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The Tasks that Remain Following the US-ROK Summit



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The US-ROK summit happened fifty days after Moon Jae-in's administration took office. Moon came to power without going through the normal transition from one administration to another, and met his opposite number in the White House in record time for a South Korean president. This surely is because Moon believes that a solution to the nuclear problem on the Korean peninsula will be found through dialogue with one of the key parties to the issue, South Korea's ally, the United States. The belief that the Korean peninsula must never again descend into war also must have played a part. Economically, even while expecting plenty of demands from his American counterpart, he took an uncharted course lacking a domestic and international consensus on the framework for crucial foreign and security policy issues including North Korea.

Before his visit to the United States, Moon had said: "I will not obsess over success on particular issues, but focus on building trust and friendship with US President Donald Trump." This seemingly meant that rather than focusing on the finer points of policy, he would seek to obtain a consensus on the larger issue of resolving the Korean peninsula nuclear problem. This solution involves first a freeze of the North Korean nuclear program followed by the second step of denuclearization. Moon has previously stated that the ultimate goal of this policy is to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue and construct a peace system on the Korean peninsula. The joint statement that followed was delayed by seven hours and 20 minutes, with one National Assembly member accompanying President Moon saying it felt like seven years. Its principal contents are as follows:

First, the US-ROK alliance was reaffirmed: "President Trump reiterated the U.S. commitment to provide extended deterrence to the ROK, drawing on the full range of U.S. military capabilities, both conventional and nuclear." However, should denuclearization negotiations resume, the deployment of strategic nuclear assets to the ROK could cause conflict (including the nuclear umbrella that the United States provides South Korea).

Second, there is the strengthening of South Korean military capabilities. The statement said: "The ROK will continue to acquire the critical military capabilities necessary to lead the combined defense, and detect, disrupt, destroy, and defend against North Korean nuclear and missile threats, including through interoperable Kill-Chain, Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD), and other Alliance systems." However, the reduction of the THAAD issue to one of procedural legitimacy within South Korea may lead to a security dilemma in Northeast Asia and on the Korean peninsula as South Korea appears to seek to nationalize its own self-defence. Subsequent to the US-ROK summit, on July 3, the Russians and Chinese released a statement from the Sino-Russian summit confirming that they both opposed the deployment of THAAD. This comes amidst reports that the DPRK is even developing Multiple Independently-targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs) for ballistic missiles that will potentially render THAAD useless.

Third, the United States and the ROK agree on the peaceful denuclearization of the Korean peninsula: "President Trump and President Moon pledged to continue to coordinate closely to achieve our shared goal of complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner." This statement is significant insofar as it means that

denuclearization will not be pursued through the use of violence—or war.

Fourth, sanctions and dialogue proceed simultaneously. Sanctions were described as a “tool of diplomacy,” and the possibility of dialogue was open. Attention has also been paid to this line: “the two leaders emphasized that the United States and the ROK do not maintain a hostile policy toward North Korea.” The statement also commented that North Korea justifies its nuclear development through reference to the United States alleged hostile policy toward the DPRK. Whilst also saying that “President Trump supported the ROK’s leading role in fostering an environment for peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula... supported President Moon’s aspiration to restart inter-Korean dialogue on issues including humanitarian affairs.” These lines have been interpreted as signalling that the ROK has autonomy in how it approaches inter-Korean relations. However, there is a need to pay attention to the fact that the resumption of inter-Korean dialogue was referenced after the seriousness of North Korea’s human rights problem.

Fifth, trilateral cooperation between the US, Japan and ROK was mentioned in the statement, including the following line: “The two leaders affirmed that trilateral security and defense cooperation contributes to enhanced deterrence and defense against the North Korean threat.” This can be read as repudiation of the Barack Obama administration’s ‘Pivot to Asia’ policy, with the alleged instability it brought and the US’s inability to project military power in Asia, as well as the Trump administration’s desire to advance trilateral military cooperation. On this front, the line “President Trump and President Moon affirmed that the United States and the ROK will work together to support and uphold the rules-based order in the Asia-Pacific region” can be read as the two sides seeking to deter Chinese actions.

Sixth, there was vague agreement on US-ROK economic relations: “President Trump and President Moon committed to foster expanded and balanced trade while creating reciprocal benefits and fair treatment between the two countries.” However, whilst President Moon was in the United States, President Trump talked about a “fair burden” of the cost for US forces being stationed in Korea, non-tariff barriers to US car exports to Korea, and tariffs on US steel among other issues. Hence, a renegotiation of the US-ROK FTA may be unavoidable. This yet again confirmed one of the elements of the Trump administration’s foreign policy: security guarantees for economic concessions.

As the major content of the Joint Statement confirms, the US-ROK relationship remains uncertain following the summit. First, with the respect to the North Korean nuclear issue, a freeze in nuclear development was not mentioned in the statement, nor was the Moon administration’s ultimate goal of establishing a peace system. North Korea’s ambassador to India indicated on June 20 (before Moon’s arrival in Washington) and the North also reiterated through the “Public Question Space” of the Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation that they would freeze in nuclear and missile testing in exchange for the cessation of joint US-ROK military exercises. This proposal was welcomed by the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs, which also connected this to denuclearization and the creation of a peace system. With no path to a freeze readily apparent, North Korea tested an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on July 4. This passed a US redline. The Moon administration responded with a joint US-ROK test of missiles that could hit the North Korean leadership. If there is no agreement between the two on how to bring about a North Korean freeze, a crisis of the warlike proportions like that of April 2017 could recur with the joint ROK-US military exercises planned for August 2017.

Second, South Korea has been granted autonomy in its handling of inter-Korean relations, yet this is limited to humanitarian issues. Since being a candidate, Moon has emphasized his theory of peaceful economics in which improvements in North-South relations could become a force for South Korea’s future economic growth. At the same time, he has stressed that if peace is not brought to the Korean peninsula—i.e., if the North Korean nuclear question remains unresolved—then the economic benefits of a peaceful economy will not be reaped. In addition, he put a single condition on an otherwise unconditional pledge to engage in dialogue with the North at the 17th anniversary commemorations of the June 15 inter-Korean joint declaration:

“cease additional nuclear and missile provocations.” In spite of the ICBM test, we wait to see whether the Moon administration can set out a North Korea policy doctrine that will lead the North back to the negotiation table having already said it is not prepared to talk about the nuclear problem with the South. The G-20 summit in Germany in early July is expected to include such discussions—including as it does China and Russia who both oppose the THAAD deployment, and a US increasingly conscious of the threat by North Korean ICBM tests.

Third, the summit demonstrated the fact that the Moon administration was unable to separate security and economic issues in US-ROK relations. Whilst in broad view a consensus was reached with respect to security, there remain individual issues that are unresolved. With security, there remains questions over whether sufficient economic concessions can be given to ensure US acquiescence, and what the costs of such concessions ultimately would be. The Trump administration’s ‘America first’ approach may create the conditions for a new kind of security and economic exchange between the two sides. If we also consider Chinese sanctions imposed on the ROK in response to the deployment of THAAD, the question of how to institutionalize policymaking with respect to general security and economic issues in the US-ROK relationship remains to be answered.

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