



Nuclear Issues on the Korean Peninsula: A Russian View of Prospects and Possibilities

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Summary

The ongoing escalation of tensions in Northeast Asia may drag other countries in the region into an arms race. Active multilateral political and diplomatic efforts should resume without any preconditions, with China and Russia playing a central role in addition to North Korea and the United States. The negotiations should be based on the principles of “phased and mutual approach” and “security steps in exchange for reciprocal security steps.” In practice, the first phase of the dialogue could involve the parties undertaking a commitment to desist from any steps that could lead to further escalation in the region. As part of these commitments, North Korea could announce a unilateral moratorium on missile and nuclear tests, while the United States could significantly limit the scale, format and scenarios of its joint military drills with South Korea, as well as military build-up in the region. The long term goal of the negotiations should be achieving a nuclear-weapon-free status of the peninsula and building a reliable system of peace and security in the region that would take into account the security interests of all the regional states, while at the same time confirming their right to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy under IAEA safeguards, and to peaceful economic exploration of outer space.

1. In January and September 2016 North Korea conducted its fourth and fifth nuclear tests. It

has also conducted more than 20 missile launches in just 12 months. Meanwhile, the United States and its allies continued to deploy new military infrastructure in Northeast Asia, while at the same time increasing the numbers and range of the weaponry used in their joint exercises on the Korean peninsula. Washington is using events in the region as a pretext for expanding the geographic footprint of the deployment of its global missile defence by deploying Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) systems in South Korea. That has the potential to undermine the fundamentals of the existing strategic balances in Asia-Pacific and beyond and to trigger an arms race in North-east Asia.

2. Military experts in Moscow and Beijing point out that the weapons and systems being deployed are clearly overkill for the ostensible threat they are meant to guard against. Another negative implication is the ongoing rise of pro-nuclear sentiment in South Korea, where the level of public support for acquiring nuclear weapons is now over 70 per cent. In these circumstances, the lack of negotiations is deepening the security crisis and increasing the potential for military conflict.

Russia's Relations with DPRK

3. Russia and North Korea have a 17km long common border along the river Tumangan, plus a 22km long common maritime border. The Soviet Union was the first country to es-

establish diplomatic relations with Pyongyang on 12 October 1948. On 6 July 1961 the two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. Under the terms of that treaty, they agreed to build their relations on the principle of equality, respect each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, desist from any interference in each other's internal affairs, work towards world peace and security, and pursue economic and cultural cooperation. The 1961 treaty was later succeeded by a new Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighbourly Relations and Cooperation signed on 9 February 2000. That treaty contains a clause in which both countries commit themselves to work towards arms reduction and build a lasting peace and security in Northeast Asia, and also to pursue bilateral trade, economic, scientific and technical cooperation.

4. Bilateral trade between Russia and North Korea has hovered around the US \$90-100mn mark in the past few years. This is well below the amount of trade between China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) (\$6bn), or Russia and South Korea (\$18bn). Russia-DPRK trade reached \$92mn in 2014, falling to \$84mn in 2015. Exports from Russia accounted for \$78mn, and North Korean imports into Russia for \$6mn. In 1992 bilateral trade stood at \$600mn and in 2005 at \$235mn. Russia currently accounts for 1-1.5 per cent of North Korean foreign trade, whereas the figure for the Soviet Union was 25-50 per cent. In the early 2000s Russia accounted for 5-6 per cent of North Korean imports and exports. Key Russian imports from North Korea in 2015 included clothes, frozen fish and musical instruments. Up until recently, one of the major areas of bilateral economic cooperation was temporary work by North Korean specialists in Russia. The two governments say they aim to bring their bilateral trade to US \$1bn by 2020. As the DPRK remains under tough international sanctions, that goal appears unrealistic.

5. Nuclear non-proliferation has been high on the agenda of Russian-DPRK relations for many years. Moscow facilitated North Korea's decision to join the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985 and to sign the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Safeguards Agreement (which entered into force in 1992), using Pyongyang's interest in Soviet

nuclear power plant technology as leverage.¹ Previously, the Soviet Union supplied North Korea with an IRT research reactor and a critical assembly installed at the nuclear centre in Nyongbyon. At Moscow's insistence, Pyongyang had agreed to place the reactor and the critical assembly under IAEA safeguards (1977) in accordance with an INFCIRC/66/Rev.2-type agreement on safeguards.²

Russia's Policies in Response to DPRK Nuclear Capability

6. Russia regards the development of North Korea's nuclear and missile program as a factor of instability for the security situation on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia; a challenge for the nuclear non-proliferation regime; and a source of significant limitations on developing bilateral trade and the DPRK's economic potential. Russian diplomats emphasize, however, that they do not regard the DPRK missile and nuclear program as a military threat to Russia itself.³

7. Ever since the early 1990s, Russia has been cautious in its assessments of the DPRK nuclear capability. A 1993 report by the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), headlined "New challenge after the Cold War: nuclear weapons proliferation" argued that "at present, the DPRK does not possess nuclear weapons. At the same time, it has long pursued an applied military program with a nuclear dimension; that program has now reached an advanced stage."⁴ The Russian intelligence community does not currently publish its latest assessments of the DPRK nuclear capability.

¹ An agreement to build a nuclear power plant consisting of four VVER-440 reactors was signed at the DPRK initiative in December 1985, but never implemented. After North Korea announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT in 1993, Russia's president signed Order No 249-pn banning the implementation of the project.

² Formally, since the DPRK does not apply the IAEA Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement of 1992, the country has automatically reverted to an INFCIRC/66/Rev.2-type agreement of 1977, whereby the IAEA has the power to request, at any time, access to the IRT research reactor and the critical assembly.

³ See statement by Russian Ambassador-at-Large Grigoriy Logvinov at the Moscow Non-proliferation Conference on 22 November 2014, <http://ceness-russia.org/rus/conf2014/materials/1436/1441/>

⁴ *A new challenge after the Cold War: Proliferation of WMD*. Open Report by the SVR, 1993. <http://svr.gov.ru/material/2-13-10.htm>

8. Based on open source reports, we can assume that, having conducted five nuclear weapon tests, North Korea can use aircraft as delivery systems for its nuclear explosive devices – but it has not yet reached sufficient progress in the area of miniaturization to fit a nuclear warhead on its existing missile delivery systems. This is why Russia is especially concerned by attempts in some quarters to overstate the North Korean nuclear and missile capability as a pretext for deploying disproportionate military infrastructure in the region by the United States and its allies. The potential of that new infrastructure far exceeds the stated purpose of neutralizing North Korea's actual military capability.

9. Russia supported UN Security Council Resolutions 1718 (14 October 2006), 1874 (12 June 2009), 2087 (22 January 2013), 2094 (7 March 2013), 2231 (16 January 2016) and 2270 (2 March 2016), which were passed in response to North Korea's nuclear and missile activities. Moscow regards these resolutions as instruments that should help bring about a resumption of the negotiating process. Sanctions against North Korea should not be used as a tool for regime change; neither should they impoverish the North Korean people, worsen the humanitarian situation or undermine North Korean industries that have nothing to do with the weapons programs targeted by the UN Security Council.

Russia's Perceptions of Desired Resolution of DPRK Nuclear Issue

10. The key elements of Russia's approach to handling the DPRK nuclear issue are the following. **First**, there can be no alternative to a political and diplomatic settlement of the nuclear problem on the Korean peninsula. Russia has consistently advocated a political and diplomatic settlement of the Korean nuclear crisis. Attempts at using force would have dramatic consequences for both the South and the North, as well as the wider region, in view of the military capability of the DPRK on the one hand, and of the United States and its allies on the other.

11. In 2015 and 2016 some of the South Korean and Western media were energetically peddling rumours of an impending collapse of the

regime in Pyongyang. Those rumours appear to have been completely unfounded. I made five visits to North Korea in the period 2012–16, and what I have seen of the social and economic trends there does not point to a collapse any time soon. The country is clearly behind its neighbours in terms of development, but there have been some positive changes in recent years and living standards are on the rise. Indicators of that include a construction boom in Pyongyang, a rapid growth in the numbers of mobile phones owned by private citizens, the growing numbers of restaurants and taxis, and North Korea's increasing self-sufficiency in food production.

12. The new strategy approved in March 2013 by the Workers' Party of Korea sets out the twin priorities of increasing the North Korean defence capability and strengthening its nuclear forces, while at the same time facilitating economic development by channelling more resources into economic projects (the so-called *byungjin* policy). What I have seen in North Korea up to December 2016 suggests that this is beginning to bear fruit.

13. The development of a new formula for the resumption of talks that would be mutually acceptable to both Washington and Pyongyang could be facilitated by so-called Track II dialogue. In this regard, we should welcome the establishment of more active channels for dialogue between DPRK foreign ministry representatives and retired US diplomats in 2016, including the meetings that took place in Beijing, Kuala Lumpur and Geneva.⁵

14. **Second**, multilateral negotiations should have priority. The failures of the previous bilateral arrangements between North Korea and the United States, including the 1994 Agreed Framework and the 2012 "Leap Day Agree-

⁵ Elizabeth Shim. "U.S., North Korea diplomats meet in Malaysia for informal talks," *UPI*, 24 October 2016, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/10/24/US-North-Korea-diplomats-meet-in-Malaysia-for-informal-talks/9001477316072/; "N. Korean diplomats arrive in Geneva for talks with U.S. experts," *Yonhap*, 17 November 2016, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2016/11/17/0401000000AEN20161117011100315.html>; Christopher Bodeen "US, North Korean diplomats attend meetings in Beijing," *AP*, 22 June 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/a9e1e0a7848548c9b08f423b9d2f844e/us-north-korean-diplomats-attend-meetings-beijing>

ment,” as well as the positive results of the first 18 months of implementing the multilateral agreement on resolving the Iranian nuclear program (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) suggest that we should prioritize a multilateral approach with collective efforts on our path towards an agreement on resolving the Korean nuclear crisis. Apart from North Korea and the United States, a major contribution to this effort can be made by China and Russia, both of which are nuclear weapon states and permanent UN Security Council members.

15. **Third**, there should be no preconditions for a resumption of negotiations by any of the parties if they are genuine about seeking such a resumption. At the same time, it is obvious that quick deliverables would help to reduce the pressure and create a more favourable domestic climate for negotiations in the participating states, especially North Korea and the United States.

16. **Fourth**, agreement needs to be reached on the basic principles which should underlie the negotiating process. As a foundation for developing a sustainable agreement, the parties should adopt the principle of “security steps from the one side in exchange for security steps from the other side.” In essence, such an approach was proposed by the DPRK, first informally, during a Track II meeting in Ulaanbaatar in May 2014, and then officially as part of the initiative announced in January 2015, whereby the DPRK offered a moratorium on nuclear tests in exchange for a moratorium by Washington and Seoul on joint drills near the DPRK borders. The principle of “economic assistance in exchange for a limitation of nuclear activities” should become a thing of the past because it has failed to provide the necessary degree of stability and sustainability.

17. Historically speaking, it is safe to say that when the DPRK initiated its nuclear weapons program in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was not driven by any desire to “monetize” nuclear technology development or turn it into a source of revenue. The main reason for that decision was security concerns: the lasting consequences of the Korean war, including threats of nuclear weapons use by the United States; ongoing hostility from Washington; the

deployment of US nuclear weapons in South Korea; and the lack of confidence in Chinese and/or Soviet support in the event of a new armed conflict.

18. The negotiations should also espouse the “phased and reciprocal” approach, which was first proposed by Russia and has been used to great effect when drawing up the plan on resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis (the JCPOA). To be more specific, no one should be expected to take any major steps overnight as part of any proposed solution and no one should immediately receive something major after taking those steps.

19. It will be important to take into account the experience – including the negative ones – of previous diplomatic efforts on the Korean peninsula, as well as the experience of the Iranian nuclear talks in terms of prioritizing the issues on the table. Any attempt to link such talks with the human rights situation in North Korea or the problem of abductees would inevitably create major complications on the already very difficult path towards a compromise.⁶

20. **Fifth**, there is a need to agree on the short and medium term objectives of the talks. The situation in the region has a great potential for military-political confrontation. In the short and medium terms, the talks should aim to build trust and take the first steps towards the formation of the foundations of multilateral arrangements on regional security. One of the possible mechanisms for these efforts is the working group for the formation of a new mechanism of peace and security on the Korean peninsula as part of the Six-Party Talks; the working group is led by Russia.

21. Practical measures in the early stages would include desisting from any steps in the region that could lead to a further escalation of tensions. In particular, the United States and South Korea should reduce the frequency and

⁶ However, for the argument that any resolution that ignores the issue of abductees would meet stiff opposition in Japan, see Nobuyasu Abe, “Japan’s ‘Charlie Brown’ Dilemma vis-à-vis the North Korean Nuclear Crisis,” APLN/CNND Policy Brief No. 31 (February 2017), http://www.apln.org/briefings/briefings_view/Policy_Brief_31_-_Japan%E2%80%99s_%E2%80%9CCharlie_Brown%E2%80%9D_Dilemma_vis-%C3%A0-vis_the_North_Korean_Nuclear_Crisis. (Editor).

duration of their joint exercises; limit the number of troops and weaponry involved; desist from using delivery systems capable of carrying nuclear warheads during the drills; and desist from including openly provocative scenarios, such as the decapitation of the senior North Korean leadership by specially trained forces, seizing large administrative centres (including Pyongyang) or delivering strikes against North Korean nuclear infrastructure.

22. For its part, North Korea should move towards suspension of nuclear and ballistic missile tests. As an important step, and in the spirit of goodwill, Pyongyang could announce a unilateral six-month moratorium on nuclear and missile tests and establish a channel for communication between the DPRK Foreign Ministry and the CTBTO Preparatory Commission. At the early stage, central elements of such cooperation could include educational and specialist training programs. Another important step Pyongyang could take as a result of new agreements being reached would be to resume the application of IAEA safeguards at several DPRK nuclear facilities (including the IRT research reactor and the critical assembly, supplied by the former Soviet Union), as well as to introduce additional transparency and limitation measures for the launches of artificial Earth satellites.

23. **Sixth**, establish long-term objectives of the negotiations. The long-term objective of the talks should be to achieve a nuclear-weapon-free status of the Korean peninsula and to establish a reliable system for peace and security in the region, taking into account the security interests of all regional states, while at the same time reaffirming their right to peaceful use of nuclear energy under IAEA safeguards and to space exploration in the interests of the national economy. A joint understanding of such a goal could be reflected in a joint statement by the participating states following one of the early rounds of the talks.

24. It is worth noting that during the vote at the UN General Assembly First Committee on 27 October 2016 on the issue of taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament – that is, achieving a nuclear weapons ban at some point in the future – North Korea supported the launch of a negotiating process aimed at ban-

ning nuclear weapons. (However, in the General Assembly vote on 23 December 2016 to commence negotiations in 2017 on a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons leading towards their total elimination, the DPRK was absent.)

25. **Seventh** and finally, there will need to be cooperation prior to the resumption of negotiations. There is a whole number of areas where countries in the region could initiate cooperation even before a formal resumption of the negotiating process, possibly with the involvement of (and coordination with) relevant international organizations. Such cooperation would serve to build trust between the potential participants in the future talks.

26. Specific areas of cooperation include organizing training programs on non-proliferation and arms control, the target audience being several countries in the region or only DPRK experts. In this context, we should recognize that a mistake was made when, under pressure from some of the UN member states, an arms control training program for a group of North Korean diplomats was indefinitely postponed after the adoption on 2 March 2016 of UN Security Council Resolution 2270 in response to the fourth DPRK nuclear test.

27. Another possible area for cooperation is export controls, taking into account the development of nuclear and dual-use technologies in the DPRK. Speaking at a plenary session of the Workers' Party of Korea in March 2013, Marshal Kim Jong-un said that "being a responsible nuclear power, the DPRK will take the most energetic efforts ... to fulfil its commitments to the international community with regard to nuclear weapons non-proliferation." Additionally, the 1 April 2013 law on the nuclear status of the DPRK states that the government will adopt a mechanism for ensuring a safe and secure storage and management of nuclear weapons and related technologies in order to prevent any illegal transfer of nuclear weapon related materials across the national borders.

28. In essence, this would require the creation of a DPRK export control system. According to the information at the author's disposal, as of 1 January 2017 such a system had yet to be put in place. This is a chance for countries in the

region – especially Russia and China – as well as international organizations to hold workshops and share their best practice in this area. Such cooperation with the DPRK, however, should not be seen as recognition of its status as a de facto nuclear weapon state. This cooperation would not weaken the negotiating positions of any of the parties ahead of the talks; to the contrary, it would create a more favourable climate for a future dialogue.

Conclusion

29. Development of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and the strengthening of the US military infrastructure in Northeast Asia are stoking up the potential for military conflict in the region and could trigger an arms race into which other regional states may also be dragged. In these circumstances, there is an urgent need for resurrecting multilateral dialogue mechanisms, which can also be augmented by bilateral tracks – dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang being the most critical of them. China and Russia can and should play an important role in that process as mediators.

30. In the long term, the talks should aim for a nuclear-weapon-free Korean peninsula and a reliable regional security system that takes into account the security interests of all states. In the short and medium terms, however, the goals should be more realistic. Achieving them would prevent further escalation, build mutual trust and create basic elements of a future regional security system. The negotiating experience gained by members of the P5+1 group (China, France, Russia, UK and USA + Germany) during the nuclear talks with Iran can be very useful during the diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis on the Korean peninsula.

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