



## Is Spring Coming to the Korean Peninsula?

by Elizabeth Yeseul Woo

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 822, May 4, 2018

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** US President Donald Trump is expected to meet Kim Jong-un within two months. The Trump administration has little time to prepare, and it is unclear which Korean experts will be involved. It is also impossible to predict how Trump's negotiating style will be received. Pyongyang will not give up all its nuclear weapons immediately. Kim will likely propose a phased negotiation and a step-by-step denuclearization on condition that the regime's safety is guaranteed and the US-South Korean alliance is denuclearized beforehand.

According to the Pentagon, Russia and North Korea have increased the salience of nuclear forces in their defense strategies and have engaged in increasingly explicit nuclear threats. In a challenge to Washington's military superiority in the western Pacific, both Moscow and Beijing are pursuing entirely new nuclear capabilities tailored to achieve their national security objectives. The Korean peninsula – which is bordered by China and Russia – has thus taken on great geopolitical significance in the Asia-Pacific. It is vital that tensions on the Korean peninsula be kept from escalating.

Negotiating with North Korea is a challenging long-term proposition, and sanctions will need to remain in place for the foreseeable future. Pyongyang's nuclear development should be stopped entirely and stepped down to denuclearization. There are many views on how negotiations should proceed, but this much is clear: denuclearization of the Korean peninsula should be the ultimate goal.

Denuclearization is clearly not realistic at this time, but it will be the most important factor to ensure peace and stability in Northeast Asia. With that in mind, a peace treaty between the Koreas must be concluded. Because the

successful completion of denuclearization will be long and slow, tensions on the peninsula need to be kept as low as possible.

We already know Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and missile programs are well advanced. That technology is not going anywhere. Even if the US and North Korea commit to a nuclear deal, devices must be put in place to build trust and ensure that Pyongyang is implementing the deal's provisions. A strategy for addressing violations by North Korea will also be necessary.

Everyone hopes that spring is coming to the Korean peninsula, and Seoul has taken the first step towards a thaw in relations with Pyongyang. One should not forget, however, that complete denuclearization is the ultimate goal.

*Elizabeth Yeseul Woo is visiting research fellow at the Truman Institute and former Asia-Pacific Leadership Fellow from East-West Center. Her research focuses on Nonproliferation, Northeast Asia security and Russia-China-North Korea relations.*

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family