

# Time is limited for the Korean Peninsula Peace Process

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The 2018 inter-Korean summits and the US - DPRK Singapore summit were opportunities that were built on the culmination of domestic political events over the past several years, and carried forward by the leadership in each country. This recent opening in the peace process is a window of opportunity that must be seized, as each leader's mandate to engage in this peace process is likely to expire in the near future. Furthermore, while the diplomatic process between the two Koreas is moving forward at a considerable pace, its speed is constrained by a stalled process between the DPRK and the US.

The immediacy of the issue can be seen in the US, as Congressional midterm elections in November could diminish support for President Donald J. Trump's approach towards the DPRK. In the ROK, President Moon Jae-in's approval rating has dropped rapidly due to domestic issues, which could have a negative impact on his foreign policy mandate. And in the DPRK, Chairman Kim Jong Un can only demonstrate a certain amount of patience before he will need to choose saving face over tolerance for a disorganized US policy.

A review of the domestic political events in each country that have led to the recent presidential-level summits emphasizes the importance of this moment. Furthermore, an understanding of the fragility of present negotiations demonstrates the need to make significant and irreversible progress towards the normalization of diplomatic relations with the DPRK as soon as possible.

## Democratic People's Republic of Korea: A path towards dialogue for economic advancement and peace on the peninsula

While some economic reforms were introduced under Secretary Kim Jong Il, many were reversed. Under Chairman Kim Jong Un, the economy has seen major changes and economic reforms have accelerated. In 2013, Chairman Kim announced the byungjin line, a parallel pursuit of nuclear weapons development and economic advancement. The policy further stated that, once the nuclear weapons program was complete, the country's main focus would shift to economic advancement. While this policy concentrated a large portion of GDP towards the weapons program, it also improved the economy overall, particularly in Pyongyang. Under Kim, the DPRK has invested heavily in improving the standard of living in Pyongyang; expanded special economic zones to experiment with potential economic models; and implemented agricultural reforms to increase incentives for farmers and provide more decision-making rights to managers in state-owned enterprises.

However, the DPRK can only improve its economy and raise the standard of living for North Korean people to a certain extent without foreign income. Only 20% of land in the DPRK is arable, which is not sufficient to feed its population of 25 million people. Furthermore, international economic sanctions block its primary exports, including coal, iron, ore, seafood and textiles. The DPRK will not be able to lift international economic sanctions, and further advance its economy, without improving diplomatic relations with the US and the ROK.

After the DPRK declared the nuclear weapons program a success in November 2017, it was consistent with byungjin that, one month later, the DPRK began to engage in diplomacy with the ROK. Kim offered dialogue in his 2018 New Year's Address by calling for easing military tensions between the Koreas and creating a peaceful environment on the peninsula. The Moon administration accepted this as an offer and proposed discussions on the DPRK's participation in the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang. The successful diplomacy of the Winter Olympics resulted in two inter-Korean Summits in Panmunjom and a US – DPRK Summit in Singapore within the next six months.

Continuing on this path, in April 2018, Kim declared the byungjin line a success and announced a new strategic line, a new policy that would place full priority on economic construction and development. This shift to the economy can also be seen in articles released by government-run media this year, such as the Korean Central News Agency and Rodong Sinmun. Both media outlets have been publicizing articles to highlight Kim's frequent visits to factories and farms to encourage efficiency and productivity.

Further proof of the significance of the timing of the DPRK's decision to engage in dialogue is to

compare past attitudes towards dialogue with the present attitude. President Moon offered dialogue to the DPRK from Berlin earlier in 2017, before the nuclear program was complete, and the DPRK did not accept. Also, in the past, the slightest aggression from the US or the ROK could derail talks. But even after President Trump threatened to cancel the Singapore Summit, the statement from the first vice-minister of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK offered patience, stating that they “have willingness to offer the U.S. side time and opportunity” and that they “have the intent to sit with the U.S. side to solve problems regardless of ways at any time.”

However, the DPRK’s level of patience and eagerness to engage will not be open-ended. The DPRK leadership closely observes the levels of public support for Trump and Moon, and if their policies of engagement lose popular support, and the US cannot deliver on their side of the bargain, Kim will need to make the decision to save face with his citizens and end negotiations.

## The Republic of Korea: A desire for peace on the peninsula and for government reform

In the summer of 2016, frustration grew over former ROK President Park Guen-hye’s handling of domestic matters, such as neglect during the sinking of the Sewol Ferry and allegations of influence-peddling, as well as a failing foreign policy of confrontation towards the DPRK. South Korean citizens took to the streets to demonstrate their disapproval. These peaceful protests evolved into the infamous Candlelight Revolution, involving millions of South Korean citizens. It became the largest protest in the nation’s history and one of the most impactful and well-respected protests witnessed in recent decades.

The Candlelight Revolution influenced the National Assembly to pass an impeachment motion which was later upheld by the Constitutional Court. Sixty days later, Moon Jae-in was elected as President based on his campaign promises to improve inter-Korean relations, weed out corruption in the government and revitalize the domestic economy.

Since his election, Moon has worked tirelessly to pursue engagement with the DPRK and to convince Trump of the importance of doing the same. President Moon employed skillful diplomacy with Trump by emphasizing and encouraging Trump’s actions and statements that he could get behind, while gently but firmly stating his nation’s intention to improve relations with the DPRK.

In the June 2017 US – ROK joint statement following Moon and Trump’s first meeting, Moon secured a phrase from Trump that the US would support the ROK’s “leading role in fostering an

environment for peaceful unification of the peninsula.” And in September of the same year, President Moon had to field Trump’s accusation that he was appeasing the DPRK. During Trump’s visit to Seoul in November, Moon continued to carefully cultivate his relationship with Trump, by praising his efforts for making America great again and entering into an agreement to purchase additional weapons from the US.

Throughout the Moon administration’s Olympics diplomacy with the DPRK, Moon was able to balance the relationship between the DPRK and the US even at a time of heightened tensions. Soon after Moon secured an agreement to hold an inter-Korean summit, his administration was able to deliver an offer from Kim to Trump for a US – DPRK summit.

Following two successful inter-Korean summits, the Moon administration has moved forward rapidly with inter-Korean cooperation. An inter-Korean liaison office was opened last week in Kaesong, inter-Korean sports exchanges continue, and a third inter-Korean summit this year will be held this week. While there has been some pushback from the US, such as the block by the Commander of US Forces Korea of a joint railway inspection, the ROK is determined to rebuild the inter-Korean relationship.

While President Moon has attained the mandate to engage with the DPRK, over time, the patience of South Korean citizens will also be tested. Recent opinion polls show that Moon’s approval rating has dropped below 50% due to domestic issues, particularly due to a still-sluggish domestic economy. Without improvements to the economy, as well as progress between the US and the DPRK, Moon could soon lose popular support to continue inter-Korean diplomacy and cooperation.

## **The United States: “America-first” foreign policy and a President’s desire for history-making diplomacy**

One of the primary reasons that Donald J. Trump won the 2016 US Presidential Election is because many Americans were dissatisfied with former President Barack Obama’s domestic and foreign policies. As far as foreign policy is concerned, many of the Americans who voted for and continue to support Trump promote a self-interested foreign policy which places America’s interests first and significantly less importance on nurturing the relationships of the nation’s traditional allies.

Trump’s mandate to negotiate with Kim comes from this desire of his base supporters for an “America-first” foreign policy. Within this frame, Trump has explained that his diplomatic engagement with the DPRK has reduced the nuclear threat towards the US, can lead to additional

cancellations of joint US – ROK military exercises which will be a cost-saving measure for the nation's military, and may lead to the prospect of bringing home some US soldiers from the peninsula at some point in the future. This justification, along with his supporters' trust, has allowed him to move forward with the Singapore Summit, and likely a second US – DPRK Summit in the coming months.

Furthermore, while Trump's rhetoric towards the DPRK has not been consistent, his administration did begin negotiations with the DPRK almost immediately after Trump assumed office. Joseph Yun, former US Special Representative to North Korea, was sent to the DPRK two months after Trump became President. Yun went to the DPRK to deliver the message that the US does not intend to be a threat but that denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is essential. Negotiations continued at this level with some progress, such as securing the release of one of the US prisoners in the DPRK. Following the ROK's diplomatic leadership and success, the US was able to transition lower-level negotiations into talks at the highest levels of the US government.

As regards personal motivations, Trump's negotiations with Kim are based on his desire to negotiate a history-making deal that no other president has made before and to achieve a deal that Obama, in particular, was not able to obtain. For example, his attempt to destroy the Iran deal is contradictory to his administration's diplomatic efforts with the DPRK, but in line with his wider goal to reverse all Obama-led policies.

Trump also has two significant obstacles to continuing diplomacy with the DPRK. There are certain members of his administration who are not in favor of dialogue with the DPRK, particularly National Security Advisor John Bolton, who has a long-standing tense relationship with the DPRK and continues to try to oppose engagement with the leadership. Furthermore, in November of this year, Congressional midterm elections will be held and Republicans are predicted to lose the majority in the US House of Representatives, and a loss in the US Senate is also possible. Without a Republican majority in the House and Senate to support his diplomacy with the DPRK, Trump may not have sufficient political capital to spend on negotiations with the DPRK.

## **A peace process too valuable to allow to collapse**

The domestic political events in the US, ROK and DPRK over the past several years have provided these nations' leaders an opportunity to move this peace process forward for the first time in 11 years. While they have taken the initial steps, their mandate to continue negotiations will have an expiry date.

The onus to break the current impasse is on the US. The Trump administration needs to fulfill its promise from the Singapore Summit to sign a declaration to end the Korean War and to engage in confidence-building activities with the DPRK to build trust. The two Koreas should be allowed to lead on the improvement of their own relations, which will likely require exceptions from UN Security Council sanctions to be carried out. After all, this concerns their peninsula and the relations between their peoples.

The 73-year division of the Korean people is too tragic, the breakout of war too risky and peaceful relations on the Korean Peninsula too valuable to allow negotiations to break down and have to wait an indefinite amount of time for the next opportunity.

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