

DPRK'S NUCLEAR CONUNDRUM AND THE U.S.-NORTH KOREA NEGOTIATIONS: A NEVER-ENDING SAGA

M. Mayilvaganan,¹Nasima Khatoon²

ABSTRACT: *The challenge of nuclear proliferation in the Korean peninsula since 2006 with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) first nuclear test had not only drawn the global attention but created a perilous situation on the peninsula. Further the Hwasong-15 Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) of DPRK that was tested in February 2023 and thereafter has heightened tensions between Washington and Japan with Pyongyang. The United States' (U.S.) diplomatic efforts to engage North Korea through bilateral means in recent times resulted in the first historic summit in Singapore (2018) and later in Vietnam (2019). Though these are undoubtedly positive developments, however, in the absence of any tangible deal after the Hanoi summit, the big question remains will the U.S. and North Korea end their mutual misperceptions, and work towards a viable solution. At the moment, the very fact that since 2019, the U.S. and North Korea have had no official dialogues is evident that misperceptions and distrust continues and finding any sort of solution is going to be a very difficult task now that North Korea has closed its borders since the COVID-19 pandemic started. The more isolated Pyongyang is, the more belligerent it will become in testing its missiles.*

Keywords: North Korea, the U.S., denuclearization, Singapore Summit, Hanoi Summit

INTRODUCTION

North Korea, officially known as Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) nuclear program in recent times has dictated changes in the regional and global dynamics. Particularly, the United States (U.S.) and its allies, South Korea and Japan are threatened and concerned with the rapid progress of North Korean nuclear missile program, whereas other powers in the region are worried about the potential implications. Conversely, China, who is the all-weather ally of Pyongyang, has been relatively unruffled. The ineffectiveness of imposition of the earlier non-proliferation of nuclear technology and sanctions on North Korea coupled with the swift progress in nuclear missile development programme escalated tensions between the US and DPRK especially in 2017. The U.S. had to seek diplomatic engagement with the aid of President Moon Jae In of the Republic of Korea. The Trump-Kim diplomatic summits in Singapore in 2018 and later in Hanoi in 2019 were designed to deescalate the crisis.

Both the summits were significant as it brought the leaders of the U.S. and DPRK to a face to face dialogue, allowing for a sitting U.S president to meet a North Korean leader. The June 2018 Singapore Summit provided space for both the Washington and Pyongyang to express their good will and faith in diplomatic engagement in addressing the advancement of

¹ First and Corresponding Author: M. Mayilvaganan PhD, Associate Professor, International Strategic and Security Studies Programme, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, India. Email: mayil@nias.res.in/ mumayil@yahoo.com.

² Second author: Nasima Khatoon MA, Assistant Professor (Research), Rashtriya Raksha University, Gandhinagar, India. Email: khatoon.nasima15@gmail.com.

nuclear capable arsenal of the latter but ended without any concrete deal. Furthermore, the highly anticipated meeting in Hanoi between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un on February 27–28, 2019 instead decreased the chances of curtailing the DPRK’s nuclear weapon program, which has advanced to unprecedented level.

Though the meeting between the U.S. and DPRK was marginally successful engagement wise, it failed to reach a concrete agreement that obliged North Korea for a “verified” denuclearization process. Also, the failure of Singapore and Hanoi summit indicates that both the countries need a different approach to move forward, an approach that’s away from the ‘status quo’ and historical misperceptions. This is particularly pertinent in the context of a changing Indo-Pacific geopolitics which is in a flux.

The article begins with the origins of North Korea’s nuclear capabilities as a background to how Pyongyang achieved its nuclear prowess. This is followed by a discussion of the impact of North Korean nuclear capabilities and the responses by its neighbours and the U.S. the extent to which the U.S has responded towards North Korea is also examined at length in order to showcase how misperceptions and mistrusts between both countries has festered over the years. The failures of the Singapore and Hanoi summits is further elaborated to show that both Washington and Pyongyang had different expectations of the outcome. The discussion then borders on options as to how to bring back North Korea to the negotiating table. The authors suggests that North Korea has to be acknowledged a nuclear state as well as its regime respected. However, the authors do acknowledge that doing so is going to be difficult for Washington. In conclusion, they conclude unless both North Korea and Washington compromise, the status quo of mistrusts and misperceptions will continue.

FAILED ROAD TOWARDS DPRK’S DENUCLEARIZATION

Origins and Development of DPRK’s Nuclear Capabilities

As early as the mid-1950s, Kim Il Sung initiated a request to acquire nuclear weapons to deter the U.S. To this end, a delegation from the DPRK’s Academy of Sciences paid a visit to Moscow in 1955 to attend a nuclear energy conference.³ Subsequently, in 1956 DPRK signed an agreement on nuclear research with Moscow and soon enough North Korean scientists were accompanied by another communist state, Peoples’ Republic of China (PRC) with other communist countries at the Dubna Joint Institute for Nuclear Research in Central Russia for training.⁴ The result was the USSR transferred nuclear technology to North Korea and assisted it by establishing a nuclear research center in 1959 with a program code named as “the Furniture Factory.”⁵ Subsequently, in 1965 the USSR also assisted DPRK in building a 4 MW research reactor close to the research facility. As a result, Pyongyang signed a “type 66” safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on Soviet insistence.⁶

The DPRK further requested Moscow in developing a nuclear power plant in 1967, which the USSR rejected. This forced the DPRK to turn to the German Democratic Republic (GDR). But the GDR was unwilling to bypass the USSR in assisting the DPRK. Meanwhile, in 1968 Unites Nations (UN) members were asked to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

³ Walter C. Clemens, “North Korea’s Quest for Nuclear Weapons: New Historical Evidence,” *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 10, no. 1, (2010):127 – 154, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23418882>

⁴ Standifer, “Timeline: A Brief History of North Korea’s Nuclear Weapon Development,” *USNI News*, 01 September (2017), <https://news.usni.org/2017/09/01/timeline-brief-history-north-korean-nuclear-weapon-development>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Lawrence E Grinter, “The Six-Party Talks and the Future Denuclearization and Rehabilitation of North Korea,” *Pacific Focus*, Vol. 23, no. (3) (2008): 294-311, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1976-5118.2008.00015.x>

(NPT) which was drafted by the U.S. and the USSR. North Korea initially opposed the NPT, which increased tensions between the USSR and DPRK leaders. However, later, North Korea signed the NPT in 1985 but the safeguard agreement was put off until 1992.

In the meantime, in the 1970s North Korea's aspiration to acquire nuclear power increased—when India's tested its first nuclear explosion.⁷ Consequently, in 1976 DPRK once again asked USSR's assistance in building a nuclear reactor; however, Moscow rejected the idea thinking it might disrupt the peace and security of the region. In the early 1980's Pyongyang nuclear program took shape rapidly with developing 30-40 MW research reactors. It is unknown whether North Korea had acquired indigenous skill or if there was any external assistance, possibly from the communist partners like China or from Eastern Europeans in building the reactor. But, by the middle of the 1980s the North Koreans were already working on a much larger reactor. According to Clemens, "North Koreans built a gas-graphite-moderated RBMK reactor that operated on natural uranium fuel, which, when irradiated, is an ideal source of weapons plutonium."⁸ Yet, America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was skeptical.⁹ But surprisingly, in 1984, the USSR agreed to help Pyongyang to build a reactor and offered a loan of \$2 billion dollars at an interest rate of 4-6%.¹⁰ It was not to the liking of DPRK as the agreement only extended to training the North Korean technicians while the Soviets operated the reactor for a period of 5 years. But soon after the operationalisation of the Yongbyon reactor, the emergence of tensions between North Korea and the USSR resulted in the USSR suspending the agreement by 1988. North Korea's displeasure over Gorbachev's reforms and its ties with South Korea further contributed in deterioration of bilateral relations between the countries.¹¹ The North Koreans felt betrayed by the USSR which forced the Pyongyang to be independent in developing its nuclear weapons programme. Meanwhile, Washington was worried about Pyongyang's nuclear development. This led to the first nuclear crisis. After tensed negotiations, Washington and Pyongyang signed the Geneva Agreed Framework in 1994 in exchange for North Korea suspending its nuclear power program in return for U.S-supplied light-water reactors. Despite some success with initial implementation, the agreement collapsed in 2003.

Strategies of the DPRK

In late 2002 and early 2003, it was discovered that the North Koreans were employing uranium instead of plutonium for weapons development. Soon after, North Korea stated conducted its first-ever nuclear test on October 9, 2006. The test was assessed to have had an explosive force of less than one kiloton, with radioactive output.¹² Thus, North Korea became one among a select few to have tested a nuclear device. According to the South Korean Geological Institute, the test was of a moderate nature,¹³ but it did invoke global negative reactions. Subsequently

⁷ Jaswant Singh, "Against nuclear apartheid," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 77, no. 5, (1998): 41-55, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1998-09-01/against-nuclear-apartheid>

⁸ Walter C. Clemens, "North Korea's Quest for Nuclear Weapons: New Historical Evidence," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 10, no. 1, (2010):127 – 154, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23418882>

⁹ Joshua Pollack, "Why Does North Korea Have A Gas-Graphite Reactor?," *Arms Control Work*, 16 October 2009, <https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/502504/why-does-north-korea-have-a-gas-graphite-reactor/>

¹⁰ Walter C. Clemens, "North Korea's Quest for Nuclear Weapons: New Historical Evidence," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 10, no. 1, (2010):127 – 154, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23418882>

¹¹ Vasily Mikheev, "Russian Strategic Thinking toward North and South Korea," in Gilbert Rozman, Kazuhiko Togo, and Joseph Ferguson, eds., *Russian Strategic Thought toward Asia*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006): 191-192.

¹² Karin Lee and Julia Choi, *North Korea: Unilateral and Multilateral Economic Sanctions and U.S. Department of Treasury Actions 1955-April 2009*, The National Committee on North Korea, 28 April 2009, https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/DPRK_Sanctions_Report_April_2009.pdf

¹³ "North Korea claims first nuclear test," *The Guardian*, 9 October 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/oct/09/northkorea>

in May 2009 again conducted its second nuclear weapons test, an underground test, apparently a magnitude of 4.7 seismic disturbances and produced an explosion yield of two to seven kilotons, which was about five times stronger than the 2006 test.¹⁴

Then after being dormant for few years, in February 2013, the DPRK under the new leadership of Kim Jong-un, conducted a nuclear test which was far larger than earlier experiments.¹⁵ Following this, North Korea conducted a fourth and fifth nuclear test in January and September 2016. In September 2017, North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test, 5.3 in magnitude, and explosion yield of about 10 kilotons.¹⁶

Development of Missile Capability

Since the 1970s, North Korea's interest in pursuing missile program along with nuclear ambition began in order to ensure the survival in the post-Korean war scenario. For the first time, in 1984, Pyongyang test-fired its own version of the Scud missile—reverse-engineering Scud missiles acquired from Egypt—with a range of 300 kilometres.¹⁷ Reportedly, they used Soviet Union's Scud-B and launch pad from Egypt.¹⁸ Consequently, Pyongyang began its work on missiles such as the Rodong-1 (range 1,300 km), Taepodong-1 (2,500 km), Musudan-1 (3,000 km) and Taepodong-2 (6,700 km) missiles. In 1990, it test fired its first Rodong missile, Taepodong-1 missile and first ballistic missile in August 1998, which it termed as a satellite launch.¹⁹

In spite of international condemnation, North Korea went ahead with the next set of missiles such as Taepodong-2, Rodong and Scud missiles in 2006 and 2009. Particularly, the Taepodong-2 was a long-range missile with the range of 15,000 kilometers. Further, in 2015 and 2016, North Korea claimed to have tested a submarine-launched missile, technology to mount nuclear warhead on its missile. Notably, Pyongyang declared that it test-fired a submarine-launched ballistic missile in April 24, 2016 and then three more tests on September 5, 2016. The missile entered Japan's air defense identification zone before falling into the Sea of Japan.²⁰ This is when Pyongyang declared it had striking ability to reach the mainland of the U.S. Following this, a year later, in 2017, North Korea fired a series of intermediate-range Pukguksong-2 ballistic missile into nearby seas. Notably, in July 2017, it launched its first Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) named Hwasong-14 from the Panghyon Aircraft Factory, and then Hwasong-15 ICBM, with a claimed range of 10,000 kilometres.²¹

Although North Korea has made significant advances in developing nuclear missile capabilities, the operational status of its nuclear warhead is unknown. Experts predict that North Korea still does not have the capability of successful deployment of a re-entry vehicle to

¹⁴ Vitaly Fedchenko, *North Korea's Nuclear Test Explosion, 2009*, SIPRI Fact Sheet, December 2009, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/FS/SIPRIFS0912.pdf>

¹⁵ Shannon N Kile, *12 Feb. 2013: Testing times in North Korea*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 12 February 2013, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/expert-comment/tue-02-12-2013-13-00/12-feb-2013-testing-times-north-korea>.

¹⁶ Robert Kelley, *North Korea's sixth nuclear test: What do we know so far?*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 05 September 2017, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/expert-comment/2017/north-korea-sixth-nuclear-test-what-do-we-know-so-far>

¹⁷ Jonathan McLaughlin, *North Korea Missile Milestones – 1969-2017*, Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, 23 January 2018, <https://www.wisconsinproject.org/north-korea-missile-milestones/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ K.J. Kwon, "North Korea missile test earns Kim Jong Un's praise," *CNN*, 25 August 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/24/world/north-korea-missile-test-kim-jong-un/index.html>

²¹ Hans M. Kristensen & Robert S. Norris, "North Korean nuclear capabilities," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 74, no. 1 (2018): 41-51, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2017.1413062>

deliver an operational nuclear warhead.²² Considering the fact that it has made considerable progress towards deploying a re-entry vehicle during the Hwasong-14 tests in July 2017 and subsequently in November 2017 during the test launch of Hwasong-15 – Pyongyang might not take much time before developing the capability to operate a fully functional nuclear arsenal.²³ Apart from this, reportedly North Korea is also trying to develop a solid fuel ICBM which will have operational advantage over liquid fueled ICBM Hwasong-15.²⁴ Solid propellant is relatively stable and therefore, it can be manufactured and stored as fueled rocket for future use which reduces mobilization time for deployment. In 2021, North Korea's ICBMs like the Hwasong-17 ballistic missile is allegedly able to carry a payload of 2.5 tons nuclear warheads.²⁵ The scaling of long-range capability and testing new missiles appeared to be a message to the world that the North is advancing rapidly and is a force to be taken seriously.

IMPLICATIONS OF DPRK'S MISSILE AND NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Importantly, North Korea's emergence as a nuclear power changed the fundamental security landscape of the Indo Pacific region²⁶ even though the existing deterrence system of the U.S.-South Korea and the U.S.-Japan alliances is far superior to North Korea's military capabilities. The DPRK's decision to go nuclear radically has altered the threat assessment of the Indo Pacific region. Any little skirmish can provoke the Kim Jong-un regime to employ nuclear weapons for its survival. But North Korea's alleged missiles capability of carrying nuclear war heads to the western coast of the continental U.S. is a serious threat for the U.S. and its allies²⁷ hence, it is not surprising, the South Koreans and Japanese are upgrading their critical technological capabilities to counter any conventional and nuclear eventuality. Particularly, Seoul is steadily adding precision striking missiles to its inventory and has reached agreement with the U.S. to double the range-payload of its longer-range strike systems.²⁸

North Korea's tests have evoked international condemnation, from all five veto-wielding permanent members of the United Nation Security Council (UNSC) to regional powers in the region.²⁹ Yet, South Korea on October 10, 2006, said they will not support any UN resolution containing military measures against North Korea in retaliation for its nuclear test. Similarly, China along with Russia too ruled out "military measures" against North

²² James M. Acton, Jeffrey Lewis, David Wright, "DPRK RV Video Analysis," *Arms Control Wonk*, 09 November 2018, <https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1206084/dprk-rv-video-analysis/>

²³ Hans M. Kristensen & Robert S. Norris, "North Korean nuclear capabilities," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 74, no. 1 (2018): 41-51, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2017.1413062>

²⁴ Hyonhee Shin, "Satellite images show N. Korea tried out rocket engine in 'very important' test—experts," *Reuters*, 09 December 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/northkorea-missiles-idUKL4N28J1OK>

²⁵ BBC, "North Korea: What missiles does it have?," *BBC News*, 4 January 2023 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41174689>

²⁶ Jong Kun Choi and Jong-Yun Bae, "Security Implications of a Nuclear North Korea: Crisis Stability and Imperatives for Engagement," *Korea Observer*, Vol. 47, no. 4, (2016): 809-811, http://www.iks.or.kr/rankup_module/rankup_board/attach/vol47no4/14833219641857.pdf

²⁷ Gözde Bayar, "North Korean missile can reach anywhere in US: USFK," *AA Energy Anadolu Agency*, 11 September 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/general/north-korean-missile-can-reach-anywhere-in-us-usfk/26032>

²⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Destabilizing Northeast Asia: The Real Impact of North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programs*, CSIS, 5 September 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/destabilizing-northeast-asia-real-impact-north-koreas-nuclear-and-missile-programs>

²⁹ John Nilsson-Wright, "North Korea's nuclear tests: How should Trump respond?," *BBC News*, 03 September 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41143589>

Korea.³⁰ The insufficient support to go against North Korea from major powers like China and Russia remains one of the main obstacle in dealing with the isolated state.

U.S ally Japan has several times reacted sharply to North Korea's missiles flying over their territory. In response, the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe modified Japan's pacifist constitution in order to allow troops to fight abroad.³¹ Japan also regularly participates in naval exercises with the U.S. and South Korea focusing on improving missile defense. Tokyo is also considering installing Aegis Ashore missile defence system/land-based batteries like the U.S. Aegis Missile Defense System in order to detect missile threats from the DPRK.

Though China was against military action towards North Korea, on the other hand, it supported the UNSC adopted resolution (2375) with regards to sanctions against the state in the wake of the 6th nuclear test conducted by DPRK in September 2017. As part of the sanctions, Beijing announced it will limit energy supplies to North Korea and to discontinue buying textiles from Pyongyang that is believed to be the highest source of foreign exchange for the latter. This was a big blow to Pyongyang which relied heavily on China's aid and trade. In this situation, Pyongyang became more belligerent in wanting to develop more sophisticated weapons as a means of survival.

DPRK AND THE U.S. POLICY APPROACH

North Korea now has clear deterrence ability against the U.S. and its allies. Probably, Washington never really thought DPRK would emerge as a major nuclear threat. After DPRK's first ballistic missile launch in 1998, the U.S. gradually realized that the DPRK's nuclear ambition could be the threat to the region. Yet, thus far, Washington and its allies have failed to eliminate the threat from Pyongyang despite imposing sanctions and isolating North Korea for decades. Historically, the U.S. initiated a dialogue which ended up with signing of the Agreed Framework with DPRK on October 21, 1994 in exchange for Pyongyang freeze its nuclear weapons program.³² As per the agreement, the U.S. supplied North Korea with fuel oil, but failed to construct the reactors. In essence, the Agreed Framework succeeded in temporarily freezing North Korea's plutonium production capabilities and further placing it under IAEA safeguards halted the operation of North Korea's 5 MW reactor at Yongbyon apart from stopping construction of two other reactors, 50 MW reactor at Yongbyon and a 200 MW reactor at Taechon.³³ The U.S. also eased longstanding sanctions against North Korea under the 'Trading with the Enemy Act,' the 'Defense Production Act,' and the 'Export Administration Act,' clearing the way for possible increased trade, financial transactions, and investment³⁴ while North Korea remained black listed from receiving critical U.S. military hardware. Unfortunately, the Agreed Framework never fully materialized with the then President Clinton out of the White House, and the new administration under President Bush completely overhauled its policy towards North Korea. The Bush administration perceived

³⁰ United Nations Security Council, "Security Council Condemns Nuclear Test by Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1718," *Press Release*, 14 October 2006, <https://press.un.org/en/2006/sc8853.doc.htm>

³¹ Charlie Campbell, "This Is All We Can Do: How the Japanese Are Preparing for a North Korean Nuclear Attack," *Time*, 20 September 2017, <https://time.com/4949262/north-korea-japan-nuclear-missiles-drills/>

³² Kelsey Davenport, *The U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework at a Glance*. Fact Sheets & Briefs, Arms Control Association, February 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/agreedframework>

³³ Daryl G. Kimball, *The Agreed Framework at a Glance*, Arms Control Association Fact Sheet, September 2004, <https://www.armscontrol.org/system/files/agreedframework.pdf>

³⁴ Michael E. O'Hanlon, "After a modest step forward in the Korean Peninsula, how to think about nuclear weapons and sanctions," *Brookings*, 27 April 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/04/27/after-a-modest-step-forward-in-the-korean-peninsula-how-to-think-about-nuclear-weapons-and-sanctions/>

North Korea as part of the 'Axis of Evil' and imposed a hawkish policy trying to change the regime.³⁵ Further, the Bush administration demanded the DPRK limit its conventional weapons. In April 2003, North Korea admitted conducting a clandestine nuclear weapons programme. In response, the Bush administration restarted the dialogue process with the DPRK through the Six-Party Talks.³⁶ The goal of the Six Party Talks was to promote denuclearization in order to bring security and stability to the Korean Peninsula. The U.S. together with China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia, the Six-party Talks became the main vehicle to negotiate with North Korea.

Six rounds of talks were held.³⁷ Although the initial rounds never yielded the desired outcome, but none the less, they paved way for constructive dialogue and addressing mutual concerns. While the dialogue was underway North Korea remained outside of the NPT and Pyongyang did disable its nuclear reactor that produced plutonium for its weapons program.³⁸ Nevertheless, these talks were not substantial enough to ensure non-proliferation and the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. In February 2005, North Korea declared that it will not participate in future talks after achieving considerable success in developing nuclear weapons.³⁹ This forced the U.S. to soften its position on North Korea. First, Washington recognized North Korea as a sovereign state and guaranteed that it had no intention to invade the isolated state.⁴⁰ Second, the U.S. declared it was not opposed to a North Korean civil nuclear energy program.⁴¹ But based on a 1992 Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,⁴² Washington stood firm on banning testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons of DPRK. Finally, the Bush administration also lifted prior restrictions prohibiting U.S. negotiators from engaging the North Koreans directly. These actions brought North Korea back to the negotiating table. Subsequently, the fifth and the sixth rounds witnessed a more open approach North Korean officials. Notably, Pyongyang committed itself to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing programs, returning to the NPT and accepting IAEA inspections.⁴³ In return, the U.S. and Japan committed to normalize their relationship with North Korea.

Meanwhile, on April 5, 2009, North Korea test-fired a modified Taepo Dong-2 three-stage rocket, ostensibly as part of its space program. The UNSC called the test a violation of Resolution 1718, and increased sanctions on North Korean firms shortly afterwards. North Korea responded by announcing its exit from the talks and declared all reached agreements as null and void. The parties involved, however, called for the resumption of talks. In December

³⁵ Douglas Graham, "George W. Bush describes Iraq, Iran and North Korea as "axis of evil," *History*, 29 January 2002, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/bush-describes-iraq-iran-north-korea-as-axis-of-evil>

³⁶ Kelsey Davenport, *The U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework at a Glance*. Fact Sheets & Briefs, Arms Control Association, February 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/agreedframework>

³⁷ *Six-Party Talks*, Nuclear Threat Initiative, 8 April 2011, <https://media.nti.org/pdfs/6ptalks.pdf>

³⁸ Sanders-Zakre, Alicia and Kelsey Davenport, *5 Myths on Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*, Arms Control Now, 21 August 2017, <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2017-08-21/5-myths-nuclear-diplomacy-north-korea>

³⁹ Xiaohu Cheng, "North Korea's Third Nuclear Test and Its Impact on Sino-North Korean Relations," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 27, no. 1, (2013): 23-46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23595528>

⁴⁰ Kelsey Davenport, *The Six-Party Talks at a Glance*, Fact Sheets & Briefs Arms Control Association, January 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/6partytalks>

⁴¹ Joseph Kahn, "North Koreans Insist on Demand For New Reactor In Nuclear Talks," *The New York Times*, 16 September 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/16/washington/world/north-koreans-insist-on-demand-for-new-reactor-in-nuclear.html>

⁴² Under the Joint Declaration (February 19,1992), the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) agree not to test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons; both the countries shall use nuclear energy solely for peaceful purposes; they shall not possess nuclear reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities.

⁴³ Kelsey Davenport, *Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy*, Fact Sheets & Briefs Arms Control Association, April 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron>

2010, China, Japan, South Korea and the U.S. called for an emergency session of the Six-Party Talks. However, North Korea refused to take part in Six-Party Talks negotiations. The collapse of the platform was a huge blow for the U.S and South Korea which wanted to see a peace regime installed on the Korean peninsula.

Later, under President Obama the U.S. offered a resumption of negotiations. On the other hand, the DPRK, responded with further nuclear tests that forced Washington to realign its policy completely. President Obama developed a new strategy, known as ‘Strategic Patience’⁴⁴ essentially a commitment to denuclearization as a precondition for talks, conducted in close alliance with South Korea and the other members of the Six-Party Talks. President Obama’s administration continued the dialogue process wherever possible with Pyongyang through China to deescalate and prevent any further eruptions of tensions arising from North Korea’s nuclear and missile test launches. The U.S. dialogue process was unsuccessful in yielding any positive results as DPRK was emboldened to carry forward with its weapons program. The U.S. policy under Obama was largely criticized for excessively depending on China to pressurize Pyongyang.⁴⁵

Donald Trump, who assumed the presidential office in January 2017, assured that there would be a change in the North Korean policy, indicating more meaningful bilateral talks in normalizing relations with Pyongyang. In the meantime, the ‘Hwasong’ IRBMs tests by Pyongyang in August and September of 2017 changed the entire discourse of Trump’s North Korean policy. President Trump took to social media to attack and condemn the missile testing. His rhetorical statements and counter statements attracted much attention. With President Trump and Korean leader Kim’s constant public aggressiveness, the dynamics on the Korean peninsula and the U.S.-North Korea relations changed entirely for the worse. At one point, there was fear the U.S might actually attack Pyongyang in 2017. In order to avert such a situation from occurring, president Moon Jae In of South Korea worked hard to bring Trump and Kim together. After much backdoor negotiations and with Moon’s assistance, Trump and Kim met in Singapore in June 2018 first, and then later in Hanoi, Vietnam in February 2019.

Singapore Summit 2018

Even if, aggressive military posturing, personal name-calling (“little rocket man”) and pressure on China to act by the President Trump, it was the South Korea-North Korea summit after the Winter Olympics really helped rapid diplomatic progress. Trump and Kim met at Singapore on June 12, 2018, which was dubbed as a new chapter in the “long, contentious post-World War II history of the Korean Peninsula.”⁴⁶ Notably, for Trump, “denuclearization” of North Korea was the main goal. Whereas, for Kim, the aim was to get the reassurances of relaxation of economic sanctions and end-of-war declaration apart from gaining recognition as a nuclear power.

The Singapore summit had its highs and lows. Convinced that the mutual confidence building can promote the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, Trump and Kim agreed upon four areas of cooperation.⁴⁷ Both committed to establishing new U.S.-DPRK relations for peace and prosperity, the U.S. and the DPRK to jointly commit to building a long lasting

⁴⁴ Jong Kun Choi, “The Perils of Strategic Patience with North Korea,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, no. 4, (2015):57-72, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1125829>

⁴⁵ Taehyung Ahn, “Patience or Lethargy?: U.S. Policy toward North Korea under the Obama Administration,” *North Korean Review*, Vol. 8, no. 1, (2012): 67-83, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43910292>

⁴⁶ James Stavridis, “What America Must Do Now, After North Korea’s Summit with South Korea,” *Time*, 27 April 2018, <https://time.com/5258118/north-korea-south-summit-donald-trump-nuclear-talks/>

⁴⁷ The White House, *Joint 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*, Statements & Releases, 12 June 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/>

and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, reaffirming the April 27, 2018 Panmunjom Declaration, the DPRK commitment towards complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and finally, commit to recover American prisoners' of war/missing in action (POW/MIA) remains. At the end however, Washington and Pyongyang had different understanding of the entire summit declarations. This translated to the failure of the Hanoi summit in 2019.

Vietnam Summit

Within one year the Singapore summit, a second one was held in Hanoi on February 28, 2019. Both the countries aimed to de-escalate the tension after Singapore summit. Hence, much was riding with the Hanoi summit. However, the summit failed to bring concrete progress on Pyongyang's nuclear question as well as expectations from Kim himself. The Hanoi summit ended in shambles with progress towards North Korea's denuclearization collapsing. One major reason for this had to do with expectations that did not tally. The DPRK and the U.S. gave different account of why they could not reach a consensus. Trump pointed out DPRK's demand of complete sanctions relief for dismantling the main nuclear facility in Yongbyon as well as failure to dismantle other covert nuclear facilities like Khanson. The DPRK disputed Trump's explanation. Basically Kim was under the impression the few steps he took after the Singapore summit would be enough for sanctions relief as well as an end of war declaration. The differing expectations resulted in a colossal failure for both the U.S. and DPRK.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

The North Korea-U.S. relationship includes reminiscences of division of the Korean peninsula after World War II, the perceived threats towards the U.S. and its allies South Korea and Japan from DPRK, and Washington's misconceptions about DPRK's ability to survive. In fact, the U.S. doesn't have any formal diplomatic relations with North Korea and the latter was one of the least concerned countries till couple of decades ago until the rise of serious missile and nuclear weapons capabilities of Pyongyang. The DPRK's effort to scale up its nuclear and missile power capabilities is undeniably one way of former's effort to attain a balance of power, against the U.S. The efforts to build good ties between the two didn't progress well in the past, including the 1994 agreement on the peaceful use of nuclear technology.⁴⁸ Predominantly, the consistent strategy of employing anti-U.S. rhetoric by successive North Korean authorities as a way of inducing nationalism and regime loyalty as the real "guardian" who can protect the country from a hostile U.S., further damaged bilateral relations between Pyongyang and Washington. The continued economic sanctions against North Korea by the U.S. is another reason that sustains the image of Washington as an "imperialist and capitalist colonizer with a long history of exploitation."⁴⁹

First, the big questions now are: what are the main issues that prevented further progress after the Hanoi summit? What are the challenges in finding amicable solution? What's next? The foremost issue is that the U.S. North Korean policy has been consistently holding the status quo regardless of who runs the Congress, whether democrats or republicans, at least in the post 'Cold War' period, with the exception of Trump. It has to be noted that Washington's conciliatory as well aggressive approach has not produced any significant or positive results. The U.S. policy failed to address the core issue of Pyongyang, which is ensuring a sense of

⁴⁸ Council on Foreign Relations, "North Korean Nuclear Negotiations, 1985 – 2019," <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/north-korean-nuclear-negotiations>

⁴⁹ Shobhit Seth, "Why North Korea Hates the U.S.," *Investopedia*, 27 August 2021, <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/032515/why-north-korea-hates-us.asp>

security—both for country and regime security— recognition of DPRK’s nuclear status and in lowering economic sanctions. Kim’s attitude of consistently firing test missiles shows that North Korea is rapidly advancing in military capabilities which guarantees the country’s sovereignty and right to existence from global threats.

The second issue is North Korea’s “denuclearization” which means Kim has to unilaterally surrender his nuclear weapon. But North Korea has a different understanding of the term ‘denuclearization’, Pyongyang may agree to do so only if certain conditions are fulfilled including easing of UN sanctions and ensuring security guarantees to it.

Third, the misperceptions and apprehension of the DPRK of the US and vice versa is a major issue. The DPRK fears closing of its test sites would impact on its capability as it has perceives threats from South Korea, Japan and the U.S. The deep rooted perception among the DPRK’s elite is that nuclear weapons are required for the country and the regimes’ continued existence and thus, denuclearization is not the solution. So DPRK likes to retain its ‘status’ as a nuclear power to reassure itself. Unless the DPRK leaders are made to feel safe and equal to the other neighboring powers, the U.S.-DPRK negotiations will be prone to breakdowns.

In other words, North Korea has no intention to give up its nuclear weapons as its leaders believe that they can achieve economic development while advancing their nuclear capabilities. Therefore, suffice to say, North Korean nuclear capabilities are crucial to economic development⁵⁰ as it is tied with continuing its power status on the peninsula, something essential for the survival of the country and the regime. Interestingly, Kim perceives possessing nuclear weapons would aid in better relations with China and Russia and other countries who maybe against the U.S. and benefit from trade of it to them for economic returns.

Options

In a way, after the summit as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. is still looking for steps towards achieving denuclearization of North Korea. Particularly, the current Joe Biden administration looks to make a “calibrated, practical approach that is open to and will explore diplomacy with the DPRK, and to make practical progress that increases the security of the United States,”⁵¹ if required. At the same time, Washington has stated that it has reached out to DPRK and ready for talks without any preconditions.⁵² However, North Korea is still closed to the rest of the world and refuses to negotiate with any major powers.

In this context, one of the best options is the U.S. should consider recognizing the DPRK’s regime as well as acknowledge that it as a nuclear state. This would, in fact, evoke more confidence of the North Korean leader and in eliminating mistrust and fear between Washington and Pyongyang. Second, modest sanctions relief and security guarantee by the U.S. and its allies could further boost positive perceptions and trust from the DPRK towards the U.S. This will provide North Korea with sufficient reason to get back to the negotiating table.

Also, this will aid the DPRK to consider Washington as a reliable partner and decrease historical misperceptions which has deterred the ability to move forward and find a tangible solution. In other words, recognizing North Korea as a nuclear state and its regime is essential in any geopolitical engagement between the Washington and Pyongyang and the rest of the world. Importantly, such confidence building measure should be supported by U.S. allies. The

⁵⁰ Ankit Panda, “The right way to manage a nuclear North Korea,” *Foreign Affairs*, 19 November 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2018-11-19/right-way-manage-nuclear-north-korea>

⁵¹ The White House, “Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Jen Psaki Aboard Air Force One En Route Philadelphia, PA,” *Press release*, 30 April 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/04/30/press-gaggle-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-aboard-air-force-one-en-route-philadelphia-pa/>.

⁵² U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing – August 3, 2021,” *Press release*, 3 August 2021, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-august-3-2021/>

logic of not recognizing North Korea as a nuclear state within the context of U.S.-DPRK's negotiations sheds critical light on why bilateral talks have not progressed although Trump and Kim sought to redefine their relations.

Although these will be difficult given the U.S. national interests and rejection of accepting North Korea as a full-fledged nuclear state, once the U.S. relents, it will definitely prevent re-escalation of conflict in the region. Moreover, such a gesture by the U.S. would work towards reducing misperceptions, mistrusts and fear of North Korean threats which can positively contribute to further dialogue and in achieving the larger objectives. Otherwise, averting a crisis in the Korean peninsula would be difficult now or in the near future. The fact that North Korea keeps testing missiles around the Korean peninsula is only going to get worse, more so during military exercises between U.S. forces and ROK troops.

As Pyongyang perceives nuclear weapons as vital to its survival and ultimately, the country's security and status, the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula depends on the concessions that the U.S. provides, including, the removal of extended deterrence assurances from South Korea, security assurances for the North Korean regime, and establishment of a nuclear weapons free zone on the Korean Peninsula.

CONCLUSION

The main problem between the US and North Korea stems from the misperception and mistrust of each other. More particularly, DPRK's mistrust of Washington stems from decades of failed negotiation tactics and unresolved promises. Rather than pressing for immediate denuclearization, building trust is more important now. The measures mentioned earlier would ensure that nuclear dangers and inter-Korean mishaps on the Korean peninsula are managed responsibly in the long run till effective solutions are worked out. As the possibilities of an immediate effective diplomacy between the two countries seems dim at least for now, both North Korea and the U.S. have to compromise in order to move forward. It is more likely that Kim will not budge until North Korea is recognized as a nuclear state and his regime is given a security guarantee before moving towards engagement or the possibility of a process towards disarmament in the near future. At the moment, the very fact that since 2019, the U.S. and North Korea have had no official dialogues, is evident that misperceptions and distrust continues and finding any sort of solution is going to be a very difficult task now that North Korea has closed its borders since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The more isolated Pyongyang is, the more belligerent it will become in testing its missiles.

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