On April 11, in Washington, a summit between South Korea and the US was held. The two countries’ leaders, Moon Jae-in and Donald Trump, discussed a wide range of issues, concentrating on resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem. In a press release, summarizing results of the summit, both sides confirmed their quest for establishing peace and achieving full denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. The leaders noted the importance of continuing close coordination and cooperation on matters pertaining to North Korea, and discussed the “enduring strength” of the South Korea-US alliance, “which remains the backbone of peace and security on the Korean peninsula and in the region.”

During the negotiations, the two sides gave high marks to the improvements that were added to the revised free trade agreement between South Korea and the US. On that note, Trump noted the investments of South Korean companies in the American manufacturing industry, including the automobile sector, in support of US jobs and exports.

Prior to the summit, the media of Russia, South Korea, among others, spread the message that “it’s hard today to speak about the possibility of a third North Korea - US summit, and continuation of dialogue between Pyongyang and Washington,” and this shows “the necessity of Seoul’s participation in the dialogue as a mediator.”
If Trump spoke about a “great deal,” which involved concessions in exchange for full denuclearization, then Moon used such terms as “good enough deal,” and “early harvest.” They anticipate gradual encouragement of the North while extending to them concrete measures for denuclearization: for example, relaxation of sanctions in exchange for closing down the Yongbyon reactor. It is to be understood that in case of an incident, the former level of pressure can be fully restored.

In reality, as a number of experts have stated, they were not proposing to relax sanctions in general, but those related to inter-Korean cooperation, namely the Kaesong industrial complex and the Kumgangsan tourism project.

Even in South Korea not everyone supported these ideas. Koh Yoo-hwan, a political advisor of the Blue House’s Security Council, believes that, since North Korea never said that it would completely cease all its nuclear and missile developments, President Moon will have a good deal of difficulty to convince Trump. On the other hand, Pak Cheol Hee, a professor of international relations in the Seoul National University, believes that the goal of the summit between President Moon and Trump is to maintain the impulse for negotiations about denuclearization, and discussions about relaxation of sanctions can examine the restrictions that affect the lives of ordinary citizens. That is so South Korea’s civil groups may have the opportunity to send humanitarian aid to the North.

These were the results of the summit’s main direction:

- South Korea’s President confirmed his commitment to holding the next inter-Korean summit. In response, Donald Trump asked to be kept up to date with changes in North Korea’s positions during the inter-Korean contacts. Accordingly, North Korea’s media stated that “Moon Jae-in’s mediator role has acquired more concrete and official characteristics.”
- The leaders of both countries also affirmed their position on maintaining the “Top Down” dialogue format, which presupposes decision making at the level of state heads, with subsequent implementation at the working level. This is despite opinions about the limitations of this approach, which appeared after the fruitless Hanoi summit. But besides that, the heads of the two countries noted that, despite the absence of concrete agreements, this meeting took on great importance.
- The format of a “good enough deal” was not discussed. In addition, Donald Trump stated that it is still “not the appropriate time” for resumption of operations of the Kaesong complex and tourist trips to the North Korean Kumgangsan mountains. However, Trump hinted that “various small deals” may also happen if there is significant progress in the North’s denuclearization.
- Trump reminded everyone of his readiness for dialogue with North Korea’s leader and affirmed that he has good relations with Kim. “Kim Jong-un has been, really, somebody that I’ve gotten to know very well and respect, and hopefully - and I really believe that, over a period of time, a lot of tremendous things will happen.” On April 13 he tweeted that he and Kim are in agreement that a third summit would be good.
- Trump noted the necessity of sanction pressure on North Korea, but stressed that applying additional sanctions is not under consideration, and they “are at a fair level.” “Frankly speaking, I had the opportunity to increase them significantly. I didn’t want to do this because of my relations with Kim Jong-un.”
- With regard to economic cooperation between the South and North, that topic must be considered in parallel with the denuclearization process.

As should have been expected, South Korea’s ruling circles and opposition expressed conflicting opinions about the summit’s results. The ruling Democratic Party Toburo stated that the parties conducted successful negotiations, affirming the union’s bilateral strength. The parties of Just Future, for Democracy and Peace, and the Justice Party stated that the summit affirmed the friendly nature of the two countries’ relations, and also maintained the thread of dialogue between North Korea and the US. The largest opposition party, Liberty Korea Party, felt that the summit was worthless. Na Kyung-won, the leader of the parliamentary fraction, Liberty Korea Party, went even further by stating that the meeting was so incomprehensible that even the object of the president’s trip was questionable. Overall, the view of conservatives is that the formats “good enough deal” and “early harvest” in essence represent North Korea’s method for gradual denuclearization.

The absence of progress along other lines attracted attention. There were no new agreements. Defense of the interests of South Korean companies in the trade war was not successful. And the matter of an agreement to share expenses for support of the American military contingent was not raised.
No, they tried to resolve the real problems at the working level. In Washington, on April 13, South Korea’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Finance, Hong Nam-ki, met with the US Secretary of the Treasury, Steven Mnuchin, as part of the meeting of the Group of 20 countries’ finance ministers and central bank directors. Hong appealed to his American colleague to lend support for the exclusion of the auto industry’s products from the list of targets for tariffs. Mnuchin, however, stated that he completely understood the substance of the request, but a final decision on this matter has not been made.

What has Moon’s visit meant for further dialogue between Pyongyang and Washington? In truth - nothing. According to sources, Kim was ready to close down the Yongbyon reactor back at the Hanoi summit. Moreover, talks by US’s leadership about a third summit taking place in the visible future first started even outside the context Moon’s visit. For instance, on April 2, Michael Pompeo during his latest interview, stated that the meeting between the leaders of North Korea and the US will take place in the “very near months.” Additionally, the State Department reported that the Secretary of State discussed with UN officials the matter of providing food aid to children and victims of natural disasters.

More likely, against the backdrop of intrapolitical problems, it is very important for Moon to position himself as the main mediator between North Korea and the US, without whose help progress is impossible. The question of whether or not this is true is difficult since, in this author’s view, the pace of dialogue sped up when the Americans and North Koreans had the opportunity to speak directly without such “help”. However, the Korean masses have believed. According to a poll conducted by Realmeter between April 8 and 12, the level of support for South Korea’s President Moon Jae-in rose by 0.7% in comparison with the previous week, comprising 48%.

And with that, President was not persuaded to turn a great deal into a good enough one. However, Trump had nothing against an additional communication channel, and now Moon Jae-in faces the task of having Kim Jong-un sit at the negotiating table during the next inter-Korean summit. For now, neither the time nor place for an inter-Korean summit has been determined. However, it’s most likely that the meeting will take place on April 27, when one year will have passed since the announcement of the Panmunjom Declaration.

Back on April 10, the Blue House’s media asserted that Moon would seek the US’s approval for sending a special messenger to Pyongyang to organize such a meeting. National Security Advisor Chung Eui-Yong gave hints about the same.

But there will be subsequent materials by the author about this, as well as about the state of current inter-Korean cooperation.

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