



New Roadmap for Denuclearization and Peacebuilding

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Nuclear talks have stalled since the failed Stockholm meeting last October, and the deadlock is likely to continue this year. It seems that neither side is interested in resuming negotiations any time soon. Washington argues that North Korea should be the first to take substantive steps toward denuclearization. However, Pyongyang also lacks trust in the willingness of the United States to take corresponding measures in response to its actions for denuclearization.¹

The impasse in denuclearization negotiations has seen both sides adopt a kind of strategic patience, bolstering their leverage and deterrence over the other.² Pyongyang has set a year-end deadline for Washington to make concessions, announcing its intention of pursuing a “new path” by warning of the resumption of nuclear and long-range missile tests if the US fails to meet its demands. Since this year, North Korea has focused its missile and strategic weapon tests on the Korean Peninsula, further deteriorating the security environment. North Korea is using South Korea as a scapegoat for the stalemate in US-DPRK negotiations. Following Pyongyang’s denouncement of the anti-regime leaflets sent by civilian groups in South Korea, North Korea has once again taken a hostile stance towards the South and indicated its determination to completely shut down all contacts and communication channels between the two countries. In line with its hardline policy toward the South, North Korea destroyed the Inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office

¹ Sangsoo Lee, “North Korea’s Nuclear Ambitions Have Turned Into a Status Quo Show,” *National Interest*, May 18, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/north-koreas-nuclear-ambitions-have-turned-status-quo-show-155361>

² Sangsoo Lee, “US-North Korea Denuclearization Negotiations: An Irresolvable Issue?,” *ISDP Focus Asia*, June 2020, <https://isdp.eu/publication/u-s-north-korea-denuclearization-negotiations-an-irresolvable-issue/>

several weeks ago. Although North Korea decided to suspend further provocations against South Korea during a Central Military Commission meeting on June 24, with the recent termination of North-South military hotlines, the likelihood of a military conflict in the DMZ and the Yellow Sea has increased significantly.

The US and South Korean governments have already cautioned Pyongyang not to escalate tensions any further. It can therefore be expected that any further provocations from North Korea may lead to military countermeasures from the US and South Korea, which would in turn further increase tensions on the Korean Peninsula. For example, B-52 long-range bombers, America's nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, and other strategic weapons could be deployed towards the Korean Peninsula, as the US did before to deal with North Korea's nuclear and ICMB tests in 2017.

Given the current situation, potential future developments appear worrisome as there is a risk of a return to a vicious cycle of confrontation, despite not being in the interest of any party.

This article attempts to suggest some ways to find a middle ground between the US and DPRK, who remain divided with perception gaps and differences in their approaches and demands. It puts forth a three-step roadmap to ameliorate tensions on the Korean Peninsula, specifying reciprocity and a sequencing of measures to achieve the end goal of denuclearization.

1. Initial Step: Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula

With the recent gridlock, both sides have frequently emphasized that it is up to the other party to show willingness and make the first move. Both sides have imposed a number of preconditions as the basis for the resumption of negotiations—preconditions which have turned out to be unacceptable to the other party involved. However, it has become obvious that a lack of trust hinders moving beyond the security dilemmas, creating a vicious cycle of tensions and escalation. As a conflict prevention measure, both parties must define the red lines for each side and refrain from crossing these red lines, which can be a starting point for creating an environment conducive to resuming negotiations.

The urgent issue for the Trump administration is to maintain North Korea's moratorium on nuclear and ICBM tests, which the administration has sought to brand as a success of its diplomacy.³ However, North Korea has already warned the US that it may resume nuclear development, including new ICBM tests. Furthermore, while downplaying North Korea's series of

³ William Gallo, "Deadline? What Deadline? North Korea, US Try New 'Strategic Patience'," *VOA News*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/deadline-what-deadline-north-korea-us-try-new-strategic-patience>

short-range projectile launches that did not pose a direct threat to the US mainland, Trump is now under growing pressure as its allies South Korea and Japan, as well as the US military bases in these two countries, have increasingly been threatened by North Korea's short-range missiles and strategic weapons.⁴

Although the regime has not engaged in further ICBM missile tests, North Korea has continued its missile technology development. Most of the weapons North Korea has tested recently were ballistic missiles or artillery shells with solid fuel.⁵ The regime is likely working to expand its solid fuel missile capabilities, which can be used for a long-range delivery system. The continuation, and especially the ramping up of testing including multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) and SLBMs will likely elicit a strong US response, particularly if Trump perceives it to be damaging to his re-election chances in the lead up to the US presidential elections in November.

North Korea has long bristled at the joint military exercises held by the US and South Korea and the use of strategic military assets in the drills. Despite the scaling down and delay of recent joint military drills, North Korea has continued to state that all military exercises should be permanently terminated. It seems as though calling for a suspension of such joint military exercises is the first step for the regime in demanding its long list of security assurances.

In this regard, it is almost certain that additional missile tests and military exercises would be red lines for each side for the resumption of negotiations. Thus, a possible option for resuming future negotiations is a moratorium on all missile tests (including short-range missiles) in response to a moratorium on all joint military exercises, which would address top interests for both sides. Such a compromise may serve as a useful starting point to break the current deadlock. The idea is that a cessation of the next joint military exercise can be seen by the DPRK as a partial lifting of hostile policy, while a moratorium on all missile tests can be seen by the US as a serious indication of its willingness to pursue long-term denuclearization.

2. *Mid-term Step: Action for Action*

Although the two sides agreed on the long-term goals of denuclearization and establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula during the first-ever US-DPRK summit meeting in

⁴ David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "North Korea Missile Tests, 'Very Standard' to Trump, Show Signs of Advancing Arsenal," *New York Times*, September 02, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/02/world/asia/north-korea-kim-trumpmissiles.html>

⁵ Shea Cotton, "Expect a surge in North Korean missile tests, and of greater range," *Defense News*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/04/10/expect-a-surge-in-north-korean-missile-tests-and-of-greaterrange/>

Singapore, there are still differences in the approaches and demands of each side due to distrust between the US and DPRK. Indeed, much speculation and debate surround the sincerity of North Korea's commitment to denuclearization, and from North Korea's perspective the US commitment to normalizing relations.

Pyongyang has its own conception of denuclearization which consists of a parallel process of removing US hostile behaviors such as lifting sanctions, suspending US-ROK military drills, and withdrawing US strategic weapons. This is mainly due to Pyongyang's lack of trust in the willingness of the US to commit to corresponding measures. North Korea claims it has taken some steps toward denuclearization, such as the destruction of nuclear test sites and moratoriums on nuclear and ICBM tests, but the US has not made any concessions in return.

Washington, on the other hand, argues that North Korea should take more serious steps towards denuclearization than simply halting tests, stating that this is not sufficient to merit corresponding measures from the US. For the US, a successful deal is more contingent on the DPRK demonstrating "real" progress on denuclearization. This concept is grounded in lingering skepticism in Washington regarding North Korea's actual willingness to abolish all of its nuclear materials and weapons.

Nevertheless, as we learned from the failure of the Hanoi Summit, both the US and North Korea need to show greater flexibility in their approaches. Thus, the issues of corresponding measures and the precise parameters of diplomatic give and take are crucial. Still, the US has consistently stated that the sanctions won't be lifted until North Korea completes the process of denuclearization.⁶ However, there are also growing debates within the US that it could be more effective to take incremental steps and a parallel approach by providing corresponding measures in exchange for denuclearization actions as opposed to making immediate and unilateral demands for denuclearization. In this regard, to avoid collapsing future negotiations, it is necessary to discuss a roadmap to specify mutually agreed-on levels of reciprocity and a sequencing of measures in the next working level meeting. More specifically, greater consideration must be given to what kind of sanctions relief to provide to find reciprocity and sequencing which can be agreed upon. Thought also needs to be given to what kind of process denuclearization will be and how to verify the process. Such a parallel and concrete approach may push the negotiation process to continue, and in doing so both sides can reach the final stage of implementation, which will involve removing all nuclear facilities (beyond Yongbyon) and all sanctions. A snapback option can be adopted during

⁶ Stephen Biegun, "A Conversation With US Special Representative," *Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference*, March 11, 2019, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/ceipfiles/pdf/NPC19-SpecialRepresentativeBiegun.pdf>

the process to prevent either side from violating agreements and to reassure skeptics in Washington. For example, the US can reinstate sanctions through a snapback if North Korea doesn't follow an agreed sequence of denuclearization measures.

In sum, future working level negotiations should create an agenda for practical commitments on the complete and verifiable dismantling of all of North Korea's nuclear productions in exchange for lifting all sanctions between the US and DPRK, based on incremental and parallel approaches.

3. Long-term Step: Peacebuilding and Denuclearization

A perception gap remains between the parties on key issues, such as denuclearization and a peace regime. North Korea claims that a peace regime can only be established through long-term trust building and requires the withdrawal of US hostile policies toward the country. In what Pyongyang perceives to be a hostile security environment, nuclear weapons offer the ultimate security guarantee for the regime. Therefore, in the long term there is a need to place greater focus on security guarantees from the US which can replace its nuclear weapons in return for the completion of denuclearization measures. However, North Korea's perception of US hostile policy is very vague and has been used by the regime to justify the legitimacy of its nuclear development. Indeed, any diplomatic effort to denuclearize the DPRK prior to reaching a comprehensive agreement on security guarantees for North Korea has thus far been doomed to failure.

This issue was brought up again after the Hanoi Summit when Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho said that a security guarantee was Pyongyang's main goal rather than sanctions relief.⁷ As a result, for future negotiations, it is unlikely that any amount of humanitarian or economic aid alone can persuade the DPRK to take serious action toward complete denuclearization. Many experts think Pyongyang will demand not only normalized relations with the US but ultimately the withdrawal of all US forces from South Korea as an ultimate condition for denuclearization.⁸ However, such a move would have an impact on the whole security structure and balance of power in Northeast Asia as China could fill the vacuum left by US military power in the region. So, the question remains whether the US could offer such guarantees to the regime.

In this regard, long-term measures to offer a security guarantee to the regime must look beyond the details of future negotiations between the US and DPRK and integrate multilateral

⁷ Simon Denyer, "North Korea wants security guarantees, but can the United States deliver?," *Washington Post*, April 25 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/04/25/north-korea-wants-security-guarantees-can-united-states-deliver/>

⁸ Ibid.

security instruments to deal with the broader security issues in Northeast Asia. In this complementary multilateral setting, all regional actors can discuss the issues of a peace treaty, arms control, inter-Korean cooperation, normalization of relations with Japan, and economic compensation to North Korea which might provide more solid and comprehensive security guarantees to North Korea. Such a multilateral approach would be able to address issues of cooperation between the US and China to facilitate a long-term solution to the situation on the Korean Peninsula. It would also provide a way for all sides to reaffirm that the end goals remain full denuclearization of the Peninsula and the building of a long-term peace regime in Northeast Asia.

Conclusion

The current situation on the Korean Peninsula urgently calls for crisis management measures focusing on the prevention of military conflict. To begin with, both official and unofficial diplomatic channels between the US/ROK and the DPRK are needed to clarify intentions and defuse tensions in order to try to stabilize the situation. Reducing tensions will eventually build confidence and allow negotiations in other areas—including denuclearization—to proceed more smoothly. A nuclear negotiation must resume between Washington and Pyongyang to move toward the common goal of denuclearization and the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. If such negotiations are not complemented by efforts to reduce tensions by engaging each other in dialogue, all parties involved risk the further increase of military tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

There may be a long way to go, but to build a sustainable peace, all nuclear weapons must be removed from the Korean Peninsula. Similarly, denuclearization cannot be completed without the process of peacebuilding. Thus, achieving denuclearization and building a peace regime cannot be viewed as separate objectives. They must go hand-in-hand. In fact, there is no option other than both sides narrowing the gap through more negotiations, rather than pressing the other side to accept its preconditions.

Recognizing that there is no silver bullet solution, the continuation of diplomatic negotiations will eventually build confidence and allow the process to reach its final goal—including denuclearization and a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. With a narrowing window of opportunity, a large concern is that time may be running out to regain momentum for future talks unless both sides change their calculation methods soon.

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