How to Put Korean Peace-Building Right: A View from Russia

By Georgy Bulychev

The leaders of the United States, North Korea and South Korea are at the center of the latest efforts to resolve the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula and lay the groundwork for peace-building. But the long history of diplomatic efforts to solve the problem is deeply embedded in a framework that involves a larger number of players, including Russia, China and Japan as well as the United Nations. Georgy Bulychev argues that the main actors would do well to heed their input.

WE ARE NOW at a crossroads in the settlement of the Korean issue — but hardly for the first time. There is actually nothing new in the so-called Singapore formula, because it was in general agreed between the United States and North Korea as long ago as 1994. Back then, North Korea had no nuclear weapons, but only a program to create them, which it agreed to freeze and eventually give up in exchange for US recognition and economic assistance. However, this deal was never implemented, and subsequent attempts in 2000, 2005 and 2012 turned out to be just as futile.

The reason? Both sides never trusted each other — and for good reason. Previous US attempts at a settlement in the 1990s and 2000s were not based on a genuine desire to find a compromise and coexist with North Korea, but rather on an underlying hidden agenda: that “engaging” North Korea was the safest way to bring about the collapse of the regime in Pyongyang in a “soft landing mode.” North Korea, on its side, was eager to explore ways to make peace with the US; however, more importantly was the desire to buy time to develop its nuclear and missile programs.

2018 became the watershed year in the modern history of the Korean conflict: from all sides, a new, rational approach was seemingly tried for the first time. Different from previous attempts, US President Donald Trump admitted, under strong influence from President Moon Jae-in’s administration (as well as China and Russia), that the North Korean nuclear issue could not be solved by either a military option or the collapse of the Pyongyang regime. We witnessed North-South co-operation reach an unprecedented scale, exceeding that of the decade of liberal leadership in South Korea (1998-2008). At that time, the US played a spoiler role, because President George W. Bush opposed “appeasing” North Korea and was seeking, in fact, to contain the reconciliation policies of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations. This time, however, US policy toward North Korea has taken a dramatic turn due to a combination of the “Trump factor” and the “Kim Jong Un factor,” assisted by the “Moon Jae-in factor.” Regrettably, we may not see another such convergence of favorable factors any time soon.

DERAILLED BY THE ‘BIG DEAL’
The general concept agreed in 2018 was denuclearization in exchange for security guarantees. Everybody seemed to have agreed that these processes should be synchronized and resolved step-by-step. But the phased approach, seemingly more or less accepted by the US in the lead-up to the Singapore summit, was unexpectedly for North Koreans changed into an “all or nothing” formula at the Hanoi summit between Trump and Kim in February 2019, something that was clearly unacceptable.

Nobody in his right mind could think that Kim or any other sensible leader would agree to a “big deal,” especially with the US, which has amply proven its inability to keep any international agreements. Involved countries should be brave enough to say that straight out.

What is Kim’s play? His rationale is not fully understood by anybody, except perhaps his closest advisers. Having achieved considerable progress in its nuclear weapons program, he might have concluded that now was the best time to use it as a bargaining chip, since there is no way he could make use of it in actual warfare without totally destroying his country. Taking into consideration the new tendencies of modern warfare (including cyber warfare), he might have concluded that his primitive nuclear weapons could no longer be considered a “final argument” and an indispensable deterrent, and decided to express a readiness, if not to abolish them then at least to move down the road of limitation and reduction with the aim of improving North Korea-US relations.

Kim’s final ambition, for which the payment for giving up his nuclear arsenal might be adequate, might include first getting breathing space for the regime and then using the geopolitical position of his country, sandwiched between the US and China, to extract something from both sides. That is, to capitalize on the Chinese market and China’s military-political interest in maintaining stability in its sensitive neighboring areas, and at the same time exploit the US interest in checking China’s expansionism by soliciting US sponsorship in exchange for remaining out of China’s sphere of influence. Becoming thus a servant of two masters, Kim could try to set them at loggerheads — the way his grandfather did, balancing between the USSR and China, which were then hostile to each other. In the process, he could hope to achieve an economic miracle in his country by receiving external assistance to combine with the country’s natural resources, qualified labor force, new technologies and logistical advantages, in order to turn North Korea into a “new Singapore.” But he might have abandoned such a childish dream now, influenced by “treachery” by the US “breaking the spirit of the Singapore meeting.”

The Hanoi summit showed the depth of contradictions within the US administration and thus the lack of consistency in US policy — in fact, we witnessed a thinly veiled attempt originating from within the US “deep state” to torpedo the US-North Korea dialogue.
Available information also shows that North Korean negotiators lacked the authority and competence to discuss the nuclear issue, preferring to leave discussions on these topics at the “supreme leader” level. They mistakenly believed (or were instructed) that giving up the Yongbyon nuclear complex — the heart of the North Korean nuclear program — would be enough to secure the concessions they demanded, even if not in full.

In fact, the importance of Yongbyon should not be underestimated — it is the only source of plutonium and much of the enriched uranium for the North’s nuclear weapons program. Its closure would more than halve North Korea’s ability to produce fissile materials and also deny them the capability to produce tritium needed for thermonuclear devices (for which a reactor is needed). Moreover, as many nuclear weapons experts believe, acceptance of inspections and verification by North Korea would immensely widen our knowledge of its WMD program, thus contributing to the final goal of denuclearization.

However, US negotiators were not ready to give up any of their “trump cards,” not knowing what they could get in return. There was also a misunderstanding of motives — North Koreans concentrated on the sanctions issue, not because of an “end of war” statement and political rapprochement, but not as a condition. North Korea now abstains from talking about sanctions relief at all, stating “we can manage under sanctions, the situation was much worse in 1990s.” To be sure, sanctions relief would be welcomed, but North Koreans do not feel obliged to make some reciprocal concessions in exchange.

**SEEKING CRACKS IN THE WALL**

As a result, the peace-building and denuclearization process is now totally stalled. Kim has given the end of this year as the deadline, after which he would no longer expect changes in US policy, especially given the start of the 2020 election campaign in the US and the possible distraction of Trump from Korea issues if there is no progress. Nevertheless, in case of a change in policy, the door remains open even for another US-North Korea summit.

But before that happens, North Korea feels free to proceed with missile and nuclear-related projects, with two exceptions. Kim has promised to put a moratorium on nuclear tests (in fact, the only test ground in the country was destroyed as a gesture of goodwill) and long-range ballistic missile tests. Other than that, North Korea can accelerate its WMD programs and even prepare for some mysterious “new way,” which is supposed to drastically increase the country’s defense capabilities.

North Korea has made it clear it will not provide any concessions and is not interested in dialogue unless the US changes its calculus. Pyongyang wants literal implementation of the Singapore Declaration. That is, discussion of measures leading to normalization of relations and security guarantees in exchange for small steps toward denuclearization. North Korea, however, has little hope that things could unfold in this way and is considering two options: keep things as they are and enjoy relative stability or resume brinkmanship, if doing so would change the US approach.

Denuclearization in principle is possible through a step-by-step and “action for action” approach. Although full denuclearization might come into reach in the event of a drastic change in the geopolitical situation, there is no reason to believe it can be achieved any time soon. However, progress in the negotiations themselves would be a good intermediate result, in fact strengthening the non-proliferation regime.

A prolonged negotiation process is beneficial for all. Even in the absence of an immediate breakthrough, it can achieve much:

- It would cap North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, at least the ones that can be observed;
- It would ease tensions on the Korean Peninsula;
- It would help build trust and enable confidence-building measures;
- It would provide room for North Korean marketization and co-operation, and eventually the easing of political regime pressure, as North Koreans actually want to be “like others.”

**OVERCOMING THE IMPASSE**

Since April’s Vladivostok summit, Russia has been actively trying to use its role as a facilitator to promote the peace-building process. As US researchers admit, the history of the diplomatic wrangling around the Korean Peninsula over three decades shows Russian ability to “tip the scale” and de-escalate tensions at critical moments. Maybe another such moment is now — and Russia can provide ideas, which could help bring the opposing parties closer.

In fact, the events of 2018 have almost exactly followed the Russia-China proposals for a roadmap agreed on during their summit on July 4, 2017. These proposals include three stages:

- Suspension for suspension — a moratorium on North Korean nuclear and missile tests in return for the US and South Korea suspending or limiting the scale of military exercises.
- Bilateral talks and the signing of bilateral documents between North Korea, the US, South Korea and maybe Japan, stipulating the generally accepted principles of relations (non-use of nuclear weapons, non-proliferation, etc.).
- The establishment of an international mechanism to neutralize North Korea’s nuclear and missile capabilities, enhancing the transparency and verification of North Korea’s nuclear activities. This mechanism could take the form of an international monitoring body that is responsible for verifying the denuclearization process and ensuring compliance with the commitments

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For both Russia and China, stability in the neighborhood might be a higher priority than denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (which might also raise questions about Russian and Chinese nuclear forces in the neighboring area).

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force, etc.), while North-South relations should be dealt with on a separate track.

- A multiparty process dedicated to the creation of a Northeast Asia security framework, within which such issues as denuclearization, sanctions (including unilateral ones), military threats, confidence-building and foreign military presence would be discussed.

The process is now stuck on the hardest phase 2, and some ideas to move it forward are as follows:

- On the North Korean side: continue the test and launch moratorium; closure, with a view to dismantlement, of the Yongbyon complex, including production, reprocessing, reactors and storage facilities; declaration and implementation of suspension of production of weapons-grade fissile materials; addressing one-by-one disclosure of other nuclear facilities and their verification.

- On the US side: “corresponding measures” may include keeping a moratorium on military exercises; an end-of-war declaration or statement; suspension of production of weapons-grade fissile materials; addressing one-by-one disclosure of other nuclear facilities and their verification.

- Within the community, confidence-building measures (increased transparency of military drills in North and South Korea; abolition of drills within a certain swath of territory along the DMZ and coastline; invitation of observers; withdrawal of heavy weapons above 100mm caliber and multiple-launch rocket systems within an agreed distance of the DMZ; exchanges of information about the composition of armed forces and location of deployments within a certain distance of the DMZ).

- A “code of conduct” in the military sphere on the Korean Peninsula should be jointly developed, probably starting with a draft suggested by the US and South Korea describing security guarantees.

- All countries should adhere to the previously adopted declarations and agreements, especially between the US, North Korea and South Korea, and make a declaration to that effect.

- In the process, with relevance to political and military measures, sanctions should be relieved step-by-step, both at the United Nations Security Council level and unilateral levels, while Security Council organs would monitor the implementation of such measures and compliance. The priority is the resumption of humanitarian assistance and inter-Korean projects and exemptions for other vital economic projects (co-ordinated with closure of fissile-material production facilities) — especially on vital imports and relief on labor exports. It would be a fair “reward” for North Korean measures, including the moratorium on nuclear tests and missile launches, which was the cause for sanctions in the first place.

- Depending on the progress on the military-political track, multilateral economic programs in and around North Korea should be initiated, maybe something like the Marshall Plan, while a joint fund (and escrow account) would be created to finance projects in North Korea under international organizations such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

- In parallel with the humanitarian co-operation and trust-building, efforts should be made to promote the “conventionalization” of North Korea, that is, turning it into a “normal” state.

**FINDING AN ‘ISRAELI’ WORKAROUND**

Kim Jong Un has made it clear he could only agree to an open-ended process on an “action for action” basis. This road is unprecedented: previous models of denuclearization (South Africa, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Libya) are irrelevant. The major factor for North Korea is its perceived need for a deterrent against an external threat (the US desire to bring about regime change and South Korea’s goal of unification, not to mention China’s desire to dominate North Korea). So, any denuclearization of North Korea, in my view, could only mean a phased process of WMD control, limitation and reduction (the experience of the USSR and the US in the 1980s in the strategic-arms limitation process might be a useful reference).

The goal of full denuclearization is unachievable any time soon; however, as long as the process aimed at this goal goes forward, such a situation does not equal, as many critics suggest, recognition of North Korea as a nuclear state. Nobody wants North Korea to become like India or Pakistan. At the same time, for both Russia and China, stability in the neighborhood might be a higher priority than denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (which might also raise questions about Russian and Chinese nuclear forces in the neighboring area). So what might be feasible in the foreseeable future is not a Pakistani, but rather an Israeli model.
talks. Had there been strictly bilateral talks, they might have broken down much earlier. Also, providing security for North Korea — as well as satisfying the interests of other actors — would not be possible on a bilateral US-North Korea basis. A safety net is needed if and when agreements are reached. The example of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in Iran shows that even if the US (or another party) withdraws from a deal, the participation of other countries can keep the agreement alive and prevent the situation from sliding into catastrophe.

It should be admitted that at present the main actors in solving the Korean issue are the US, North Korea and South Korea. Other countries and actors play only a supportive role.

MOVING FORWARD
One idea may be to separate the issue into two tracks: one on denuclearization, another on “corresponding measures.”

• Technical and practical issues for how to deal with the North Korean nuclear program should be dealt with in a “3+1” format: involving relevant nuclear-weapons states (the US, China and Russia plus the “culprit,” North Korea) — in fact, non-nuclear weapons states are prohibited from any access to nuclear weapons technology and thus cannot be a part of the discussions.

• Another “3+1” format should be centered on discussion of the modalities of security guarantees, normalization of relations and a so-called “bright economic future” for North Korea, etc. It should bring together the countries on which the solution of these issues depend — the US, South Korea and Japan plus North Korea.

• All these processes may run in parallel, at first, on track 1.5 and then on track 1. In the endgame, they would merge into the familiar Six-Party format.

So what would the end result of diplomacy actually look like?

1) A heads of state joint statement (on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, with the participation of the Secretary-General of the UN) may kick-start a diplomatic process once the bilateral understandings are reached.

2) The goal would be to prepare a politically and legally binding multilateral treaty (“On Security and Co-operation in Northeast Asia”). It could be tied to legally binding deals between the former adversaries in the Korean War.

3) Another option is a set of bilateral legally binding treaties between each member of the six and the other five parties, which would regulate the relations between them on the Korean issue.

4) Such agreements should be an addition to the existing bilateral (and multilateral) pacts. For example, such a new agreement between the US and South Korea should be based on their basic alliance treaty and later bilateral documents, and not contradict them.

5) To be sustainable, these agreements would need supervision and guarantees on implementation, which could be provided by other members of the Six-Party format and may involve monitoring by the UN. That means a monitoring mechanism (such as the Security Council Committee or a Six-Party secretariat, or both) would watch how the arrangements are kept and report accordingly to the UN and other institutions and to the leadership of all the countries involved.

6) Through this process, a Northeast Asia Security and Co-operation Organization may emerge. At a later stage, it may become a venue charting the plans for multilateral and bilateral co-operation and integration.

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