



## US-DPRK: BRIDGING THE DIFFERENCES

BY RALPH COSSA

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As Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump arrive in Hanoi for their second summit, debates continue to rage over whether their first meeting, in Singapore last June, was a “huge success,” a “total failure” or a “sellout.” The answer is that it is too soon to tell. We are still in the early innings of what promises to be an extra-inning game and even if you believe, as I do, that Kim scored first, the game is a long way from over.

What is clear already is that, right or wrong, good or bad, the historic Singapore Declaration signed between the two leaders forms the foundation upon which the DPRK-US relationship will be built . . . or crumble. It is useful, therefore, to review what was and was not in this Declaration as we get set for Kim-Trump II.

There was nothing in the Declaration about a halt in DPRK missile or nuclear tests. In fact, Kim had announced the end of testing over a year ago since his “powerful deterrent” was already in place. The emphasis now, according to his 2018 New Year’s Address, was to “mass-produce nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles, the power and reliability of which have already been proved to the full.” In this year’s speech he indicated that “we would neither make and test nuclear weapons any longer nor use and proliferate them.” But this pledge is not (yet) in any signed agreement and there is a huge difference between not making more weapons and getting rid of the ones he already has. Note also that there was no reference to ballistic missile production and deployment which, by all accounts, continues.

There was also nothing in the Singapore Declaration about US military exercises or troop levels. The halt in “war games” was a unilateral gesture by President Trump who also stressed, then and since, that US troop levels on the Peninsula were not on the table. Unfortunately, he frequently adds as a footnote that he really wished he could send them all home, largely undercutting his message and raising anxieties in the US, ROK, and elsewhere. Kim, on the other hand, made his preferences clear in his recent New Year’s address: “joint military exercises with outside forces should no longer be allowed and deployment of war equipment such as outside strategic assets should be completely stopped.” While agreement to halt deployments of strategic assets to the Peninsula during subsequent exercises could be an appropriate confidence building measure, any future declaration should make it clear that the US force presence on the Peninsula is for Seoul and Washington to decide and is not a bargaining chip in negotiations.

In the Singapore Declaration, the US and DPRK jointly commit to three things: “to establish new U.S.–DPRK relations”; to “join their efforts to build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula”; and to “recovering POW/MIA remains.” Most importantly (at least to Washington but listed third), was a commitment by the DPRK “to work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

In referencing this agreement, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo frequently refers to Kim’s agreement to the denuclearization of North Korea. This was publicly and pointedly corrected by the DPRK in December when a KCNA Commentary protested Pompeo’s “misguided understanding”: “the U.S. regards the big concept of the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula as the same as the partial concept of the ‘denuclearization of north Korea’ . . . This is something aghast.” In rejecting this “optical illusion,” the Commentary noted: “When we refer to the Korean peninsula, they include both the area of the DPRK and the area of south Korea where aggression troops including the nuclear weapons of the US are deployed.” Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula means “removing all elements of nuclear threats from the

areas of both the north and the south of Korea and also from surrounding areas from where the Korean peninsula is targeted. This should be clearly understood.”

The Commentary also clearly specifies the order in which denuclearization must take place: “denuclearization of the Korean peninsula means ‘completely removing the nuclear threats of the U.S. to the DPRK,’ *before it means the elimination of its nuclear deterrence.*” [emphasis added] This has been a consistent DPRK message. It was the nuclear threat to the DPRK which “compelled” Pyongyang to develop its own nuclear deterrence. Therefore, this threat must be removed first before the North will even begin to take steps toward removing its own nuclear capabilities. While the US seems to have transitioned from the “North Korea denuclearization must come first” approach to the North’s preferred “step-by-step” approach, Pyongyang has made it clear who it expects to take the first step. It has also made it clear what one of the first steps must be: “The end of the hostile policy toward the DPRK and the lift of unwarranted sanctions measures are what the U.S. can do without a knuckle of finger, only if it has a will.”

For the second summit to be a success, at a minimum there must be agreement on what constitutes “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” and what are the obligations and expectations of each side. Just as the North has agreed to move toward denuclearization, the US has promised to work jointly with the North to “build a lasting and stable peace regime.” Pyongyang believes that this must start with an End of War Declaration and there are hints that President Trump has agreed to sign such a document.

It is unclear, however, what such a Declaration would entail or represent and how it would differ from a formal Peace Treaty to replace the Armistice Agreement and officially end the Korean War. Today, the governments in Seoul and Pyongyang both claim to be the sole legitimate representative of the Korean people on both sides of the demilitarized zone. Acceptance of each other’s right to exist and legitimacy over its half of the Peninsula seems like a prerequisite for any meaningful Declaration. It would

also be an important test of both the North’s and South’s sincerity to peacefully coexist.

The Singapore Declaration laid the foundation for a new US-DPRK relationship. The challenge now is to start building constructively on this foundation. At a minimum, this will require common understanding on what constitutes complete denuclearization and what steps are required by each side to get there from here, plus agreement on who goes first and next. Incorporating Kim’s pledges not to test or build more nuclear weapons and to eliminate the nuclear complex at Yongbyon as a first step toward eliminating current arsenals would be a significant addition to any new Declaration as would be identification of the “corresponding measures” required to make this happen. Clarification as to what’s on and not on the table regarding military exercises, troop presence, and force deployments would also be useful, assuming of course that there is advance consultation and agreement between Washington and Seoul as to the particulars.

Denuclearization, while an important end in itself, must also be seen as a means toward an even more important end, which is peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. This requires not only a new constructive relationship between Washington and Pyongyang but agreements in both Pyongyang and Seoul to respect one another’s sovereignty and right to co-exist until such time as peaceful reunification can take place. Steps taken by Washington to address Pyongyang’s security concerns must also take into account the legitimate security concerns of Seoul and others (Tokyo very much included). As a result, the US defense commitment to both the ROK and Japan should be seen not as an impediment to peace but as part of the foundation upon which a “lasting and robust peace regime” can be built.

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