North Korea: Outcomes and Implications

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Despite limited progress since the June 30, 2019 meeting between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un at the DMZ, the opportunity to resolve the North Korea nuclear problem without the use of force has not been this great in decades. It is easy to forget that Trump may have brought "fire and fury" to the Korean Peninsula a little more than two years ago. Moreover, bombastic North Korean rhetoric and weapons tests without summits involving heads of state have been the norm. The most recent working-level talks held on October 5 in Stockholm may not have yielded an agreement, but limited progress is still progress.

Optimism can also be found in the favorable context in which none of the relevant regional stakeholders are spoilers to a denuclearization agreement. Trump may be the most eager to strike a deal because it would be his most significant foreign policy win. Not only would a deal fulfill his desire to eclipse Barack Obama's North Korea legacy, it would also provide a useful talking point in the 2020 elections. At the very least, it would distract from the current impeachment proceedings. Moon Jae-in has also pegged his legacy on improving relations with the North and has sacrificed much public support for his dovish policies. Forward momentum of any kind would also draw attention from his ineffective domestic economic and anti-corruption efforts.

In addition, poor relations with Japan have led Moon to double down on a future tied to North Korea, where he even claimed that a united "peace economy" would replace Japan's economic superiority in "one burst." China, Japan, and Russia are mostly concerned with American trade wars and have not slowed down the negotiation process. Lastly, as a nuclear power, North

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Korea is in its strongest bargaining position ever, which may allow it to extract enough concessions to be satisfied with a deal.

Yet, denuclearization has always been in the interest of these stakeholders to some degree. The North Korea nuclear puzzle has been tough to solve because over the years, rhetorical obstacles have been placed that make all possible outcomes prohibitively costly. In his 2002 State of the Union Address, George W. Bush placed North Korea in the trio of states that constituted an "axis of evil" due to its weapons of mass destruction and human rights violations. However, negotiators have often treated denuclearization and upholding human rights as mutually exclusive, with the former taking priority. As a result, the paths forward require a tolerance of human rights violations that will ultimately lead to regional instability. East Asia cannot afford to keep kicking the can down the road, yet continues to do so because North Korea has served as a unifier for the region.

Possible Outcomes

North Korea poses three problems for the international community. First, its nuclear program is an immediate threat to Japan, South Korea, and the US. Relatedly, horizontal proliferation becomes increasingly difficult to prevent if North Korea can acquire nuclear weapons without consequence. Second, the North Korean humanitarian crises caused by poor governance and gross human rights violations are an affront to international law and the morality of people throughout the world. Third, its non-nuclear threats such as illicit cyber activity are increasing in frequency and impact. A grand bargain would address not only the nuclear problem, but also the other issues that originate from the authoritarian Kim regime.

Reunification would be that grand bargain. This most ambitious—and implausible—scenario would come with enormous costs. If the Moon administration could overcome the growing sentiment against reunification, especially among South Korea's youth, it would still have to pay for the reconstruction of a failed state. Bearish analysts estimate a 3 trillion dollar and multi-decade price tag. If the Moon government insists that South Korea remain in the driver's seat during the reunification process, it will be unlikely to draw the international financial support necessary for the endeavor, particularly from Japan.

The more difficult problem is what to do with the Kim family. The pragmatic approach would be to allow them to remain in government. To do so, however, would require hawkish politicians, human rights-focused NGOs, and the public to ignore the Kim family's human rights record, one rightly earned from assassinations, prison camps, and a complete dereliction of duty to the North Korean people. The Kim family is also unlikely to believe that it would receive the

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Napoleon treatment in a free and democratic society.

Thus, if the Kim family cannot be removed, then complete nuclearization without regime change is the more likely scenario. Whether this occurs through Complete Verifiable Irreversible Dismantlement (CVID) or Final Fully Verifiable Denuclearization (FFVD), this scenario requires unprecedented cooperation from North Korea. Moreover, the closer to denuclearization one gets, the less likely human rights issue will be raised because it would be seen as a violation of good faith negotiations by Kim. Trump and Moon seem aware of this as they have framed the North Korean humanitarian crisis in terms of economics rather than human rights.

What Kim desires is an India and Pakistan model, where North Korea can keep its nuclear weapons and the US ends its economic sanctions. Variants of this outcome are a freeze or a complete breakdown of talks while North Korea continues to develop its nuclear program. The latter two scenarios would have the highest chance of American military intervention. Such an intervention remains unlikely as the US public has little appetite for a major war after Afghanistan and Iraq, nor would China sit idly by.

Hence, the most likely scenario is the eventual collapse of the Kim regime and the North Korean state. The long history of tabling human rights issues for immediate security needs while simultaneously isolating North Korea economically and politically has created the perfect storm for a humanitarian catastrophe that will spread throughout Asia. According to the Global Hunger Index, malnourishment has increased 6% over the last decade and now sits at 47.8%. The North Korean economy has shown abysmal or negative growth and falls further behind in global competitiveness each year. These poor conditions have led to over a quarter million defectors since 1953. These figures will pale in comparison to the millions of refugees that will pour out of North Korea when the state collapses. Even with China's support and nuclear blackmail, the current North Korean economy is not sustainable. This should be obvious as many states fail even *without* being completely removed from the global economy.

East Asia's Punching Bag

East Asia is not prepared for a humanitarian crisis that extends beyond North Korean borders. That is to say, it has *tolerated* a crisis that has remained within North Korea to preserve the status quo. As a result, the region lacks the institutional resources necessary to address the instability to come. There is a robust scholarship that explains why East Asia does not have a NATO-like institution, and instead, prefers a "complex patchwork" of institutions or a US-led hub-and-spoke model. A common thread among the various theories is that the institutions that bind East

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Asia are built on common threat rather than common cause.

The arrangement of states is more akin to a bracelet made up of interlocking bilateral relations that surround North Korea. The US has strong ties with Japan and South Korea, but under Abe Shinzo, Japan has better relations with Russia than South Korea. Similarly, South Korea is tied more closely to China and the US than Japan. China's positive relations with Russia and South Korea complete the bracelet. Any semblance of greater cooperation has related to managing the North Korea puzzle, which is defined by efforts to limit its nuclear program while allowing the Kim regime to exist. When relations between Japan and South Korea deteriorate, most recently in the "white list" trade war and the Moon administration's decision to withdraw from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), the US uses the North Korean threat as a reason to cooperate. Without North Korea as the problem, other issues that cause insecurity come to the forefront, such as South Korea-Japan history disputes, US-China great power competition, and US bases and alliance burden sharing, to name a few.

Conclusion

The post-Cold War model is unsustainable because it requires North Korea to remain a threat, but not to the degree that would cause significant harm beyond its domestic population. This balancing act has been sustained more by luck and a disheartening indifference to human suffering than by sound regional security management. It is also a model that has failed in all regards because North Korea has acquired nuclear weapons. The next great threat will be mass migration.

It may have taken 116 years for the Hundred Years' War to end, but like all conflicts, its resolution was inevitable. Failed states rarely last a century. North Korea's isolation, failing economy, and human rights violations will eventually lead to its collapse, and as it stands, East Asia is not prepared to deal with the consequences.

One need look no further than the failure to handle the Rohingya refugee crisis, or the region's reluctance to take in Syrian and Yemini refugees. North Koreans are less likely to find a state willing to take them in by the hundreds of thousands because decades of condemnation have sowed distrust at best and apathy at worst among the region's stakeholders. The stability of East Asia has been built on the ability of North Koreans to endure the Kim family. When one looks into a mirror, there are two people. The person you see, and the person you don't want to.

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"North Korea: Outcomes and Implications"
Date of Issue: 12 November 2019 979-11-90315-18-0 95340

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