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A Real Path to Peace on the Korean Peninsula
The Progress and Promise of the Moon-Kim Summit
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Twelve hours in Panmunjom—the village in the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea that has long symbolized division and war—produced an unexpected [miracle of peace](#) ^[1] on Friday. In the Panmunjom Declaration, [Moon Jae-in](#) ^[2] and Kim Jong Un, the leaders of South and North Korea, pledged that “there will be no more war on the Korean Peninsula and thus a new era of peace has begun.” Given North Korea’s military provocations, the growing [North Korean nuclear arsenal](#) ^[3], and the acute sense of crisis that has haunted South Koreans over the last year, such a reversal looks surreal. But after attending all three summits between the two Koreas (in 2000, 2007, and 2018), I believe that this latest one represents real progress and lays the groundwork for lasting peace.

Although much commentary has focused on the remaining difficulties, which are considerable, it has missed just how much was accomplished last week. Moon and Kim did not just make high-level commitments; they also laid out specific timetables for implementing them and took concrete steps that will have immediate effects in facilitating cooperation and [preventing conflict](#) ^[4]. That offers cause for hope that for all the remaining challenges, a comprehensive peace deal including real denuclearization by North Korea is achievable in a couple of years, if not in the months ahead.

ENDING THE KOREAN WAR

The tangible outcomes of the summit are significant. It successfully normalized inter-Korean relations, and the two leaders agreed to “hold dialogue and negotiations in various fields including at a high level, and to take active measures to implement the agreements reached at the Summit.” They will establish a joint liaison office with resident representatives from both sides and encourage active cooperation, exchanges, visits, and contacts at all levels. They also agreed to proceed with reunion programs for families split between North and South Korea, on the occasion of National Liberation Day on August 15. And there will be practical steps to connect and modernize railways and roads, building on a 2007 agreement.

The summit also produced a watershed agreement to alleviate military tension and eliminate the [danger of war](#) ^[5] on the Korean Peninsula. Both leaders agreed to completely cease all hostile acts against each other in every domain, including land, air, and sea, and to transform the demilitarized zone into a peace zone. They pledged to turn the areas around the Northern Limit Line in the West Sea into a maritime peace zone, in order to prevent accidental military clashes. They also committed to military measures, including launching a joint military committee to ensure active cooperation, exchanges, visits, and frequent meetings between military authorities and defense

ministers.

The Panmunjom Declaration further included a historic joint commitment to cooperate in establishing a permanent and solid peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, ending the current state of armistice that has persisted since fighting stopped in the Korean War more than 60 years ago. As part of these efforts, the leaders agreed to carry out disarmament in a phased manner, through the reduction of military tensions and confidence-building measures, and to pursue three-party meetings, involving North Korea, South Korea, and the United States, or four-party meetings, involving China as well, within the year. The aim would be to declare an end to the war and to turn the armistice into a peace treaty. Finally, and most important of all, the South and North Korean leaders confirmed the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula.

BREAKING GROUND

For all the real importance of such commitments, the significance of the summit goes well beyond them. Past agreement and declarations have never included such bold goals. The two leaders were able to narrow a long-standing gap: the South has generally favored a functionalist approach based on the logic of “economy first,” but the North has insisted on “military-political issues first.” Panmunjom was the first inter-Korean summit in which the two sides converged on the primacy of military-political issues.

The adoption of a written agreement on complete denuclearization was also groundbreaking. In the past, North Korea has refused to accept the nuclear issue as an agenda item in inter-Korean talks, arguing that it is a matter solely for the United States and North Korea to address. This time, Kim made a written commitment, and *Rodong Sinmun*, the official daily newspaper of the Workers’ Party of Korea, openly reported agreement on complete denuclearization, which is unprecedented. Underscoring his commitment to complete denuclearization, Kim told Moon that he would close the North’s still usable nuclear test sites in Punggye-ri in May, inviting experts and journalists from the United States and South Korea to observe and verify.

Throughout the meeting, Kim was pragmatic and realistic. He did not mention the reduction or withdrawal of U.S. forces in South Korea, or the status of the U.S.–South Korean alliance, as a precondition for denuclearization. “Once we start talking,” Kim said, “the U.S. will know that I am not a person to launch nuclear weapons at South Korea, the Pacific, and the U.S.” He also identified to Moon what he wants from Washington: frequent meetings and trust building, an official end to the Korean War, and a nonaggression treaty. If these conditions are met, he added, “why would we have nuclear weapons and suffer?” That is why he wanted to link denuclearization to the process of ending war and building a peace regime. As the final declaration says, if the process of ending the Korean War and transforming the armistice into a peace treaty occurs, the North will expedite efforts to denuclearize.

Finally, recognizing the mistakes in [past agreements](#) [6], both leaders made precise concrete pledges to implement what they agreed to. The dates for major meetings and events were specified in the declaration, with high-level talks and a general-level military meeting already scheduled in May. The reunion of separated families will take place on August 15. And Moon is scheduled to visit Pyongyang in the fall.

ROCKY ROAD AHEAD

What made such success possible? First, the summit never would have happened without Kim’s strategic [decision to engage](#) [7]; he initiated and engineered the encounter. He presumably did so partly because he needed economic concessions from the South (he emphasized in his New Year’s speech that he will push for economic development

even at the expense of nuclear weapons) and partly because he wanted to utilize Moon to secure access to the Trump administration. But also critical was Moon's sincerity, open-mindedness, and willingness to play the role of honest broker between Pyongyang and Washington, which he demonstrated during the North Korean delegation's visit to Seoul during the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics earlier this year. (Seoul also worked hard to persuade the North's officials through numerous clandestine contacts.) Finally, U.S. President Donald Trump's combination of "maximum pressure" on Kim and timely encouragement of Moon's approach to the North helped bring the two leaders together.

Yet as many observers have aptly pointed out, there is a rocky road ahead. However comprehensive the Panmunjom Declaration, it will not be easy to transform long-standing Korean conflict into a lasting peace. Reducing military tensions, building confidence, and finding agreement on arms reduction are challenging and time-consuming tasks, especially for archrivals.

The same will be true when it comes to the denuclearization of North Korea. Although the North, the South, and the United States all understand denuclearization as the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of nuclear weapons, they differ in the sequencing. Whereas the U.S. position is "CVID first and reward later," the North demands an incremental, synchronized exchange of denuclearization and reward. South Korea advocates an eclectic approach, in which North Korea's credible commitment to and actions toward denuclearization would be followed by step-by-step implementation of declaration, inspection, and verifiable dismantling in a compressed time frame.

The critical question is whether Kim is truly willing to get rid of his nuclear facilities, materials, and bombs in a verifiable, irreversible way. Skeptics contend that he will use "salami tactics," insisting on incremental, synchronized denuclearization in which every action he takes must be met with a reciprocal step by the United States; in the past, the North has in fact managed to get the benefits without following through on its own pledges. Such skepticism is reinforced by Kim's own domestic uncertainties. No matter how tame the North Korean military may have become under Kim's ruthless rule, it might be difficult for the military to accept agreements on complete denuclearization. But neither Seoul nor Washington can accept the incremental approach; the entire deal would collapse ^[8] if the North pursues it, leading to another round of crises and the possibility of military action and even all-out war on the Korean Peninsula. Seoul and Washington are aware of that risk and have sent a clear message to the North. And it is not likely that the North will return to this old practice, because its leader appears to fully understand that gains from denuclearization are hefty, whereas the nuclear path is excruciating.

By obtaining North Korea's explicit commitment to "complete denuclearization" in the Panmunjom Declaration, South Korea laid the groundwork for the Trump-Kim meeting that is supposed to occur in late May. Now the ball is in Washington's court. The Trump administration needs to deal with Kim to work out the details of denuclearization, which will require a compromise between Washington's preferred comprehensive one-shot deal and Pyongyang's incremental, synchronized approach. Trump will likely have to come up with a more realistic, flexible, and creative way of handling North Korea in order to move forward.

South Korea is not free from domestic constraints either. What will happen to U.S. forces in South Korea if a peace treaty is signed? It will be difficult to justify their continuing presence in South Korea after its adoption. But there will be strong conservative opposition to the reduction and withdrawal of U.S. forces, posing a major political dilemma for Moon. Although he wants to push for legislative approval of the declaration, in order to assure implementation even after a change in the government, conservative opposition is likely to block such approval, stalling implementation efforts.

“A peaceful, nuclear weapons–free Korean Peninsula” has been Moon’s goal since long before his election to the presidency. Although the Panmunjom summit has opened a new historical opportunity to fulfill his dream, shaping a new history of peace is not easy. But Moon is acutely aware of the obstacles on the path ahead. He will approach his long-standing goal with prudent and patient stewardship.

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