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# The Time Is Right for a Deal With North Korea

By Michael H. Fuchs and Abigail Bard June 2019

Center for American Progress



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# Introduction and summary

The United States and the international community have been attempting to deal with North Korea’s nuclear program for decades. The situation has evolved over time; today, North Korea has nuclear weapons and likely the ability to deliver them as far as the continental United States.<sup>1</sup> But the basic premise of negotiations remains the same: How much nuclear capability would North Korea be willing to give up for what level of normalization of relations with the United States and the rest of the world? The contours of numerous deals—from the 1994 Agreed Framework to the reported deal discussed at the 2019 Hanoi summit—are variations on this essential bargain between the United States and North Korea.

Like all diplomacy, the ever-changing variable is the political will on each side. Today, the environments in the main capitals—Seoul, Washington, D.C., Tokyo, Pyongyang, and Beijing—are still complicated, but there is an opening for at least a partial deal. A progressive government in Seoul is keen to develop inter-Korea relations, while Pyongyang has shown at least a temporary willingness to engage. Meanwhile, an erratic and unpredictable U.S. president looking for political wins has upended the traditional U.S. playbook on North Korea; the prime minister of Japan is wary of engaging North Korea, but he prioritizes the U.S.-Japan alliance and is willing to go along with the diplomacy; and China wants to deflect pressure from the United States. This combination presents a genuine opportunity for diplomatic progress—if only for the time being.

There are three main elements to making progress with North Korea: 1) understanding the politics in each capital to ensure that any deal will not unravel; 2) allowing each side to come away portraying itself as the victor; and 3) enacting a substantive agreement that advances enough that each side has a reason to stay invested in the process. This report details each of these elements in turn.

# The politics of negotiating with North Korea

No progress will be possible with North Korea if the politics in each of the key capitals do not allow for it. While administrations in Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo have tried a variety of approaches toward North Korea over the years, politics have often prevented new ideas or serious risk-taking. But the prevailing politics toward North Korea in Seoul and Washington today may leave open a door to progress.

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## United States

The 1994 Agreed Framework—the first deal to stop North Korea’s nuclear program—ran into serious obstacles in the ensuing years as North Korea began violating the deal and accused the United States of dragging its feet on implementation. This contributed to accusations on both sides about the other not following through with the agreement, and the deal eventually fell apart. Ever since, the politics of North Korea in Washington have followed the narrative that North Korea cannot be trusted because it violated the Agreed Framework.<sup>2</sup> Pressure, sanctions, and condemnation have therefore long been the default position, while support for unconditional diplomacy—or any diplomacy at all—with North Korea has been often seen as politically risky.

Today, however, things are changing. While president of a political party that is usually more hawkish on North Korea, Trump has embraced diplomacy and leader-to-leader engagement. This dynamic has virtually silenced the Republican members of Congress who would normally criticize the kind of engagement President Trump has begun with North Korea. For example, congressional Republicans leveled criticism regularly when former President Barack Obama started diplomacy with Iran and Cuba.<sup>3</sup> As long as President Trump is in office and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un refrains from intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and nuclear tests, Trump’s allies in Congress are unlikely to seriously attempt to obstruct his pursuit of diplomacy. President Trump’s diplomacy is also the first U.S. attempt at leader-to-leader engagement with North Korea, which could be a game-changing variable if utilized well.

Furthermore, many who usually oppose President Trump's policies—including Democrats and anti-war activists—are more inclined to support diplomacy with regimes such as that in North Korea, and they are supportive or at least muted in their criticism of President Trump's engagement with North Korea.<sup>4</sup> While many critics do not believe that President Trump is making any progress with North Korea and that his uncoordinated and undisciplined approach cannot work, they genuinely support diplomacy and recognize that there are few better choices available at the moment. Much of the criticism is rooted in concerns about how ineffectively Trump is pursuing diplomacy rather than in a desire to end diplomatic engagement.

Public opinion also supports diplomacy with North Korea. When North Korea was regularly testing missiles in 2017, for example, the American people were inundated with news about how North Korean weapons could now reach the United States, and concerns were high. Since diplomatic efforts began, however, North Korea as an issue has become less of a concern to Americans. Although 83 percent of Americans see North Korea's development of nuclear weapons as a critical threat, between the beginning of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, the percentage of Americans who listed North Korea as the greatest enemy of the United States dropped from 51 percent to 14 percent.<sup>5</sup> Once diplomacy began in 2018, a Pew Research Center poll showed that 71 percent of Americans supported diplomacy with North Korea.<sup>6</sup>

If President Trump were to strike an interim deal with Kim Jong Un that included concrete North Korean actions related to halting or rolling back the country's nuclear program, Trump would likely find significant support in Washington and among the American people. At a minimum, he would not face serious opposition.

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## South Korea

The political dynamics in South Korea are also currently conducive to an interim deal. The administration of South Korean President Moon Jae-in continues to lead the way in supporting diplomacy and peace with North Korea, and whatever other obstacles he faces at home, Moon can continue to engage with the North for now, as significant constituencies in South Korea support the diplomacy. So far, this engagement has yielded results such as the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain, which reduces military tensions through measures that include dismantling military posts and mines along the Demilitarized Zone.<sup>7</sup>

Some supporters of diplomacy believe that Kim Jong Un is different enough from his father and grandfather to make genuine progress on denuclearization possible. They cite evidence such as the rise of capitalist black markets, the spread of cell phones, and increased information flows into North Korea.<sup>8</sup>

Although the current environment in South Korea makes an interim deal with North Korea possible, it is also highly politicized. As of May 2019, 45 percent of South Koreans think that the Moon administration's North Korea policy is going well, while 43 percent think it is not going well.<sup>9</sup> However, 81 percent of members of Moon's party—the liberal Democratic Party of Korea—believe that his North Korea policy is going well, while 83 percent of the conservative Liberty Korea Party believes it is not going well.

South Koreans have been living under the threat of North Korea for decades. In that time, they have learned to live with the status quo, building a robust democracy and economy where many younger people are wary of the idea of eventual unification of the two Koreas.<sup>10</sup> While unification may not be a top priority, 58.9 percent of South Koreans believe that there is a very or somewhat high chance that North Korea could reform or open.<sup>11</sup> This indicates a willingness in South Korea to make progress with North Korea. Indeed, as of March 2019, 64 percent of South Koreans believed that North Korea would not give up its nuclear weapons, but 58 percent were optimistic about U.S.-North Korea negotiations.<sup>12</sup>

While many in the United States are skeptical of deepening ties with North Korea without concrete movement toward denuclearization, some in South Korea argue that North Korea is more likely to denuclearize if more peaceful inter-Korea relations are established.<sup>13</sup> According to this theory, improved relations with North Korea will help it feel secure enough to abandon its nuclear deterrent.

At the same time, the conservative opposition to President Moon is in a difficult spot. While many conservatives oppose Moon's diplomacy, their party also staunchly supports South Korea's alliance with the United States. With President Trump engaged in his own diplomacy with North Korea and publicly airing his displeasure with alliances, conservatives do not have a usually cautious and steadfast United States to point to as a reason to oppose diplomacy.

Besides North Korean intransigence, President Moon's largest obstacles in pursuing diplomacy with North Korea are time, his popularity, and his party's staying power. Limited to only one term, Moon has three years left in office, which means that he has an incentive to move quickly with North Korea. Moon's approval rating has been hovering at just less than 50 percent in recent months—a significant drop from where

it was when he began engaging with North Korea. Importantly, however, this drop can largely be attributed to issues with the Korean economy; only 23 percent of Koreans approve of the Moon administration's economic policy.<sup>14</sup> Moon's party, the Democratic Party of Korea, holds a small plurality of seats within a liberal coalition in the National Assembly. Opposition from the Liberty Korea Party, a conservative political party that currently holds the second-highest number of seats in the Assembly, blocked the Assembly's ratification of the April 2018 Panmunjom Declaration.<sup>15</sup> The Moon administration has since decided that neither the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain nor the Pyongyang Declaration—which outline the steps that South Korea and North Korea have agreed to take to improve relations—required National Assembly ratification. There is a possibility that future agreements could run into trouble if there is a shift in power with the 2020 National Assembly elections.<sup>16</sup> For now, however, engagement seems safe as the Democratic Party of Korea is currently leading in polls.<sup>17</sup>

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## Japan

In Japan, most policymakers and politicians in positions of authority take a harder line on North Korea, and they are wary of the current diplomacy between North Korea, South Korea, and the United States. Japanese leaders generally believe that North Korea poses a serious threat; that North Korea has not upheld past agreements; and that North Korea has no intention to give up its nuclear weapons. There are concerns about an interim deal, as previous step-by-step agreements with North Korea have not stuck. The current diplomatic effort is seen as a page out of the same North Korean playbook to buy time and relief from economic pressure.

Furthermore, the issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea decades ago remains a potent political issue and at the top of Japan's list of priorities with North Korea. In fact, a greater percentage of Japanese citizens are interested in the abduction issue than in the North Korean nuclear issue.<sup>18</sup> Japan contends that the North Korean government kidnapped at least 17 Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2002, North Korea acknowledged the abduction of 13 Japanese citizens and sent five back to Japan, along with death certificates for the remaining eight and the purported remains of 1 of those 8.<sup>19</sup> In 2004, the North Korean government returned the alleged remains of Megumi Yokota, a young woman who is often considered the face of the abductee issue.

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However, the return of all these remains set off further controversy: Tests conducted in Japan suggested that in both the 2002 and 2004 cases, the remains were not actually those of the abductees that North Korea claimed them to be.<sup>20</sup> North Korea responded by casting aspersions on how the tests were conducted.<sup>21</sup> Progress on the issue stalled until 2014, when North Korea came forward to agree to launch investigations into two abductees—one on Japan’s list of 17, one not—and agreed to launch an investigation into what happened to the abductees.<sup>22</sup> The investigation has since been disbanded, however, due to Japan reinstating sanctions against North Korea, and little progress has been made on the issue.<sup>23</sup> Japan sees the resolution of both the nuclear and abduction issues as necessary for moving relations forward with North Korea, and it considers the abductions to be a human rights issue.<sup>24</sup>

The Japanese public is split on emphasizing pressure versus dialogue: In March 2019, 45 percent of respondents to a survey believed that pressure should be emphasized in relations with North Korea, while 41 percent believed that dialogue should be emphasized. However, the favorability of emphasizing pressure has increased since June 2018.<sup>25</sup>

Japan’s buy-in is important from multiple perspectives. As a treaty ally, the United States must treat Japan’s concerns seriously. It would undermine the U.S.-Japan alliance if the United States were to move forward on a grave security issue without properly consulting and coordinating with Japan. In addition, maintaining Japanese support is important because Japan is likely to offer financial incentives to North Korea if a deal is made, as well as technical economic expertise in the event that North Korea builds and modernizes its economy.

Despite Japanese concerns over the current diplomacy, Japan is keen to portray itself as being in lock-step agreement with its ally the United States. While Japan is unlikely to be enthusiastic about an interim deal that does not address both the nuclear issue and abductees, its priority is maintaining a strong alliance with the United States. In addition, Japan is currently attempting to thwart a hardline U.S. stance on trade, which means it wants to avoid more issues publicly driving a wedge between the two allies.<sup>26</sup> And with most other regional players meeting with Kim Jong Un in the past year, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe recently said that he is willing to meet with Kim without preconditions.<sup>27</sup> All of this gives the United States significant room to maintain Japan’s support in the event of a deal, and it also means that Japan will be looking to avoid a public rift with the United States. If the United States were to move ahead with an interim deal, Japan would be unlikely to take a public stance against it.

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## North Korea

The internal politics of North Korea are opaque. Limited information comes out of the country that is not from state-run media, and foreign media outlets are often severely limited in their ability to report in the country. But over the years, it has been clear that Kim Jong Un's primary interest is regime security, much like it was for his father and grandfather before him. There are both internal and external components to this: How can Kim prevent an outside power from destabilizing his regime, and how can he maintain internal stability so that domestic actors do not threaten the regime?

North Korea's development of nuclear weapons was in part motivated by these considerations. With the possession of nuclear weapons, North Korea is deterring outside aggression, but this delicate calculus also bets on outside powers not threatening the regime because of its nuclear weapons. North Korea's development of its nuclear program, along with other illicit programs and destabilizing behavior, have brought a series of international sanctions against the regime.<sup>28</sup> Initially, the international community hoped that the economic effects of these sanctions would destabilize the country enough that it would choose to abandon its nuclear program, but North Korea has instead doubled down.

There is ongoing debate over the extent to which sanctions imposed by the U.N. Security Council and individual countries since 2016 have affected the North Korean economy and, most importantly, elite North Koreans.<sup>29</sup> Some analysts believe that North Korea came to the bargaining table in 2018 because of the sanctions, while others think that North Korea reached a point in its nuclear program that gave it confidence that it had the leverage necessary to gain legitimacy for the regime and its nuclear program or some sanctions relief. Presumably, North Korea wants sanctions relief regardless of whether or not the sanctions have crippled the country's economy. The North Korean government rarely makes data about its economy available, and analysts must often rely on data from China, South Korea, and North Korean defectors.

After the February 2019 Hanoi summit ended without an agreement between the United States and North Korea, North Korea's then-Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Choe Son Hui—now the first vice minister of foreign affairs—attempted to portray Kim as going out on a limb to negotiate. She stated that Kim had ignored the petitions from the munitions industry urging him not to denuclearize.<sup>30</sup> The actual level of internal dissent—and North Koreans' ability to voice dissent—is impossible to

measure, and it is unclear to what extent raising internal opposition to denuclearization was a tactic to encourage the United States to ask for less from North Korea rather than a means of explaining actual political constraints. It does seem certain that North Korea views Hanoi as a failure, and Kim wants to reaffirm his toughness—a notion reinforced by the subsequent missile tests and the reported punishment of North Korea’s negotiators.<sup>31</sup> It is fair to assume that, as much power as Kim has in his regime, he is not omnipotent and must balance competing interests.

Over the years, North Korean officials and state-run media have expressed a variety of different goals. Beyond sanctions relief, the range of potential North Korean goals in negotiating with the United States and South Korea have at one time or another included reducing the U.S. military footprint in South Korea and ending the U.S.-South Korea alliance; removing U.S. military capabilities that could threaten North Korea; ending U.S.-South Korea military exercises,<sup>32</sup> unifying with South Korea,<sup>33</sup> and integrating North Korea into the global economy.<sup>34</sup> It is difficult to know which of these are North Korea’s current priorities without a consistent dialogue.

Whatever Kim Jong Un’s goals in negotiations, however, he will need to be able to sell his decision to the North Korean public and the elites that support his regime. Given that the North Korean people have been told that any sacrifices they have made were in the name of developing nuclear weapons as a deterrent, any deal needs to give Kim Jong Un an exit ramp from his government’s nuclear narrative.

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## China

Since the diplomacy between the United States and North Korea began in 2018, China has been one of the main winners. The pressure on China to enforce sanctions against North Korea—driven primarily by the United States—has relaxed, and attention has shifted away from getting China to encourage North Korea to change its behavior. Prior to 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un were at odds with one another and had never met, but diplomacy has pushed Kim Jong Un to look for allies; he has traveled to Beijing four times since 2018 to meet with President Xi.<sup>35</sup>

China has regularly stated its opposition to North Korea’s nuclear program, but it has mostly counseled other countries to talk to North Korea and engage in dialogue rather than pursuing sanctions. However, the rapid pace of missile and nuclear tests that North Korea conducted in 2016-2017 forced China to support numerous rounds of Security Council sanctions.<sup>36</sup>

China's top priority in approaching the current round of diplomacy between the United States and North Korea is to reduce tensions on the peninsula that could lead to more U.S. sanctions on China. While China has many interests on this issue—including maintaining leverage with Pyongyang, dividing the United States and South Korea, and avoiding a partnership between the United States and North Korea that could eventually turn on China—for the moment, China is likely focused on avoiding more U.S. and international pressure.

# Allowing everyone to be a winner

The most successful diplomacy allows every side to portray itself as a winner. And while any progress with North Korea will involve compromises on all sides, a successful and sustainable deal must allow all sides to maintain their longer-term stated goals, even if those goals may never be realized. This section explores the rhetorical if not genuine long-term goals that each country would need to be able to maintain in order to strike an interim deal.

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## United States

There is widespread bipartisan support in the United States for complete denuclearization of North Korea. No matter how incremental the progress is on the nuclear issue, it would be difficult for the nation in the near term to abandon the goal of denuclearization or act in a way that might suggest that the United States is content with allowing North Korea to keep its nuclear weapons forever.

Substantive reasons for this include the fact that more nuclear weapons are dangerous, and there are concerns about proliferation and eroding the norms of the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which is the primary international agreement governing international norms related to nuclear weapons and the peaceful uses of nuclear power.<sup>37</sup> But there are also political reasons for maintaining the denuclearization goal: Few elected leaders want to appear weak by allowing North Korea to keep its weapons, and the United States would be making a major concession by changing its goals without receiving anything in return.

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## North Korea

Many analysts believe that North Korea wants to be recognized as a nuclear weapons power and was welcomed into the international community as such. It has also stated that it wants unification of the Korean peninsula and repeatedly expresses its displeasure at the U.S.-South Korea alliance.<sup>38</sup> And yet, the lack of consistent engagement

with North Korea over the years makes it difficult to know authoritatively exactly what North Korea's long-term goals and intentions are. Nevertheless, an interim deal would likely need to leave room for North Korea to maintain some of these more maximalist positions or at least continue to be vague about what its endgame is.

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## South Korea

Depending on the administration, South Korea has different goals. For progressives, the priority seems to be reducing tensions and deepening engagement with North Korea; for conservatives, the priority usually appears to be deterring North Korea and stopping its nuclear program. Although the goal of the Moon administration is denuclearization, it exists within the broader context of building a peace regime and reforming relations with North Korea. To sell an interim deal in South Korea, President Moon will likely need to maintain a strong stance on denuclearization—even if that goal is far off.

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## Japan

As stated above, Japan's primary interests focus on denuclearization—which includes removing the threat of medium-range missiles—and addressing North Korea's abductions of Japanese nationals. For Japan to accept an interim deal, it would need to maintain these goals publicly and make clear that it intends to continue to work toward denuclearization and resolving the abductee issue.

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## China

China's goal in any interim deal is to reduce tensions between the United States and North Korea and avoid being the target of more U.S. sanctions. China will therefore be looking to demonstrate that the North Korean threat is mitigated to ensure that pressure on China remains reduced.

To be successful, an interim deal with North Korea would have to find a way to enable each of these countries to claim that their key interests are being addressed, even if they are not resolved.

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# Elements of a good enough deal

The goals of an initial deal with North Korea should include: 1) making a down payment on concrete progress in dismantling North Korea's nuclear program; 2) confirming and verifying that each side is willing to follow through on promises; and 3) using the interim deal as an opportunity to build support for more progress.

An interim deal is essential to progress. North Korea will not agree to give up its nuclear weapons all at once, if ever, so any hope for progress must rest upon a step-by-step approach. And an incremental approach will only work if both the United States and North Korea are able to prove to each other that they are willing to follow through on their promises. An interim deal would give the United States and North Korea an opportunity to test each other's intentions. Therefore, the first major test of diplomacy will be North Korea's first promise to halt or give up some significant part of its nuclear capabilities; if that promise is kept, it can be built upon. In response, the United States must also follow through with real concessions.

The reports of the conversations between President Trump and Kim Jong Un in Hanoi reinforce that this kind of an approach is possible. Kim reportedly offered to freeze or dismantle the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center—or some part of it—in return for relief from U.N. sanctions that have been imposed since 2016. (Trump reportedly rejected the offer) Whether or not one believes that this deal is worth considering, it reveals that North Korea is willing to put a significant part of its nuclear program on the table for discussion.

While an initial deal cannot tackle all the issues identified in previous sections of this report, it should attempt to address at least one of the top priorities from each side. For the United States and Japan, the top priority is denuclearization. For North Korea, it's sanctions relief. For the current South Korean government, it's improving North-South ties. And for China, it's reducing sanctions pressure on itself.

The core elements of an interim deal must include:

- **Verifiable dismantlement of significant nuclear facilities.** Any deal must require the verifiable dismantlement of at least a significant portion of the Yongbyon nuclear facility—and/or other North Korean nuclear facilities. The dismantlement would have to be verified and inspected by the International Atomic Energy Agency. There are many possible permutations to this part of the deal that extend beyond this baseline condition, and the precise amount of dismantlement would be negotiated. But if North Korea committed to and followed through on dismantling a sizable amount of its nuclear facilities—far beyond just blowing up a cooling tower, as it did in 2008—it would be a significant step forward in curtailing North Korea’s nuclear program. The commitment could also provide the basis for building trust that the United States and North Korea will follow through on their respective promises and lay the foundation for more progress.
- **Step-by-step sanctions relief.** The United States should be willing to provide partial sanctions relief that corresponds in scope with the degree of the dismantling at Yongbyon—perhaps to include relief on parts but not all of the U.N. sanctions since 2016. The United States could also include snapback mechanisms to ensure that sanctions would resume if North Korea did not make good on its end of the deal. A key part of this sanctions relief will be creating space for inter-Korea projects. While there is debate surrounding how much North Korea cares about these projects, South Korea clearly is invested in them, and, as an ally, the United States should be supportive on South Korea’s behalf.
- **A formal testing moratorium.** In April 2018, Kim Jong Un announced that North Korea would no longer test nuclear weapons, intermediate-range ballistic missiles, or ICBMs,<sup>39</sup> but the regime recently resumed testing short-range weapons.<sup>40</sup> It is therefore critical to make the announced testing freeze part of the foundation of any interim deal. The more that North Korea tests ICBMs and nuclear weapons, the less politically feasible a deal will be in the United States, Japan, and South Korea.
- **Established processes for implementation and follow-up.** The last key component of an interim deal would be an agreement to establish processes to implement the tangible aspects of the deal such as dismantlement of nuclear facilities and sanctions relief as well as to discuss next steps on issues including denuclearization and security assurances.

There are other issues that an initial deal should reference but does not need to solve. The goal of including language on these issues in an interim deal is to identify topics for further negotiations and to give each side something to point to in order to build domestic support for the deal. Inclusion of these issues also serves as a public signaling mechanism that demonstrates to the world that the United States is protecting its allies' interests. While addressing many of the below issues would likely be helpful in achieving U.S. goals and advancing the negotiation process—and the United States should include them if possible—they do not seem essential to achieving the first step in an interim agreement.

- **Nonproliferation.** The United States and the Security Council have in place a robust set of enforcement mechanisms to prevent North Korean nuclear proliferation, and that work will continue while any interim deal is implemented. Nevertheless, guarantees and additional safeguards to prevent proliferation will be an essential part of any eventual comprehensive deal with North Korea, so an interim agreement should note that proliferation issues will continue to be discussed.<sup>40</sup>
- **Liaison offices.** While it appears that the United States and North Korea may have been close to agreeing to open liaison offices during the Hanoi summit,<sup>41</sup> this move does not seem essential for progress. Nevertheless, it could send the right signals to both sides about an intention to continue a dialogue and would be a positive inclusion in an interim agreement. Regular diplomatic contact will also improve the United States' and North Korea's ability to coordinate on other U.S. interests such as family reunions between North Koreans and Korean Americans; humanitarian aid delivery to North Korea; and North Korea's return of remains of U.S. prisoners of war and those missing in action from the Korean War.
- **Formal end of the Korean War.** Like the opening of liaison offices, a statement declaring the end of the Korean War would be positive but probably not necessary for progress. A declaration ending the war—as opposed to a formal treaty—could also send the right signal to North Korea about U.S. intentions and therefore could help improve the environment for further progress.
- **Human rights.** While it is difficult to make progress on convincing North Korea to change the way it treats its own people, the United States must find a way to signal—either in the text of an interim deal or in its own simultaneously released statement—that human rights are part of the agenda and that the United States will address treatment of North Koreans as well as South Korean prisoners and Japanese abductees. This will send the right signal to North Korea that the United States

will continue to press on human rights; Japan will be able to point to the language in garnering its own support for the deal. The United States should also expand humanitarian support to the North Korean people generally as a concrete way of showing U.S. support for improvements in their quality of life.

The United States must be clear and transparent in the scope of the deal it is looking to make with North Korea. North Korea is home to a host of illicit programs: It has advanced cyber capabilities, chemical and biological weapons, and a thriving drug trade.<sup>42</sup> And yet, the United States must be willing to put some of these issues to the side for now for the sake of making progress on denuclearization and laying the groundwork for progress on other issues in the future. In Hanoi, North Korea made it clear that a so-called big deal involving quickly giving up its nuclear weapons wasn't an option; it's time for the United States to refocus and concentrate its efforts on its highest-priority issue.

# Conclusion

While it is unclear whether North Korea will ever give up its nuclear weapons or whether better relations between North Korea and the world are possible, there is a window of opportunity now for the United States and North Korea—with the support of other key countries—to strike an interim deal exchanging the dismantlement of some nuclear facilities for sanctions relief. Although this initial deal would be highly imperfect, it would very likely earn the support of all relevant players and open the possibility of more progress. The politics of negotiating with North Korea have changed—at least for the moment—and the international community should seize this opportunity to make progress before it disappears.

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## Endnotes

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