On Recent Developments on the Korean Peninsula
Tatsujiro Suzuki
Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition, Nagasaki University (RECNA), Nagasaki, Japan

ABSTRACT
Despite high expectations, the summit between the US President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in Hanoi, Vietnam, on February 27–28, 2019 did not produce any agreement. What did we expect from the summit? What were the reasons for nonagreement? How should we evaluate the results of the summit? What were the implications for future negotiations and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula? What should we do to keep momentum toward ending the conflict between the US and the DPRK and the Korean War? Those are the questions we need to address after the Hanoi summit. The Panel on Peace and Security of Northeast Asia (PSNA), established in 2016 by the Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition, Nagasaki University (RECNA), asked prominent experts in various countries to contribute a short working paper to address the key questions. This article is a compilation of three such papers. Ramesh Thakur (Australia) regards the Hanoi summit as “neither breakthrough nor breakdown”. Mark Byung-Moon Suh and Elisabeth Imi Suh (Germany and Republic of Korea) argue that we need to sustain the inter-Korean momentum despite the lack of agreement at the summit. Shen Dingli (PRC) stresses the importance of keeping the diplomacy for the common good. All the papers are the opinions of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of PSNA or RECNA.

Kim–Trump Summity: Neither Breakthrough nor Breakdown (Ramesh Thakur)

CANBERRA – The first summit in Singapore last June gave Kim Jong-un legitimacy as the head of a de facto nuclear-armed state engaging with US President Donald Trump as an equal (Thakur 2018). The second summit in Hanoi on February 27–28 has normalized that status but accomplished little else (Thakur 2019b).

Trump had successfully managed expectations downwards since last year. Gone were the boasts about the nuclear threat from Pyongyang having ended. Instead, Trump shifted the “transformational goal” of total denuclearization to the “transactional goal” of limiting Kim’s nuclear capability (Litwak 2019). The US walked back from the insistence on total, verified denuclearization as a precondition for improved ties and
normalization. Instead, it has embraced the principle of simultaneous and parallel steps toward denuclearization and peaceful relations.

The Hanoi summit offered neither a breakthrough nor a breakdown. White House press secretary Sarah Sanders said that although “No agreement was reached at this time”, the two leaders had “very good and constructive meetings” and “discussed various ways to advance denuclearization” (Talev et al. 2019). Trump said the impasse arose over Kim’s demand for a lifting of sanctions in their entirety in return for a promise to dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear complex (BBC 2019). North Korea’s Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho disputes this account, saying it only asked for limited sanctions relief.

The Kashmir crisis that flared up dangerously with exquisite timing during the Hanoi summit underlines the logic of Trump’s moves on Korea (Thakur 2019a). Abandoning a demonstrably failed policy over a quarter century, of insistence on a total and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea, is no big sacrifice. Engaging with Kim personally to establish a working relationship that can dispel misperceptions, build confidence and trust, deepen inter-Korean relations and in other ways greatly reduce the risks of a war with catastrophic consequences: now that is a big deal.

For all his strategic illiteracy, Trump may have a surer intuitive grasp of this underlying big-picture reality than most of the devotees of the Washington playbook of increasingly militarized responses to foreign crises (Goldberg 2016). Communications channels are now active between North and South Korea, and between North Korea and the US, at summit, high and working levels. This is no bad thing.

That said, Trump was right to walk away from the demand to lift all sanctions now in return for dismantling just one key nuclear facility. Perhaps Kim misjudged Trump’s eagerness to make a deal, any deal, in order to claim a victory to offset the worsening domestic situation for the president, particularly with his former lawyer’s testimony to Congress. Trump has not reached that point of desperation yet.

**After the 2nd US-DPRK Summit in Hanoi, Vietnam: Sustain the Inter-Korean Momentum (Mark Byung-Moon Suh² and Elisabeth Imi Suh³)**

The much expected and awaited second meeting between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un abruptly ended without any agreement and will go down in history as the 2019 no deal-summit. Surely, the lack of an agreement is disappointing; it does not equate, however, to the end of diplomacy with North Korea. What went wrong and what needs to be done to keep the momentum of peace process in Korea?

**Two Track Diplomacy Vis-à-Vis North Korea**

After the tension-loaded year of 2017, diplomacy on the Korean peninsula quick-started after Kim Jong Un’s New Year’s speech at the beginning of 2018. The progressive administration in Seoul had iterated offers for inter-Korean dialogue since the

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²Council Member, Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, Member of the German Council on Foreign Relations.
³Research Assistant, German Institute for International and Security Affairs.
inauguration of Moon Jae-in in May 2017. Moon was very keen on bringing North Korea and the US to negotiating tables, and careful to set the right tone as he did in his Berlin speech in July 2017. His genuine interest in dialogue with the North – important not for the sake of accelerated reunification, but in the name of joint Korean ownership of peace and stability on the peninsula – has translated into the re-establishment of crisis communication channels, the institutionalization of working-level dialogue through, e.g., the liaison office in Kaesong as well as leader-to-leader meetings that resulted in the Panmunjom Declaration of April 2018, the Pyongyang Declaration and Military Agreement of September 2018. Seoul’s continuous endeavor to constructively engage Pyongyang and to find mutually acceptable steps towards political reconciliation, military confidence-building and economic cooperation has spilled into a relatively stable track of inter-Korean dialogue(s).

US–North Korean diplomacy, however, stands in stark contrast to this: Donald Trump’s initial willingness to meet directly with Kim quickly fell into oblivion with his 2017 maximum pressure campaign and “fire and fury” rhetoric. While first inter-Korean talks and Pyongyang’s high-level attendance of the Pyongchang Winter Olympics in February 2018 were met with US discontent; nevertheless, Trump gratefully accepted Kim Jong Un’s invitation that was extended by Seoul’s special envoys in March 2018. Diplomacy between Washington and Pyongyang since then, however, appears rather as “off-again on-again” momentum of dialogue and summity: First high-level talks between the Trump administration and Kim regime were followed by the cancellation and then resumption of preparations for their first summit meeting, finally resulting in the Singapore Summit and its consequent declaration of intentions in June 2018. Besides frictions in July, August and November, high-level meetings between Washington and Pyongyang took place in July and October. High-level meetings in the run-up to the Hanoi Summit, and especially working-level talks in January and February, were the cause of high hopes for the second encounter of Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un. The ups and downs in US–North Korean interactions as well as the no deal-summit reveal the shortcomings of the US administration’s approach to Pyongyang.

The Singapore Summit in June 2018: Start of a New Relationship?

The first-ever leadership interaction between the US and North Korea supposedly marked the beginning of a fundamentally new bilateral relationship and the start of an innovative top-down approach to diplomacy. The Trump administration explicitly distances itself from previous administrations’ North Korea policies – which is correct in terms of its willingness to directly and personally engage Pyongyang’s leader(ship) without explicit preconditions. In terms of content, however, US positions remain the same and rather increasingly emphasize the threats posed to its national security by North Korea’s ICBM and uranium enrichment capabilities.

On a rhetorical level, Donald Trump has played with ideas of withdrawing all US troops from South Korea, of opening liaison offices and declaring the end of the Korean War. The no deal-summit of Hanoi, however, bluntly revealed the actual stakes being discussed and the narrow room for maneuver: while Pyongyang insists on the partial lifting of sanctions and suggests the focus on confidence- and relationship-building measures, Washington shows no flexibility nor creativity in allowing for compromise in
terms of North Korea’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. Although
details of the failure to reach agreement in Hanoi remain to be seen, the Trump
administration has passed up the opportunity to put Pyongyang’s nuclear testing and
missile moratorium into writing, to sign a narrow deal consisting primarily of allowing
inspectors into Yongbyon and to declare the end of the Korean War. These three
milestones would have put negotiations on track towards building actual confidence,
and towards achieving peace and disarmament realistically step-by-step.

The Right Lessons to Be Learnt from Interactions with Pyongyang

Moon’s administration is not only building on the fundamentals of the Sunshine Policy
(1998–2008), but rather developing it. Moon has apparently drawn the right lessons to
prioritize political and military confidence-building measures in dialogue with
Pyongyang. The prospect of economic cooperation remains an important element in
inter-Korean relations, but is understood to not automatically spill into the desired
change of North Korea’s foreign policy behavior.

The current administration in Washington, however, has not drawn any lessons
from past successful and failed negotiations with Pyongyang. International and uni-
lateral sanctions remain the preferred (and only) tool; a tool that is merely being
utilized as “sticks” instead of “carrots and sticks”. Besides insisting on the implementa-
tion of the complete sanctions regime against North Korea, the Trump administration
overestimates the effectiveness of its maximum pressure campaign. Sanctions do have
an effect on North Korea’s economy and population; the abrupt changes in its foreign
policy behavior and willingness to engage in talks, however, derive from Pyongyang’s
own strategic developments and Moon Jae-in’s genuine interest in resuming inter-
Korean dialogue as well as facilitating US–North Korean diplomatic interactions.

As a general lesson to be drawn from past negotiations, willingness to compromise
and creative persuasion are more likely to result in constructive dialogue and agree-
ments, than mere coercion. Moreover, a declared end of the Korean War would not
only represent the ultimate security guarantee of respecting mutual state sovereignty
and the beginning of actual non-adversarial relations, but also alleviate the entire
peninsula’s population from the seven decades-long state (and threat) of war, and put
a dent in the military’s power within North Korea.

Outlook and Recommendations

North Korea and the US remain (at least rhetorically) interested in dialogue; both of
their leaders insist on having and wanting to extend their positive personal relationship.
It is imperative for Seoul to double its efforts and resume its role of facilitator and
mediator, continuing the positive momentum of inter-Korean relations and helping to
bridge the gaps between Washington and Pyongyang. After having practically agreed to
terminate the Korean War in September 2018, the two Koreas must commerce eco-
nomic cooperation and expand exchanges in all areas to grow together. Extensive inter-
Korean relations can encourage US–North Korean relations and help to reduce political
and military tensions on the Korean peninsula.
Independent from the no-deal of Hanoi, there is an urgent need to follow-through on the de facto inter-Korean end of war and declare the end of the Korean War multilaterally. Instead of coercing North Korea into unilateral disarmament, a more realistic step-by-step approach needs to be adopted; a comprehensive approach that conceptualizes steps of a freeze, capacity reductions and then dismantlement, steps reciprocated through selective sanctions lifting. Additionally, military confidence-building measures and institutionalizing bilateral interactions serve to mitigate present and future tensions.

Most importantly, it is imperative to understand the roots of North Korea’s conviction regarding its possession of an indigenous nuclear deterrent. While the US consideration of nuclear weapons during the Korean War sparked this conviction, Washington’s handling of Iraq and Libya as well as its nuclear-capable strategic assets stationed in Guam, bomber overflights as demonstrations of force and decapitation plans have intensified it. Without substantial changes in the security environment on the Korean Peninsula therefore, there will be little substantial changes in Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons or ballistic missile programs. It is therefore laudable to continue the indefinite suspension of US–South Korean joint military exercises, which was mostly expected after the Singapore Summit in June 2018. The absence of large-scale military drills serves to build the fundament of normalizing state interactions and constructive dialogue towards a negotiated solution to the deep-rooted security dilemma on the Korean Peninsula.

**Applying Diplomacy for the Common Good (Shen Dingli)\(^4\)**

The much expected second summit between President Donald Trump of the US and Chairman Kim Jung Un of the DPRK has just ended with no deal. Despite the fact that both advance teams had reached Hanoi for days-long pre-summit negotiation without reaching an agreement, Washington and Pyongyang still expected to deliver a deal at the summit level.

However, on the surface, it seems that both parties have had significant misunderstandings before and during their talks, which made it impossible to hammer out a deal with proper mutual compromise.

According to President Trump in his solo post-summit press conference, Chairman Kim demanded that the US lift “all” economic sanctions in exchange for the DPRK’s verified closure of its Yongbyon nuclear complex, without addressing any further denuclearizing details including declaration, inspection and dismantling all DPRK’s nuclear weapons and missiles program, hopefully completely and irreversibly.

Nevertheless, the DRPK Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho said at a late press conference of his own that Pyongyang only asked for the partial lifting of sanctions, contradicting what Trump said. DPRK has indicated that in principle it agrees with denuclearization for the complete lifting of sanctions. But at present, the DPRK only asked for the partial lifting of sanctions and offered to close its Yongbyon nuclear site.

\(^4\)Professor and Director, Program on Arms Control and Regional Security, Institute of International Studies, Fudan University.
If both sides had expressed their positions unambiguously, they should not have such vastly different understandings, and their differences could be narrowed. The US side was opposed to the entire lifting of sanctions for non-complete implementation of DPRK’s denuclearization. This is quite understandable. Actually, the US current stance of the possible partial lifting of sanctions for denuclearizing a significant part of the DPRK nuclear program has already been much more flexible than its previous position at the earlier summit in Singapore.

Though it is still hard to decipher why the two teams could not communicate and understand each other properly, one should keep in mind that they are willing to use diplomacy to settle their difference. In response to a journalist’s question, Kim Jung Un said he would not have come all the way to Hanoi without a genuine intention to denuclearize.

It is possible that both sides have attempted high-pressure diplomacy. In this initial tangible high-stake give-and-take game, Pyongyang wanted to retain as much as nuclear flexibility by restricting the US freedom in verification scope, and meantime to maximize its potential gain through attempting a total lifting of sanctions, though signaling also a possible partial lifting as well. The US side, after offering a liaison office as its carrot, resolutely denied a “non-equal” deal. Given their similar character and temperament, their best intent of opting for diplomacy could end with applying pressure. As both feel “no rush” at this time, their talk quickly collapsed.

If the above-conceived scenario makes any sense, the lesson is clear. Each side has not applied sustained diplomacy. Instead, they could well end up with using diplomacy as a one-shot pressure. In light of this, their failure to strike out a deal this time is not surprising.

Given the vast distrust between the two countries, any pursuant of a quick solution through denuclearization is unrealistic. The reason is pretty simple: the DPRK does not feel secure and is keen to preserve certain nuclear capability in its early stage of “denuclearization”, even if Pyongyang would do it eventually. The US, for its part, has to address the DPRK nuclear and missile arsenal in its entirety despite its own softening of position from a “time-bound total denuclearization” to a “no rush” incremental process.

Understanding the DPRK’s feel of geostrategic insecurity would help make explicable the collapse of this talk. Given the demise of the Soviet Union, the DPRK has lost one key ally. The other, China, still has a legally-binding alliance agreement with the DPRK on paper. However, Pyongyang has doubts that China would ever have honored its commitment. At a time China is branding itself as a “responsible power”, Beijing might accord its regional and global responsibility to stem nuclear proliferation a higher priority over its bilateral commitment to come to the DPRK’s defense, if the two objectives conflict with each other.

In addition, Pyongyang would not fail to see that the US still has a hegemonic foreign policy. Without any hard evidence or UN Security Council endorsement, the Bush administration launched an illegal preemptive attack on Iraq, and described Pyongyang along with Teheran and Baghdad as a member of “an axis of evil”. President Obama, while receiving his Nobel Peace award, partly for his leadership of “global zero”, exercised his “strategic patience” to be distant with the DPRK. In addition, President Trump has ordered the building of miniaturized nuclear warheads, so as to deter those leaders of “rogue states” more effectively.
Remembering President Trump’s “fire and fury” in 2017, his sudden shift of stance toward the DPRK could well be his display of “art of deal”. Once the DPRK would imprudently follow the US demand of a CVID approach to comprehensively, verifiably and irreversibly denuking itself while the US would do nothing during this process, Pyongyang could well commit political and strategic suicide without any parallel economic benefits. No sensible DPRK leader would ever embrace such a one-sided highly risky formula.

Seven months after the first summit in Singapore in June last year, the White House has become more pragmatic, as it now seems to understand that virtually it is impossible to achieve a “US-wins-all, the DPRK-loses-all” denuclearization game. Lately, President Trump has sent a number of messages to show that based on his wonderful personal relations with Chairman Kim, he would not expect the second round of summit to conclude a total and immediate denuclearization. Instead, he would enlighten his DPRK counterpart with the success of Vietnam, the host country, that Pyongyang holds a tremendous opportunity of economic prosperity, if it is prepared to surrender the core of its nuclear and missile arsenals, while the US would offer some enticing olives including setting up an American liaison office in Pyongyang.

While the US has softened its position to some extent, the rest of the world would expect the DPRK to reciprocate in return. Pyongyang may not only agree to extend its existing virtual nuclear and missile testing moratorium, but also offer a certain version of a roadmap toward eliminating its fissile material and missile arsenal, though in a limited and incremental manner.

A reasonable conclusion from Trump’s walkout from this summit is that high-pressure diplomacy has led to an impasse on relative cost-benefits on the table. This may indicate either their lack of skill in using diplomacy, or lack of intent to make the deal so soon. From the DPRK side, indeed it is in no rush to yield.

Militarily, after six rounds of nuclear weapons tests and tens of missile flight tests, Pyongyang’s nuclear deterrent should not be underestimated. With nuclear armaments, Pyongyang trusts that it is more secure rather than without. And, with its acquired data from previous tests, the DPRK may be confident in building up its nuclear tipped missiles without immediate further tests, and hence without annoying its neighbors. Economically, it may be hungry but not dying. With its testing moratorium, Pyongyang has already much improved its relationship with Beijing, Seoul and Moscow. It is likely to believe that the beleaguered Trump may be thirstier to get a deal, given his presidential reelection need, at a time of America’s challenging relationship with China, Russia, and allies, as well as his many legal battles in the Congress.

The world should not allow the US and the DPRK to squander time this way. Without making even an imperfect deal of denuclearization, Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile arsenal could keep expanding, adding its weight in any future talks with the US. If the two sides intend to meet again, they should be better prepared than this time, communicating well and accommodating each other’s legitimate concerns. They should trust and apply diplomacy for common goods, rather than use it merely as a platform. Based on improved diplomacy, the US and the DPRK shall present to the world that they are able to achieve both denuclearization and the opening of a new peace era with the official ending of the Korean War.
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Notes on Contributor

Tatsujiro Suzuki was born in 1951. He graduated from the University of Tokyo (1975), from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1979) and gained a Ph.D. from the University of Tokyo (1988) in nuclear engineering. He served as Vice Chairman at Japan Atomic Energy Commission (JAEC) from 2010 to 2014. He joined RECNA in 2014 and served as its Director (2015-2019). He has been a Council Member of Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs since 2014.

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