

GLOBAL FORUM

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

A Chinese response

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KEYWORDS

China; disarmament; India; Iran; Korean Peninsula; North Korea; Nuclear Suppliers Group; nuclear weapons; Pakistan; United States

Since North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test in January, the Korean Peninsula has seemed more distant than ever from denuclearization. Leadership in Pyongyang, with its strongly realist inclinations, sees nuclear deterrence as the ultimate guarantee of its security – and perceives Washington’s attitude as essentially realist also. Pyongyang is likely betting that US policy will eventually change in its favor – for instance, that Washington will come to accept the nuclear reality on the Korean Peninsula and ease sanctions. This calculus may in fact make sense, especially because Washington experiences regime change every 4 or 8 years.

Indeed, the United States never approved of Israel’s possession of nuclear weapons, but it has had to live with the hard reality of a nuclear Israel and to protect Tel Aviv from the establishment of a Middle East nuclear-weapon-free zone. Nor does Washington approve of a nuclear India. It imposed sanctions on New Delhi following India’s 1998 nuclear test – but those sanctions were lifted within days of the 9/11 terror attacks. In 2008, the United States even waived its ban on civilian nuclear cooperation with India – a ban it had imposed through the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which it helped create in 1975 precisely to punish India for its “peaceful” nuclear test in 1974. As for Pakistan, the United States designated that country a major non-NATO ally in 2004 to gain Islamabad’s cooperation in the fight against terrorism – despite Pakistan’s development of nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, President Obama is pursuing normalized relations with Cuba after decades of hostility between Washington and Havana. All this may encourage Pyongyang to believe that Washington will not wait additional decades to normalize relations with the North.

China and North Korea, meanwhile, have been allies for decades. And even though China has been cooperating more closely with the United States on sanctions against North Korea, Pyongyang has certainly noted China’s

insistence that sanctions must not generate instability on the peninsula, risk war, or create humanitarian problems. China is simply unwilling, whether Pyongyang has nuclear weapons or not, to see North Korea collapse. This stance would seem to ensure North Korea’s survival. In fact, Beijing may be more concerned about Washington’s “rebalancing” in Asia than it is about Pyongyang’s nuclear program. Beijing and Washington may cooperate on North Korea to some degree, but they do not trust each other, as evidenced by China’s strong opposition to Washington’s decision to deploy its Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System in South Korea (Judson 2016).

Consequently, any successful approach to the Korean nuclear issue must be incremental, pragmatic, and cooperative in nature. It must provide assurances to all sides. Denuclearization proposals will only entice North Korean participation if they are built on a win-win philosophy. Two such approaches have a chance of success – one that shares attributes with the approach underlying the Iran nuclear deal and another based on US strategy toward India after its 1998 nuclear test.

Phased approaches

Under the first approach, the world might take the Iran deal as a partial template and demand of North Korea a “three noes” policy: no further development of nuclear weapons (including nuclear tests); no transfers of nuclear weapons outside North Korean territory; and no using (or threatening to use) nuclear weapons. Pyongyang would essentially be asked to accept a “nuclear freeze” regime – which would include a unilateral arms control ceiling and an appropriate verification system. In return, North Korea would receive a package of benefits including a multilateral security assurance arrangement; initiation of a diplomatic process toward normalization of North Korea’s relations

with the United States and other nations; and removal of economic, trade, and investment sanctions.

In negotiations toward the Iran deal, the international community could not prevail on Tehran to accept complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (Albright and Hinderstein 2006) of its nuclear programs. But Iran *did* commit itself to eliminating the lion's share of its uranium enrichment capacity. Meanwhile, it obtained sanctions relief by curtailing its dubious nuclear operations. The international community – even if complete dismantlement was not achievable – greatly reduced the risk that Iran would become a nuclear weapon state in the near term. Both sides compromised.

Clearly, such a process could not achieve North Korean denuclearization at once. But Pyongyang is adamant about not relinquishing its nuclear capabilities, so any path toward disarmament must be phased. Establishing denuclearization as a short-term objective would only invite total failure. It is better to get the ball rolling with initial-stage diplomacy.

That way, nuclear tensions on the Korean Peninsula might be contained through cooperative, incremental measures aimed at nuclear threat reduction. The international community – North Korea included – might reinvigorate a diplomatic process toward a nuclear-free peninsula. If the initial stages of the approach succeeded, Pyongyang's leadership might transform its outlook toward the importance of nuclear arms in national security. Eventually, the North might be ready to take concrete steps toward eliminating its entire nuclear arsenal.

The second approach would model itself on the strategy that the Clinton administration devised in the aftermath of India's 1998 nuclear weapon test. Realizing that India would be unwilling to abandon its nuclear weapons program any time soon, the United States crafted a strategy theoretically aimed at *eventual* elimination of all Indian nuclear weapons – a strategy known as “cap, roll back, eliminate.” In the North Korean context, “capping” would essentially mean nuclear arms control. “Rolling back” would mean nuclear disarmament – no matter whether the disarmament turned out to be complete or incomplete. Elimination would be the eventual goal.

Such an approach might have a chance at success because North Korea might be pleased to see the outside world establish nuclear arms control, rather than disarmament, as its immediate policy objective. It might even see some appeal in joining a regime for nuclear arms control – as long as it could trade its participation for bread. Indeed, when Pyongyang committed to a limited nuclear no-first-use policy at its

Workers' Party Congress in May, it provided some evidence that it wishes to be perceived as a responsible nuclear stakeholder (Al Jazeera 2016).

Conservatives in the United States and elsewhere, of course, would resist any phased program that included concessions. The Indian example only hardens their insistence that nuclear disarmament must precede any deal with the North. India, to many observers, has gotten everything it wanted from the United States *without* really capping and rolling back its nuclear arsenal.

To be sure, Washington's behavior toward India has been unprincipled, and has confirmed Pyongyang's conviction that it should play the nuclear card to the fullest extent. But when conservatives demand that North Korea abandon its nuclear weapons as a precondition for negotiations and aid, they only stand in the way of a grand bargain – whereby North Korea's nuclear arsenal would be capped or rolled back and Pyongyang's relations with the rest of the world would improve.

The only realistic approaches to the North Korean nuclear problem involve *talking* to Pyongyang – if not to eliminate North Korea's nuclear arsenal at the moment, at least to limit it at current levels. With luck, the North might be willing to reduce its arsenal over time. Eventually, it might even give up its nuclear weapons entirely. Obviously, engaging North Korea in order to mitigate the nuclear threat is destined to be most challenging. But that is no reason not to give engagement a try. Especially when alternatives do not exist.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This paper is a part of research project “Contemporary International Nuclear Politics and China's National Security Study,” under grant of State Social Science Fund (11-ZD181).

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