

How to break stalemate on Korean Peninsula

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Editor's Note:

Over six months after US President Donald Trump and **North Korean** leader **Kim Jong-un** shook hands at a Singapore summit, progress in the peace process seems to be fizzling out. A new round of war of words has started between the US and North Korea after Washington imposed sanctions on three North Korean officials for human rights violations. How will this influence the stalled negotiations? Can South Korea mediate to make a breakthrough? Global Times (GT) reporter Yu Jincui talked to Moon Chung-in (Moon), Special Advisor for Foreign Affairs and National Security to President **Moon Jae-in** of South Korea, over these issues on the sidelines of the Third Understanding China Conference in Beijing.



Illustration: Liu Rui/GT

GT: The US just imposed sanctions on three North Korean officials for human rights violations. Washington is still sticking to its policy of exerting maximum pressure. How will this influence the resolution of the peninsula issue?

Moon: That's very negative. The US position has been sanctions and maximum pressure. The Trump administration hasn't deviated from this. North Korea wants it to change, but there is no change. Given the fact that the US has imposed sanctions on three North Korean leaders, this will serve as a negative factor in resuming dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang.

The US has asked us to slow down inter-Korea exchange and cooperation by fine-tuning it with US-DPRK relations. We have agreed. We decided to form a working group with the US for synchronizing inter-Korea relations and US-DPRK relations. But we hope that the US and North Korea will take some bold measures so that there could be some new momentum. If the current trend continues, the outlook for 2019 is not likely to be bright. Negotiations are all about give-and-take. North Korea should take some bold and concrete measures for denuclearization and the US should also offer corresponding incentives to North Korea by relaxing sanctions. Such exchange will produce a significant breakthrough. As long as both the US and North Korea take non-compromising position, breakthrough is unlikely.

South Korea has been working very hard at mediating between Washington and Pyongyang, but the two parties so far have been too

rigid. There should be words for words, commitments for commitments and actions for actions, but both sides are lacking actions. It's time for them to take actions.

GT: President Moon Jae-in earlier suggested North Korean leader Kim Jong-un visit Seoul before the end of this year, which seems very unlikely now. What are the main obstacles for Kim's visit to Seoul?

Moon: If Chairman Kim visits Seoul, he should bring something back to Pyongyang. For example, North Korea wants the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the Mt. Geumgang Tourist Project to reopen. It also wants some tangible economic benefits from South Korea. But South Korean government's position is: Until real progress is made in the direction of denuclearization, we will comply with the UN Security Council sanction resolutions. Chairman Kim might think it's not the right time to visit Seoul.

The ideal scenario is that Kim would have a second summit with Trump, and our president would join them in signing the end of war declaration, and afterward Chairman Kim visits Seoul. By then there could be some relaxation of UN Security Council sanction resolutions and we could expect a real progress in inter-Korea economic exchanges and cooperation. But that has not been the case.

GT: How do you view the prospect of a second Trump-Kim summit?

Moon: Trump said he is willing to have a summit with Kim sometime in January or February. Let's wait and see. We are hoping the two leaders meet soon.

Kim Yong-chol, vice chairman of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party Central Committee and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo were supposed to meet, but the meeting didn't take place. If they had met, they could have made some important decisions, lending new momentum to denuclearization and peace on the **Korean Peninsula**. But it's a pity it didn't happen.

North Korea's position is very clear: It has dismantled the Punggye-ri nuclear test site, and it is willing to dismantle the Dongchang-ri missile engine testing site in the presence of American experts and to permanently do away with nuclear facilities in Yongbyon if the US takes corresponding measures in accordance with the letter and spirit of the June 12 US-DPRK Singapore Declaration signed by Kim and Trump. But the US position has been very persistent: Without complete denuclearization, there will be no relaxation of sanctions, which North Korea cannot accept.

China has proposed a simultaneous exchange based on the principle of action for action. But the US position is "you denuclearize first, then we will come up with some incentives." North Korea hasn't taken up that proposal, and consequently a stalemate has continued.

GT: What role can China play in the resolution of the North Korea nuclear issue? Some argued that given the inter-Korean summits and Trump-Kim meeting, China's role has been undermined. What's your take?

Moon: No. I do not agree. President Xi Jinping has played a very important role in changing Kim's attitude, and China's role should never be underestimated. Without three meetings between Xi and Kim, Kim's positive assertive moves would have never been possible. Now it's time for China to play a more active role in not only persuading Washington to make some bold concessions in return for North Korea's good behavior, but also fostering Pyongyang to move fast toward denuclearization. Because of ongoing trade frictions with the US, Xi might not be in a position to persuade Trump, but I still think President Xi can play a pivotal role in breaking the current stalemate.

GT: Your argument in May regarding the presence of US troops in South Korea after the signing of a peace treaty sparked a controversy. What's your take on the issue now?

Moon: What I said in the Foreign Affairs article is that it will be difficult to justify the continuing presence of American troops in South Korea after

the adoption of a peace treaty. I didn't identify the subject. What I had in mind is that it would be very difficult for the US and South Korea to justify continuing presence of American troops after the adoption of the treaty.

After I wrote that article, President Moon made it very clear that American forces in South Korea and ROK-US alliance have nothing to do with signing an end of war declaration and peace treaty. I agree with him because the ROK-US alliance is a sovereign matter between Seoul and Washington. But the reality is very difficult, particularly for the American side. If there is a lasting peace in Korea, how can the US justify its continuing military presence in South Korea?

GT: China-South Korea relations have suffered after the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (**THAAD**) system in South Korea. How do you comment on the current state of bilateral relations? What are the opportunities and challenges ahead next year?

Moon: I think bilateral relations have improved since late last year. Our government, which has promised not to have additional THAAD deployed in South Korea, said it will not join the America-led theater missile defense system in Northeast Asia, and will not consider any kind of military alliance involving US, Japan and South Korea. The Chinese government is satisfied with the announcement.

Regarding the **North Korea issue**, President Xi has three principles: promoting peace and stability on the peninsula, denuclearizing the peninsula and the peaceful resolution of all pending issues through dialogue and negotiation. These principles are completely shared by President Moon. China has proposed a double suspension and simultaneous exchange based on principle of action for action. They are very similar to South Korea's strategies.

To promote relations next year, first we should overcome the negative repercussions of the THAAD issue such as personal exchanges and restrictions on South Korean firms' economic activities in China. And we should encourage more Chinese tourists to come back to South Korea and more South Koreans to visit China. As for the North Korea issue, as I have said, Chinese proposals and South Korean proposals are almost identical. I don't see any problem.

Another issue is US-China trade friction. Our government's position is that we should return to the multilateral trading regime, strengthen the World Trade Organization, and oppose any form of protectionism, which is very similar to China's stance.

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