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The Trilateral Summit at Panmunjom: What's Next?



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Approximately a week has passed since the first-ever trilateral summit between North Korea, South Korea and the United States was held in Panmunjom. US President Donald Trump became the first American president to step foot on North Korean territory. Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un appeared at first ready to simply exchange pleasantries before going their separate ways, but their conversation lasted almost one hour. Their meeting, which at first could have just ended in a simple photo op, has brought about the restart of US-North Korean working-level negotiations within the next two to three weeks. Trump and Kim's meeting in Panmunjom was nothing less than a third US-North Korean summit. Many observers had commented on the possibility of the three leaders meeting in Panmunjom -- some even included China in the equation -- after the US-North Korean summit in Singapore last year.

The Panmunjom summit occurred dramatically just a day after Kim accepted Trump's proposal to meet on Twitter. The results of the summit and the intentions of the parties involved, however, were not the same. The reasons for Trump announcing on Twitter that the results of the Panmunjom meeting were good and the calculations behind Kim's decision to head to Panmunjom were not perfectly aligned. Trump emphasized that their meeting would be a short one up until the point he headed to Panmunjom. It is difficult, however, to say that Trump's proposal was aimed at using the meeting for his upcoming reelection campaign. He may have been motivated to meet with Kim after Chinese president Xi Jinping's recent visit to North Korea. In all likelihood, Trump proposed the meeting with Kim to maintain the status quo for domestic political reasons as opposed to any feelings that his achievements toward denuclearizing North Korea were insufficient in the face of his upcoming reelection campaign.

Similarly, there is little reason to think that Kim accepted Trump's proposal to regain the "dignity" that he lost as North Korea's Supreme Leader at the Hanoi summit. If the Panmunjom summit had just ended abruptly with brief salutations and a picture-taking ceremony at the military demarcation line (MDL), as Trump had predicted, Kim most likely would not have made the trip. If that kind of meeting had occurred, Kim would have again revealed his own weakness and may have even faced greater risks domestically.

I imagine that North Korea demanded that the two leaders be given time to hold a conversation during late-night negotiations with the Americans the night before the Panmunjom meeting. If the South Korean government had failed to quickly prepare a place for the conversation to take place in the Inter-Korean House of Freedom, the historic Panmunjom summit may not have ever taken place. North Korea has held summits with China and Russia recently and is calling loudly with bravado for a "new path" to be found, but the country's leaders still desire a short-cut; namely, denuclearization and a guarantee of regime security through talks with the US. Given his announcement that he would give until the end of this year for further US-North Korean talks to take place, Kim most likely accepted Trump's proposal to meet in Panmunjom as a way to break through the stalemate in US-North Korea negotiations following the failure of the Hanoi summit. Trump may have proposed the summit for domestic political reasons, but Kim likely saw the meeting as a "last chance" to restart US-North Korean talks and decided to take it. During the Panmunjom meeting, Kim may have bombarded Trump with his feelings on the differences in

opinion, feelings of discontent and misunderstandings that occurred at the Hanoi summit. The Rodong Sinmun reported that Kim "explained the concerns that impeded progress and the [two parties] shared a complete understanding [about these concerns]."

Trump envisioned a two-minute meeting with Kim at the MDL, but, as Kim desired, their meeting lasted 53 minutes at the House of Freedom. Kim was all smiles while leaving the meeting, which had lasted longer than anyone had predicted. Trump, on the other hand, looked as if he had a lot on his mind. The two leaders moved beyond just meeting for domestic political reasons or confirming the need for mutual dialogue; they prepared the way to restart working-level negotiations between the two countries, which had been on ice since the Hanoi summit. While they were not prepared to decide on the specific agenda for the negotiations at that point, the two leaders confirmed the broad outlines of what they could discuss. This made it possible for them to announce that working-level talks would begin in two to three weeks. Such a result would not have been possible if the two country's leaders had not held that 53-minute-long talk in the House of Freedom.

The prospects for working-level talks between the two countries is not all rosy, however. Stephan Bigeun, the US special representative for North Korea at the State Department, said that "What we are looking for is a complete freeze of WMD programs" and that the administration has not changed its stance on complete denuclearization of North Korea. He also mentioned that while sanctions on North Korea would continue until denuclearization occurred, the US could provide humanitarian aid or even set up a liaison office in North Korea. Bigeun's remark that the US would accept a "freeze" of North Korea's nuclear program shows how the US has become more flexible in its negotiations with the country. The "freeze" he mentioned, however, is not up for negotiation; rather, it is a prerequisite for the two countries to resume negotiations. It is also not clear whether humanitarian aid or the establishment of a liaison office would come in response to a freeze in North Korea's nuclear program. In short, the situation has become more complex. It is now more difficult to decide on the scope and priorities of the negotiations regardless of the "simultaneous and parallel" approach argued for by the US or the "gradual and simultaneous" approach espoused by the North Koreans.

"Freezing" is different than just "suspending" nuclear tests and missile test launches. An inspection team focused on confirming and monitoring the freezing of the North's nuclear program would need to be inside the country, and North Korea would be required to submit a list of facilities that have been frozen. This would not be an easy task. The US, moreover, is demanding that North Korea freeze its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program, not just its nuclear program or its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon. The North Koreans would find it impossible to meet this demand because it would mean the end of its efforts to reprocess plutonium, produce nuclear material such as highly-enriched uranium. It would also lead to the halt of the production of missiles and chemical weapons, not to mention the closing down of all related facilities. It is unknown whether America's seemingly more flexible attitude is reflected in its agreement to restart negotiations now that it has confirmed that North Korea has shutdown WMD production facilities to ensure that no more manufacturing of the offending materials is taking place. It will be a more realistic goal for North Korea to first promise to freeze its nuclear program and then move forward to dismantle its facilities in Yongbyon.

Recently, President Moon spoke about the dismantlement of Yongbyon saying that Yongbyon is central to North Korea's nuclear facilities and that "If all the nuclear facilities in the complex, including the plutonium reprocessing facilities and the uranium enrichment facilities, are completely demolished and verified, it would be possible to say that the denuclearization of North Korea has entered an irreversible stage." Moon's mention of the dismantlement of Yongbyon was aimed at adding new life to the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018. Rather than just parroting North Korea's proposal made in Hanoi, however, he is proposing that North Korea and the US both yield halfway by moving forward with dismantling the Yongbyon facility. There's no 'plus alpha' demanded for by the US, but there is an imperative to make verification and dismantlement of Yongbyon more concrete, to start the dismantlement, and link it with the establishment of the liaison office or declaration of the end of the Korean War in the

spirit of the agreement made by North Korea and the US in Singapore. That being said, the issue of declaring an end to the Korean War or starting talks to conclude a peace agreement have become more complicated following Xi's announcement while in North Korea that China will play an active role in achieving denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. When there has been some progress in the dismantlement of Yongbyon, it will be possible to allow the continuance of inter-Korean cooperation, including the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, despite the international sanctions in place and, later, the partial or gradual lifting of sanctions by the international community.

Going forward, the results of working-level talks between North Korea and the US will determine the path of denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula. The issues between the two countries will not end with the talks set to be held within two or three weeks. Following the Panmunjom summit, events are moving even faster on the Korean Peninsula. Kim may visit China to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1 and the 70th anniversary of the establishment of official ties between the two countries on October 6. In September, Kim may make a speech at the UN General Assembly. There's a need to decide what should come first: US-North Korean talks, inter-Korean talks, the UNGA, or a Sino-North Korean summit. There's also a need to push for Kim's visit to Seoul, which was agreed upon in the Pyongyang Joint Declaration. It is little more than wishful thinking to expect the Panmunjom summit has opened the door to a restart in US-North Korean talks or that inter-Korean relations have normalized, or even that South Korea has recovered its role as a "mediator." We need to understand that the US-North Korean dialogue "channel" now centers on North Korean foreign minister Ri Yong-ho. This is clearly the time for South Korea to meet the challenge of creating an "irreversible inter-Korean relationship" instead of focusing on its own desire to play the role of a mediator.

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