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North Korea: High-Level Engagement Lends Momentum to Talks

By Ambassador Tom Hubbard

As Chairman of the Korea Society in New York, I recently had the honor of introducing President Moon Jae-in when he addressed a distinguished group of friends of Korea at the Council on Foreign Relations following his participation in the UN General Assembly and bilateral Summit with President Trump. Along with other speakers I praised him for taking the lead in creating opportunities to reduce tensions and build peace on a Korean Peninsula that is free of a nuclear weapons threat.

Indeed, we have come a long way since this time last year. A year ago, we were watching the North Koreans carry out increasingly threatening nuclear and missile tests and worried about imminent war on the Peninsula. Now, nearly a year has passed without provocative North Korean tests, and far from talking about war, we engaged in an unprecedented flurry of top-level meetings, beginning with President Moon's meeting with Kim Jong Un at Panmunjom following the Winter Olympics. Thanks to this initiative and President Trump's willingness to follow up with his own meeting with Kim in Singapore, we appear to have unprecedented momentum toward progress on the Korean Peninsula. Before the end of this year, the North Korean leader is expected to pay a first visit to Seoul, and Trump and Kim are likely to meet again in somewhere in the world.

I'm often asked if I'm optimistic about North Korea. My answer is that I'm relieved that we are all talking to each other but that it is too soon to be more than cautiously optimistic about the outcome. I have several concerns.

First, the series of meetings has thus far produced more movement on North-South issues than on the broader international concern of denuclearization. The joint declarations issued in Panmunjom and Pyongyang have included important steps toward reconciliation and some confidence building measures that should reduce military tensions. That is good news, but the North Koreans have thus far offered only vague promises of denuclearization, conditioned upon corresponding steps by the US. We still do not have an agreed definition of denuclearization nor

a clear idea of what North Korea expects those corresponding steps to be. It is encouraging that, at President Moon's insistence, the South and North are discussing denuclearization more directly than ever before. However, President Trump's upcoming meeting with Kim Jong Un will not be a success if he does not emerge with more concrete commitments on denuclearization than he did in Singapore.

Second, as we move through this series of meetings, the US and South Korea need to stand solidly together. Our interests are more closely intertwined than ever before. President Moon cannot achieve his ambitions for peace on the Peninsula without the support of President Trump, who wants to achieve a legacy of peace on the Peninsula but cannot do so without "solving" the nuclear issue. Both sides need to be sure that stresses over such issues as when to issue a peace declaration, whether to loosen sanctions, or when to resume military exercises do not diminish our solidarity as we head toward crucial talks with the North.

Finally, we are engaged in an unprecedented top-down negotiating process, with national leaders more engaged than ever before. President Moon and President Trump are taking a great risk in dealing directly with the unpredictable North Korean leader without knowing whether he is really prepared to give up his nuclear deterrent in exchange for economic progress. Most experts believe Kim Jong Un continues to want both economic development and nuclear weapons. That may be his great gamble. The fundamental challenge before us is to persuade him that he can't have both, that nuclear weapons are incompatible with his aspirations for peace and prosperity. That will require not only a warm atmosphere, but also alliance solidarity behind a credible combination of pressure and incentives.

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