

Bilateral Diplomacy for Breakthroughs, Multilateral Diplomacy for Durability

**A Changing International Order and Diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula:
Lessons from UN Multilateralism and the Singapore U.S.–North Korea Summit**

July 20, 2026

AHN, Young-jip

**Vice President, Korean Council on Foreign Relations
Former Ambassador of the Republic of Korea to Singapore**

Mr. Ahn Young-jip graduated from the Department of International Relations at Seoul National University and earned a master's degree in international relations from the University of Pennsylvania. After joining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he served at Korean embassies in the United States, Nigeria, and the United Kingdom. He went on to hold several senior posts, including Director of Policy at the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) in New York, Deputy Director General for North American Affairs, and Director General of the Consular Affairs and Overseas Koreans Bureau at the MFA. He later served as Ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, Ambassador to Greece, and Ambassador to Singapore.

This article is a revised and expanded version of remarks delivered at the expert roundtable, “Reassessing the Role of the United Nations and International Organizations in a Changing International Order: Security, Human Rights, Humanitarian Crises, and the Future of the Korean Peninsula,” hosted by Korea University’s Institute for Interdisciplinary Unification Studies on June 29, 2026.

1. The Crisis of Multilateralism: Not the Disappearance of Norms, but the Paralysis of Implementation

The United Nations and other international organizations are being asked to address more global challenges than ever before, from climate change, public health, disarmament, and human rights to trade and nuclear non-proliferation. Yet even as the need for international cooperation grows, the capacity of multilateral institutions to solve problems is weakening. This was the central paradox I encountered during my years in multilateral

diplomacy in Geneva. Multilateral institutions possess broad participation and procedural legitimacy, but consensus-based decision-making and deepening political divisions often prevent them from translating agreement into action.

Consensus rules, in particular, can give even a very small number of states an effective veto. The principle is legitimate insofar as it seeks decisions acceptable to all participants. But when interests sharply diverge, one or two countries can block an entire agenda for years. International norms may remain formally intact, while enforcement mechanisms are weak and compliance with international law continues to depend heavily on power.

As strategic competition between the United States and China intensifies, U.S.-Russia confrontation deepens, and the Global South becomes more assertive as a collective political force, international organizations have become both arenas for addressing common problems and stages on which great-power rivalry is played out.

2. Structural Limitations Revealed in Geneva

The UN Human Rights Council frequently demonstrates how political calculations can override universal human rights principles. Selective criticism, voting contests among regional and political blocs, and the election of states with poor human rights records to the Council all undermine confidence in the system. These contradictions do not negate the importance of human rights norms themselves. Rather, they reinforce the perception that those norms are applied unevenly according to geopolitical alignment.

The Conference on Disarmament offers perhaps the clearest illustration of the consensus trap. Since the conclusion of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty in 1996, it has failed for decades to produce another major disarmament treaty. Negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty have remained stalled, while new forms of arms competition, including AI-enabled weapons, cyberwarfare, hypersonic missiles, and lethal autonomous weapons, have advanced rapidly. Threats evolve, but the institutions responsible for developing new rules cannot keep pace.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty also continues to carry the burden of a fundamental inequality between the five recognized nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states. Non-nuclear parties are expected to comply strictly with their non-proliferation obligations, while many believe that the nuclear powers have failed to make meaningful progress toward their own disarmament commitments. The rise of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is, in part, a political response to this accumulated frustration.

The World Trade Organization faces a similar institutional crisis. Its rule-making and dispute-settlement functions have weakened significantly. The paralysis of the Appellate Body, U.S.-China competition, unilateral tariffs, and the growing importance of supply-chain and economic security have narrowed the scope of universal multilateral trade rules. States have increasingly turned instead to regional and bilateral trade arrangements.

These cases demonstrate that multilateral institutions have not disappeared. The more immediate danger is that institutions may retain formal legitimacy while losing the capacity to act.

3. The Singapore Summit: A Diplomatic Breakthrough, but an Incomplete Agreement

The 2018 Singapore summit between the United States and North Korea represented an unprecedented top-down approach to nuclear diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula. Direct engagement between the two leaders broke through an impasse that working-level negotiations had been unable to resolve and opened a channel for dialogue at a time of acute military tension.

From a diplomatic perspective, the summit was therefore a partial success. The fact that the leaders of the United States and North Korea met directly and discussed a new bilateral relationship, a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, and the broad direction of denuclearization carried considerable political significance. From the standpoint of denuclearization, however, the summit fell short. The joint statement omitted the essential elements needed to translate political commitments into implementable policy: a declaration of nuclear programs and facilities, verification arrangements, an implementation timetable, and the conditions and sequencing of sanctions relief.

The announcement suspending major U.S.-ROK military exercises, made without sufficient prior coordination, also created difficulties for alliance management and subsequent negotiations. Top-down diplomacy can have exceptional power precisely because the ultimate decision-makers are directly involved. When successful, it can create a breakthrough that lower-level negotiations cannot achieve. But when talks collapse, restoring negotiations at the working level becomes much more difficult. If diplomacy depends too heavily on personal rapport and political spectacle, agreements remain tied to the preferences of individual leaders rather than anchored in institutions and procedures.

The Singapore summit demonstrated that leader-level diplomacy can break a deadlock. It also showed that without detailed preparation and credible implementation mechanisms, a summit agreement may remain little more than a declaration of intent.

4. A Practical Approach to North Korean Nuclear Diplomacy: Bilateral Breakthrough, Multilateral Implementation

It is unrealistic to expect either bilateral or multilateral diplomacy alone to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. UN Security Council sanctions can impose pressure and help bring North Korea to the negotiating table, but sanctions alone cannot secure denuclearization. Conversely, a U.S.-North Korea summit may generate political decisions and open the possibility of a new relationship, but it cannot itself provide the verification and institutionalization required to sustain an agreement.

Meaningful denuclearization would require a coordinated process involving the declaration of nuclear facilities and materials, verification by the International Atomic Energy Agency, phased dismantlement, adjustments to Security Council sanctions, security assurances, economic assistance, and North Korea's eventual return to the NPT framework. Such a complex process cannot be managed by Washington and Pyongyang alone. It would require the participation of the Security Council, the IAEA, relevant states, and specialized international institutions.

The appropriate division of labor is therefore clear. Bilateral negotiations should generate the political breakthrough; multilateral institutions should translate that breakthrough into detailed, verifiable, and sustainable implementation. Bilateral and multilateral diplomacy are not competing alternatives. They perform

different functions at different stages. A summit may open the door to an agreement, but multilateral institutions are needed to turn that agreement into an enduring framework.

5. The Complementary Role of ASEAN and Regional Multilateral Channels

The Singapore summit also demonstrated the potential contribution of ASEAN states and regional multilateral channels to diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula. ASEAN cannot serve as the principal party to, or ultimate arbiter of, the North Korean nuclear issue. It can, however, provide a relatively neutral diplomatic setting and maintain informal contacts when official relations are strained.

The ASEAN Regional Forum has limited enforcement and verification capacity. Nevertheless, it remains significant because it is one of the few regional security institutions in which North Korea participates. It can support preventive diplomacy, confidence-building, North Korea's gradual engagement with the international community, and the continuity of dialogue. Particularly when official U.S.-North Korea or inter-Korean negotiations are suspended, regional multilateral channels can function as diplomatic safeguards against a complete breakdown in communication.

6. Implications for Korean Diplomacy

The Republic of Korea should not simply wait to see whether negotiations with North Korea resume. The more important task is to prepare in advance for how a future political agreement would be specified, verified, and implemented.

Seoul should develop concrete plans for the scope and sequencing of verification, the conditions for sanctions relief, security guarantees and economic assistance, the role of international organizations, and a pathway for North Korea's return to the NPT. Only then can ROK become a key party in ensuring the sustainability of any agreement, rather than merely passively accepting the outcome of negotiations between North Korea and the United States.

Nor should the weakening of the United Nations and international organizations become an excuse to abandon multilateral diplomacy. Today's multilateral system is slow, politicized, and at times deeply ineffective. But bilateral diplomacy alone cannot deliver nuclear verification, coordinate sanctions, mobilize economic assistance, or provide international legal legitimacy. The answer is not to discard multilateralism, but to design a more practical architecture connecting bilateral, minilateral, regional, and universal institutions according to their respective functions.

The most important lesson of Singapore is not simply that summit diplomacy failed. It is that summit diplomacy without adequate institutional foundations has inherent limits. Political will may initiate negotiations, but rules, expertise, verification, resources, and international support are what sustain an agreement.

For diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula to succeed in a changing international order, it must combine the agility and breakthrough potential of bilateral engagement with the legitimacy and durability of multilateral cooperation.