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Trump Could Get a Win with North Korea This Time, by Taking Lessons from His First Term

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Stephen Costello
Non-Resident Fellow
Quincy Institute

Executive Summary

All indications are that the Trump administration will once again pursue direct talks with North Korea. In doing so, it should learn from the mistakes of the failed 2018–19 U.S.–North Korea negotiations and seize the opportunity for a transformative nuclear agreement with Pyongyang.

During the previous negotiations, it appears that North Korea offered ending the production of new nuclear weapons in exchange for civilian sanctions relief. In part due to the participation of hard-liners such as John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, who were hostile to President Trump's desire for a deal during his previous term, this offer was rejected and the talks failed. However, stopping the production of new fissile material, nuclear weapons, and long-range missiles would be highly beneficial to the United States and our allies and well worth ending nonmilitary sanctions.

A similar deal should be pursued in new talks. Beyond the immediate benefits of ending the production of new weapons, such a deal could set up a diplomatic framework to address and diminish the North Korean nuclear arsenal over the long term. Building trust by concluding and adhering to an initial deal would be critical to any such effort.

Adopted by the U.N. Security Council in 2016 and 2017, the current nonmilitary sanctions on North Korea amount to collective civilian punishment without any productive purpose. Rather than providing leverage, these sanctions have prevented diplomacy, intensifying Kim Jong Un's intransigence and desire to further bolster his regime's nuclear program. By lifting these nonmilitary sanctions, the Trump administration could chart a new path forward toward North Korean buy-in to the international nonproliferation regime, International Atomic Energy Agency inspections, and, possibly, the long-term goal of denuclearization.

South Korea should be integrally involved from the planning stages to the deal's signing and management. Such support will help to diffuse tensions with North Korea toward the long-term goal of peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula. The United States should also seek Chinese backing of the deal, offering a credible guarantor of its implementation, while opening space for further U.S.–China nuclear diplomacy.

Introduction

U.S. President Donald Trump seems to want to try again to meet with Kim Jong Un of North Korea and perhaps finally strike a mutually beneficial deal. A new agreement would be difficult given the history of relations between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK. For a generation, American leaders have struggled to define their interests in Northeast Asia, formulate policies, and implement them.[1] Top officials who would now have to cooperate on a new initiative would have to overcome decades of conflicting analysis and missed opportunities since their predecessors last experienced success at dealmaking with North Korea.

Despite evolving North Korean capabilities since Trump last met with Kim in 2019, the interests of regional parties have not changed significantly. Washington and its East Asian allies and partners would still benefit greatly from halting Pyongyang's nuclear weapons development as well as reduced tensions, increased commerce, and expanded political interaction. North Korea and China would also benefit. Meanwhile, the DPRK is still unable to access the broader global trade space.

Stopping Kim's production of new nuclear material, weapons, and long-range missiles should be the earliest goals of the first deal. After that, bringing him into the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, Missile Technology Control Regime, and other agreements could become realistic goals of U.S. policy. Ideally, a commitment to aim for full denuclearization should be agreed, even if the timeline is a decade or more. However, these long-term goals become possible *only* after the U.S. administration demonstrates

[1] Van Jackson, *Pacific Power Paradox: American Statecraft and the Fate of the Asian Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

that it can and will lift the five nonmilitary sanctions requested by the DPRK six years ago in Hanoi as part of the first deal that verifiably stops production.

The basket of issues surrounding the Korean Peninsula is at the heart of regional tensions and impacts political and security affairs and economic development. A realistic outline for progress is not difficult to sketch out, but implementing it would require heavy lifting from the new administration's national security team. This brief is a review of what went wrong in Trump's first term, how U.S. capabilities could be used this time, and what a new approach to North Korea could look like.

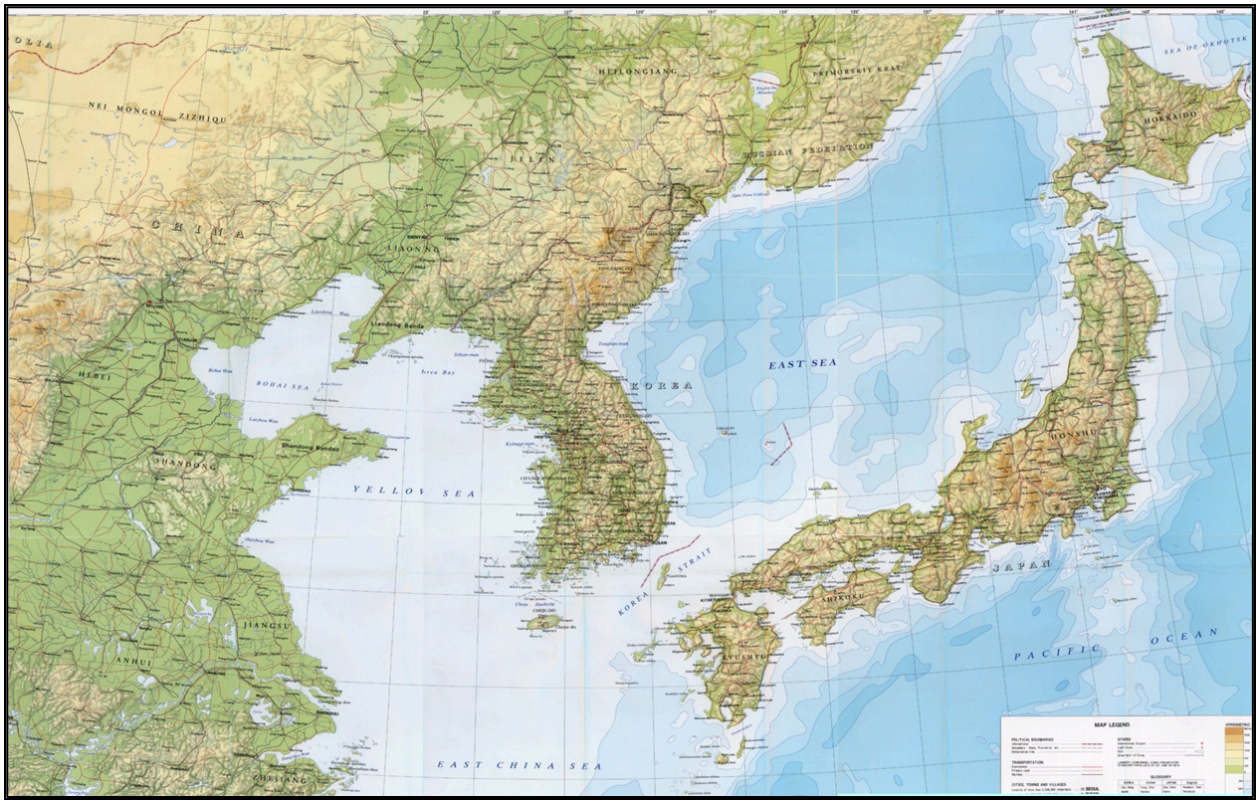

Figure 1: Map of the Korean Peninsula and Japan

What went wrong with U.S. policy toward North Korea in Trump's first term?

In his first term, Trump faced the wreckage of decades of inconsistent and badly grounded policymaking by Washington. The 1990s saw a realistic and strategically valuable U.S. approach to North Korea, under both U.S. Presidents George H.W. Bush

and Bill Clinton. Those diplomatic initiatives culminated in the Agreed Framework of Oct. 1994, which froze the DPRK's plutonium production under an on-the-ground inspections regime by the International Atomic Energy Agency, or IAEA.

In exchange, the United States created a new organization, the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization, to oversee the provision of proliferation-resistant "lightwater" nuclear power reactors to the North. Because of the extensive practical and diplomatic activity that the Agreed Framework established, it could have transformed the security, diplomatic, and economic profiles of the Korean Peninsula and the Northeast Asia region. The wide-ranging advantages to U.S. interests from this decade-long process were significant and could have expanded upon.

However, the inauguration of George W. Bush in Jan. 2001 signaled the reversal of the previous White House view of U.S. interests.[2] Many observers have noted a large break between the relatively functional policymaking structures of the first Bush and Clinton administrations and those of the second Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden teams. The National Security Council in particular worked quite well until 2001 — under Brent Scowcroft, Tony Lake, and Sandy Berger — using input from the State Department, intelligence community, and others. The NSC was then eclipsed in favor of a small group of policymakers with little input from outside the White House.[3] Democrats followed Republicans in limiting input to policy and did not rebuild the apparatus.

This problem has not only been specific to U.S. policy toward Northeast Asia but also to broader American foreign policies. George H. W. Bush's effort to liberate Kuwait in Operation Desert Storm and Bill Clinton's Agreed Framework with North Korea are in stark contrast to George W. Bush's Iraq and Afghanistan invasions, Barack Obama's

[2] "Bush's Deferral of Missile Negotiations with North Korea: A Missed Opportunity," *Arms Control Today* 31 no. 3 (Apr 2001), https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2001-04/features/bushs-deferral-missile-negotiations-north-korea-missed-opportunity.
[3] David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006).

failure to resuscitate the Agreed Framework with Pyongyang, and Joe Biden's failure to reenter the nuclear deal with Tehran.

In parallel, the capability of senior policymakers at the White House and the State and Defense Departments has declined. On policy toward Northeast Asia, the Bush administration in the early 1990s included Arnold Kanter and Donald Gregg in addition to the president's broad institutional and international experience. The Clinton team included Robert Gallucci, Stephen Bosworth, Winston Lord, Joseph Nye, Al Gore, and Ken Lieberthal. Together with significant authority from their presidents, these officials and others had backgrounds and experience that have not been matched in subsequent U.S. governments.

Those two structural elements — a broken and constricted policymaking machinery and cabinet members lacking input and buy-in to policy — have kneecapped policymaking and implementation. Add to that the increased importance of the chief executive's knowledge and instincts, and the system risks a perfect storm of dysfunction, even if it gains wide latitude in the president's ability to set policy. Korea issues have been a primary victim of these institutional mistakes.

A deal that would have concretely advanced U.S. interests was probably left on the table in 2018–19. We do not know how alternative scenarios would have played out. But we do know much about what the DPRK put on the table, and we have the example of its attempt in Hanoi to meet some of the expanded requirements from the U.S. side.

Experienced nonproliferation experts have been clear that the United States should have taken the deal that was possible in Hanoi.[4] It was fundamentally an exchange: Dismantling all of the Yongbyon nuclear facilities — plus beginning to talk about further capping and rolling back the rest of the program — in exchange for the lifting of the five "extreme" sanctions, which do not impact security.

The Seoul–based Korean daily newspaper *Hankyoreh* reported on March 2, 2019:

[4] Jeffrey Lewis, "Opinion: Trump Just Walked Away from the Best North Korea Deal He'll Ever Get," NPR, March 1, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/03/01/698909173.

> During a press conference that was held at the Melia Hanoi, Kim Jong–un's hotel, shortly after midnight on Friday, Mar. 1, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong–ho rebutted U.S. President Donald Trump's claim that North Korea had asked for sanctions to be lifted in their entirety. "We only asked for relief from the five sanctions resolutions that the U.N. Security Council adopted between 2016 and 2017, and in particular the aspects of those sanctions that interfere with the civilian economy and the people's livelihood," Ri said.[5]

Sanctions adopted by the U.N. Security Council in 2016 and 2017 contained nonmilitary and nonsecurity elements. Relief from those items that impacted the broader economy was the main requirement from the North Korean delegation in Hanoi. The five key broad-based sanctions that affected the civilian population were:

- a ban on transfers of coal, minerals, machinery, and various other key sectors
- a ban on all refined petroleum products
- restrictions on the supply, selling, or transfer of crude oil
- a ban on selling all seafood
- a ban on the export of textiles from North Korea.[6]

A preference for shallow images of coercion over concrete achievements of cooperation has resulted in the formation of a new nuclear state where there was none before. Resistance to lifting sanctions on North Korea is partly grounded in the belief that broad-based sanctions on the civilian population are "leverage" that is too valuable to give up. Scholars of sanctions have regularly pointed out that this belief is false. [7]

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[5] Noh Hyung–woong, "Analyzing the Type of Sanctions Relief that North Korea Wants," *Hankyoreh*, March 2, 2019, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/884236.html.
[6] United Nations, "Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1718 (2006)," Security Council, Sanctions Committees, https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/1718; Arms Control Association, "U.N. Security Council Resolutions on North Korea," Jan. 2022, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/un-security-council-resolutions-north-korea.
[7] Daniel Wertz, "Converting Maximum Pressure to Maximum Leverage: The Role of Sanctions Relief in Negotiations with North Korea," Korea Economic Institute of America, April 9, 2019, https://keia.org/publication/converting-maximum-pressure-to-maximum-leverage-the-role-of-sanctions-relief-in-negotiations-with-north-korea; Ruediger Frank, "Rethinking Sanctions against North Korea: Strategic

Sanctions are far more likely to drive the subject into increased resistance, expanded defense, and development of alternative markets and alliances. This has been the case with North Korea.

The U.S. fell prey to wishful thinking that it could substitute other offers in place of the essential demand of sanctions relief. It is remarkable in hindsight that several experienced policy mechanics working to support Trump and his administration were unable to make clear to them what would work and what would not. The president went ahead without any medium- or long-term plan and did not promote clear and realistic goals before the meeting.

The seat-of-the-pants nature of this effort was exposed in the weeks before the meeting, when two close advisors, Stephen Biegun and Andrew Kim, said clearly at Stanford University, at separate events, that Trump would not meet Kim's central concerns.[8] Specialists who had been following these issues knew at the time that some sanctions relief would be the essential condition for Kim — and logically so.[9]

From Pyongyang's point of view, a route to expanded trade and international economic interaction has been its consistent desire for decades. Yet Trump entered the meeting in Hanoi with no plan to use the leverage of sanctions relief. It is hard to see how this meeting could have succeeded.

Top U.S. officials were hostile to the idea of any kind of deal. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton in particular were particularly

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Shifts and their Implications," *38 North*, May 18, 2022, https://www.38north.org/2022/05/rethinking-sanctions-against-north-korea-strategic-shifts-and-their-implications.

[8] "Transcript: Andrew Kim on North Korea Denuclearization and U.S.–DPRK Diplomacy," Stanford University, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Feb. 25, 2019, https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/transcript-andrew-kim-north-korea-denuclearization-and-us-dprk-diplomacy; Melissa De Witte, "Economic Prosperity in North Korea Is Part of U.S. Diplomatic Visions, Says U.S. Special Representative for North Korea at Stanford Event," *Stanford Report*, Jan. 31, 2019, https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2019/01/outlining-u-s-diplomatic-strategy-north-korea.

[9] Kelsey Davenport, "North Korea Pushes for Sanctions Relief," *Arms Control Today* 48, no. 10 (Dec. 2018), https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-12/news/north-korea-pushes-sanctions-relief; Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Here's Why Kim Jong Un Put Sanctions First — and Why North Korea Is Not Vietnam," *Washington Post*, Feb. 28, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/02/28/heres-why-kim-jong-un-put-sanctions-first-why-north-korea-is-not-vietnam.

unlikely to agree to any exchange that would be acceptable to North Korea, no matter what the details were. Both had policy and ideological histories that left little room for the realpolitik needed by Washington in the case of Pyongyang. Trump would have at least needed to explain to them how their concerns would be addressed in any agreement. This kind of briefing would have been necessary for Republicans in Congress and press briefers as well. In this sense, the need for Trump to brief his team and give them marching orders went unused.

The failure of Kim and Trump to come to an agreement made both rapprochement and beginning the work of denuclearization more difficult. Attempts to explain the outcome such as "Sometimes you have to be willing to walk" masked a deeply malfunctioning diplomatic structure.[10] In fact, this missed opportunity led directly to anger and disillusionment in North Korea and, eventually, to a far more radical turn away from South Korea and the United States and toward Russia and China.[11] These developments following the missed opportunities in Hanoi signaled significant, major setbacks for U.S. interests in the region and those of its allies. Continued DPRK isolation and impoverishment fuel arms proliferation, increase U.S.–China and North–South Korean tensions, and put off economic development.

America's South Korean and Japanese allies were not used to the advantage of the United States. This oversight demonstrated that a U.S. go-it-alone approach to a major diplomatic initiative in the region is impractical. The United States can instead expand its diplomatic power and legitimacy by linking a new deal to significant goals and interests of its allies. Governments in Seoul and Tokyo were constrained by

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[10] Trump, quoted in Eliana Johnson, "'Sometimes You Have to Walk': Why Trump Bailed on North Korea," *Politico,* Feb. 28, 2019, https://www.politico.com/story/2019/02/28/trump-north-korea-summit-1195227.
[11] Hyunsu Yim and Hyonhee Shin, "North Korea Blows Up Inter–Korean Road, Rail Lines Near Border," Reuters, Oct. 15, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-blows-up-parts-inter-korean-roads-its-side-s-korean-military-says-2024-10-15; Kelsey Davenport, "North Korea Ends Inter–Korean Military Agreement," *Arms Control Today* 54, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 2024), https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-02/news/north-korea-ends-inter-korean-military-agreement; Kelsey Davenport, "North Korea, Russia Strengthen Military Ties," *Arms Control Today* 54, no. 6 (July/Aug. 2024), https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-07/news/north-korea-russia-strengthen-military-ties; Khang Vu, "Why China and North Korea Decided to Renew a 60-Year-Old Treaty," *The Interpreter*, July 30, 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/why-china-north-korea-decided-renew-60-year-old-treaty.

Washington's approach, with no way to address or put aside their divisive public and government conflicts. Each has large investments in its North Korea policies and could reap great benefits if new diplomacy moves forward.

Public confusion marked the end of the Hanoi meetings. In the hours and days following the summit, it was the North Koreans who accurately revealed the deal's outlines. Trump, Beigun, and Pompeo said the DPRK had demanded the lifting of "all" or "virtually all" of the sanctions. In fact, sanctions on all military-related or strategic items would not have been affected.[12] Only those on civilian or multiuse items necessary for commerce would have been lifted. The lack of clarity about the U.S. position has added to both the United States and Trump's lack of trustworthiness in the eyes of the North Koreans and many observers.

How can Trump and his team use precious diplomatic leverage and achieve a win this time?

In order to test whether a new round of meetings is desirable for the White House, Trump would have to assemble a well-functioning team. If the decision is to make a sincere effort, he would have to carefully prepare his cabinet for a successful initiative. The outline and the exchanges would have to be agreed among the disparate factions within the national security team. The exact sanctions to be relieved and the process to do so would have to be spelled out. The nuclear facilities to be closed and/or destroyed would have to be set, and the inspection regime would have to be agreed.

With Marco Rubio as secretary of state, Allison Hooker as under secretary for political affairs, and Richard Grenell as special missions envoy, Trump now has loyalists who would be able to craft the roadmap to a deal and set up the structure to move it forward, if the president is committed to such a course. In addition, Ambassador Joseph Yun is currently serving as chargé d'affaires ad interim at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul. With his

[12] Joshua Berlinger, Jake Kwon, and Sophie Jeong, "North Korea Asked for Only a Partial Lifting of Sanctions at Summit with Trump, Its Foreign Minister Said," CNN, March 1, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/28/asia/north-korea-hanoi-summit-intl/index.html.

unique and unparalleled background and experience with both Koreas and U.S. diplomacy, Yun would be a valuable addition to any new initiative. Several other former officials with critical expertise would also be useful.

Even if the president decides to empower a special envoy for North Korea to play the role that Steve Witkoff is now playing with Russia and Iran, that envoy would have to be empowered to put the early lifting of sanctions clearly on the table in order to begin any meetings. That, in turn, would require the national security team to agree on a basic strategy.

A growing number of Korea analysts believe that the United States should step back from demanding denuclearization because it is not possible. This is true of immediate denuclearization, but in the long term denuclearization can still be an important target. Denuclearization should remain an agreed goal, but it would take at least a decade.[13] Slow and paced denuclearization is a more realistic target to aim for. The DPRK is not in a position to decline the lifting of "extreme" sanctions. The country is impoverished; its agricultural sector is on life support due to U.S. and U.N. sanctions.[14] The North Koreans have been smart about strategic choices because they must be; they are transactional.

There is a long history of what DPRK leaders have said and done. It suggests they want an end to their geographic and economic isolation.[15] They want expanded political interactions too if that becomes possible. Few remember what the South Koreans were

[13] John Mecklin, "Sig Hecker: 'A Major Positive' If Kim Jong–un Dismantles Yongbyon," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Oct. 3, 2018, https://thebulletin.org/2018/10/sig-hecker-a-major-positive-if-kim-jong-un-dismantles-yongbyon; "Frank Aum: Why North Korea's Claims Should Be Taken at Face Value" (podcast), *NK News*, Oct. 17, 2024, https://www.nknews.org/category/north-korea-news-podcast/latest/frank-aum-why-north-koreas-claims-should-be-taken-at-face-value/948505.

[14] Hazel Smith, "The Impact of Sanctions on Humanitarian Assistance to the DPRK," Open Nuclear Network, Aug. 1, 2024, https://platform.opennuclear.org/thoughtroom/external-contributions/the-impact-of-sanctions-on-humanitarian-assistance-to-the-dprk.

[15] Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Poneman, and Robert L. Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005);
Robert L. Gallucci, "Is Diplomacy between the U.S. and North Korea Possible in 2024?" *National Interest*, Jan. 11, 2024, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/diplomacy-between-us-and-north-korea-possible-2024-208528.

doing with North Korea in April and Sept. 2018. Those initiatives were very close to being regionally transformative, all to the benefit of U.S. interests and goals. If the United States sincerely puts the counterproductive sanctions on the table, the North Koreans have a long list of reasons to talk and to strike a deal. Their reliance on their Chinese and Russian neighbors has never been comfortable for them.

A new road map should aim for a durable change to the status quo — one that would put the U.S./Trump stamp on a successful diplomatic initiative. Because of the U.S. inability to stop DPRK nuclear and missile programs since 2001, any agreed deal would be a major achievement. It would benefit all parties, and its goals should be clear and simple. "Enhanced security and economic development" would return U.S. goals to those that measurably contribute to the region. These achievements are entirely possible — if structured smartly.

For security, the administration should aim for an early halt to all fissile material, nuclear weapons, and the production of intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs. This would include the Yongbyon facilities as discussed in Hanoi, because they are critical for plutonium production. Uranium production would also have to stop, with inspection regimes and timetables being agreed to. A deal would also require on-the-ground IAEA inspectors for the long period of implementation, as was done in the late 1990s.

Add to that a credible process for meeting and discussing reducing DPRK nuclear capabilities. Full denuclearization should be an agreed long-term aspiration, even if that would depend on variables that are impossible to know now. The question of U.S. adherence to an agreement would be a crucial determinant of whether real progress toward denuclearization was possible, since such adherence has proved unreliable in past agreements. A decade might be a good place to start in considering a realistic timeline for progress on denuclearization.[16]

[16] William J. Broad and David E. Sanger, "North Korea Nuclear Disarmament Could Take 15 Years, Expert Warns," *New York Times*, May 28, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/28/us/politics/north-korea-nuclear-disarmament-could-take-15-years-expert-warns.html.

These two things can be the most important achievements from the first agreement. They are so significant that any substantial lifting of nonmilitary sanctions would be a bargain in exchange.[17]

In return, Trump and his team must be ready to deliver credible sanctions relief, now, to North Korea. Without that key, this whole process will likely not get off the ground — or will fail again. The five "extreme" sanctions are the first sincere offer for Trump to make. They are illegal under international humanitarian law as well as counter to the United Nations' own standards for applying sanctions, target the entire civilian population and not the leadership, and have been counterproductive.[18] These sanctions' suspension is what the North Koreans asked for at the Hanoi meeting in Feb. 2019. This is an area where Trump's willingness to use all U.S. tools quickly to get a result can help.

There is no downside to relieving these sanctions. They have prevented all diplomacy. Debates about the logic and utility of U.S. sanctions have advanced over the past decade, to the point where many of those on North Korea, and on Iran, have been widely judged to have been not just useless in achieving stated goals but counterproductive, preventing any diplomacy.[19]

The so-called "snapback" provision would have to be similar to the one in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA. Since President George W. Bush reversed U.S. support for the Agreed Framework with North Korea in 2001 and President Trump

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[17] John Mecklin, "Interview: Siegfried Hecker on Two Decades of Missed Chances to Deal with North Korea's Nuclear Program," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Feb. 20, 2023, https://thebulletin.org/2023/02/interview-siegfried-hecker-explains-how-washington-and-pyongyang-missed-chances.

[18] Henri Feron et al., "The Human Costs and Gendered Impact of Sanctions on North Korea," Korea Peace Now, Oct. 30, 2019, https://koreapeacenow.org/first-comprehensive-assessment-of-the-impact-of-sanctions-against-north-korea-shows-adverse-consequences-for-civilians-especially-women; Hazel Smith, "The Impact of Sanctions on Humanitarian Assistance to the DPRK," Open Nuclear Network, Aug. 1, 2024, https://platform.opennuclear.org/thoughtroom/external-contributions/the-impact-of-sanctions-on-humanitarian-assistance-to-the-dprk; Joseph DeThomas, "The New U.S. Sanctions: Moving from Sanctions to Economic War," *38 North*, Sept. 22, 2017, https://www.38north.org/2017/09/jdethomas092217.

[19] Daniel Wertz and Ali Vaez, "Sanctions and Nonproliferation in North Korea and Iran: A Comparative Analysis," Federation of American Scientists, June 2012, https://fas.org/publication/sanctions-nonproliferation-north-korea-iran; Kevin Gray, "Sanctions on North Korea Are Counterproductive," *Just Security*, Nov. 26, 2019, https://www.justsecurity.org/67473/sanctions-on-north-korea-are-counterproductive.

ended U.S. participation in the JCPOA with Iran in 2018, it is not credible for the United States to be solely responsible for judging when any suspended sanctions could be reimposed.[20] As with Iran, there would have to be other signatories to an agreement, at least in the section specifically setting out standards for a snapback.

In any case, no agreement should rely on a snapback provision for enforcement. The combination of reciprocal actions by the DPRK and active support, oversight, and guarantees by China, Russia, Europe, and Asia would be far more effective. Mutually reinforcing actions, aligned with the core interests of multiple players, would ultimately provide the most confidence in any agreement.

It is worth noting that the North Koreans have their own snapback provision. That would be returning to producing new nuclear weapons and long-range delivery systems.

A smaller deal may be the only one possible in a first agreement. This would be limited to the exchange of lifting sanctions for the stopping of production of fissile material, weapons, long-range missiles, and testing as well as deploying IAEA inspectors on the ground. Nevertheless, Trump seems very much aware of the leverage value of any first agreed deal with Kim. This is in contrast to past U.S. presidents for two decades. He wants to "go big" if possible. In that case, there are other elements that would serve to support and stabilize any first agreement.

Several items that would be mutually beneficial and supportive of long-term engagement have been discussed for at least 30 years. It would strengthen the overall initiative to use such items to lock in the parties' commitments. A formal end to the Korean War and a formal peace treaty would be logical elements of a new road map. Just the security dividends from these actions would be immensely favorable to U.S. interests. The economic and geostrategic advantages would only add to their value.

Scaling back and rethinking U.S. military exercises related to Korea could also be part of early confidence-building mechanisms. This has been done successfully many times in

[20] Tom Collina, "Killing the Iran Nuclear Deal Was One of Trump's Biggest Failures," *Responsible Statecraft*, May 8, 2024, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/iran-nuclear-deal.

past years, including during Trump's first term. Exercises can be adjusted to avoid impacting readiness.

The administration should prepare for criticism. Many will say that this exchange is not enough. The following arguments may be effective in pushing back against such expected criticism:

- These voices have supported policies that have provoked and allowed today's DPRK nuclear program. How are those policies working out for us?
- Presidents Bush, Obama, and Biden failed to come up with any way to stop North Korean weapons programs.
- Twenty-five years ago, North Korea had no nuclear weapons. None.
- Now the U.S. administration must clean up the mistakes of the past two decades.
- A smart and successful negotiated deal with North Korea would not only fix more than two decades of ineffective diplomacy and costly decisions but it would lay the groundwork for better relations, lower tensions, and more economic development in the region. We will be safer. Our South Korean and Japanese allies will be safer. And everyone will make more money. Not a bad deal.

The U.S. administration can use regional players by aligning their interests in support of a U.S. initiative

The role of China will be crucial. North Korea issues are perhaps the most immediately practical subject where U.S. and Chinese interests overlap. Today the Chinese are not in the mood to cooperate with the United States on anything, since they feel a full-on assault from U.S. economic policies. But since this process with North Korea would benefit them, the Chinese have reasons to participate. However, Beijing will only be interested if the initiative is done well — and comprehensively. Reduced tension and economic development on China's southeast border would be very valuable. If a deal is

successful, it could open up some space for additional U.S.–China cooperation on other matters, including nuclear deescalation.

Even in the context of heated U.S.–China rivalry, the Chinese role in this case should be promoted as helpful. The Chinese are neighbors with North Korea, so their core concerns are involved. Chinese leaders have maintained for years that they oppose DPRK nuclear weapons. They could provide credible guarantees in support of the deal, so that they are present at many of the "capping" sites and in many of the "rollback" talks. Chinese buy-in could be strong and durable.

The role of Russia may not be as important as that of China. Nevertheless, the geography of the region, its recent history, and the current Russia–North Korea relationship make Russian participation important, if mainly to avoid negative blowback from being excluded.

Military assistance now going from North Korea to Russia is a separate issue. However, it may be useful leverage if only to judge the seriousness of Russia's medium- and long-term intent toward the Koreas. Such discussions could balance Russia's interest in North Korea's growing economic development against its interest in using DPRK troops and weaponry. In general, these two are incompatible.

If the Russian war in Ukraine comes to an end, then Russia's participation in any arrangements capping and rolling back DPRK nuclear and missile capabilities should be easier. As with China, the Russian Far East would benefit from new economic activity. If there are reasons for Russia to show interest in a new deal with North Korea, Russia's nuclear expertise and good relations with North Korea could be useful additions to the "guarantees" that will be needed from China. Moscow could provide some assurance to Washington and Pyongyang that the deal will be followed.

The South Korean role will be useful and essential. Seoul will have a new president on June 3. Since the first Democratic Party gained power in February 1998, administrations have tried different ways to advance Korean interests. The overlap of Kim Dae–jung with Bill Clinton during the three-year period of 1998 to 2001 saw the deepest and most

meaningful policy initiatives by both. They and their top officials shared a view of how North–South and North–U.S. engagement could leverage power in the service of denuclearization, arms control, security, and economic development. Benefits would flow to South Korea, Japan, and the United States, but also to North Korea and China, helping to stabilize the deals.

When the United States turned away from that shared view under President George W. Bush in 2001, it was gone for good. South Korean Presidents Roh Moo–hyun and Moon Jae–in both tried to return to an agreed form of engagement, with similar regional impacts, but U.S. presidents were not responsive. President Moon came closest to recreating a shared approach, with unprecedented North–South meetings and agreements. But his role as supporter to the U.S.–DPRK meetings, without being an active participant, proved insufficient to impact the United States.

South Korean Presidents Lee Myung–bak, Park Geun–hye, and Yoon Seok–yeol tried instead to leverage the "coercion and containment" policy preferred by U.S. Presidents Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden, largely "subcontracting" most of South Korea's foreign policy to its ally. Without meaningful engagement, those policies prevented diplomacy that might have kept North Korea from building nuclear weapons and ICBMs.

With this background, the next South Korean president has an opportunity to expand Seoul's role, so that it is offering ideas and pushing decisively for a new agreement. We do not know who the next president will be, but it is possible that they will have the personnel, the understanding of this recent history, and the democratic legitimacy to act with more decisiveness than their predecessors.

Now that South Korea will hold a snap presidential election, there is a good chance that a leader who supports denuclearization, tension reduction, and inter–Korean economic cooperation will win.[21] If they do then that leader will quickly become "the adult in the room" in that region regarding regional diplomatic capability and flexibility. South Korea

[21] Joyce Lee and Hyunsu Yim, "Appeal Win Helps South Korea Opposition Leader Clear Presidency Hurdle," Reuters, March 26, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-court-reverses-opposition-leaders-election-law-conviction-2025-03-26.

does not have the regional historical baggage of Japan or China. It has military and economic weight and a core of experienced officials from the past two decades. If Seoul is able to combine diplomatic credibility with flexibility and leadership, its first-among-regional-parties interest in Pyongyang's denuclearization will weigh heavily on a new deal.

Seoul's role should be one of the leading roles on the ground and going forward. After Pyongyang, it has the most at stake in all of Washington's initiatives. If the United States and President Trump can provide the key and the overall roadmap, then the South Koreans should be the party to carry much of the weight of follow-through. To do this, they should be brought in from the beginning on planning and meetings.

In recent weeks, four of the most level-headed and best informed South Korean national security thinkers have separately encouraged the Trump team to take a fresh look at what is achievable with North Korea. Assemblyman and former deputy intelligence chief Park Sun–won and Democratic Party leader Lee Jae–myung both mentioned the prospect of a Nobel Peace Prize for Trump — if he is successful at making a deal work.[22]

Assemblyman and former intelligence chief Park Jie–won proposed a three-step process for getting DPRK weapons under international supervision. And longtime foreign policy thought leader Moon Chung–in noted that, as with Europe, South Korea should do what the United States will not, using its leverage to lower tensions on the peninsula and in the region. South Koreans are not being cynical but, rather, stressing how crucial and central the North Korea issues are to their country and the region.[23]

[22] Kwak Yeon–soo, "Trump Deserves Nobel Peace Prize, Says South Korean Lawmaker," *Korea Times*, Feb. 18, 2025, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2025/02/120_392504.html; Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "South Korea's Likely Next Leader Wants Warmer Ties with China, North Korea," *Washington Post*, Feb. 14, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/02/14/south-korea-lee-jae-myung-interview.
[23] Kwan Yeon-soo, "Ex-Spy Agency Chief's NK 'Nuclear State' Remarks Cause Stir," *Korea Times*, Feb. 21, 2025, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2025/02/103_392744.html; Moon Chung–in, "Korea Will Soon Face a Security Dilemma like Europe's," *Hankyoreh*, Feb. 24, 2025, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1183921.html.

Japan's role in bringing North Korea in from the cold will always be important, but Tokyo has not had a leadership voice in support of its productive participation for decades. The lingering impact of Japan's past focus on abducted Japanese still makes it hard for leaders to disentangle that issue from the country's real interest in engaging with the DPRK. In 2018, the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe floated the long-discussed $10 billion in reparations to the North as an attempt to join Trump's initiative with Kim Jong Un.[24]

Escalating tensions between Washington and Beijing have constricted Tokyo's options in the region. Tensions with South Korea — hot and cold, historical and contemporary, public and government — have limited Japan's ability to take advantage of their extensive overlapping interests and histories. A new initiative led by Washington could provide a chance for the Japanese government to find a way to reclaim a positive regional role and expand engagement with its neighbors.

Conclusion

American capabilities to practice diplomacy have atrophied over the past 25 years. A new effort to secure a durable deal on North Korea issues would be a complex and demanding one. The second Trump administration must harness the personnel, the strategic rationale, and the organizational ability if it is to try for a deal.

If the administration does decide to tackle this challenge, there are routes to a successful outcome. Quick and dependable relief from the five "extreme" U.N. sanctions is the opening and absolute requirement for the process to begin. Many elements should be mutually reinforcing, and the United States should not be expected to carry more than diplomatic and supervisory responsibilities. In case the White House is

[24] Koya Jibiki and Yosuke Onchi, "Japan Weighs $10bn in North Korea Aid to Spur Return of Citizens," *Nikkei*, Aug. 17, 2018, https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/N-Korea-at-crossroads/Japan-weighs-10bn-in-North-Korea-aid-to-spur-return-of-citizens.

serious about this challenge, a successful outcome would have lasting and far-reaching positive impacts.

The long-term and transformative potential of a return to mutually beneficial dealmaking with North Korea is hard to overstate. The ramifications would be felt regionally and would impact economic development, political and military stability, and infrastructure. The United States has a significant interest in the growth and cohesion of its allies Japan and South Korea. It would also benefit from a range of new arms control agreements and lowering of tensions among China, North Korea, Japan, and South Korea.

If trade issues do not impede the new U.S. administration from working with these governments, a new deal with the DPRK could help steer the region to a new era of stability and growth, with the United States in a supportive role.[25]

[25] "South Korea, China, Japan Agree to Promote Regional Trade as Trump Tariffs Loom," Reuters, March 30, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-china-japan-agree-promote-regional-trade-trump-tariffs-loom-2025-03-30.

About the author

Stephen Costello is a non-resident fellow at the Quincy Institute and a non-resident scholar at the Institute for Korean Studies at George Washington University. Since 1990 he has been a political consultant, policy analyst, columnist, and facilitator of U.S.–Korea dialogue. Working mainly in Washington and Seoul, Costello has run think tank programs and consulted with companies, embassies, government officials, former officials, academics, and scholars in both capitals. During these three decades he has maintained regular contact with civic groups, politicians, and journalists focusing on the urgent pending issues on the Korean Peninsula and in the East Asia region. He has also chronicled the shifting U.S. policies toward the region. From 1989–95, Costello was a consultant to overseas political parties and foundations at Gowran International. From 1995–98, he was Director of the Kim Dae-jung Peace Foundation/Washington, D.C. office. From 1999–2004, Costello was Director of the Korea in Transition program at the Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C.

He has been a speaker at universities in Washington and Seoul and several times at Syracuse University, his alma mater. Costello has also spoken to groups at the U.S. State Department Bureau of Intelligence & Research, the U.S. National Intelligence Council, the Korean Foreign and Unification ministries, and the Korean National Intelligence Service. Some of Costello's writings can be found at the East Asia Forum, a project of Australia National University in Melbourne, and at *The Korea Times*, the oldest English language paper in Korea.

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2000 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
7th floor
Washington, DC 20006

+1 202-800-4662
info@quincyinst.org
www.quincyinst.org