Outcomes of Meeting between US and DPRK Representatives on 4 - 5 October 2019

On 1 October 2019, Choe Son Hui, First Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK, released a statement saying that North Korea and the United States had agreed to hold a meeting between their respective working groups on 5 October. Later on, it was reported that the talks would take place in Stockholm. And then the North Korean delegation headed by Kim Myong Gil, the Roving Ambassador of the Foreign Ministry, arrived there via Beijing. The previous meeting (which lasted 3 days) between Choe Son Hui and her U.S. counterpart, Stephen Biegun, had also been held in Stockholm in January 2019.

South Korea’s presidential administration welcomed DPRK’s decision. While fielding questions from members of ROK’s National Assembly during a session of its Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee, Foreign Minister of South Korea Kang Kyung-wha said that the outcomes of the negotiations on 5 October would depend on the extent of flexibility both sides would be prepared to show.

Naturally, there were questions about the agenda of this meeting as well as expert forecasts regarding its outcomes prior to the talks in Stockholm. Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell even suggested that “President Donald Trump could eventually accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state” as long as Pyongyang agreed to “partially dismantle its nuclear weapons program” in exchange for relief from sanctions.

On 3 October, two sources “familiar with the issue”, who had asked not be identified, told the Korea Times that the United States had “unofficially” promised “North Korea “low-level” sanctions relief including a partial resumption of tourism at Mount Geumgang.

Other rumors of this nature came from Vox Media, an American digital media company based in Washington D.C., which reported that the United Nations was going to lift sanction on textile and coal exports from the DPRK for 36 months in exchange for the closure of the Yongbyon nuclear facility and the end of North Korea’s uranium enrichment program. Vox also claimed “US President Donald Trump promised North Korean leader Kim Jong-un during their meeting at Panmunjom in June that he would sign a declaration to end the Korean War which is technically ongoing – as only an armistice was signed – and cancel a joint military exercise with South Korea”.

We would like to remind our readers that in July 2019, Yonhap News Agency published an article “citing a source close to the White House” that said “Washington would support suspending the UN sanctions on Pyongyang’s coal and textile exports for 12 to 18 months” if Pyongyang agreed to dismantle its main nuclear facility at Yongbyon and halt its nuclear program. At the time, the US State Department denied the report saying it was “completely false”.

Time also made similar claims citing officials from the White House. According to the magazine, Donald Trump’s aides made a number of different proposals aimed at renewing negotiations with the DPRK during the meeting of the National Security Council on 1 October. The aforementioned suggestion was among them, and if the United Nations were to refuse to lift the sanctions, advisors to the US President recommended halting enforcement of these restrictions during the 12 to 18 month period. Donald Trump supposedly agreed to the proposal as, on account of Pyongyang’s submarine missile launch, he decided that it was important to restart and continue the negotiations with North Korea despite its efforts to develop dangerous weapons.

Donald Trump’s opponents were most probably behind these reports. And the latest developments remind the author of the times before the summit in Hanoi, when U.S. President’s enemies began to leak information about documents
On 4 October, the deputy chiefs of countries' delegations Mark Lambert of the USA and Kwon Jong-gun of North Korea were supposed to attend the pre-negotiation session in a conference hall of Villa Elfvik Strand on the island of Lidingo. And it is unclear whether the meeting between Kim Myong Gil and Stephen Biegun had taken place or not. Curiously, South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not send any officials to Sweden. And, during a parliamentary review, ROK's Ambassador to the United Nations (UN), in no uncertain terms, urged North Korea to alter its "course" and reject the notion that time could be on their side. He said that there were no guarantees that the position of Donald Trump's administration would remain flexible and ensure its willingness to engage in dialogue.

On 5 October, the bulk of negotiations took place, and both sides described their outcomes in very different ways. According to the Dagens Nyheter newspaper, Kim Myong Gil spoke to journalists after the talks, saying he was disappointed that the United States had brought "nothing to the negotiation table", and that the fate of any future North Korea-U.S. dialogue depended on the United States.

Kim Myong Gil told the journalists "The US raised expectations by offering suggestions like a flexible approach, new method and creative solutions, but they have disappointed us greatly, and dampened our enthusiasm for negotiation by bringing nothing to the negotiation table". Having thus expressed his dismay, Kim Myong Gil then proposed a suspension of talks with the United States until the end of the year. He demanded the USA come up with mutually acceptable proposals to either keep the dialogue alive or "forever close the door to dialogue". Kim Myong Gil also said that whether or not Pyongyang "would lift its self-imposed moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests" was completely up to the United States.

In turn, spokesperson for the U.S. Department of State Morgan Ortagus stated "The early comments from the DPRK [North Korean] delegation do not reflect the content or the spirit of today's 8.5-hour discussion." "The U.S. brought creative ideas and had good discussions with its DPRK [North Korea] counterparts," she said, adding "The U.S. delegation previewed a number of new initiatives that would allow us to make progress in each of the four pillars" of the joint statement issued after the first North Korea–United States summit in Singapore in June 2018.

Morgan Ortagus noted “The United States and the DPRK [North Korea] will not overcome a legacy of 70 years of war and hostility on the Korean Peninsula through the course of a single Saturday." In addition, she said the U.S. representatives had accepted an invitation from Sweden to return to the negotiating table in two weeks to continue the talks.

Sweden’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde also said that the working-level negotiations between the DPRK and the United States, held in Stockholm, had been constructive. During an interview with the Sveriges Television (SVT) channel, the head of the ministry noted that the two sides had not reached any specific agreements, but also stated that if the DPRK and the United Stated decided to have another meeting, Sweden would be happy to provide both sides with comprehensive support.

On 6 October, South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement saying that although, in fact, no progress had been made during the negotiations, Seoul hoped that the dialogue would resume. Later on, a spokesperson for ROK’s Foreign Ministry pointed out that South Korea would continue to play the role of a mediator and collaborate with the United States in order to keep the dialogue with North Korea going. A spokesperson for ROK’s Ministry of Unification also stated that it was too early to say that there was no longer any impetus for negotiations, after all the fact that the meeting had taken place was significant in itself as both sides were able to understand each other’s positions better following a 7-month break after the talks in Hanoi had failed.

The same day, in response to views expressed by the American side regarding the negotiations, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of DPRK, issued a statement clarifying its stance. It said that North Korea had approached “the negotiations with expectations and optimism that the U.S. side would think and act in a proper way.” However, “The trite stance shown by the delegates of the U.S. side at the negotiations venue made us feel that our expectations were no better than an empty hope and rather increased a doubt as to whether the U.S. truly has a stand to solve the issue through dialogue." Most importantly, the statement said "We have no intention to hold such sickening negotiations as what happened this time before the U.S. takes a substantial step to make complete and irreversible withdrawal of the hostile policy toward the DPRK, a policy that threatens the security of the country and hampers the rights to existence and development of its people." Hence, North Korea’s stance has not changed since its leader gave a speech in April when he said that unless the United Stated changed its approach there would be no dialogue between the two sides. And the statement ended as follows “We have clearly identified the way for solving
problem, the fate of the future DPRK-U.S. dialogue depends on the U.S. attitude, and the end of this year is its deadline.”

From the author’s point of view, the situation in Hanoi, in part, had repeated itself in Stockholm. Since Donald Trump’s opponents publicly claimed that he would make unacceptable concessions during the talks, the U.S. was forced to take a step back which caused dismay among the North Korean side.

Still, we would like to point out that although Pyongyang was clearly disappointed with the talks and chose to wait until the end of the year to see if any further changes occurred and then to prepare plan B, Americans were much more optimistic about the negotiation process. And possibly, they have adopted this stance not only with the view of creating a good impression within the United States. Since the talks actually lasted for 8.5 hours, they were not simply a part of a formal event that both sides had attended only to slam the door on any possible negotiations in the future.

After the summit in Hanoi, Donald Trump’s hands were “tied” for a certain period, but since Robert Mueller’s investigation ended and did not yield any ammunition for the President’s opponents, the internal political climate in the USA improved. Hence, the decision was made to continue the talks with North Korea. However, such processes need time, but, in the meantime, the scandal over Donald Trump’s conversation with Volodymyr Zelensky erupted and the Democrats used it as an opportunity to begin an impeachment inquiry. Therefore, once again the U.S. President had limited room to maneuver.

Other than that, the author would like to point out that Kim Jong-un’s strategy will in large part depend on who he thinks will become the U.S. President in 2020. After all, neither the Democrats nor conservative Republicans are likely to choose the direction the relationship between the United States and the DPRK is currently taking. This means that, despite a good personal relationship between the two leaders (if Donald Trump has been honest in his descriptions of it), from a political perspective, it is not to Kim Jong-un’s benefit to sign any agreements that, a year and change later, could be deemed as not in line with wishes of the American people. Naturally, until the end of Donald Trump’s presidential term, the two sides will try to maintain the current status quo. However, DPRK’s launch of the ballistic missile from a submarine could (if so desired) be used by hard liners to put an end to the dialogue.

Konstantin Asmolov, Ph.D, Chief Research Fellow of the Center for Korean Studies, Institute of Far Eastern Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.