

[Engagement Network Series 2] S Korea's Chief Nuke Negotiator on How Nuclear Talks with the DPRK Could Resume

published by [Jee Abbey Lee](#) on Sep 17, 2020

Open Nuclear Network (ONN) is currently in the process of compiling a network of trusted third parties known as the ONN Engagement Network. As former officials from high-level diplomatic and military positions around the globe, they will be provided with data-driven analysis from ONN to utilise in nuclear de-escalation efforts in their respective countries. From South Korea, former Chief Negotiator to Six Party Talks Chun Yung-woo is one of the members.

Based on an hour-long conversation with the former high-level official, this two-part analysis sheds light on what goes on behind closed doors when negotiating with North Korea. Part one lays out some of Chun's experiences as the South's top nuclear diplomat in interpreting the North's messages to interested parties. In this second part, ONN hears his thoughts on the basic minimum conditions for a meaningful resumption of disarmament talks.

Starting from standstill

Current discussions are at a standstill. According to Chun, a successful disarmament process begins with a phased approach moving towards a freeze and later eventual dismantlement of the DPRK's nuclear weapons programme. He recognises that North Korea would never unilaterally disarm and calls for reciprocal actions from South Korea and the United States.

"Once there is a cessation of all nuclear activities, a nationwide freeze, [North Korea's] nuclear arsenal will not increase. In the next phase, the nuclear stockpile needs to decrease and the final step would mean complete dismantlement of their programme," [1] said Chun.

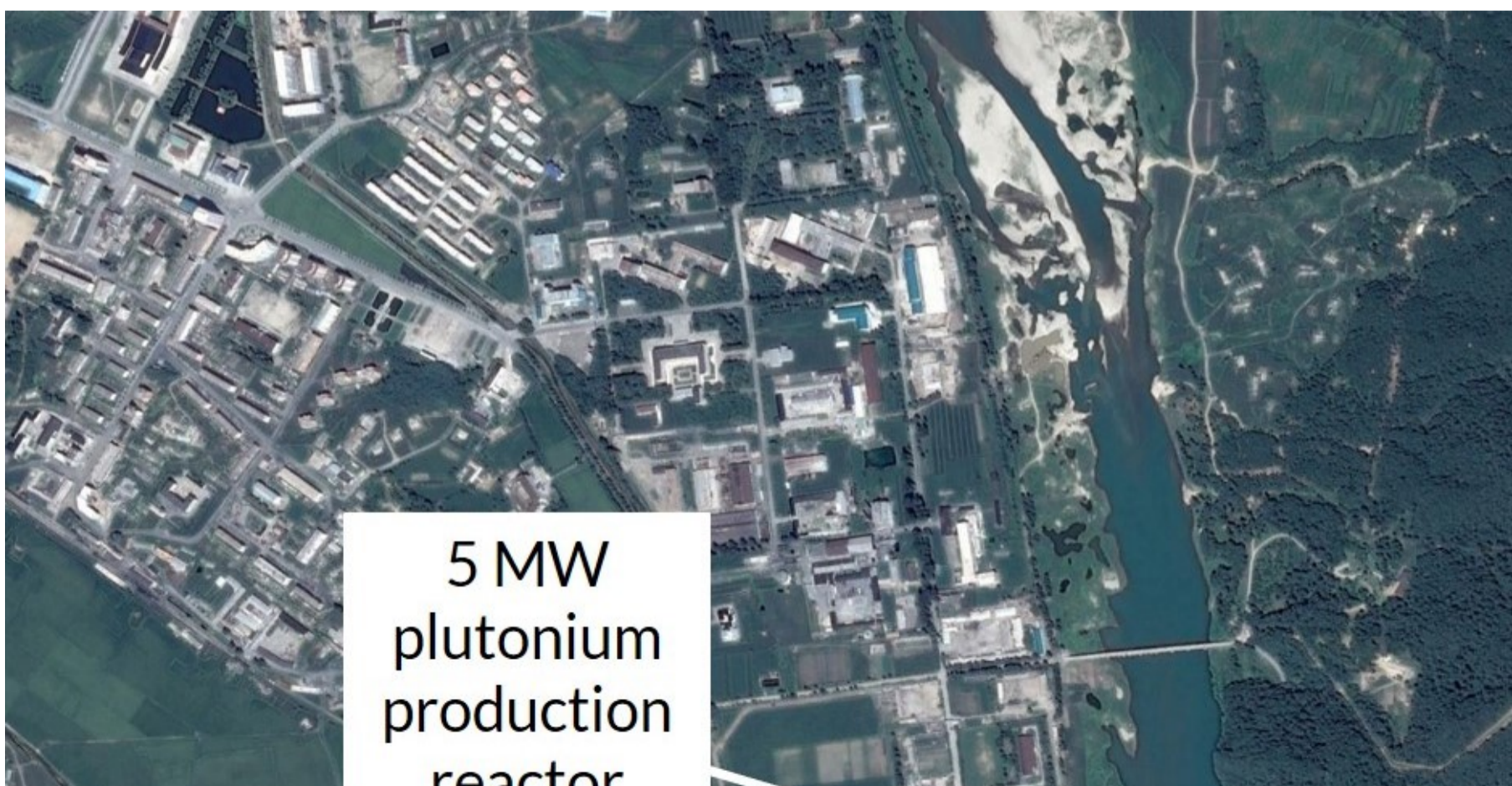
He believes such a phased approach is the only plausible option.

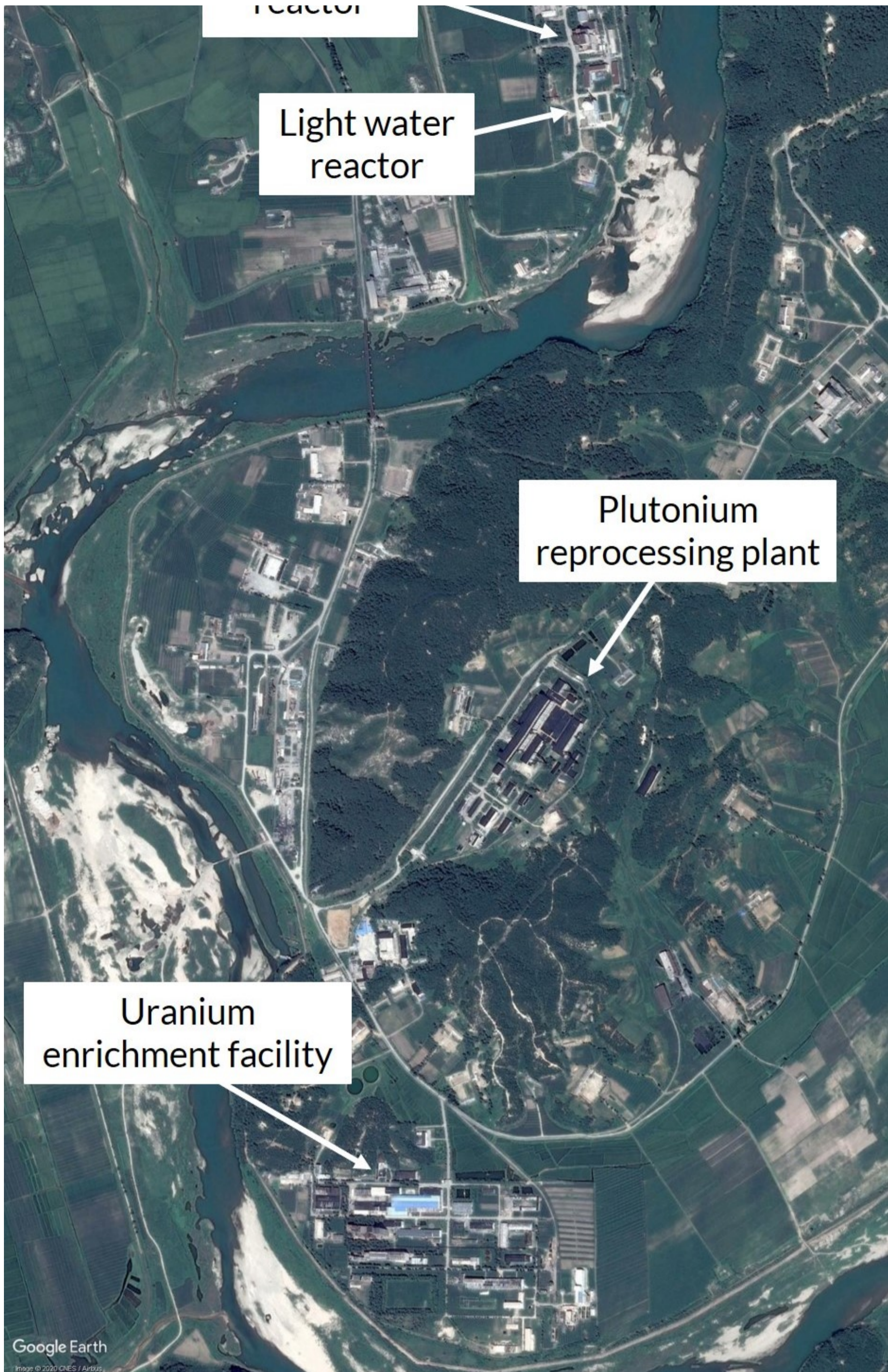
"Both sides' actions need to be taken 'in parallel,' he said, citing the lack of trust between Pyongyang and Washington." Chun compared the situation to a "cash-only" business because there is no trust to use a credit card system of buying now, paying later. [2]

Equivalence

In addition to a nationwide freeze on the uranium enrichment programme (UEP), Chun said there needs to be "equivalence" of offers from North Korea and the United States.

Stating the comparatively low value the US puts on the North's Yongbyon nuclear complex, Chun likened the Pyongyang offer of giving up Yongbyon in exchange for lifting of recent sanctions at previous negotiations to offering 100 dollars for 1,000 dollars' worth of goods.





Yongbyon Complex, Source: Google Earth/ CNES Airbus/ Maxar

“The US is a powerful nation so it could possibly offer double the value of what North Korea would offer; but it would not offer 10 times as much as the North’s offer. That would be sort of giving into fraud,” [3] Chun said.

He believes North Korea's trust in the South's ability to coach them about what the US wants has tanked, hit by the failed Hanoi Summit. Chun elaborated that North Korea was counting on getting something out of the negotiations at the summit. So when proceeding with the South's advice led to its abrupt end, the incident left a negative impression on Pyongyang. [4]

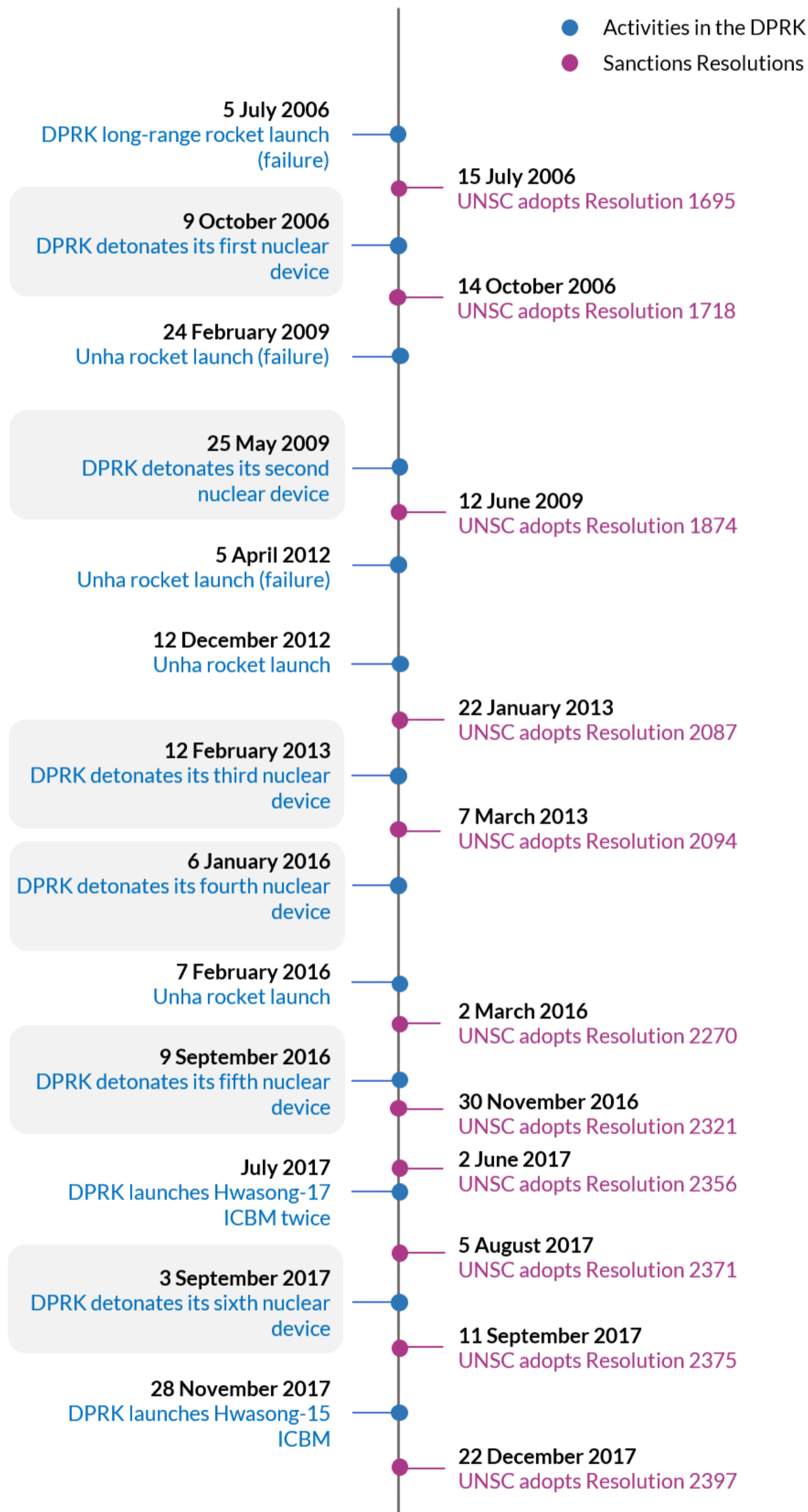
Sanctions relief

"If North Korea cannot give up their uranium enrichment programme, another option for them is to come up with a certain amount of nuclear material, warheads, or even a declaration of their denuclearisation plans." [5] As for what they can ask in return, Chun said Pyongyang can possibly demand a lift on bans on coal export or relaxed limitations on crude oil imports.

"Almost 95 percent of sanctions on North Korea were imposed after 2016. If they are asking for lifting of these sanctions [in exchange for Yongbyon] that means they will not have much more incentive to dismantle the rest," cautions Chun. [6] Rightly or wrongly, the US government may believe there are two or more uranium enrichment facilities outside of Yongbyon according to a claim made by David Albright in 2018. [7]

In the latest sanctions update, the US government and its armed forces [issued an advisory](#) on 14 May to provide assistance to industry insiders in the maritime industry, energy and metals sectors in their efforts to counter illicit shipping and sanctions evasion.

CHRONOLOGY OF SANCTIONS



Clinton's security assurance

According to Chun, after the historic 1994 Agreed Framework was signed, then-US President Bill Clinton sent a confidential letter of security assurance to North Korea, which includes assurance against the use of conventional weapons, in addition to that of nuclear. [8] Prior to this, other security assurances from the US government did not exclude the use of

conventional firearms against the guarantee nation.

"I remember seeing the letter so I believe it was confidential," said Chun. [9]

The Agreed Framework itself only guarantees not using nuclear weapons against the North.

What needs to be in a security guarantee?

"What North Korea wants is a document of security assurance ratified by US lawmakers. The reason is to account for a change in administration over time. For instance, Clinton shared [the aforementioned] letter of security assurance with North Korea, but the next [George W. Bush] administration called it part of an [Axis of Evil](#)," explained Chun. [10] President Bush made this remark in the January 2002 State of Union address. North Korea's official KCNA was quick to react to his speech by accusing Washington of "pursuing [a] hostile policy to stifle the DPRK." Such a document would be enormously difficult and polarising to push through the US Congress, especially in an already contentious election year.

Previously, Washington committed to the [Joint Communiqué](#) signed between Pyongyang and Washington on 12 October 2000. In it, "The two sides stated that neither government would have hostile intent toward the other and confirmed the commitment of both governments to make every effort in the future to build a new relationship free from past enmity." [11]

A year later on 7 January, 2003, Japan, South Korea, and the US reaffirmed this commitment in a [joint statement](#). In particular, it stated the US "has no intention of invading" North Korea.

Since then, hawkish politicians in the US have made specific and overt threats of attack against the DPRK including regime change and the now infamous Bloody Nose strike floated during the Trump administration. Thus, it is likely the DPRK has little trust in traditional security guarantees.

What Seoul can do and its limitations

The former South Korean chief negotiator describes the current South Korean administration's leadership as "More Catholic than the Pope," when it comes to engaging with or wanting to help North Korea's Kim family.

However, "there is not much Seoul can do with North Korea due to sanctions. Even if we relax South Korea's sanctions on the North, such as in the May 24 Measures, [attempts to engage with the North] activity would ultimately be prevented by UN Security Council resolutions," [12] said Chun.

"Should the pro-North politicians go as far as breaching the UN Security Council sanctions to engage with Pyongyang, such a breach of international law would seriously damage South Korea's relationship with the US. In that case, there is little leverage for South Korea in dealing with the North," [13] Chun said. He reiterated that Pyongyang is interested in Seoul to the extent the latter can persuade Washington.

The May 24 Measures, also known as 5.24 in Korean, are the South Korean sanctions against North Korea that prevents economic relations with the latter. The measures follow the sinking of South Korean Cheonan on 26 March, 2010 that killed 46 sailors.

False hope

As Chun believes the current South Korean administration is not a hardliner when it comes to the North, he cautions the Unification Ministry from overpromising on what it can deliver in terms of helping its northern neighbour.

"[The Unification Ministry] needs to make sure it does not give North Korea false hope. I believe it is not accurately aware of the sanctions against North Korea, especially the UN General Assembly Resolutions and the so-called Warmbier sanctions," [14] Chun said.

If Seoul can only deliver some food and fertiliser aid to the North, he believes Pyongyang would be more disappointed than grateful.

Chun added, what little South Korea can provide to the North in the current climate is not very attractive to Pyongyang. Even travel packages that can be modelled after the now-cancelled Mount Geumgang travels is not going to attract much revenue. [15] As one of the well-known projects of the rescinded Sunshine Policy, it arranged South Korean civilians' travels to the scenic mountain until December 2008, when a North Korean soldier shot a tourist that was taking a walk beyond the allowed area.

Trump vs. Biden: Pyongyang's pick

"A lot of people say North Korea will launch strategic provocations some time in September or October, such as an ICBM or SLBM launch. In my view, provocations that negatively affect Trump is not helpful to North Korea," [16] shared Chun. It will most likely make those threats — but unlikely to act on it, Chun predicted.

When asked who the North Korean leader Kim Jung Un will be rooting for in the upcoming US Presidential Election, Chun was quick to name the incumbent.

“[Kim Jong Un] would think it is beneficial for him that Trump, not Biden, is elected. First of all, they have a relationship, in which he invested effort. He’d also think that it would be easier to fool Trump based on his vanity and shallow knowledge,” [17] Chun shared in his opinions. If Trump is reelected in November, his calculations will no longer be tied to re-election. This could mean he can be as hard-line as he was at the beginning of his presidency or as engaging as he was in 2019.

On whether North Korea will launch a repeat of the level of provocation seen earlier this year in which the North blew up an inter-Korean office, Chun said, “Pyongyang would risk massive humiliation if it wants to act on threats of provocations against the South.” [18]

All things considered, the lifelong diplomat described North Korean leader Kim Jong Un as “very shrewd” and having “sharp strategic mind;” not unlike his predecessors. Despite threats aimed at staying relevant, the North’s Kim family have shown a track record of being able to bring their desired negotiating partners to dialogue.

[1] English translation by author: “모든 걸 핵 활동을 cessation of all nuclear activities, nationwide freeze가 돼야 일단 nuclear arsenal은 현단계에서 고정이 되지만 더 안 만든다는 거죠. 그래서 2단계에서는있는 핵을 줄이고 마지막 단계에서는 다 없애도 이렇게 가는 것 아닙니까.” ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[2] English translation by author: “그리고 행동 대 행동... parallel밖에는 될 수 없어요. 북한이 먼저 내려놓고 미국이 나중에 보상하고 이런 것은 서로 믿을 수 가 없는 상황에서 불가능하고... 장사로 보면 cash basis밖에 안되고 credit 안되는거예요.”ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[3] English translation by author: “미국이 강국이니깐 북한이 내는 것의 2배 정도는 낼 수 있겠지만 북한이 내 놓는 것의 10배를 내놓으라고 하면 일종의사기극인데 그게 되겠어요?” ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[4] English translation by author: ONN interview, Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July, 2020. “ONN interview, Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July, 2020. “우리가 북한한테 미국이 받아들일 수 없는 안을 가져가라고 부추겼기 때문에 하노이 회담이 깨진것이고. 북한이 우리를 미워하는 이유도 자기네들은 진짜 딜을 함 해볼려고 갔는데 제재를 좀 완화시키고 연변 외에 더 놓더라고 딜을 하고 싶었는데 우리가 연변만 가져가면 된다고 하도 코치를 하니깐 정말 그게 되는 줄 알고 왔는데 헛수고만 하고 오니까 우리를 원망하고 당신들은 좀 빠져라 일을 하지도 못할 것 같으면 끼어들지 말라 이렇게 얘기하는거죠.” ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[5] English translation by author: “연변 밖에 있는 농축시설을 못 내놓을 것 같으면 예를 들어서 핵 물질 (플루토늄이건 HEU건) 얼마를 내 놓으라던지 warhead, declaration 등등 값을 맞출 수 있는 것을 내 놓고... sanctions relief같은 것을 요구해야한다. 그에 상의한 것을요구해야한다.” ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[6] English translation by author: “2016년 이후의 제재가 거의 95%이상인데, 그걸 다 풀어달라는 건 그 이상은 자신들이 안하겠다는 애긴데... 다른 것을 받아낼 모든 딜을 받으려고 하는데. 이렇게 통할려면 우리가 북한을 설득해야 하는데... 이게 왜 말이 안되는지 이런 것 우리가 설득을 시켜야한다.”ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[7] David Albright, Reports: On the Question of Another North Korean Centrifuge Plant and the Suspect Kangsong [sic] Plant, 25 May, 2018, available at: <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/on-the-question-of-another-north-korean-centrifuge-plant-and-the-suspect-ka/10>

[8] English translation by author: “예전 제네바 합의 이후에 클린턴 대통령의 레터로 북한에 security assurance해준 적이 있다. 핵무기 혹은 재래식(conventional) 무기로 쳐들어가지 않는다.”ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[9] English translation by author: “Clinton의 SA는 confidential letter형식으로 되어 있었던 것 같아요. 내가 본적은 있는데 비공개 였던 거 같네요.” ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, e-mail, 17 August 2020.

[10] English translation by author: “북한이 요구하는 것은 미국 의회에 비준을 받은 문서를 원한다. 정권이 바뀌고 딴 소리 하면 클린턴 편지 써 놓고 부시가 들어오니까 악의 축이다 이러니까 이를 어떻게 믿겠냐.” ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[11] US-DPRK Joint Communique released by the Office of the Spokesman, US Department of State, October 12, 2000.

[12] English translation by author: “이 사람들이 북한하고 할 수 있는게 없어요... 할려고 해도 제재가 있으니까. 우리가 북한과 가지고 있는 일방적인 제재, 524 조치같은 것을 풀어도 안보리 제재에 걸리게 돼 있는데.” ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[13] English translation by author: “우리가 의도적으로 안보리 제재를 위반하면 북한과 같은 위치, 제재 위반국이 되면 한미 관계 파탄나고, 그 뒤에는 북한에 대한 레버러지가 없지.” ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[14] English translation by author: “대북 제재가 어떻게 돼 있는지 안보리 제재가 어떻게 돼 있는지 월비어 법이 어떻게 돼 있는지 잘 모르는 것 같아요. False hope만 주고 하지도 못 할 일을 약속하면 안된다.” ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[15] English translation by author: “현재 제재 안에서 할 수 있는 것은 북한에 별로 매력적이지 않다. 관광산업도 쉽지 않을 것이며 돈이 많이 못 모일 것이다.” ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[16] English translation by author: “많은 사람들이 대선 전에 9, 10월에 북한이 전략 도발할 것이다. icbm아니면 slbm 발사를 하던지 하는데... 내가 보기에는 북한한테는 트럼프한테 불리한 도발을 하는게 북한에 도움될 것이 없다.” ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[17] English translation by author: “북한에게는 바이든보다는 트럼프가 재선되는게 좋다고 생각할 것이다. 우선 친분관계가 있고 그동안 공을 들여왔고... 트럼프가 허영심이 있고 지식이 없어서 트럼프를 fool하는게 바이든 보다는 쉽다. 전략도발을 해서 트럼프 선거 전략에 말려들어가면 오히려 북한에 틈 화가 될 수 있고.” ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

[18] English translation by author: “말로 협박하지만 실제 행동하는 것은 엄청난 humiliation을 감당해야 하기 때문에.” ONN interview of Chun Yung-woo, virtual, 27 July 2020.

Nuclear Engagement Network Diplomacy Six Party Talks denuclearization

Share this on:  