

The Prospect of Situation on the Korean Peninsula and China's Role

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The situation on the Korean Peninsula has witnessed a major shift since 2018: the road towards a resolution of the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue has returned to the path of negotiation, and major breakthroughs and improvements have been made in bilateral relations between the US and the DPRK, between North and South Korea, as well as between China and North Korea. However, with major disputes in core issues remaining including the pathway toward nuclear dismantlement and the removal of international sanctions, negotiations between the US and the DPRK have stalled. At the end of 2019, the fifth plenary session of the seventh Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) made a great strategic adjustment, shifting from the approach of devoting itself to domestic economic development and facilitating negotiations with a peaceful posture, to one of stressing both the economy and the military domestically and exerting more pressure to push negotiations diplomatically.¹ Therefore, with a degree of uncertainty, the regional situation is at a crossroads. On the positive side, the US and the DPRK are expected to maintain contacts and negotiations in the coming year, thus sustaining the hard-earned peace in the region. On the negative side, talks on denuclearization may still be subject to disruption which could likely lead the Peninsula back into tensions like those in 2017, or even worse. Against this background, it is of great

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1 "Significant Signals of the 5th Plenary Session of the 7th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea," *Xinhua*, January 2, 2010, http://www.xinhuanet.com//2020-01/02/c_1125416394.htm.

importance for China to review and analyze this tortuous process of the easing of tensions on the Peninsula, make forward-thinking judgments on future trends with the view of delivering the proper response to any possible changes, and cultivating peace and stability within the region. At this crucial moment, how China, as a major responsible country and a stakeholder of the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue, will contribute its beneficial efforts will have profound influence on the progress toward the denuclearization of the Peninsula, together with the peace and development of Northeast Asia.

The Situation on the Korean Peninsula: A Tortuous Road Toward Moderation

Ever since the fourth nuclear test of 2016, Pyongyang's nuclear capacity has advanced by leaps and bounds in just two years. By testing its first hydrogen bomb, and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) Hwasong-14 and Hwasong-15, the DPRK has acquired the initial operational capability of striking the US homeland. Recognizing the reality of the DPRK's increasing nuclear capabilities, the US pushed back quickly. On the one hand, military pressure against the DPRK was further strengthened with America's threat of launching a "preemptive strike" to foil an attack by the DPRK. On the other, international sanctions on the DPRK were increased with the aim of suppressing the DPRK's productive capabilities as well as its foreign trade. Consequently, the relationship between the two sides was once again on the verge of war.

However, quite unexpectedly, the DPRK made a U-turn in its attitude, with Kim Jong Un, the supreme leader, asserting that North and South Korea should work jointly in forging a peaceful environment, easing military tensions and avoiding any escalation of the situation. In his New Year's address, he expressed his willingness to send a delegation to the 2018 Winter Olympics held in PyeongChang. Thus, taking the thaw in the South-North relationship as an opportunity, the era of unresolved tensions on the Korean Peninsula seemed to be receding. In March 2018, during his very

first visit to China, Kim exchanged views on the regional situation with Chinese President Xi Jinping, reconfirmed the DPRK's stance on pursuing denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and expressed a willingness to strengthen bilateral strategic communication and safeguard the peace and stability of the Peninsula through joint efforts.²

In April, Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in held the third North-South summit in the Peace House of Panmunjom. At the end of talks, Kim and Moon issued the Panmunjom Declaration, which explicitly stated the final goal of achieving denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and a shared eagerness to transform the armistice into a peace agreement and construct a permanent and stable peace regime.³ At the same time, Kim Jong Un declared at the third plenary session of the seventh WPK Central Committee that the new national course of the DPRK was to completely terminate nuclear tests and concentrate on economic development. In addition, he promised to close the Punggye-ri nuclear test site, thus showing his intent to denuclearize. Then on June 12, US President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un held the historic US-DPRK summit in Singapore. A joint statement was signed by the two sides expressing the determination to establish new US–DPRK relations, to build a lasting and stable peace regime, to work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and to recover remains of prisoners of war (POW) and persons missing in action (MIA). Taking the Singapore summit as a turning point, this round of moderation on the Korean Peninsula reached its climax.

Yet, the progress in pushing for a reversal of the situation on the Korean Peninsula was never smooth sailing. Despite magnificent political intentions, the US obtained nothing but a rather vague promise of denuclearization from Pyongyang while the DPRK, in turn, received no concrete security assurances. As the bilateral negotiations entered entering a decisive

2 “Xi Jinping Meets with Kim Jong Un,” *Xinhua*, March 28, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com//2018-03/28/c_1122600292.htm.

3 “Leaders of North and South Korea Sign the Panmunjom Declaration, Settle the Goal of Denuclearization,” *Xinhua*, April 28, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2018-04/28/c_129861582.htm.

phase, divergence on core issues was growing, including the procedure of denuclearization, as well as the removal of international sanctions, etc. The US initially demanded a “complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization” (CVID) but then raised its expectations, calling for a “final, fully-verified denuclearization” (FFVD), both of which were sternly rejected by the DPRK. The DPRK accused the US of introducing “rogue thoughts” and the bilateral communication was nearly brought to a standstill. At the end of February 2019, Trump met with Kim Jong Un in Hanoi during which their differences suddenly flared up. In the meeting, Trump refused Kim’s proposal of dismantling nuclear facilities in Yongbyon in exchange for partial relief of sanctions against the DPRK, and publicly presented a tough denuclearization plan which caught Kim off guard. Thus, the Hanoi summit ended without any agreement. Since then, the DPRK has issued strongly worded statements denouncing the US for its poor attitude which has led the situation into dangerous waters and cast a shadow over the prospect of denuclearization.

To break the deadlock after the Hanoi summit, the DPRK took the lead in conducting a series of diplomatic activities. In April 2019, Kim Jong Un paid a visit to Russia for his first meeting with President Vladimir Putin. The two sides coordinated their positions on the denuclearization issue and reached “satisfactory consensus.” On June 20, President Xi Jinping visited the DPRK and had a talk with Kim Jong Un. The international media praised this meeting for “consolidating the global confidence in the Korean Peninsula peace process.”⁴ On June 30, Trump paid a surprise trip to Panmunjom after the G20 Osaka summit and met with Kim Jong Un for the third time. The Korean Central News Agency stated that the two leaders were “extremely satisfied” with the talk. Meanwhile, the US also sent out several positive signals since the breakup of the Hanoi summit, including the phrase “synchronous and parallel process” instead of “one-package solution.” It suggested that the US was trying to encourage the DPRK to return

4 “A Journey of Peace: Xi Jinping’s Visit to the DPRK Received High Praises of the International Media,” *People*, June 23, 2019, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0623/c1024-31175221.html>.

to the track of negotiation by expressing a certain degree of flexibility.⁵ In September, John Bolton, the US National Security Advisor known for being tough on North Korea, was fired by Trump. In October, the US-DPRK working group was reestablished. However, the above actions did not imply the elimination of divergence in the views of the two parties. Although the US recognizes that a diplomatic solution is required, sanctions have also been considered indispensable to appeal to jingoistic tendencies.⁶ This resulted in the breakdown of US-DPRK working-level nuclear talks in just one day. In the middle of December, Stephen Biegun, then US Special Representative for North Korea, openly presented a proposal to meet with North Korean officials during his visit to South Korea, but it was rejected by Pyongyang. At the end of December, at the fifth plenary session of the seventh WPK Central Committee, Kim Jong Un stated that the DPRK no longer held hopes that the US would lift any sanctions and therefore would remain firm in developing strategic weapons for its national security.⁷ Under this circumstance, will the DPRK reinitiate nuclear and intercontinental missile tests? And will the US alter its current North Korea policy? The answers to these questions would affect the future of the Korean Peninsula.

Behind the Tortuous Process toward Moderation

The tortuous nature of this round of negotiations was based on two factors: the divergence of views on denuclearization between the DPRK and the US due to their deep-rooted mutual mistrust, and different understandings among other major countries involved regarding the approach to denuclearization and the peace mechanism, which posed challenges to cooperation between the stakeholders.

5 “Detailed Report: the US Representative is Prepared to Talk with the DPRK,” Yonhap News Agency, June 28, 2019, <https://cn.yna.co.kr/view/ACK20190628005700881>.

6 Victor Cha, “A Small Deal with a Big Deal,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 8, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/small-deal-within-big-deal-0>.

7 “Report of the Fifth Plenary Meeting of Seventh WPK Central Committee,” January 1, 2020, <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/index.php?lang=chn&ptype=cfonew&mtype=view&no=26053>.

Absence of mutual trust and divergence of negotiating positions between the US and the DPRK

In the course of the 20-year-history of the Korean nuclear issue, the absence of mutual trust has always been the major cause of the Peninsula being trapped in the vicious cycle of tension and moderation. The lack of mutual trust is mainly due to three things. The first involves the ad hoc nature of communication since the two countries have not established formal diplomatic relations. As both the US and the DPRK can only conduct their respective strategic analysis of each other based on limited bilateral connections, it is perhaps to be expected that they will interpret the other's action based on a worst-case scenario. Secondly, the US and the DPRK both consider the other as lacking in credibility. Drawing conclusions from the US invasion of Iraq and intervention in Libya, the DPRK believes that the US is unable to keep a promise. In addition, Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty has increased Pyongyang's worry. It is reported that the President of Iran warned the DPRK's Foreign Minister that the US is not a trustworthy partner.⁸ On the other hand, many Americans insist that the DPRK is merely taking advantage of the negotiations in order to strengthen its power and consolidate its political legitimacy. Consequently, there should not be any expectations that the DPRK will adopt practical measures for denuclearization.⁹ Third, the credibility of both sides has also been weakened by the scare tactics practiced by both. When the US and the DPRK faced each other with a more combative posture, each side had used very provocative language intended to threaten the other without taking any practical actions.¹⁰ For instance, the DPRK threatened to turn Seoul

8 Saphora Smith, "North Korea's Foreign Minister Visits Iran after U.S. Sanctions Are Re-imposed," August 8, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-korea-s-foreign-minister-visits-iran-after-u-s-n898611>.

9 Zhang Yunling, "Northeast Asia in under Profound Changes Unseen in a Century," *World Economics and Politics*, No.9, 2019, p.16.

10 Robert Jervis and Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Perception and Misperception on the Korean Peninsula," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.97, No.3, 2018, pp.103-117.

and Washington into “a sea of flames” but conducted no actions. Likewise, Trump in 2017 threatened to fight back with “fire and fury” if the DPRK continued its blackmail. However, when the DPRK went on with its missile test, the US did nothing.

Due to this deep-seated mutual mistrust, even though the negotiation on denuclearization was reinitiated, divergence between the two sides quickly emerged over the reward for the DPRK on denuclearizing, the principles on which the process will occur, as well as the timeline and verification methods of denuclearization. Both the DPRK and the US have shown cautiousness and cast doubt on proposals from the other side. For instance, the DPRK once proposed to dismantle the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon and Punggye-ri in exchange for sanctions being partially lifted. However, believing that the DPRK intentionally concealed the fact of large numbers of nuclear instruments hidden underground at Pungang, Sowi-ri and Kangson, the US refuted the above proposal and suspected that it was not aimed at ultimate total denuclearization.¹¹ Hence, the US insists on verifying the DPRK’s reliability in denuclearization by examining whether it is able to include “Yongbyon + X” projects in the scope of verification. Similarly, the DPRK casts doubt on the credibility of the United States’ commitment to providing security guarantee, normalizing bilateral relations, and offering economic assistance. It believes that America’s standards of denuclearization, which include the disposal of its nuclear capabilities not only for weapons but also for civilian usage, are different from its own understanding of the matter.¹² Therefore, once the US interpretation of denuclearization, be it CVID or FFVD, were implemented, it would involve unacceptable pressure for the DPRK. Concluding from the above arguments, the two states both harbor a good deal of suspicion towards the other’s strategic intentions and refuse to make any concessions on core issues. As a result, the denuclearization

11 “US Media: Trump May Leak Intelligent Secrets by Disclosing 5 Hidden Nuclear Sites,” *Joongang Ilbo*, May 22, 2019.

12 Liu Ming, “From Singapore Summit to Hanoi Summit: Difficulty, Causes and Prospect of US-DPRK Denuclearization Talks,” No.6, *Pacific Journal*, 2019, pp.19-20.

negotiations have been a tortuous process.

Disparities in understanding the mechanism of denuclearization and establishing a peace regime among major relevant countries

The Korean Peninsula nuclear issue has never been a problem solely between the DPRK and the US. Politically it also involves the interests of the surrounding countries.¹³ Thus, resolving the issue not only demands the DPRK and the US meeting each other halfway, but also requires the shared efforts of neighboring countries such as China, the ROK, Japan and Russia. The thaw in regional tensions since 2018 has been dependent upon the common efforts of the regional parties. However, disparities in understanding the stepwise process of denuclearization, the nature of a peace regime, and the imposition and removal of international sanctions, have also made it difficult for them to forge a common position in the resolution of the nuclear issue, and even deepen their mutual strategic misgivings, leading to twists and turns of the situation.

First, as regards the approach to denuclearization, both the US and Japan insist on adopting the CVID or FFVD model. Nonetheless, the DPRK remains firm in opposing the above proposal and promotes its own version of denuclearization featuring a “phased and synchronous” approach, a position which is supported by China and Russia. In October 2018, Russia, China and North Korea, represented by their vice foreign ministers, held their first ever working meeting in Moscow, reached agreement on the above position, and discussed the possibility of conducting trilateral cooperation on denuclearization. Comparatively, South Korea’s attitude is more ambiguous. The Moon Jae-in government has been trying to find a middle path between the United States’ “one-package solution” and the DPRK’s phased approach. Yet due to pressures from Washington and Pyongyang, Seoul’s position on denuclearization has witnessed constant vacillation. Hence, diverging views among the six parties have prevented the development of a common

13 Wi Seong-rak, “The Influence of Cooperation between Major Countries on the Denuclearization Process of the Korean Peninsula,” *World Affairs*, No.22, 2019, p.18.

approach on denuclearization.

Second, as far as the construction of a peace regime is concerned, the DPRK tends to normalize the US-DPRK relations through bilateral negotiations and utilizes it as the basis for constructing the peace regime on the Peninsula. Although the US does not oppose a multilateral security mechanism on the Peninsula, it certainly refuses to replace its alliance system with a general system of multilateral security in Northeast Asia. The ROK considers that the best solution for forging the regional peace regime is to allow South and North Korea as the main participants with surrounding countries merely providing international assurance. Moreover, the ROK insists on the principle of “America before China.”¹⁴ As its government stated, a declaration to formally end the Korean War shall be signed by the two Koreas and the US, while China should play an important role in signing a peace pact.¹⁵ In response, China believes that the security regime of Northeast Asia should be established on the basis of the Six-Party Talks and refuses to be excluded from a trilateral negotiation. Moreover, Japan and Russia are also seeking to be involved in the peace-making process. Thus, differences among the six parties have created mutual suspicions in conducting multilateral cooperation in resolving the Korean Peninsula issue.

Third, regarding the greatest concern of the DPRK, the removal of international sanctions, the US has not conceded an inch and has the backing of Japan on this matter. At the G20 Osaka summit, Japan even urged for complete implementation of the UN sanctions on North Korea. South Korea holds a position different from that of the US and Japan, believing that there should be a partial lifting of the sanctions on North Korea in order to promote the inter-Korean relations and greater economic cooperation. In December 2019, China and Russia jointly proposed at

14 Han Xiandong, “Constructing the Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula: Perspective of International Politics and International Law,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies*, No.3, 2008, p.58.

15 Yu Gang Mun, Seong Yeon Cheol, and No Ji Won, “ROK, DPRK and US Shall Issue Declaration of Ending the War with China Signing the Peace Pact,” *The Hankyoreh*, May 3, 2018.

the Security Council a relaxation of sanctions on the DPRK with the aim of injecting new impetus in the ongoing denuclearization process. This, however, was rejected by the US. As huge differences exist, the current international sanctions will be maintained. The deadlock has formed an even greater obstacle to the already sluggish denuclearization process.

Prospects of Situation on the Korean Peninsula

Suffering from the dual shocks of US-DPRK mistrust and divergences among the relevant major countries, the detente process on the Korean Peninsula has witnessed a marked slowdown since the beginning of 2019. Moreover, for the forces pushing for denuclearization and a regional peace process, progress has also begun to fade, with many adverse signs looming large.

First, the United States' policy towards the DPRK is ambiguous and the willingness of the current government to promote a solution to the nuclear issue is fast fading. Although Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" has been highly popular within the US, a peaceful settlement remains a better solution than usage of force.¹⁶ Despite negotiations between the two sides have gone on now for almost 2 years, Trump's North Korea policy is nothing short of a delicate balancing act between exerting pressure and building bridges between the two sides. On the one hand, Trump has no intention of making substantial concessions and eliminating the option of military force. In December 2019, he even referred to Kim Jong Un as "rocket man" again at the NATO summit in London. On the other hand, Trump dismissed the hawkish John Bolton, claiming to pursue a "flexible solution"¹⁷ and relax sanctions on the DPRK, and assigned Stephen Biegun to prepare for negotiations with Pyongyang during his South Korea visit. Nevertheless, highly skeptical of America's willingness to rescind sanctions to settle the

16 Wang Junsheng, "The Trump Administration's North Korea Policy: Consensus under a Multicultural Background," *Northeast Asia Forum*, No.4, 2018. p.39.

17 "Editorial: Biegun's Visit to the ROK Is the Last Chance," *The Hankyoreh*, December 13, 2019.

nuclear issue, the DPRK remained unconvinced of Trump's sincerity. Moreover, with the US presidential election approaching, the priority of domestic policy has further blunted Trump's enthusiasm of altering his foreign policy which could further drive the denuclearization process into a stagnation for some time.

Second, the US policy has frustrated the DPRK's resolve to negotiate. During this round of negotiations, without any acceptable plans, the US stuck to its red line of "no denuclearization, no removal of sanctions,"¹⁸ causing great disappointment for the DPRK. After the second Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi, Choe Son Hui, Vice Foreign Minister of the DPRK, held a press conference in Pyongyang denouncing the US for its selfishness and insincerity. In addition, she explicitly pointed to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton who, by their attitude, produced an atmosphere of hostility and mistrust in the Hanoi meeting.¹⁹ Soon afterwards, the DPRK renewed its missile testing and even conducted a "crucial test" at the Sohae launch site in early December 2019. Moreover, the communique of the fifth plenary session of the seventh WPK Central Committee warned that by wasting time and dragging its feet at normalizing bilateral relations, the US would ultimately have to recognize the growing power of the DPRK, and witness the new strategic weapons they were about to achieve.²⁰ Under the influence of the rigid US policy, the DPRK's willingness to eliminate its nuclear capability may be undermined, forcing it to deliver more belligerent signals.

Third, the demonstration effect of the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue for cooperation among regional countries is waning. Over the past 20 years, the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue, as the largest security concern in Northeast Asia, has held the attention of regional countries. The Six-Party Talks were the model for regional cooperation in dealing

18 Victor Zhikai Gao, "What Next for the Korean Denuclearization?" *Foreign Policy Journal*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2019/03/08/what-next-for-the-korean-denuclearization>.

19 "DPRK Considers Suspending Denuclearization Talks with the US," *Cankao Xiaoxi*, March 16, 2019, <http://m.ckxx.net/shouye/p/153742.html>.

20 "Report of the Fifth Plenary Meeting of Seventh WPK Central Committee."

with the nuclear issue. Positively speaking, the spillover effects of the cooperation platform has reduced confrontation on other issues and built an atmosphere of pursuing common interests among regional countries. However, as the transition of power and the reconstruction of the order in Northeast Asia intensify and create a substantial shift in the major conflicts of the region, resolving the DPRK nuclear issue has become less of a priority. Furthermore, the Trump administration, by playing the “North Korea card” in order to pursue its own interests, has severely weakened cooperation among the parties. On the one hand, the US connects its North Korea policy with its policies towards China and Russia, requiring China and Russia to accept US bullying and pressure while demanding their cooperation on the nuclear issue. On the other hand, the US has pressured Japan and South Korea to compromise in other areas in exchange for its security protection. As a result, the effect of the nuclear issue on facilitating regional cooperation has become less pronounced. On the contrary, it has become a bone of contention in their mutual relations.

Fourth, the decreasing autonomy of North and South Korea has stalled the easing of tensions in their bilateral relationship. Without a doubt, the two countries have played positive and crucial roles in moderating the regional situation. Kim Jong Un has reaffirmed his commitment to completing denuclearization and adjusting national policy in a decisive manner. In addition, proceeding on the basis of their ethnic relationship, Moon Jae-in has been actively working to ease the inter-Korean relations. The collective action and coordination exhibited by North and South Korea have obviously enhanced their autonomy on the Korean Peninsula. However, with rapid improvement of the inter-Korean relations, South Korea is subject to greater containment from the US. For instance, during a bilateral meeting, Trump rejected Moon Jae-in’s proposal for restoring the Kaesong Industrial Complex as well as the economic cooperation between the South and the North and asked Moon to reconsider his proposal,²¹ which led Moon to pull

21 “Japanese Media: Trump Rejects Moon Jae-in’s Proposal of ‘Restoring South-North Economic Cooperation’,” *Chosun Ilbo*, July 7, 2019.

back his initiative. Meanwhile, as direct contact between the DPRK and the US was established, Pyongyang has come to realize the limit of South Korea's role and began complaining about the South's concessions to the US on multiple occasions. Choe Ryong Hae, President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, once claimed at the summit meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement that only when the South becomes completely independent from external powers which are undermining the common interests of the Korean nation, and takes due responsibility for Korea's shared national rejuvenation, can the South-North relations be fundamentally improved.²²

Despite the dire outlook, the motivations of the parties to maintain contact and avoid confrontation still exist. Although the actual talks are running hot and cold, it's certain that that each party is trying to avoid the situation devolving back to the tensions of 2017. The DPRK did restart their missile tests which had been halted for nearly a year and a half since April 2019. However, it has not conducted any intercontinental ballistic missiles or nuclear tests that might threaten the security of the US. Likewise, the US has maintained calm in the face of North Korea's actions with Trump saying there shouldn't be any worries as the DPRK was only testing short-range missiles. Moreover, in 2018, the Trump administration suspended the joint military exercises with the ROK. In 2019, the US-ROK military drills, although reactivated, were scaled down under titles of "19-1" and "19-2" instead of traditional and more belligerent names like "Key Resolve," "Foal Eagle" and "Ulchi-Freedom Guardian." As a result, we can conclude that the parties concerned are much more cautious and have avoided sending out alarming signals that might result in a significant deterioration of the regional situation.

For the DPRK, the economic issue is still the most crucial front to break through on. Therefore, the door for US-DPRK dialogue has not yet closed. The DPRK expressed the will to chart "a new course," but did not

22 "North Korea's Second-in-Command Urges the US to Abandon Hostile Policy," *Yonhap*, October 19, 2019, <https://cn.yna.co.kr/view/ACK20191029000200881?section=nk/index>.

mention suspending negotiations with the US. The fifth plenary session of the seventh WPK Central Committee stressed that economic development and improving people's livelihood remain the primary task for the current period. Kim Jong Un visited villages and factories many times to conduct field research and underlined the importance of raising people's living standards. Although international sanctions have not been lifted, the condition of food security in the DPRK has achieved great progress as a result of the market system which was introduced in agricultural production and consumption since the 1990s and the introduction of the cooperative farm system more recently.²³ Thus, in the short term, the DPRK is not likely to repeat the old course in which "nuclear capacity and national economy advance in parallel." With regard to the US, Bolton's resignation has granted Trump and Stephen Biegun with the best opportunity seen in more than a year for creating a negotiation framework featuring bilateral compromise, flexibility and a staged process,²⁴ which means the US is likely to soften its tough stance on denuclearization. At the same time, with the presidential election approaching, Trump, eyeing his second term, is eager to achieve noticeable diplomatic achievements that could garner votes. With mediocre performance in other areas, a breakthrough achieved in the US-DPRK relations remains Trump's most remarkable accomplishment.

China's Role in the Evolving Korean Peninsula Situation

In the past 20 years, China has been unwavering in playing an active role in pursuing a resolution to the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue. As a "crisis mediator," China has pulled the parties back to the table when the negotiations reached a deadlock.²⁵ China's influence on the issue is vividly

23 Kim So-yeong, "Marketization in North Korea's Agriculture with Cooperative Farms and Markets at the Center," *KDI Economic Review*, p.29.

24 Daniel R. Depetris, "John Bolton's Awful Legacy on North Korea," *38North*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.38north.org/2019/10/depetris101719>.

25 Chou Fahua, "The Six-Party Talks and China's Diplomatic Capability," *Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol.22, 2010, p.212.

manifested in the four roles it plays.

First, China is an explorer of problem-solving approaches. For a long time, the denuclearization talks ended in a deadlock since the countries involved always sought to pursue their own interests in formulating their Korean Peninsula policies.²⁶ However, upholding the concept of common security, China has been dedicated to narrowing the differences and seeking practical solutions. China has made a series of proposals such as “dual suspension” and “dual track” in denuclearization aimed at a successful transition from an armistice to a peace regime, thus playing an important role in easing regional tensions, restoring dialogue, and developing a blueprint for peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Second, China is a safeguard for denuclearization, peace, and stability on the Korean Peninsula. China’s resolve in promoting these goals remains strong and durable. As for denuclearization, China insists on realizing denuclearization of the entire Korean Peninsula, not only North Korea. At the same time, China supports the DPRK’s legitimate right for peaceful use of nuclear power. As for safeguarding regional peace and stability, China is committed to eliminating the possibility of war and chaos on the Peninsula, encouraging dialogue as a means of resolving problems, and eventually establishing a regime for peaceful cooperation in Northeast Asia. Therefore, despite all the twists and turns of the nuclear issue, China has been able to make important contributions at crucial moments in preventing war and moderating the situation.

Third, China is an advocator for independent and peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula. As a strong supporter of inter-Korean independent negotiations leading to peaceful unification on the Peninsula, China has taken positive measures in its collaboration with the other countries involved. During the Cold War, China had advocated peaceful unification of the Peninsula and withdrew its People’s Voluntary Army. In the post-Cold War era, China has also encouraged direct contact between North and South

26 Yu Shaohua, “The Prospect of the Denuclearization Process on the Korean Peninsula,” *International Studies*, No.2, 2019, p.123.

Korea by creating favorable conditions. China succeeded the hawkish talk in the US and South Korea which claimed that China's only priority was its own geopolitical interests rather than denuclearization, and accused China of "delaying reunification of the Peninsula."²⁷ This stands in stark contrast to the US that has been deploying troops to South Korea and hindering reconciliation between the South and the North.

Fourth, China is a contributor to the prosperity and development in Northeast Asia. The Northeast Asian region includes major global economies like China, Japan and the ROK with highly complementary industrial structures, close trade ties and tremendous growth potential. To promote Northeast Asian regional cooperation, China has played an active role in developing the Tumen River area, and advocating for free trade negotiations among China, Japan, and the ROK. Moreover, China also has put forward the Belt and Road Initiative seeking to engage Japan, South Korea, and North Korea in its construction with the aim of restoring regional economic cooperation.

At present, the reduction of tensions on the Korean Peninsula is facing challenges including the shortage of internal motivations as well as the deterioration of the external environment. Thus, promoting denuclearization and peace with the "national self-determination" of North and South Korea as a driver is no longer sustainable. The new circumstances demand that China continue to exert positive influence on the issue and take actions to avoid a backlash in the denuclearization and peace process.

In the first place, China should continue to provide intellectual support for the denuclearization process and the construction of a peace regime in Northeast Asia through multi-channel, deep-rooted and wide-ranging communication, and utilize its great wisdom to provide new creative ideas. In addition to state-to-state talks, China should place more emphasis on public diplomacy which can exert positive influence in resolving the Korean Peninsula affairs. Such an approach might involve

27 Chen Xiangyang, "A Study on China's Policy on Reunification of the Korean Peninsula," *Asia & Africa Affairs*, No.5, 2012, p.21.

“Track-2 diplomacy” or “Track-1.5 diplomacy” which could explore possible solutions together with the other relevant countries. In September 2019, the International Symposium on the Korean Peninsula Situation hosted by Shanghai University with scholars of all six parties is a good example of such diplomacy.

Second, China should remain committed to the stance of balancing denuclearization with the DPRK’s own security concerns. It is necessary for China to deliver a more explicit expression of a final denuclearization vision for the DPRK in the international arena. However, the legitimate security concerns of the DPRK must be guaranteed during the process. In this sense, China needs to forge collective efforts with all parties in pursuit of a reliable security mechanism which could allay the concerns of the North.

Third, China should continue to create the conditions for realizing North-South talks. Currently, as the US-DPRK relationship is in a deadlock, inter-Korean relations and communication have also been adversely affected. However, China continues to maintain good relations with both North and South Korea. Since 2018, there have been five meetings between leaders of China and the DPRK, which opens a new chapter of the bilateral relations. In addition, as tensions over the installation of the THAAD missile defense system have receded, the Sino-ROK relationship continues to grow. Hence, China should fully exert its role as a link between the two countries and initiate China-DPRK-ROK trilateral talks beyond the present institutional arrangements, in the aim of improving North-South relations and supporting independence and reunification through practical measures.

Last but not least, China should help activate the potential of regional cooperation taking advantage of the “pivot” of the Belt and Road Initiative to Northeast Asia. With the shift in the DPRK’s national policy to developing its economy, regional communication and cooperation are provided with new opportunities. As the US is absent from multilateral economic cooperation under its unilateralist approach and protectionist policies, China should take the chance to provide regional public goods based on the “pivot” of the Belt and Road Initiative to Northeast Asia, and improve regional

synergy and connectivity, to facilitate substantial breakthroughs in cross-Peninsula as well as Northeast Asian economic cooperation.

Conclusion

The current turnabout in the situation on the Korean Peninsula is due to the collective efforts of the parties involved. This has not been an easy task. Hence, to keep the process on the right track will require not only the mutual trust, cooperation, and compromise between the US and the DPRK, but also joint endeavors from all the other countries involved, including China. With each party working together in the same direction, the prospects for Northeast Asia will be bright. However, the achievements made will come to naught if the parties involved, due to lack of mutual trust, continue to solely pursue their own short-term interests. Indeed, the instability of the United States' North Korea policy, the frustrated resolve on the part of the DPRK to totally eliminate its nuclear weapons, the declining demonstration effect of inter-Korean cooperation, and the weakened strategic independence of North and South Korea will all continue to inject difficulties into the next round of peace process. Yet we should not fail to see the remaining aversion of all the parties involved to confrontation, not to mention actual warfare, and the existence of opportunities for US-DPRK negotiations, which are strong forces militating against a total disruption of the peace process. The Korean Peninsula issue has never been merely a problem of denuclearization; it is intimately connected to the peace and prosperity of Northeast Asia. With a major strategic transition going on within the region, China should not regard the issue as simply a conflict between the US and the DPRK but rather an issue of regional significance. China should continue to play an active role in providing intelligence and strength to the resolution the issue, and forging a new order in the Northeast Asian region that features peace, stability, and prosperity. 🇨🇳