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SPECIAL REPORT

US-DPRK Negotiations: Time to Pivot to an Interim Agreement



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Introduction

If and when US-DPRK working-level talks resume, as agreed by US President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un at their brief June 30 meeting at the Demilitarized Zone, prospects for overcoming the current impasse will depend heavily on whether the Trump administration is now prepared to recognize that the North is unwilling, at least at the present time, to give up its nuclear weapons—and whether, as a result, the administration is now prepared to consider an agreement that imposes significant constraints on DPRK capabilities but falls short of requiring complete denuclearization in an agreed time frame.

To be sure, such an agreement is not the ideal outcome that the US government and all other interested governments would like to see. However, a less ambitious agreement should be compared not with the ideal but unattainable goal of complete, time-bound elimination but with its most likely alternative—a US strategy of pressure, containment and ultimately regime change.

Is the Trump Administration Scaling Back Its Negotiating Objectives?

The *New York Times* reported on June 30 that the Trump administration may be considering scaling back its negotiating objectives on North Korea. The *Times* story [said](#) the administration has been “weighing a new approach,” that “would amount to a nuclear freeze, one that essentially enshrines the status quo and tacitly accepts the North as a nuclear power,” and “would not, at least in the near future, dismantle any existing weapons.” The administration immediately sought to throw cold water on the *Times* report. Senior US Department of State official Steve Biegun, the administration’s point person on North Korea, characterized the report as “pure speculation,” and maintained that the administration was “not preparing any new proposal currently.”

In distancing itself from the *Times* report, however, the administration was not disavowing any interest in a nuclear freeze—only in a freeze that would replace complete denuclearization as the outcome of negotiations. Actually, the administration has been prepared to accept a nuclear freeze, but only as a first step in an agreed road map leading to complete elimination in a definite period of time. It has finally come to recognize that denuclearization is inevitably a complicated,

phased process that must start with a partial measure, and it believes the logical place to start is a freeze or cap—a commitment by the North to “Stop making things,” as Biegun explained to reporters in an off-the-record briefing.¹ On July 9, reaffirming the administration’s commitment to complete and verifiable denuclearization, the State Department spokesperson [said](#) a freeze was “something that we would certainly hope to see at the beginning,” but not as “the end goal.”

So the key issue is not whether to pursue a freeze on North Korea’s nuclear capabilities. The administration, as well as those calling for a more flexible approach, favor some version of a freeze. The issue is whether to pursue a freeze in the absence of a credible North Korean commitment to eliminate its nuclear weapons capabilities in a finite period of time—a commitment that Kim Jong Un seems to have no intention of providing. And so far, at least, the administration has apparently been unwilling to negotiate a freeze that is not an integral part of an agreed road map leading to complete denuclearization.

It is unclear whether, as the *New York Times* story suggests, the administration is seriously thinking about altering that position. But if the Trump team hopes to overcome the current impasse and get negotiations on track, it needs to adopt an approach to the negotiations that involves agreeing on some version of a freeze in the near term while putting off to the future the task of reaching agreement on the timing and modalities of achieving complete denuclearization.

Components of an Interim Agreement

A freeze or cap—best called an “interim agreement,” to make clear that it is a first step rather than the end of the road—should cover testing, exports and production of fissile materials. It should address North Korea’s nuclear and missile capabilities, although restrictions on the latter would be less comprehensive, especially given the greater difficulty of monitoring missile capabilities. It should not address chemical or biological weapons, which pose much greater verification and definitional challenges, as they could impede the conclusion of any agreement on the higher priority nuclear and missile threats, and should, therefore, be handled separately.

Most of the key provisions of an interim agreement would probably be worked out in direct bilateral negotiations between the United States and North Korea. But US-DPRK engagement would presumably take place in close consultation with other interested states, mainly China and South Korea. The agreement itself should be multilateral, with North Korea, the United States, China, South Korea, Russia and Japan, and perhaps others (e.g., the European Union) as its parties—both to give greater international standing to the agreement and additional countries a role in implementing it and enforcing compliance.

On nuclear testing, an interim agreement should codify and make permanent the current North Korean moratorium on nuclear weapons testing, perhaps by requiring North Korea to adhere to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. And it should verifiably shut down the DPRK nuclear test site.

On missile flight testing, an interim agreement should go beyond the current DPRK moratorium, which covers long-range missiles, perhaps only intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). Instead, it should formally ban flight tests of ballistic and cruise missiles capable of delivering a

payload of 500 kilograms to a range of at least 300 kilometers, the Missile Technology Control Regime’s (MTCR) definition of a “Category I” missile capable of delivering a nuclear weapon. Thus, it would address the threat to Japan and South Korea from short-range missiles not covered by the current moratorium, although it would not deal with tactical systems such as nearly all anti-ship cruise missiles or air-defense missiles.

The flight-test ban should also apply to launches of rockets exceeding the MTCR Category I parameters carried out ostensibly for civilian space launch purposes, since flights of space launch vehicles (SLVs) could help North Korea further develop ICBMs. In the likely event that North Korea objects to banning SLV launches, the United States could propose working with other space-faring nations to offer to boost civilian North Korean satellites into orbit in lieu of North Korea pursuing the capability to do so on its own. In US-DPRK missile negotiations in the late 1990s, North Korea accepted such an approach, at least in principle, although no agreement was reached.

These prohibitions on nuclear testing and flight testing of ballistic missiles and SLVs could be monitored with high confidence, although verifying cruise missile range would pose a greater, but not insurmountable, technical challenge.

Limits on exports would also be an important component of an interim agreement, especially given North Korea’s track record of earning hard currency through the transfer of proliferation-sensitive equipment and technology, particularly missile-related items. An interim agreement should ban the DPRK’s export of equipment, materials or technology contained on the nuclear and missile control lists and dual-use control lists of the Nuclear Suppliers Group and Missile Technology Control Regime, as well as the export of items not on any control lists that are nonetheless intended to contribute to a nuclear or missile program. Individual exports of prohibited items, particularly small shipments, might be able to escape detection, and transfers of blueprints and technical data through cyberspace would pose special challenges. But it should be possible, over time, for US or partner national monitoring measures to discover evidence of illicit transfers, principally recurring or large-scale transfers.

A critical component of a freeze would be limits on North Korea’s production of fissile materials needed to fabricate nuclear weapons—highly enriched uranium (HEU) and plutonium. Stopping the fabrication of nuclear weapons from already-produced fissile materials would also be desirable. But verifying the amount of fissile material the DPRK has already produced would be a complex and time-consuming process, and detecting the illicit fabrication of nuclear weapons from undeclared, existing fissile material stocks at relatively small, covert workshops would also be difficult. It is advisable to defer consideration of existing stocks to a later stage and focus on a first-step agreement to prevent the production of *additional* fissile material, which is easier (although not easy) to verify, would cap North Korea’s inventory of fissile material and would, therefore, effectively limit the number of nuclear weapons North Korea could produce.

A Freeze Confined to Yongbyon

A key factor in a freeze would be the geographic scope of limits on North Korea’s production of fissile materials. At the Hanoi Summit, Kim Jong Un proposed the dismantlement of nuclear

facilities at North Korea's known nuclear complex, the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center—a proposal rejected by the United States because it included the excessive demand that the US terminate the most consequential United Nations (UN) sanctions against North Korea. The North was reportedly unclear about which Yongbyon facilities would be covered. But to be of any interest to the United States, the shutdown, at a minimum, would have to cover all facilities related to the production of plutonium or enriched uranium, including the 5 MWe reactor and associated reprocessing facility that together are responsible for North Korea's production of plutonium, the 25 MWe experimental light water reactor not yet in operation, the uranium enrichment facility and related fuel fabrication and uranium conversion facilities.

The constraining effects of an agreement confined to Yongbyon would not be insignificant. As Gary Samore points out, by depriving Pyongyang of its only known source of plutonium, it could limit the number of thermonuclear weapons the North could produce if it wants to include plutonium in its thermonuclear weapons rather than rely exclusively and less optimally on HEU. A Yongbyon agreement could also eliminate the most likely sources—but not the only potential source—of North Korean production of tritium gas, which can be used to increase the nuclear yield of fission weapons. And closing Yongbyon's gas centrifuge enrichment plant would end HEU production at its only declared enrichment facility.²

But the critical shortcoming of a freeze confined to Yongbyon is that it would not address nuclear activities, especially uranium enrichment, that the United States is confident are taking place at undeclared facilities outside Yongbyon. Such a geographically-limited freeze would not prevent North Korea from continuing and expanding those activities and further building up its stock of fissile materials for the production of additional nuclear weapons. Samore concludes: “The benefits of a US deal with the North to dismantle Yongbyon should not be dismissed, but they should not be oversold. If the US decides to buy it, the administration shouldn't pay too much for the prize.”³

A Nationwide Ban on Fissile Material Production

To place a meaningful, comprehensive cap on North Korea's inventory of fissile material, an interim agreement would need to halt fissile material production nationwide, not just at Yongbyon. The North Koreans would be required to declare and cease all activities throughout their country related to the production of enriched uranium or plutonium, allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to monitor the shutdown of those activities, and agree to procedures, including IAEA visits to suspect sites, to resolve any discrepancies between North Korea's declaration of relevant facilities and information available to the United States and others about locations where prohibited operations may be taking place. To increase the irreversibility of the cessation of fissile material production, the DPRK would also have to agree to disable and dismantle, or at least reliably convert to non-nuclear purposes, all facilities involved in such production.

North Korea can be expected to strongly resist a US proposal for a verifiable, comprehensive ban on its production of fissile material. Trump administration negotiators have apparently raised with their North Korean counterparts the idea of freezing activities outside Yongbyon, including at Kangson, a suspect enrichment site located near Pyongyang that has been cited in

Western media. The North Koreans have so far refused to address facilities outside Yongbyon, arguing that sufficient mutual trust does not yet exist, and have been unwilling even to admit the existence of nuclear activities outside their declared nuclear complex.

Despite DPRK objections, the United States needs to insist that an interim agreement go beyond Yongbyon. It would be difficult enough for any US administration to sell an agreement domestically that fell short of requiring complete denuclearization in a predictable timeframe. It would be much harder to gain the necessary domestic support for an agreement that did not even prevent North Korea from continuing the production of fissile material and increasing its nuclear arsenal, especially if Washington needed to reward Pyongyang for accepting such a limited deal.

A Fissile Material Ban in Stages

To gain North Korean approval of a comprehensive, verifiable ban on fissile material production, it may be necessary for an interim agreement to approach such a ban in stages. It could start with a step the North Koreans have proposed themselves: the shutdown of Yongbyon, or at least its key plutonium-related and enrichment-related facilities. Activity at those facilities would be halted immediately, an accelerated schedule of disablement and dismantlement operations would get underway and the IAEA would be present to monitor the process.

The interim agreement would also provide for going beyond Yongbyon. It could require that, concurrent with the start of Yongbyon shutdown operations, the parties would begin negotiating the procedures for implementing a nationwide ban on fissile material production, especially procedures—including IAEA visits to suspect sites—for resolving questions about the accuracy and completeness of North Korean declarations regarding facilities subject to the ban. The parties would be given a deadline for agreeing on such procedures—perhaps 12 months—at which point North Korea would be obliged to declare and cease activities at banned facilities and the IAEA would be called on both to monitor the cessation of operations at DPRK-declared facilities and to begin the potentially time-consuming process of verifying the completeness of the North Korean declaration. The interim agreement would also contain a schedule for disabling and dismantling proscribed facilities at both Yongbyon and outside Yongbyon. Depending on the number of facilities involved, their elimination or conversion could take anywhere from several months to a few years.⁴

Suitable Compensation for North Korea

Pursuing a nationwide fissile material production ban in stages might make it somewhat more palatable to North Korea. But to gain DPRK approval of an interim agreement, particularly one containing a comprehensive and rigorously-verified termination of fissile material production, the United States and other interested governments would need to provide North Korea with various forms of compensation. Past negotiations with the North Koreans suggest that they would make exorbitant demands. But especially for an interim agreement that did not, at least for the time being, require them to give up the fissile material and nuclear weapons they had already produced—or even to declare the amount of fissile material and the number of nuclear weapons

they had already produced—they could not expect to achieve overly ambitious negotiating objectives, such as the complete termination of sanctions, and they would likely settle for much less.

Still, North Korea would insist on more than the Trump administration has so far been prepared to give. The administration has strongly resisted making concessions to North Korea that would ease the economic impact of its maximum pressure campaign. While it is reportedly prepared to offer the North relatively modest incentives—Biegun is quoted as willing to support “humanitarian aid, expanded people-to-people talks, presence in each other’s capitals”⁵—the administration has maintained that economic sanctions relief would not be forthcoming until the North makes major, tangible progress toward denuclearization. While Trump officials have not been precise about how much progress would be needed to justify the initiation of economic sanctions relief, an interim freeze on North Korean capabilities would presumably not qualify as providing sufficient justification, at least not under the administration’s current position.

The administration is right to be cautious in rewarding the DPRK for steps short of eliminating its nuclear capability. The United States will need leverage, especially the leverage provided by sanctions relief, to press North Korea to move beyond an interim agreement and down the path toward complete denuclearization. But an interim agreement along the lines suggested here—banning nuclear and missile tests, proliferation-sensitive exports and fissile material production—would warrant more than the administration is currently willing to do, including in the area of sanctions relief.

If an interim agreement can be negotiated with effective restrictions on North Korean capabilities and strong verification arrangements, a reasonable incentives package might include the following elements: a declaration to end the Korean War; the establishment of liaison offices in Pyongyang and Washington; limits on the scale of US-South Korean joint military exercises; a commitment not to pursue new US or UN sanctions; humanitarian assistance; exceptions to existing sanctions to permit certain inter-Korean projects (such as the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the Mt. Kumgang tourism project); and the suspension of certain UN sanctions, especially those restricting activities that do not earn hard currency for Pyongyang (such as North Korea’s import of petroleum products).

Moreover, such a compensation package could be doled out incrementally to incentivize the North to continue implementing its commitments. For example, in a phased approach to a fissile material production ban along the lines described above, relatively modest rewards could be provided for shutting down Yongbyon, while more significant economic measures would be provided when suitable verification procedures are agreed for dealing with suspect sites and when North Korea has declared and ceased proscribed activities nationwide.

Reaffirming, and Defining, the Goal of Complete Denuclearization

An interim agreement would contain a commitment to the goal of complete denuclearization and would obligate the parties to continue negotiations to pursue that eventual outcome. However, it would not specify a deadline for arriving at that objective, given North Korean opposition, at

least at the present time, to making such a time-bound commitment. The DPRK would be able, for the time being, to retain the nuclear weapons and materials it had already produced.

Although the interim agreement would not set a deadline for reaching complete denuclearization or prescribe a road map for getting there, it should contain an agreed definition of what that goal would involve, addressing such questions as the extent to which missiles and non-nuclear weapons of mass destruction would be covered and whether North Korea would be allowed to pursue a civil nuclear energy program and, if so, which kinds of facilities and activities would be permitted. Of course, agreeing on the eventual destination is no guarantee that the parties will ever arrive there. But at least the parties would not be committing themselves to an objective with very different end states in mind, which is the situation that exists today, with Pyongyang apparently adhering to its longstanding definition of complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, which includes elements the United States and its allies could not accept, such as the elimination of the US nuclear umbrella. North Korea's continued support for such a definition undermines any confidence that it would genuinely be willing in the future to give up its nuclear deterrent.

Going Beyond a Simple Freeze?

While the main rationale for an interim agreement would be to cap rather than reduce North Korean nuclear capabilities, it would obviously be desirable for an interim agreement, as a kind of bonus, also to require the DPRK to make some reductions, even if token, in its inventory of nuclear weapons or fissile materials. In addition to developing and implementing procedures for the removal and disposition of North Korean nuclear materials and weapons—which would be critical to eventual denuclearization—such a requirement would establish a vital precedent for further reductions and greatly boost the credibility and political appeal of an interim deal in the United States.

If the Trump administration decides to go for an interim agreement, it might seek some reductions as part of the deal. Biegun may have hinted at that when he reportedly speculated about the North giving up 20 nuclear weapons, citing a US desire “to take pieces off the board.”⁶ But getting Pyongyang to agree to include reductions in an interim agreement would be very difficult. And in any event, token reductions, which is the most that might be negotiable, would do little to actually reduce the DPRK nuclear threat. The US administration would need to decide how valuable such token reductions would be, whether to press for them in the negotiations and if so, what it would be willing to pay to get them.

Another decision to make in approaching an interim agreement is how much to seek in terms of missile constraints. It would be tempting to go beyond a flight-test ban and press for more, including perhaps the verifiable shutdown of certain missile flight-test or production facilities, or the reduction or even elimination of certain missiles, especially existing ICBMs. As in the case of nuclear constraints, the United States would need to consider the value of such additional missile constraints, the prospect of achieving them and what it might be required to pay for them.

In the end, a simpler and less inclusive interim agreement—one focused on capping North Korean capabilities by prohibiting nuclear and missile testing, proliferation-sensitive exports

and fissile material production, and not on seeking to get a significant head start on reductions or other restrictions—would probably be the most that could be negotiated at a reasonable price.

But it shouldn't be assumed that an interim deal confined mainly to freezing capabilities would be easy to negotiate. Although it would give Pyongyang a reprieve on complete denuclearization, several of the features of the interim agreement described here—such as suspect-site inspections outside Yongbyon, the dismantlement or conversion of all fissile material production facilities, and the inclusion of all MTCR Category I missiles and SLVs (and not just ICBMs) in a missile flight-test ban—would be strongly resisted by the North. It would take a continuation of effective sanctions pressure as well as the strong support of other interested countries, mainly China, to induce the North Koreans to accept such an interim agreement.

Benefits of an Interim Agreement

An interim agreement along the lines outlined above, if achievable and effectively implemented, would bring important benefits. The nuclear test ban would impede improvements in the miniaturization of DPRK nuclear weapons and, therefore, constrain the North's ability to deploy compact warheads or multiple warheads on its missiles. The missile flight-test ban would impede advances in the accuracy and reliability of North Korea's missiles and in their ability to penetrate US and allied air and missile defenses.⁷ The fissile material production ban would bound the nuclear material available for the fabrication of the North's nuclear weapons and, therefore, the size of its nuclear arsenal.

These constraints would better enable US and allied defense planners to develop and deploy effective responses, including missile defenses, to the DPRK threat. Those responsible for defending allied territories and the US homeland would clearly prefer to work against a constrained and, therefore, less capable and responsive threat.

An interim agreement, especially one containing extensive monitoring and consultative arrangements, could provide a greater window into DPRK intentions and capabilities than would otherwise exist. In addition, it would open channels of communication that could be used to lower tensions, avoid dangerous miscalculations and explore means of addressing a range of long-standing and more recent concerns, including the conventional and sub-conventional threats (e.g., low-level and non-traditional provocations such as cyber attacks) posed by the North.

While falling short of the international community's hopes for eliminating North Korea's nuclear capability once and for all, an interim agreement would have the support of most interested governments as a pragmatic compromise that would limit Pyongyang's most destabilizing capabilities, reduce regional tensions and the likelihood of military confrontation, and at least keep the door open for further progress toward complete denuclearization.

Shortcomings of an Interim Agreement

But an interim agreement would have significant downsides and would surely be controversial. Despite the commitment to continue negotiations toward complete denuclearization, there would

be no deadline for achieving that goal and no guarantee that it would ever be achieved. Critics would, therefore, claim that the deal would effectively confer on North Korea the status of a *de facto* nuclear-weapon state.

Critics would also object to giving North Korea any rewards for an agreement that did not provide for complete denuclearization by an agreed deadline. Indeed, they would argue that the euphoria accompanying an interim agreement would significantly erode international support for enforcing remaining sanctions, which would undermine the leverage needed to press North Korea to take further steps toward eliminating its nuclear capability.

And not least, the critics would charge that, given North Korea's checkered record on implementing previous agreements, Pyongyang could be expected to walk away from the new agreement when doing so would suit its interests, pocketing the benefits it had already realized.

These criticisms would pose a challenge for an administration seeking to gain congressional approval for a legally binding interim agreement. Such approval—perhaps as a “congressional-executive agreement” requiring a simple majority of both houses rather than as a treaty—would be desirable because it would give the agreement greater political and legal standing, enhance its durability and facilitate congressional support for any legislative action needed to fulfill US commitments under the agreement to provide compensation to North Korea. Prospects for approval would depend heavily on the administration's ability to make a strong case that the agreement placed effective and verifiable constraints on DPRK capabilities, and that compensation provided to the North was justified by those limitations.

Abandon Negotiations and Pursue a Long-Term Pressure Strategy?

An interim agreement along the lines outlined here would surely face criticism. But to evaluate it fairly, it should be compared not with the ideal but unattainable outcome of complete denuclearization in an agreed timeframe, but with an interim agreement's most likely alternative: abandoning negotiations, ramping up sanctions, and pursuing a long-term strategy of pressure, containment and ultimately regime change.

The aim of such a strategy would be to squeeze the resources available for North Korea's destabilizing weapons programs, deter its provocations, weaken the regime and eventually bring about its fundamental transformation or collapse.

A major drawback of such a strategy is that, by forfeiting the opportunity to negotiate near-term constraints on North Korean capabilities, it would concede that Pyongyang would be free to advance its nuclear and missile programs well into the future. While Kim Jong Un has claimed that the North has already obtained the deterrent capability it needs, there is much the North can do in the absence of negotiated limits—and given the powerful influence of the DPRK military, surely would do—to expand and improve its capabilities and place US and allied territories and interests at much greater risk.

Moreover, a key element of an effective pressure strategy—gaining strong international support for ratcheting up sanctions—would face serious challenges. Kim Jong Un's active summit-level

outreach and effective public diplomacy have blunted the momentum of the 2017 maximum pressure campaign. Now there is uneven enforcement of existing UN Security Council sanctions and strong resistance to adopting additional international measures to pressure Pyongyang. It could take major DPRK provocations to revive international support for sanctions. And even in the event of such provocations, the US would have to overcome efforts by China and Russia—both of which have sought in 2018 and 2019 to rebuild their relations with North Korea—to defend North Korea and weaken sanctions.

In addition, the ultimate goal of a pressure strategy—regime transformation or collapse—would be difficult to engineer from outside. Many observers have predicted the demise of the Kim dynasty for decades, but the regime, despite strong international pressures, has proven resilient. Kim Jong Un appears to have ensured the loyalty of the North Korean elite through a combination of generous rewards and brutal intimidation. While current sanctions have taken a heavy toll on the DPRK economy, there are no signs that it is near the breaking point. And China, which is deeply worried about the unpredictable implications of regime change for regional stability, can be expected to work hard to thwart any US efforts to achieve it.

Not least, pivoting away from negotiations could bring back the heightened tensions that prevailed during 2017, with North Korean nuclear and missile testing, stepped up US and allied military exercises, inflammatory rhetoric and increased potential for misperceptions and miscalculations. The risks of armed conflict, including the possibility of large-scale war on the Korean Peninsula that could escalate to the nuclear level, would grow significantly.

A Less Ambitious but Realistic and Positive Path Forward

Scaling back from complete and early denuclearization to a less ambitious interim agreement would be a hard pill to swallow for a US administration that has repeatedly stressed its determination to finally put an end to North Korea's nuclear capability and not settle for partial measures. It would also be a disappointment to North Korea's neighbors, all of whom would strongly prefer that the DPRK nuclear issue be resolved rather than once again kicked down the road.

But it should be clear by now that a North Korean commitment to the complete and time-bound elimination of its nuclear capability is not in the cards, at least not in current circumstances. Realistically, such an ideal outcome may never be possible. But to increase the odds that it will eventually become possible, it is critical now to place a cap on DPRK capabilities. In the absence of near-term, negotiated constraints, the North will expand its nuclear and missile capabilities and tensions between the United States and North Korea could sharply increase—placing the goal of complete denuclearization further out of reach.

Of course, an interim agreement capping North Korea's capabilities will not eliminate the nuclear threat posed by Pyongyang and will not allow the United States and its East Asian allies to let down their guard. The allies will need to maintain strong military capabilities to deter North Korean aggression at the sub-conventional, conventional and nuclear levels, including by continuing to ensure the credibility of the US extended nuclear deterrent. They will need to work together and with other key states to ensure that sanctions left in place by an interim agreement

are enforced and can provide leverage to press Pyongyang to proceed further down the path toward denuclearization. They will need to work closely with other parties to a multilateral interim agreement to hold the North to a strict standard of compliance with its obligations. And they will need to prepare contingency plans, including for the re-imposition of sanctions, in the event that North Korea violates or withdraws from the agreement.

Although a conscientiously-implemented interim agreement would not eliminate the North Korean threat, it could bound the threat and make it easier and less expensive for the United States and the allies to develop and deploy effective means of deterring and defending against it. And while an interim agreement would certainly not guarantee continued progress toward complete denuclearization, it could help stabilize the current situation and facilitate further engagement between Washington and Pyongyang that over time could reduce bilateral tensions and perhaps create conditions that would reduce North Korea's perceived need to retain a nuclear deterrent.

It is time for both the Trump administration and the North Korean regime to abandon their unrealistic hopes and negotiating positions and start pursuing such an agreement.

Endnotes

¹ Jonathan Swan and Erica Pandey, "Scoop: Trump's negotiator signals flexibility in North Korea talks," *Axios*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.axios.com/trump-negotiator-steve-biegun-signals-flexibility-in-north-korea-talks-0b1f9a53-2599-49ac-b236-0fa819d175f8.html>.

² Gary Samore, "How Significant is the Dismantlement of Yongbyon?" *38 North*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.38north.org/2019/03/gsamore031119/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. Gary Samore has [proposed](#) a phased approach along these lines for achieving a comprehensive ban on North Korean fissile material production.

⁵ Swan and Pandey.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See the analysis by Vann Van Diepen on the value of banning the flight testing of North Korean ICBMs [here](#).