Since the failure of February 2019’s summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un, relations between the US and North Korea have been put on hold, with no active dialogue, but no nuclear crisis or military stand-off. On the one hand, Pyongyang has avoided any talks on the question of denuclearization. On the other hand, it is still complying with the moratorium on the testing and launch of long-range rockets, even though some commentators had predicted that North Korea would resume its previous course when Joe Biden took office. The US has also stopped talking about the “big deal” scenario and the “complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement” (CVID) of North Korea’s nuclear program.

Washington is doing whatever it can to restart the talks with Pyongyang. Wendy Sherman, US Deputy Secretary of State, has confirmed that the US has contacted North Korea, but Pyongyang has not responded - although it is still taking every opportunity to make its presence felt.

Ned Price, Spokesperson for the US Department of State has reiterated on a number of occasions in the last six months (August 3, September 9, September 24, October 7, October 14, October 26, and November 8) that the US is ready to enter into talks with North Korea at any time and in any place, and that Washington has no hostile intentions and that its offer to enter into dialogue is still open. And, no less frequently, White House representatives Jen Psaki and Jalina Porter have reiterated this message.

On August 6, during the regional ASEAN forum, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken repeated that Washington was still ready to meet authorized officials from North Korea for talks at any time, anywhere, without preconditions.
However, An Kwang Il, North Korea’s ambassador to Indonesia, ignored these calls.

On September 21, in an address to the UN General Assembly in New York, Joe Biden stated that the US was seeking serious and sustained diplomacy to pursue the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. He added that Washington sought “concrete progress toward an available plan with tangible commitments that would increase stability on the Peninsula .... as well as improve the lives of the people in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.”

On September 23, Mark Lambert, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Japan and Korea at the US Department of State, also said that the US would “go anywhere” to talk with North Korea, but that “unfortunately, they have not responded to date.” He also added that “We will continue to support the provision of humanitarian aid, consistent with international standards for access and monitoring, to the most vulnerable North Koreans, regardless of progress on denuclearization.”

However, Donald Trump’s role in bringing about the current situation has been swept under the carpet. For example, on August 23 the US Department of State published a fact sheet on bilateral relations with North Korea. The document states that the US works closely with allies and partners to achieve “greater peace and security in the region” and that in the past, it provided food and other aid to North Korea in response to famine and natural disasters, but that it does not currently provide any aid to Pyongyang. But, significantly, the document made no reference to the summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un.

Despite the US proposals for talks, the general trend is “one step forward, three steps back.” For example, on October 7, Ned Price stated that the US would continue to provide humanitarian aid to North Korea even if the denuclearization talks failed to make any progress. He described providing humanitarian aid to Pyongyang as “critical”, but blamed the North Korean regime for the suffering of its people as it “continues to exploit its own citizens, to violate their human rights, to divert resources from the country’s people to build up its unlawful WMD and ballistic missiles program.” Ned Price reiterated that the goal of the US remained the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, and to that end, “we remain prepared to meet with the DPRK without preconditions, anytime, anywhere.”

North Korea has also continued to stick to its previous position. In an address to the UN General Assembly on September 27, Kim Song, North Korea’s ambassador to the United Nations, said that if the US wants to help bring about peace on the Korean Peninsula, it must stop the joint military exercises with South Korea, and its placement of strategic weapons in that country. “I am convinced that a good prospect will be opened for US - DPRK relations, and inter-Korean relations, if the US refrains from threatening the DPRK and gives up its hostile towards it. If the US shows its bold decision to give up its hostile policy, we are also prepared to respond willingly at any time,” he added.

Also on September 27, the North Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) referred to the US as the “most heinous human rights abuser” for using human rights as a means to put pressure on other countries and assert its global dominance. It cited examples of human rights violations by the US, including its decades long blockade of Cuba and its use of the problems in Xinjiang and Hong Kong to threaten China’s political stability.

On October 31 the North Korean Foreign Ministry accused the United States of acquiescing in the proliferation of nuclear weapons around the world, citing its decision to share nuclear submarine technology with Australia. According to the KCNA’s statement, the North Korean Foreign Ministry saw the creation of an alliance between Washington, London and Canberra as a “dangerous act which will upset the strategic balance in the Asia-Pacific region and may trigger a nuclear arms race.” The statement added that if that decision caused any threat to North Korea’s security, then North Korea would immediately respond accordingly.

On November 3, Kim Song called for the dismantlement of the US-led United Nations Command (UNC) on the Korean Peninsula, claiming that it is only serving the political and military interests of Washington, which is using the command to occupy South Korea and exert influence in the region.

Experts from the US and South Korea have interpreted the situation in a number of different ways, and some have offered unexpected advice to resolve the crisis. According to an article in the Korea Times by former diplomat Paul Tyson, there is little likelihood of a summit between Joe Biden and Kim Jong-un in the near future. He considers that the meetings between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un brought some benefits. The threat of war receded, but now it is unlikely that Kim Jong-un will negotiate with anyone less than the US President. Paul Tyson therefore proposes the renewal of talks at a high level, perhaps with a meeting between US Vice President Kamala Harris and Kim Yo-
Harry Kazianis, a senior director at the Center for the National Interest think tank, considers that following the US’s withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan, it has more pressing problems than North Korea. This conclusion is supported by a survey of US public opinions conducted by the Associated Press from August 12-16, in which only 47% of respondents said that they were concerned about North Korea’s nuclear program. According to the survey, the greatest threats were seen as fake news (75%), cyberattacks (67%), domestic extremist groups (65%), the spread of infectious diseases (65%), the growth of China’s global influence (57%), climate change (53%), foreign extremist groups (50%) and the Iranian Nuclear program (48%).

Andrew Kim, formerly a Korea specialist at the CIA, believes that Pyongyang wants two things. Firstly, it wants an official declaration (rather than just spoken promises) confirming that Washington is ready to negotiate without any preconditions. Secondly, it is likely that North Korea wants the US to confirm that it is committed to an “action for action” approach.

Joseph DeTrani, former US envoy for the six-party talks with North Korea, has elaborated on the need for a “catalyst to reinstitute dialogue with North Korea”, such as an official declaration on the end of the Korean War, as repeatedly proposed by Moon Jae-in. "This would be a confidence building gesture to the North."

Donald Gregg, who served as a CIA officer and US ambassador to South Korea from 1989-1993, believes that the US should be more proactive in its attempts to resume talks with North Korea and break the impasse. In his view Joe Biden’s administration is in a more advantageous position than Kim Jong-un’s regime, and Washington should therefore reach out to Pyongyang. He also emphasized the need for efforts to build trust.

Jun Bong-geun, professor at South Korea’s National Diplomatic Academy, has commented that it is important to be aware that North Korea's nuclear and missile programs are “in full swing” and that the longer the denuclearization negotiations are further delayed, the more nuclear warheads and missiles North Korea will develop. Moreover, once North Korea becomes confident that it has an effective nuclear deterrent it will ask for exorbitant compensation for denuclearization, such as the suspension of all joint military exercises between South Korea and the US and the withdrawal of US forces. In an even worse case scenario, it could simply refuse to participate in nuclear negotiations at all, and become a de-facto nuclear-armed state like India or Pakistan.

Nevertheless, he believes that the current pause in the dialogue means that both parties are still in reality committed to the “action-for-action”, but that neither party is taking any action.

He sees the Iranian nuclear model as a possible way forward for the talks with North Korea, citing the views expressed by Antony Blinken, currently US Secretary of State, who proposed this approach in his columns for The New York Times back in 2018. He is aware that the dialogues between the US and North Korea, and between the two Koreas, can only begin again in earnest once COVID-19 has ceased to be an obstacle, but in the meantime, he suggests that Joe Biden send Kim Jon-un a personal letter proposing negotiations to fulfill the four goals set out in the Singapore Statement. “Once Kim receives Biden's letter, he will be tempted to reply positively.”

How long will this situation continue? This author believes that nothing will change as long as both sides have little to gain from resuming talks - especially given that North Korea is far from the top of Joe Biden’s list of problems. To venture a prediction, it is possible that in the near or even medium term both sides will try to avoid inflaming tensions, but that two possible scenarios could make the situation worse: a renewed confrontation between the US and China, or a change of policy in South Korea, perhaps as a result of a Conservative election victory.

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