

Beyond the Trump-Kim Summit
CIGS and Stimson Center Joint Seminar
May 28, 2018

EVENT SUMMARY

On May 28, 2018, roughly two weeks before the Trump-Kim summit, the Stimson Center and CIGS together hosted a panel discussion analyzing the prospects and pitfalls of North Korea's denuclearization process, emphasizing the national interests of the East Asian actors surrounding the Hermit Kingdom. Moderated by East Asia Program Co-Director Yuki Tatsumi, the panel highlighted U.S., South Korean, Chinese, and Japanese perspectives on North Korea, with speakers Katsu Furukawa, former member of the U.N. Panel of Experts on Sanctions against North Korea; Frank Jannuzi, president of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation; Jenny Town, Managing Editor at 38 North; and Yun Sun, East Asia Program Co-Director.

Tatsumi opened the panel discussion, noting the continuing uncertainty of whether the summit will take place, but also the various possible outcomes. Jannuzi observed that there are three possible outcomes: the good-bad outcome, in which President Trump and Chairman Kim agree in principle on denuclearization without settling any specific details; a bad-bad outcome, in which talks fail to achieve a breakthrough and Trump reverts to the maximum pressure policy; and a catastrophic outcome, in which negotiations breakdown and Trump launches preemptive military strikes against North Korea. Jannuzi indicated that he believes the good-bad outcome is likely, and noted that the rapprochement initiated by President Moon, and the consolidation of power by Kim Jong-un, are just as important strategic factors as Trump's maximum pressure campaign in bringing the North Koreans to the table.

Town discussed the geopolitical and domestic obstacles in South Korea that may affect the denuclearization process. While South Korea led the initial diplomatic breakthrough with the North, Town cautioned that the growing involvement of the U.S. and China risks marginalizing the South Koreans in future negotiations. Moon has also invested substantial political capital into these efforts, so a failed summit could embolden domestic opposition to undermine him.

Sun addressed speculations that Chinese pressure is responsible for shifting North Korea from a confrontational to cooperative stance. She said that, from the Chinese perspective, the threat of the "Libya model" is responsible for North Korea's change of heart.

Furukawa noted that Prime Minister Abe will most likely continue to support Trump's position. However, Japanese experts are nevertheless concerned that the Trump administration may not understand the complex situation, according to Furukawa. Despite what Bolton says, the Libya model is not applicable to North Korea, as the North Korean nuclear program will take much longer to disarm. North Koreans are concerned that the U.S. may shift from cooperation to confrontation under future administrations, making them hesitant to commit to any deal. Furukawa also observed that if North Koreans engage in "salami-slicing" to gradually dismantle economic sanctions, the sanctioning countries can respond in kind, removing sanctions only after concrete moves toward denuclearization.

Sun said that while China professes peace, stability, and denuclearization as key objectives in peninsular diplomacy, the country also insists on being party to any decision or deal, preferring a quadrilateral China-U.S.-North Korea-South Korea configuration.

Town then asserted that a common U.S. perspective on North Korea, that DPRK may somehow be bought off with economic aid and security guarantees, is incorrect. North Korea is

ultimately looking for an entirely new relationship with the international community, which would take years to credibly build and could be jeopardized by political turnover in involved countries. Jannuzi agreed that political turnover before denuclearization is achieved is likely, and he predicted that the Singapore summit would yield little other than a declaratory peace. He cautioned that working-level negotiations would be necessary following the summit to provide details to a symbolic outcome.

Furukawa discussed Japan's role in the North Korea issue, emphasizing the weight of the abductee issue, likening its importance in Japanese politics to that of the hostages in the Iranian hostage crisis. He observed that breakthroughs in abductee issues were usually caused by improvements in Japan-North Korea relationship. As such, he agreed that long-term relationship-building is critical to diplomacy with the North. He also expressed concerns that the U.S. is putting the North Korean leader in a situation where he may look to his domestic audience like he is capitulating to U.S. pressure if he gives up his nuclear weapons. Furukawa said that the U.S. should instead work to save Kim's face during the denuclearization process rather than openly denouncing him.

Tatsumi opened the panel to questions from the audience. To a question on the danger of continuing negotiations without first requiring North Korea to drop its threat of armed unification of the peninsula, Town observed that such an agreement on paper would mean little without negotiations to begin changing political realities. Jannuzi agreed that North Korea would be unlikely to agree to disarm prior to negotiations. Another question asked about the effectiveness of sanctions so far, and whether the maximum pressure policy could be reinstated if the summit does not go well. Furukawa stated that the sanctions had not produced quantifiable evidence of disrupting the North Korean economy, which grew under the sanctions. Another audience member asked whether Congress would give a guarantee of continuing any agreement in the post-Trump era given North Korea's human rights abuses. Jannuzi responded that Congress, controlled by Republicans, would set aside human rights concerns if Trump asked them to, but also noted that the human rights situation in North Korea will not improve under an adversarial relationship with the U.S. Town added that the North Koreans would likely build a congressional mandate into any agreement. To a question about whether having talks with North Korea and allowing Kim to buy time is a better outcome than continuing maximum pressure, Jannuzi argued that the U.S. has already been tolerating North Korea as a nuclear power for years, and that there is no good alternative to talks, given the ineffectiveness of sanctions. Another question asked about the view among American observers that Kim thinks he can trade nuclear weapons for economic assistance, to which Town responded that the American idea that North Korea can be bought off ignores the North's core strategic interests, which is a mistake. An audience member also asked who will continue the negotiations process if Trump loses interest, and how the U.S. might arrive at a common understanding with China regarding denuclearization. Town noted that the efforts leading up to the summit have been without substance so far, and expectations for what follows must be tempered. Sun agreed that the U.S. and China have different views on denuclearization and potential outcomes for the peninsula, but observed that China was also uncertain whether Trump would be willing to cooperate, given the lack of a beneficial trade deal that Trump promised earlier. Jannuzi added that the summit is backwards: rather than lower level negotiations preceding a summit, the leaders are meeting first. Furukawa voiced his hope that the U.S. would keep working on the North Korea issue to prevent it from becoming a bigger problem in the future.

Tatsumi concluded the panel by thanking the speakers and the audience.