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Panmunjom Declaration : A Glass Half Full

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The 2018 inter-Korean summit was held on April 27 at Panmunjom. As President Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un conversed during the 12-hour summit, it seemed as if the prospect of a lasting peace on the peninsula was possible. As the host, President Moon showcased his warmth and consideration, while Kim behaved with surprising tact. Following the completion of the summit, the leaders released the “April 27 Panmunjom Declaration,” which addressed the pending issues on the peninsula. The fact that Kim signed his name to a statement pledging “complete denuclearization” can be seen as a sign of progress. However, despite the stated mutual goal of denuclearization, the declaration lacked any discussions about concrete steps to achieve this goal. Because of this and other reasons examined below, the summit can be assessed as “mostly successful.”

In many regards, the Panmunjom summit can be seen as a success. The event schedule was the result of meticulous preparation. Despite the time and space constraints, the organizers were able to showcase the symbolic reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas. The summit featured a reception at the Military Demarcation Line, review of the honor guard, meetings between the two leaders, a commemorative tree planting ceremony, a stroll along a footbridge, the signing of the declaration, dinner, and a send off ceremony. From the conference table and chairs to the dinner menu, every detail was carefully considered.

The level of harmony exceeded expectations. The first meeting between President Moon and Kim was as relaxed as the meeting of two brothers. On display seemed to be a true

human bond. President Moon appeared honest and sincere, and Kim responded in kind. In particular, the two leaders' walk along the footbridge and the tranquil discussion they shared showed the bond of sympathy held by the Korean people. There was even a moment when the two leaders clasped hands during the short farewell performance.

The form and content of the summit declaration was also a major step forward. Unlike the previous two summits, the declaration involved a joint signing of the document and joint statements, making this more of a "normal summit." The content of the declaration was also an improvement on the past. The expression "denuclearization" appeared for the first time, while ethnic solidarity, alleviation of tensions, and the creation of a denuclearized peace regime were all explicitly mentioned. Other points, such as the establishment of a joint liaison office, reunion of separated families, transformation of the demilitarized zone into a peace zone, and the announced end of the Korean War within the next year are signs that progress is being made towards North Korea's denuclearization and the improvement of inter-Korean relations. That South and North Korea will likely continue discussion about these and other issues in the future is another reason to assess the summit as a positive development.

However, the Panmunjom Declaration focused more on ethnic solidarity than denuclearization. Rather than concentrating on the most pressing issue (i.e. the elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons), the declaration allots more space to inter-Korean cooperation and the establishment of a peace regime. As a result, South Korea has been saddled with a greater burden moving forward. Even though denuclearization is a requirement for successful inter-Korean cooperation, there is no mention of a specific date or concrete measure regarding denuclearization. Thus, the government's plan to push the discussion on "denuclearization then peace" turned into "peace then denuclearization." In this process, the North has already extracted promises for economic cooperation to develop its own railway system, prompting the question as to whether the South has given up its leverage too prematurely. There is an imbalance between the three fields of

exchange/cooperation, relief of military tensions, and establishing a peace regime/denuclearization. The reversal of these priorities is one problematic outcome of the summit.

It is important to point out that the summit's substantive function was veiled by its vagueness. With limited knowledge it is difficult to make a definitive assessment, but it seems that the most pressing issues were not addressed at the summit itself but that the meeting was more about formalizing the agreements which had already been settled prior to the summit. If the two leaders did not engage in a tête-à-tête to discuss sensitive issues but rather only focused on striking a symbolic agreement, then there are serious questions about the content of the Panmunjom Declaration. There is a need for more clarity about inter-Korean relations as a result of this summit.

As denuclearization, confidence building, and increasing exchanges/cooperation are no small tasks, it is imperative that the follow up measures to the summit be pursued with great interest and effort. Because the Panmunjom Declaration contains possible traps, the stakeholders must proceed with caution.

There are several issues that must be addressed regarding denuclearization before the U.S.-North Korea summit. North Korea's obligations in the denuclearization process must be specified, and a fixed roadmap for this process must be established. Going forward, there needs to be close cooperation between South Korea and the U.S., as well as the international community, to prevent North Korea's deviation from the agreement. While pursuing simultaneous denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime, the stakeholders must avoid falling into ideological traps and maintain focus on denuclearization. There are plans for a South Korea-U.S. summit and U.S.-North Korea summit in the near future, and South Korea must set their priorities and pursue consistent policies to achieve them.

Inter-Korean exchanges and confidence building measures must proceed with caution. Issues like the formation of a joint liaison office, the cessation of loudspeaker broadcasts, and the establishment of a peace zone require continued discussion during the U.S.-North Korea summit. The outcome of the U.S.-North Korea summit must reflect the agreements reached by the South and North through continued interaction and honest dialogue. Because the results of the U.S.-North Korea summit depend on North Korea's conditions for denuclearization, the situation is subject to possible change. There is a danger that South Korea may make undesirable compromises if denuclearization is not the main driver for reshaping inter-Korean relations.

Experts at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies discussed the 2018 inter-Korean Summit and assessed its various effects. You can find the transcript of the meeting [here](#) (in Korean).