

## The April 11 ROK-U.S. Summit: Assessment and Tasks Ahead

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On April 11, 2019, President Moon and President Trump held another summit in Washington, D.C., the first to follow the U.S.-North Korea summit that took place in Hanoi in late February. The main purpose of the talks was to make progress on the stalled denuclearization negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea, and discuss concrete ways to achieve the common goal of establishing complete denuclearization of North Korea and peace on the Korean Peninsula. The timing of the talks was critical since there were concerns that the speed of the ROK government's initiative to promote inter-Korean economic cooperation and normalization of the bilateral relations may weaken ROK-U.S. collaboration to solve the North Korean nuclear issue.

### Outcome of the ROK-U.S. Summit

At the bilateral meeting, the two leaders affirmed their commitment to maintain the momentum for dialogue and agreed that the top-down decision-making approach would continue.

At the White House press conference held immediately before the talks, President Moon Jae-in acknowledged that by virtue of President Trump's trust toward Kim Jong Un and direct engagement with North Korea, considerable progress has been made in securing

Pyongyang's moratorium on nuclear and missile tests. He also extended appreciation towards U.S. efforts toward the denuclearization and establishment of a peace regime on the Korean peninsula. President Moon underlined the meaning of the Hanoi Summit as "the part of a bigger process that will lead to a bigger agreement" and emphasized that the purpose of the bilateral talks was to demonstrate to the international community that the concerned parties will maintain a dialogue that would work toward holding the third U.S.-North Korea summit.

However, with regard to the core agenda that includes a roadmap for denuclearization and an incentive package to induce North Korea to change its behavior, the ROK fell short of securing U.S. support on the "good-enough deal," a compromise deal that characterizes a comprehensive denuclearization agreement with phased implementation. President Trump said the U.S. adheres to the "big deal" principle, while offering to consider a smaller deal if certain conditions are met. With regard to sanctions against North Korea, he stated that current levels were fair but an exemption for humanitarian assistance was possible.

In Hanoi, limiting the scope of denuclearization to only its nuclear programs, North Korea demanded that the U.S. take reciprocal steps for its phased denuclearization approach, which begins with the dismantlement of its Yongbyon nuclear facilities. In contrast, the U.S. insisted on relinquishing all WMD/missile programs in a comprehensive and proactive manner before it would consider appropriate responses such as sanctions relief and normalization of U.S.-North Korea relations. Recognizing this stark gap, the ROK government has stressed the importance of creating an environment where North Korea would have no choice but to abandon its nuclear program. That is, it has promoted a virtuous circle of trust-building between the two Koreas that is catalyzed by enhanced inter-Korean economic cooperation. This practical approach pursues a smaller, "early harvest" to prevent further growth of North Korea's nuclear arsenal rather than prolonging gridlock.

As the two governments make ceaseless efforts to find common ground to accomplish denuclearization, the two leaders agreed on the need to resume dialogue with North Korea and emphasized the willingness to cooperate. On April 15th, at a meeting with the chief of staff and presidential aides, President Moon Jae-in said that upon an agreement with President Trump, "the ROK and the U.S. agreed to work towards resuming U.S.-North Korea talks in a timely manner." The possibility of trilateral talks among South Korea, North Korea, and the U.S. was

raised, taking into account President Trump's scheduled visit to Japan in May, as an opportunity to continue U.S.-North Korea talks in Seoul.

### **What was achieved at the ROK-U.S. Summit**

At the recent ROK-U.S. summit, some small yet meaningful changes were observed in terms of dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue and more importantly, deepening the ROK-U.S. alliance. First, the talks helped dispel concerns that there is disagreement between South Korea and the U.S. over how to achieve denuclearization. Second, it helped specify the core agenda of future negotiations albeit the lack of substantive discussion. Third, it brought attention to the need to discuss the future vision of the ROK-U.S. alliance in addition to pressing current issues.

The greatest achievement is that the summit eased concerns about possible disagreement, even friction, between South Korea and the U.S. over how to realize denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and helped the ROK government to regain trust from the political community in Washington, D.C. President Trump made it clear at the press conference that he was willing to continue talks with Pyongyang and asked President Moon to once again "seize North Korea's intention," acknowledging his pivotal role in the denuclearization talks. It is a noteworthy change that the U.S. congress, which thus far has been most skeptical of leader-centric summit diplomacy in dealing with the denuclearization issue, has begun to recognize South Korea's mediation efforts anchored in the solid ROK-U.S. cooperation. In particular, opinions that differ from the mainstream have begun to surface, which will help find a compromise point between the ROK and the U.S. As a case in point, on the day of the summit, two House members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus(CPC) sent an open letter urging President Trump to support the ROK government's efforts to promote inter-Korean economic cooperation.

Second, the discussions for resolving the North Korea issue has deepened, complementing the specificity of the agenda. While the breakdown of the Hanoi summit revealed a gap between the U.S. and North Korea's denuclearization concept and implementation method, it provided an opportunity to identify the specific issues to be dealt with at the working-level. U.S. experts have begun to engage in discussions that include critical but less noticed agendas, such as possible fault lines in the ROK-U.S. alliance in dealing with the North Korean problem, Kim

Jong Un's actual authority over abandoning the nuclear weapons programs and domestic political conditions, and practical agreements to be pursued. Expanding the agenda has the effect of widening the negotiating space to adjust mutual expectations.

Third, the political communities in Seoul and Washington reaffirmed the importance of the ROK-U.S. alliance that is in essence, the driving force of the North Korea denuclearization talks. Particularly, the need to develop a future vision of the alliance as well as maintain the current levels of alliance cooperation has become acute. While discussions between South Korea and the U.S. thus far have focused on the bilateral cooperation for the denuclearization of North Korea, the ROK government's role, limitations and strategic concerns have now come to the fore. Furthermore, there is growing awareness that the ROK-U.S. alliance should pursue a comprehensive security alliance that is mutually beneficial and reinforced, which transcends a mere bilateral relationship. Four U.S. lawmakers, including Senator Cory Gardner(R-CO), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cyber Security, proposed a resolution advocating for the "strengthening and broadening of diplomatic, economic, and security ties between the two nations in recognition of the role of the ROK-U.S. alliance as the linchpin of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region."

### **The Tasks Ahead**

Although the summit confirmed that the momentum for maintaining denuclearization negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea is valid, it remains uncertain as to what final outcome can be achieved. The ROK government is faced with a difficult task to bring North Korea back to the negotiating table, while the U.S. position on sanctions remains largely unchanged. On April 15th, President Moon Jae-in announced that "now is the time to prepare and promote the inter-Korean summit." Another ROK-U.S. summit might be held in May. In the end, the key is to identify North Korea's genuine commitment to denuclearization and realize it, rather than argue over the "size" of the deal.