



## **Korean Peninsula at the Crossroads: Perceptual Gaps and Emerging Challenges to Diplomacy**

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The situation in the Korean Peninsula has changed dramatically over the last one year from the brink of war to diplomacy. Change is manifested at three levels; diplomatic opening of North Korea, de-escalation of security tension and breakthrough in the nuclear status quo. The developments created an environment for diplomacy but not without challenges. The weakening of international cooperation, an emerging rift between the US and South Korea and stalemate in US-North Korea negotiations are impediments manifested recently. Assessing developments in the Korean Peninsula, the paper argues that the fundamental challenge to diplomacy is to bridge perceptual gaps that exist between the principal actors on primary issues.

### **New Situation in the Korean Peninsula**

The 2018 New Year speech of the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un unleashed a dramatic turn of events in the Korean Peninsula. Declaring the completion of North Korea's nuclear mission, Kim announced Pyongyang's intent to focus on economic development and improving relations with South Korea. The diplomatic breakthrough in the context of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in February 2018, between the two Koreas, brought about a radical change in the situation in the Korean Peninsula.

The new situation is marked by three significant developments: the diplomatic opening of North Korea, de-escalation of security tensions and breakthrough in the nuclear status quo. The diplomatic opening of North Korea facilitated a dramatic improvement of inter-Korean relations, a breakthrough in North Korea-US relations and have restored an older balance in North Korea-China relations. The diplomatic move marks a departure in North Korean foreign policy under Kim Jong-un. Since assuming power in 2011, Kim had not travelled abroad nor met any foreign leader until March 2018. The diplomatic opening of Pyongyang produced events unprecedented in North Korea's foreign policy history including three inter-Korean Summits, three Xi-Kim meetings and the historic North Korea-US Summit.

Starting with the breakthrough from the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics and through three Summits between President Moon Jae-in and Kim, inter-Korean relations are witnessing an unprecedented momentum in multiple areas including political, military, economic and social. Seoul and Pyongyang expanded their channels of communications by establishing a liaison office in the border city of Kaesong and a hotline between the leadership. They also restored the military communication mechanism. During the September inter-Korean Summit in Pyongyang, North and South signed a Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) to reduce military tension at the border by scaling down military activities and initiating confidence-building measures.<sup>1</sup> Even though economic projects are yet to start because the existing sanction regime on North Korea, Seoul and Pyongyang over the last few months conducted many feasibility studies to promote economic cooperation including road, rail and port connectivity and restarting stalled inter-Korean projects. Seoul has also expressed its intention to relax the bilateral sanctions that it had imposed on North Korea. Social and people to people exchange between the two Koreas have also witnessed improvement with their joint participation in international sports events, exchanges of sports and art personalities and the restoration of family reunion meetings.

The most dramatic event that changed the dynamic in the Korean Peninsula was the first ever US-North Korea Summit in Singapore in June. Though normalisation of the relationship between Washington and Pyongyang is still not on the horizon, the Trump-Kim Summit overhauled the previous year's narrative of an imminent war, with President Trump's declaration that the issue of North Korea's nuclear program is "largely solved."<sup>2</sup> The meeting also facilitated the opening of the communication channel and active diplomatic engagement reflected by the four visits to Pyongyang by the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The new approach of Washington constitutes the "maximum engagement" strategy along with the "maximum pressure" campaign, which was adopted by the Trump administration in response to North Korean provocation in 2017.

The diplomatic opening of North Korea also facilitated the reconciliation and improvement in North Korea-China relations, which was at a historic low under Kim Jong-un and President Xi Jinping. The three meetings between Xi-Kim underscored a revitalisation of the traditional relationship between the two countries. China also supports Pyongyang's demand to ease international sanctions. Some reports suggest that Beijing has already relaxed its enforcement of sanction measures on North Korea.<sup>3</sup>

The second dimension of the new situation is the de-escalation of security tension in the Peninsula. North Korean moratorium on nuclear and missile tests for the last one year and the cancellation of US-South Korea joint military exercise are the most visible manifestation of the relaxed security posture. North Korea also scaled down its military posture and anti-US rhetoric since the beginning of this year. The inter-Korean military agreement at the third inter-Korean Summit in September is another step that would further reduce tension in the Peninsula.

The third dimension of change in the Korean Peninsula situation is the breakthrough in the nuclear status quo. Despite its lack of specifics on the process and timeline for denuclearisation, the Singapore declaration effectively broke the nuclear status quo that existed since the collapse of the Six-Party Talks in 2009. Even though the US-North Korea nuclear negotiation since the Singapore Summit has not produced any specific mechanism, the process of engagement at the highest level is a departure from the previous US administration's 'strategic patience' approach<sup>4</sup>. Compared to the previous administration which adopted a bottom-up approach focusing on the technical aspects of denuclearisation, President Trump appears to seek

a political solution directed from the top. For the first time North Korean leadership made its commitment for denuclearisation and have taken a few steps to substantiate the claim. These steps included the demolition of a nuclear test site and moratorium on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests. During the Pyongyang inter-Korean Summit, North Korea announced that it will permanently shut down a missile engine test site and rocket launch pad. North Korea also declared that it will permanently dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear facility, depending on corresponding measures from the US.<sup>5</sup> Though the US and North Korea have begun engaging in nuclear diplomacy, the way ahead is complicated as they have diverging definitions of denuclearisation and the way to go about it.

### **Emerging Challenges**

The changing dynamics, while creating a favourable environment for diplomacy have also produced a set of new challenges. The weakening of international cooperation on North Korea is the first challenge. Difference of opinion between countries on the continuation of international sanction on North Korea an indication of the weakening of the international solidarity on the issue. In the September UNSC meeting on North Korea, China and Russia argued for relaxing sanctions in response to positive actions taken by North Korea.<sup>6</sup> The message was repeated during a trilateral meeting between North Korea, China and Russia on October 10, 2018.<sup>7</sup> Seoul has also been mulling on relaxing the bilateral sanctions that it had imposed on Pyongyang and to start inter-Korean economic projects.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the US, Japan and Western countries are firmly arguing for the continuation of existing sanctions until North Korea gives up its nuclear programme.

Another challenge is an apparent rift emerging between the US and South Korea in recent months. It appears that Washington is not fully convinced with the speed at which inter-Korean rapprochement is progressing compared to limited progress in the US-North Korea denuclearisation negotiation. Washington worries that an improved inter-Korean relations could weaken its position in the nuclear negotiations. The difference was also reflected in Washington's apprehension about Seoul's decision to sign a comprehensive military agreement with North Korea in the third inter-Korean Summit without consulting the US.<sup>9</sup> In another instance, President Trump made a strong statement disapproving Seoul's plan to review its sanctions on Pyongyang by saying, South Korea would "do nothing without our approval".<sup>10</sup> South Korea also scrapped a plan to run a test train for the joint rail project between the two Koreas, after the US-led United Nations Command (UNC) refused to approve.<sup>11</sup> South Korean President Moon Jae-in's appeal to his French and UK counterparts to work in the UN to relax sanctions against North Korea runs counter to Washington's insistence to continuing the maximum pressure campaign.<sup>12</sup> The third challenge is the apparent logjam in the US-North Korea denuclearisation negotiation. The impasse was revealed when President Trump cancelled Secretary Pompeo's visit to Pyongyang in August and the last minute postponement of a highest level meeting in the first week of November.<sup>13</sup> The negotiation reached a deadlock on how and in what sequence to proceed. Washington and Pyongyang are expecting the other to concede to go forward. US demanded North Korea to make a full disclosure of its nuclear programme, while Pyongyang is demanding the US to declare the end of the Korean War and relax sanctions.<sup>14</sup> President Moon managed to facilitate the reengagement by holding the third inter-Korean Summit, resulting in Pompeo's visit to Pyongyang in the first week of October and the announcement of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Trump-Kim Summit early next year. Though the engagement has resumed, it is not clear that there has been any progress in the nuclear negotiations.

## Perceptual Gaps

As evident in recent months, a diplomatic solution to the North Korean problem faces several hurdles. The primary source of challenge is the perceptual gap between countries on important issues.

A fundamental challenge is the divergent perception on the source of the problem in the Korean Peninsula. China, North Korea and South Korea appear to view the legacy of the Cold War mentality as the primary source of security problems including the nuclear challenge. This perspective views North Korea's nuclear problem as a consequence of the continued existence of Cold War security order in the Korean Peninsula. Thus it suggests that a permanent solution to the nuclear problem involves simultaneous dismantlement of Cold War security structures. On the other hand, the US and Japan view North Korea's nuclear development as the primary source of security challenge. Thus any process for peace on the Korean Peninsula can only begin with the denuclearisation of Pyongyang. This divergent perception leads to issues of prioritisation. China and South Korea prioritise de-escalation and stability over immediate denuclearisation, while the US and Japan stress on North Korea's nuclear problem as the priority matter to address.

The US and North Korea also face hurdles in persuading the other about their intentions being genuine. Not only do they have no diplomatic relations, but their views on each other are based on a penurious set of previous interactions. The exchanges between the two during the last three decades including failed nuclear negotiations has created a situation of mutual distrust. Though there is a general desire to improve trust, perceptions on how to go about it are incompatible. It appears that North Korea, China and increasingly South Korea are of the view that improvement in relations is the way to build trust before demonstrable actions on denuclearisation but the US and Japan see otherwise.

## Conclusion

The developments in the Korean Peninsula over the last one year have created a positive momentum for peace. However, a diplomatic solution to the North Korea problem is by no means an easy task as it carries the weight of seven decades of conflict. Main challenge of the ongoing diplomacy is to bridge the perceptual gap between the leading actors, notably Washington and Pyongyang. The mediating role that the South Korean President Moon Jae-in undertook over the last one year managed to break the ice between North Korea and the US. However, progress on denuclearisation remains challenging and problematic.

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*Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

## Endnotes

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