

Risk Realism: The Arms Control Endgame for North Korea Policy

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Summary:

Put simply, the primary goal of policymakers is, or should be, to reduce the risk of nuclear and conventional war. However, the time has come to change the strategic paradigm underlying U.S. strategy towards North Korea. The secondary goal of denuclearizing North Korea doesn't just fail to reduce risks, it actively heightens them. In point of fact, there is no deal possible that will convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons, and policies aimed at bringing about that impossibility are doing more harm than good. It is time, therefore, to embrace a paradigm centered on arms control, and abandon the "era of denuclearization".

Many think of denuclearization as a cost-free and risk-free approach. In actuality, however, the costs are simply too high and the risks too extreme. Thus this lecture aims to propose a rough blueprint outlining an arms control paradigm for future North Korea negotiations. This paradigm necessarily focuses on piecemeal, achievable goals, which will require significant unilateral US concessions.

It is clear that from the perspective of North Korea, nuclear weapons are the lynchpin to their international security. There exists no other form of security guarantee that is as effective at ensuring regime survival as nuclear weapons. Thus, there is essentially nothing the United States could possibly offer to North Korea that would effectively persuade its leaders to abandon their best line of defense against a hostile world.

Therefore, an American focus on denuclearization is a focus on the unachievable and utopian, clung to because the rhetoric of denuclearization preserves American policymaker's sense of moral superiority. This focus is ultimately self-defeating, for two reasons. The first is that it leads to dangerous crisis instability risks, and the second that it causes negotiators to operate in bad faith, poisoning the negotiation process itself.

When faced with pressure, empirically it is clear that North Korea retaliates with pressure of its own. As the sanctions regime grew ever more onerous, North Korean missile tests grew more common, step for step. This dynamic is incredibly dangerous, since for three decades the Washington foreign policy establishment has seen increased pressure as the only tactic available to them. This, and the obsession with the illusion of absolute security, is what led to dangerous miscalculations like invading Iraq. The more "Fire and Fury" rhetoric ratchets up, the greater the chance of a "bloody nose" attack, and the more likely that North Korea responds with measures of its own. This cycle, occurring as it does between two nuclear powers, is incredibly dangerous.

The second reason that denuclearization is such a damaging paradigm for negotiations is that it introduces perverse incentives into the diplomatic negotiations. If North Korean leaders perceive actually denuclearizing as being against their self-interest, as they seem to, then why would they negotiate in good faith? Every time the American policy community trumpets a compromise as

being the next on the road to denuclearization, they damage their own case, and give Kim Jong Un reason to not carry through on his promises. Counter-intuitively, it seems that abandoning denuclearization as a goal would actually go farther towards achieving denuclearization than what we have now.

So, if denuclearization is untenable, why not adopt a different framework- that of arms control. By accepting that North Korea is a de facto nuclear weapon state, and operating accordingly, the damage can be mitigated, workable compromises reached, and the risk of nuclear war lessened. A useful example is the case of China. American interactions with nuclear armed China were not predicated on eventual denuclearization as the only acceptable outcome, and as a result they were not negotiations but rather a strategic dialogue. This must be the American approach to North Korea, as well.

Any arms control agreement with North Korea will require extensive US unilateral concessions to begin. This is because, for decades, American policymakers have objected to deals with North Korea due to their lack of trustworthiness, yet have done little to build up their own credibility. America is the great power in this conversation, and its existence is not in danger. It is for that reason that it must take the first difficult steps towards trust building. These concessions are important precisely because they are not merely transactional. Instead, they are transformational, changing the context within which negotiations occur. These changes would include a change in the U.S. denuclearization rhetoric, an announcement of stable coexistence, and eventually a declaration of the end of the Korean War.

In order to further facilitate such a transformation of context, the U.S. particularly needs to build broad spectrum engagement with North Korea. These dialogues will help create nuclear stability, by allowing security professionals from each side to explain the way they think of nuclear signaling and nuclear doctrine. This helps to reduce the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation, and opens up other interest groups within the North Korean polity, turning them into stakeholders in dialogues as well.

Although these actions are very controversial, they are relatively low cost and have the potential to dramatically change the way the two nations interact. Reduced risks of miscalculation or unintended escalation are immensely valuable, and are far more valuable than the possible harms. These actions, taken together as part of a thoughtful, careful effort to change the nature of U.S./DPRK interactions, provide the new context within which real nuclear negotiations take place, ultimately decreasing the risks of a catastrophic war.

Discussion:

Q: What is going to happen with the end-of-the-year deadline coming soon? How do we shift the paradigm from denuclearization to arms control? Could a possible solution be combining arms control and denuclearization?

President Trump has changed the space for negotiations. While some disagree, in the Trump era, we cannot implement change with long-term implications because Kim Jong-un has been very rational. Under these circumstances, Kim Jong-un sees Trump as a soft target, which means that Kim Jong-un has no incentives to move forward through dialogue. As for now, we cannot do much immediately as we have maneuvered ourselves into an unwinnable situation. Arms control would not be a concession, but it could lead to greater discussions.

Q: There is a commitment problem. Many want arms control, but North Korea seems disinterested in it despite the circumstances. What are your thoughts on this issue?

The Issue is that arms control in the context of denuclearization is not actually related to the concept of arms control. It's a path to denuclearization. The culminating point of the smaller agreements is supposed to be illuminating of North Korea's strategic deterrence. That is the fundamental problem. It encourages bad faith. North Korea does have commitment problems, but so does the United States. Structurally, the burden has to be on the United States because its existence is not at stake.

Q: North Korea states that the window is closing. How can you succeed when the new way is seen like bluff. How can we guarantee that once unilateral actions are taken, North Korea won't return to their ways?

Our situation is unwinnable. The end-of-the-year deadline is not a bluff. It would be a huge mistake to think so. There is not much we can do in the short term. We have narrowed our situation, and the choice that is available right now in the context of President Trump, is to plan for what we would do now. We have to be reactive with a multi-year plan that begins with a new presidency. Under the current circumstances, North Korea will try to pocket as much as they could receive.

Q: In this situation, it seems as though that the deadlock will be hard to get out of. To change the paradigm, what kinds of alternative actions can be taken? Are there military options? What is meant by a bloody nose strike? Preventive war, preemptive strike, and blood nose strike, are they the same things?

They are different, but do imply that North Korea must be struck. This is a part of the old paradigm of denuclearization. In a practical sense, you do not want to preventive strikes against nuclear states because you can cause nuclear war. If you can guarantee that North Korea will engage in war with the United States, then there might be a need for a preemptive strike, but it's not preventive.

Q: We have a fundamental, existential, and political problem. We have socialized people to believe that complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization is an intangible goal by respective governments. And, if the paradigm shifts from denuclearization to arms control, you would be recognizing North Korea as a nuclear state. Who will bite the bullet in recognizing North Korea as a nuclear state?

I wonder what political cost anybody would suffer because there is not much proof of anybody suffering political costs for reorienting the paradigm. If the United States does so, it would be done subtly, where nuclear negotiations will discontinue to be discussed. Let's stop talking about FFVD and CVID, and discuss practicalities. I am not naive toward North Korea. There is a change that North Korea does not deliver even minimal concessions on nuclear deterrents, so the alternative to making unilateral concessions would be to simply continue what we have now. Thus far, North Korea conducted six nuclear tests; it is a de facto nuclear state. However, we approach North Korea as if it is not. The one solution that we could take to acknowledge North Korea as a nuclear state, while retaining our ultimate goals in complete and permanent denuclearization during the transitional period. However, I am not certain about the success of such a middle-range approach.

Q: How can we propel North Korea to commit to proposals made? For example, South Korea multiple ways to engage in dialogue, but North Korea was not responsive to most. In this respect, your suggestion about instituting Shanghai seems like a good idea to narrow the gap between North Korea and Washington, D.C. in terms of nuclear issues. However, the problem of North Korean officials wearing different hats in various meetings remains as a problem. How can we make North Korea respond to proposals made?

There are historical indications that the North Korean military wanted to have dialogue with the United States. One of the main reasons why was because they had no incentives. They received nothing. As a result, it is unfair to criticize North Korea as not having honored commitments. Rather, in many cases, South Korea has failed to meet their own commitments. Thus, if decisions regarding mitigation of hostilities are made, then international communities must respect the commitments decided upon during discussions as well. North Korea's perspective is important to consider.

Q: Your paradigm is indicative of a different direction in handling the North Korean crisis. What role does the dynamics of East Asia play?

Historically, China has never been able to control North Korea. Chinese capital and efforts to convince North Korea to halt almost never worked. I don't talk much about China because China does not control North Korea, and North Korea does not trust them either. Unless the negotiations affect the national interests of China, China will be compelled to prefer the United States and North Korea continuing with current types of negotiations.

Q: What kinds of sanctions can be suggested as alternatives?

North Korea has been affected by the UN Security Council sanctions since 2016, and the United States has implemented those sanctions through executive orders. There is political capital to

make different choices happen. If the United States changes direction and faces the circumstances in providing sanctions relief or situational change, then it will place the burden on allies as well.

Q: Could you clarify on executive orders?

Executive orders have the force of law unless Congress states otherwise. I'm not a fan of President Trump's use of executive orders. Executive orders on tariffs are active negative actions; the Executive order that prevents nuclear deployments ties our hands and shows restraint. The whole point is to think about how to credibly signal to North Korea. This may involve unwanted costs. However, we have to show that we are willing to give concessions. Thus, clever ways must be brainstormed to build trust; something like President Trump's executive orders has power, and it can be used to facilitate discussion and negotiations.