yong-chol remained his counterpart in the talks, which meant hardline voices were undiluted. After visiting North Korea, Pompeo also travelled to Japan, Vietnam, Abu Dhabi and Brussels, where he joined Trump at the NATO summit. Although on this trip Pompeo spent a night in Pyongyang — his previous visits were all one-day affairs — no details were provided on what transpired during the discussions between Pompeo and Kim Yong-chol. It also remained unclear for some time whether Pompeo met with Kim Jong Un, as had been expected, but it was later confirmed that he did not. As the Trump administration’s top diplomat, Pompeo conveyed to the North Koreans that the US was committed to reaching a deal under which North Korea would denuclearize and realize economic benefits in return. Both sides wished to clarify “things,” but neither gave any explanation of what exactly needed to be clarified, although it is not difficult to guess that there was lack of clarity on how “denuclearization” would be interpreted to the satisfaction of both sides.

For the US, unless its three basic goals — complete denuclearization of North Korea, security assurances and the repatriation of remains of American soldiers killed during the Korean War — are met, no further progress could be expected. Left subject to interpretation is whether this was a departure from its earlier demand that an agreement must cover “complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization.” The fact that this wording was no longer being used gave rise to speculation that the US had begun to dial back its demands. Despite the three-hour talks between Pompeo and Kim Yong-chol over dinner, no clarity emerged over whether Kim Jong Un would honor his promises made in Singapore and translate them into concrete action. Beside the nuclear issue, Pyongyang has yet to return all of the remains of the US troops killed during the 1950-53 Korean War, despite the fact that Kim committed at the summit to their “immediate repatriation.”

Elsewhere, North Korea also does not want the issue of human rights violations to ever be raised. Trump faced criticism from human rights activists for not raising the issue in Singapore. Just before Pompeo’s recent visit, the North’s state-run Uriniminzokkiri website warned Washington not to provoke the North with an “anachronistic human rights racket” when diplomatic attempts are being pursued to improve ties. The nuclear issue gets further complicated because no framework or guidelines were agreed to in Singapore for working toward “com-
Global Asia Vol. 13, No. 3, September 2018

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plete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” Trump administration officials deflected criticism of the Singapore agreement and described it as a first step in a negotiated process to persuade Kim to give up his nuclear weapons. But if the analyses by researchers and journalists suggesting that North Korea is continuing to increase the production of nuclear fuel, build more missile launchers and expand a key rocket-engine manufacturing facility are correct, then Kim Jong Un’s real intentions could be put into question. Perhaps what North Korea really wants is to test Trump’s patience and extract maximum concessions, one possible reason why there are no clear signs of any progress on denuclearization.

RASH STATEMENTS, RISKY OUTCOMES

Be that as it may, the reality is that the Trump administration’s plan to dismantle the North’s nuclear weapons and missile programs in a year is both unrealistic and risky. It was rash of Trump to make the claim soon after the summit that North Korea was no longer a nuclear threat, when there was plenty of ambiguity in the joint statement. Trump should have been circumspect, keeping in mind that his predecessors had failed to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea in the past quarter century since Pyongyang began producing fissile material for bombs. Further, Pompeo’s claim that North Korea would take “major” nuclear disarmament steps within the next two years — in other words, before the end of Trump’s first term in January 2021 — was certainly bullish, given Pyongyang’s history of evasion and reluctance to allow verification of disarmament agreements. Trump’s national security advisor, John Bolton, went even further, asserting that the denuclearization process could be completed within a year, so that Pyongyang could win sanctions relief and receive aid from Japan and South Korea. Such hasty assertions smacked of diplomatic immaturity. That Trump, Pompeo and Bolton seemingly believed Kim, without the North Korean leader being transparent, meant that they were naive and open to being deceived. In a secretive regime such as North Korea, it is extremely difficult to know exactly the number of nuclear warheads in its possession, nor whether there are undisclosed facilities able to make fissile material for nuclear bombs.

Since North Korea and the US have not yet negotiated the terms under which the former would relinquish its weapons, Pyongyang will surely seek leverage in discussions. If the US overlooks this possibility, it could be to the North’s advantage. Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, rightly observed: “Denuclearization is no simple task. There is no precedent for a country that has openly tested nuclear weapons and developed a nuclear arsenal and infrastructure as substantial as the one in North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons.” David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security suggests the US get Kim to disclose a complete list of all his nuclear sites and materials, including uranium and plutonium. He further suggests that Trump and Kim should decide whether to move the nuclear weapons out of North Korea to dismantle them or do it inside the country. Japan’s offer to send experts and money to help dismantle them should be accepted.

According to nuclear physicist Siegfried Hecker, a leading expert on North Korea’s nuclear program, the magnitude of dismantling its WMD programs is so huge that it could require a 10-year roadmap, based on the belief that Pyongyang will not give up its weapons and weapons programs until its security is guaranteed. North Korea’s stockpile is estimated to include as many as 60 nuclear devices. Hasty promises or written agreements are not enough to achieve the denuclearization goal. Kim could still conceal parts of his stockpile and production facilities, intending to preserve a nuclear weapons capability as the ultimate guarantor of his dynasty’s survival.

LACKING CLEAR DEFINITIONS

The root of the confusion is that Trump and Kim did not establish an agreed definition of “denuclearization.” Trump seemed to have accepted North Korea’s position that a disarmament process encompasses the entire Peninsula, which would include the US military presence in South Korea and the region, not just North Korea’s assets. In a fast-track move, Trump agreed to Pyongyang’s long-time demand, and that of its chief ally China, to stop joint military drills with South Korea. Since the annual drills are meant to shore up protection for the South against possible aggression from the North, the two Asian allies of the US in the region — South Korea and Japan — were shocked, because neither was consulted before an announcement was made, although both Pyongyang and Beijing were pleased.

There was more confusion in store as Pompeo had a tough time answering probing questions from the media. The joint statement signed in Singapore called for “complete” denuclearization but did not include two other elements of Washington’s long-time demand that the process also be “verifiable” and “irreversible.” Later, South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha clarified that North Korea had balked at a written pledge for “complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization” for historical reasons, but stressed that the goal remained the same whether that exact phrase was used or not. Adding to the confusion were the mixed signals sent out by Trump, Pompeo and Bolton after the July 7 visit by Pompeo. The optimism demonstrated by the US, despite obvious setbacks, was surprising. While Pompeo parroted Trump’s bullish views, he at least admitted that “there’s still more work to be done” through working groups on both sides. But the fact is that such working groups were also a feature of past nuclear agreements with the North and served only to postpone eventual failure. Past practice tells us that forming small working groups is another stalling tactic to create the illusion of co-operation. What transpired subsequently was that the definition of the word “denuclearization” remained inconclusive.

‘GANGLSTER-LIKE’

Hours after Pompeo had left Pyongyang, calling his talks “productive,” North Korea accused the Trump administration of pushing a “unilateral and gangster-like demand for denuclearization” and called it “deeply regrettable.” While he refused to divulge details of his talks with Kim Yong-chol, Pompeo is said to have expressed in private his doubts that Kim would ever give up his nuclear weapons.

In blasting the talks with Pompeo, Pyongyang was contending that the US was demanding everything and offering nothing, and warned of “a dangerous phase” that could “rattle our willingness for denuclearization.” To be sure, the tough talk might have been part of a negotiating strategy and for domestic consumption to appear strong in the face of a long-time bitter foe. Several analysts have endorsed, and with some convincing reasons, Kim’s claim of being the winner in dealings with Trump, including Kim’s recognition on the world stage as a statesman worthy of a sit-down with an American president. Trump’s sudden acquiescence to North Korea’s demand that the US end joint military drills and exercises with South Korea was cited as further proof of Kim’s rising stature. Such vitriolic diatribes, this time one-sided, show just how complex negotiations are with North Korea, which could take years, if not decades.
This throws up the real challenge for Pompeo — to decipher Kim’s real intentions. If Pompeo’s apparent doubts are real, then we are back to square one and the world will have to learn to live with a nuclear North Korea. Seen from this perspective, Pompeo’s trip may have been the least “productive” possible. He was rather circumspect in reacting to the “gangster-like” remark, by saying that “the world is a gangster” because the same demands by the US are part of a United Nations Security Council resolution.

The enduring — and deepening — confusions also stem from the manner in which negotiations took place between Trump and Kim in Singapore. There were no note-takers or aides, something unheard of in the world of high-stakes diplomacy. No one really knows what Trump might have said or promised Kim, leaving analysts to interpret by following post-summit statements by both sides. The summit between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin on July 16 in Helsinki, during which the two also had talks without note-takers or aides present, threw up the same type of uncertainties.

From North Korea, Pompeo flew to Tokyo where he met with his counterparts from Japan and South Korea, Taro Kono and Kang Kyung-wha, respectively. He admitted that denuclearization will be difficult and that much work remains to be done. Not to spoil the momentum, he shrugged off Pyongyang’s “gangster” rebuke, while citing progress during the visit to the north. But it was clear that the North’s statements undermined hopes for a quick deal and raised questions about Kim’s intentions. The two envoys sought to put the best face on the situation, with Kono pledging to stand “hand in hand” with Pompeo on nuclear talks “to the end,” and Kang affirming that the shared defense posture with the US would remain “iron-clad” and “watertight” despite the cancellation of military exercises. The statements, however, did little to mask the worry in Tokyo and Seoul.

From Tokyo, Pompeo travelled to Hanoi, where he appealed to North Korea’s leaders to follow Vietnam’s path in overcoming past hostilities with the US. He called on Kim to replicate Vietnam’s “miracle” of economic growth by improving ties with the US, vowing that America keeps its promises with former foes.

But there are reasons why North Korea cannot replicate Vietnam’s path to economic growth and prosperity. If the US continues pursuing its “maximum pressure campaign” of economic and diplomatic isolation, it will only harden Pyongyang’s stance. UN and US sanctions have cut 90 percent of North Korea’s export revenue. But so long as China remains North Korea’s principal ally and backer, despite maintaining cosmetic sanctions, the geo-strategic matrix could continue to weigh in the North’s favor. Therefore, Pyongyang remains unperturbed. Amid all these development, Japan reported on June 29 a suspected ship-to-ship transfer of goods in the waters around North Korea. This is believed to be the eighth instance in 2018 alone. Such clandestine dealings keep the North’s economy afloat. Given facts such as these, the denuclearization issue is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon.

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