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Comprehensive regional security

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From the Editors' desk

Southeast Asia has long understood that effective national security goes well beyond military preparedness to encompass a variety of 'non-traditional' security issues. This idea is at the heart of political cooperation within ASEAN and competes with traditional notions of regional security in East Asia. Japan's *sogo anzen hosho* (comprehensive security) philosophy has also underpinned its plurilateral pursuit of non-military security objectives since the 1970s. This goal has driven Japan to champion multilateral trade liberalisation and institution-building, and the whole of Asia has been the beneficiary.

This issue of *East Asia Forum Quarterly* explores the idea of comprehensive regional security—an approach that embraces economic, environmental and energy security as well as military interests, and considers how they are collectively secured within today's economically interdependent and politically cooperative regional system.

The vocabulary developed in the face of growing geopolitical tensions—decoupling, dual circulation, friend-shoring, 'strategic' supply chains, securitisation—suggests that the big powers are working towards their own notion of comprehensive security. But there is nothing comprehensive, or regional, about this. Indeed, it subordinates key national interests to a process of geopolitical competition that is, by its nature, a zero-sum game. Securitising the economic arenas which facilitated the mutually-beneficial, cooperatively-achieved growth of the past 70 years has unwelcome externalities for the rest of the world—at the expense of economic openness, growth and adaptable supply chains.

Contributors in this issue recognise that comprehensive regional security can only be secured collectively: one country's resilience to climate change, or access to free and well-served markets for energy and food doesn't come at the expense of others', for instance.

They emphasise the 'regional' in comprehensive regional security for good reason. In East Asia multilateralism and international integration have a fighting chance against protectionism and hyper-nationalism. Asia's homegrown multilateral platforms—including ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the Asian Regional Forum, the East Asian Summit and now RCEP—offer powerful instruments for integrating the security and economic domains within multilateral rule-making and cooperation.

Our Asian Review section suggests one way through the North Korean roadblock and scores political progress on gender equity in Indonesia.

Nicola Cole and Liam Gammon

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COVER PHOTO: Indonesian President Joko Widodo plants mangrove trees at the Taman Hutan Raya Ngurah Rai Mangrove Forest on the sidelines of the G20 summit (Bali, 2022). Picture: Alex Brandon/Pool via REUTERS.

Fixing the deadlock in North Korean denuclearisation

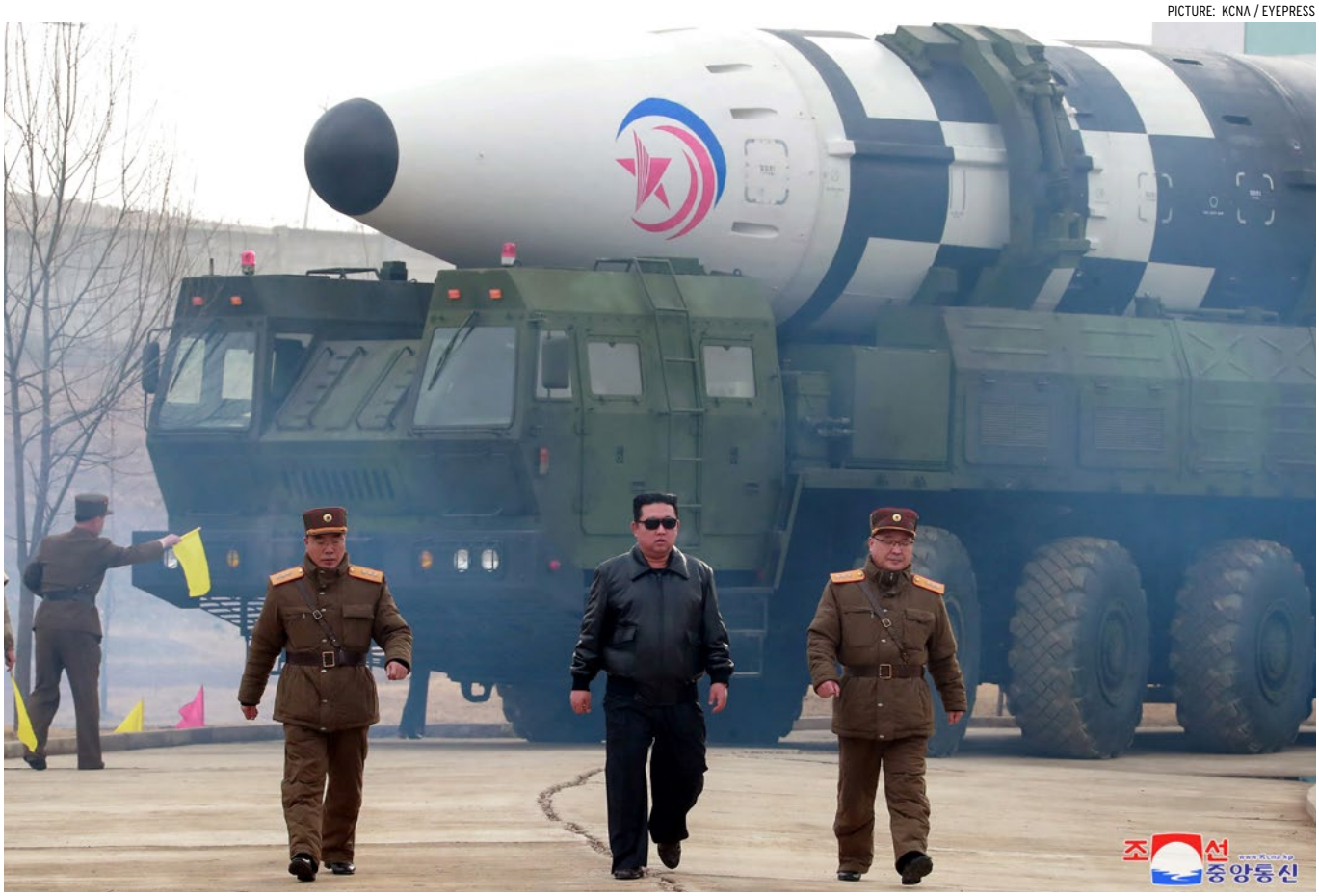
CHUNG-IN MOON

ON 19 September 2018, after signing the Pyongyang Declaration with then South Korean president Moon Jae-in, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un declared, 'We have agreed to make every effort to make the Korean Peninsula a land of peace that is free from nuclear weapons and nuclear threats.'

In his speech at the Rungrado 1st of May Stadium in Pyongyang that evening, Moon reaffirmed this and celebrated that 'Chairman Kim Jong-un and I reached concrete agreements on measures to completely remove the fear of war and danger of armed clashes on the Korean Peninsula.' Over 100,000 North Korean citizens welcomed the remarks with cheers of enthusiasm.

North Korea followed up on its

PICTURE: KCNA / EYEPRESS



A photo released by the North Korean Central News Agency shows Kim Jong-un walking ahead of the Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile before its launch (March 2022).

leader's pledges by closing nuclear test sites in Punggye-ri and showing a willingness to dismantle a missile-launching platform in Dongchang-ri. Pyongyang also claimed it would close all nuclear facilities in Yongbyon provided that the United States honoured the Singapore Declaration signed on 12 June 2018.

Before these moves, Kim Jong-un had already initiated a unilateral moratorium on nuclear and missile activities in April 2018. It seemed that peace was near and a pathway to denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula had finally been found.

Come the beginning of 2022, however, we witnessed a completely different picture. In January, Pyongyang announced the cancellation of its nuclear and missile moratorium. Since then, it has test fired more than 30 ballistic missiles. On 8 September 2022, it enacted a new nuclear forces law, making its possession of nuclear weapons formal and legal. The law not only stipulates the automatic firing of nuclear weapons in the case of a leadership emergency but also identifies five conditions that could trigger the use of nuclear weapons.

Pyongyang also revealed its possession of tactical nuclear weapons and their deployment to frontline units. More critically, Kim Jong-un declared the irreversibility of North Korea's nuclear armament, precluding any diplomatic negotiations on denuclearisation by stating that 'There will never be such a thing as our abandonment of nuclear weapons or denuclearisation first, nor will there be any negotiations to this end or bargaining chips in these processes'. These developments invalidate three decades of dialogue and negotiations on denuclearisation, heightening the danger of a nuclear catastrophe.

A golden opportunity was missed in February 2019. After an exchange of 'love letters', former US president Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un met in Hanoi between 27–28 February for the second time. Kim took a 60-hour train ride from Pyongyang to Hanoi with the hope that he could return home with a message of hope.

At the summit on the morning of 28 February, Kim proposed that the North would dismantle all nuclear facilities in Yongbyon in return for a partial relaxation of UN Security Council sanctions on North Korea relating to the civilian economy and essential goods. It was an unprecedented proposal by the North Korean leader.

It was also a good deal, precisely because—as Siegfried Hecker, a renowned specialist on the North Korean nuclear issue, pointed out—nuclear facilities in Yongbyon account for at least 60 to 70 per cent of North Korean nuclear production capabilities.

But Trump turned it down outright and counter-offered what he described as 'a big deal' in which 'a bright future' for the North Korean economy was promised if the North abandoned its nuclear and biochemical weapons and ballistic missiles completely. It was tantamount to requesting that Kim surrender. Kim still wanted to conduct further discussions during a scheduled working lunch, but Trump cancelled the lunch and left. He went back to Washington with no deal by proposing a 'big deal' while rejecting Kim's 'some deal'.

Washington officially cited North Korea's hidden highly enriched uranium facilities as justification for derailing negotiations, though North Korea was willing to discuss these facilities further. Later, Trump confessed that he turned down Kim's offer because of strong opposition from then national security advisor John Bolton and secretary of state Mike Pompeo.

It was a bad decision, driven mostly by domestic political considerations, such as congressional hearings involving Michael Cohen that were taking place on the same day and distracting media attention away from Hanoi.

In late June 2019, Trump met Kim in Panmunjom for the third time and promised to suspend US–South Korea joint military exercises in return for the resumption of working-level talks. But his pledge was not kept, and North Korea rejected the United States' proposal.

Although North Korea showed up to a working-level talk with the United States in Stockholm in early October 2019, there was no progress. North Korean officials simply notified the United States that the North would never return to such talks unless Washington's hostile policy was reversed. The Trump administration continued a 'maximum pressure' strategy through the intensification of sanctions.

Major stakeholders in the region share a common goal of denuclearising North Korea, but their approaches have diverged

US President Joe Biden has not been interested in reviving the summit talks, a Trump legacy, and has favoured working-level dialogue. But Pyongyang has not responded. In the eyes of North Korea, Biden's policy, which is anchored in placing maximum pressure on the North through sanctions and stable management of the North Korean nuclear situation through deterrence and alliance coordination, is no different from that of his predecessor.

North Korea does not occupy a high priority in Biden's foreign policy agenda alongside hot issues such as strategic competition with China, the Taiwan Strait crisis and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Former president Barack Obama's strategic patience has degenerated into strategic neglect under the Biden administration.

South Korea has been helpless in reversing this retrogression. The Moon Jae-in government played a crucial facilitating role in arranging the summit talks between North Korea and the United States by taking advantage of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in February 2018. Seoul also contributed to the opening of channels of communication between Pyongyang and Washington.

When the Singapore summit, which had been scheduled for 12 June 2018, was on the verge of collapse because of a war of words between US and North Korean senior officials, president Moon convened a secret summit with Kim at Panmunjom on 26 May. As Pyongyang–Washington relations soured after then secretary of state Mike Pompeo's visit to North Korea in July 2018, Moon convened the Pyongyang summit a month earlier than scheduled and helped smooth out soured relations. At every critical juncture, Moon played an important role in facilitating dialogue between Kim and Trump.

The Moon government had great expectations for the Hanoi summit. The Yongbyon card that Kim played had been strongly suggested by president Moon at the Pyongyang summit in September 2018. The Hanoi setback, therefore, dealt a critical blow to the Moon government, and Pyongyang began to show an increasingly hostile attitude towards the South.

Moon failed to deliver as promised at the Panmunjom and Pyongyang summits primarily because of international sanctions. Moon tried to resuscitate talks between Pyongyang and Washington by proposing in September 2021 that the Biden administration adopt an end-of-war declaration involving Seoul, Pyongyang, Washington and Beijing, relax sanctions against North Korea and endorse the partial opening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the Mount Kumgang tourist project. The Biden administration was not supportive, and the Moon government failed to revive momentum for dialogue.

As US–North Korea bilateral summits over the past three years demonstrate, trust deficits and rigid bargaining positions can easily derail dialogue and negotiation

SOUTH KOREA'S Yoon Suk-yeol government, inaugurated in May 2022, regards its predecessor's North Korean nuclear policy as a total failure and has pursued a hardline policy. While placing a heavy emphasis on conventional deterrence, it has strengthened extended deterrence in partnership with the United States, increased the frequency and intensity of US–South Korea joint military exercises and training, requested the regular deployment of US strategic weapons in South Korea and consolidated South Korea–US–Japan trilateral cooperation.

Yoon also proposed an 'audacious initiative' that links Pyongyang's incremental denuclearisation to the provision of lucrative economic incentives such as massive food aid, large-scale infrastructure projects and international investment and financial support. But the North openly ridiculed the initiative by calling it 'an audacious delusion', putting the Yoon government in a helpless situation.

China is now rather indifferent. In the past, Beijing actively facilitated the peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem by hosting the Six-Party Talks. It also advocated for diplomatic negotiations based on the principles of a 'freeze-for-freeze' of North Korea's nuclear weapon and missile tests and South Korea–US military exercises, 'parallel progress' towards a peaceful regime and the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, and gradual exchanges of simultaneous concessions.

The Chinese government is adamant that sanctions alone cannot compel North Korea to denuclearise. The United States has not listened to Beijing but continues to outsource the North Korean problem to China. Pyongyang has not been cooperative with Beijing either, ever since China

began to lose its influence over Washington. Caught between North Korea and the United States, China has been sidelined.

Japan has taken a hardline posture on North Korea by adhering to the principle of 'denuclearisation first, dialogue and incentives later'. Along with the United States and the European Union, Japan has adopted unilateral sanctions against North Korea. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's cabinet has followed in the footsteps of his predecessor, Shinzo Abe, in favouring deterrence, sanctions and close trilateral cooperation with the United States and South Korea.

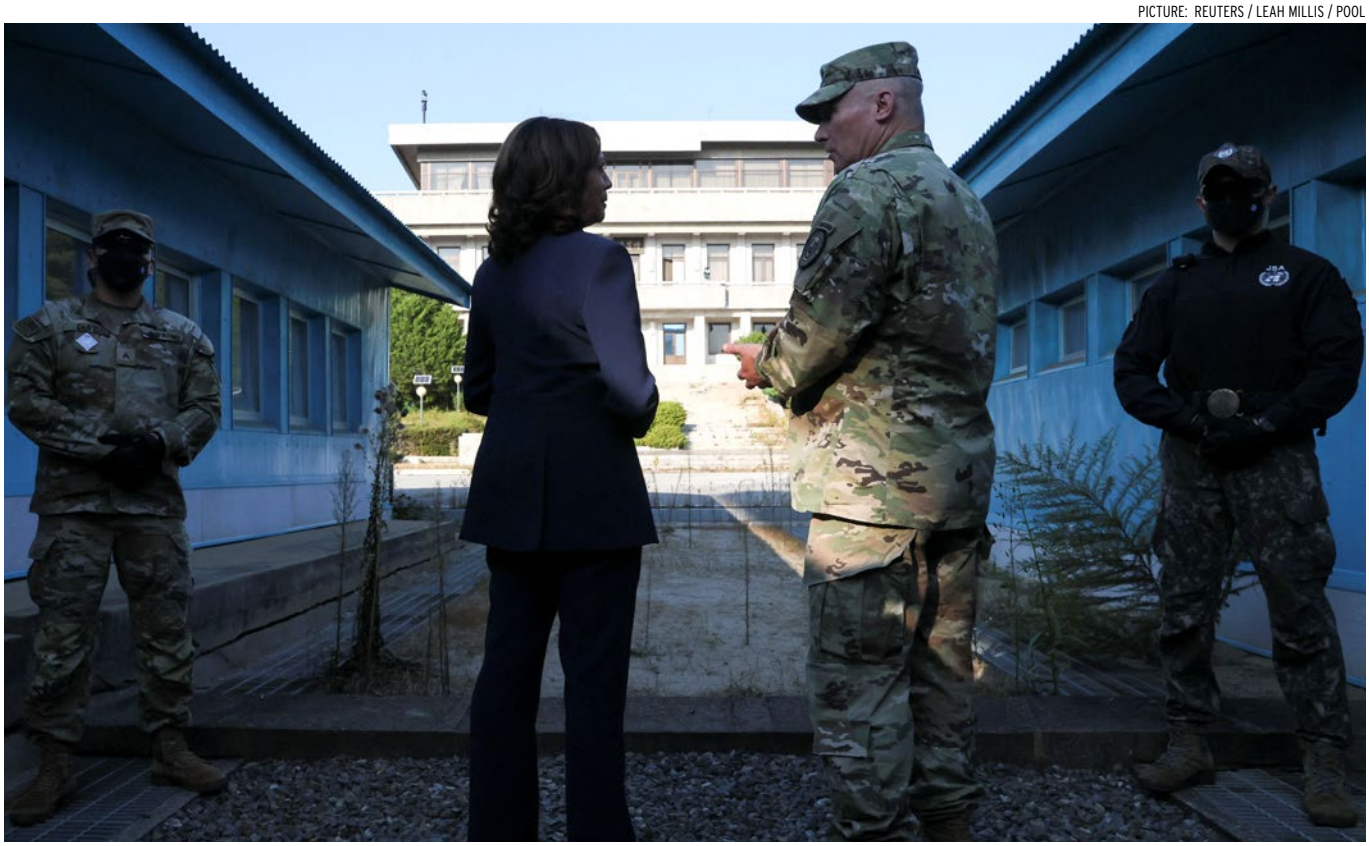
Although it is a member of the Six-Party Talks, Russia has been a rather marginal stakeholder. Its policy has been similar to that of China and it has closely coordinated with China at the UN Security Council in blocking punitive measures targeted at North Korea. Pyongyang's diplomatic support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is likely to make Russia a staunch patron of North Korea. Nevertheless, Russia will not be supportive of North Korea's status as a nuclear-weapons state.

Major stakeholders in the region share a common goal of denuclearising North Korea, but their approaches have diverged. The United States, South Korea and Japan see North Korea's denuclearisation as the immediate goal, to be achieved through deterrence and hard-pressure tactics such as sanctions and the show of military force. China and Russia are taking the opposite path, preaching the utility of diplomatic negotiation, crisis stabilisation and an incremental and reciprocal approach. Meanwhile, North Korea has become bolder and more assertive, with no signs of making any real concessions.

How can a breakthrough be made in the current stalemate? It will require pragmatism and a new multilateral arrangement.

Seeking practical solutions should be a starting point. North Korea already possesses nuclear facilities, materials, warheads and missiles and has expanded its nuclear arsenal by carrying out six nuclear tests and making its nuclear devices smaller, lighter and more diverse. North Korea is a nuclear-weapons state in all but name. Setting complete and irreversible denuclearisation as the immediate goal of diplomatic negotiations is unrealistic. Sanctions, conventional deterrence and US

PICTURE: REUTERS / LEAH MILLIS / POOL



US Vice President Kamala Harris stands next to the demarcation line separating South Korea from North Korea (September 2022).

provision of a nuclear umbrella to South Korea prevent North Korea from accepting the denuclearisation demand.

THE most critical step is to listen carefully to what North Korea wants. Pyongyang has consistently stated that its nuclear weapons are a product of Washington's hostile policy, which threatens its survival and hampers its people's right to development. North Korea wants the suspension of joint military exercises and the withdrawal of US strategic weapons, the adoption of an end-of-war declaration, diplomatic normalisation with the United States and Japan and the lifting of sanctions to enable economic opening and reform.

These demands should be addressed at any negotiations, along with the international community's demands for reciprocal measures towards denuclearisation. Simultaneous exchanges based on action-for-action should be the terms of engagement with the North.

The United States is the only country that can satisfy North Korea's demands. But since the Hanoi setback, damage to mutual trust between North Korea and the United States is deep and almost irreparable. If the North undertakes a seventh nuclear test or a test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile, bilateral relations will worsen.

The Biden administration continues to call for dialogue, but Pyongyang has not responded. Third-party facilitators will need to jumpstart Pyongyang–Washington bilateral talks. In the past, Beijing and Seoul have played this role. Now, neither can. Seoul has taken the side of the United States, while Beijing is reluctant to serve as a mediator. The European Union, ASEAN or Australia could be potential replacement candidates.

Modalities of dialogue and negotiation with North Korea have varied over time. The Agreed Framework of 1994 was the result of North Korea–US bilateral negotiations, while the 19 September Joint Statement of 2005 was adopted at the Six-Party Talks. Pyongyang has always preferred bilateral negotiations, while the United States has favoured multilateral arrangements with the assumption that if talks with the North fail other multilateral stakeholders would join the United States in pressuring the North.

As US–North Korea bilateral summits over the past three years demonstrate, trust deficits and rigid bargaining positions can easily derail dialogue and negotiation. A multilateral approach in the form of Six-Party Talks needs to be revived. This is not only because the North Korean nuclear issue is nested in Northeast Asian security dynamics, but also because a combination of bilateral and multilateral talks can facilitate more flexible negotiations.

Given the past failure of Six-Party Talks, such a multilateral arrangement may sound idealistic. The current climate of US–China rivalry and the international isolation of Russia following the war in Ukraine are also inhibiting factors. But the North Korean nuclear problem, along with tensions in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, is unlikely to be resolved without reference to a comprehensive regional security perspective.

The Six-Party Talks were not successful partly due to the level of the delegates involved. Principal negotiators came from the level of assistant secretary (in the case of the United States) or deputy foreign minister. To deal with the North Korean nuclear issue from a comprehensive regional security perspective, higher-level representation is needed.

Simultaneous exchanges based on action-for-action should be the terms of engagement with the North

The ideal would be the convening of a Northeast Asian security summit held annually. At this summit, the North Korean leader's participation would be indispensable. Kim would attend the summit if a US president attended and if China persuades him.

The issue here is whether the United States and China can cooperate. Within an institutional framework, all agenda items could be addressed. These include denuclearisation, nuclear arms control, extended deterrence, South Korea–US–Japan joint military exercises and new ideas such as a Northeast Asian nuclear-weapon-free-zone.

Denuclearising North Korea is a perilous odyssey. Pragmatic attitudes coupled with multilateral arrangements can serve as a useful guide to navigating that odyssey. EAFQ

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