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The First Anniversary of the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration:
"The Upward Climb on this Long Journey Starts Now"



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Spring has now arrived on the Korean Peninsula but the warmth felt at this same time in 2018 is nowhere to be found. The inter-Korean relationship is not improving as quickly as expected. That being said, when we compare today to the time before 2017, when the news was full of nuclear tests and missile launches, it is perhaps not fair to say that things have not improved. We may simply be grasping at out-of-reach hopes and wishes for the inter-Korean relationship. After all, the "Panmunjom Declaration" was a precious gift that no one could have predicted.

Let's go back in time to one year ago. North Korea's supreme leader crossed the military demarcation line (MDL) into South Korean territory for the first time since the division of the Korean Peninsula to hold the first inter-Korean summit in 11 years. The shivers of excitement felt while we watched the two leaders cross the MDL holding hands and walking together in pleasant conversation still exist to this day. Both leaders declared that a new era of peace had arrived. They agreed to develop the inter-Korean relationship, reduce military tensions and eliminate the threat of war, and create a system of peace on the Korean Peninsula. The development of the inter-Korean relationship since then was accelerated by efforts to implement their agreements and, in fact, peace did firmly take root on the Korean Peninsula. The year since the Panmunjom Declaration has witnessed efforts to meaningfully implement the promises made between the two Koreas.

Looking back, there has been a great deal of activity over the year since the Panmunjom Declaration. Only two inter-Korean summits had taken place since the Korean division; over the past year, however, two more took place. A total of three summits were held between the leaders of both Koreas just in 2018, which points to progress in both the level of communication and trust that exists between the two leaders. Inter-Korean talks have continued across a range of spheres to ensure the continued implementation of agreements between the two Koreas. The establishment of the Inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office in Kaesong, for example, has established the foundation for a permanent system of deliberation that is aimed at making the inter-Korean relationship official. The restart of exchanges and cooperation across a range of fields, including those themed on social, cultural, sports, historical, public health, religious and journalism-related issues, along with divided family reunions, have created a foundation for inter-Korean reconciliation and overcoming differences between the two Koreas. A framework of joint prosperity for both North and South Korea was also built through efforts to connect railways and roads, along with preparations for the joint use of the Han River Estuary.

The two US-North Korean summits over the past year in Singapore and Hanoi were also surprising events. The inter-Korean summits served as a force to jumpstart denuclearization negotiations and propel normalization of the US-North Korean relationship forward; in short, they moved beyond just improving and normalizing inter-Korean relations. Just as Section Three of the Panmunjom Declaration declares, the inter-Korean relationship is no longer at the mercy of the North Korean denuclearization issue and the US-North Korean relationship: the two Koreas themselves are guiding the direction of their own future. The development of inter-Korean relations provides a basis for progress in the US-North Korean relationship and also serves as the "key" to build a system of peace on the Korean Peninsula and achieve North

Korean denuclearization.

The second inter-Korean summit held at the Unification Pavilion on the North Korean side of Panmunjom proceeded like any other summit meeting; in fact, however, the meeting allowed the troubled first US-North Korea summit in Singapore to move ahead. The second US-North Korean summit in Hanoi, for its part, failed to achieve any meaningful bilateral agreement. It is clear, however, that the development of the inter-Korean relationship following the Panmunjom Declaration has both propelled forward negotiations between the US and North Korea and served as an important foundation for resolving issues through dialogue.

The third summit in Pyongyang led to the announcement of the “Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018.” This joint declaration aimed to implement agreements made in the Panmunjom Declaration and develop the inter-Korean relationship even further. The “Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain” was adopted as a subordinate agreement of the Pyongyang Joint Declaration and practical measures were implemented to prevent unintended conflict between the two sides and along with efforts to turn the DMZ into a peace zone. These achievements are likely the most significant of those brought about by the two Koreas since the Panmunjom Declaration. Buffer zones have been created on land, sea and air, and confrontational behavior has been halted by both sides. The 11 guard posts (GPs) near Panmunjom have been torn down and the joint security area (JSA) has been demilitarized. The two Koreas have worked together to uncover the remains of missing soldiers by removing mines and connecting roads; there have even been scenes of soldiers from both Koreas meeting each other. In the past, bilateral military issues have never been a priority. Now, however, they have been the first to be resolved and these achievements have taken the risk of war and bilateral military threats off the table. In short, these developments have established a de-facto end to the Korean War between the Koreas. All of these efforts have ended up bringing peace to the lives of Koreans in both North and South Korea, and signal that the two Koreas are on an irreversible march toward an era of peace.

The biggest changes that have happened over the past year have occurred in North Korea. The country has not conducted any nuclear tests or missile launches since the launch of the Hwasong-15 on November 29, 2017. North Korea announced that it would halt nuclear tests and missile test launches right before the Panmunjom Declaration on April 20. The country has abandoned its parallel economic and defense construction policy and adopted a new strategic policy that focuses on economic construction. On May 24, North Korea shutdown the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site. At the September summit in Pyongyang, the two Korean leaders announced plans for denuclearization that included shutting down the Tongchang-ri Missile Test Site and the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center. Without changes in North Korea, it would have been impossible for a South Korean president to announce to Pyongyang citizens at North Korea’s May Day Stadium his intention to make the Korean Peninsula a bulwark of peace that no longer accepts nuclear weapons. Chairman Kim Jong Un’s visits to Singapore and Hanoi to participate in US-North Korean summits can also be seen as evidence of North Korea’s commitment to change. The Panmunjom Declaration was the spark that brought change to North Korea and saw its return to the international community.

Despite these positive developments over the past year, inter-Korean relations are now stagnated following the US-North Korean summit in Hanoi. That being said, Koreans from both the North and South are meeting each other and many South Koreans are walking the streets of Pyongyang. Despite the halt in US-South Korean joint military exercises, South Korea has maintained a strong national security posture without an issue. The DMZ Peace Trail in and around Kosong was opened to the general public exactly one year after the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration. Peace has become the new normal and people no longer fear war. Ultimately, the Panmunjom Declaration is still standing the test of time.

Koreans have a saying that “The ground only gets firmer after the rain,” meaning, in essence, that difficulties only make one stronger. Inter-Korean relations, which looked to be advancing breathlessly forward, have now come face-to-face with a steep path upwards. This, of course,

was not something unexpected; the relationship has had a long road to get to this point. Even over the past year, a many barriers have been passed to reach where we are now. The real climb upwards, however, starts now. We need to take a brief rest before heading up any further. It is imperative for us to look back with a sympathetic eye at how much effort has gone into implementing, and trying to implement Section Three, Clause 13 of the Panmunjom Declaration and Section Six, Clause 14 of the Pyongyang Joint Declaration. The military agreements between the two Koreas have gone forward without fail despite international sanctions. They must continue to propel the inter-Korean relationship forward in a peaceful and stable manner.

Following the US-North Korean summit, the inter-Korean relationship itself is now undergoing difficulties and it is clear that bringing North Korea to the dialogue table again through special envoys or single-issue summits are useful ways forward. The slowdown in US-North Korean denuclearization negotiations reveals an increase in the influence of hardliners in the US and further ideological polarization in South Korea. Given this situation, it is important for us to strengthen cooperation with the international community and create solidarity with the citizens of both Koreas. There are limits to event-driven resolutions and short-term fixes to underlying problems, however. The inter-Korean relationship has a long road ahead and there is no need to favor political considerations over all others to bring about broad achievements. There is, however, an imperative to clearly set out policy-related priorities along with efforts to expand the sphere of autonomy the inter-Korean relationship enjoys. This must be done, of course, with due consideration to change in North Korea and the choices that the country's leaders make.

The period after the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration led to changes in the inter-Korean relationship. Similar changes need to take shape after the declaration's first anniversary. Our expectations and hope guided the actions made over the year following the declaration and now we need to focus on planning and putting into practice what we can. Over the past year, there has been a huge gap between what we have accomplished and what we had wanted to accomplish. We need to first show whether we have the desire and ability to prioritize the inter-Korean relationship no matter what the cost. Being able to do that will allow us to establish the "New Korean Peninsula Regime" mentioned during President Moon's speech commemorating the March 1st Movement that we are guiding forward in partnership with North Korea.

During the second summit at the Unification Pavilion, President Moon Jae-in said that "Just like it becomes harder to walk when the summit of a mountain appears... [improving our relationship] will not be a smooth process." The inter-Korean relationship is now facing a real upward slope. The slope ahead of us, however, can be climbed if the two Koreas join hands and have the courage to avoid continued division. Would it not be the happiest thing in the world to see the two Koreas climb that slope together, no matter how steep it is?

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