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Washington's North Korea Dilemma

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The June 30, 2019 meeting between President Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un at Panmunjom, the border between North and South Korea, reignited negotiations between North Korea and the US on the Singapore agreement. The gap between Washington and Pyongyang remains huge. The negotiation team will have to find new ways to weave together North Korea's Yongbyon offer and Washington's demand for full disarmament.

The Singapore Summit on June 12, 2018 between President Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un led to high expectations that tensions might be eased in the Korean Peninsula. President Moon Jae-in and Xi Jinping supported the summit and praised both leaders for meeting for the first time and working to find way to resolve the conflict after seven decades. The agreement the leaders signed in Singapore was written in general terms, and both sides continued to negotiate ways to implement what had been agreed upon therein.

The Hanoi Summit on February 27-28, 2019 was the meeting at which the leaders were expected to discuss specifics on implementing the Singapore agreement. The Hanoi summit failed to achieve its goal. While Pyongyang expected Washington to start to lift the sanctions once it began partial disarmament, Washington insisted that the sanctions would not be lifted until North Korea was fully disarmed.

The failure of the summit, notwithstanding President Trump's statement that it did not fail, left both states with a huge expectation gap. Trump used his visit to South Korea as a venue to meet again with Kim in order to find ways to bridge that gap. On June 30, 2019, Trump met with Kim at the DMZ, accompanied with President Moon. The bilateral dialogue between Trump and

Kim led to the renewal of negotiations between the American and North Korean delegations on the implementation of the Singapore agreement.

The Panmunjom meeting puts Washington in a dilemma.

The US has stated that it demands that North Korea fully disarm its nuclear, missile, and other non-conventional capabilities via a disarmament process that is verifiable and irreversible. Once Pyongyang begins (or, according to the more hawkish voices at the White House, at the end of) the process, Washington will consider lifting the sanctions.

Pyongyang is not willing to accept this demand. Kim Jong-un stated at the beginning of the Hanoi summit that Pyongyang has done its part, and Washington should now lift the sanctions. Pyongyang is not interested in waiting until disarmament is complete for the lifting of the sanctions.

Kim Jong-un has offered to dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear complex via a process that would include a verifying mechanism. In return, Pyongyang expects Washington to lift the sanctions. Later, Washington is expected to end the war with North Korea and improve relations between the two states.

Pyongyang's offer looks like a viable solution. However, in focusing solely on the Yongbyon complex, Washington would be allowing North Korea to keep its nuclear arsenal until negotiations reach the point that nuclear disarmament is discussed. Accepting Kim Jong-un's offer would allow Washington to start the disarmament process, but, it would not fully disarm North Korea and would allow it to hold onto its nuclear bombs for a longer period.

The US negotiation team will have to find a creative way to allow Washington to accept North Korea's Yongbyon offer. The agreement should include a road map that includes the dismantling of its other nuclear and non-conventional capabilities. The roadmap should include carrots and sticks that would prevent the reversal of this process.

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