



US-DPRK: CAN/SHOULD “TALKS ABOUT TALKS” PROCEED?

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A spokesperson for the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated on March 3 that Pyongyang was open to direct talks with Washington: “Out of the desire of our nation and international society aspiring after peace, we have clarified our position that a dialogue with the U.S. will be possible.” While rejecting the US precondition that “it will have dialogue only for making the DPRK [Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Korea or North Korea] abandon nuclear weapons” as “really more than ridiculous,” it further noted that “the dialogue we desire is the one designed to discuss and resolve the issues of mutual concern on an equal footing between states.”

Significantly, unlike many prior announcements, the statement did not rule out denuclearization as an eventual outcome, even while rejecting it as a precondition. But, also significant was the “equal footing” assertion (dare we call it a precondition?). A benign interpretation could simply mean “one sovereign state to another.” Less benign, and more consistent with prior North Korean demands, would be “one nuclear weapon state to another.”

In short, the March 3 statement may represent the long-awaited breakthrough opening the door for dialogue or may just be a change in tactics aimed at trying to get Washington to rescind its “maximum pressure” campaign (which was condemned in the statement) while achieving *de facto* recognition as a nuclear weapon state. While my suspicions lie with the latter, the best way to find out is to sit down and talk with Pyongyang. While Washington has made it clear that formal negotiations with Pyongyang must begin with an agreement that the prospect of denuclearization is at least on the table, preliminary “talks about talks” would provide an opportunity for each side to test the other’s sincerity.

Prior to engaging in any discussion, Washington should reiterate its intentions: the US remains committed to Korean Peninsula denuclearization and any direct discussions, formal or otherwise, do not constitute recognition or acceptance of North Korea’s nuclear and long-range missile programs, which remain illegal under numerous UNSC Resolutions. UN and US unilateral sanctions will remain in place until the North comes into full compliance with its UN obligations. In addition,

while bilateral dialogue is useful in addressing issues of mutual concern, no solutions regarding long-term peace and stability on the Peninsula will be achieved without the full participation and consent of the Republic of Korea (ROK) government. “Equal footing” must apply to Seoul as well.

That said, Washington should follow Seoul’s lead and offer to send a high-level delegation to Pyongyang to discuss the prospects of future dialogue. Perhaps the ROK delegation, led by National Security Office director Chung Eui-yong and National Intelligence Service chief Suh Hoon, could deliver this message from President Trump, thus underscoring the close US-ROK cooperation that remains essential to any long-term solution.

The US delegation needs to be senior enough to receive assurances in advance that they will be able to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un. A delegation led by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and including National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster would demonstrate US seriousness while also being able to deliver a credible message (assuming, of course, that President Trump does not undermine this credibility with an ill-timed tweet).

As a goodwill gesture, the Trump and Moon administrations could also announce that the upcoming series of US-ROK exercises (scheduled for April) will be “defensive only” and will not include any “decapitation” scenarios or involve Guam-based strategic assets, such as long-range bombers. This would demonstrate US sensitivity toward genuine DPRK concerns while also demonstrating continued US/ROK resolve to defend the Peninsula. (Cancelling or further postponing the exercises would be seen as a sign of weakness in Pyongyang that it would inevitably try to exploit and would not serve the interests of deterrence.)

Washington and Seoul also need to recognize that there is another player with a huge stake in this game; namely Tokyo. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has been in lockstep with Washington over its maximum pressure campaign and needs to be brought into this process. Tokyo’s support is critical to show broader alliance solidarity and remind Pyongyang that efforts to separate Washington from either of its Northeast Asian allies will not succeed. It will also serve to remind Seoul that Japan still matters.

Pyongyang's statement concluded that "The U.S. should not misjudge our intention for dialogue." It is absolutely essential that Pyongyang not misjudge US intentions either. This requires a face-to-face meeting with Kim Jong-Un similar to, and in lockstep with, the ROK delegation that precedes it.

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