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Overcoming the Very Different Calculations Between the US and North Korea



Yong-il MOON
Professor, IFES, Kyungnam University
yimoon@kyungnam.ac.kr

The second US-North Korean summit that focused the world's attention ended without a signed agreement. Given the high expectations for the meeting, this was a very unfortunate outcome. Both countries even blamed each other for the failure to reach an agreement. In the press conference held right after the cancellation of the agreement signing was made public, President Donald Trump stated that North Korea had strongly demanded that all economic sanctions be lifted after he proposed the dismantling of nuclear facilities apart from the Yongbyon nuclear site. Meanwhile, during a midnight press conference, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho and Vice Minister Choi Sun-hee refuted President Trump's statements, saying that the North Korean side had proposed the complete dismantling of the Yonbyon nuclear facility and, furthermore, there had been no proposal to lift all of sanctions. Instead, according to them, the North Korean side had proposed the lifting of only five specific sanctions established after March 2016 that hampered the civilian economy and the livelihoods of the North Korean people. They also added that "Our principle [that a step-by-step plan is the best way forward] stands and remains invariable, and our proposal will never change in the future even if the US wants further talks."

The biggest issue to surface from this summit was the continued existence of a massive gap in North Korean and American perceptions toward denuclearization. Both sides have agreed to head in the direction of denuclearization, but they have still failed to agree to the principles and approaches of the denuclearization process. For example, the two countries do not seem to have made a clear agreement on whether the process should move forward in a step-by-step fashion based on bilaterally simultaneous measures, or through an all-encompassing "grand bargain." The bigger issue here is that the two sides have a major gap in their thinking on the equivalence of North Korea's major moves toward denuclearization and corresponding American measures.

This gap was made much clearer through the statements made by Vice Minister Choi Sun-hee. At the midnight press conference on March 1, she remarked that Chairman Kim Jong Un's thinking changed after feeling suspicious toward America's calculations. According to North Korea, the dismantling of the Yonbyon nuclear facility is a major step given that the site has played a pivotal and symbolic role in North Korea's nuclear program, and that it will be difficult to come up with a better proposal. North Korea's calculation is that, given that the country has not conducted nuclear or missile tests for 15 months, the dismantling of the Yongbyon nuclear site is valuable enough to demand the lifting of the now unjustifiable international sanctions adopted after March 2016.

However, this perception is very different from the one held by the US. The US side strongly believes that sanctions are what brought North Korea to the negotiating table and are a key tool to bring about denuclearization. The lifting of sanctions on North Korea, in the eyes of many American policymakers, should come not after the dismantling of Yongbyon and other nuclear facilities; rather, they should be lifted once the complete and verifiable destruction of all nuclear weapons and nuclear material in North Korea has occurred. Moreover, given that the core of the current sanctions on North Korea was adopted after 2016 means that North Korea's argument for "the partial lifting of sanctions" really means, in American eyes, the total lifting of sanctions.

This issue explains why politicians on both sides of the aisle in Washington were generally positive about the failure of the summit. They believe that it is better to obtain no agreement than to hurry to obtain a bad agreement. There were also many concerns voiced about whether President Trump is yielding to North Korea too much to escape his own domestic political crisis. The Cohen hearing occurred at the same time the US-North Korean summit occurred in Hanoi, and the focus of major American news outlets was on that hearing. It may have been the case that President Trump was forced to consider his own gradually worsening domestic political situation. Given this situation, most American experts are welcoming the news that the Hanoi summit was not successful.

Meanwhile, North Korea, and in particular Chairman Kim, likely find the failure of the summit troublesome. This is because authoritarian regimes are also susceptible to “audience costs.” Kim’s failure to achieve successes through the Hanoi summit means that the North Korean state may face a broadening of suspicions about the justifications and validity of denuclearization and US-North Korean negotiations.

The South Korean government’s role in maintaining the momentum of US-North Korean talks and pushing them towards an agreement has thus become even more important. During his speech commemorating the 100th anniversary of the March 1st Movement, President Moon Jae-in stated that he would “ensure the US and North Korea communicate closely and cooperate so that they can reach an agreement.” President Trump also reportedly asked President Moon for his “active role as a mediator.” If the reason for the failure of the US-North Korean talks in Hanoi is due to the very different calculations by the two countries on denuclearization and lifting sanctions, then South Korea’s efforts are needed as a mediator and facilitator to narrow the gap. Rather than the gradual lifting of existing sanctions, the sanctions issue will likely need to be solved by allowing measures like humanitarian aid or inter-Korean cooperation to be exempt from sanctions, which means that it is imperative to create a “virtuous cycle” that allows inter-Korean cooperation to push US-North Korean dialogue forward.

Fortunately, both North Korea and the US clearly seem to perceive the need for maintaining momentum on US-North Korean dialogue to resolve the nuclear issue. The Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) reported on March 1st that the summit was “an important opportunity for the two leaders to strengthen their trust and respect for each other and propel the bilateral relationship to a new level” and that the two sides “agreed to continue productive dialogue to bring about Korean denuclearization and dynamic development in the US-DPRK relationship.” North Korea’s Ri Yong-ho and Choi Sun-hee also refrained from criticizing or provoking the US. The US likewise continued to emphasize the need for dialogue with North Korea. North Korea promised to refrain from conducting nuclear and missile tests, while the US and South Korea promised to refrain from conducting Key Resolve, Foal Eagle and other joint military exercises.

As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, there is still a long way to go and a lot of work ahead. The goals of diplomacy and negotiations is achieving progress and results. However, to accomplish this there is a need to ceaselessly continue the dialogue process so that both sides can understand each other. The process of moving away from 70 years of enmity and distrust to create a peaceful framework based on mutual trust and respect is inevitably one that requires ceaseless patience and effort. The summit between President Ronald Reagan and Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev ended in failure in 1986, but a year later they concluded an historical nuclear weapons agreement. Similarly, the breakdown in the Hanoi summit does not mean the failure or end of US-North Korean dialogue. The gap that existed between both sides at the summit and their efforts to overcome them will hopefully bring about denuclearization and the establishment of a peace system on the Korean Peninsula.

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2(Samcheong-dong) Bukchon-ro 15-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul 110-230,
Republic of Korea
TEL. +82-2-3700-0739 FAX. +82-2-3700-0707
EMAIL. ifes@kyungnam.ac.kr