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.

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Has Singapore Led to Real Gains on the North Korean Nuclear Question?

By Jeffrey Lewis

THE WARM FEELINGS of the Singapore summit between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump in June have given way to the chill of December and the reality of a coming winter. In October and November, North Korea’s state-run news agency, KCNA, published a series of commentaries warning that North Korea might resume testing nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles. North Korea also objected to a small-scale US-South Korea military exercise, describing it as an “anachronistic military movement that threatens peace and tranquility.” And Kim Yong Chol, North Korea’s top nuclear negotiator, ghosted the Trump administration, failing to show up in Beijing for the flight that was to take him to New York and a meeting with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Kim’s Deputy, Choe Kang Il, has consistently refused to meet with her US counterpart, Steve Biegun.

Even so, the process may yet not collapse. Trump has said that he remains committed to holding a second summit in the new year. But there are signs this could be the last opportunity for the summit process to produce practical steps. The administration has again dropped its demand for a time-bound commitment to dismantle nuclear weapons and referred primarily to perceived nuclear threats from the US. North Korea may now possess nuclear weapons, but its officials’ view it was the US that “nuclearized” the peninsula. This North Korean phrase does not mean “disarmament” in the sense that most US observers seem to presume.

The term “denuclearization” actually dates to the period prior to North Korea’s acquisition of nuclear weapons and referred primarily to perceived nuclear threats from the US. North Korea might suggest, Pyongyang is not offering to disarm, and certainly not unilaterally. What the North Koreans have offered — indeed, what they have always offered, even dating back to the era of Kim Il Sung — is to work toward the “denuclearization” of the Korean Peninsula. This North Korean phrase does not mean “disarmament” in the sense that most US observers seem to presume.

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THE VIEW FROM PYONGYANG

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replacing the politically provocative nuclear and missile tests of 2017 with positive stories consistent with North Korea’s improving relations with Seoul and Washington. But they do not remove the weapons that have been built.

THE VIEW FROM WASHINGTON
The North Koreans believe the US understands this. Indeed, when Pompeo tried to press the case for denuclearization steps, his North Korean counterpart, Kim Yong Chol, held up a mobile phone and taunted him: “Why don’t you call your president?” And he may be right. After an absurd public furor in November 2017 over missile bases that have existed for decades, Trump seemed to admit that he understood well that North Korea retained nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, the administration has continued to promise that Pyongyang will rapidly and completely abandon its nuclear weapons and missile programs. Writing in Foreign Affairs, Pompeo even promised a formal agreement that would be “superior” to the agreement with Iran, including the inspection of military facilities. Moreover, he set a date, January 2021, for completion of what he called “the process of rapid denuclearization of North Korea.”

In addition, the Trump administration has been adamant that it will not remove sanctions until this entire process is completed. In the meantime, it has sought to increase pressure, refusing visas for humanitarian aid workers wishing to travel to North Korea and dragging its feet, through the US/UN Military Command, on the inter-Korean railway project agreed by South Korean President Moon Jae-in and by Kim Jong Un.

PHASING DENUCLEARIZATION
Stating these realities should not denigrate the progress made between Pyongyang and Washington, or the parallel progress made between Seoul and Pyongyang. There has been a substantial reduction in tension over the course of 2018, moving the issue of North Korea’s nuclear weapons out of the news cycle. This is itself a welcome development given the tendency of leaders in Washington and Pyongyang to feel compelled to respond to every insult. North Korea stopped the politically provocative nuclear and missile tests that made 2017 so frightening, returned the remains of some US servicemen killed in the Korean War and agreed with South Korea to measures aimed at reducing military tensions along the demilitarized zone and at sea. The US and South Korea also have suspended a number of large military exercises that are traditionally met by objections from Pyongyang.

But this progress is only sustainable as long as concerns about the nuclear program are managed, either through negotiations or at least the promise of future disarmament. Could a second summit set in train a phased agreement, and if so, how would it work?

The proposal that North Korea provide a declaration or inventory of its nuclear facilities in exchange for a formal declaration on the end of the Korean War seems to have been an early, if misguided, effort at pragmatism. From a policy perspective, it would be wiser to articulate a series of interim steps in which denuclearization is a phased process with stages that ought to reflect roughly what the North Koreans are willing to offer — typically, the closure or dismantling of specific facilities — in exchange for limited relief from sanctions. Past experience in negotiating with North Korea, particularly during the missile talks that came close to a deal in 2000, suggest that Pyongyang tends to hold back the most important concessions for its leader to offer in person. A summit, then, offers an opportunity for the best offer from North Korea — if only one is open to what is really being offered.

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of objectives, proceeding one after another: measures to slow, cap, reduce and ultimately eliminate North Korea’s nuclear and missile capabilities. Since we are focused on the summit, I will look only at the first two steps.

The first set of measures would simply slow the growth of North Korea’s missile forces. North Korea is, at the moment, committed to “mass-producing” nuclear-armed ballistic missiles. There is probably very little opportunity to place a hard cap on its nuclear and missile-production capabilities, but that does not mean that we should not be opportunistic in terms of persuading it to close certain facilities. The two major steps that North Korea has taken so far — closing the nuclear test site at Punggye-ri and dismantling an engine-testing stand at the Sohae Satellite Launching Station — do not impose any meaningful constraint on North Korea’s production of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Those activities are being conducted elsewhere — and, indeed, they are still being conducted.

One opportunity to slow North Korea’s development of nuclear capabilities is the permanent shutdown of the Yongbyon nuclear facility, an offer that Kim Jong Un made in the context of the Pyongyang Declaration in September 2018. Critics will point out that the reactor at Yongbyon that was used to produce plutonium is well past its expected lifetime, while the enrichment facility is not North Korea’s only source of highly enriched uranium. These are fair objections, but it is also true that the complex at Yongbyon is the “core for the nuclear program of the DPRK.” Even if North Korea were to retain additional facilities for producing fissile material, the closing of Yongbyon would slow the growth of its nuclear weapons stockpile.

It is worth noting that a “Yongbyon-first” approach that emphasizes slowing the growth of North Korea’s fissile material stockpile could proceed without the inventory that North Korean officials have refused to provide. It seems unlikely, to be frank, that any inventory would involve North Korea’s willingness disclosure of sites that it believes remain hidden from the US. (If one reads carefully the media reports surrounding the most recent US national intelligence estimate, it seems the intelligence community has concluded that there are additional fissile-material production sites and that some evidence indicates Kim Jong Un has made a decision not to disclose them.)

While it would be easy to accuse Kim Jong Un of dishonesty, reluctance to reveal undisclosed sites is understandable. After all, the disclosure of a site is irreversible. Relief from sanctions, however, is not — as the unhappy experience of the Iranians and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) suggests. The North Koreans have been clear that they believe any declaration on their
part would only deepen US suspicions, presumably because they are not comfortable offering a comprehensive accounting of such programs. If, however, a Yongbyon-first strategy were to succeed in building confidence between the two sides, that might open up the option for North Korea to agree not merely to the shutdown of Yongbyon, but to the closure of other facilities such as the presumed enrichment site near Kangson. In this phase, where the US would seek to cap the growth of North Korea’s arsenal, Pyongyang could take a number of steps. The closure of the test site at Punggye-ri could be supplemented with Kim’s signature on the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Signing the treaty would raise the cost for Kim of returning to testing while increasing the tools available to the international community in the event of an ambiguous event suspected to be a nuclear test. The work of verifying an end to North Korea’s fissile-material production would be relatively straightforward and could largely be done by the International Atomic Energy Agency with existing safeguards, as long as North Korea accepted the “Additional Protocol.” This is generally the approach taken in the JCPOA with Iran, under which the agency used existing safeguards authorities, supplemented by measures including access to centrifuge workshops and uranium mines. Capping the missile program is more complicated. Many observers are fond of saying that North Korea’s missiles must be a part of any agreement. North Korea’s missile program is far larger than Iraq’s pre-1991 program and less concentrated than the former Soviet Union’s. More than a dozen sites around the country are involved in the production of airframes, engines, fuel and other components. The relationships among these sites is unclear, and it seems there is substantial redundancy. It would not be easy or straightforward to monitor, let alone eliminate, these programs. Our hypothetical negotiators, if they should be so lucky as to reach this point, may come to appreciate the decision by President Barack Obama’s administration to seek a deal with Iran that did not include Tehran’s missile programs.

LIMITED BUT SUBSTANTIAL

Even limiting ourselves to the relatively modest goal of slowing and capping North Korea’s arsenal, the measures outlined are substantial. Rather than be disheartened, one should consider the implications. Even measures short of disarmament would improve the security situation and are worth purchasing with some measure of sanctions relief.

In particular, we should not undervalue the benefits of limiting the growth of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal. North Korea’s nuclear strategy seems to envision the large-scale use of nuclear weapons against US forces in South Korea and Japan to “repel” an invasion, with a substantial reserve of intermediate- and intercontinental-range systems held in reserve to deter the US from escalation. As I have argued elsewhere, this strategy is highly destabilizing, because it places a premium for North Korea on the first use of nuclear weapons in a crisis. This strategy, in turn, depends crucially on two factors: A credible threat to the US homeland to deter escalation and a large enough stockpile of short- and medium-range nuclear weapons to execute the plan. North Korea’s ICBM force has only a single successful test of a missile that can reach targets throughout the US, but even this rudimentary capability would give an American president pause. That leaves us with North Korea’s arsenal — this strategy requires a larger arsenal than North Korea is currently believed to possess. Preventing North Korea from creating an operational deterrent capable of exercising this strategy would be well worth pursuing.

A second summit next year, therefore, need not be a train wreck that makes manifest these contradictions. Instead, it offers an opportunity for the two sides to begin to put in place measures to reduce tensions, lift sanctions and slow the growth of North Korea’s nuclear stockpile. Much has been made of North Korea’s general reluctance to engage in working-level talks and the continued refusal to meet with US nuclear negotiator Steve Biegun. The reality is that North Korea has tended to hold back its largest concessions for its top leader to make. If it is going to resume its offer to close some facilities at Yongbyon, that offer will be left for Kim Jong Un to make to Trump at a summit. It will then fall to the Trump administration to decide whether to lower its goals and how to sell this more modest objective to the American public. If it can do so, there are real gains for US security to be had. Spring, after all, is just around the corner.

Jeffrey Lewis is the director of the East Asia Nonproliferation Program at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies at Middlebury Institute of International Studies, Monterey, California.