



An NCAFP meeting with CICIR on North Korea

By Rorry Daniels

On March 16, 2018, the NCAFP organized a one-day conference with a visiting delegation from the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) to discuss policy coordination on the North Korean nuclear issue.

The conference took place shortly after the Pyeongchang Olympics at which a high-level North Korean envoy delivered a summit invitation from Kim Jong Un to ROK President Moon Jae-in, and immediately after both the departure of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the surprise announcement that President Trump would follow the Kim-Moon summit with one of his own in May. The meeting took place amidst discussion of the imminent departure of U.S. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster (now confirmed to be replaced with Ambassador John Bolton) and before Kim Jong Un's secret trip to Beijing.

In short, the situation on the Korean Peninsula is complex, changing rapidly, and shows no sign of settling in the short-term. What follows is a summary of the discussion and recommendations from the bilateral conference given the information available at the time.

A Surprise Summit

The relatively rapid switch in North Korea's policy approach from one of confrontation to one of reconciliation came as a surprise to both American and Chinese participants, but not nearly the surprise that President Trump delivered when he agreed to a May summit meeting with Kim Jong Un. Participants agreed that this development fit President Trump's pattern of unpredictable and unconventional foreign policy decision-making.

Many of the American participants were concerned about the potential for a high-level U.S.-DPRK summit as a first step in a serious negotiation process and about the manner in which this summit invitation was accepted. Summits are generally held after substantive working-level consultations ensure some bargain can be reached and formalized by the leaders. Invitations are usually carried directly through state representatives and not through a third-party envoy. Even less conventional was the decision to have the envoy from the Republic of Korea (ROK) announce the summit on behalf of the White House with no administration officials in sight.

An American participant wondered if President Trump's unconventional approach was, in fact, an asset. After all, lower-level meetings and drawn-out negotiations, including those that produced phased approaches to denuclearization, have all fallen apart due to lack of mutual trust. Perhaps the summit could create political will that carries a negotiation process forward. There may be a value in tackling the hard things first and the easy things later to ensure that deals won't fall apart when the hard things are eventually addressed.

Participants on both sides felt that North Korea was responding to a pressure campaign that included unprecedented international sanctions coordination and enforcement as well as credible threats by the U.S. of a unilateral military strike, even if the strike was purported to be limited in scope. Some clarifying discussion followed over whether sanctions were already hurting the North Korean regime's ability to do business as usual, as a few Chinese participants suggested; or, as many Americans expressed, North Korean leadership was anticipating the effects over the medium- to long-term but the sanctions were not yet biting Pyongyang elites.

This difference of perspectives revealed concerns on the American side that China may be willing to ease up on enforcement during negotiations, which a few American participants cautioned would undermine the process and the prospects for a permanent deal on denuclearization. A Chinese presenter stated clearly that sanctions should continue and only be eased incrementally through a planned agreement, but wondered what other incentives the U.S. would be willing to put on the table to begin a phased approach to denuclearization. Chinese presenters reiterated that if the U.S. was not prepared to accept a 'freeze for freeze' arrangement, the onus was on the U.S. to come up with an alternative path forward.

Possible Outcomes

A Chinese presenter described Beijing as generally welcoming of the upcoming summits and glad to see the Trump administration move away from confrontational—and potential escalatory—rhetoric on military strikes. However, both sides were aware of the potential pitfalls of a failed attempt at diplomacy. A Chinese participant summarized four possible outcomes: the U.S.-DPRK summit falls apart before it happens; talks for talks sake occur with no real movement on the key issues; talks make some great achievements such as denuclearization and normalization of relations; and talks are held without major outcomes, which may cause President Trump to become disillusioned with the negotiating process.

American participants disagreed on whether or not the summit is a final opportunity for a peaceful resolution. Some felt that it was the last card to play—or, in other words, a failed summit would inevitably set the stage for prolonged confrontation. Others were more optimistic that either a success could be eked out because of the political costs of failure to both sides, or that a failure of sorts would not preclude further negotiations. It is difficult to predict the likely reactions of President Trump to a failed summit for two reasons: one, he is exceedingly skilled at changing the conversation when faced with adversity; and two, he eschews typical patterns of state-to-state interactions with which students of history and politics are familiar.

Failure is also in the eyes of the beholder. Participants on both sides largely agreed that it would be wise to set low expectations for the outcomes of a summit; therefore, a grand bargain is not anticipated. The best case scenario, should the summit proceed, is that it opens up space to continue a negotiation process. This process may include a series of top-level bilateral and trilateral summits, or a return to multilateral negotiations. Chinese participants expressed a desire for a return to Six-Party Talks or a Four-Party mechanism between the U.S., China, the DPRK and the ROK that would consult with Japan and Russia as needed. One Chinese participant noted that the Six-Party process had actually facilitated and contained a number of bilateral meetings. So there was precedent for multiple, simultaneous bilateral processes.

The worst case scenario is a failed summit—either because no agreement can be reached, because one party declares the other side unable to meet minimum expectations, or because an agreement reached is spoiled by one of the parties or a third party. In these scenarios, Chinese and American participants worried that the Trump administration may revert to the military options that were being seriously considered at the end of 2017. Meanwhile, the DPRK may continue provocations that compel the Trump administration to exercise military options. The resulting chaos could be unfathomable.

The participants discussed the views on North Korea of the new (and likely new) Trump administration appointees. An American participant pointed out that Secretary of State Designee Pompeo and Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats have identified both deterrence and coercive diplomacy as DPRK intentions in pursuing a nuclear program. This shows that the administration believes the DPRK will pursue an aggressive strategy. Meanwhile, National Security Advisor John Bolton has recently gone on the record to say that he hopes negotiations fail so that a military option can be exercised and Pompeo has previously called for a decapitation strike and regime change in North Korea.

Although one participant noted that any incoming U.S. administration in 2016 would have had a sense of urgency to deal with the DPRK, many participants were concerned that the Trump administration's ideological viewpoints preclude a peaceful resolution. Still, another American participant pointed to Pompeo's recent remarks that the sanctions had worked and were a success. The key question is how the Trump administration will define victory and failure, and these definitions are not likely to be clarified in advance of the summit.

Policy Coordination and Recommendations

Policy coordination is primarily hampered by an overall deterioration of U.S.-China relations, primarily regarding trade issues but also due to a growing sense among U.S. policy makers that China is a long-term strategic competitor. A Chinese presenter pointed out that recent national security documents label China as a revisionist power and a major competitor, and noted that for the first time since the turn of the millennium China and Russia have replaced terrorism as the top security threats to the U.S. The presenter also referenced trade tariffs and the Taiwan Travel Act as further evidence that the U.S. is taking a more aggressive approach to U.S.-China relations. The Chinese presenter suggested delinking trade from the North Korean nuclear issue to improve policy coordination.

Another way to improve coordination was to hold the U.S.-DPRK summit in Beijing. American participants were divided over where the summit should be held. Some agreed that Beijing was one good option; others thought it was likely to be held in South Korea and others thought it should be held off the Korean Peninsula but not necessarily in Beijing. The Chinese presenter was quick to note that Beijing was a suggested location, not a necessity.

An American presenter was pessimistic about the prospects for both policy coordination between the US and China and a successful U.S.-DPRK summit. He noted recent DPRK public press statements that outline North Korea's ultimate goal of acceptance as a *de facto* nuclear weapons state. He sketched three options for the U.S.: resort to a military option to end the nuclear program; accept the DPRK as a nuclear weapons state and try to contain the program through freezes and deterrence; or ramp up pressure to an unprecedented level to compel the North Koreans to a stark choice between giving up the program or total collapse. The last option was the safest choice, and another American participant agreed that there is plenty of room to further sanction and isolate North Korea.

The American presenter recommended that the best way forward on U.S.-China policy coordination in the short- to medium-term was to be as transparent as possible with each other on the different interests and goals for outcomes on the Korean Peninsula and not to let these gaps grow. He also recommended that if China is serious about not accepting the DPRK as a nuclear weapons state, it should make clear what it is willing to do to prevent that outcome. In discussion, both sides generally agreed that the task at hand was to make the DPRK change their calculus on the value of pursuing a nuclear program at the cost of economic development and international cooperation.

American participants recommended that as much effort as possible goes into preplanning for the U.S.-DPRK summit to ensure the Trump administration can claim it as a success. If this prospect is either shaky or not possible, it would be better to postpone the summit and continue a pressure campaign until some common ground can be found than to proceed with a summit that might fail. One American participant characterized the coming months as an 'all hands on deck' situation. Another noted that China could be helpful in sounding out the DPRK on its intentions and the possibilities for finding overlapping interests.

Chinese participants reiterated that the U.S. needs to have a sense of what can be immediately offered to the DPRK in exchange for a commitment to denuclearization. If a freeze of military exercises is not possible, the U.S. will need to find alternate incentives.

An American participant with a great deal of experience in prior U.S. nuclear negotiations was optimistic that a deal on denuclearization can still be achieved. The major obstacle continues to be verification. In this regard, it would be very helpful for the DPRK to declare its capabilities, though it may not be possible to get this full declaration upfront. Still, the U.S. and others are working with limited information on North Korea's capabilities so any definitive, verifiable declaration of even part of the program would demonstrate political will and build mutual trust.

Conclusion

The conference highlighted some areas of agreement and potential pitfalls ahead in the summit process. In the coming weeks and months, attention would be best focused on improving the atmosphere for talks among all the major players. The situation on the Korean Peninsula is not taking place in a vacuum. The atmosphere in U.S.-China relations and U.S. alliance relations, as well as the international community's support will all affect and shape the environment for negotiations. In the interim, much time that is devoted to predicting the outcomes of the summit would be better spent on clearly outlining the parameters on which the U.S. can negotiate with North Korea, in close consultation with U.S. allies and with China.

**THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY'S (NCAFP)
FORUM ON ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY (FAPS)
PRESENTS**

**A CONFERENCE WITH THE DELEGATION FROM THE CHINA INSTITUTES OF
CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (CICIR)**

FRIDAY, MARCH 16, 2018

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