

US-NORTH KOREA NUCLEAR RELATIONS: REVISITING THE PAST TO FIND POINTERS FOR THE FUTURE

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On June 12, 2018, Singapore witnessed history. For the first time, the sitting heads of two adversarial states—the US and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK)—came face to face with each other to sign a mutually agreed framework for establishing a peaceful Korean peninsula, primarily aimed at preventing a future nuclear crisis in the region. Considering that the US-DPRK have always had a faceoff-standoff kind of dynamics, this development indeed marked a fresh note after the US-DPRK relations had touched new lows, and the threat of the cancellation of talks had loomed large. The Singapore Summit that finally took place appears to be a step in the right direction. It produced a joint declaration¹ that captured the essence of Presidents Trump’s and Kim’s meeting in four points in less than 100 words.

Both countries put forward five major commitments: (i) to establish new US-DPRK relations, (ii) to make joint efforts to build lasting peace in the Korean peninsula; (iii) affirmation to the Panmunjom Declaration of April 27, 2018; (iv) work towards denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula; and (v) a commitment to recover the Prisoners of War (POWs), including immediate

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1. “Full text of US-North Korea Joint Statement in Singapore”, June 12, 2018. Available at <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180612/p2g/00m/0in/100000c>. Accessed on June 13, 2018.

Many experts have, however, expressed scepticism about whether this meeting would lead to anything substantial. Since the devil lies in the detail, it is suspected that a follow-up on these four broad commitments might end up tearing apart whatever mutual understanding the two countries have established.

repatriation. Though low on specifics, the document, nevertheless, makes a first step with valuable pledges.

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However, in the subsequent days, one can notice some follow-up on these pledges by both sides. For instance, the US-RoK (Republic of Korea) agreed to indefinitely suspend the military exercise Freedom Guardian, along with the delay of two Korean Marine Exchange Programme (KMEP) drills scheduled in the upcoming months. It is to be noted that these exercises were an annual routine in the US-RoK defence partnership. Last year's Guardian Freedom saw the participation of 17,500 American troops and more than 50,000 South Korean troops in the drills.² As a response to this, the DPRK has also signalled that it would cancel its annual "anti-US imperialism" rally,³ which is held every year in Pyongyang, commemorating the Korean War, usually utilised by the DPRK to signal its discontentment of the US. Additionally, it is reported that North Korea has also returned the remains of 200 US or allied Service members⁴ lost in the Korean War. It is noteworthy that both countries

2. "Pentagon Cancels Two More Military Exercises with South Korea", *Reuters*, June 23, 2018, Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/23/pentagon-cancels-two-more-military-exercises-with-south-korea>. Accessed on June 24, 2018.
3. Benjamin Hass, *Guardian*, June 26, 2018. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/26/north-korea-cancels-anti-us-imperialism-rally-pompeo-denuclearisation>. Accessed on June 25, 2018.
4. Emily Birnbaum, "Trump Says Remains of 200 US Soldiers Have Been Returned from North Korea", *The Hill*, June 23, 2018. Available at <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/393801-trump-remains-of-200-us-soldiers-have-been-returned-from-north-korea>. Accessed on June 26, 2018.

had agreed on this during the Singapore Summit.

While these developments can be viewed as an effort to promote goodwill and facilitate conditions for further positive engagement, those that closely observe US-DPRK interactions have often remarked that there is a pattern in US-DPRK relations. History has witnessed many occasions when both countries have agreed to be the facilitators of peace and stability in the region but have ended up in a devastating decay of their agreed commitments.

It is in their historical interactions that their mutual distrust of each other can be evidently viewed. This historical understanding of the US-DPRK relations can be utilised to assess what the near future might hold after the recent Singapore Summit. This becomes important in the light of the fact that the summit itself was cancelled once, and the run-up to the summit displayed a repeat of the pattern of their interactions. It is in this context that this paper delves deep into history to understand the recent fluctuations in the US-DPRK interactions, including the escalated nuclear war rhetoric on both sides that compelled some experts to label it as an escalating nuclear crisis.

SEPTEMBER 2017 NUCLEAR CRISIS

In September 2017, North Korea crossed an important nuclear threshold in its nuclear weapons programme.⁵ On September 3, 2017, Pyongyang conducted its sixth nuclear test which was claimed to be a hydrogen bomb test. However, experts differ on whether this test makes the North Korean nuclear threat potent and whether North Korea actually possesses the capability to build a hydrogen bomb. This test was reported as one of the

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5. David Santoro, "Three Futures for the Korean Peninsula", *Japan Review*, vol.1 no.3, Spring 2018, pp.73-78.

most powerful nuclear tests by the country, with a possible 100-kiloton yield. Interestingly, early in January 2017 itself, during his New Year's Day speech, Kim Jong-Un had announced that the country was in the last stage of preparations to test an Inter-continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). Later, during May 2017, the leader also hinted at a strong resolve in going ahead with the weapons programme when he declared a willingness to risk the country's friendship with its closest ally, China, if it tried to limit the North Korean tests. It needs to be recalled that by this time, the country had already tested its 12th Pukguksong-II Medium Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM), conducted its largest military drill ever in order to commemorate the 85th anniversary of the Korean People's Army (KPA) and also conducted the flight test of its ICBM, Hwasong-14, that coincided with the American celebration of their independence.⁶ It is noteworthy that in 2017 alone, North Korea conducted 15 nuclear and missile tests in total, including that of a hydrogen bomb.

Some observers have asserted that with these recent tests, the DPRK has demonstrated a capability of reaching the continental United States, while some others contend that the country has acquired the capability of intercontinental ranges with its missiles. In fact, post the September 2017 nuclear test, tensions escalated between the US and North Korea to an extent that the war of words transcended from "Pyongyang would be met with *fire and fury like never before...*"⁷, to the sending of the B-2 bombers by the Americans. Some of the prominent nuclear experts even viewed the nuclear crisis as transcending from a *proliferation problem to a deterrence problem*. Scott Sagan, in his recent *Foreign Affairs* article, viewed the overall play of these factors as posing immediate dangers, wherein the possibility of an *accidental war due to miscalculation, a misperceived military action or a false warning was alarmingly high*. The situation, according to him, was compounded because of

6. Ashutosh Kumar, *2017 North Korea Crisis and International Security Problem* (Aarti Prakashan), pp.94-107.

7. "Trump Vows To Unleash 'Fire And Fury'", *BBC*, August 8, 2017. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/40857783/trump-north-korea-threats-will-be-met-with-fire-and-fury>, Accessed on October 30, 2017; and James Griffiths and Brad Lendon, "US Warns of N Korean 'Provocations' as it Sends Bombers, Carriers To Region, 2017. "Available at <http://www.kabc.com/2017/10/30/us-warns-of-n-korean-provocations-as-it-sends-bombers-carriers-to-region/>

the presence of the *unpredictable and impulsive leadership on both sides*.⁸ Others viewed the Korean peninsula crisis as appearing to be “*the Cuban missile crisis in slow motion*”,⁹ with the presence of a relentless drive to assemble the nuclear arsenal, the propaganda and uncertainty surrounding the North Korean leadership, as well as hints of military action by the United States.

If one contextualises these observations with North Korean Minister Ri Su Yung’s response to President Trump’s United Nations General Assembly speech,¹⁰ one may discern the possibility of the crisis escalating into a larger military action, as the North Korean foreign minister clearly viewed President Trump’s speech as a “declaration of war on North Korea”.¹¹

The possibility of conflict on the Korean peninsula became very real, and it was perceived that it was US aggression that would bring about that conflict. Many in Seoul viewed this as being thrust directly into the line of fire by an ally.¹²

It is, indeed, true that tensions on the Korean peninsula in September 2017 had escalated to levels not anticipated, yet after almost six months of sabre-rattling, peace talks between the DPRK and ROK were held in April 2018 in order to resolve the crisis. Kim Jong-Un became the first North Korean leader to visit South Korea. This summit generated a lot of hope as it put the agenda of denuclearisation back on the negotiation table. Experts viewed it as the “start of a period of better relations between the two Koreas”.¹³

8. Scott Sagan, “The Korean Missile Crisis: Why Deterrence Is Still the Best Option”, *Foreign Affairs*, November -December 2017. Emphasis added.

9. David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, “The Cuban Missile Crisis in Slow Motion”, *The New York Times*. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/16/us/politics/north-korea-missile-crisis-slow-motion.html>. Accessed on January 9, 2018.

10. Kelly Swanson, “Trump’s Full Speech to the UN General Assembly”, “September 19, 2017. Available at <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/9/19/16333290/trump-full-speech-transcript-un-general-assembly>. Accessed on May 25, 2018

11. Hina Pandey, “Implications of North Korean Nuclear Exchange for South Asia: Hypothetical Reality and Possible Options”, *South Asian Voices*, November 27, 2017. Available at <https://southeastianvoices.org/implications-north-korean-nuclear-exchange-south-asia-hypothetical-reality-india-options/>. Accessed on April 28, 2018.

12. Karl Friedhoff, “Why Trump’s Cancellation of the North Korea Summit May Undermine the US-South Korea Alliance”, *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, May 24, 2018. Available at <https://thebulletin.org/why-trumps-cancellation-north-korea-summit-may-undermine-us-south-korea-alliance11847>. Accessed on May 26, 2018.

13. Ramon Pacheco Pardo, “The Inter-Korean Summit: When Moon Met Kim”, *ISDP*. Available at <http://isdpeu.org/expert-interview-the-inter-korean-summit-when-moon-met-kim/>. Accessed on May 17, 2018.

What was truly historic in all this was the establishment of a direct phone line¹⁴ between Presidents Moon and Kim. Other than that, Pyongyang had also offered direct talks with the US, as well as offered to halt its nuclear and missile tests as part of the understanding between the two Korean leaders.

PATTERN OF OSCILLATION BEFORE THE SINGAPORE TALKS

With everything in place to hold a US-DPRK Summit, a sudden halt came due to President Trump's announcement of the cancellation of the peace talks between the US president and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. This dimmed the prospects of normalising of the nuclear dynamics of the US-DPRK. It was rather strange for President Trump to have called off¹⁵ the talks approximately two weeks before the scheduled date—more confusing was the fact that within hours of North Korea destroying its Punggye-ri nuclear test site,¹⁶ President Trump decided to cancel the upcoming summit. It is to be noted that in his letter to the North Korean leader, he expressed regret for cancelling the talks and justified it as based on the “tremendous anger and open hostility displayed”¹⁷ by Kim Jong Un in his recent statement.

Even before President Trump's cancellation on May 15, 2018, North Korea too, had threatened to cut off the talks with South Korea as well as the planned US-North Korea Summit, citing the upcoming military exercises between the United States and South Korea as the reason. Interestingly, a day later, the US-South Korea military exercise “Max Thunder” took place,¹⁸ involving some 100 warplanes, including a number of B-52 bombers and

14. Yi Whan-woo, “Moon, Kim Connected with Direct Hotline”, *The Korea Times*, April 20, 2018. Available at https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/04/103_247603.html. Accessed on May 20, 2018.

15. “President Donald Trump's Letter to Kim Jong Un Canceling the Summit”, May 24, 2018. Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/24/politics/donald-trump-letter-kim-jong-un/index.html>. Accessed on May 24, 2018.

16. Choe Sang-Hun, “North Korea Said It Destroyed Nuclear Site, Hours Before Trump Canceled Meeting”, May 24, 2018. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/asia/north-korea-shuts-nuclear-test-site.html>. Accessed on May 24, 2018.

17. n.15..

18. “South Korea, US to Work Closely on Summit after Pyongyang's About-Face.” Available at <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/20/south-korea-us-to-work-closely-on-summit-after-pyongyangs-about-face.html>. Accessed on May 22, 2018.

F-15K jets.¹⁹ It is puzzling as to why after the Kim-Moon talks that resulted in the Panmunjon Declaration, the US-RoK conducted military Exercise “Max Thunder”, especially with B-52 bombers and F-22 stealth fighters, that not only symbolised nuclear capability but demonstrated the US’ ability to decapitate North Korea. What was most interesting was that in the last year’s “Max Thunder” Exercise, these aircraft had not been included. The DPRK’s perception of this exercise was that it was a demonstration of President Trump’s “fire and fury”, and not a routine exercise. Fitzpatrick has argued that may be “Max Thunder” was a way of showing that maximum pressure was still in play. The purpose could have been to pressure North Korea to make concrete concessions in the meeting.²⁰ What unfolded before the resumption of the Singapore talks can be viewed as a pattern of oscillation in the attempt at reconciliation, brushed by mutual distrust. Historically, too, the attempts to resolve the nuclear crisis in the Korean peninsula have been marked by extreme possibilities of achieving a breakthrough on the stalemate, on the one hand, and a complete halt of the negotiations, on the other.

US-DPRK NUCLEAR INTERACTIONS GOVERNED BY AMERICAN NON-PROLIFERATION STRATEGY

At the outset, what lies at the very base of the US-DPRK interactions must be spelt out. The very foundations of US-DPRK interactions have been within the framework of negotiations during nuclear crises. The Americans’ approach in all these interactions was driven largely by their non-proliferation objective – that is, to prevent new states from acquiring nuclear weapons capability. Thus, when North Korea was suspected of moving towards such capability in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Americans’ approach in their bilateral interaction was, indeed, very clear. Since the very beginning, the US non-proliferation strategy had dominated the US-DPRK interactions,

19. “N Korea Cancels Talks with South Korea and Warns US”, May 15, 2018. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44133308>. Accessed on May 18, 2018.

20. Mark Fitzpatrick, 2018, IISS, Available at <https://www.iiss.org/en/politics%20and%20strategy/blogsections/2018-4cda/may-ba86/on-again-off-again-korean-summit-3d0c>. Accessed on May 25, 2018.

It is ironical that most of the US-DPRK interactions occurred during the Clinton and Bush Administrations, and yet it was in these Administrations that their relations deteriorated the most. In both Administrations, the US missed the opportunity to reverse North Korea's nuclear pursuit.

broadly focussing on (a) preventing North Korea from acquiring nuclear capability; (b) preventing the spread of nuclear weapons technology to other nations; and (c) getting the country to remain within the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime.

Broadly, the United States had two significant opportunities to accomplish these goals. The first was during the 1990s period, when the US and DPRK interacted during four nuclear crises that had engulfed the Korean peninsula in 1993. The second was in 2000 when China was able to initiate

the Six-Party Talks (6PT). In both cases, the talks collapsed, leading to further deterioration of US-DPRK relations. It is ironical that most of the US-DPRK interactions occurred during the Clinton and Bush Administrations, and yet it was in these Administrations that their relations deteriorated the most. In both Administrations, the US missed the opportunity to reverse North Korea's nuclear pursuit.

Nuclear Weapons in the Region?

As mentioned earlier, the oscillation of talks and a similar pattern of bargaining and blaming had occurred between the US and DPRK in the period 1991-98, during which the Agreed Framework (AF) was negotiated, and once again, in 2003, when progress was made during the Six-Party Talks. Since the nuclear capability remained central to their interactions, a brief overview of how the nuclear variable entered the region is worthy of mention.

One can locate North Korea's decision to explore nuclear technology back to the days of the Korean War, when North Korea invaded South Korea in an attempt to unify the Korean peninsula by force. The war ended in a stalemate three years later, in 1953, with the signing of the Korean Armistice

Agreement (KAA) for 60 years. It is noteworthy that four years later, in 1957, the US NSC (National Security Council) began consideration of a proposal by Adm Radford concerning the introduction of nuclear weapons into South Korea. This was perceived by North Korea as a breach of paragraph 13(d) of the KAA that mandated both sides to not introduce new types of weapons and missiles. The unilateral American abrogation of the KAA occurred on June 21, 1957, when it notified the North Korean representative at the UN.

In August 1957, the NSC 5702/2 permitted the deployment of nuclear weapons in Korea. One year later, in January 1958, the nuclear armed Honest John missiles and 280 mm atomic cannons were deployed to South Korea. Thus, one can argue that it was, in fact, the US that introduced nuclear weapons into the region for the first time. The nuclear deployments by the US since 1957 continued in the Korean peninsula till 1993, simultaneously with the annual US-South Korean joint military exercises.

US: Nuclear Deployments in South Korea

During the Cold War, the United States deployed nuclear weapons in South Korea continuously for almost three decades, mainly from January 1958 to December 1993. Interestingly, the US rationale for such deployment was to deter aggression from North Korea, a country that did not have any nuclear capability, especially during the 1950s. The US deployment was also, to a great extent, to maintain its strategic presence against Russia and China. The Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953, had set the stage for such a deployment. The first US nuclear weapons that were deployed in South Korea, arrived four-and-a-half years after the Korean War ended, and

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four years after forward deployment of nuclear weapons began in Europe. Over the years, the numbers and types deployed in South Korea changed frequently. At one point, in the mid-to-late 1960s, as many as eight different types were deployed at the same time, and the arsenal peaked at an all-time high of approximately 950 nuclear warheads in 1967. However, over the following quarter century, the US nuclear arsenal in South Korea gradually declined as weapon systems were withdrawn or retired and conventional capabilities improved. By the early 1980s, the arsenal had shrunk to between 200 and 300 weapons, and it declined to around 100 by 1990.²¹

A recent report of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* shows a dramatic nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula shortly after the end of the Korean War. In fact, in 1958, the United States deployed four nuclear weapon systems, with approximately 150 warheads. The systems included the Honest John surface-to-surface missile, the Atomic Demolition Munition (ADM) nuclear landmine, and two nuclear artillery weapons, the 280-mm gun and the 8-inch (203-mm) howitzer. Nuclear bombs for fighter-bombers arrived next, in March 1958, followed by three surface-to-surface missile systems – the Lacrosse, Davy Crockett, and Sergeant – between July 1960 and September 1963. Within five years of the first deployment, the South Korea-based stockpile had ballooned to seven different nuclear weapon systems and 600 warheads in total. The dual-mission Nike Hercules anti-air and surface-to-surface missile arrived in January 1961, and, finally, the 155-mm howitzer arrived in October 1964. At the peak of this build-up, in 1967, eight weapon systems with a total of 950 nuclear warheads, were deployed in South Korea.²²

Four of the weapon types remained deployed only for a few years, while the others stayed for decades. The most enduring of them all was the 8-inch howitzer, the only nuclear weapon system deployed throughout the entire 33- year period. In 1974, for example, the US Air Force strapped nuclear bombs under the wings of four F-4D Phantom jets of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing parked at the end of the Kunsan Air Base runway (US Pacific Command 1975, vol. 1, pp. 264–265). The jets were kept in a heightened state

21. Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "A History of US Nuclear Weapons In South Korea", *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, vol. 73, no. 6, pp. 349–357.

22. Ibid.

of readiness, known as quick reaction alert, less than 610 miles (1,000 km) from Beijing and Shanghai, and 550 miles (890 km) from the Soviet Pacific Fleet headquarters at Vladivostok. Additionally, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, for example, the US Navy suddenly began conducting port visits to South Korea with nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). It made just a few visits in 1976 and 1978, but the frequency increased significantly with more than a dozen visits in 1979 and 1980. Over the course of five years, there were 35 SSBN visits, all to Chinhae, with some vessels visiting several times each year. All the visits were by older Polaris submarines that only operated in the Pacific; each carried 16 missiles with up to 48 nuclear warheads²³

While historical facts point to the Americans' introduction of nuclear capability in the region, it is not known whether in 1957 or prior to that, North Korea was considering its pursuit of nuclear weapons. It must be reckoned that for the DPRK, the suspicions concerning its pursuit of nuclear weapons capability surfaced later in the 1980s to the 1990s. While the country did have a nuclear technology base with the help of Soviet Russia as early as in 1959, as this was the year Soviet Russia and the DPRK signed the first civilian nuclear cooperation, in reality, the nuclear reactor was only delivered in the year 1962. The Soviet and DPRK civilian nuclear cooperation treaty, albeit with Soviet reluctance, continued until 1991—however, till today, the Soviet position on the DPRK remains that it did not support the DPRK's nuclear weapons capability. In any case, the historical fact is that there is no evidence to suggest that the DPRK was thinking about acquiring nuclear weapons capability before the introduction of nuclear weapons in the region.

Fast Forward to 1990s

In February 1990, the DPRK signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) based on the assumption that the US nuclear umbrella, the tactical nuclear weapons, would be removed in exchange for the DPRK's commitments to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Since North Korea had newly signed the NPT, the IAEA inspections were to

23. Ibid.

follow. However, by 1993, Pyongyang had stopped cooperating with the IAEA, which resulted in its referral to the UN Security Council (UNSC).

It must be reckoned that by 1992, Soviet intelligence²⁴ had confirmed that North Korea had actually completed a bomb. One year later, by 1993, Pyongyang had also expressed its intention of withdrawing from the NPT. The reason from North Korea was simple: it accused the US of not fulfilling its promise of cancelling the joint military exercise called “Team Spirit”, which according to Pyongyang, directly threatened its security interest. The second reason was the US not being able to establish a high level dialogue between the two countries. It is noteworthy that North Korea had opened its nuclear facility for the IAEA safeguards in exchange for these two demands.²⁵

It is to be noted that by this time, the US had already influenced the IAEA to conduct special investigations on the North Korean nuclear sites by showing the satellite imagery of a waste storage site next to the Yongbyon reprocessing facility; obviously, North Korea viewed this demand as unfair and rejected the IAEA’s request. It is important to note that these two sites were undeclared by North Korea. Additionally, it perceived these demands of the special investigations as being motivated by the US influence. Pyongyang actually perceived that it could meet the same fate as Iraq. On the other hand, this refusal led to the suspicion that the DPRK was intending to preserve the mystery of its nuclear past. For the IAEA, these inspections were deemed as necessary for concluding whether North Korea had produced enough plutonium for nuclear weapons.

It was this demand of special inspections that further worsened the US-North Korean relations as the US insisted on them as a precondition for any high level talks with the DPRK. On the other hand, Pyongyang also remained unbending, and perceived the US motivated UN sanctions, which were a response to the DPRK’s refusal, as a threat of war. However, in the subsequent months, bilateral talks began after the US dropped its precondition. This

24. Michael J. Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb: A Case Study in Non-Proliferation* (MacMillan Press, 1997).

25. James A. Bayer, “The North Korean Nuclear Crisis and the Agreed Framework: How not to Negotiate with The North Koreans”, *Asian Perspective*, vol. 19, no. 2, Special Issue on Security and Cooperation in Northeast Asia, Fall-Winter 1995, pp. 191-222.

time, a range of political and economic issues were discussed, including the prospects of the DPRK replacing its graphite moderated nuclear reactor with the Light Water Reactor (LWR) which is proliferation resistant, and the DPRK suspending its withdrawal from the NPT. Some progress was also made on DPRK and South Korea discussions for the implementation of the de-nuclearisation accord, and the continuity of regular, not 'special', inspections by the IAEA of the DPRK's nuclear programme. In the next few months, however, the IAEA had to bear the frustration of not being able to continue its inspections as the DPRK only permitted customised pre-approved inspections. This issue was raised by the IAEA in the UN General Assembly (UNGA).²⁶

Unfortunately, in response to this, the DPRK cancelled all its inspections when the US further pressured the DPRK by siding with the IAEA's position, along with a possibility of further economic sanctions; Pyongyang not only reciprocated by breaking off the talks but also threatened to start off the war in the Korean peninsula. On the policy front, this had resulted in the US' deployment of the Patriot missile in the Korean peninsula. After a continued standoff for months, the talks began for the second time by reaching a resolution on February 25, 1994, that reestablished the tradeoffs of the 1993 interim agreement. This time, the US also agreed to suspend the "Team Spirit" Exercise as earlier asked by Pyonyang. Yet, for the third time, the accord collapsed. By March 1994, the Korean peninsula had entered a third nuclear crisis. This time, Washington had reversed its position on opening the high level talks and made them conditional on actual exchange of nuclear envoys between the two Koreas. The DPRK further responded by interfering with the IAEA inspections and prevented the IAEA inspectors from carrying out tests that could have determined whether nuclear materials were moved out from the 5MW nuclear research reactor to the reprocessing plant at Yongbyon.²⁷

Once again, in the year 1994, the Clinton Administration cancelled the talks and resumed the "Team Spirit" Exercise. This time, the US also pushed

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

The Clinton Administration resumed its talks with North Korea, but, only a few days later, the IAEA's parallel negotiations with North Korea on the 'fuel rods segregation', etc. failed. This actually meant that the DPRK was attempting to destroy all evidence of any nuclear weapons history.

for UNSC sanctions; however, upon China's veto, only a statement asking for North Korea's compliance with the IAEA was announced. Moreover, Japan, and South Korea too supported the Chinese approach of a UNSC statement, instead of implementation of severe sanctions. Surprisingly, the DPRK dismissed this UNSC statement as well as the repeated attempts by the IAEA for inspections. Some hope was created when the US further delayed its joint military exercise with South Korea in anticipation of engaging North Korea directly. But the crisis began

to unfold for the fourth time in the period from April-June 1994 when the DPRK expressed its intent to refuel its research reactor at Yongbyon. This decision by North Korea was viewed as a problem—the country's attempt to reprocess could harvest enough weapons grade plutonium by the end of 1994. However, subsequently, North Korea allowed the IAEA to conclude its pending investigations. What triggered the change of heart is unknown, but it is argued that the prospects for US concessions offered earlier may have worked. A breakthrough was finally reached when, in its inspection results, the IAEA concluded that no evidence had been found that suggested that the DPRK had reprocessed plutonium in the period after 1993.²⁸

The Clinton Administration resumed its talks with North Korea, but, only a few days later, the IAEA's parallel negotiations with North Korea on the 'fuel rods segregation', etc. failed. This actually meant that the DPRK was attempting to destroy all evidence of any nuclear weapons history. North Korea went ahead, nonetheless, ignoring the warning of the UNSC. It dumped the fuel rods that the IAEA was looking to inspect. The US responded by strengthening further the economic sanctions and also called for an embargo on the sale or purchase of weapons and oil, including all financial transactions

28. Ibid.

and the remittances sent to North Korea by Japan. The US also demanded the DPRK's suspension in all international organisations, including on the UN's technical aid to the country. The US wanted to appear tough on North Korea as it wanted to send a message to other potential violators of the NPT such as Libya, Iran, etc. At this point, officials in the US State Department believed that if not curtailed, the DPRK could produce 5 or 6 nuclear weapons from the rod extracted from the 5MW reactor. It would also make progress on other nuclear reactors and in the near future, could possibly produce enough material for 10 bombs per year.²⁹

The Agreed Framework was to be implemented over 10 years in three phases. On the North Korean part, it agreed to remain an NPT member, implement the IAEA inspections, freeze its nuclear programme and eventually dismantle its existing nuclear facilities.

Once again, the sanctions proposal was met with fervent opposition by China at the UNSC. Japan too expressed its opposition to the proposal of a ban on remittances. In order to save face, the US then sent former President Jimmy Carter to meet with Kim-Il Sung. After many ups and downs, once again, a breakthrough occurred, with both countries resuming the bilateral talks and the US giving up the sanctions policy while the negotiations were underway.³⁰ The sudden death of Kim-Il Sung further created doubts but the successor, Kim Jong-il, too remained committed to North Korea's negotiations strategy. Yet the talks were unable to reach a compromise as the US expressed that it was prohibited by law to provide technology to enemy states—the case in point was the LWR that the DPRK was looking for. On the other hand, South Korea which could have assisted in giving the LWRs too, attached a precondition that the DPRK was to open its two nuclear waste dump sites for IAEA investigations. After many rounds of pushback on both sides, the Geneva Agreed Framework (AF) was reached between the US and North Korea. It committed the US to arrange for the LWR and also compelled the US to provide for alternative energy supplies of oil to end

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

the country's diplomatic and economic isolation. The Agreed Framework was to be implemented over 10 years in three phases. On the North Korean part, it agreed to remain an NPT member, implement the IAEA inspections, freeze its nuclear programme and eventually dismantle its existing nuclear facilities.³¹

Observations

It is evident that the first phase of US-DPRK negotiations went through many ups and downs. One can argue from the US perspective, that while it was not clear whether the DPRK possessed a full scale nuclear cycle for a nuclear weapon, it remained undeniable that the DPRK's intention was well known. Jina Kim (2014) has argued that the DPRK's choice of reactor—50 MWe (graphite moderate, gas cooled)—that was to be completed by 1995 had the negotiations not taken place, had already raised suspicions. It was suspected that it could produce upto 55kg of plutonium per year. Similarly, the other reactor of 200MWe, that began operation in 1989 and was expected to be critical by 1996, was assumed to be able to produce approximately 220 kg of plutonium per year. Furthermore, it was also known by this time (1992) that since 1986, North Korea had established a reprocessing facility which was disguised as a radio-chemical laboratory. At this point, it should be added that in 1992, the Soviets had conveyed information to the Americans³² about the possible nuclear pursuit by North Korea. Additionally, it was also known to the US through its own intelligence taken by a satellite photograph that there might be a plutonium separation facility in operation in the DPRK. This intelligence was available in the year 1989 and was corroborated by the French and Japanese intelligence as well. To add to that, the DPRK's (then) ongoing missile production had further strengthened the circumstantial evidence, as well as assisted in raising doubts that the DPRK was being honest in its dealings with the IAEA. Thus, one can argue that the US was engaged in the negotiations with an already preconceived notion of mistrust.

31. Ibid.

32. Mazarr, n.24.

On the other hand, there were definite delays on the part of North Korea in the ratification of the IAEA safeguards which was supposed to take place within 18 months after the DPRK ratified the NPT in 1992. However, at this juncture, Jina Kim points towards the IAEA's mistake which provided a wrong document to the DPRK. By the time it was corrected, another 18 months had gone by. Additionally, when finally the IAEA inspections were concluded, post the acceptance of the Safeguards Agreement, the IAEA demanded more inspections in June 1992 as it had concluded that some parts of the DPRK's programme were still unclear. The discrepancy lay in the amount of plutonium produced by the DPRK. The declaration of plutonium produced by the DPRK did not tally with the IAEA analyses, which prompted the IAEA to request for special inspections. However, the very fact that these IAEA observations and its preliminary assessment were revealed to the public could be responsible for North Korea's non-cooperation. These findings received enough media attention and speculation about the DPRK's intention and its alleged weapons pursuit was flagged internationally that further contributed in forming a negative perception about the country. Finally, the Agreed Framework was signed but with these misconceptions in the background.

Bush Administration's Flip on Agreed Framework

While everything seemed to be in place with the progress of the Agreed Framework, the succeeding Bush Administration took a more hardline approach to North Korea and even suspended the fuel oil shipments agreed to under the Agreed Framework during the Clinton Presidency. By the end of 2002, North Korea ordered the IAEA inspectors out of the country. The Agreed Framework had collapsed. Their relationship hit a new low in 2003 when the DPRK officially withdrew from the NPT, and within months, it became evident that the DPRK had at least one nuclear weapon.³³

33. Priyanka Boghani, "The U.S. and North Korea on the Brink: A Timeline", *Frontline*, April 18, 2018. Available at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-u-s-and-north-korea-on-the-brink-a-timeline/>. Accessed on May 22, 2018; and George Moore, "America's Failed North Korea Nuclear Policy: A New Approach", *Asian Perspective*, vol. 32, no.4, 2008, pp.9-27.

The Bush Administration's reengagement of North Korea occurred in the form of the Six-Party Talks, which manifested in a joint statement in 2005 that committed North Korea to once again give up its nuclear weapons programme, accede to the NPT and allow IAEA inspections, while keeping its right to peaceful nuclear energy. Yet, in 2006, provoked by the US targeting of its financial assets and the pace of the LWR project, the DPRK broke its moratorium on testing medium- and long-range missiles. Since then, the country has consistently conducted its nuclear and missile tests to acquire a nuclear deterrent against the US. It is indeed true that the American approach to prevent North Korea from going nuclear had failed, the answer to which partially lies in a lack of understanding of North Korea during the missed opportunities.

Why the US' North Korea Policy Failed

Neoconservative Takeover: Michael J Mazzar has argued that the Bush Administration had crafted an extremely poor strategy in dealing with North Korea. The Bush Administration had entered the White House without a clear foreign policy doctrine and it failed to articulate a coherent policy. He argues that President Bush's view that "dictatorships are morally reprehensible and cannot be trusted" actually formed the core attitude in the Bush presidency. In fact, the North Korean strategy was not even debated at the senior levels of the US government, which resulted in a strategic muddle. President Bush had perceived that Kim Jong Il, the North Korean leader (then), was a loathsome tyrant who did not deserve to be in power. Additionally, this lack of understanding was compounded by the presence of the varied unfortunate influence of the hawkish group that reflected a strong consensus on North Korea. This group included senior officials in the Administration such as Undersecretary of State John Bolton, the NSC's Joseph, aides to Vice President Dick Cheney, senior Defence Department officials, including Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld and the vice president himself. It is argued that all of them viewed the North Korean government as a brutal, Stalinist and tyrannical one, and believed that any economic and political engagement with Pyongyang implied prolonging

the life of a dangerous regime. It is to be recalled that it was the Bush Administration that had included North Korea in the axis of evil. Almost all these hardliners believed that since there were no prospects of North Korea giving up its nuclear weapons, negotiations meant a waste of time. Thus, they envisaged the preferred solution as a situation in which North Korea was to surrender its nuclear weapons and abide by the intrusive verification regime, without the US making any concessions.³⁴

Approach ABC: “Anything But Clinton”: Another reason for the failure of the US-DPRK talks also lies in the Bush Administration’s approach to the previous Administration, which George Moore has defined as “ABC: Anything But Clinton”. It is to be noted that President Bush felt that the Agreed Framework negotiated by the Clinton Administration was a terrible mistake and, thus, ought to be undermined. Hence, the Agreed Framework was always a non-starter in the Bush Administration. The first action he took was to review Clinton’s North Korea policy. He had serious doubts about its success and he wanted to undermine it. The only reasonable way to undermine the Agreed Framework was to impose more sanctions. Anything to strangle the North Korean economy and push it to the point of collapse was viewed as being in the long-term interest of the US vis-à-vis North Korea.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS: POINTERS FOR THE FUTURE

Live up to the Commitment

The forty years of history and the recent declaration reveal that if history is to serve as any guide for the future, one lesson that is worth incorporating is that both sides should live up to their commitments. While the suspension of the military exercise³⁵ is a good start, one needs to take a long-term view of it. President Trump, in one of his statements, referred to the military exercise as “provocative” and “expensive”. This, in a way, brands these exercises as

34. Michael J Mazarr, “The Long Road to Pyongyang”, *Foreign Affairs*, September–October 2007. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2007-09-01/long-road-pyongyang>. Accessed on May 4, 2018.

35. “S.Korea Says to Suspend August War Games with U.S.”, *Xinhuanet*, June 19, 2018. Available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/19/c_137264433.htm. Accessed on June 26, 2018.

One can argue that the US commitment to the RoK and Japan may come in conflict with the US commitment to indefinitely suspend the military exercises. How then, will the US live up to its commitment?

unnecessary, however, this may not be the view in South Korea. Additionally, it is not clear as to what kind of military exercises would be suspended and that too, for how long? It is to be recognised that the US-South Korea exercises go beyond Freedom Guardian, the one which is suspended indefinitely. It is noteworthy to point out here that even a bigger military exercise known as Foal Eagle, that is a joint field training exercise, lasting up to two months, is said to have been delayed, not suspended. Some scholars³⁶

have viewed this suspension without much enthusiasm largely because in the long run, this might seriously affect the US-RoK alliance. Will this trigger the US allies—RoK and Japan—to question the future of the alliance? One can argue that the US commitment to the RoK and Japan may come in conflict with the US commitment to indefinitely suspend the military exercises. How then will the US live up to its commitment? The American pledge to suspend military exercises with South Korea as a quid-pro-quo for denuclearisation is the core of the recent summit and any progress has to be built around it. This is a significant concession and an excellent step that has the potential for denuclearisation, because it mitigates North Korea's threat perception from the US-RoK and, thus, negates the need for North Korea to possess nuclear weapons. It is to be noted, however, that this may not actually be realised. Interestingly, this huge concession that involves the security of an important US ally, was given without even consulting South Korea. Even if it is assumed that these military exercises will be cancelled, how will the US assure South Korea that it (the US) will be a responsible security ally is not clear. Let us assume that it will do so by strengthening military aid, but will that not further strengthen North Korea's threat perceptions and make it unsure of 'peace and stability of the Korean peninsula', the second most important goal in the Singapore Summit?

36. Matts Engman, "Consequences of Suspending U.S.-ROK Military Exercises, *ISDP*, June, 20 2018, Available at <http://isdpeu/consequences-suspending-u-s-rok-military-exercises/>. Accessed on June 26, 2018.

Additionally, for North Korea, one has to understand that as Kim Jong Un has declared his country's nuclear deterrent complete, this further raises questions on the possibility of 'denuclearisation'. Additionally, US Secretary of State Pompeo³⁷ has already stated that the Trump Administration would regularly assess the regime's seriousness about abandoning its nuclear programme. To start with, on the idea of 'denuclearisation', the Singapore Declaration has shied away from making any mention of the comprehensive (sometimes complete) verifiable, irreversible disarmament (dismantlement) of nuclear weapons. Caution should be exercised while hoping that this goal of denuclearisation will be met any sooner, even when the declaration has said so. The first, obvious question that comes to mind is, "When has any country, after testing its nuclear capability ever given up its nuclear weapons capability"? The answer is, "Never". While there is no harm in being hopeful in the North Korean case, the reality militates against it. In this context, two separate but related variables need to be connected. The first is the constitutional amendment by the DPRK in 2012 that legitimises its pursuit of nuclear weapons and officially makes the pursuit of nuclear weapons and economic development of the country a goal to be achieved simultaneously. The second is the North Korean principle of *Juche*, the core philosophy of the country, which implies self-reliance and autonomy. According to scholars who observe North Korea closely, "The North Korean government has worked to inspire the entire nation with the *Juche* ideology..."³⁸ It is a coherent body of thought that reflects the North Korean understanding

Washington continues to demand that Pyongyang relinquish the nuclear weapons it already has. The Trump Administration has pledged that the North Korean regime will never acquire a nuclear missile that can hit the United States.

37. Elise Labott, "Exclusive: Pompeo Says no Timeline on North Korea Negotiations", June 25, 2018. Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/25/politics/pompeo-exclusive-north-korea/index.html>. Accessed on June 26, 2018.

38. Jina Kim, *The North Korean Nuclear Weapons Crisis: The Nuclear Taboo Revisited* (UK: Palgrave Mcmillian, 2014), p.42

of its dynamics of relations with other countries and also guides its perception of the international system. In this regard, it is important to ask the question, "By giving up nuclear weapons, a pursuit that was followed for more than three decades, how is the DPRK adhering to its *Juche* philosophy"?

Yet, Washington continues to demand that Pyongyang relinquish the nuclear weapons it already has. The Trump Administration has pledged that the North Korean regime will never acquire a nuclear missile that can hit the United States. Scholars such as Jervis view this as a more dangerous phase in the US-North Korean relationship. On the current scenarios, Jervis³⁹ is of the opinion that regardless of what manifests out of the diplomatic engagement, one can argue that the US is not likely to change the tools of engagement such as sanctions, deterrence, and even military force (or the show of it). It is important to ask at this point whether this will actually result in the normalisation of US-DPRK ties.

IAEA as an Honest Broker

The very day the Singapore Summit was concluded, a statement from the IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano welcomed this development. The head of the monitoring agency also remarked that the IAEA would be watching the negotiations further and is ready to undertake verification activities⁴⁰ that may be requested. Indeed, the role of the IAEA is significant. However, the history of their interactions suggests a mistrust for the IAEA by North Korea. For instance, in 1993, when the DPRK had warned about its NPT withdrawal, it announced it by sending a statement of notice in which it accused the "IAEA of violating its sovereignty and interfering in its internal affairs, attempting to stifle its socialism, and of being a 'lackey' of the United

39. Robert Jervis and Mira Repp Hopper, "Perceptions and Misperceptions on the Korean Peninsula: How Unwanted Wars Begin," *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2018.

40. Yukiya Amano, "Statement by IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano", June 12, 2018. Available at <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/statements/statement-by-iaea-director-general-yukiya-amano-on-dprk>. Accessed on June 27, 2017.

States".⁴¹ According to North Korea, the United States influenced the officials of the IAEA Secretariat and member states at the IAEA Board of Governors meeting on February 25, 1993, to adopt a resolution requiring North Korea to open its sites to inspections that were not nuclear-related.⁴² However, it is to be noted that one year ago, when the DPRK had newly ratified the IAEA safeguards agreement, in the subsequent days, as a requirement, it had provided the IAEA a 150-page report on its nuclear facilities and material, 25 days ahead of schedule. It also invited Hans Blix and the IAEA's head, with the inspection team, to Yongbyon for a tour of any site, even if unlisted. The DPRK reported to the IAEA not only completed but under construction facilities as well. However, the IAEA's conclusion that highlighted the DPRK's nuclear programme needed more clarification. The IAEA alleged that the DPRK was involved in several reprocessing campaigns, contrary to what it had claimed. This generated a sense of suspicion that undeclared material had been hidden in a secret facility elsewhere. When the IAEA demanded special inspections, which, earlier, it had never done, the DPRK resisted. The North Korean response was reciprocated by the resumption of the US-ROK military exercise and the reduction of the US Force Korea (USFK) was put on hold. Additionally, the ministers of foreign affairs from as many as 13 states in the Asia-Pacific urged the DPRK to again agree to the special inspections. As mentioned above, this demand was viewed by the DPRK as a grave violation of its national sovereignty. These issues of distrust might surface again considering that denuclearisation is still on the table, and the IAEA will play an important role. The DPRK's perceptions of the IAEA as an impartial entity are necessary. However, it is not clear as to what these are at this stage.

41. IAEA News Centre, (2018). Available at <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/dprk/chronology-of-key-events>. Accessed on June 27, 2018. It should be noted that on June 11, one day before its notice of withdrawal from the NPT was due to take effect, the USA persuaded North Korea to suspend the "effectuation" of its withdrawal and to accept normal IAEA inspection of the seven sites it had declared in the Initial Report to the agency. However, it withdrew its membership of the IAEA on June 13, 1994.

42. Ibid.

Role of China

Any pointers to the future have to include the role of China, as it is the only country that enjoys such a significant influence over the DPRK. Many questions come to mind when North Korea's nuclear weapons are discussed.

Scholars have argued that for all China's assumed influence over the DPRK, it is still puzzling to observe why China has consistently been reluctant to play a substantive role in diffusing the DPRK's nuclear weapons issue, considering its own opposition to the DPRK's nuclear programme. In this context, it is important to ask: what is the real attitude of China towards North Korea? Professor Kerry Brown of Chinese Studies at Kings College has observed, "...To many Chinese, North Korea... figure as a brother, is clearly regarded as a delinquent, one they not only dislike, but look down on⁴³..." He argues that China believes North Korea to be a problem, delinquent nation, and the best strategy is to let it muddle through, as taking responsibility would not help. Most importantly, China views the issues as bilateral between the US and DPRK and has often urged both parties to talk directly. Additionally, one must ask: what are the gains that China would make if the DPRK's nuclear issue gets resolved? The very fact that by letting this issue simmer, China also gets to ensure its leverage on the US, compels one to assume that China may not be truly invested in the DPRK's denuclearisation, if at all, that is taking place. Additionally, while assessing China's role, it is also imperative to ask whether China's influence is significant enough to induce North Korea to give up its nuclear capability?

FINAL OBSERVATION

This brings another important variable as a pointer to the future, that is, mainstreaming North Korea into the international community, more in terms of the economy, can be a long-term solution. While the Singapore Summit has been able to diffuse the escalating nuclear rhetoric of

43. Kerry Brown, "What Does China Really Think of North Korea", *Diplomat*, May 25, 2018.

September 2017, there is still a long way to go. Thus, to conclude, one may argue that the summit was able to produce an ambitious, non-binding document that may not result in any tectonic shift in the dynamics of the security and stability of the Korean peninsula; after all, it is easy to reach an agreement when the pledges are vague, unbinding, without concrete timelines or a methodology for progress, promising a hypothetical peace scenario. This seems like an ‘up-cycled’ promise of some de-escalation of tension between the US and DPRK, without substantial consequences for the future of the peace promised to the people. Finally, both sides must realise that they both have the opportunity to create a historic pathway towards the generation of peace, by reducing the threat of the presence of nuclear weapons in the Korean peninsula. While the US may find it useful to learn that extreme pressure campaigns might not work; North Korea, too, might find it useful to refrain from its habit of issuing threats of cancelling the talks and signalling non-cooperation. Indeed, the Singapore Summit has released many pledges. However, these valuable pledges are just that—‘pledges’—on which a lot of ground work needs to be done by both sides if these are to be actualised. One can argue that the summit did not produce anything substantially different from the previous commitments in past agreements, that could be ‘life altering’ to either US-DPRK relations or DPRK-RoK relations and the larger goal of maintaining the security and stability of the Korean peninsula.