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Reimagining DPRK Summit Diplomacy: Can ASEAN Play a Bigger Role?

By Shawn Ho and Sarah Teo

SYNOPSIS

The lack of agreement at the 2nd DPRK-US Summit in Hanoi highlights the necessity of an alternative approach; particularly one which ensures that the DPRK continues to engage the regional and international community. There is potential for ASEAN, as the key multilateral platform in post-Cold War Asia Pacific, to play a bigger role towards this end.

COMMENTARY

WITH THE lack of agreement between US President Donald Trump and North Korea's (DPRK) Chairman Kim Jong Un at the 2nd DPRK-US Summit in Hanoi in February this year, summit diplomacy appears to have hit a wall. Following the Hanoi Summit, many questions have been raised about the future of denuclearisation negotiations between the two countries. A related and longer term question would be whether the DPRK can eventually integrate into the regional architecture.

Such a question would, inevitably, bring ASEAN – the primary multilateral platform in the post-Cold War Asia Pacific – into the picture. Given that both President Trump and Chairman Kim seem unwilling to budge from their current public demands of each other in the denuclearisation negotiations, it would be timely to consider alternative avenues in approaching the stalemate. As an organisation that has historically prided itself on its neutrality and centrality in the region, ASEAN could utilise this opportunity to enhance its convenor profile by doing more to bring the DPRK into its regional multilateral fold.

Roadmap for ASEAN's Strategy

There are a few occasions in the near future which ASEAN could utilise. First is the

ASEAN-Korea Commemorative Summit at the end of this year in Korea involving South Korea's (ROK) President Moon Jae-in and leaders of the 10 ASEAN member states. This Summit is meant to commemorate the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN-ROK Dialogue Relations. As Indonesian President Joko Widodo had suggested last November at the ASEAN-ROK Summit in Singapore, South Korea could invite Chairman Kim to this ASEAN-Korea Commemorative Summit later this year.

The hope is that this would deepen Pyongyang's participation with the regional multilateral architecture, beyond its current participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum, and convince Chairman Kim that further engagement with the international community is the path towards ensuring the DPRK's security and economic growth.

This would also tie in with President Moon's proposal for Chairman Kim to visit Seoul, in what would be a first for a DPRK leader. President Moon is committed to making sure that this visit materialises as soon as possible, as agreed upon during the previous Inter-Korean Summit in Pyongyang last year.

The ASEAN-Korea Commemorative Summit could provide further incentive for Chairman Kim to visit Seoul as he will be able to meet all 10 ASEAN leaders and President Moon in one trip. It is also worth pointing out that this would be Chairman Kim's first ever multilateral summit if he attends it.

Setting the Stage

As a lead-up to this ASEAN-Korea Commemorative Summit and to reignite the momentum for dialogue between the DPRK and the US, the upcoming Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore in May/June and the ASEAN Regional Forum in Bangkok in July/August could provide two occasions to persuade the DPRK to continue on the path of dialogue and negotiations.

At these two high-level multilateral settings, there will be ample opportunity for various countries in the region and beyond to engage ministerial-level representatives from the DPRK should the latter decide to participate in these meetings.

Moreover, should positive circumstances for dialogue endure, a 3rd DPRK-US summit could be held in early 2020. Potential venues could be the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, or again in Hanoi (given that Vietnam will be the ASEAN Chair next year).

Either of these possibilities would be beneficial to ASEAN's quest to remain central in the regional architecture and reinforce its relevance to its Dialogue Partners such as the US, China, ROK, Japan and Russia. All of these Dialogue Partners share common interests in getting the DPRK to implement its complete denuclearisation plans.

For ASEAN to play a bigger role in facilitating the DPRK's integration into the regional architecture, it could also consider reviving the "Friends of the Chair" initiative. Originally proposed in the early 2000s, the initiative calls for selected regional countries, together with the ASEAN Chair, to take the lead in addressing the Korean Peninsular challenge. This could help ensure some consistency in the region's approach, as well as across different ASEAN chairmanships, towards engaging the DPRK.

Challenges and Opportunities

There is no doubt that the regional climate today is much better than two years ago, when major conflict on the Korean Peninsula appeared imminent. However, this window of opportunity to achieve significant progress in the Korean Peninsula is narrowing. With campaigning for the next US presidential election already starting, President Trump's focus is likely to shift away from foreign policy issues to more domestic priorities.

An alternative approach is urgently required, specifically one in which the DPRK is encouraged to engage in multilateral regional summit diplomacy via the ASEAN platform. The aim is to persuade Chairman Kim that regional countries in this region stand ready to assist him in any way to help him develop his economy should he denuclearise completely.

The peace dividends from an eventual denuclearised Korean Peninsula, normalised bilateral relations between the DPRK and the US, and permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula, would be enormous not just for the East Asian region but the world.

Dialogue remains the only workable option towards resolving the multiple complex issues on the Korean Peninsula. In this regard, a multilateral summit meeting between the two Korean leaders and 10 ASEAN leaders in the ROK at the end of 2019 could go down in history as the turning point that led to the eventual resolution of one of Asia's longest standing flashpoints.

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