

GLOBAL FORUM

North Korea, nuclear weapons, and the search for a new path forward

A South Korean response

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In an address to the Workers' Party Congress on May 7, Kim Jong Un told his audience that North Korea was "a responsible nuclear weapon state" that would not use nuclear weapons – "unless its sovereignty is encroached upon by any aggressive hostile forces with nukes" (Al Jazeera 2016). He pledged to "strive for global denuclearization" – but he emphasized the continuation of the "*byungjin* line," a policy that seeks simultaneous development of North Korea's economy and its nuclear programs (Panda 2015). Kim's remarks can be seen as an outright rejection of international calls for Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons.

Over the past 7 years, while six-party talks have been derailed, North Korea has strengthened its nuclear arsenal. The North is believed to have amassed nuclear materials steadily, and is now estimated by some sources to possess about 10 nuclear warheads. Pyongyang conducted a fourth nuclear test in January. It possesses a wide variety of delivery vehicles, which range from short-range Scud-type missiles to intermediate-range Nodong and Musudan missiles to – perhaps – submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Pyongyang is close to developing intercontinental ballistic missiles and claims to have made progress miniaturizing and diversifying its nuclear warheads as well.

A nuclear North Korea poses serious security threats to the Korean peninsula, all of Northeast Asia, and the world. North Korean nuclear weapons significantly alter the military balance on the peninsula and ultimately impede peaceful coexistence there. The regional security impacts are likewise profound – a nuclear domino effect might lead to proliferation elsewhere in Northeast Asia. And the possibility exists that North Korea will export nuclear materials, technology, and even warheads to other regions, threatening the very foundations of world security in this age of global terrorism.

So what's the way out of the North Korean nuclear quagmire? Sanctions have accomplished little. Military confrontation is not an option. Now, as ever, negotiations are the only path forward. But it is also the case that negotiations can *succeed* – if negotiators are practical, flexible, and willing to listen to Pyongyang carefully.

What won't work

Today, international approaches to the North Korean nuclear problem are based on international sanctions and on the logic of crime and punishment. According to this approach, North Korea's crimes – possession of nuclear weapons and violation of UN resolutions – must be punished through forceful, comprehensive sanctions. Such sanctions, the thinking goes, will cause so much discomfort in the North that the regime will be at risk of collapse and Kim Jung Un will be compelled to choose denuclearization. But North Korea is not Iran. It is a very closed society and very accustomed to sanctions. China, meanwhile, is unlikely to enforce sanctions that undermine stability in the North. And Pyongyang's typical behavioral pattern has been to exhibit greater defiance as more pressure is exerted. Linking sanctions to regime collapse – an idea common in Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo alike – seems presumptuous and misguided.

Some pundits in Seoul argue that South Korea should counter Pyongyang's nuclear threats by developing an indigenous nuclear arms program. But as soon as South Korea declared a nuclear weapons campaign, it would face strong headwinds. The country's nuclear power industry – run entirely for commercial purposes – would be ruined. So would Seoul's traditional alliance with Washington. South Korea would likely be slapped with international sanctions, sending the economy into a tailspin. Moreover, a series of nuclear dominos could fall in Northeast Asia – starting with South Korea, spreading to Japan, and perhaps

even reaching Taiwan. But it is unrealistic in the first place to believe Seoul could use a nuclear program as leverage against North Korea (and China). For one thing, Seoul does not even have operational control of its own forces during wartime. For another, a South Korean nuclear weapons program would give Japanese conservatives an excuse to expand the Japanese military. South Korean nuclear weapons are simply the wrong response to North Korean nuclear weapons.

A preemptive attack on the North, or military action of any kind, is also out of the question. Even putting aside the violations of international norms that an attack would entail, the military option would fail because of North Korea's formidable defensive capabilities. And any preemptive attack could easily escalate into a full-fledged war and jeopardize the lives and property of South Koreans. The United States is well aware of these risks, and of the fundamental limitations on military force on the Korean Peninsula. The United States can destroy North Korea – but it cannot win a war over it.

Dialogue and the search for a negotiated settlement are the only viable options. Dialogue has not worked in the past – but that is no reason to dismiss it. What is needed is a new and inventive approach to seeking a negotiated settlement. Such an approach requires a willingness to listen, a practical attitude, and a good deal of flexibility.

What might work

If the parties negotiating with North Korea wish to find solutions acceptable to all sides, they must speak their minds – but also hear out Pyongyang. Being deaf to the North's concerns is a path that only leads to the exits. Talking and listening to Pyongyang requires putting oneself in the North's shoes and encouraging the North to do likewise. And dialogue will only be hindered if the North is portrayed as an untrustworthy rogue state or if unilateral preconditions are insisted upon.

Negotiations with Pyongyang must also be practical and realistic. Goals must be adjusted according to circumstances. Specifically, since the North cannot be forced, completely and quickly, to dismantle its nuclear weapons, the short-term goal should be a moratorium on Pyongyang's nuclear programs. A moratorium would prevent the North from making further technical progress and from producing additional nuclear materials. Indeed, Pyongyang has repeatedly said it would cease nuclear activities if certain terms were met, so a viable exit strategy might already exist in the step-by-step approach, proposed by Stanford scholar Siegfried Hecker, of freezing, rolling back, and verifiably dismantling the North's arsenal (Hecker 2015).

Finally, flexibility is required. All possible cards must be on the table in negotiations with North Korea. These "cards" could include temporarily halting joint military drills between South Korea and the United States; negotiating a peace treaty to replace the armistice that brought the Korean War to a close; formally accepting North Korea's right to peaceful uses of atomic energy and to a space program; and normalizing diplomatic relations between North Korea and the United States. These possibilities must not be excluded just because Pyongyang demands them. Moreover, conducting dialogue on these issues would provide a way to probe Pyongyang's intentions and demand accountability for any North Korean breach of faith.

At this critical juncture, *Realpolitik* is desperately required. And those who negotiate with North Korea should bear in mind that time is not necessarily on their side.

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