

North Korea: What 18 Months of Diplomacy Has and Has Not Achieved

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Overview

Since President Trump agreed in March 2018 to hold a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to discuss North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, the Trump Administration's strategy has appeared to be based on the presumption that developing a leader-to-leader relationship will produce more results than the working-group approaches taken by previous administrations. Trump and Kim have held three meetings: in [Singapore](#) (June 2018); [Hanoi](#) (February 2019); and Panmunjom (June 2019). Since March 2018, Kim also has met on five occasions with Chinese President Xi Jinping, three with South Korean President Moon Jae-in, and one with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Overall, these diplomatic efforts have produced a marked reduction in tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and Trump and Kim appear to have developed a personal relationship that Trump [says](#) ultimately could produce a breakthrough. Kim has pledged to denuclearize, and has maintained a unilateral moratorium on nuclear tests and *long-range* and *medium-range* missile tests.

Kim's public denuclearization promises, however, have been conditional and vague. North Korea has done little to dismantle its nuclear program and [appears to be advancing its military capabilities](#). In addition to continuing to produce fissile material, since May 2019 North Korea has conducted multiple *short-range* ballistic missile (SRBM) tests, which violate United Nations prohibitions, apparently attempting to advance its solid fuel and guidance systems and [develop capabilities to thwart short-range missile defense systems](#).

U.S. and DPRK positions do not appear to have moved closer to each other since the February 2019 Hanoi summit ended without an agreement due to differences over the scope and sequencing of concessions, specifically DPRK denuclearization measures in exchange for sanctions relief. The two countries have yet to agree upon a definition of denuclearization; whether and when North Korea will identify and declare all its nuclear weapons-related stocks and related facilities; if an agreement will include North Korean missiles, chemical weapons, biological weapons, and/or conventional forces; and the mechanisms for verifying any agreement, including inspection and monitoring arrangements. China, Russia, and to a lesser extent South Korea have called for a relaxation of sanctions on North Korea.

At Panmunjom in June 2019, Trump and Kim [agreed](#) to restart talks, but as of early August none had been held. North Korea [said](#) it would not to enter talks if the United States and South Korea proceeded with joint military exercises that commenced on August 5. The exercises are significantly reduced in scope due to President Trump's decision following the June 2018 Singapore summit to cancel larger-scale bilateral exercises. Trump's order, combined with his stated skepticism of alliances and demands for steep increases in allies' contributions to the costs of hosting U.S. troops, have raised questions in South Korea and Japan about the reliability and durability of U.S. security commitments.

Looking ahead, U.S. negotiators face the question of whether to aim for incremental dismantlement of North Korea's WMD programs in step with gradual sanctions relief, or to try for a "[big deal](#)" and demand complete denuclearization in exchange for full sanctions relief. A related question is whether the Administration would accept partial denuclearization as an outcome of talks, and what specifically such a bargain would entail. The possibility of full sanctions relief in exchange for denuclearization could reduce the number of tools available to challenge North Korea on other issues, [including human rights](#), money laundering, and its cyberspace activities.

Key Developments Since March 2018

North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programs

- Kim publicly [agreed](#) to "work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," [pledging](#) "permanent dismantlement" of nuclear facilities in Yongbyon—an important nuclear site—"as the United States takes corresponding measures." He promised to dismantle North Korea's Sohae missile and satellite launch site in the presence of international inspectors, and agreed to allow experts to visit a nuclear test site that North Korea says it has disabled.
- North Korea has not tested nuclear weapons or test-launched *long-range* or *medium-range* missiles since November 2017. In March 2018, South Korea said Kim [promised](#) to suspend "strategic provocations," including nuclear tests and ballistic missile test launches, while dialogue continues. In Panmunjom, Kim [reportedly](#) made a similar pledge, but did not include SRBMs. Trump has said he has "[no problem](#)" with North Korea's 2019 *short-range* missile tests.

Diplomatic and Economic Developments

- North Korea and China have restored close diplomatic relations. The relationship had been strained since Kim became leader in 2011.
- Several countries [appear](#) to be enforcing international sanctions against the DPRK less robustly than before the rapprochement began. The United Nations has documented North Korea's efforts to evade sanctions, including ship-to-ship transfers of oil and coal in the waters off China and Russia's coasts.
- In 2018, North and South Korea opened a permanent liaison office near Kaesong, North Korea. Progress in inter-Korean relations largely has been frozen since the Hanoi summit, however, exemplified by North Korea's apparent July 2019 [refusal](#) of a South Korean humanitarian donation of food. International and U.S. sanctions prevent Seoul from pursuing many projects Moon favors.
- The DPRK, ROK, and the United States have agreed to build a "peace regime," which could start with a declaration formally ending the Korean War.
- The U.S. and DPRK have discussed exchanging diplomatic liaison offices.

Military Developments

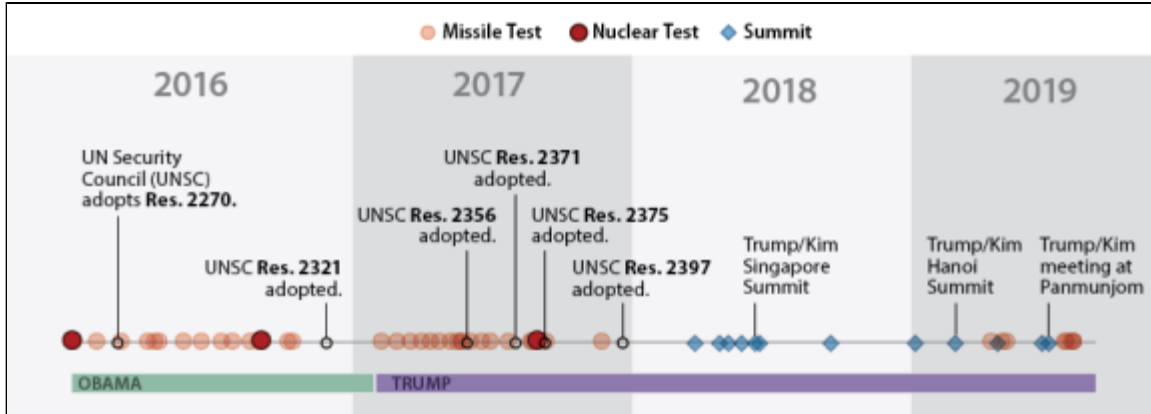
- The two Koreas have taken several [military confidence-building measures](#), including reducing military activity around the border and removing guard posts along their demilitarized zone (DMZ). U.S. military forces have been involved in implementing the measures, occasionally producing U.S.-ROK tensions.
- Trump unilaterally cancelled major annual U.S.-South Korea military exercises. Subsequently, Congress inserted provisions to condition the president's authority to reduce U.S. troops in South Korea into defense authorization legislation ([P.L. 115-232](#); [H.R. 2500](#) and [S. 1790](#) in the 116th Congress).

Other Developments

- North Korea has released three American detainees.
- In 2018, North Korea repatriated the remains of possible U.S. Korea War-era troops. In 2019, [no progress](#) has been made on this issue.

Timeline of North Korean Nuclear and Missile Tests,

U.N. Sanctions, and Major Summits



Derived from various publications. Missile tests include *long-range*, *medium-range*, and *short-range* missiles.