The Quest for a Denuclearized North Korea

Jong Seok Lee
A possible future on the Korean Peninsula of peace and mutual prosperity is visible now, but it will take much hard work yet to get there.

John Nilsson-Wright
A recent Chatham House conference on North Korea evinced some pessimism that remains valid despite upcoming summits.

Binoy Kampmark
A gathering in Seoul in December offered pointers for the issues that will remain to be solved after the Trump-Kim meeting this May.
An international group of seasoned policy-makers, analysts and experts gathered in Seoul last December to discuss a future nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. The meeting was hosted by the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, with co-organizers the Nautilus Institute and the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network.

While there could have been no pointers then that a Trump-Kim meeting was on the horizon, the issues discussed remain valid to any solution to the North Korean nuclear issue.

The salience of these discussions was evident in the subsequent push for a resumption of North-South Korean talks and moves towards a prospective dialogue with the administration of US President Donald Trump. To that end, intentions, strategies and approaches were analyzed and canvassed in forensic detail across six sessions. Various themes and approaches characterized the discussions: the intentions of North Korea and its current political outlook and responses; the approaches, actual and possible, toward North Korea; the issue of achieving an enduring peace settlement for the Korean Peninsula, factoring in denuclearization; the capabilities of North Korea; the intentions of the United States, most importantly those of Trump; and notable areas of divergence and convergence on all these issues.

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Despite the adverse security environment and heated exchanges between Pyongyang and Washington, participants struck a note of confidence. Leon Sigal of the Social Science Research Council appropriately termed the barbs “clickbait” and
“catnip.” Trump’s tweets were merely weapons of mass distraction. Tony Namkung, Senior Advisor to the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, viewed the transactional nature of Trump’s engagement as unlikely to yield dividends. Nor did the “maximum pressure and engagement approach” — one cornering North Korea — seem much different from previous US administrations. That said, Trump’s sheer unpredictability suggested unprecedented opportunities. The challenge lay in identifying the most feasible means of moving North Korea’s Kim Jong Un from a state of increasingly dangerous weapons testing and arming to a willingness to consider negotiations.

Former US Secretary of State Colin Powell exemplified this spirit during his address on the opening day. “I am a believer in a denuclearized peninsula and a denuclearized world.” Any resolution of the dispute through force of arms was untenable; “jaw jaw,” said former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd during the first day’s discussions, is certainly preferable to “war war.” The prospects of a feasible military resolution had also been compounded by improvements in North Korean military capabilities, hampering accurate targeting in any pre-emptive strike. In any event, it was generally felt that the US would not, as Prof. Chung-in Moon said, “use such military force without prior agreement” with South Korea.

The solution, then, must be diplomacy of the sort that would, as Rudd argued, “avoid sleepwalking into war in Northeast Asia and achieve the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” Tom Schelling’s point on the reciprocal fear of surprise attack, made during the Cold War, was deemed even more apt by way of analogy to the Guns of August, Barbara Tuchman’s history of how the First World War started. The cycle of fear by which Washington and Seoul anticipated a possible attack by North Korea on the basis of statements or provocations had to be broken.

**Diplomatic Solutions, Incremental Steps**

What, then, would the shape of this diplomacy look like? Participants saw promise in an incremental approach: small, reciprocal steps to build up trust, accompanied by parallel activities. For Nobuyasu Abe, former UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs and Ambassador, chronic mutual distrust and the security deficit must be overcome. Small, preliminary steps — “micro level” engagement — might also be taken in energy co-operation. Various short-range energy options could find their way to the diplomatic table and be exchanged for a reduction in the production of fissile material. This point was advanced in a detailed presentation to participants by Nautilus Institute energy expert David von Hippel and director Peter Hayes. This stress on energy, of fissile material. This point was advanced in a detailed presentation to participants by Nautilus Institute energy expert David von Hippel and director Peter Hayes. This stress on energy, noted discussants, would involve North Korea in international structures, elevate interdependence and encourage compliance. Pyongyang could be involved in regional oil and natural-gas pipelines. Electricity grid interconnections could be powered by Sympa/Kumho reactors. Renewable energy options and sharing of excess oil refining capacity might also be developed. Co-operation on transportation infrastructure could also feature in discussions. The military sphere might furnish additional areas of joint co-operation, including search and rescue, fisheries management and joint oceanographic research and vessel control in some ocean areas west of the Korean Peninsula.

To increase trust on an even higher level, Pyongyang might be convinced that it need not fear preventive war from the US. For Morton Halperin, formerly of the Policy Planning Staff at the US Department of State, a regime guarantee might also be warranted in which the US would give an undertaking not to use force to overthrow the Pyongyang regime. Such approaches might seem to be a question of what Deng Xiaoping described as crossing “the river by feeling the bottom one stone at a time.” As Sigal and former US Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Pickering asserted in discussions during the first day, North Korea could hardly be expected to relinquish the political leverage inherent in its nuclear capability without something in return. As North Korean expert Patrick MccEarchern noted, denuclearization could be realized but only after the initial expansion of Pyongyang’s nuclear armed forces in both a qualitative and quantitative sense, and the ending of the “hostile policy” of the US.

Such steps might well constitute a freeze-for-freeze option (entailing the initial suspension of US-South Korea military exercises on the one hand, and North Korea nuclear and missile testing on the other) to initially temper the situation and build trust. In that respect, participants found much common ground between Halperin’s suggestion for an immediate freeze on military exercises and weapons tests, and those articulated in Chinese-Russian proposals. Drafting a timetable for the destruction of nuclear weapons, accompanied by external security guarantees from the US and China and economic incentives for North Korean development might also be advanced.

This would bring into play the nature of a comprehensive security settlement featuring six phases: the creation of a Six-Party-Northeast Asia Security Council; the gradual ending of sanctions against North Korea; a declaration of non-hostility; the signing of a normalizing peace treaty to end the Korean Armistice; the provision of aid to North Korea that would encompass energy, telecoms, logistics, transport, mobility, trading and financial networks through the North Korean land-bridge linking Eurasia with Japan and South Korea; and, finally, the establishment of a nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ). Such an interlocking system crowned by the NWFZ would help ensure a lasting arrangement. For Halperin, the last element, while only coming in the final phase of negotiations, would nonetheless be an incentive to create lasting peace while forging a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. Hayes furnished an additional pointer: that it would supply a means of managing the threat as North Korea incrementally disarmed, enabling it to come into compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Participants also noted that using the NWFZ would shift the focus away from specifically denuclearizing North Korea to creating a zone free of nuclear weapons. Such a treaty format also has the distinct merit of avoiding competing claims of sovereignty over the Korean Peninsula, while acknowledging the superseding of the September 2005 principles issued at the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks. Hayes noted the salient point of ensuring durable trust: North Korea should have confidence in agreements that will last beyond the lifespan of administrations in Seoul and Washington.

Such an ambitiously envisaged Grand Bargain could also employ the anchoring stability of the Six-
Points of Disagreement

Inevitably, some disagreement was registered on the issue of what sanctions regime would encourage North Korea to resist more forcefully. Yang Xiyu, senior fellow at the China Institute of International Studies, noted that any full containment of Pyongyang, sealing off all doors for engagement, was fraught with danger. Energy studies have also suggested that disruptions to the coal-export cap, a dramatic cut in Chinese oil exports to North Korea and a reduction of hard currency earnings for North Korea are unlikely to significantly bruise the military. David von Hippel and Peter Hayes further added that the effect of such sanctions on North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs would be at best negligible.

Some participants diverged over the extent to which targeted sanctions might prove effective. Some form of pressure was required to prevent or slow down North Korea’s nuclear missile build-up by restricting materials coming in. Nobuyasu Abe took the view that humanitarian consequences were regrettable, but could be ameliorated through separate assistance. There were also differing views about the nature of North Korea’s economic performance, which has been uneven. Since Kim Jong Un came to power, 23 special economic zones have been built. Yang Xiyu reported that many of these remain empty, awaiting capital and trade to boost the economy. Such opportunities have been eliminated by sanctions, most conspicuously in rural areas.

Olympic Moments

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Party format, despite its moribund status, China, according to Rudd, would find much to recommend in such an approach. Additional actors, such as the United Nations Security Council and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, could also play roles. Beyond that, a regional security architecture was suggested as a means of calming the temperature and settling disputes, whether along the lines of an East Asia Summit, as suggested by Rudd, or the more specific, phased processes envisaged by Halperin and his colleagues. Disagreements between such powers as China and the US also have to be managed.

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of deterrence and should not be decoupled. Putting stock in such peacekeeping bodies as the United Nations would be a poor substitute. Differences surfaced also on the role of sanctions, very much the preferred weapon of choice for the Trump administration and its allies. Historically, when sanction regimes have been imposed, notably with US-Chinese agreement, Pyongyang, far from being dissuaded, has actively pursued weapons testing. As a tool of coercion, sanctions have repeatedly failed. Furthermore, a total sanctions regime would encourage North Korea to resist more forcefully. Yang Xiyu, senior fellow at the China Institute of International Studies, noted that any full containment of Pyongyang, sealing off all doors for engagement, was fraught with danger. Energy studies have also suggested that disruptions to the coal-export cap, a dramatic cut in Chinese oil exports to North Korea and a reduction of hard currency earnings for North Korea are unlikely to significantly bruise the military. David von Hippel and Peter Hayes further added that the effect of such sanctions on North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs would be at best negligible.

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The Olympic moment, one anticipated by discussions during the December 11-12 gathering, has already been seized upon by the parties. Dialogue between Seoul and Pyongyang, initiated through the offices of Kim Jong Un’s sister, Kim Yo Jong, during the PyeongChang Winter Olympics, has re-commenced. The freeze-for-freeze option has gained traction. Despite initial skepticism marked by the cancellation of a meeting between the North Korean delegation and US Vice President Mike Pence during the initial stages of the Winter Olympics, President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un are now preparing for summit discussions by the end of May. The road heavily travelled toward a peaceful Korean Peninsula has taken another twisting turn.

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