

North Korea

Nuclear Threat or Security Problem?

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Abstract

The negotiation process on North Korean nuclearization is stalemated and no change seems likely anytime soon. This stalemate demonstrates the failure of the US policy, a very dangerous situation particularly in view of the absence of any viable American strategic approach to the issue, the ensuing divisions among allies, and lack of a coherent approach to North Korea. Continuing the policy of strategic patience, which would be Washington's default position if no further progress occurs, is doomed to fail. Therefore, the United States must simultaneously enhance alliance cohesion while pursuing a credible negotiating proposal. This article lays out the reasons why that stance is needed now and is becoming more urgent. Such strategic approach can lead to better negotiated outcomes that would not only bring about denuclearization and North Korean security but also promote a new, more stable, equilibrium in Northeast Asia.

Introduction

As American officials have observed, the denuclearization talks with North Korea are dead.¹ North Korea's evolving military-political posture confirms this. In March 2020, Pyongyang tested four missiles and is now rebuilding land- and sea-based nuclear weapons and facilities for storing them.² In October, more advanced missiles, potentially fitted with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV) or with penetration aids to attack the US homeland, were displayed.³ These linked processes, political failure, and military buildup threaten three of the most fundamental US interests since 1945, as revealed in the historical record of US nuclear policies.⁴

These three interests are America's commitment to military superiority and potential use of force over all opponents up to the point of potential nuclear use; global commitment to nonproliferation, even among allies; and the cohesion of US European and Asian alliances.⁵ Since an unprovoked military strike against North Korea is infeasible, if Washington really understands the issues at stake here it has no real option other than negotiations with Pyongyang. However, North Korea has set preconditions for renewed negotiations, including an easing of sanctions and acceptance of Pyongyang's terms for reinforcing its missile and

nuclear capabilities.⁶ By July 2020 Kim Jong-un no longer felt bound by a moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests and had renounced negotiations.⁷ North Korea apparently believes negotiations only benefit the United States; therefore, Pyongyang continues building its “deterrent” to guarantee its security.⁸ North Korea further signaled its belief that it has been betrayed and gained nothing from the summits with South Korean president Moon Jae-In and US president Donald Trump, underscoring his displeasure by destroying the inter-Korean liaison office at Kaesong and “suspending” military action plans against the South.⁹

Thus, as Frank Aum of the United States Institute of Peace observes, “We are basically back to square one—only in some cases it’s worse.” North Korea is “quietly amassing more fissile material every year—enough to build seven to 12 nuclear bombs annually, experts estimate—and are steadily improving their intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities, leaving us nothing to show for 3 1/2 years in terms of denuclearization.”¹⁰ This stalemate represents the failure of a decades-long bipartisan nonproliferation policy toward North Korea intended as well to minimize risks to Asian security. However, it also highlights an abiding dilemma of arms control negotiations. One side demands disarmament first followed by discussions of security and guarantees (Washington), while the other side insists on security guarantees before disarmament (Pyongyang).¹¹

Moreover, since Kim will not relinquish nuclear weapons, arguments that the 2018–19 freeze on deployments and testing (especially absent negotiations or coercion) will engender denuclearization are unconvincing. Indeed, that freeze may convince observers “as signifying US acceptance of North Korea as “at least a limited nuclear weapons state for the indefinite future.”¹² Thus, this stalemate jeopardizes global nonproliferation and allied cohesion in Northeast Asia. Therefore, to obtain a positive outcome in Korea, Washington must negotiate to achieve peace, denuclearization, and a legitimate order there.

The Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” policy, including new sanctions, is likewise infeasible. That program will meet with Sino-Russian support for North Korea. Beijing and Moscow will cushion the impact of any new sanctions or economic pressure on Pyongyang because they are increasingly allied with North Korea in its approach to Washington and because of their own individual interests.¹³ Even while voting for sanctions, Russia and China openly violate them.¹⁴ Beijing and Moscow have ample incentives to encourage North Korean resistance, if not some form of controlled escalation, toward the United States, given their intensely adversarial relations with Washington.¹⁵ Nor, obviously, is it feasible to rely on a renewed form of “strategic patience,” where we just wait for Pyongyang to change its mind while we merely add ever newer and more sophisticated weapons

and sanctions to deter Pyongyang and Beijing's growing threats. Waiting for North Korea to disarm equates to waiting for Godot.

Yet ongoing realities obligate Washington to frame a strategy and then conduct policies to advance it. Since, only a negotiated settlement reliably guarantees peace and security for all concerned in Northeast Asia, alliance management, deterrence, and a plan for negotiations must be conjoined parts of our strategy. Thus, the next administration has no choice but to negotiate with North Korea. However, since negotiations are not occurring, North Korea is strengthening its missile, conventional, and nuclear programs, thereby enhancing regional tensions in Northeast Asia and facilitating further North Korean proliferation to Iran if not elsewhere.¹⁶

Indeed, negotiations strengthen our alliances. Even while renovating our military and supporting our allies' modernization programs to meet North Korean, Chinese, and other threats, we must simultaneously reassure them that we are not seeking to precipitate war in Asia. Virtually every researcher has found that our Asian allies crave security (or deterrence) and peace. Therefore, reassurance is as important as deterrence. A credible negotiating platform accessible to North Korea (DPRK) represents a critical part of that reassurance. Otherwise, the current arms race in Northeast Asia will certainly accelerate.

With a progressive president occupying the Blue House though, and a majority in the National Assembly from the same party as the president, the risk of an intra-alliance wedge arises—not from negotiating with North Korea but rather from failing to do so. In this context, nothing could be more reassuring than the United States negotiating in good faith to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula.¹⁷

A negotiated settlement in Korea that also formally ends the state of war is the only way North Korea, China, and Russia can mitigate their abiding fears of an arms race and/or conventional conflict in Northeast Asia that then escalates to the nuclear level. This negotiation, because it revolves around denuclearization, must also consider North Korean demands for security and the entire complex of issues involved in any denuclearization process. It must necessarily be a protracted process and lead to a formal end to the Korean War.¹⁸ Therefore, this article argues why this negotiation is necessary sooner rather than later and does so with regard to the aforementioned historical US vital interests.¹⁹ First, it outlines the proliferation threats. Then it demonstrates the absence of a viable military solution that therefore makes negotiations necessary. Third, it analyzes why this “dual-track” of alliance management and negotiation is necessary. Next, it presents the strategic logic of why this approach benefits not only the United States and its allies but also the DPRK, China, and Russia. The article argues that the next administration must approach Korean denuclearization and security from the

standpoint of enhancing American and allied security objectives throughout Northeast Asia. Those imperatives are even more urgent given increased Sino–American antagonism and the concurrent evolution of a Sino–Russian alliance, most notably regarding Northeast Asian security and Korea.²⁰

Why Negotiations Are Essential

Many current trends make negotiations urgent and the only way forward. First, it is increasingly urgent, as North Korea improves and Iran relaunches their respective nuclear programs, to reduce their likely bilateral proliferation. North Korea has given Iran’s missile and space programs significant assistance.²¹ Iran has recently announced that it will push this program forward despite American pressure.²² Iran has already nearly tripled its stockpile of enriched uranium, bringing it considerably closer to actual production of a nuclear weapon.²³ Therefore, the next administration will probably confront two simultaneous, linked, but different proliferation crises that share several common denominators, e.g., the perception of diminishing American reliability and power.²⁴ For Tehran and Pyongyang, Washington’s rejection of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran demonstrates Washington’s unreliability and fundamentally threatening nature as another common denominator of these overlapping crises. Just as Pyongyang frequently invoked Libya’s example as reasons for distrusting the United States, it will likewise invoke the JCPOA’s experience in the future even if Washington understands Libya’s case differently than does North Korea, which sees it as a betrayal leading to forcible regime change.²⁵ Absent genuine negotiations, we cannot convince Pyongyang that North Korea’s understanding of the Libyan case is incorrect.

Another common denominator is the further erosion of allied cohesion on dealing with Iran or North Korea.²⁶ A fourth common denominator is that Washington’s Iran policy apparently is another abortive effort to impose “maximum pressure” in the belief that this will inevitably generate regime change.²⁷ Pyongyang grasps both this perception and the fact of widespread European disagreement with Washington.²⁸ That perception stimulates North Korea’s, China’s, and Russia’s incessant probes to open and exploit wedges between and among the United States and its allies. These aforementioned factors will enhance North Korean and other states’ distrust of American intentions and undermine the mutual confidence that can only come from a prolonged negotiation.

The second factor making negotiation more urgent is North Korea’s growing capabilities. North Korea’s arms programs are reaching a point of no return. Beyond developing his nuclear capabilities, Kim continues to test new missiles of improved systems that can potentially augment his nuclear threats.²⁹ UN reports

certify that despite the “freeze” on actual nuclear testing the DPRK continues developing infrastructure and capacity for its missile program. Missile tests in December 2019 may have been “aimed at qualifying new intercontinental ballistic missile engines (liquid propellant) or checking existing engine batches (possibly solid propellant).” Either way “they point to a new phase in the ballistic missile program.”³⁰ Already in 2017, North Korean missiles could reach the continental United States. Evidence also suggests that North Korea has sufficient conventional and nuclear missiles to target entry points in South Korea for US troops, while intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) threaten US cities to deter an American nuclear strike. The most recent tests in October 2020 apparently add to that latter capability.³¹ Logically this entails having a credible DPRK second-strike capability to deter an American first strike. Jan Ludvik observes:

Publicly available estimates put the size of North Korea’s arsenal between 10 and 60 nuclear devices, although it is uncertain whether some of these weapons are operational and deployed with the Korean People’s Army. In the last few years, however, North Korea has demonstrated remarkable progress and surprised the international community with advances in nuclear weapons and ballistic missile technologies. It is not unwarranted to expect that in the foreseeable future, North Korea may acquire a reasonably robust, moderate-sized nuclear arsenal with 50-100 nuclear devices.³²

These developments strike directly at the US ability to use military power freely and defend its allies’ security and long-standing vital interests. Kim appears to be reverting to a more aggressive posture, including nuclear tests, since he also has warned about a new strategic weapon.³³ Since his posture enjoys Moscow’s and Beijing’s support, they will likely not block his return to that more aggressive policy line.³⁴ Then, no external actor will possess leverage over Pyongyang to dissuade North Korea from more overt testing for missiles and nuclear components. Therefore, the DPRK sacrificed nothing by negotiating with President Trump while it refined and improved its suite of missiles.³⁵ Indeed, recent tests already show considerably more sophisticated forces than before. As Vipin Narang wrote, “These [missiles] are mobile launched, they move fast, they fly very low and they are maneuverable. That’s a nightmare for missile defense.”³⁶

By mid-summer 2020, another UN report claimed that North Korea has “probably” learned how to fit nuclear devices onto ballistic missiles, creating a usable warhead. North Korea has also, according to this report, learned how to miniaturize its nuclear weapons.³⁷ These reports corroborate previous Japanese claims that North Korea can miniaturize its nuclear missiles, add multiple warheads to its missiles, and substantially increase its nuclear threat to South Korea and Japan.³⁸ Narang also believes that North Korea has achieved success here, stating “North

Korean missile development over the past year clearly prioritized complicating, saturating, and defeating regional missile defenses, among other things like, you know, mass production. Looks like they've succeeded."³⁹ Furthermore, Japan has also charged North Korea with developing warheads with which to penetrate US missile defenses based in Japan.⁴⁰

Adding to this dilemma is the fact that North Korea's rhetorical threats grow along with its capabilities. Before October 2020 reveal of the likely MIRVed Hwasong-15, the most prominent known enhancement of the DPRK's nuclear capability was a new nuclear-capable submarine that could either serve as a second-strike capability or strike directly at US territory.⁴¹ Indeed, on 2 October 2019 after announcing new working group talks with the United States, North Korea tested an intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM), something it had not done in earlier tests, from that nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN). Those tests signaled Washington that nothing can stop the DPRK from further nuclearization and growing capability.⁴² The aforementioned "suspension" of North Korean military plans against South Korea suggests but does not confirm a serious debate in North Korean elite circles about some kind of military strike against South Korea (ROK). Any such strike would likely escalate very rapidly. Yochi Dreazen reported in 2018 that the consensus view is that if war breaks out Kim Jong-un would likely try to overcome US superiority by massive chemical warfare and missile and nuclear strikes during the war's initial phase.⁴³ Signifying its more truculent rhetoric, in June 2020, Pyongyang stated that given Washington's "hostile policy" the only option given the failure of negotiations is to "counter nuclear with nuclear. . . . A strong war deterrent for national defense came to stand out as an indispensable strategic option."⁴⁴ Finally, Washington has accused Pyongyang of launching cyberattacks on the government and financial institutions to launder money, extort companies, and use digital currencies to finance its nuclear program. These attacks also signal a failure to deter the DPRK's offensive behavior.⁴⁵

The third reason why a credible negotiation offer is necessary is that the only alternative to that means replaying the discredited "strategic patience" approach. Arguments citing a technological breakthrough that works uniformly for the United States against the DPRK and allows Washington to threaten, if not actually conduct, a sweeping preemptive strike to denuclearize the DPRK in the future lack any political-strategic perspective.⁴⁶ Neither North Korea nor China, nor probably Russia, will passively allow this outcome to materialize. Numerous reports show the seriousness of China's technological challenge to the US military, a trend that possesses serious repercussions throughout Asia, including Korea.⁴⁷ Therefore, "Given the debates that are occurring today, it does little practical

good to assume that internal and international circumstances will change so positively that states will agree to implement nuclear disarmament with little concern over their counterparts' capacities and intentions to renege on disarmament and nonproliferation commitments."⁴⁸ Under existing and foreseeable strategic realities, would China (let alone the DPRK) stand by idly and let Washington even threaten, let alone conduct, that operation? And would not North Korea be motivated to preempt any such American strike? If Ludvik's assessment of North Korea's real capabilities is correct, then we must recognize that by having a viable second-strike capability and a portfolio of usable short-range capabilities that can devastate South Korea and/or Japan, North Korea is close to achieving genuine strategic stability for its purposes, as Kim Jong-un stated above.⁴⁹

Military Solutions and Strategic Patience Are Therefore Inconceivable

Therefore, waiting for North Korea to negotiate on American terms is impossible given these and other Asian strategic realities. This conclusion should impel Washington to find a credible negotiating posture. Indeed, the latest breakdown of the negotiations process suggests that the Trump administration failed to capitalize on the earlier summits or verify that North Korea will never negotiate on its nuclear program and therefore Washington should strengthen its Asian alliances. Under current strategic realities in Asia, strategic patience translates into what increasingly looks like multilateral arms racing, a condition that only aggravates existing tensions.⁵⁰ Moreover, this arms racing occurs in an atmosphere where Washington's browbeating of its allies facilitates this process because of mounting fears of US unreliability amid rising North Korean and Chinese threats to regional security. The Biden administration must reconsider these past policies and recalibrate US strategy to rebuild its alliances, create incentives for Korean denuclearization, and facilitate a transition to a transformed regional order in Northeast Asia that enhances US, not Chinese, interests. Any future negotiations and resolution of Korean issues must reckon with the increasingly global Sino-American confrontation and its relationship to the Korean Peninsula.

Thus, we must emphasize that whatever opinion readers possess about the Obama, Trump, and other administrations, the failure to devise a negotiating approach that would elicit positive responses from Pyongyang is bipartisan. Obama's strategic patience policy actually resembled what we have now.

The Obama administration's policy strategic patience policy aimed to put pressure on the DPRK while insisting that it rejoin the Six-Party Talks. The policy's main elements included pressuring Pyongyang to commit to steps

toward denuclearization as previously promised in the Six-Party Talks; closely coordinating with treaty allies Japan and South Korea; attempting to convince China to take a tougher line on North Korea; and applying pressure on Pyongyang through arms interdictions and sanctions. US officials stated that, under the right conditions, they would seek a comprehensive package deal for North Korea's complete denuclearization in return for normalization of relations and significant aid but insisted on a freeze of the DPRK's nuclear activities and a moratorium on testing before returning. This policy was accompanied by large-scale military exercises to demonstrate the strength of the US–ROK alliance. In addition to multilateral sanctions required by the UN, the Obama administration issued several executive orders to implement the UN sanctions or to declare additional unilateral sanctions.⁵¹

This policy replicated previous administrations' demand that the DPRK commit to or disarm first before Washington would discuss security. Predictably, as in earlier disarmament negotiations, this approach encountered North Korean and Sino–Russian objections that security must be on the table. Hence, stalemate and charges of betrayal, as in earlier such negotiations, prevailed. Congressional resolutions advocated a similar negotiating stance.⁵² Hitherto, the United States has insisted upon credible, verifiable, and irrevocable denuclearization (CVID) for North Korea as a precondition for an end to sanctions, unspecified economic benefits, and negotiations on security issues, e.g., a formal peace treaty ending the Korean War. This was the administration's position at the Singapore and Hanoi summits. Yet, these demands are known nonstarters and are seen in Pyongyang (if not elsewhere) as a demand for unilateral surrender.⁵³ Evidently US policy makers and negotiators in both parties have not assimilated the history of disarmament negotiations before those with North Korea. A fundamental point in all previous negotiations on this issue dating back to the Versailles Treaty have had to come to grips with this point of prioritizing either disarmament or security guarantees.⁵⁴

This struggle between those who demand disarmament first as a precondition of security versus those who demand credible security guarantees first as a prelude to disarmament continues today. It has occurred in the negotiations of the 5+1 with Iran that led to the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. The primary recurring point of contestation in these negotiations dating back to the 1930s is the conflict between the stronger party's repeated insistence on disarmament as a precondition for agreements regarding the security of the weaker side that has been trying to arm itself with nuclear or other controversial weapons, often covertly due to its fears of the stronger side's intentions. The weaker side insists that before agreeing to any disarmament it needs ironclad guarantees of security against any belligerent activities of the stronger side. Generally, the stronger side is loath to provide

such guarantees until it sees tangible disarmament. And those so-called belligerent activities feared by the weaker party need not necessarily be military ones. They could be sanctions, for example, as in the Iranian and North Korean cases and as occurred in the early 1920s against Germany.⁵⁵

Clearly that is the pattern here; so, unless one or the other side yields, stalemate will inevitably ensue. Van Jackson also argues that the historical record strongly suggests that in US–DPRK negotiations the stronger side (the United States) must offer concessions to initiate the process of winning North Korea’s trust.⁵⁶ Because the scope of the issues to be negotiated with North Korea is so large, a successful negotiation means mutual compromises, not least by the United States. CVID, like it or not, is a fantasy of amounting to Washington dictating terms to a vanquished opponent. Neither North Korea nor its allies will tolerate that approach. Therefore, another policy and course of action are needed.

Strategic Disarray

Neither is this the only reason why in Korea we have seen 30 years of bipartisan failure. Two other considerations must be considered. One pertains to the administration’s specific failures regarding Korea and Asia more generally, while the other pertains to the broader Asian strategic context in which any effort to resolve Korean issues must occur. In other words, it is impossible to begin thinking about progress, let alone resolution of these issues, without constant reference to the broader strategic environment that is dominated by an intensifying Sino–American confrontation.

The bipartisan failures to date suggest a US governmental pattern of cognitive inability to grasp fully the problems involved in securing denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula. Of course, we could simply brush it away by saying Kim will not negotiate and return to a pattern of strategic patience, i.e., passivity and arms buildup until such time as the situation changes. However, doing so undermines our alliances and detaches Korean policy from our overall Asian policy at a time when the Sino–American confrontation is perhaps the single most decisive fact of contemporary world politics. Worse yet, that passive approach further enroots the existing trends toward strategic bipolarity in Asia that observers have warned about for years. Thus, South Korean columnist, Kim Yo’ng Hu’i, wrote in 2005,

China and Russia are reviving their past strategic partnership to face their strongest rival, the United States. A structure of strategic competition and confrontation between the United States and India on the one side, and Russia and China on the other is unfolding in the eastern half of the Eurasian continent including

the Korean peninsula. Such a situation will definitely bring a huge wave of shock to the Korean peninsula, directly dealing with the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces in Korea. If China and Russia train their military forces together in the sea off the coast of China's Liaodong Peninsula, it will also have an effect on the 21st century strategic plan of Korea. We will now need to think of Northeast Asia on a much broader scale. The eastern half of Eurasia, including Central Asia, has to be included in our strategic plan for the future.⁵⁷

Subsequently, Lyle Goldstein and Vitaly Kozyrev warned, "From the standpoint of global politics, the formation of a Sino-Russian energy nexus would represent a strong consolidation of an emergent bipolar structure in East Asia, with one pole led by China (and including Russia) and one led by the United States (and including Japan)."⁵⁸ Moreover, whether Moscow and Beijing have an alliance or an entente, their bilateral military cooperation is growing and is likely to grow further. Merely putting more missile defenses and IRBMs into the theater will only generate further militarization against the United States on the part of Russia, China, and North Korea.⁵⁹ Furthermore, Russia and China not only have at least an entente if not an alliance but also fully support North Korea's negotiating posture and have not criticized North Korea's new weapons, missile tests, or belligerent rhetoric.⁶⁰

Therefore any US policy for the Korean Peninsula must harmonize with Washington's overall policy toward China. Here the prospects for a course correction that will offer a credible negotiating strategy and enhanced alliance management become much more difficult. If Washington truly demands denuclearization, it must be prepared to offer not just a peace process (albeit not a mere replica of North Korea's understanding of what that means) but also a compelling strategic vision for the region. That means seeing the Korean Peninsula and its security dilemmas in the context of a regional security problem, not only a nuclear proliferation issue. This means achieving a solution that deprives China of reasons to undermine the process. China must gain from this solution as does the United States, Japan, the ROK, the DPRK, and Russia. The solution must be truly a "win-win" solution for all.⁶¹ That means a negotiated outcome must aim for dynamic stability in Northeast Asia, where all the interested parties benefit from denuclearization, peace, and their attributes.

Consequently, Korean policy is ultimately inextricable from our China policy, and any outcome regarding Korea must, from Beijing's perspective, harmonize with China's policy toward the United States. China's individual reasons for sustaining and supporting the DPRK have remained constant despite multiple and even severe North Korean provocations in 2011–18. As a recent analysis of China's policy concludes,

China's policies toward the Korean Peninsula are often an outcome of its strategies toward another great power, the United States. What this means is that Beijing's frustration with Pyongyang's provocative behavior, which has destabilized the region and resulted in international criticism directed at China, have not translated into policy changes that increase pressure on North Korea and are not likely to do so, at least not to the extent that will risk destabilizing North Korea.⁶²

Yet this basic, and determining strategic factor, seems to be lost on the Trump administration. At least some administration officials openly seek to make it harder to deescalate tensions with China and thus intensify strategic confrontation with China.⁶³ Unfortunately this posture not only ensures that China will not cooperate with any US approach to North Korea or on the Korean Peninsula but also apparently has no goal in mind regarding shaping China's future behavior. As policy makers told Matthew Kroenig of Georgetown University, the confrontation with China is for its own sake, and open-ended. There is no objective in sight for future relations with China and therefore no understanding of how Korean issues relate to US China policy.⁶⁴ This dysfunction clearly drives what also has been a dysfunctional policy process on Korean issues: e.g., although during the 2020 electoral campaign President Trump stated, quite wrongly, that, if he wins the election the United States, North Korea will make a deal very quickly, because the only thing holding it up is the election. However, numerous aides and staffers have sought to undermine his policy.⁶⁵ Thus, it is not surprising that on too many issues, including Asia policy, US policy is failing.⁶⁶

While some scholars have argued on behalf of the administration's coherent Asian policy, the balance of evidence presented here strongly suggests an opposite interpretation.⁶⁷ Indeed, sources have reported continuous struggles within the Trump administration on how to approach Pyongyang before the 2019 Hanoi summit. Neither has anyone subsequently publicly addressed this question in any truly coherent manner.⁶⁸ While that may explain one motive for North Korean attacks on officials Pyongyang regarded as too hardline, like Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former National Security Council Director John Bolton, it also reveals the administration's fundamental internal disarray that precludes effective policy making, negotiation, and most of all, strategy for Korea and Northeast Asia.⁶⁹ Certainly such disarray and endless internal division is visible in foreign economic policy, which is of the utmost importance for whatever Asian policy the United States might pursue.⁷⁰ Admittedly, Bolton was a hardliner and has criticized Trump as being insufficiently hardline toward North Korea. However, such statements and Pompeo's apparent continuation of Bolton's line strongly

suggest that Washington is continuing along a well-trodden but unproductive path that denuclearization must precede any negotiations.⁷¹

Indeed, some analysts contend that we cannot discern any coherent strategy or strategic thinking in Trump's Asia policies. Michal Kolmas and Sarka Kolmasov write, "Much of Trump's policy toward Asia is guided by immediate pragmatic interests and personal beliefs. While this disregard for norms in favor of pragmatic gain has given Trump the chance to thaw some frozen relations, it can hardly be seen as a coherent policy toward Asia."⁷² Similarly, Mark Beeson writes,

Assessing the Trump administration's approach is made more difficult by the fact that its strategic policy has been characterized by a remarkable degree of inconsistency, highlighted most dramatically by Trump's approach to North Korea. Within the space of a few months, Trump went from threatening North Korea with nuclear annihilation to welcoming Kim Jong Un to a bilateral summit in Singapore, at which Trump was widely judged to have been out-manuevered by the wily Kim. Not only is there no evidence that North Korea has given up on developing its nuclear capabilities, but Kim has continued to flout the principles of the supposed agreement by directly overseeing new missile tests.⁷³

Beeson further observes that,

Trump's attitude to alliance relationships in the Asia-Pacific changes on a day-to-day basis. Whereas Trump previously made much of the need to compel supposedly freeloading alliance partners to make a greater contribution to national and regional security, his administration appeared to be actively trying to reassure allies made nervous about the new order. And yet his failure to consult South Korea or Japan about his decision to abandon "provocative" joint military exercises in South Korea wrong-footed supposedly close allies. America's traditional role as a mediating force between Japan and South Korea has also allowed a key regional relationship to deteriorate.⁷⁴

Diminished Alliance Cohesion

This dysfunctional policy has diminished alliance cohesion and management with South Korea and Japan. The well-publicized battles over payments for US troops, trade wars against these allies, and the erratic handling of North Korean denuclearization have undermined confidence in the reliability of US policy and deterrent. Much of this erosion of interallied confidence in North Korea's and Iran's cases stems from US policy. Failure to bring about a negotiating process would probably compound this erosion and increase its pace and effects. In the Korean case, there is already significant and dangerously growing allied friction with Washington over the Trump administration's demands for more South

Korean support for US forces as embodied in the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) now being negotiated.⁷⁵ As one recent commentary observes, “Never has an occupant of the White House enacted such an erratic North Korea policy, especially while decrying one of the United States’ most trusted allies—South Korea—as a defense free rider.”⁷⁶ And, there also is the unresolved and long-lasting tension with Japan that almost triggered a rupture between Seoul and Tokyo in 2019.⁷⁷ Indeed, it was only US pressure and mediation that engendered a process of bilateral negotiation between the ROK and Japan in 2019.⁷⁸ Therefore, it is arguably the case that a weakening US commitment to either party here would likely spill over into the South Korea–Japan negotiations and negatively affect their outcome.

South Korea clearly has reservations about the US negotiating position. Moon Ching-In, a special security advisor to ROK president Moon Jae-in, stated that Washington should show more flexibility and realism to break the current impasse lest it force Seoul to follow a more independent course to assuage domestic pressures for an accord with Pyongyang. As he said, “You really cannot pursue the strategy of ‘you denuclearize first, and we’ll reward you.’ That won’t work.”⁷⁹ Concurrently Trump’s efforts to coerce either Japan or South Korea into economic agreements with Washington to pay more for protection has undermined mutual confidence among allies.⁸⁰

Equally troubling is the fact that as of yet there is no sign of what Victor Cha calls a “proactive policy agenda” between Seoul and Washington that might stimulate serious and fresh thinking about getting to an agreement with North Korea and then dealing with the consequences of that accord.⁸¹ As he wrote in 2019,

One is hard-pressed to delineate what the issues are that constitute the mainstay of the proactive alliance development outside of North Korea. Alliance maintenance does not equate with the status quo, but with continuing to find new areas of cooperation to make the alliance better. This is absent today. By comparison, the last time there was a politically progressive government in Korea, a multitude of “alliance advancement” projects were being worked on in addition to North Korea. This included Yongsan base relocation, NATO+3 status for South Korean arms purchases, Visa Waiver program, KORUS, troop deployments in Iraq, climate change, and provincial reconstruction teams in Afghanistan. All of these contributed to a positive and forward-looking agenda for the alliance that reflected both countries’ interests. Today, the alliance is entirely dominated by tension over North Korea, tension over trade, and tension over the cost-sharing negotiations (Special Measures Agreement) in which Trump wants South Korea to pay entirely for the US troop presence on the Peninsula.⁸²

Many other commentators have argued that the failure to work with allies on trade, investment, support for US forces, and overall economic coordination only makes it more likely that illiberal and mercantilist policies like China's will gain stronger support across Asia and weaken our alliances' political cohesion.⁸³

Though neither the ROK nor Japan admits openly to dissension with Washington, their defense policies reveal their mounting unease at the growth of both Chinese and DPRK capabilities and concurrent sense of the unpredictability and unreliability of US policy. Their rearmament, pointing toward new and advanced or even preemptive strike capabilities reflect Washington's failures in alliance management and the rising power of China and the DPRK.⁸⁴ Embedding China policy in a larger strategic vision of Asia that encompassed relations with other Asian governments, including strengthened alliances, means approaching North Korea within the framework of that vision of overall Northeast Asian security.⁸⁵ Doing so also comports with current US strategy that sees China as the America's main strategic adversary.⁸⁶ If China is the main threat, Washington must find mutually satisfactory ways of reducing if not ending North Korea's threat and embedding it within a stable regional equilibrium that prevents China from dominating it or South Korea. A nuclear DPRK in China's "sphere of influence" would lead to South Korean and Japanese nuclearization, if not worse.⁸⁷

The China Factor

Finally, alliance management and credible negotiation proposals should march in tandem, because the only parties that benefit from stalemate are North Korea's nuclear hawks and China. Strategic patience allows North Korea leisure to build up its forces with no countervailing force to stop it, especially as both China and Russia are supportive and remain silent about the recent buildup. Then whenever talks begin, Washington will have to negotiate from North Korea's agenda. This alone should render strategic patience as an unacceptable option. However, beyond that, it also enhances Chinese influence throughout Northeast Asia, which is utterly inimical to US and allies' interests.

Beijing saw the Singapore summit and the process thereby as a threat of China's marginalization, as Pyongyang and Washington might reach agreement without it. For China this is an unacceptable outcome, particularly given the tense North Korean ties to China from 2011–17. Since Singapore, however, Kim and Xi have restored their ties, holding numerous summits and Xi (along with Russian president Vladimir Putin) supported North Korea's negotiating posture.⁸⁸ China's aims to subordinate North Korea using economic pressure and political support as its main instruments of leverage, drive a wedge into the ROK–US alliance, force South Korea to see China as the main guarantor of

regional peace and security, and thus diminish America's presence in Northeast Asia—leaving China as the regional hegemon.⁸⁹ From Beijing's geostrategic viewpoint Pyongyang's, economic dependence on China today can be used as future political leverage, when Beijing seeks to influence Pyongyang's behavior in China's favor. Beijing will endeavor to maintain good political relations with North Korea to insure itself against any future developments concerning the Korean Peninsula, especially in its dealings with Washington.⁹⁰

China and Russia have supported a so-called “double freeze” of nuclear tests and US-ROK exercises that occurred from 2018 till now but which allowed North Korea to undertake the aforementioned refinement and improvement of its military capabilities. Moscow and Beijing also support Kim's negotiating posture and envision a long-term process enabling North Korea to retain nuclear weapons for a very long and unspecified time.⁹¹ Continuing the present stalemate, the US-driven rifts in the alliance, and unwillingness to engage North Korea in a genuine negotiation process merely abets China's hegemonic potential over North Korea's faltering economy and places pressure on the ROK not to challenge Beijing by placing missile defenses in South Korea against Chinese missiles.

China's objectives are generally inimical to the United States, American allies, and arguably North Korean interests. North Korea's distrust of Chinese and Russian efforts to subordinate North Korea to their interests is long-standing and may be one reason for the DPRK's nuclearization, since that enables Pyongyang to repair its economy more independently of all the great powers.⁹² Arguably, if Washington made a credible sign of its willingness to accept and guarantee peace on the peninsula and facilitate economic ties between North Korea and its neighbors, that might facilitate Pyongyang's movement away from Beijing and give Russia a greater stake in a less China-centric Asian policy. These gains are only attainable through negotiations that create a stabler more peaceful order in Northeast Asia, and they come not at Washington's but at Beijing's expense. However, China would probably willingly pay a high price for denuclearization that would eliminate the ROK-US-Japanese drive to build more IRBMs and missile defense that Beijing regards as a very serious threat.

Conclusion

Any military option other than deterrence is infeasible and may be excluded (absent terrible miscalculation, wild cards, or black swans). Rational policies and negotiations that bring the United States credible strategic gains become the only potential route toward defusing the crisis. Since the current stalemate benefits North Korea, the logic of the situation should compel Washington to negotiate. Indeed, if maximum pressure is already compromised and force is ruled out as an

option, sustained and protracted negotiations are the only way to bring about denuclearization, peace, and security. The United States should therefore craft a regional equation that gives both Korean states credible security guarantees and brings an end to the Korean War and all acts of belligerency. This means a formal peace treaty six-power mutual guarantees of both Korean states, and an end to all belligerent acts in return for verifiable and complete denuclearization.⁹³ This would open economic alternatives for the DPRK, giving Pyongyang alternatives to Chinese tutelage and offering Russia a stake in upholding the new regional order while preserving US alliances with Seoul and Tokyo. That outcome strengthens peace and security for all interested parties, creating a newly legitimate regional order that also stimulates regional economic growth. Therefore, the next president should simultaneously empanel a negotiating team empowered to end the Korean War, obtain denuclearization, and warn Pyongyang that failure to negotiate will trigger restored bilateral US–ROK exercises, deployments, and sanctions. Pyongyang must understand that the DPRK can have nuclear weapons *or* security—but not both—and that the benefits of negotiated accords outweigh those offered by weapons.

On that basis, Washington can and must dramatically improve interallied coordination. This means articulating for itself and its allies a vision of regional security in Northeast Asia encompassing all the six players with vital interests there. In short, the United States must begin thinking strategically—however uncongenial this may be. Otherwise the United States and North Korea will continue plowing the same disputed acre endlessly to no avail and with ever higher risks accruing from each failure. Thinking strategically entails not only articulating a logical vision based on a realistic assessment of possibilities and goals, it also mandates assembling the means to achieve a desirable end in harmony with those goals.

In addition, new opportunities might present themselves. The COVID-19 pandemic may lead North Korea to open up and accept foreign help as it has privately requested. A credible negotiating stance also tests the genuineness of Kim's statements concerning opening the economy.⁹⁴ Alternatively if the pandemic worsens, it could raise the specter of regime collapse in North Korea, an event that would then force the other five players to act quickly, decisively, and one hopes, concertedly to stabilize the new status quo and keep it peaceful and non-nuclear. Indeed, this prospect might lead both sides to reconsider their positions and resume serious negotiations.⁹⁵ That situation would require the utmost coordination and strategic focus from all the players and only drives home the need for Washington to improve policy making before it is too late. Indeed, this latter possibility illustrates just how fragile the status quo in Northeast Asia is and why

a negotiation process based on a well-conceived strategy is necessary. For if Washington continues sailing without a US strategic approach to Korean issues the United States and its allies will be adrift on uncharted seas. And then some other ambitious captain will try to steer that rudderless ship for his own inimical purposes. That cannot be the outcome US policy makers want to see. 🌐

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