



The North Korean Nuclear Problem

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Summary

Diplomacy will be essential to avoid sleepwalking into war in Northeast Asia, and to achieve the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The key objective is to preserve peace and prosperity in the region. Armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula is an increasing possibility – between 25 and 50 per cent – though not yet a probability. Strong Chinese intervention would entail risk for China; but so too does the current situation, where tensions continue to rise. While for the moment China is disinclined to press North Korea into negotiations, the Trump administration's tough talk is beginning to worry Beijing. One positive development is Russia's willingness to engage. There may also be greater scope for engagement through UN channels. The real question is the possible shape and content of a final diplomatic solution. A partial solution, a freeze of the North's ICBM program, might expose South Korea and Japan to a form of North Korean 'nuclear blackmail', and undermine US alliance solidarity. There is also the possibility of an eventual diplomatic 'grand bargain' for the Korean Peninsula. An enhanced regional security architecture is essential to help manage long-term regional disputes.

you to the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security and the Korea National Diplomatic Academy for inviting me to this conference. And thank you also to Ramesh Thakur and the Asia Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament for co-sponsoring.¹

2. The aim of this conference is to find a new approach to denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula. This is important. It is also urgent. Whether we will succeed is an open question. But if we are to curtail, or bring about the cessation, and then the destruction, of the North's nuclear program, diplomacy is not optional. It is essential. There is no other option. So I commend this conference on seeking to explore practical diplomatic options towards this critical objective.

3. North Korea has consumed much of our collective thinking over the past year. Many of us are trying to understand what to do about a nation that now poses not only a direct threat to South Korea and Japan, but also now to the continental United States and other US allies in the wider region and the world.

1. Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha, General Colin Powell, Ambassador Tom Pickering, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Thank

¹ This is the text of a keynote address delivered at the IFANS 2017 conference on "A Nuclear-Free Korean Peninsula: Strategies and Action Program for the Moon Jae-in Administration," Korea National Diplomatic Academy, Seoul, 11–12 December 2017. It is being published simultaneously as a NAPSNet paper: <https://nautilus.org/?p=47760>.

4. I have been a close observer of events on the Korean Peninsula for the better part of 35 years. I have had the privilege of visiting this great country many times under different presidents. I have also been to the North on several occasions.

5. Let me say from the outset that I believe that preserving the peace, prosperity and livelihoods of the people of this peninsula should be our first priority.

6. Armed conflict on the peninsula is an increasing possibility. But not a probability. My own judgement is that that possibility is now somewhere above 25 per cent; but certainly less than 50 per cent. But I am worried that this number continues to edge upwards.

7. This reassessment has been driven in large part by the very public advances in North Korea's capabilities – most recently with the launch of the Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), which many analysts believe has the range to strike the east coast of the United States.

8. The core reason given by Pyongyang for the development of its missile and nuclear programs is regime survival. But there is also the deeply troubling question of how far North Korea's President Kim Jong Un is prepared to go to reunify the Korean Peninsula. That we do not know with any certainty. But it brings the predicament facing us into even sharper relief.

9. In China, there is a brutal assessment about how this is likely to play out. Whatever pause or cessation of the North Korean nuclear program might be deliverable, the Chinese see little chance that the North Koreans will ever scrap their nuclear bombs or ballistic missiles altogether.

10. Many of our Chinese friends ultimately believe the United States is going to have to live with North Korea as a nuclear weapons state. Some Chinese friends also believe that a North Korean nuclear capability is a nine-out-of-ten problem for America, and a one-out-of-ten problem for China. This in turn shapes the content and trajectory of Chinese diplomacy on North Korean in the interim.

Possible Scenarios

11. So what are the possible scenarios?

12. The first scenario is that the United States, as China would wish, informally accepts North Korea becoming part of the global nuclear weapons club, and that the North, perhaps in consultation with others, develops its own sets of rules, procedures and nuclear doctrine, that enables it to behave "responsibly" as a nuclear weapons state.

13. The second scenario is a unilateral US military strike to destroy or to retard the North Korean nuclear capability. Until recently the view in Beijing was that Washington would never risk the possibility of North Korean retaliatory strikes against South Korea and Japan, quite apart from the impact this would have on the future of US alliances with both Seoul and Tokyo. This is also the view held by many others in the wider region and around the world.

14. But having had numerous conversations with Chinese friends and colleagues over the last few months, I sense that view may be beginning to change. There is now a stronger sense that the Trump Administration might in fact be prepared to use unilateral military action against the North. Hence the dispatch of China's senior foreign ministry official Zheng Zeguang to Washington last week.

15. The third option is diplomacy. But a potential diplomatic solution to this crisis faces almost impossible hurdles. The US expectation is that China will intervene politically, diplomatically and militarily to pressure and perhaps force Pyongyang to change course on its nuclear policy. China responds by saying there is a limit on what it can do, or is prepared to do. Indeed, privately Chinese friends will ask what is in such an approach for Beijing?

16. The Chinese ask five core questions about this:

1. Why should we make a permanent enemy out of the North?
2. Why should we cause the North to look to Russia rather than China for

protection and international support, thereby enhancing Moscow's stocks in Pyongyang and decreasing Beijing's stocks?

3. Why should we cause the current regime in Pyongyang to topple without knowing what will replace it?
4. Why should we be left to deal with the massive humanitarian consequences of North Korean collapse?
5. Why should we run the risk of Korean reunification on US or South Korean terms, thereby placing a de facto US ally right along China's border?

17. The truth is I hear some or all these things in Beijing, often from different parts of the system, where I have spent the last several days. These go to the deepest conservative nature of Chinese strategic culture, which militates against taking strategic risks, which often encourages a degree of policy inertia in the system.

18. Of course there is a different logic as well which China also understands:

- That deployments of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile system in the South are a direct result of the North's nuclear weapons advances;
- That the North's behaviour towards the South is drawing the South and the United States even closer together;
- That the debate in the South to acquire its own independent nuclear deterrent will intensify – with newspaper polls in the South already reporting 60 per cent-plus support for South Korea going nuclear;
- And that a parallel set of forces are now being unleashed in Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Japan with recent changes in Japan's military posture, budget and related constitutional arrangements for the deployment of its defence capabilities.

Therefore the internal debate on North Korea in China is complex – both sets of voices are heard, although the former remains in the ascendancy.

19. Following US President Donald Trump's visit to Beijing, China dispatched the Head of the Party's International Department, Song Tao, to Pyongyang on a diplomatic mission. But Kim Jong-Un did not receive him. And he appears to have returned to Beijing empty-handed.

20. Of course, other diplomatic channels have recently opened up. Russia has also been engaging North Korea. And it is understood from the Russians that there is a preparedness on Pyongyang's part to now engage in direct bilateral discussions with the United States. This is a positive development. At least the North Koreans are talking to somebody. And all the doors have not yet closed.

21. We have also just seen a visit to Pyongyang by the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs of the United Nations, Jeffrey Feltman, himself a former US diplomat. The public statements by both the UN and the North Korean Foreign Minister seem to indicate that North Korea is prepared to keep the UN channel open as well. This too is a positive development.

22. However, channels of diplomatic communication may be one thing. But the real question remains the possible shape and content of a final diplomatic solution. This is where the debate becomes particularly acute.

23. There are some who suggest that a settlement lies in North Korea agreeing to either freeze, abandon, or in its most ambitious version, destroy, its ICBM capabilities. As we all know, this program is already highly developed. That was further demonstrated by the Hwasong-15 launch recently.

24. There is an open question as to whether any such North Korean assurances on ICBMs would be credible, verifiable, or let alone acceptable in Washington. And this leaves to one side entirely the continued accumulation of North Korean nuclear material which adds to the accumulation of Pyongyang's existing nu-

clear weapons stockpile. The estimates vary. But there seems to be some consensus around the number of 30-50 nuclear bombs already being in the North's possession. Let us all remember that these nuclear bombs can always be delivered by the crudest of platforms, not necessarily involving a ballistic missile.

25. A further problem with this approach is where does it leave South Korea and Japan (and for that matter, US territories in the Pacific, most particularly Guam) in terms of the existing reach of North Korean short and medium range missiles, as well as North Korea's submarine launched ballistic missile (SLBM) capabilities, of which we have seen some evidence in recent years?

26. The possible danger for South Korea and Japan is if the United States were to cut a deal with the North on its ICBM capabilities, does that then leave Seoul and Tokyo at the mercy of North Korean nuclear blackmail in the future? In other words, does this result in time in a decoupling of the United States from its North East Asian allies?

27. For Seoul and Tokyo to accept such a deal from the United States would require faith in the proposition that:

- a. The US global strategic nuclear umbrella would automatically extend to any tactical threats against its Northeast Asian allies; and
- b. Given that the North Koreans have a reputation for risky behaviour, would such guarantees by the United States to its Northeast Asian allies be seen in Pyongyang as credible?

28. What could be the content of any such nuclear blackmail by the North against a more isolated and potentially vulnerable South Korea and Japan? On that question, North Korean potential behaviour would be unpredictable. It might include pressure on both South Korea and Japan to incrementally reduce their reliance on the United States as an ally, with the ultimate objective of having them repudiate these alliances.

29. For the South, it could involve threats aimed at forcing a particular form of reunification between the North and the South, presumably weighted in North Korea's direction. Some may regard such potential threats as so risky that they would never be delivered by the North under these circumstances. But I am not sure North Korea's regional and international behaviours give us grounds for such confidence. And of course, all these considerations leave to one side the continued exposure of US forces in South Korea, Okinawa and most particularly Guam, which is US territory.

30. Therefore, while a number of analysts may point to the elegance of such an ICBM freeze by the North (possibly extending to verifiable cessation and even destruction), the capabilities that would remain in place in the hands of the North would continue to have formidable military and diplomatic potential. And I'm not sure, therefore, whether such an approach would be acceptable in either Seoul or Tokyo. And we should remember that one of Pyongyang's core strategic objectives, also shared by certain other states, is to shatter US alliance solidarity over time.

31. This is not the only diplomatic initiative on the table – there are many, including those that may be generated at this conference. Beyond an ICBM freeze, there are other diplomatic options as well. The notion of a "freeze" could also be extended to other categories beyond an exclusive freeze on ICBMs. It might include an initial freeze on ICBMs in addition to a freeze on nuclear testing. Or an additional freeze on other categories of ballistic missiles beyond ICBMs.

32. The key challenge would be to engineer an ICBM freeze (with the potentiality to also bring about the destruction of the arsenal) but in addition to other elements of North Korea's overall program in which the United States, Japan and South Korea have equal skin in the game. In other words, decoupling must be avoided at every level and at any cost. Which means that any initial freeze would be the first step in a series of other steps that over time, once calibrated with parallel initiatives that would benefit the North Koreans, could con-

ceivably bring about denuclearization in the longer term.

The Diplomatic Options

33. This brings us to the architecture of what a grand bargain on the Korean Peninsula might look like in the end, for example:

- An immediate ‘freeze-for-freeze’;
- A timetable for the destruction of the North’s nuclear weapons;
- A peace treaty signalling the formal conclusion of the Korean War;
- External security guarantees for the future of the North Korean regime;
- The economic reconstruction of the North; and
- A further adjustment of US troop numbers, including the final possibility of phasing out the US troop deployment.

34. As I said before, the opening of new diplomatic channels, either through Russia or the United Nations is to be welcomed. As Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said last week, “We know that North Korea wants above all to talk to the United States about guarantees for its security. We are ready to support that.”² And as Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has stated ahead of his visit to Japan this week, “We want [a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula] to be achieved through meaningful dialogue, open dialogue, constructive dialogue.”³ Or as Churchill famously said, “To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.” But the difficulties I have just referred to cannot simply be papered over in terms of the final content of any proposed direct diplomacy between Pyongyang and Washington.

² Julian Borger, “North Korea ready to open direct talks with US, says Russia’s Sergei Lavrov,” *Guardian*, 8 December 2017,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/07/north-korea-ready-direct-talks-us-sergei-lavrov>.

³ Jiji Press, “Guterres pledges to facilitate dialogue toward realizing nuclear-free N. Korea,” *Japan News*, 10 December 2017, <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0004118416>.

35. Of course, those of us who have spent our lifetimes in politics and diplomacy understand the importance of remaining professional optimists about possible breakthroughs. And all of us must continue to work as hard as possible. But we should also be sober about where this road may end up.

36. And this also leads us to the unpredictable political personality that is President Trump himself. Those who know him well argue that tough talk from the president on the possibility of unilateral military action is simply consistent with his general negotiating style – and this is purely designed to “soften up” his interlocutors in order to land a deal which is considerably different to his publicly articulated position. I must admit I am not so confident about that.

37. I also notice that when I am travelling in Beijing, over the last 12 months when I have warned of the growing possibility of unilateral US military action, my Chinese friends have discounted such a possibility as US diplomatic bluff – a bluff that is designed primarily to cause a deep change in China’s own diplomacy towards North Korea.

38. But as I have already noted, in the last short period of time, I have detected a certain change in Beijing’s attitude as well on this core question of the possibility of some form or other of a US military strike against the North’s nuclear capabilities. The dispatch from Beijing to Washington last week of Zheng Zeguang possibly reflects growing Chinese concerns about this contingency.

Conclusion

39. In conclusion, as a long-term friend of the Republic of Korea, my first concern is the well-being of the 20 million residents of the greater Seoul metropolitan area. This city has already seen massive destruction some two-thirds of a century ago. None of us wish to see that again. Least of all the people of this great city. Therefore all of us must redouble our diplomatic efforts.

40. If and when we are able to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough on North Korea, let us also

as a region consider how we better manage the unresolved territorial disputes which plague our wider region for the medium to long term future as well. We all understand the new geopolitical instabilities which are arising in our wider region.

41. That is why in the future we need to begin to act as a regional family in dealing with various of these problems. That is why for example, over the last two years, a team of us as former senior ministers and officials from many of the states of the region have worked on the development of concepts for additional regional security architecture for the future – producing a consensus report with the support of either the former foreign ministers or national security advisers of South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, India, the United States, Indonesia and Australia.

42. At the core of this project is our recommendation to strengthening and enhancing the East Asia Summit's role as a regional leaders-level forum with the mandate to discuss the full suite of strategic and economic matters. We must also promote this strategic dialogue alongside tactical cooperation. While there is a natural partnership on common security challenges on the region, an exclusive focus on these can perpetuate strategic mistrust by avoiding discussion of more contentious issues.

43. We must also build towards a networked approach to regional institutions. A networked approach means placing a premium on promoting a culture of greater dialogue, greater transparency and greater cooperation on common security challenges, building greater strategic trust over time.

44. I do not intend to go into the details of the report here. It is available in full from the Asia Society Policy Institute,⁴ and I encourage you to read it. I know our Chinese friends are looking at it as we speak. But the central point is that we need an enhanced regional security archi-

tecture to help us address the challenges of our neighbourhood together.

45. An enhanced East Asia Summit would not replace existing alliance structures. They will remain. But enhanced common security architecture for our region may well bring the regional temperature down: to avoid the bilateralization of all security challenges; to evolve over time a different, more collaborative security culture; and to deal in time as well with the polarization of our region into Chinese and American camps.

46. We are living through a troubling and uncertain age. A durable solution to the challenge of North Korea will require creative thinking. But diplomacy is the only way to avoid a repeat of the tragedies of the 20th century. I am often reminded of my compatriot Christopher Clark's book, *The Sleepwalkers*, about how the great powers of 1914 stumbled into a pan-European war that not only destroyed much of the continent, but unleashed destructive forces that defined the global order for much of the following century.

47. I see some echoes of that period in our current era. But none of us wish to see a tragedy like that again. So let us learn from history. Let us not repeat it.

⁴ *Preserving the Long Peace in Asia: The Institutional Building Blocks of Long-Term Regional Security* (New York: Asia Society Policy Institute, September 2017), <http://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/preserving-long-peace-asia>.

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The **Centre for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (CNND)** contributes to worldwide efforts to minimize the risk of nuclear-weapons use, stop their spread and ultimately achieve their complete elimination. The director of the Centre is Professor Ramesh Thakur. See further <http://cnnd.anu.edu.au>.

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