

Summit Diplomacy and Denuclearizing North Korea

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In recent months, a window of hope has opened up and there is a possibility that intractable North Korean nuclear issue might be resolved. Two important summits, one between the leaders of South and North Korea and another between the leaders of the US and North Korea might change the security equations of the Korean peninsula and bring about the denuclearization of North Korea.

One of these summits has been successfully held on 27 April 2018 and the other is scheduled to happen on 12 June 2018 in Singapore. It's undeniable that there have been efforts behind the scenes and also that these summits are products of a process which began when North Korea agreed to participate in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics (Council on Foreign Relations 2018) held in South Korea in February 2018. However, the two summits have their own salience. It must also be underlined that in the inter-Korea summit, the two Koreas are equally eager because of their own strategic calculations, but in the US-North Korea summit, both Washington and Pyongyang still have a huge trust and perception deficit. There are still serious doubts

that the second summit meet would be able to bring the desired results.

Arrival of the Inter-Korea Summit

After a gap of more than a decade, top leaders of North and South Korea met in Panmunjom and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un became the first top leader of North Korea in last seven decades to visit South Korea. The summit meet was special as both the leaders were able to meet in spite of threatening exchanges of words and actions between the US and North Korea in recent months. Actually, the meeting itself was an achievement because nobody could have imagined such an event just a few months ago. There were often rumours that at any moment military conflict with North Korea might begin and it was undoubtedly a scary situation on the Korean peninsula (Millar 2018). Notwithstanding outcomes, the very fact that the summit took place has been a welcome development.

Some experts may argue that the meeting between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in is basically a shrewd strategy on the part of North Korea to move out of international sanctions and pressures which made the North Korean situation from bad to worse in recent years. Experts also argue that after six nuclear tests and testing of its long-range missiles till late-2017, North Korea itself announced that it has reached the threshold level and there is no need of further tests of these arsenals. So basically, it's just another oft-repeated tactic of Pyongyang to show an olive branch and come out of international isolation and economic hardships. This skepticism is not entirely unfounded but a more comprehensive understanding of the process also indicates that it is South Korea that has been the main architect of the process.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in after assuming office in May 2017, brought a different approach to deal with North Korea. His methods are quite different from the previous conservative leaders of South Korea who narrowly focused on putting pressure on North Korea for almost a decade. The current policy called 'Moonshine' prescribes engagement and diplomacy to resolve the North Korean issue (Breen 2017). Moonshine policy rightly underlined that rather than being productive, the South Korean strategy from 2008 to 2017, spoiled all the channels of communications and exchanges between the two Koreas. Furthermore, the earlier South Korean policy forced North Korea to achieve a huge leap in its nuclear and missile developments in a very short span of time. US President Donald Trump also pursued a similar policy of containment and threat to North Korea which almost brought the Korean peninsula to the brink of war. President Moon Jae-in disagreed with the approaches of both the US and the previous South Korean leaders Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. He announced on the independence day of Korea, 15 August 2017, that he would not allow anybody to thrust a war on the Korean peninsula without South Korea's consent (The Kyunghyang Shinmun 2017).

Moon Jae-in in the first few months struggled to have space to operationalize his North

Korean policy. He got a chance when North Korea agreed to participate in the Winter Olympics which happened in Pyeongchang city of South Korea in February 2018. Moon Jae-in crafted a process to engage and denuclearize North Korea by utilizing this opportunity. The context and intent of the process must be taken into account to comprehend one of its events, the inter-Korea summit meet. Moon Jae-in worked hard to reach out to North Korea by carefully utilizing every opportunity which came in the way. Of course, North Korea also keenly responded to every attempt of South Korea because of its own strategic calculations.

A more comprehensive understanding of the process indicates that it is South Korea that has been the main architect of the process and it is not just the shrewd strategy on the part of North Korea to move out of international sanctions and pressures.

Once North Korea agreed to participate in the Winter Olympics, the process got incredible traction and the goal of inter-Korean rapprochement and expectations about North Korean denuclearization became increasingly real and strong. North Korea sent Kim Jong-un's sister, Kim Yo-jong, the formal head of state of North Korea, Kim Yong-nam and the head of National Intelligence of North Korea, Kim Yong-chol to the Olympic ceremonies (Choe 2018). North Korea also sent an invitation for the summit meet between the leaders of both the countries through these North Korean high-level visitors. In the next move, South Korea sent its two special envoys Chung Eui-jong and Suh Hoon to Pyongyang in March 2018. The South Korean envoys returned with North Korean assurance to denuclearize itself, if security of North Korea and its system is ensured. It was also informed by the South Korean envoys that North Korea had agreed to meet South Korean leader Moon Jae-in and the US leader Donald Trump to discuss these issues further.

Deciphering North Korea Enigma

One of the biggest hurdles is the fact that North Korea's intent and strategy is still doubted by the US administration. Even after the inter-Korea summit meet, North Korea has not been categorical about its denuclearization. The Panmunjom declaration, and afterwards the North Korean pronouncements mention "complete denuclearization" of the Korean peninsula which could be interpreted differently by parties (Yonhap News Agency 2018). There have been several unilateral announcements by North Korea such as moratorium on its nuclear and missile tests along with the closing down of its nuclear test facility at Punggye-ri (Fifield 2018) but since these steps are not being agreed upon in any bilateral agreement, North Korea might walk out of them anytime.

Kim Jong-un might be willing to denuclearize North Korea but with at least two cautions: First, it should not look like North Korea is succumbing to the external pressure. Second, security and stability of North Korea and its systems must get trustworthy assurance.

However, a closer look at North Korea's behavior indicates that even though it wants to move forward in giving up its nuclear and missile programs, it wants to project domestically that it has been taking all these steps voluntarily rather than because of the pressure or intervention of South Korea or the US. Actually, Kim Jong-un might be willing to denuclearize North Korea but he must take at least two precautions. First, it should not look like North Korea is succumbing to external pressure. Second, security and stability of North Korea and its systems must get trustworthy assurance.

Kim Jong-un is aware that the isolation of North Korea could not be sustained beyond a point and it would definitely result in military conflict sooner or later. This would not serve the goal of survival for North Korea and the

regime. In such a context, he worked hard to acquire maximum offensive and defensive capacities in the last few years and now looks to use them diplomatically to ensure his survival. In the broader North Korean game, nuclear and missile programs are essential and it would be quite reluctant to give them up. However, these programs might be compromised for their supreme goal of survival. Actually, in the current environment of mistrust, the denuclearization would not be acceptable to North Korea. However, if a process of trust-building and genuine assurance of North Korea's survival is laid out and if North Korea by its own assessment finds them reliable, the relevance of nuclear and missile arsenals for North Korea might diminish. This might finally lead to the denuclearization of North Korea.

Towards the Trump-Kim Summit

The summit-meet between the US and North Korea scheduled on 12 June 2018 must accommodate North Korea's aspirations and its compulsions. The US administration's caution as well as non-compromising attitude on the denuclearization issue of North Korea is essential but so is flexibility and being accommodative. The confidence or trust building is a tedious process in which both the parties must walk simultaneously. Any triumphalism or absolutism might become a hurdle in moving forward and the Trump administration must avoid such tendencies. The US and North Korean leaders have called names to each other along with mutually provocative actions and both the countries need to avoid a spill-over of the past on their future engagements .

Unfortunately, the Trump administration appears to lack the deftness required to push forward the process of bonhomie. The US administration rather than utilizing the opportunity seems more interested in proclaiming the success of its policy of 'maximum pressure' on North Korea (Business Standard 2018). The US is right when it says that any relaxation in sanctions on North Korea

would depend on the outcomes of the Kim-Trump summit but it is unnecessary and also inaccurate to claim that North Korea has agreed to talk because of the US policy of sanctions and strangulation. The US has been pursuing this policy together with two successive South Korean administrations under Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye for almost a decade without influencing any change of behavior in North Korea. In fact, in recent years, the North Korean economy has shown the highest growth rate in the last seventeen years and it rose by 3.9 percent in 2016 (Kim 2017).

The appointment of Mike Pompeo as the new Secretary of State and John Bolton as the new National Security Advisor also has not gone well with North Korea as both of them have been quite aggressive in their approach towards the North Korean nuclear issues including supporting military action on Pyongyang. Fortunately, Mike Pompeo had two visits to North Korea in the mid-April and 9 May 2018. Pompeo visited North Korea first as the CIA Director and the next time as the Secretary of State. During these two visits, he must have been able to establish some connect with the North Korean leadership. But still, it would be premature to say that North Korea would be comfortable with the US administration's current orientation. Many North Korean watchers have linked these appointments with North Korea's renewed rapprochement with China.

It is being speculated that since the US appears to be aggressive with the recruitment of hardliners, North Korea also felt the need to be prepared for all the possibilities including failure of the US-North Korea summit. The North Korean leader who did not go for any visit to China after coming to power in late-2011 suddenly had two successive visits on 26 March and 7-8 May 2018. Whereas, earlier China was seen to be cooperating with the US and South Korea in putting pressure on North Korea to denuclearize, the Kim Jong-un's visit to China has definitely made it possible for North Korea to forge a better understanding with Xi Jinping and acquire more strategic space in dealing with the US.

Two other recent developments must also have raised doubts in North Korea over the US

intent. In his interview to the CBS News on 29 April 2018, the National Security Advisor John Bolton said that the US was considering the 'Libya model' in its talks with North Korea. It's important to remember that once Libya gave up its nuclear programme, its leader Muammar Gaddafi was killed in 2011 and since then the country has been politically and economically unstable (Haaretz 2018). It's not the right signal to be sent to North Korea just a month before the summit meet.

Any triumphalism or absolutism on part of United States might become a hurdle in moving forward. Kim Jong-un's visit to China has made it possible for North Korea to forge a better understanding with Xi Jinping and acquire more strategic space in dealing with the US.

In another case, on 8 May 2018, the US has withdrawn itself from the 'defective' Iran deal (George 2018). After withdrawing from the deal unilaterally, Donald Trump announced that the US would put the highest level of sanctions on Iran. The US still does not have any proof that Iran violated the terms of the deal but the Trump administration walked out of the deal because it considered it "poorly negotiated" and "that even if Iran fully complies, the regime could still be on the verge of a nuclear breakout in just a short period of time" (The White House 2018). Again, North Korea would not get any encouraging lessons from the US act and it would be more careful in its dealing with the Trump administration.

Way Ahead

The summit diplomacy in its first leg produced desired results and similar expectations from the second leg are quite natural. But it must also be underlined that the milieu and approaches of North and South Korean leaders during the inter-Korea summit meet was quite positive and accommodative but the same could not be said about the upcoming Trump-Kim summit. The Trump-Kim summit is scheduled to take place in the midst of all the pulls and pressures, perceptions and

misperceptions, interpretations and misinterpretations, threat and accommodation and so on. Although, South Korea has been trying its best to bring both North Korea and the US close to each other by coordinating and connecting each other's expectations, it cannot help the process beyond a point. It is up to the US and North Korea now to take it forward by being flexible and accommodative. Especially, the US administration needs to understand that being firm on its demand to denuclearize North Korea and being stubborn to do it at its own terms are two different things.

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Also, the Trump administration needs to realize that resolving the problem is more important than claiming a complete victory over North Korea. Furthermore, it would also be crucial to involve or at least keep informed the other concerned countries such as China, Japan and Russia as it was done by South Korea in the context of the inter-Korea summit. These regional players, especially China would remain an important variable in any future deal with North Korea on the nuclear issue and it would be naive to leave it out. The outcomes of the Trump-Kim summit would depend on whether the US is able to comprehend these nuances.

Undoubtedly the summit diplomacy so far has raised huge hopes for denuclearization of North Korea and the establishment of a peace regime in the Korean peninsula. However, it would be premature to claim success before the Trump-Kim summit. The odds are still huge but statesmanship, diplomacy, a positive sum model, being accommodative, inclusiveness and futuristic approach by the concerned parties may bring the desired success. Given

the imperfect choices we have, it's mandated on all the parties to tread carefully because the alternate scenario of a military conflict on the peninsula is very frightening.

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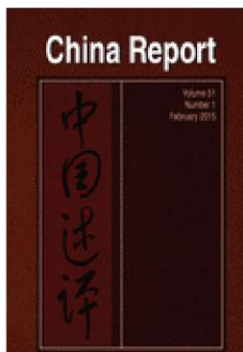


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