

Prospects of a US-DPRK Rapprochement & Japanese Concerns

Ambassador Vishnu Prakash

Former Indian Ambassador to South Korea
vishnu.prakash@gmail.com

The Korean Peninsula makes for riveting theatre. Thus, the drama and suspense around the second US North Korea summit in Hanoi on 27-28 February 2019, that ended abruptly, was true to form. The landmark event had generated sizeable expectations of forward movement. Considerable preparatory work had been done by both sides, unlike the previous occasion of the Singapore summit on 12 June 2018. A draft outcome document reportedly had been readied with some key elements left for the decision of the Principals.

The meeting was preceded by letter diplomacy between Chairman Kim Jong-un (KJU) and President Donald Trump. After the Singapore summit a euphoric Trump had certified that KJU had – “a very good personality, he’s funny, and he’s very, very smart” and also that the nuclear threat from North Korea (DPRK) was over.

DPRK has refrained from conducting any nuke or missile tests since 1 January 2018. It has also taken some CBMs including; blowing up the Punggye-ri nuclear test site in May 2018, returning the mortal remains of US soldiers and fostering a noticeable thaw in inter-Korean ties. The US suspended joint military exercises with South Korea, lavished hollow praise on KJU, dangled the prospects of DPRK

becoming an ‘economic powerhouse’ and urged it to do more.

The challenge of denuclearization

However, the elephant in the room was (and continues to be) the definition, scope, sequence and pace of denuclearisation. Not unexpectedly the sides are poles apart. On 26 March 2018, at Beijing, KJU had unequivocally outlined Pyongyang’s position and expectation - “The issue of denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula can be resolved, if South Korea and the United States respond to our efforts with goodwill, create an atmosphere of peace and stability while taking progressive and synchronous measures for the realisation of peace.”

The US on the other hand has been insistent on upfront ‘Comprehensive, Verifiable and Irreversible Denuclearization’ aka CVID, before easing sanctions or normalising ties. To force KJU’s hand Trump even called off the Singapore Summit on 24 May 2018, but the former remained unmoved. The American President relented within 36 hours, even conceding that denuclearisation was a ‘process’ which required time.

First US DPRK Summit at Singapore

At Singapore the leaders settled for a vague understanding without any timeline - ‘President Trump committed to provide security

guarantees to North Korea, and Chairman Kim Jong-un reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula'. At a press conference later in the day Trump surprised everyone including Seoul, by acceding to a key DPRK demand to suspend joint military exercises with South Korea (ROK). He however held the line on sanctions.

Raising hopes of a compromise solution, Secretary Mike Pompeo tweeted on his way to Pyongyang on 6 July 2018 that the US was seeking a 'Final, fully verified Denuclearization' or FFVD. There was no mention of 'comprehensive'. His visit however did not go well at all. KJU refused to meet him & his interlocutors did not budge from their stated position. Pyongyang accused that the US, "came up only with its unilateral and gangster-like demand for denuclearization, just calling for CVID...which ran counter to the spirit of the Singapore summit and talks." The US stance has since hardened again to demand CVID. However, Pyongyang has been consistent in insisting upon a step-by-step approach and dilution in sanctions, to begin with.

Many rounds of gruelling discussions took place between the two nations at various levels, during the run-up to the Hanoi summit. There were ample indications that the US 'all-or-nothing' approach was not working. Speaking at the UNGA in September 2018 North Korean FM Ri stated, "The recent deadlock is because the US relies on coercive measures which are lethal to trust-building". In his national address on 1st Jan 2019, KJU went even further -- 'if the US misinterprets our patience & intention and continues with the sanctions, then we have no choice but to come up with new initiatives and new measures.'

China and North Korea mend fences

Meanwhile KJU succeeded in making up with China, its sole and sulking ally, by having four meetings with President Xi Jinping between March 2018 and January 2019. Both sides needed it. China was upset at being side-lined by Washington and wanted its usual say and spot at the negotiating table. Facing global opprobrium and isolation, KJU wanted to be reassured of Beijing's continued support. In the

process and much to DPRK's relief, China began to quietly ease sanctions on it. The US was mortified but could little except wag its finger, given the strained bilateral ties.

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Key mediatory role of President Moon Jae-in

A dignitary who has played a key role in facilitating the US – DPRK dialogue, has been ROK President Moon Jae-in. He has emerged as a deft mediator – a role that has been encouraged and appreciated by KJU and Trump. He has been encouraging both sides to take a 'bold decision' on denuclearisation, through direct negotiations. 'But until communication between ...them... becomes more active, we cannot but ...mediate' he said, adding pointedly - 'President Trump and Chairman Kim have asked that I play this role'. And that is why periodic face time between Moon and Kim is so critical.

Kim and Moon have had held three summits between April and September 2018. Kim has promised to visit Seoul soon, which would be a historic first. The 18 to 20 September summit in Pyongyang was particularly significant. DPRK pledged to "permanently dismantle" the ICBM engine test and launch site at Tongchang-ri, in the presence of inspectors, as also the critical Yongbyon nuclear facility, if the US took 'corresponding steps'.

Kim and Moon are ready to resume economic engagement and conclude a Peace Accord but cannot do so without American (and Chinese) approval. Washington's tough stance is not sitting well with Seoul. Both capitals are struggling to paper over their differences. The Trump administration is viewed with scepticism and concern by ROK. His abrupt suspension of joint military exercises, without any prior consultations has rattled Seoul.

It is also noteworthy that the South Korean polity is divided right in the middle, with the Conservatives up in arms at the ‘appeasement’ of a rogue nation and the Liberals doing everything within their means to find a modus vivendi with an ‘estranged cousin’.

Second KIM Trump summit at Hanoi

The two leaders met warmly on 27 February 2019. However, talks broke down abruptly on the next day amidst mutual recriminations. The Americans alleged that DPRK had insisted on complete lifting of sanctions in return for dismantling the Yongbyon nuclear facility, which was unacceptable. DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho countered that the North had only sought partial sanctions relief in exchange for shuttering its main Yongbyon nuclear complex, but that the US demanded further disarmament steps. DPRK had also offered, he added, to permanently halt nuclear and ICBM tests, but that Washington wasted an opportunity that “may not come again.”

It transpires that Trump had handed over a bilingual paper to KJU calling for “fully dismantling North Korea’s nuclear infrastructure, chemical and biological warfare program and related dual-use capabilities; and ballistic missiles, launchers, and associated facilities.” Speaking at an interview with a US radio station in the 3rd week of March, NSA John Bolton termed Trump’s offer as a ‘big deal’ which would ensure a ‘very bright economic future for North Korea’. DPRK’s Vice Foreign Affairs Minister Choe Son Hui stated that “we have neither the intention to compromise with the US in any form nor much less the desire or plan to conduct this kind of negotiation” and hinted that North Korea was considering ending its moratorium on nuclear and missile tests.

Unverified reports have since emerged of DPRK preparing to launch a new satellite (ballistic missile). The US has cautioned that such a move would have consequences. On the positive side, Trump quashed a move to impose further sanctions, tweeting on 22 March 2019 – ‘It was announced today by the U.S. Treasury that additional large-scale sanctions would be added to those already existing sanctions on North Korea. I have today ordered the withdrawal of those

additional sanctions!’ President Trump and Chairman Kim continue to express mutual admiration, leaving the sparring to their officials.

President Moon will be in Washington on 10-11 April 2019, to goad Trump to stay engaged. Seoul’s stance too remains unchanged that “the all-or-nothing strategy needs to be reconsidered. In order to see meaningful progress in the denuclearization talks, a senior ROK official underlined, there should be first trust-building measures, which I will call an early harvest.”

The road ahead gets thornier

It is obvious that the so-called ‘big deal’ is a non-starter for KJU. At his confirmation hearing, David Stilwell, nominee for assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs said -‘We’ve been fooled enough times, so the steady pressure will continue to have an effect...(the US is not going to) pull back just on their word.” The US rightly suspects DPRK of having secret nuclear / missile facilities and seeks the destruction of its nuke arsenal. Pyongyang has often cheated in the past and the US too has not kept its part of the bargain. Naturally there is complete lack of mutual trust, and hence the necessity for an incremental ‘step-by-step’ approach.

The rationale of the American ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ stance is therefore difficult to fathom. It demonstrates the ascendancy and imprint of hawks like Pompeo and Bolton, who have been votaries of a regime change in Pyongyang. North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui criticized them for the “atmosphere of hostility and mistrust.” KJU is fully conscious of their outlook and is determined to protect his regime. The WMD arsenal is thus considered a deterrent and insurance against regime change, which Pyongyang will never fully give-up. Ironically despite knowing that, the Americans continue to chase a chimera, expecting different results. They also underestimate the North Korean resolve and its ability to cope with hardship.

Like it or not, the reality is that DPRK is a de-facto nuclear power and no Nuclear Weapon State (NWS) except South Africa has ever disarmed in history. At best, DPRK will halt and offer IAEA monitored freeze, on its advanced WMD programme. The US realises

that it may have to settle for PLCD (Progressive, Limited & Conditional Denuclearization), but continues to push the envelope. Posturing aside, all powers except Japan can live with such an outcome. However, it is possible that Trump is on back foot due to domestic political woes, allowing the hardliners a free run.

In sum, the breakdown represents another missed opportunity. The big question is who will blink first? The real risk is that the sides will overplay their hand. 2019 is a 'make or break' year for the Korean Peninsula. Rapprochement has now become an uphill task with a bleak prospect of success, unless the US meets DPRK midway.

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Japanese concerns and relations with DPRK

A victim of Japanese colonial rule, DPRK has been threatening to wreak vengeance since long. It can strike Japan in less than 10 minutes, with its arsenal of short and medium range missiles, a reality that has instilled fear among the Japanese and bred a strong dislike for 'Zainichi' - ethnic Koreans in Japan. They face widespread discrimination and are viewed with suspicion.

Their number is estimated at 322,000. A majority of them are from present day South Korea. In 1945 they numbered around 2 million. Most of them gradually returned to the Koreas. Among the returnees to North Korea was a young girl - Ko Yong-hui - who went on to mother Kim Jong-un. Experts estimate that Zainichi have sent billions of dollars over the decades to North Korea mostly to help their families.

Abduction of Japanese nationals

During the 1970's and 1980's, a number of Japanese were abducted by North Korean agents. Japan identified 17 such individuals.

During the first Japan-North Korea summit on September 17, 2002, the latter admitted abducting them and apologized. A Pyongyang Declaration was adopted in which Japan pledged economic assistance to North Korea, once bilateral diplomatic relations were normalized with the resolution of the abduction issue, to atone for its past colonial rule. DPRK agreed to extend its moratorium on missile testing.

In October 2002, five abductees were returned to Japan. DPRK also informed Japan that 8 of 17 persons in the list were dead. Pyongyang committed during the 2nd bilateral summit on 22 May 2004 to immediately resume thorough investigations. Family members of the 5 aforementioned abductees were also brought back home in 2004. However, as relations deteriorated, North Korea unilaterally announced complete cessation of comprehensive investigations, in January 2016.

To maintain basic working relations with Pyongyang, Japan had been providing it liberal economic and humanitarian assistance, till the sanctions kicked-in. Japanese financial resources would again be critical to any post-normalization economic development agreement with the North, given the high cost involved.

North Korean missiles threaten Japan

Nonetheless, since the 1998 launch of the Taepondong missile that overflowed northern Japan, DPRK has lobbed missiles towards Japan, over Japan, and into Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). As recently as on August 29, 2017, it launched a Hwasong-12 ballistic missile that flew over Hokkaido. On 29 November 2017, Pyongyang tested an ICBM that landed into Japan's EEZ.

The US has been assuring a worried Japan that it would closely coordinate positions to secure the full implementation of the relevant UNSC resolutions, and help resolve the abductions issue. On April 17-18, 2018 PM Shinzo Abe, visited the US. He urged President Trump to maintain maximum pressure on DPRK and accept nothing short of CVID. Yet, Japan remains worried that Trump administration, despite its tough talk, will ultimately acquiesce, perhaps settling for a freeze that allows the North to keep a small arsenal. Japan perceives

a realistic danger of DPRK carrying out strikes against it, in case of conflict. Unsure of the effectiveness of the American security umbrella, Tokyo wants to shore up its defence capabilities.

Can Japan go nuclear?

Therefore, if the US were to agree to PLCD, effectively recognising DPRK as NWS, Japan could be tempted to go nuclear. South Korea, Australia, Myanmar, Taiwan and Vietnam too have been mulling over the issue from time to time. Japan briefly considered building a “defensive” nuclear arsenal in the 1960s despite its pacifist Constitution. It retains the expertise to build nukes within a year or two. It is a virtual nuclear superpower, sitting on a stockpile of nuclear material that could power an arsenal of 6,000 weapons.

It is ironic that during its occupation of the Korean Peninsula, Japan located its rudimentary nuclear weapons development facilities in what is now North Korea. For Tokyo thus, no deal between the US and DPRK is better than a ‘bad’ deal. That said, Japan finds itself in an unenviable position. It is forced to watch from the side-lines as major decisions impacting its security are being taken.



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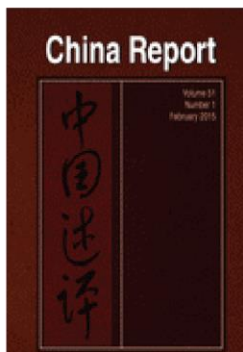


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INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES
8/17, Sri Ram Road, Civil Lines,
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Tel: +91 (0) 11 2393 8202
Fax: +91 (0) 11 2383 0728
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