



SPECIAL REPORT

Revisiting the Comprehensive Security Roadmap to Reduce the Risk of War on the Korean Peninsula

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REVISITING THE COMPREHENSIVE SECURITY ROADMAP TO REDUCE THE RISK OF WAR ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

OVERVIEW

In this paper we revisit the concept of comprehensive security in Northeast Asia as the guiding principle that should be used to reduce tension, avoid war, and re-engage on a constructive peace-making cooperative security agenda in Northeast Asia, including reducing then eliminating the threat of nuclear war.

In section 1, we outline the mostly negative security trends in the region over the last five years.

In section 2, we explain how the DPRK's¹ nuclear breakout has become the most urgent threat in the region, but also now demands a more indirect approach at a regional level than in 2018 when we last addressed the issue of comprehensive security.²

In section 3, we explore how inter-Korean relations have spiraled into hostility, rupture, and potentially rapidly escalating conflict and unraveled hard-won channels of communication, cooperation, and collaboration due to how the two Koreas have responded to the evolving external security context and to their respective domestic imperatives.

In section 4, we suggest four steps that could ease insecurity in the region, especially in Korea, namely:

- a) The US and China tacitly act in concert whereby the US tries to restrain Seoul from provocative threats or actions animated at Pyongyang while China seeks to restrain Pyongyang from issuing and acting on threats, especially nuclear threats;

¹ DPRK, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, sometimes referred to as "North Korea."

² See: Morton Halperin, Peter Hayes, Thomas Pickering, Leon Sigal, "GENERAL ROADMAP AND WORK PLAN FOR NUCLEAR DIPLOMACY WITH NORTH KOREA", NAPSNet Special Reports, April 10, 2018, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/general-roadmap-and-work-plan-for-nuclear-diplomacy-with-north-korea/>

MORTON HALPERIN, PETER HAYES, THOMAS PICKERING, LEON SIGAL, PHILIP YUN, "FROM ENEMIES TO SECURITY PARTNERS: PATHWAYS TO DENUCLEARIZATION IN KOREA", NAPSNet Policy Forum, July 06, 2018, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/from-enemies-to-security-partners-pathways-to-denuclearization-in-korea/>

- b) China reaches out to reassure the ROK³ with concrete steps while the US takes unilateral steps to reassure the DPRK;
- c) The US engages China to propose a joint statement with all parties on the inadmissibility of use of nuclear weapons and a dialogue on creating a nuclear-weapons-free zone including changes in the nuclear postures of all nuclear-armed states in the region;
- d) The US and the ROK explicitly outline the benefits to the DPRK of curbing its nuclear arming including improved security, access to advanced information technology, access to space services, and its integration into regional and global institutions with concomitant increased stature.

In section 5, we conclude that the steps being taken to reinforce deterrence may lead to a downward spiral that leads to rather than deterring war; and that progress in easing tensions in Korea could then inspire cooperative security efforts elsewhere in Northeast Asia to the benefit of all parties in the region while re-establishing the conditions needed for a comprehensive approach to realizing the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

³ ROK, the Republic of Korea, sometimes referred to as “South Korea.”

I. INTRODUCTION: DEGRADATION OF NORTHEAST ASIAN SECURITY SINCE 2018

The security environment in Northeast Asia has deteriorated significantly over the past five years. The most alarming development is the sharp increase in US-China competition. That rivalry, coupled with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has led to a firming up of US-ROK-Japan military cooperation and a widening Asia-Pacific effort to contain China.

A US-driven effort to impede exports of militarily significant technology to China and to reduce its supply chain dependence has led to some economic decoupling, compounding the dislocation of global trade resulting from China's shutdown during the COVID pandemic. The Chinese economy has yet to recover. Beset by deflation, its growth has slowed appreciably, with adverse consequences for GDP in South Korea and Japan. It has also limited Chinese economic support for the DPRK.

The economic fallout of these two developments has affected domestic politics in Northeast Asia. Economic slowdown, rising inequality, and slumping support for leaders, have spawned fear and loathing and scapegoating of "the other" in most countries and rising authoritarianism in some.

Russian revanchism has affected regional security—not only because of its aggression in Ukraine, but also because of its effort to restore its influence in the former Soviet republics, its active courting of North Korea, and its reintroduction of submarine-launched ballistic missiles in the northwest Pacific and the Arctic and other shorter-range nuclear missile and strategic bomber aircraft, including on the Russian-Chinese border. Moscow's veto of UN sanctions monitoring and potential help for DPRK missile and nuclear development in return for Pyongyang's supply of military arms for use against Ukraine are fundamentally destabilizing. Although Russia's provision of oil, military technology, and employment of North Korean workers ties may benefit the DPRK in the short run, it cannot meet Pyongyang's long-term technological and infrastructure rehabilitation needs. Nevertheless, Russia's new assertiveness poses a challenge to China's dominant role in the DPRK's external relations, arousing concern in Beijing.

Arms racing is speeding up as military budgets expand. The US is modernizing its nuclear arsenal as is Russia. China is expanding its nuclear forces by 7 per cent a year, rapidly and massively increasing their lethality. In South Korea and Japan there is louder talk and increased public support for nuclear arming. Submarine capabilities are increasing throughout the region. China is developing an offshore anti-submarine warfare capability, which may eventually enable it to challenge US and Japanese naval dominance in the Taiwan Straits. Space-based capabilities are growing, along with cyberthreats, which endangers C3I assets. Arms control is moribund.

Northeast Asia is riven by conflict—between the DPRK and the ROK and its allies, between the United States and Russia over the war in Ukraine, between the United States and China over the Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea, and between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Daiyou Islands. Elsewhere there is the potential for clashes in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean and the risk of horizontal escalation of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

Two flashpoints in Northeast Asia stand out—the Korean peninsula and the Taiwan Straits—spurring fear of a two-front war in the region.⁴ The most imminent risk of military conflict arises from the rivalry between the ROK and the DPRK.

Top military commanders perceive that the risk of inadvertent war and possible nuclear escalation in Korea is increasing. As Kim Jong Un himself has acknowledged, a “physical clash can be caused and escalated even by a slight accidental factor in the area along the Military Demarcation Line where large armed forces of both sides are standing in confrontation with one another.”⁵

II. COMPELLING NEED FOR COOPERATIVE SECURITY IN THE REGION

Amid this unraveling, diplomatic re-engagement, de-escalation, and arms control are imperative and there is no shortage of opportunities for cooperative initiatives on climate change; energy insecurity; pandemic threats; regulation, standard setting, and sharing of technological innovation in sectors ranging from vaccines to AI; food and energy insecurity; nuclear insecurity due to terrorism; regulation of new military and economic competition in the melting Arctic and Antarctic, in space, or on and beneath the oceans (the latter perhaps spearheaded by retired submariners and starting with a commitment to cooperative rescue operations).

The region faces some disturbing and immediate uncertainties. What, for example, are the prospects for balancing against an expansionist Russia? Is the DPRK’s alignment with Russia a marriage of convenience that does not preclude its eventual reaching out to the US? Is China subtly tilting the global balance against Russia, just as the US did with China in the late 1960s?

In 2018, we saw the Korean nuclear issue to be a relatively easy starting point for greater power cooperation that would enable the formation of a regional security institution. Today, we see that a regional approach, short of an inclusive institutional framework, as the best way to address the grave risk of war in Korea with attendant risk of escalation to nuclear war. Progress in reducing tension on the Peninsula could

⁴ Markus Garlauskas, “The United States and Its Allies Must Be Ready to Deter a Two-Front War and Nuclear Attacks in East Asia,” Atlantic Council, August 16, 2023.

⁵ KCNA, “Report on 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th WPK Central Committee,” December 31, 2023.

facilitate broader collaboration in other contested areas, thereby creating the conditions for dialogue about a comprehensive regional security settlement and framework and inverting our earlier assumption that a regional security dialogue and institution building should precede and thereby enable an incremental resolution of the Korean nuclear issue.

In previous reports, we examined the prospects for a Comprehensive Security Settlement at the global and regional level with a focus on nuclear war risk reduction via denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in the form of war avoidance, crisis management, and eventually, disarmament in Korea, combined with constructive peace-making centered on a Northeast Asia Security Council.⁶

Although a regional approach is still valid, a key premise—that a Council should be convened to kickstart a comprehensive regional security process—is currently open to question. If it were to be formed now, such a Council might function to firm up two new blocs, which would impede rather than promote resolution of any regional conflicts. Moscow’s involvement may complicate efforts to resolve differences between Washington and Beijing, who might make more headway trying to ease tensions bilaterally, starting with issues where they have interests in common such as climate change, pandemics, etc. Also, a Council may prove dysfunctional at a time when conservatives in Seoul and Tokyo strongly support security trilateralism based on upgraded military cooperation with each other and their US-led alliances.

Conversely, some in Tokyo and Seoul (mostly on the center-left) may be concerned about entrapment in a US-China conflict over Taiwan. They in turn may resist security trilateralism and support cooperation in the Council’s deliberations. Overall, the Council idea seems premature in today’s circumstances and as likely to be divisive as constructive of security cooperation.

Another of our premises was that the DPRK would engage seriously, and in the long run, would have no alternative but to curtail its nuclear program, rather than to stay at the bottom of the deep economic hole it has dug for itself leading to isolation and poverty that undermine the foundations of its national power, and therefore, reduce the prospects for regime survival. Underlying that premise was the assumption that the DPRK was motivated to seek a fundamental improvement in its political relationship with the United States, the ROK, and Japan—to end US enmity, or what it called the United States’ “hostile policy”—to hedge against excessive dependence on a rising China and to curtail the ROK using its rising power to crush the DPRK and to entertain US troops remaining in the ROK. In return for US commitments to reduce its hostility embodied in various types and levels of cooperation—most notably the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) and more recently, not staging US-ROK military exercises, the DPRK showed it was prepared to restrain its nuclear

⁶ Ibid.

and missile programs. Today Pyongyang has less urgent need to improve relations with Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo in order to hedge against the rise of China because of its warming ties with Moscow, which, in turn, might make Beijing reluctant to differ with Pyongyang.

An implicit message of the regional concept in our 2018 analysis was that Korea was only one of a number of security issues that needed to be settled in Northeast Asia, and was not even the most important of them, although it would likely be the first to be taken up in a regional approach, and in fact any progress on that front would make addressing other security issues easier.

Today, the risk of a conflict in Korea that could escalate to nuclear war demands urgent attention in its own right. Moreover, it may also be necessary to defer striving directly for denuclearization of the Korean peninsula for the moment although we believe that it is still possible to approach that issue on a regional basis in a carefully sequenced manner, as we explain below.

III. THE NEW CONTEXT IN KOREA

As in the region, so too in Korea much has changed since 2018, little of it for the better. During the Cold War, Kim Il Sung played off the former Soviet Union and China against one another in a delicate balancing act to maintain some freedom of action of its own. In 1988, anticipating the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Kim felt compelled to reach out to Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo in hopes of securing greater autonomy from a rising China and developing the DPRK's economy. His son Kim Jong Il, and then his grandson Kim Jong Un, sustained that effort. The Kims demonstrated their willingness to reciprocate. After Washington announced its intention to withdraw tactical nuclear weapons from Korea, Pyongyang unilaterally stopped reprocessing plutonium in 1992, then concluded the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework with the United States shutting the operating nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, halting construction of a larger reactor, storing plutonium-laden spent fuel in a cooling pond, and allowing around-the-clock international monitoring from 1994 until 2002—at a time when North Korea had no nuclear weapons.

The DPRK changed its strategy after Donald Trump walked away from the 2019 Hanoi summit with Kim Jong Un and reneged on his subsequent promise to forgo joint military exercises in Korea. Perceiving little prospect of persuading Washington to end enmity, Pyongyang had no motive to curtail arming. Instead, it reverted to its Cold War strategy of playing off a revived Russia and a greatly strengthened China. At the same time, Kim Jong Un stepped up its development and testing of missiles and expanded the DPRK's nuclear arsenal. When a conservative government was elected in 2022 in Seoul that confronted the DPRK with provocative “Kill Chain” plans for preemptive attack, hardline rhetoric, and an increase in intensity and pace of joint ROK-US drills—including a well-publicized “decapitation” of the DPRK leadership exercise by special

forces—Pyongyang reacted with ever more menacing arming, missile tests, rhetoric, and military drills. As part of its new strategy, Pyongyang has cut off nearly all contact, both official and unofficial, with Washington and Seoul for the past five years. Yet it has held several meetings with Japanese officials and Kim Jong Un even sent a message of sympathy to Prime Minister Kishida Fumio after a January 2024 earthquake.⁷ Kishida has encouraged contacts, but his term as prime minister is coming to an end and Pyongyang’s opposition to discussing denuclearization or abductees raised doubts about prospects for summitry anytime soon.

Much of the DPRK’s hostile rhetoric is a tit-for-tat response to ROK threats. For instance, after ROK President Yoon Seok-yol warned, "If North Korea uses nuclear weapons, its regime will be brought to an end by an overwhelming response from the ROK-U. S. alliance."⁸ Kim countered, “If the ROK dares attempt to use armed forces against the DPRK or threaten its sovereignty and security and such opportunity comes, we will have no hesitation in annihilating the ROK by mobilizing all means and forces in our hands.”⁹

Worse yet, both sides eroded existing checks on military confrontation. Notably, the September 19th Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain, or the *Comprehensive Military Agreement* (CMA),¹⁰ made public at the Panmunjom summit meeting between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong Un, is now defunct. It barred “all live-fire artillery drills and field training exercises at the regiment level and above within 5km from the MDL [the Military Demarcation Line that splits the Demilitarized Zone separating the ROK and the DPRK] ,” “all live-fire and maritime maneuver exercises” near the contested waters of the East Sea, imposed “no fly zones” on various aircraft in the vicinity of the MDL, established “permanent communication channels”—hotlines—to prevent any accidental military clash, provided for a “maritime peace zone” in the West Sea “to prevent accidental military clashes and ensure safe fishing activities,” committed the sides to “completely withdraw all guard posts within the DMZ,” to demilitarize the “Joint Security Area in Panmunjom,” and set up a “Joint Remains Recovery Site and minesweeping” area in the DMZ. Both sides gradually whittled away the provisions with repeated violations. Having disparaged his predecessor’s handiwork, President Yoon seized on a North Korean launch of its first satellite in November 2023 to suspend

⁷ Jesse Johnson, “North Korea’s Kim Sends Rare Sympathy Message to Japan over Ishikawa Quake,” *Japan Times*, January 6, 2024.

⁸ Sarah Kim, “Alliance Will End Regime If North Uses Nukes, Yoon Warns,” *JoongAng Ilbo*, September 26, 2023.

⁹ KCNA, “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Inspects Major Munitions Factories,” January 10, 2024.par

¹⁰ “Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain,” September 19, 2018, at: <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/agreement-implementation-historic-panmunjom-declaration-military-domain.pdf>

the accord partially.¹¹ A North Korean drone flight over the South in January 2024 prompted him to threaten to suspend the accord altogether.¹²

Kim Jong Un beat him to the punch. In a fundamental restatement of inter-Korean policy, he told a plenary meeting of the Central Committee on December 30, 2022, “The general conclusion drawn by our Party, looking back upon the long-standing north-south relations is that reunification can never be achieved with the ROK authorities that defined the ‘unification by absorption’ and ‘unification under liberal democracy’ as their state policy.”¹³

He went on, “The north-south relations have been completely fixed into the relations between two states hostile to each other and the relations between two belligerent states.” From now on, the South would be treated as a separate state: he “stressed the need to take measures for readjusting and reforming the organizations in charge of the affairs related to the south including the United Front Department of the Party Central Committee.”¹⁴

He elaborated that stance in a speech to the Supreme People’s Assembly on January 15, 2024, “We have formulated a new stand on the north-south relations and the policy of reunification and dismantled all the organizations we established as solidarity bodies for peaceful reunification at the current session of the Supreme People’s Assembly which discusses the laws of the DPRK.”¹⁵

Kim drew particular attention to the contested waters of the West Sea, where deadly clashes have taken place in prior decades: “As the southern border of our country has been clearly drawn, the illegal ‘northern limit line’ and any other boundary can never be tolerated, and if the ROK violates even 0.0001 mm. of our territorial land, air, and waters, it will be considered a war provocation.”¹⁶

He also called for the removal of a monument to reunification, and added, “We can specify in our constitution the issue of completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming the ROK and annex it as a part of the territory of our Republic in case a war breaks out on the Korean peninsula.” He called for education to instill “the firm idea that ROK is their primary enemy state and invariable principal enemy.” He went on,

¹¹ Kim Han-joo, “S. Korea Partially Suspends 2018 Inter-Korean Military Accord,” *Yonhap*, November 22, 2023.

¹² Kim Mi-na and Bae Ji-hyun, “Yoon Threatens to Suspend Inter-Korean Agreement Aimed at De-escalation,” *Hankyoreh*, January 5, 2024.

¹³ KCNA, “Report on 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th WPK Central Committee,” December 31, 2023.

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

“We will never unilaterally unleash a war if the enemies do not provoke us... We do not want war, but we also have no intention of avoiding it. There is no reason to opt for war, and therefore, there is no intention of unilaterally going to war, but once a war becomes a reality facing us, we will never try to avoid it.”¹⁷

By reformulating the North’s relationship with the South as an enemy state, not part of one nation, Kim underscored plans to use nuclear weapons against it, a step that Kim Il Sung had opposed but his grandson first promulgated in the revised Law on Nuclear Forces Policy enacted in 2022.¹⁸ At least theoretically, Kim Jong Un also left open the possibility of abandoning efforts to subvert each other and even establishing normal state-to-state relations between the two Koreas, however unlikely any diplomatic engagement between them seems for the foreseeable future.

IV. TOWARD COOPERATIVE SOLUTIONS IN KOREA

The very steps that both sides in Korea are taking to bolster deterrence—stepped up arming, accelerated tempo and increased size of military exercises, and threatening rhetoric—have increased the likelihood of inadvertent loss of control or accidental clashes that could quickly escalate.

Deterrence alone will not suffice to forestall war in Korea. Reassurance is also needed. And it is not enough to reassure US allies. It is also essential to reassure the DPRK’s leaders.

In this respect, actions can speak louder than words. Although Washington trumpets its commitment to deterrence, USFK has quietly discouraged Seoul from conducting live-fire drills too close to the contested waters of the West Sea.

Yet with the 2019 CMA guardrails dismantled, both Korean leaders are engaged in competitive risk-taking.

Given these negative trends and dangerous dynamics, does a comprehensive cooperative security strategy still offer a way to establish a durable peace and to improve security while reducing the risks of nuclear war and proliferation?

We highlight four cooperative solutions to reduce the insecurity that grips the region, in particular, the risks arising from the nuclear-prone Korean conflict. In sum, these are:

1. *Tension Reduction*: The US concentrates its diplomacy on restraining Seoul while China does the same in Pyongyang using measures that underscore the seriousness of their respective demarches.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ KCNA, “Law on DPRK’s Policy on Nuclear Forces Promulgated,” September 9, 2022.

2. *Reassurance*: Concurrently, China reaches out to reassure the ROK while the US takes steps to reassure the DPRK, employing measures that suffice to underscore the seriousness of their respective demarches.

These combinations of restraint and reassurance diverge from typical unilateral great power influence in that the respective foci of China and the US would reinforce rather than opposing each other's effects in Seoul and Pyongyang.

3. *Inadmissibility of Nuclear Weapons Use Declaration*: Capitalizing on Beijing's stance opposing nuclear use in Ukraine, the US quietly suggests that China take the lead in proposing a joint statement renouncing the threat or use of nuclear weapons in Northeast Asia similar to the G-20 and other statements as to the inadmissibility of use of nuclear weapons. That, in turn, would lead to formulating a nuclear-weapons-free zone and to articulation of a changed US nuclear posture in Korea (that was always implicit in the denuclearization of the whole Korean peninsula declared as a Six-Party goal in 2004), in turn reengaging Pyongyang to resume steps towards its own denuclearization.
4. *Peace regime in Korea*: Capitalizing on Kim Jong Un's implicit proposal to normalize relations between the ROK and the DPRK, Washington and Seoul make explicit the political and economic benefits to the DPRK of curbing its nuclear armament, including a peace process to culminate in an inter-Korean peace treaty, access to advanced information technology, access to space services, and its integration into regional and global institutions with concomitant increased stature. Seoul under a center-left government might be better positioned to open the way for Pyongyang to engage Washington, but it would have to overcome DPRK skepticism about past failure to deliver on that potential. Conversely, conservatives can shift quickly when circumstances change and external imperatives that affect the DPRK and the ROK in fundamental ways are possible over the next few years. It is therefore prudent to prepare for the best as well as the worst possible outcomes.

We spell out these steps in more detail in the rest of this section.

A. US-China cooperation on Korea

Getting the DPRK and the ROK to back away from the brink will be difficult without engagement by outsiders. The key to that effort lies in Washington and Beijing.

The DPRK's new strategy worries China's leaders. Preoccupied with its domestic concerns, Beijing does not want trouble on its borders. Addressing the Munich Security Conference on February 17, 2024, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, "Now the most pressing task is to prevent a vicious cycle, address relevant parties' reasonable security

concerns, and de-escalate and stabilize the situation.”¹⁹ Beijing also showed resentment at Pyongyang’s warming relations with Moscow as undercutting its own influence. During DPRK Foreign Minister Choe Song Hui mid-January mission to Moscow, she was hosted by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and met with President Vladimir Putin presaging a return summit meeting with Kim Jong Un. Contrast that with her low-key meeting later that month with Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Sun Weidong in Pyongyang.

A deadly clash in Korea may pose a difficult choice for Beijing: whether to intervene militarily to support a conventionally inferior Pyongyang or risk North Korean escalation of the conflict to nuclear war. At that point, too, Washington’s bluff could be called: whether to engage in a conventional war with China or resort to nuclear escalation of its own. Tensions in the Taiwan Straits could add to the incentives for both Beijing and Washington to calm tensions in Korea.

Such considerations might provide an opening for cooperation between the United States and China to engage in preventive diplomacy in an effort to forestall war in Korea.

This cooperation might take either of two paths. First, Washington might temper Seoul’s assertiveness while Beijing attempts to reassure Pyongyang. The impediment to this alternative is the deep distrust between China and the DPRK.

Alternatively, the Chinese might reach out to Seoul while it would be up to the Americans—as the stronger party—to counter the DPRK’s distrust of the US built up from decades of failed negotiations by taking some unilateral steps to open the way for talks with the DPRK to resume:

- Washington might restrain Seoul from conducting especially provocative military exercises and adjust the tempo of its own forward deployments. It might also discourage Seoul from demonizing Pyongyang and encourage it to tone down its rhetoric.
- At the same time, Beijing might indicate to Seoul and Tokyo its willingness to enter into trilateral dialogue on a range of contentious low and high security issues, possibly at meetings of the existing Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat.
- Joint US-ROK military exercises are a *bête noire* for the DPRK which not only sees them as evidence of enmity but also compels it to mobilize some of its own forces as a precaution. A more demanding gesture would be to convince Seoul to suspend a planned large-scale joint exercise and gauge Pyongyang’s reaction.

¹⁹ Choi Hyun-june, “China’s Wang Yi Calls for ‘Political Resolution’ to Korean Peninsula Issue,” Hankyoreh, February 19, 2024.

- At the same time, China might refrain from naval exercises near Korean waters.
- Depending on Pyongyang's reaction, and with Seoul's acquiescence, Washington might make an even more forthcoming move by trying to open back-channel diplomacy with the DPRK and pledging to work toward what former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo once called "a fundamentally different strategic relationship" with the DPRK.²⁰ That pledge could be underscored in a letter to Kim Jong Un from the US president committing to negotiate an end-of-war declaration, as the starting point of a peace process in Korea, and designating a presidential envoy to engage the DPRK on this process.

As noted above, for all Kim's tough talk and rewriting of DPRK laws and its constitution, the DPRK faces irresolvable economic and strategic dilemmas unless he obtains significant external support that only the United States can deliver. That makes it difficult for Kim to ignore American overtures in the long run even as he buys time and seeks strategic flexibility by embracing Russia in the short-term.

- Behind the scenes, USFK might talk to Seoul about restoring confidence-building measures as an initial step to reviving the September 19th Comprehensive Military Agreement between North and South. Meanwhile, China might quietly suggest that Pyongyang reciprocate by restoring its military and other hotlines with Seoul.
- A more far-reaching and more likely more effective move would be for Washington to propose establishing a hot line between the US President and the DPRK's leader to kick-start a top-down approach to "rebooting" the US-DPRK relationship.

Such steps could pave the way to more far-reaching regional cooperation efforts enumerated below.

B. Gradually relax sanctions on the DPRK over time

Although the DPRK's economy has limped along even when sanctions were applied maximally by the UNSC and the United States and its allies, it remains at the bottom of a very deep economic hole. The DPRK simply does not have the wherewithal to self-fund the capital reconstruction of its key infrastructure and its state-owned industries. This reality does not inhibit its nuclear weapons program which is relatively cheap. Nothing Kim has said or done has resolved this strategic dilemma. Closely related to

²⁰ "Secretary of State Mike Pompeo With Hideki Yui of NHK," US State Department, June 7, 2018, at: <https://2017-2021-translations.state.gov/2018/06/07/secretary-of-state-mike-pompeo-with-hideki-yui-of-nhk/>

this domestic situation is the DPRK's continuing high dependence on China for trade and essential inputs, especially food, given the limits of trade with Russia. This reality constitutes a second strategic dilemma that remains unresolved by Kim Jong Un. Re-engaging Russia and deploying nuclear weapons buys Kim Jong Un some time, but his options remain highly constrained by these twin, inter-twined strategic dilemmas. Ultimately, Pyongyang needs an opening to Seoul and Washington in order to prosper and to lessen China's grip on the DPRK's future.

Sanctions on the DPRK have always served primarily as a political tool with limited economic effectiveness. Politically, they allow the proponents of sanctions to claim they are doing something to punish Pyongyang for its perceived transgressions. Yet the crime-and-punishment approach has never worked. Despite the enthusiasm for sanctions in some political circles in Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo, they have had limited effectiveness in compelling Pyongyang to do what the sanctions enthusiasts want.

Evasion has been rampant—all the more so as the competition between Russia and China for influence in Pyongyang has intensified. Most borders are porous: few states have been able to control smuggling.

Sanctions have always been regarded in Pyongyang as evidence of enmity. Given the DPRK's pre-existing economic isolation and the recent shift in Russian and Chinese enforcement of sanctions imposed on the DPRK, easing them might not matter much economically to Pyongyang but it would send an important political signal.

US unilateral sanctions rely primarily on market mechanisms that cannot be simply reversed by state-diktat. Lifting them has seldom been easy, politically or administratively, and takes time; but it is an essential tool for easing tensions. Coordinating UNSC de-sanctioning with China, Russia, and other member states would be easier as a first step and also may enable the United States to realign its policies with the reality of already-eased sanctions by China and Russia in recent years.

C. Declare non-hostility

This is a critical step to ease tensions on the Korean Peninsula. It should not be taken lightly. Rhetoric alone will not suffice; actions that match the words are essential. Pyongyang has heard Washington say such words many times before and vice versa. Seoul would do well to underscore the political gesture with military moves to build confidence. Washington might lend credence to its words by communicating its willingness to normalize diplomatic relations and to begin a peace process that would culminate in a peace treaty.

A lesser version of this approach would be to declare that the US will not be first to use nuclear weapons in Korea; that it will not use cyberattacks to disable DPRK nuclear command-and-control systems; and that it will not introduce AI systems into US NC3.

These measures could be offered unilaterally or introduced on a mutual basis. A US-DPRK presidential hotline could serve as a political kick-starter to this process.

D. Begin a peace process to replace the Korea Armistice with a peace treaty and/or a “peace regime.”

If Pyongyang is willing to re-engage diplomatically with Washington, then it is up to Seoul to convey its seriousness by toning down its rhetorical excesses and curb some of its military drills. The peace process could begin with confidence-building measures by both sides, culminating in the revival of the September 19th Comprehensive Military Agreement.

In light of Kim Jong Un’s policy change renouncing claims to sovereignty over the ROK, the DPRK may be open in the future to a formal inter-state treaty between the two Koreas that was formerly precluded by their mutual claim to sovereignty over the other. That is more likely if the center-left comes to power in Seoul but if external circumstances change rapidly and massively, a conservative-led government may abandon anachronistic reunification goals and discover that Kim Jong Un’s generation in both the ROK and the DPRK prefer pragmatic peace-making to conducting ideological battles let alone war.

E. A US-China Nuclear Initiative

As part of its stance on Ukraine, China stated on February 24, 2023: “Nuclear weapons must not be used and nuclear wars must not be fought. The threat or use of nuclear weapons should be opposed. Nuclear proliferation must be prevented and nuclear crisis avoided.”²¹ That statement provides an opening for a US-China initiative to address North Korea’s growing nuclear weapons arsenal.

A year later, on February 26, 2024, the director-general of the arms control department of the PRC Foreign Ministry, Sun Xiaobo, told the UN Disarmament Conference in Geneva, “Nuclear-weapon states should negotiate and conclude a treaty on no-first-use of nuclear weapons against each other or make a political statement in this regard.”²²

Taking up this initiative, Washington might quietly broach the idea that China propose a joint US-PRC declaration on the inadmissibility of using or threatening to use nuclear weapons in Northeast Asia as a stepping stone to resuming talks with Pyongyang on the nuclear issue.

²¹ PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis,” February 23, 2023.

²² Reuters, China Urges the Largest Nuclear States to Negotiate a ‘No-First-Use’ treaty,” February 27, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-urges-un-define-roadmap-exempt-non-nuclear-states-nuclear-threat-state-2024-02-28/>

Once they agree, Washington would sound out Seoul and Tokyo about the possibility of a negotiating nuclear-weapons-free zone (NWFZ) in Northeast Asia as a means of inducing Pyongyang to resume incremental steps toward denuclearization starting with a reaffirmation of its commitment to nuclear disarmament and willingness to adjust its own nuclear posture in the region as it pertains to the Korean peninsula. Beijing would do the same with Pyongyang.

F. Defer Formation of a Six-Party Northeast Asia Security Council

Participation in an inclusive Northeast Asia Security Council would obliquely address a longstanding DPRK demand for “respect for its sovereignty.” At its heart that demand means that other states will not attempt to overthrow its government. Its membership in a regional security council also would underscore its stature as a sovereign equal and give it a voice in a range of regional security concerns including threatened use of nuclear weapons. But all these possibilities would require it to re-engage with the ROK, which is difficult to foresee with the current ROK presidential incumbent.

The inclusion of Russia would give the DPRK some assurance that the other parties would not gang up against it, a complaint it voiced in the Six-Party Talks whenever China sided with the common front put up by the United States, ROK, and Japan.

Conversely, while it would likely be welcomed in Pyongyang, Russia’s involvement under current geopolitical circumstances would pose serious political difficulties in Washington as long as Vladimir Putin wages war in Ukraine. That difficulty is compounded by North Korean arms exports to Russia, including artillery shells and short-range missiles that have been used on the battlefields of Ukraine. In return, the Russians are suspected of offering technological assistance for DPRK arming as well as busting the UNSC sanctions aimed at reversing the DPRK’s nuclear armament. Worse yet, Moscow may have an incentive to keep tensions high in Korea in order to distract Washington from its aggression in Ukraine.

The Council might also become embroiled in disputes between China and the United States, reducing its utility in solving problems on the Korean Peninsula. Beijing may also be reluctant to side with Washington given its rivalry with Moscow over Pyongyang’s affections. In short, Council deliberations might exacerbate inter-Korean differences without helping to resolve them, let alone reduce the risk of war and nuclear escalation.

While it is necessary to defer its establishment for now, the eventual establishment of the Council remains a critical step for regional security since it would provide a forum for all the relevant parties. The Council is also an ideal vehicle for providing the DPRK with multilateral security assurances that are critical to establishing a nuclear weapons free zone. Some elements of our regional approach may be helpful in ameliorating if not resolving the looming crisis in Korea and any progress might underscore the value of such an approach. At some point, sufficient cooperation may be achieved to bring back

the Council idea usefully as a vehicle for providing the DPRK with multilateral security assurances—but not now.

For the same reason, regional summitry by heads of state as suggested in 2018 is premature until Putin’s war on Ukraine is resolved or at least eased to the point that the US and Russian heads of state are able to meet.

Meanwhile, finding a diplomatic pathway whereby China and the United States can realign on how best to curb the DPRK’s nuclear and military threats to the United States and its allies is the highest priority.

In the short-term, this imperative entails changing Kim Jong Un’s calculus as to the value of embracing Putin and his war in the Ukraine and bringing ROK president Yoon Suk-Yeol or his successor to the negotiating table with the DPRK.

G. Establish a nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) to re-establish the DPRK’s non-nuclear commitment in a legally binding manner that treats all parties on an equal basis

Although denuclearization remains the ultimate goal, the NWFZ we proposed in 2018 needs to give way for now to heading off the risk of war on the Korean Peninsula. Not focusing on its nuclear assets may reassure the DPRK for the moment.

By the same token, the drumbeat of proponents of nuclear-arming in the ROK and Japan poses a risk that might be headed off by involving them in talks about a NWFZ—if the US-China initiative succeeds. That might pave the way for eventually engaging the DPRK on joining a NWFZ. Thus, we propose that China, the United States, and perhaps other regional states initiate an inclusive, UN-led dialogue to discuss a NWFZ in the region as the follow-on to a regional declaration on the inadmissibility of nuclear weapons in the region suggested above.

V. CONCLUSION

The temptation for leaders is to bolster deterrence and tighten alliances, relying on them to prevent war. Yet the resulting downward spiral of security in Northeast Asia, if not arrested, could lead to the very war that deterrence is presumed to prevent.

Slowing and reversing that spiral requires diplomatic re-engagement, de-escalation, and arms control—in short, a revival of cooperative security—starting in the Korean peninsula where tension is highest and rising prompting the two sides to bolster deterrence in ways that could erupt in a deadly clash with the attendant danger of escalation. There, too, lies the best prospect for cooperation with the highest payoff in security gains, however difficult it may seem.

If successful, diplomatic intervention by the US and China could, in turn, reopen the way to address the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. As an inducement to DPRK steps to denuclearization, that process could begin with a US-PRC commitment to negotiate a regional declaration on the inadmissibility of using or threatening to use nuclear weapons in Northeast Asia as a stepping-stone to resuming talks with Pyongyang on the nuclear issue, followed by efforts to negotiate a nuclear-weapons-free zone in Northeast Asia that the DPRK could ultimately join.

Any progress in easing tensions in Korea could then inspire cooperative security efforts elsewhere in Northeast Asia, thereby laying the groundwork for resumption of efforts to create a regional Security Council and other institutional means that are required to lay the foundations for a durable peace built on comprehensive security.

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ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organization and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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