



## Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

### **Korean Peninsula: Nuclear Disarmament/De-escalation of Conflict February 2019**

*“Positive signs are arriving from the Korean Peninsula. The Holy See regards favorably the dialogues in course and expresses the hope that they can also deal with the more complex issues in a constructive attitude and thus lead to shared and lasting solutions capable of ensuring a future of development and cooperation for the whole Korean people and for the entire region.”* Pope Francis Address to the Diplomatic Corps, January 7, 2019

Korea has been much in the news and rightly so. In 2017, tensions were high as the Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Korea (DPRK) or North Korea advanced its nuclear program and launched missiles, some overflying Japan, and others reportedly able to reach the United States. Kim Jong-un, the autocratic DPRK leader, and President Donald Trump traded insults. The United States led efforts in the UN to put “maximum pressure” on North Korea through economic sanctions. But much changed for the better in 2018.

South Korea hosted the Winter Olympics in February 2018, attended by Kim Jong-un’s sister, and for the first time, South and North Korean athletes joined to compete in three sports. A very cordial Inter-Korean summit was held April 27 at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) at which South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un signed the Panmunjom Declaration renouncing war and confirmed steps toward a “common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean peninsula.” In May, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Pyongyang and returned with three Korean-Americans who had been imprisoned there. And in June, in response to an invitation extended by Kim Jong-un, a Trump-Kim summit was held in Singapore; a vague general joint statement was issued but in it, the DPRK did commit to “work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” President Moon visited the DPRK in September and said the two leaders declared that a “new era of peace had opened.”

The leaders of China, Japan and South Korea met in May 2018 to discuss denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and how to promote free trade. This was the first such trilateral summit since November 2015. Historically, China and Japan have been involved on the Korean peninsula. Both maintain strong interest in how Korea figures into the regional balance of power. Whether these positive signs lead to denuclearization on the Korean peninsula and a peace treaty that finally resolves the Korean War stalemate may hinge on the next Trump-Kim summit as talks between the U.S. and North Korea are currently stalled. President Moon is playing the role of mediator – trying to reassure the United States that as a strong ally, South Korea will maintain sanctions, while at the same time, encouraging gradual loosening on some sanctions to allow investment in joint economic projects that Moon feels will entice the North to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Balancing what each side wants against what each is prepared to give will be difficult, given a history of distrust and broken promises. Major issues to be resolved include:

**Denuclearization vs Lifting Economic Sanctions** – While the Panmunjon Declaration commits to “complete denuclearization,” how is this to be achieved? In the past, the United States has required that North Korea undergo complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of its nuclear weapons before lifting sanctions. The Trump Administration wants to continue this approach, believing it is pressure that has caused Kim to make concessions. North Korea prefers an incremental approach where they receive economic rewards in return for steps taken to gradually denuclearize, such as the apparent destruction of a nuclear test site in May 2018. But North Korea has previously reneged on such promises and skeptics warn that lessening sanctions rewards a corrupt regime for its long-term pursuit of nuclear weapons. South

Korea wants North Korea to take some credible actions toward denuclearization to be followed by a more compressed timetable of inspections and verifications of dismantling nuclear weapons sites before offering some economic incentives. Despite President Moon's overtures to DPRK, he still supports a very robust defense budget. One report cautions that, unlike Iran, North Korea likely has many more nuclear weapons sites, often in remote areas. Even if the North Koreans are forthright in identifying the sites, the large number will pose unprecedented challenges to inspections. Beyond denuclearization, there is concern over the possible use of the large numbers of conventional arms in the region.

**Humanitarian Aid** – Sanctions have greatly restricted the flow of humanitarian aid by limiting money transfers, transportation and travel by aid workers. Vital medicine, water and sanitation equipment, and food are not getting to the 10 million North Koreans, estimated by the United Nations to be in need of assistance. Making sure that the aid gets to those most in need, particularly in rural areas, is a challenge. The UN Food and Agricultural Organization reports 40 percent of North Koreans are undernourished and 28 percent of children are stunted. A long-standing tuberculosis program, run by the Maryknoll Fathers for the Eugene Bell Foundation, has been interrupted, endangering the health of patients under treatment.

**Downgrading of U.S. Military Presence** – About 25,000 American military are stationed in South Korea. Their removal or a significant reduction in their numbers might be a concession the United States could make although South Koreans remain very supportive of their continued presence. So too would a decrease in the number and scope of joint U.S.-South Korean military exercises. The United States and South Korea already agreed last year to modify certain exercises that North Korea views as provocative. Finally, the United States supplied the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile defense system to South Korea in April 2017. Its deployment there is opposed by China and North Korea who view it as a provocative action destabilizing regional security. South Korea is likely to be pressured by China and North Korea to dismantle THAAD. But Japan, which hosts a number of U.S. military bases and troops, would likely prefer some continued U.S. military presence in South Korea.

**Human rights** - North Korea has an abominable human rights record. Human rights groups want the promotion of these rights to be an integral part of any discussions with North Korea while others argue the focus should be on providing basic needs first, before pushing for human rights. While applauding the release of the three Korean Americans falsely accused of espionage, the State Department notes there are 100,000 people in prison camps, subjected to hard labor, starvation, and torture. Japan and South Korea want the issue of abductions of their citizens to be raised. North Korea is officially atheist and those espousing religions are usually imprisoned.

**Regional Politics** - Secretary Pompeo denies the United States wants regime change in North Korea but U.S. officials support maintaining "maximum pressure" (i.e. sanctions) on North Korea – a stance that North Korea says is "an affront and insult to their sincere efforts for peace." South Korea and Japan (U.S. military allies) and China (U.S.' geopolitical/economic competitor) want to have input into any negotiations and likely differ as to the timing and steps of denuclearization and sanctions relief, as well as the scope of issues covered. China is North Korea's largest trading partner and together with Russia, is likely to favor easing sanctions. Kim Jong-un consulted closely with China's leader Xi Jin-ping, before engaging with the United States.

Domestic pressures facing each leader need to be factored into their stance on negotiations. For example, President Moon lacks the support of the political opposition for his push for peace on the Korean peninsula. In contrast to his campaign promises, problems in the South Korean economy and high youth unemployment also have diminished Moon's popular support. In the DPRK, while Kim Jong-un's possession of nuclear weapons has enhanced his status, his willingness to open North Korea as reflected in the Panmunjom Declaration may be opposed by his military bent on maintaining their privileges. An agreement could lead to large flows of North Koreans into South Korea and China, causing domestic problems. If North Korea

resumes certain nuclear activities, such a nuclear and long-range missile testing, some U.S. officials may press for “pre-emptive strikes” with catastrophic consequences given Seoul’s proximity to the DMZ. Finally, the DRRK’s retention of nuclear weapons signaling its de facto status as a nuclear power would likely fuel a nuclear arms race in the region.

**Catholic Church in Korea** - Catholics account for about 10 percent of the population of South Korea but they have considerable influence as they make up 25% of the Parliament and 35% of the military leadership. The Church is one of the most respected religions in South Korea as they have historically promoted equality and democracy and fought against corruption.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea (CBCCK) has long been active in promoting peace on the Korean Peninsula, contacts between separated families, and humanitarian assistance to North Korea. CBCCK President Archbishop Hyginus Kim Hee-joong wrote: "To settle peace completely on this peninsula, we must not raise all kinds of weapons of mass destruction, and the 'denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula' must be realized. To attain these goals, we need to restore trust between the South and the North through frequent dialogues and meetings. We also need enough time to accept each other as companions, not enemies. We could remain in true peace together when we continue to try overcoming the divided system and to create the peace regime."

President Moon Jae-in, a practicing Catholic, shares the Church's goal of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula by guaranteeing North Korea's safety and establishing a permanent peace accord that has the support of surrounding countries. His Administration and the Catholic bishops want to resume and sustain exchanges between North and South Korea. President Moon's wish for a "new economic community" on the Korean peninsula reflects the CBCCK's inclusion of "mutual development" as part of their strategy to advance peace although there may be some differences among the bishops as to the pace of these efforts.

The CBCCK enthusiastically endorsed the meeting of North and South Korean leaders on April 27, 2018 and welcomed the resulting Panmunjom Declaration, saying that it "opened the way for peace and reunification through complete denuclearization." Pope Francis likewise commented on the meeting saying, "I accompany with prayer the positive success of last Friday's Inter-Korean Summit and the courageous commitment assumed by the leaders of the two sides, to engage in a course of sincere dialogue for a Korean Peninsula free of nuclear arms."

The CBCCK strongly favors a visit by Pope Francis to North Korea, should an official invitation be extended, as they believe it will contribute to the advancement of peace, not only on the Korean peninsula but globally. South Korean bishops and clergy have made a few visits to North Korea and CBCCK President Archbishop Hyginus Kim accompanied President Moon in his September 2018 visit to Pyongyang.

In November 2017 and November 2018, the Catholic Institute of Northeast Asia Peace (CINAP) hosted two international conferences on “The Catholic’s Role for Peace in the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia.” U.S. bishops spoke at both conferences, along with other international speakers. CINAP was established by Bishop Peter Lee Ki-heon of Uijeongbu diocese located near the DMZ that separates North and South Korea. The first conference focused on Church teaching and regional views on nuclear disarmament. The second emphasized peace-building and reconciliation in a post-Cold War period, opposed long-term-economic sanctions as “ineffective,” and urged the U.S. government to “take a more active stance..., including overcoming hostility, establishing a new US-North Korea relationship.”

**RESOURCES:** Visit <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/asia/korea/> and Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Korea’s website <http://english.cbck.or.kr/index>