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Paved with Good Intentions: Trump's Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea

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ABSTRACT

The first-ever US-DPRK summit meeting in Singapore yielded an agreement in principle that satisfied both sides' key demands, but the two overreached in Hanoi. Ever since then, North Korea has been demanding unilateral steps by the United States to demonstrate its commitment to end enmity before it will return to the negotiating table. After the failed summit, opponents of engagement in Pyongyang began pushing back against negotiations. Kim Jong Un responded with an 12 April 2019 policy speech to the Supreme People's Assembly imposing an end-of-the-year deadline for an offer he could accept and hinted he would end his self-imposed moratorium on testing nuclear weapons and the longer-range missiles to deliver them. Despite US attempts to meet him part-way, he ramped up testing of other missiles and continued fissile material production. He also held relations with Seoul hostage to further advances in talks with Washington. Yet it seems unlikely he is giving up seeking the same goals sought by his grandfather and father to reconcile – end enmity – with Washington and Seoul in order to hedge against the rise of China. Unlike his forebears, he has willing partners in the US and South Korean presidents, but his increasing nuclear leverage may tempt him to overplay his hand in coercive diplomacy either by resuming tests to enhance that leverage or by asking for more than President Trump can give.

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Introduction

His frustration was palpable. US Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun had been trying his utmost to induce North Korea back to the negotiating table. Yet any hope he had of meeting the North Koreans during his December 2019 trip to Seoul and Beijing had just proved fruitless.

President Donald Trump's willingness to sit down with Kim Jong Un and negotiate provides an unprecedented opportunity to write a new chapter in US-DPRK relations. At the same time, however, Washington has been waging a campaign of "maximum pressure" by tightening sanctions.

The administration claims that tighter sanctions, along with a heightened risk of war, compelled Pyongyang to negotiate, though there are reasons to doubt this claim. From

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the start of Trump's presidency, Washington had gradually deployed airpower and other forces to the region, but Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford, and the commander of US Forces in Korea Vincent Brookes repeatedly voiced caution about using them. The drumbeat of war in the news media, which amplified Trump's threats of "fire and fury" and loose talk of "bloody nose" strikes, aroused consternation in Seoul, though not in Pyongyang.

Careful parsing of Trump's over-the-top rhetoric suggests he was making deterrent threats in the event that North Koreans actions put US or allied security in jeopardy¹. On 29 April 2017, at the peak of the war fever, KCNA dismissed the threats as bluffs:

The US is bluffing after firing dozens of missiles at Syria and dropping a GBU-43 bomb on Afghanistan. During his recent junket to Asia, US Vice-President Pence, saying the world witnessed the "bold decision of the president" through the military actions in Syria and Afghanistan, behaved so arrogant as to urge the DPRK not to misjudge the will of the US and test the decision of Trump and muscle of the US forces. Dignitaries including the US ambassador to the United Nations also noisily talk about "strong warning" to someone every day, asserting that the era of "strategic patience" has come to an end and all options including military action are on the table. **This is just a bluff of the US** keen on flexing its muscle by striking non-nuclear countries and weak nations only. Such an act can never irritate the DPRK. . . . The US is getting evermore desperate in its bluffing, but it only reveals the vulnerability of those exasperated by the DPRK's nukes of justice and invincible military muscle².

Meanwhile the news media were paying scant attention to secret U.S. talks with the North that began in spring 2017. The high point of their behind-the-scenes diplomacy would come on 1 April 2018 when then-CIA Director Mike Pompeo met with Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang.

Pyongyang's response was similarly two-edged – floating a willingness to negotiate on a sea of threats in its own exercise of coercive diplomacy.

Kim's April 2019 Policy Speech

Kim himself had set the tone in an 12 April 2019 speech to the Supreme People's Assembly. In the wake of the Hanoi summit, he said, U.S. demands were "running counter to **the fundamental interests of our country**." Compelling Washington to end enmity and improve the North's security, he said, were essential for him to resume negotiations: "[I]t will be hard to expect any progress" without "a fundamental liquidation" of the "hostile policy of the US" He cited "open hostile moves," specifically, "the US recent test simulating the interception of [an] ICBM from the DPRK and the resumption of the military exercises whose suspension was directly committed to by the US president."

Kim endorsed the joint statement issued in June 2018 in Singapore at the first-ever U.S.-DPRK summit meeting as "a landmark in establishing the new DPRK-US relations." By contrast, he blamed Washington for the failure of the second summit in Hanoi. Dismissing the US negotiating position there as "absolutely impracticable," he noted that

¹For example, "The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea." White House Office of the Press Secretary, Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the U.N. General Assembly, 19 September 2017.

²KCNA, "U.S. Muscle-Flexing Can Never Work on DPRK: KCNA Commentary," 29 April 2017. (Emphasis added.)

“it is necessary for both sides not to table their unilateral demands but find out a constructive solution to meeting each other’s interests.”

Kim’s willingness to resume negotiations was conditional:

Now the U.S. is strongly suggesting it’s thinking of holding the third DPRK-U.S. summit talks and the settlement of the issue through dialogue. Yet it is still shunning the withdrawal of its hostile policy, the fundamental way of establishing the new DPRK-U.S. relations, and miscalculating that it can bring us to our knees if it puts maximum pressure on us . . . **If the US adopts a correct posture and comes forward for the third DPRK-US summit with a certain methodology that can be shared with us, we can think of holding one more talks** [sic].

He warned that he would not hold his fire for long, however: “[W]e will wait for a bold decision from the U.S. until the end of this year.”³

Kim’s goals, and those of his grandfather and father, were far-reaching. He wanted Washington to end enmity. To judge from what North Korean officials have been telling American officials and ex-officials for years, reconciliation requires a peace treaty writing a formal end to the Korean War, the normalization of political and economic relations, and ultimately an alliance like the one that the United States has with South Korea, backed by a continuing US troop presence on the peninsula and even a “nuclear umbrella” (Halperin et al. 2018).

Why? In a word, China. Kim Il Sung had played off the Soviets against the Chinese throughout the Cold War, but in 1988, anticipating the collapse of the Soviet Union, he reached out to the United States, South Korea, and Japan in an effort to reconcile and hedge against China’s rise.

From Pyongyang’s perspective, the Kims’ aims were the basis of the 1994 Agreed Framework, which committed Washington to “move toward full normalization of political and economic relations” – in plain English, end enmity. This aim was also the basis of the September 2005 Six-Party Joint Statement in which Washington and Pyongyang pledged to “respect each other’s sovereignty, exist peacefully together, and take steps to normalize their relations subject to their respective bilateral policies” as well as to “negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.”

On 7 June 2018, Secretary of State Pompeo, perhaps echoing what US officials were hearing from the North Koreans, told an NHK interviewer, “We want to achieve **a fundamentally different strategic relationship** between our two countries.”⁴ It may have been the first and last time that Pyongyang heard those words from Washington.

A Good Start in Singapore

Kim’s positive reference to the Singapore joint statement in his April 2019 policy speech was noteworthy. Issued on 12 June 2018, at the first-ever meeting between a sitting US president and a North Korean leader, it contained reciprocal commitments. The DPRK pledged in principle to “work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” the ultimate US goal, although the wording implied a gradual step-by-step

³KCNA, “Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at First Session of 14th SPA,” 13 April 2019. (Emphasis added.)

⁴U.S., Department of State, Secretary State Mike Pompeo, Interview with Yui Hideki of NHK, June 7, 2018. (Emphasis added.)

approach that could require reciprocal inspections in both North and South Korea. The United States, in turn, committed to satisfy two long-sought DPRK goals: “to establish new DPRK-US relations” and “to build a lasting and stable peace on the Korean peninsula.”⁵ The North also promised to return remains of American missing-in-action, which could help lay the Korean War to rest – and not just for their kin.

Yet critics pounced on President Donald Trump’s willingness to burnish Kim’s stature without obtaining a detailed commitment to specific denuclearization steps in return (DeYoung and Nakamura 2018; Baker and Choe 2018; Rucker 2018). That assessment downplayed Kim Jong Un’s unilateral suspension in April 2018 of nuclear and longer-range ballistic missile tests⁶ – stopping short of the further testing it needed for a proven thermonuclear device and before it had demonstrated an ICBM equipped with a reentry vehicle robust enough to withstand the deceleration and thermal ablation by hot plasma associated with the shock wave from its reentry into the atmosphere at a speed of seven kilometers per second.

Washington, in Pyongyang’s view, never quite reciprocated this concession. At Singapore, Trump did suspend joint military exercises with South Korea – only to resume them months later. Trump told reporters, “We will be stopping the war games, which will save us a tremendous amount of money, unless and until we see the future negotiation is not going along like it should.”⁷ The president had told Kim the suspension was conditional, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo briefed reporters the next day: “I was present when the discussion took place. He made it very clear that the condition precedent for the exercises not to proceed was a productive, good-faith negotiations being ongoing.”⁸

Resumption of the joint exercises would soon be seen as a disappointment, if not a betrayal, in Pyongyang.

Overreach in Hanoi

The success of Singapore was called into question at the second Kim-Trump summit, held in Hanoi on February 27–28, 2019. Both sides overreached, demanding too much and offering too little.

In the months leading up to Hanoi, secret talks involving intelligence officials, including Mike Pompeo, then director of central intelligence, as well as diplomats from both sides had sketched out some elements of an accord. Dropping its all-or-nothing approach for a more limited first-stage deal, Washington signaled openness to partially satisfying two desires of Kim, downsizing large-scale exercises on the peninsula and proposing an exchange of liaison offices as a way-station to full diplomatic normalization. It allowed some exemptions from UN Security Council sanctions to deliver humanitarian aid, but it hinted at a willingness to relax other unspecified sanctions, or as Special Representative Biegun phrased it obliquely in an appearance at Stanford University, “We didn’t say we won’t do anything until you do everything.”⁹

⁵Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit Issued on 12 June 2018.

⁶KCNA, “3rd Plenary of 7th C.C., WPK Held in Presence of Kim Jong Un,” 21 April 2018.

⁷White House, Office of the Press, Press Conference by President Trump, Capella Hotel Singapore 12 June 2018.

⁸U.S., Department of State, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Remarks to the Traveling Press, Seoul, 13 June 2018.

⁹U.S., Department of State, “Remarks on DPRK at Stanford University,” 31 January 2019.

In pivotal talks with Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang in October 2018, Secretary of State Pompeo had committed to accepting an end-of-war declaration, and Kim, in turn, had offered “dismantlement and destruction of North Korea’s plutonium and uranium enrichment facilities ... ‘and more,’” Biegun also revealed at Stanford¹⁰.

By the eve of the Hanoi summit, US negotiators had narrowed their immediate objective to seeking a verifiable suspension of all fissile material production and a written commitment to inspect key sites slated for dismantlement rather than a complete declaration of the North’s entire fissile material inventory and facilities¹¹. Yet Biegun’s North Korean interlocutor, former intelligence chief turned State Affairs Commission Special Representative for US Affairs Kim Hyok Chul, stopped short of confirming what Kim Jong Un himself had offered Pompeo in October, leaving it unclear whether all facilities at Yongbyon, never mind a suspect enrichment site nearby, would be included. The North also demanded substantial relaxation of UN sanctions in return. “In particular,” DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho told reporters at the end of the summit, “out of the eleven UN sanctions resolutions all together, we proposed the lifting of the five groups first from those that were adopted from 2016 to 2017, especially the articles that impede the civilian economy and the people’s livelihood among them.”¹²

The hardening of the DPRK negotiating position opened the door for National Security Adviser John Bolton, long an opponent of arms agreements with North Korea or any other country, to propose complete denuclearization as well as elimination of all chemical and biological arms first and only later “a very bright economic future”¹³ – a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

On the second day of the summit, Kim Jong Un put Yongbyon back on the negotiating table, though he may have been vague about the details. DPRK Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui reportedly tried to save the summit by rushing over to the Americans’ quarters and telling them that all of Yongbyon was included in the offer. Encountering skepticism, she checked back with Kim Jong Un and confirmed that interpretation – but it was too late. The US delegation had already decided to break off negotiations and abruptly depart from Hanoi, snubbing Kim Jong Un by skipping a scheduled lunch¹⁴. At a press briefing immediately afterward, Choe Son Hui dropped a cryptic hint that the North’s offer may even have encompassed the suspect uranium enrichment site several kilometers from Yongbyon:

Regarding **the Yongbyon area**, the proposal we put out this time, as our Foreign Minister had stated – we have made a historic proposal for the permanent disposal of the whole of the Yongbyon nuclear complex, and within that, **all** of the plutonium and uranium facilities, including **all** nuclear facilities altogether in the presence of US experts. In return, we have demanded – as our Foreign Minister has stated – of the sanctions resolutions, the five sanctions related to the people’s livelihood and the civilian economy we asked to be lifted¹⁵.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho, Press Conference, Hanoi, 28 February 2019, Yonhap transcript.

¹³Yonhap, “Bolton Says Trump Gave N. Korean Leader ‘Several’ Options,” 21 March 2019. See also Wroughton and Brunnstrom (2019).

¹⁴Kyodo, “N. Korea’s Kim Made Failed Bid to Stop Trump from Leaving Summit: CNN,” 6 March 2019.

¹⁵Press Conference with Choe Son Hui, Hanoi, National Committee on North Korea translation, 1 March 2019. (Emphasis added.)

After Hanoi, the president kept playing up his bromance with Kim, but who would trust a love letter from Donald Trump?

The North Plays Hard to Get with Washington and Seoul

At first, both Washington and Pyongyang tried to put the best face on Hanoi that they could, and some behind-the-scene contacts soon resumed¹⁶.

But trouble was brewing. The collapse of Hanoi prompted pushback in Pyongyang by hardliners wary of engagement with Washington and resistant to economic changes underway at home. Hints of that domestic discord gradually seeped into North Korean media.

The North's moratorium on nuclear tests and longer-range missiles remained in effect although Kim in his 12 April 2019 policy speech acknowledged that the failed Hanoi summit "aroused a strong question if we were right in taking the steps."¹⁷ Five days later, Kim presided over the first of seven test-launches of a new shorter-range ballistic missile¹⁸ – designated the KN-23 by US intelligence – which was capable of reaching all of South Korea and parts of Japan. By August the North would conduct two tests of another new shorter-range ballistic missile, and four tests of two new multiple-launch rockets, one of them, a copy of Russia's solid-fueled *Iskander* ballistic missile. It referred to some of those tests as exercises¹⁹.

In the wake of Hanoi, Washington and Seoul also resumed military exercises of their own. The first, held March 4–10, 2019, was a command post exercise renamed Dong Maeng that replaced the previously scheduled Key Resolve field exercise (Lamothe 2019). In April, just five days after the first North Korean test-launch, the allies conducted a downsized version of a previously scheduled joint air exercise²⁰. The North responded on August 8, three days after the start of another US-ROK joint exercise, by test-launching two short-range missiles²¹. The allies also ran a joint exercise to decapitate the North's leadership. The United States even launched several Minuteman-III ICBMs and Trident-II SLBMs over the Pacific from the California coast, including at least one to serve as the target for a simulated anti-missile interception²². The South also continued to test-launch a new short-range missile of its own that was capable of targeting all of the North.

Each side condemned these acts as what they called "provocations," but the test-launches and military exercises are better understood as attempts to shore up deterrence. Yet the very military moves that each side makes for deterrence purposes run the risk of deadly clashes, as happened in the West Sea in 2009–2010 and other times in Korea's past. Military confidence-building measures can reduce, though not eliminate that risk. Until there is a fundamental transformation of the political relationship – reconciliation or the end of enmity – mutual deterrence will still play a part in preventing war on the peninsula.

¹⁶U.S., Department of State, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, Interview with Norah O'Donnell of CBS This Morning, New York, 5 April 2019.

¹⁷KCNA, "Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at First Session of 14th SPA," 13 April 2019.

¹⁸KCNA, "Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Guides Test-Fire of New-Type Tactical Weapon," 18 April 2019.

¹⁹KCNA, "Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Guides Power Demonstration Fire of New-Type Tactical Guided Weapon," 26 July 2019. See also Van Diepen and DePetris (2019).

²⁰KCNA, "CPRC Warns S. Korea against Acts of Perfidy," 25 April 2019.

²¹Lee and Hwang (2019); Yonhap, "N. Korea Fires Two Short-Range Missiles into East Sea: JCS," 6 August 2019.

²²Broad and Sanger (2019); Barrett and Whalen (2019); Yun (2019); KCNA, "Use of Strength Is Not at All Monopoly of U.S.: Director of Institute of American Studies, FM of DPRK," 29 May 2019.

In anticipation that lifting of sanctions was not imminent, self-reliance became Kim Jong Un's watchword. In an 11 April 2019 report to the Central Committee of the Korean Workers' Party, he cited "the changed international landscape and the peculiarities of the present situation becoming daily acute" and "underscored the need to more vigorously advance socialist construction by dint of self-supporting national economy suited to the specific local conditions of our country based on our efforts, technology and resources under the uplifted banner of self-reliance, so as to deal a telling blow to the hostile forces who go with bloodshot eyes miscalculating that sanctions can bring the DPRK to its knees."²³

President Trump, nevertheless, did hint at some flexibility in the all-or-nothing approach he had taken in Hanoi. Moments before an 11 April 2019 meeting at the White House with President Moon Jae In of South Korea, he told reporters, "There are various smaller deals that maybe could happen. Things could happen. You can work out, step by step, pieces. But, at this moment, we're talking about the big deal. The big deal is we have to get rid of the nuclear weapons."²⁴ Asked if he was willing to ease economic sanctions, such as restarting the inter-Korean industrial complex in Kaesong or cross-border tours to Mount Kumgang, he answered, "At the right time, I would have great support. This isn't the right time. But at the right time, I'd have great support with North Korea." He added that "we are discussing certain humanitarian things right now, and I'm okay with that, to be honest. I think you have to be okay with that. And South Korea is doing certain things to help out with food and various other things for North Korea. And we'll be discussing different things inside."²⁵ In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee a day earlier, Secretary of State Pompeo had hinted at even greater leeway when he was asked if no sanctions would be eased until complete denuclearization: "I want to leave a little space there," he answered. "From time to time, there are particular provisions that if we were making substantial progress that one might think that was the right thing to do to achieve. Sometimes it's visas. I want to leave a little room" (Nakamura 2019).

Also, on 11 June 2019, in a major shakeup in Pyongyang, Kim Jong Un assumed the chairmanship of the State Affairs Council, thereby elevating it to the top decision-making body, named Choe Ryung Hae to be president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly or titular head of state to replace the long-serving Kim Yong Nam, and promoted the reform-minded Pak Pong Ju to vice chairmanship of the Korean Workers' Party, replacing him as prime minister with Kim Jae Ryong. Most significant for his US policy, he promoted Choe Son Hui first vice foreign minister to succeed the retiring Kim Gye Gwan and made her a member of the State Affairs Council, while replacing his negotiator at Hanoi, Kim Hyok Chul. The next day, the DPRK leader laid down his policy in his speech to the Supreme People's Assembly.

Kim also stepped up his interaction with China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin, implying that he had alternatives to reconciling with Washington.

²³KCNA, "Report on 4th Plenary Meeting of 7th Central Committee of WPK," 11 April 2019.

²⁴White House, Office of the Press, Remarks by President Trump and President Moon Jae-in before Bilateral Meeting," 11 April 2019.

²⁵White House, Office of the Press, Remarks by President Trump and President Moon Jae-in before Bilateral Meeting," 11 April 2019.

Perhaps most important of all, North Korea henceforth insisted that the United States commit to take unilateral steps to implement the Singapore agreement and reciprocate for the test moratorium before it would resume negotiations. The DPRK Foreign Ministry spokesman put it this way on 4 June 2019:

The DPRK remains unchanged in its stand and will to cherish and implement in good faith the June 12 DPRK-US Joint Statement personally signed by the supreme leaders of the DPRK and the US at the first-ever DPRK-US summit talks. However, if the U.S., a dialogue partner, fails to carry out its obligation and keeps resorting to anti-DPRK hostile policy, the fate of the June 12 DPRK-US Joint Statement will not be promising. Whether the June 12 DPRK-US Joint Statement will remain effective or turn out to be a mere blank sheet of paper will now be determined by how the US would respond to our fair and reasonable stand²⁶.

The North also put diplomatic, economic, and military engagement with the South on hold. It even turned down Seoul's offer of much-needed food aid in July, citing a planned US-ROK military exercise as the reason²⁷.

Holding Seoul Hostage to Progress with Washington

South Korean President Moon Jae In was doing his utmost to promote US-DPRK diplomacy, embracing Donald Trump and coaxing him to negotiate in earnest. He went along with economic sanctions and joint military exercises – much to the dismay of many of his supporters on the center-left. In his May 2017 inaugural address, Moon even signaled a willingness to subordinate his desire for a summit meeting of his own to Trump's priority: "I will meet Kim Jong Un when preconditions of resolving the nuclear issue are assured."²⁸

Moon's stance was tacit acknowledgement that Pyongyang had always held relations with Seoul hostage to its engagement with Washington. When it was making headway with Washington, it was open to dealings with Seoul, but when diplomacy with the United States hit a roadblock, Pyongyang gave Seoul the cold shoulder and blamed Washington in hopes of wooing support in the South and sowing trouble in relations between the allies.

The White House would claim that maximum pressure was working, but behind-the-scenes US-DPRK contacts in 2017 may have done more to encourage Kim to re-engage Seoul. In his New Year's Day 2018 address, Kim called for a thaw in "the frozen inter-Korean relations" and accepted Seoul's invitation to participate in the Winter Olympics in the South scheduled to open that February. He stressed, "First of all, we must work together to ease the acute military tensions between the north and the south and create a peaceful environment on the Korean Peninsula," and called on the South Koreans to discontinue "the nuclear war drills they stage with outside forces." In a decidedly mixed message, he also authorized his nuclear and rocket industries to "mass-produce nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles."²⁹ Two days later, the North announced the reopening of a military hotline it had shut down and the allies announced postponement of military exercises due to take place during the Olympics.

²⁶KCNA, "Fate of DPRK-U.S. Joint Statement: Spokesperson for Foreign Ministry of DPRK," 4 June 2019.

²⁷Yonhap, "N. Korea Refusing to Accept Seoul's Food Aid over Allies' Joint Military Drill," 24 July 2019.

²⁸Yonhap, "President Moon's Inaugural Address, 10 May 2017.

²⁹KCNA, "Kim Jong Un Makes New Year Address," 1 January 2018.

Talks with the South about the North's participation in the Olympics began on 17 January 2018. Pyongyang did more than send its athletes to compete and march alongside the South Korean team. A delegation headed by Kim Yong Nam that included Kim's younger sister, Kim Yo Jung, met with President Moon. KCNA described the occasion in glowing terms:

Kim Yo Jong, first vice department director of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, **upon authorization of Kim Jong Un**, supreme leader of the Party, state and army of the DPRK, courteously **handed over his personal letter to President Moon Jae In and verbally conveyed his intention**. President Moon Jae In expressed deep thanks to Chairman Kim Jong Un for taking a special step of making the high-level delegation of the north side participate in the Olympics and sending his personal letter and verbal greetings, and asked for certainly conveying his gratitude to Chairman Kim Jong Un. After delivery of the personal letter, the DPRK delegation had a **frank and candid talk** with the south side over the issue of improving the north-south relations. President Moon Jae In expressed the will to take one step after another for the common prosperity of the south and the north in close cooperation with each other, saying that the inter-Korean relations should be mended by the parties concerned at any cost as indicated by Chairman Kim Jong Un in his New Year Address³⁰.

President Moon was coaxing Kim and Trump to meet, a message he conveyed on 5 March 2018 when the South's special envoy Chung Eui Yong met with the North Korean leader to arrange a North-South summit meeting³¹. On March 8, Chung briefed President Trump on the outcome and in a stunning announcement on the White House lawn told the world that Trump "would meet Kim Jong Un by May to achieve permanent denuclearization" (Kim 2018). On March 10, a *Chosun Sinbo* analysis commenting on the meeting said the South Koreans had "grasped" Kim's "intent," a hint that they had transmitted his invitation to Trump to meet (Carlin 2018). On March 20, a KCNA commentary hinted that Moon's appeals were achieving some success in Pyongyang: "[D]ramatic atmosphere for reconciliation has been created in relations between the north and the south of Korea and there has been a sign of change also in the DPRK-US relations."³²

In anticipation of summits with Seoul and Washington, Kim made a surprise trip to Beijing on March 25–28, 2018, his first as North Korean leader, to reassure Xi Jinping and provide a foretaste of his stance on the nuclear issue. "Once the US and South Korea take phased and simultaneous measures in response to our peace efforts, the issue of denuclearization of the peninsula can be resolved," he was quoted as telling his hosts (Lee 2018).

Despite President Moon's hopes for a summit meeting, the North made it clear that US relations had priority. As Kwon Jong Gun, Director-General of the Foreign Ministry's Department of American Affairs, put it on 11 August 2019, "Though we are to enter into a dialogue in future as the currents flow in favor of dialogue, they had better keep in mind that this dialogue would be held strictly between the DPRK and the US, not between the north and the south."³³

³⁰KCNA, "DPRK High-Level Delegations Meets S. Korean President," 11 February 2018.

³¹Yonhap, "Moon's Envoy Says Trip Aimed at Facilitating U.S.-N.K. Denuclearization Talks," 5 March 2018.

³²KCNA, "KCNA Blasts Dishonest Forces' Distortion of Truth," 20 March 2018.

³³KCNA, "Press Statement by Director-General of DPRK Foreign Ministry," 11 August 2019.

The US all-or-nothing approach in Hanoi had called into question Pyongyang's engagement with Seoul, not just Washington. In his 12 April 2019 speech to the Supreme People's Assembly, Kim was critical of the Moon administration and raised doubts about its attempts at mediation:

The US is openly forcing the south Korean authorities to “control speed” and moving in every way to subordinate the implementation of the north-south agreement to its policy of sanctions and pressure on the DPRK. Because of this, we now face a serious situation of whether to defuse tension and keep maintaining the atmosphere of improving the north-south ties or to go back to the past when the ties plunged into a catastrophe with the danger of a war increasing.

Kim's bottom line to Seoul was blunt: “The south Korean authorities should not act an officious ‘mediator’ . . . ”³⁴ He wanted to hear directly from Washington what it was prepared to do to end enmity.

A Get-Together in Panmunjom

A mid-June, 2019 exchange of letters between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump seemed to improve the atmosphere for engagement. Without revealing the contents of Kim's note, Trump praised it as “a beautiful letter . . . a very personal, very warm, very nice letter” (Smith 2019). Kim was reported as regarding Trump's reply “with satisfaction that the letter is of excellent content.”³⁵

A third meeting between Trump and Kim took place in the Demilitarized Zone at Panmunjom on 30 June 2019. Trump had traveled to Seoul for a meeting with South Korean President Moon Jae In, who escorted him to the border. When the two leaders stepped across the border, it made headlines around the globe.

Critics panned the encounter as a mere photo op (Baker and Crowley 2019), but the two met for an hour. Hints of what transpired soon seeped out. The leaders each said they had agreed to resume working-level talks. At an impromptu press conference afterward, Trump disclosed he had invited Kim to come to the United States. He also spoke of easing economic sanctions: “At some point, . . . I'm looking forward to taking them off,” adding, “At some point during the negotiations, things can happen” (Seong 2019). En route home Biegun alluded to further flexibility. “What we are looking for is a complete freeze of WMD programs,” he told reporters on board. In return, the administration was open to taking unilateral action: “things we can do in the meantime,” such as “humanitarian aid, expanded people-to-people talks, presence in each other's capitals.” Yet complete denuclearization remained on the negotiating table, or as Biegun put it, “an idea of an end state, and then within that we have a discussion of a roadmap” (Swan and Pandey 2019; See also Baker 2019). Defining that “end state,” not to mention agreeing on a complete roadmap, would prove daunting, given US reluctance to commit to Kim's ultimate goal of a security partnership with the United States as well as the DPRK's willingness to spell out denuclearization in detail.

³⁴KCNA, “Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at First Session of 14th SPA,” 13 April 2019.

³⁵KCNA, “Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Receives Personal Letter from U.S. President Donald Trump,” 23 June 2019.

The Panmunjom Declaration: A Path to Korean Reconciliation

The Trump-Kim get-together paved the way for a high point in North-South relations: a summit meeting in Pyongyang on September 18–19, 2019. Kim Jong Un came to the airport to hug Moon Jae In on his arrival, then allowed the South Korean president's speech to be broadcast nationwide. The two agreed to a Panmunjom Declaration containing a bilateral end-of-war pledge: "The two leaders solemnly declared before the 80 million Koreans and the whole world that there will be no more war and a new era of peace has begun on the Korean peninsula." The Declaration committed the two sides to "completely cease all hostile acts against each other in every domain including land, sea and air," "devise a practical scheme to turn the area of the Northern Limit Line in the West Sea into a maritime peace zone to prevent accidental military clashes and ensure safe fishing activities," "carry out disarmament in a phased manner," "hold frequent meetings between military authorities including the defense ministers' meeting," and "actively promote the holding of trilateral meetings involving the two sides, the United States, or quadrilateral meetings involving the two sides, the United States and China with a view to replacing the Armistice Agreement with a peace agreement and establishing a permanent and solid peace regime."³⁶

An Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain, issued at the summit, promised to turn these fine words into deeds with the most comprehensive array of military confidence-building measures ever negotiated between the two sides, among them, a commitment to maintain "permanent communication channels" in order to prevent "any accidental military clash" on land, air, and sea "by immediately notifying each other when an abnormal situation arises"; agreement to "continue consultations regarding the installation and operation of direct communication lines between the respective military officials"; cessation of "all live-fire artillery drills and field training exercises at the regiment level and above within 5 km of the MDL"; a halt to "all live-fire and maritime maneuver exercises" in designated zones of the West and East Seas"; installation of "covers on the barrels of coastal artilleries and ship guns"; a ban on all "tactical live-fire drills involving fixed-wing aircraft, including the firing of air-to-ground guided weapons within the designated No Fly Zones in the eastern and western regions of the MDL"; designation of "additional no-fly zones for fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles, and hot air balloons"; adoption of a five-step warning procedure to prevent inadvertent clashes; turning the DMZ into a zone of peace by commitment to "withdraw all guard posts"; establishment of a "trilateral consultative body" among South Korea, North Korea, and the United Nations Command that would "implement measures to demilitarize the Joint Security Area"; a "pilot project of an Inter-Korean Joint Operation to Recover Remains in the DMZ"; and conversion of the area around the Northern Limit Line in the contested waters of the West Sea into a "maritime peace zone" and "pilot joint fishing zone." The two sides also reaffirmed their agreement on "accidental military clashes in the West Sea" and agreed to "devise and implement inter-Korean joint patrol measures in order to deny illegal fishing and to ensure safe fishing activities for South and North Korean fishermen" in the zone; to allow "unarmed vessels" entry into the zone along a "mutually approved route" after

³⁶Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula, Submitted to the United Nations General Assembly on 6 September 2018.

hoisting a Korean Peninsula flag and giving 48 hours' notice; agreed to require prior notification and approval of the other side "if the entry of naval ships is unavoidable," to "establish a plan," permitting "the use of Haeju Passage and Jeju Strait for North Korean vessels through consultations at the Inter-Korean Joint Military Committee," and to set up a zone of joint use of the Han (Imjin) River estuary with one-day notice and inspection of vessels and personnel³⁷.

Critics disparaged the end-of-war declaration as an opening for Pyongyang to demand the withdrawal of US forces from the peninsula. That ignored past North Korean assertions that if US enmity ended, it might want US troops to remain as a hedge against China. Yet the North's failure to implement many of its Pyongyang commitments underscored a cautionary note that the political relationship between longtime foes, and especially between the United States and the DPRK, was the driving force in reducing or increasing tensions that could erupt into armed clashes in the toe-to-toe military standoff on the peninsula.

Another Setback in Stockholm

In a speech at the University of Michigan on 6 September 2019, Special Representative Biegun addressed enmity, the central issue for the North, and hinted at the possibility of security cooperation: "At this moment, to achieve further progress, the most important step we can take is for the United States and North Korea to work together to overcome the policies and demonstrations of hostility that compromise the simple ability of our diplomats to talk, and to sustain the rhythm of negotiations." If tensions can be lowered, US military forces in South Korea will no longer need to stand perpetually ready to fight, he continued. "They could instead serve and cooperate to build a foundation to support a lasting peace. And if we can forge sustainable peace, forge the modalities of cooperation, we will reap the mutual rewards that will spring from frank discussion" (Lee 2019b).

Striking a discordant note, however, the U.S. Navy test-launched two Trident II missiles across the Pacific on September 4 and two more on the day Biegun spoke. It was an unusual display of US power (Trevithick 2019).

Nevertheless, a favorable response from Pyongyang came just three days after Biegun's speech. First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui sounded optimistic about resuming US-DPRK working-level talks, as promised in Panmunjom:

I think the US has since had enough time to find the calculation method that it can share with us. We have **willingness to sit with the US side for comprehensive discussions of the issues we have so far taken up at the time and place to be agreed late in September.** I believe that **the US side will come out with a proposal geared to the interests of the DPRK and the US and based on the calculation method acceptable to US.**³⁸

But she warned, "If the US side fingers again the worn-out scenario which has nothing to do with the new calculation method at the DPRK-US working negotiation to be held with so much effort, **the DPRK-US dealings may come to an end.**" Announcing that talks would be held on October 4 in Stockholm, she said, "It is my expectation that the working-level negotiation would accelerate the positive development of the DPRK-US relations."³⁹

³⁷Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain, 19 September 2018.

³⁸KCNA, "DPRK First Vice Foreign Minister Issues Statement," 9 September 2019. (Emphasis added.)

Sounding a discordant note of its own the next day, 10 September 2019, the North twice tested what KCNA described as “super-large multiple rocket launcher.”⁴⁰

Yet, in another encouraging sign from Washington hours later, President Trump sacked his national security adviser, John Bolton, who had opposed negotiating with North Korea for years (Baker 2019). Lest anyone doubt why, Trump publicly blamed Bolton for the failure in Hanoi and trashed his Libya solution:

We were set back very badly when John Bolton talked about the Libyan model. And he made a mistake. And as soon as he mentioned that, the “Libyan model,” what a disaster. Take a look at what happened to Qaddafi, with the Libyan model. And he’s using that to make a deal with North Korea? And I don’t blame Kim Jong Un for what he said after that. And he wanted nothing to do with John Bolton⁴¹.

Stockholm proved to be another disappointment, however. The North Koreans, it seems, came empowered not to negotiate, only to listen for what First Vice Foreign Minister Choe called a proposal “based on the calculation methods acceptable to us.” Biegun spoke of sanctions relief, but whether he offered to allow exports of textiles or coal for three years’ time or a suspension of joint military exercises in return for a fissile material cutoff is not clear from the public record (Ward 2019; Lee 2019a). He still asked for a North Korean commitment to a roadmap ending in comprehensive denuclearization, however, and he did not repeat Secretary Pompeo’s idea of a “fundamentally different strategic relationship.” Despite Biegun’s efforts to be accommodating, the North’s response was noncommittal.

Afterward, in what smelled like a pre-cooked statement, North Korea’s negotiator, Kim Myung Gil, blamed Washington for failing to reciprocate its suspension of testing and other unilateral gestures:

The breakup of the negotiation without any outcome is totally due to the fact that the US would not give up their own viewpoint and attitude. These days, the US raised expectations by offering suggestions like “flexible approach,” “new method,” and “creative solutions.” But they have disappointed us greatly, and dampened our enthusiasm for negotiations by bringing nothing to the negotiation table. ... **We made it clear that we can enter into a full discussion on denuclearization measures ... when the US responds in a sincere way to our preceding steps for denuclearization and confidence building, such as the discontinuation of nuclear and ICBM tests, dismantlement of the northern nuclear test ground, and repatriation of remains of US soldiers.** This is a realistic and appropriate proposal to recover confidence between the DPRK and the United States, which was unilaterally undermined by the US and also to create an atmosphere that is helpful to the solution of the problem. The US has openly threatened our rights to existence and development since the Singapore’s DPRK-US summit meeting alone, they have imposed sanctions against the DPRK for 15 times, and resumed joint military exercises one after the other, which the US President himself committed to suspend and introduced sophisticated war equipment into the Korean peninsula and its neighborhood. **Our position is clear: the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is possible only when all the obstacles that threaten our safety and check the development are removed completely ...**⁴²

³⁹KCNA, “Choe Son Hui, First Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK, Issues Statement,” 1 October 2019.

⁴⁰KCNA, “Successful Test-Fire of Super-Large Multiple Rocket Launcher Held under Guidance of Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un,” 25 August 2019.

⁴¹White House, Office of the Press, President Trump’s Remarks at Meeting on Vaping, 11 September 2019.

⁴²NK News, “New Ways of Calculation’: Kim Myung Gil’s Stockholm Press Conference, in Full,” 7 October 2019.

Pyongyang Disengages

In the aftermath of Stockholm, Pyongyang talked tough and acted tougher. Biegun's interlocutor in the run-up to Hanoi, Kim Hyuk Chul, warned: "The US trumpets the crucial measures taken by the DPRK for confidence-building as its own 'diplomatic gains' but no substantial progress has been made in the DPRK-US relations and **belligerent relations still persists that there can be the exchange of fire any moment.**"⁴³ Roving Ambassador Kim Yon Jung bridled at an impending US-ROK joint air-ground exercise and threatened an end to the North's suspension of testing:

The US reckless military frenzy is an extremely provocative and dangerous act of throwing a wet blanket over the spark of the DPRK-US dialogue on the verge of extinction and stoking the atmosphere of confrontation on the Korean peninsula and the region. No one will believe that the changed war exercises will change their aggression nature. **We have already emphasized more than once that the planned joint military exercise can block the DPRK-US relations from advancing and compel us to reconsider the crucial measures we have already taken**⁴⁴.

The State Affairs Council, chaired by Kim Jong Un stepped up the pressure, calling the impending exercise a "breach" of the Singapore agreement:

Our official stand is that we can no longer remain an onlooker to such a reckless act of the US. At present when one party backpedals on its commitments and unilaterally takes hostile steps, there is neither reason nor any excuse for the other party to keep itself bound to its commitments. **What's more, there is no sufficient time left. Now that the physical movement of threatening our sovereignty and the security environment is clearly seen, it is the exercise of the full-fledged self-defensive right of a sovereign state to take countermeasures to contain it.** It is our intention and will to answer dialogue with dialogue and recourse to force in kind. To look back on the past hours which we let them pass with patience, we no longer feel the need to exercise any more patience. The US has to ponder over what it can do during the short last hours left⁴⁵.

Pyongyang underscored its warnings by a flurry of tests: shorter-range missiles capable of reaching all of South Korea and part of Japan, multiple-launch rocket systems, a submarine-launched ballistic missile, and indigenously developed missile engines intended to supplant those made in the former Soviet Union. More ominously, it hinted at ending its self-imposed moratorium on longer-range missiles and nuclear tests.

On 7 December 2019, Kim Song, DPRK ambassador to the United Nations, dismissed the US pursuit of "sustained and substantial dialogue" as stalling for time in order to further a "domestic political agenda," adding, "We do not need to have lengthy talks with the US now and the denuclearization is already gone out of the negotiation table" (Andone and Joseph 2019).

Yet, while continuing to castigate Washington for not offering enough, Pyongyang still held open the door for talks:

The US talks about dialogue, whenever it opens its mouth, but it is very evident that the U.S. has nothing to present before us **though dialogue may open.** The US talked about

⁴³KCNA, "KAPPC Chairman's Statement," 27 October 2019.

⁴⁴KCNA, "Roving Ambassador of Foreign Ministry of DPRK Blasts U.S. Plan to Resume Combined Aerial Exercise with S. Korea," 6 November 2019.

⁴⁵KCNA, "Statement of Spokesman of DPRK State Affairs Council," 13 November 2019.

a “corresponding measure” in the meeting. However, as we already declared, we have nothing to lose more and we are ready to take a countermeasure corresponding to anything that the US opts for. By holding the meeting, the US did a foolish thing which will boomerang on it, and decisively helped us make a definite decision on what way to choose⁴⁶.

If Pyongyang’s aim was to prod Washington to be more forthcoming, it worked. The Trump administration had backed away from Bolton’s uncompromising approach in Hanoi and expressed a willingness to be flexible. It had committed to declaring an end to the Korean War that would open the way to peace process culminating in a formal peace treaty. It had suspended some joint exercises and scaled back others. And it had hinted at a willingness to ease some sanctions by allowing exports of textiles and coal for a period of time in return for some North Korean steps to denuclearize (Lee 2019a).

If Pyongyang’s aim was to put the blame on Washington for the lack of negotiations, it also worked. Some in Seoul were now saying Washington was not doing enough and urging President Moon Jae In to take charge. That reaction ignored Pyongyang strategy of rebuffing Seoul’s entreaties until it was engaging with Washington. In November the North turned down President Moon’s invitation for Kim Jong Un to attend an ASEAN summit meeting in Pusan, although the rejection was unusually diplomatic in tone:

As nothing was achieved in implementing the agreements made in Panmunjom, Pyongyang and Mt. Paektu, the north-south summit for the mere form’s sake would be pointless. This is our stand. . . . At this moment, **not content with sustaining losses from dependence on the US**, the south side made an offer for discussing the north-south relations in the theatre of multilateral cooperation. This makes us only dubious. . . . Explicitly speaking again, it is important to choose the proper time and place, if everything is to be done well. Therefore, it can be said for sure that a good result cannot be produced though even a number of meetings are held with those of no knowledge of such reason. Under these circumstances, there would be no option for us but to see with patience when the independent decision would begin to develop and grow from such barren mentality. We are grateful for the trust and sincerity of the south side but we hope it would understand the reason that we failed to find out the proper reason for the SAC Chairman to visit Pusan⁴⁷.

What Changed in Pyongyang?

The North’s effort to blame Washington also ignored a more troubling development: unlike past failures to implement the 1994 Agreed Framework or the 2005 Six-Party Joint Statement, when blame was shared, now the hang-up in negotiations was due much more to Pyongyang than to Washington.

To many critics of the Trump administration’s North Korea policy, the reason was obvious. Pyongyang was determined to arm itself with nuclear weapons and the missiles to target the United States and had never been serious about negotiating. These critics failed to acknowledge Pyongyang’s past willingness to stop making fissile material for weapons for a decade in the 1990s – at a time when it had no nuclear weapons. They also were overlooking its offer to end development, production, and deployment of longer-range missiles in the summer of 2000. More fundamentally, they seemed skeptical about the North’s oft-stated aim of seeking to end enmity with the United States, as well as

⁴⁶KCNA, “DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman Issues Statement,” 12 December 2019.

⁴⁷KCNA, “Everything Needs Suitable Time and Place,” 21 November 2019.

South Korea and Japan, in an effort to hedge against China's growing power and reduce its economic dependence on Beijing. And they seem oblivious to what North Koreans have been telling some Americans is the Kim's ultimate aim: an alliance with Washington like the one the United States has with South Korea or Japan.

What had changed? Had Kim Jong Un now given up on his grandfather's and father's goal of reconciling with the United States to hedge against China's rise? That seems possible, but not likely. After all, China had become even more powerful and he, unlike they, finally had a president who was willing to do what his predecessors were not: sit down and talk with him.

Two possible changes seemed more plausible. One is that Pyongyang was now in a much stronger bargaining position as its nuclear and missile arsenal was growing and Washington's maximum pressure campaign was losing steam.

The second possible change is more worrisome: that the resistance of orthodox or hardline party officials and military officers to engaging with Washington has intensified, putting Pyongyang's diplomats on the defensive. After all, many in the party and military may wonder what will happen to their place in the North Korean hierarchy if Pyongyang and Washington end enmity. And some who are living off kickbacks from smuggling to evade sanctions may fear future economic engagement.

Coercive diplomacy depends on which side has more leverage. Washington was reluctant to acknowledge its disadvantage, while Pyongyang was confident, perhaps overly so. On 3 December 2019, as Korea was heating up, President Trump trumpeted US military superiority and warned, "Now we have the most powerful military we've ever had and we're by far the most powerful country in the world. And, hopefully, we don't have to use it, but if we do, we'll use it."⁴⁸ The chief of staff of the Korean People's Army was quick to dismiss Trump's vague threat as "bluffing," but added, "I clearly state here that if the US uses any armed forces against the DPRK, we will also take prompt corresponding actions **at any level**."⁴⁹

If Washington was overestimating its leverage, Pyongyang was making unreasonable demands, leading observers to question whether it intended to engage in diplomacy at all. The risk, however, was that Kim would overplay his hand by resuming tests to build up leverage or asking for more than Trump can give to get talks started.

The Not so "New Way" at Year's End

As Kim Jong Un's end-of-year deadline approached, the North announced it would soon convene a plenary meeting of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee.

In the month-long run-up to the party plenary, US news media overwhelmingly echoed the views of experts who questioned Trump's nuclear diplomacy. Many predicted Kim would end negotiations as well as resume ICBM and nuclear testing. Instead of focusing on Kim's authoritative end-of-year deadline for a change in US policy, reporters latched on to the rhetorical flourish of the DPRK Vice Foreign Minister for American affairs who warned of a "Christmas present" in an effort to compel Washington to make

⁴⁸White House, Office of the Spokesman, Briefing with President Trump and NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg after 1:1 Meeting, Winfield House, London, 3 December 2019.

⁴⁹KCNA, "Use of Armed Forces Is Not Privilege of U.S. Only: Chief of General Staff of Korean People's Army," 4 December 2019. (Emphasis added.)

further concessions⁵⁰. Reporters solicited experts' opinions of what would be tested, thereby adding more leverage to the North's coercive diplomacy than Kim himself would at the party plenary when he warned of a new and "promising strategic weapon system . . . to be possessed in the near future" and declared that he no longer felt bound to maintain his self-imposed moratorium on strategic weapons tests.

In lieu of the customary New Year's Day address by North Korean leaders, Kim laid out his policy in a report on 31 December 2019, the fourth day of an unusually long party conclave. Much of that address was a reprise of his 12 April 2019 policy speech to the Supreme People's Assembly.

Kim paid considerable attention to his straitened economy and stressed the need for self-reliance, signaling a return to party orthodoxy and state control with little reference to markets. The "immediate task" was to "rearrange the economic foundation of the country" because he did not expect an end to sanctions anytime soon: "If we do not put spur to the struggle for bolstering the power for self-development while waiting for the lift of sanctions, the enemies' reactionary offensive will get fiercer to check our advance."

The attention of the rest of the world was understandably focused on the end of his self-imposed moratorium on ICBM and nuclear tests:

In the past two years alone **when the DPRK took preemptive and crucial measures of halting its nuclear test and ICBM test-fire and shutting down the nuclear-test ground for building confidence between the DPRK and the US, the US, far from responding to the former with appropriate measures, conducted tens of big and small joint military drills which its president personally promised to stop and threatened the former militarily through the shipment of ultra-modern warfare equipment into south Korea**, he said. The US also took more than ten independent sanctions measures only to show before the world once again that it remained unchanged in its ambition to stifle the former, he said. He stressed that under such condition, **there is no ground for us to get unilaterally bound to the commitment any longer . . .**

He did not say when he would resume testing but he hinted at an important reason for new tests when he revealed that the North was "developing" an "ultra-modern weapon system." He did not specify what it was, prompting a new spate of expert speculation that only further enhanced his leverage. He also warned that his nuclear force with solid-fueled missiles might be less vulnerable to US preemption and ready to shoot first: "[W]e will reliably put on **constant alert** the powerful nuclear deterrent capable of containing the nuclear threats from the US."

He strongly implied that the testing as well as arming was conditioned on a softening of the US stance toward the North. Accusing Washington of delaying tactics at the negotiating table and calling for a "frontal breakthrough politically, **diplomatically** and militarily," he warned, "in the future, the more the US stalls for time and hesitates in the settlement of the DPRK-US relations, the more helpless it will find itself before the might of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea getting stronger . . ." On the other hand, he said, "[T]**he scope and depth of bolstering our deterrent will be properly coordinated depending on the US future attitude to the DPRK.**"⁵¹

⁵⁰KCNA, "DPRK Vice Minister for U.S. Affairs Issues Statement," 3 December 2019.

⁵¹KCNA, "Report on 5th Plenary Meeting of 7th C.C., WPK," 1 January 2020. (Emphasis added.)

Kim's exclusive focus was on Washington. He ignored Seoul uttering the words "South Korea" just once – in the passage quoted above.

More worrisome for future negotiations, when appointments and promotions to key positions were announced, two of the three Foreign Ministry representatives on the State Affairs Council, Ri Su Yong, former foreign minister and until now head of the Korean Workers' Party international division, and Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho were missing. Only First Vice Minister Choe Son Hui remained. In mid-January 2020, diplomats in Pyongyang were told that Ri's successor as foreign minister would be Ri Song Gwon, an army officer who had led DPRK delegations to military and political negotiations with the South, most recently as chairman of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea, the DPRK's equivalent of the South's Ministry of Unification⁵². Whether his promotion signifies a further hardening of the North's negotiating position or just a sop to hardliners remains to be seen.

What's Next?

However iffy the prospects for resuming negotiations in the near future, as long as reconciliation remains the goal of all three parties, diplomacy remains preferable to ramping up sanctions pressure, weapons testing, or military confrontation.

A first-stage deal like one under consideration before Hanoi still seems negotiable. It would focus on a verifiable suspension of all production of plutonium and highly enriched uranium at Yongbyon and nearby and a written commitment not to test nuclear weapons and longer-range ballistic missiles by North Korea. In return, the United States would take steps to end enmity including a suspension of all field exercises with South Korea for the duration of talks, an end-of-war declaration opening the way to a peace process on the peninsula, and substantial sanctions relief for at least three years or as long as negotiations are making progress.

Yet Pyongyang has erected a high barrier to entry for talks. In order to reopen them, it is demanding US unilateral actions up front to demonstrate its commitment to end enmity that Washington has yet to satisfy. Three such actions might bring it back to the negotiating table. One is a commitment in principle to work toward what Secretary of State Pompeo once called "a fundamentally different strategic relationship" from enmity to friendship. A second is a commitment to suspend all joint field exercises with South Korea on land, in the air, or offshore for one year or longer if negotiations continue to make progress. A third is additional sanctions easing such as an exemption from Security Council sanctions to permit the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Zone or to allow North Korean sales of coal and textiles.

Such commitments would be politically challenging, but Trump has shown his willingness to withstand domestic opposition in the belief that a deal would help his chances of re-election. And despite his critics' arguments for stepping up pressure, the only likely alternative to negotiations is an unbounded nuclear weapons and missile program in the North.

The more difficult question to answer is whether Pyongyang is ready to take yes for an answer. Alternatively, would it just demand further concessions before opening talks,

⁵²Bloomberg, "North Korea Picks Army Man Who Headed Korean Talks as Top Envoy," 19 January 2020.

putting Washington on a slippery slope and leaving Trump open to charges of appeasement? Yet for Kim Jong Un to do so, he would have to abandon his grandfather's and father's goal of reconciliation and leave himself nuclear-armed but economically and politically more dependent on China.

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Notes on Contributor

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