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Intelligence and Analysis Division

WHITE PAPER SERIES

North Korean Denuclearization: Recent Progress and Potential Obstacles

INTENT

This white paper is designed to provide an in-depth analysis of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events/trends and their potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be an all-encompassing assessment of the subject, rather, it provides a brief overview to provide the reader with situational awareness regarding topics with which they may not be familiar.



North Korean Denuclearization: Recent Progress and Potential Obstacles

Introduction

North Korea's unprecedented level of missile testing in 2017 greatly increased tensions with a number of countries, particularly South Korea and the U.S. Other regional powers, such as China and Japan, have also weighed in and taken a variety of actions in an attempt to resolve the ongoing crisis. However, in recent months, a series of events have occurred that indicate a shift towards the pursuit of a Korean peace process and potential denuclearization of the North, including a proposed meeting between the leaders of the U.S. and North Korea. Still, a number of challenges stand in the way of a successful U.S.-North Korean summit. This white paper will review the recent progress in advance of the proposed U.S.-North Korean summit, as well as a number of potential obstacles that may complicate the proposed de-escalation.

Recent Progress

During 2017, North Korea conducted a number of missile tests, including the nation's first tests of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), in addition to its sixth and most powerful nuclear test. North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un and U.S. President Donald Trump had also exchanged verbal blows throughout the year, and the U.S. military positioned aircraft carriers in the region along with conducting several bomber overflights of the Korean Peninsula. After a year filled with military provocation and heated rhetoric, North Korea began 2018 by taking several incremental steps toward easing international tensions which were largely welcomed by the U.S. and South Korea.

Initial Reduction of Tensions: The 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics

The initial reduction of tensions came in advance of the 2018 Winter Olympic Games, scheduled to be held in Pyeongchang, South Korea. In an annual New Year's Address, Kim Jong-Un expressed a desire for peace with South Korea, and proposed sending a joint delegation to the Olympics. Kim also echoed previous threats to the U.S., claiming that North Korean missiles could reach the U.S. and that "the nuclear button is always on [his] desk."¹ Ultimately, the two countries marched together at the opening ceremonies and participated as a unified team in women's ice hockey.² Although this step was largely symbolic, it nonetheless marked a diplomatic breakthrough between the two feuding nations.

Kim Jong-Un Announces Openness to Denuclearization

In March 2018, Kim Jong-Un began to express an openness to "denuclearization," a term that is not yet precisely defined, an issue that will be discussed in further detail later in this paper. During a meeting between South Korean and North Korean officials in early March, leaders in Pyongyang reportedly expressed willingness to engage "in an open-ended dialogue" with the U.S. "to discuss the issue of denuclearization and to normalize relations with North Korea."³ Kim echoed this sentiment in a visit to China later that month, telling leader Xi Jinping "if South Korea and the



United States respond with goodwill to our efforts, and create an atmosphere of peace and stability, and take phased, synchronized measures to achieve peace, the issue of the denuclearization of the peninsula can reach resolution."⁴ These overtures were met with cautious optimism, although they marked a dramatic shift from Kim's belligerent rhetoric from just months prior.

Pompeo Visits North Korea

In mid-April 2018, media outlets reported that then-CIA Director (now Secretary of State) Mike Pompeo had traveled to North Korea at the beginning of the month and met with Kim Jong-Un.⁵ The meeting was later confirmed by President Trump, who added that "a good relationship was formed." This visit, and the face-to-face relationship-building that ensued, would prove key to laying the groundwork for an eventual summit between Trump and Kim. Additionally, on 8 May 2018, Secretary Pompeo visited North Korea for the second time, returning with 3 newly-freed American prisoners, a perceived sign of good will by the North.⁶

A U.S.-North Korean Summit is Planned

Shortly after now-Secretary Pompeo's inaugural visit, President Trump announced a joint U.S.-North Korean summit. The summit is intended to provide a forum to discuss issues such as denuclearization and the formal ending of the Korean War, which technically has not ended (via a peace treaty or other formal agreement) since fighting ceased and an armistice was signed in 1953. The summit is expected to occur early this summer, with President Trump stating that he expects to meet with Kim in June, or perhaps even sooner.⁵ At the time of writing, no specific timing or location details have been publicly announced, although following Pompeo's second visit to North Korea, details are expected within days, per President Trump.⁶ Although the topics to be discussed and the rough timing of the meeting have been largely established, the location for such a summit has yet to be determined, for reasons that will be discussed in greater detail shortly.

The Panmunjom Declaration

On 27 April, Kim Jong-Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-In met at the Joint Security Area, the iconic section of the Korean Demilitarized Zone where the two countries straddle a shared area of buildings and military facilities. Since the de facto end of the Korean War in 1953, the two countries' militaries have stood face-to-face at the site with limited interaction.⁷ However, the meeting between the two leaders was a historic moment: the first time a North Korean leader had crossed into the South. Moon also briefly stepped over the military demarcation line to enter the North. After the two leaders exchanged pleasantries, they met to sign the Panmunjom Declaration, a non-binding yet groundbreaking proclamation for peace between the two neighbors. The declaration also includes language calling for a formal end to the Korean War and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.⁸

Potential Obstacles

However, despite all of the productive steps toward a U.S.-North Korean summit and an eventual peace and/or denuclearization process, a number of challenges remain. Some issues are simple matters of planning and negotiation, while others revolve around optics of the summit and both sides' adherence to a hypothetical agreement. While the following subjects are not an all-inclusive list of potential obstacles to the summit (and subsequent denuclearization), they are some of the



more high-profile challenges that must be faced in order to ensure that the proposed summit is a constructive, mutual process that produces tangible results.

Finding a Summit Site

An initial point of contention was the ideal location for hosting the summit. As with many high-profile international meetings, the site selection is very important, not only for security and logistical reasons, but also for the potential symbolism of the selection. Several sites have been floated in media reports, such as the aforementioned Joint Security Area, or perhaps another seemingly neutral location such as Sweden, which has facilitated communications between the two countries.^{9,10} The neutrality of any site is key, as some observers have speculated that a site too close to North Korea could be used by Kim as a propaganda victory. Following Pompeo's 8 May visit, President Trump stated that the Joint Security Area had been ruled out as a potential summit site, despite its symbolism as the site currently separating the two Koreas, as well as the site of the recent Panmunjom Declaration.⁶ Additionally, it was reported on 9 May that Singapore was the preferred site for the meeting, and President Trump posted on Twitter the same day "Date & place set", referring to the summit, although he did not elaborate further.¹¹

Defining "Denuclearization"

Some observers have advocated for cautious optimism, or even skepticism in advance of the summit due to the yet-to-be defined centerpiece of the talks: denuclearization. Former U.S. government officials have warned that North Korea's definition of denuclearization is far different from that of the U.S., and that such a definition includes the complete withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the South.¹² Other analysts have concurred with that line of reasoning, contending that Kim would only be willing to fully denuclearize (meaning abandoning the possession of nuclear weapons entirely) if the U.S. withdrew from the region militarily.¹³ Furthermore, the timeframe and conditions for any form of denuclearization would likely need to be discussed at the summit, rather than determined ahead of time. This means that the summit would likely result in an additional, written expression of intent to denuclearize by North Korea rather than any tangible steps in the near-term.

Presidential Rhetoric

Concerns have also been raised surrounding President Trump's rhetoric leading up to the summit. Trump has been hailed by many of his supporters as being a blunt, straight-talking communicator, while critics contend that his style is undiplomatic and could lead to miscommunication, potentially escalating the situation. In either case, prior rhetorical exchanges between Trump and Kim appear to be in the rearview as the summit's final details are due to be finalized in the coming days and weeks. Still, concerns remain that a single off-the-cuff remark could throw existing plans off-course given President Trump's propensity for controversial statements and strong language, including incidents related to North Korea and Kim Jong-Un. Trump has countered these accusations, crediting his own negotiation skills with the progress made with North Korea, while conceding that he is "trying to calm it down a bit," referring to his rhetoric.¹⁴



JCPOA Precedent

On 8 May, President Trump announced that the U.S. was withdrawing from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA; a multilateral agreement signed in 2015 by the U.S. and Iran (along with Russia, China, and the European Union) that limited Iran's nuclear ambitions. The JCPOA consisted of a number of regulatory measures, coupled with monitoring mechanisms that Iran was supposed to follow in exchanged for sanctions relief.¹⁵ President Trump withdrew after repeatedly stating his dissatisfaction with the deal's terms and implementations. Like the previous issue regarding rhetoric, opinions on the matter are largely divided based along political lines. Supporters of the withdrawal have contended that Trump's hardline stance will compel Kim Jong-Un to carefully adhere to any deal reached, while critics believe that the withdrawal will erode America's credibility in the realm of international arms control agreements.¹⁶

Outlook

While it is too early to accurately assess what the outcome of the planned U.S.-North Korea summit will be, a number of positive indicators are present, although several challenges remain. North Korea has almost entirely ceased the provocative behavior that it embraced throughout most of 2017, and Kim Jong-Un has taken several incremental steps toward restoring diplomatic ties with traditional adversaries such as South Korea and the U.S. Kim also expressed a desire to formally end the Korean War and declared his openness to some form of denuclearization. Still, concerns remain regarding a number of issues, (only a handful of which were discussed in this paper) which could drastically affect the outcome of the summit and any future bilateral or multilateral talks or agreements. Nonetheless, the recent developments and the upcoming summit should warrant cautious optimism due to the gradual reversal of North Korea's long-standing defiance of the international community and Kim's seemingly new-found desire for positive change.

Source List

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