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Toward an Incremental Pathway to Peace on the Korean Peninsula

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SUMMARY One possible way to address the North Korean nuclear threat is by beginning a series of incremental steps to gradually lessen tension and lead to eventual peace on the Korean Peninsula. Such steps could include halting North Korea's nuclear-weapons testing and further advancement of its nuclear-weapons program in return for scaling back joint military exercises between the United States and South Korea; reducing North Korea's nuclear stockpiles in exchange for special development aid to North Korea for targeted economic, social, and public health initiatives; a moratorium on North Korean missile testing in exchange for the suspension of United States missile-defense systems in South Korea, and, providing earlier steps were successful, a peace treaty ending the Korean War. Recognizing what it would take for these initiatives to emerge requires also reckoning with the inevitable obstacles.

Introduction: A Path Still Not Taken with North Korea

Prospects for securing a peace treaty finally ending the Korean War have stalled indefinitely. The continuing buildup of North Korea's nuclear-weapons program is seen by the United States as the principal element of the deadlock. The United States has long maintained that denuclearization must be factored into any negotiation toward a peace treaty. Yet it appears increasingly unlikely that North Korea will drop this program outright. The North Korean nuclear-weapons program enables the autocratic regime in Pyongyang to punch above its weight in world politics and to secure its domestic legitimacy while also serving as a deterrent against possible invasion.

This has left other stakeholders in Northeast Asia with a dilemma: while signing a peace treaty with a nuclear North Korea is unacceptable, particularly from the standpoint of global nuclear-nonproliferation objectives, continuing the unresolved status quo of the 1953 armistice leaves the Korean Peninsula vulnerable to catastrophe. A sudden unexpected military skirmish along the demilitarized zone separating the two Koreas or on the disputed maritime border in the West Sea could suddenly escalate into full-blown conflict with millions of casualties and heavy damage to both sides. Similarly, any military strike against North Korea's nuclear facilities also carries the risk of all-out war as well as of nuclear contamination through the release of toxic radiological substances.

One possible way to move beyond this deadlock would be by beginning a series of incremental steps, by all signatories to the 1953 armistice and South Korea, to gradually lessen tension and lead to eventual peace on the Korean Peninsula. Such steps could include halting North Korea's nuclear-weapons testing and further advancement of its nuclear-weapons program in return for scaling back joint military exercises between the United States and South Korea; reducing North Korea's nuclear stockpiles in exchange for special development aid

to North Korea for targeted economic, social, and public health initiatives; a moratorium on North Korean missile testing in exchange for the suspension of United States missile-defense systems in South Korea, and, providing the earlier steps were successful, a peace treaty ending the Korean War. (The 1953 armistice that suspended hostilities but did not end the Korean War was signed by North Korea, China, and, on behalf of the United Nations Command, the United States.)

Recognizing what it would take for these initiatives to emerge requires also reckoning with the inevitable obstacles.

The existing stalemate has left many East Asia analysts, politicians, and scholars dismissive of the possibility of replacing the armistice with a peace treaty. They consider negotiations toward a treaty an unworkable path simply not worth attempting. What, however, is the alternative?

Still Waiting

The current state of affairs is undesirable for all parties in Northeast Asia, excepting the North Koreans. Despite attempts by Washington to enter into negotiations, the policy of "strategic patience" under former US President Barack Obama's administration left the United States waiting for the North Korean regime to change its mind.

With the transition to Donald Trump's administration, the United States strategy on North Korea is now framed as "maximum pressure and engagement." However it remains unclear if this new label will lead to any substantive policy changes from either Washington or Pyongyang.

North Korea, meanwhile, has been riding out all the international sanctions directed its way and waiting for the United States to drop its insistence that denuclearization precede any peace settlement. In the absence of meaningful negotiations, ever-increasing sanctions on North Korea have not prompted any changes in behavior.

North Korea has been waiting for the US to drop its insistence that denuclearization precede any peace settlement

North Korea has conducted six nuclear-weapons tests, more than 50 missile tests, processed plutonium and uranium, and might soon deploy a miniaturized nuclear weapon

Throughout the years following the armistice, North Korea has conducted a total of six nuclear-weapons tests, conducted more than 50 missile tests, continued processing both plutonium and uranium, and, as shown by its two July 2017 tests of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), has been building the capability to deploy a miniaturized nuclear weapon capable of reaching the continental United States.

North Korea is close to achieving “nuclear breakout” both by increasing its arsenal size and by its advances in missile development.¹ Unless one accepts the thinking of the late international-relations theorist Kenneth Waltz that rival nuclear forces pointed against each other provide the key to stability, this military buildup by North Korea must be seen as a dangerous activity.

An Alternative

Incremental steps to gradually lessen tension offer a pathway to change the circumstances on the Korean Peninsula—without attempting to suggest a peace treaty be negotiated straight away. None of the signatories to the 1953 armistice appear ready for definitive negotiations. South Korea was not a signatory to the armistice, but is clearly an essential party to any future negotiations.

However, there remains a possibility that the United States, in conjunction with South Korea, could initiate dialogues with North Korea with the aim of opening up regular interactions and exchanges, identifying small steps which might ease tensions, and gradually building trust on all sides. At this stage, the overriding goal of diplomacy should be transactions that end the North Korean nuclear threat—not necessarily an immediate transformation of the North Korean regime.²

Ever since North Korea conducted its first nuclear-weapons test in 2006, the United States has stated that it will not tolerate a nuclear-armed North Korea. In fact, however, the United States *has* now tolerated a nuclear-armed North Korea for several

years. Former US State Department official and Korea analyst Joel Wit has also argued for what amounts to an incremental approach to bringing about North Korean denuclearization: “The North Korean W.M.D. cancer was essentially left to metastasize. . . . The North Koreans are serious about building a nuclear deterrent and we are not serious about stopping them.”³ Now is the time, then, for the United States to become serious in its negotiations and remove this “cancer” in such a way as to not cause violent and massive destruction.

What Incremental Steps Would Look Like

North Korea’s nuclear-weapons program is both the regime’s trump card and its insurance policy. It strengthens the regime’s ability to present itself at home as the ultimate and necessary defender of Chosun (what North Korea calls itself, after the Korean dynasty from centuries past) against the alleged “Yankee imperialist aggressors.” Yet nuclear weapons for North Korea are not cost-free, as the resources that have been poured into nuclear weapons could have been allocated elsewhere, including toward initiatives that might have improved the living conditions of the North Korean people.

North Korea has made this choice because, ever since the time of Kim Il-sung, the ruling regime has treated the absence of a peace treaty as posing an existential threat. The United States, then, must take incremental steps enabling the North Koreans to remove this perception of a threat while North Korea is offered an opportunity to cap and reduce its nuclear-weapons stockpiles in exchange for an eventual peace treaty formally ending the Korean War.

“Incremental steps” may be viewed as a gradual course of interactions with North Korea, rather than attempting to move immediately into negotiations for a comprehensive peace treaty and the diplomatic relationships between North Korea and both the United States and South Korea that would presumably follow.

Rather than trying to turn back the clock and convince North Korea to immediately eliminate its nuclear weapons, the United States should seek a series of smaller measures, one at a time, creating

conditions for North Korea to reconcile itself with reversing its current position and phasing out its nuclear-weapons program. Establishing a series of incremental steps would test North Korea to see if the regime can enter into and, more importantly, live up to binding international agreements. It would also test the extent to which those countries with stakes in the Korean Peninsula can build mutual trust with North Korea.

Obvious as a first incremental step is an end to all nuclear-weapons testing in North Korea and a cap on North Korea's existing nuclear weapons. Such a cap would require the North Korean regime to cooperate fully with routine inspections and transparent verification procedures on the part of an international collective, most likely organized by the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Going to Great Lengths

Working out the details of verification in comprehensive terms has proven to be a major stumbling block. Ultimately, this issue contributed to the demise of the 2005 agreement in which North Korea had agreed to end its nuclear-weapons program and allow international inspectors into its nuclear facilities in return for economic benefits and a guarantee from the United States that it would not be attacked.

Although a cap is a far smaller step than outright denuclearization, a verifiable cap or freeze on North Korea's nuclear-weapons program would be no small accomplishment in curbing North Korea's nuclear ambitions. The RAND Corporation estimated in 2016 that North Korea will be in a position to have as many as 100 nuclear weapons by 2020 if no countervailing measures are taken.⁴

Despite the claims from the United States that it will never tolerate anything less from North Korea than total denuclearization, a cap and a moratorium on nuclear testing would amount to the most that the United States can hope to secure from North Korea in the near term. James Clapper, who served as director of national intelligence in former US

President Barack Obama's administration, admitted as much in the fall of 2016: "They are under siege and they are very paranoid, so the notion of giving up their nuclear capability, whatever it is, is a non-starter with them... The best we could probably hope for is some sort of a cap, but they are not going to do that just because we ask them. There's going to have to be some significant inducements."⁵

One plausible inducement from Washington would be to scale back (but still continue) the military exercises held jointly each spring by the United States and South Korea. China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, made a somewhat more ambitious proposal along these lines in April 2017, calling for North Korea to suspend its nuclear and missile tests and the United States, in return, to suspend the joint military exercises. The proposal was flatly rejected in Washington and also tacitly rejected in Pyongyang, as North Korea's missile tests continued.

The United States and South Korea could, however, reduce the magnitude of the military exercises, with the United States perhaps no longer deploying a supercarrier or a nuclear submarine, as has become common in recent years,⁶ while maintaining US forces in South Korea as well as ample interaction among the military personnel from the two countries. The United States could hold the issue of missile testing for a second step in negotiations while focusing initially on the urgent issue of preventing further progress in North Korea's nuclear-weapons program.

Gradual Disarmament

Following incremental steps, accordingly, would focus on the gradual disarmament of North Korea's nuclear weapons as well as on the conventional missiles Pyongyang is developing to deploy such weapons. Here the US and South Korean goal would be for North Korea to reduce, over a period of years, its growing nuclear stockpiles to zero in exchange for international aid targeted at specific economic development and public health objectives. The aid package could start small and increase in regular intervals,

The US could focus initially on the urgent issue of preventing further progress in North Korea's nuclear-weapons program

A dual approach involving both Washington and Seoul would 'immediately test Pyongyang's sincerity and its willingness to treat Seoul as a sovereign equal'

conditional on sustained cooperation and good faith from North Korea and thorough UN and IAEA inspections of the country and its facilities.

In exchange for a moratorium on missile testing, in addition to the moratorium on nuclear testing, the United States could offer at this stage to suspend the operation of its Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile-defense system, which began deployment in South Korea in April 2017, as long as continued North Korean cooperation on all facets of the negotiated agreements could be verified.⁷

Provided that North Korea kept to its commitments to cap and gradually eliminate its nuclear weapons and to reduce its conventional armaments, and also continued to keep the country open to ongoing inspections, the next steps would be a formal peace treaty ending the Korean War and the launch of diplomatic relations between the United States and North Korea as well as between South Korea and North Korea, complete with American and South Korean embassies in Pyongyang and North Korean embassies in both Washington and Seoul, and a timetable for the progressive lifting of international sanctions.

Lifting Sanctions

As the primary objective of sanctions is to bring North Korea into negotiations and keep the regime in compliance with any negotiated agreements, the lifting of sanctions can only come in the final stages of rapprochement. This step also would require coordination among the various countries and international organizations, including the United Nations and the European Union, that have leveled sanctions against North Korea. South Korea, for its part, could take the lead in negotiations on normalization of diplomatic relations with North Korea while the United States would take the lead on denuclearization. Ralph Cossa suggested such a path in late 2016, noting that a dual approach to negotiations involving both Washington and Seoul would “immediately test Pyongyang’s sincerity and

its willingness, finally, to treat the Seoul government as a sovereign equal.”⁸ Likewise, former US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mike Mullen and retired US Senator Sam Nunn have argued that the United States should also bring China into negotiations that would “coordinate planning in the event of a crisis and convey that it is not U.S. policy to cause the collapse of the North Korean regime.”⁹

Objections to Taking Incremental Steps

Any proposal for dialogue with North Korea has long been met with heavy skepticism, all the more so in recent years given the continued acceleration of North Korea’s nuclear-weapons program and the military skirmishes that have taken place between the two Koreas. The objections can be summarized in a brief list of questions and objections:

1. Why reward North Korea for its saber-rattling?
2. The North Koreans have cheated on past agreements and will cheat again on new ones; they routinely violate international agreements with impunity.
3. North Korea is a “textbook” rogue state involved in arms trafficking, assassinations, counterfeiting, drug smuggling, human-rights atrocities, human trafficking, money laundering, etc. They might consider smuggling remaining nuclear weapons to terrorist groups if offered the right price. They simply can’t be trusted.
4. The existing North Korean regime can’t accept peace even if they wished to secure it because they plausibly fear that their citizens would then overthrow them. The survival of North Korea’s Kim regime rests on the continuing deception of their people into believing they must depend on the regime to protect them from the threat—a threat that the regime does not want to give up—of an American invasion. If this threat is removed, or even lessened, the Kim regime will lose what little legitimacy it has and the people will finally turn against them.

*Improved behavior
from North Korea,
not bad behavior,
can be rewarded
through incentives*

5. It is dangerous to give North Korea a chance for peace as this would shift the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula in favor of North Korea and could, paradoxically, lead to an invasion of South Korea if the United States were to withdraw its military forces.
6. Giving North Korea a temporary reprieve and allowing it to hold on to some of its nuclear weapons for an extended period of time will undermine the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), sending the wrong message to its 190 signatories.
7. Any US agreement with North Korea is a nearly impossible sell in the United States. The Kim dynasty has been depicted as so erratic that any American president who might strike a deal with Kim Jong-un will be lambasted for appeasing a wild and crazy dictator and for paying a high price with the possibility of getting nothing (or worse) in return. In other words, no president would stick his or her neck out for a deal with North Korea in the present circumstances.

Expect the Unexpected

Several analysts have argued that all anyone can reasonably do about North Korea is prepare for contingencies (e.g., regime collapse or the outbreak of conflict) and expect the unexpected. In other words, the United States should place the responsibility for change entirely on North Korea and simply respond, in the meantime, to whatever happens (often by surprise) with North Korea in a way that will contain the likely problems as much as possible.

Yet not a single one of the objections above should foreclose negotiations. Any incremental steps worked out with North Korea must insist on constant and unwavering reciprocity; under no circumstances should Washington formally recognize North Korea as a nuclear-weapons state or otherwise give away the candy store to Pyongyang (or to anyone else). The United States must make it clear that the entire series of incremental steps will depend on good faith

on all sides. Provisions in agreements for verification can be included that, if followed, will greatly reduce the chances North Korea will be able to cheat.

Improved behavior from North Korea, not bad behavior, can be rewarded through incentives. United States military forces could remain in South Korea even after the signing of a peace treaty and normalized diplomatic relations with Pyongyang. At that time the number of US troops in South Korea would presumably be reduced but not eliminated. The numbers could be proportionately based on drops in the numbers of North Korean forces.

The nuclear nonproliferation treaty has already been undermined, given that North Korea withdrew from the treaty in 2003 in favor of pursuing nuclear weapons. A series of incremental steps gradually reducing North Korea's nuclear weapons to zero would have the effect of bringing North Korea back into the nonproliferation treaty.

An American president could explain to the US public that working out a pragmatic and carefully designed arrangement with North Korea to phase out its nuclear-weapons program and bring long-awaited peace to the Korean Peninsula is a good thing. It should be a far more palatable and ultimately a less costly option for the United States and its allies than "kicking the can down the road" on the issue to the point of later facing military action with all the resulting casualties in both Koreas. And even military action would not likely wipe out North Korea's dispersed nuclear-weapons infrastructure.

The most difficult objection above is the fourth on the list: that, given the box it has constructed for itself that depends on keeping the country on a perpetual war footing, the North Korean regime simply is not in a position to secure its own peace. It appears this was one reason why North Korea has cheated on past agreements.

Yet this, too, can be overcome. A series of gradual steps could buy time for the regime to turn its ingenuity toward the task of creating a new narrative not reliant on a paranoid siege mentality to justify its existence. One way to do so might even be

Any proposal for negotiating with North Korea has to reckon with the possibility, even the probability, of failure

for North Korea to portray the progression toward a peace treaty as a victory for the country and its people. This rhetorical strategy could help the regime strengthen its legitimacy for the time being.

For the North Korean regime, peace combined with economic benefits could be a preferable alternative to continuing isolation, sanctions, and poor living conditions for most people. All this plus the looming threat of a disastrous military clash if Pyongyang really does keep advancing its nuclear-weapons and missile-development programs.

With incremental steps toward peace, North Korean propaganda need not make an instant 180 degree spin but can be modulated toward a more collaborative posture for East Asian international relations. It could combine the shift in rhetoric with tangible investment in the future. This could also involve the start of a turnaround on its human-rights record and a shift toward compliance in its existing international agreements.

Whether the regime would actually choose to take such a path remains far from certain. But it is hardly out of the question—especially if Pyongyang can be presented with the right reasons for doing so. A series of incremental steps might be the only feasible way for North Korea to ease its way into a more benign narrative. While a sweeping peace treaty would require an immediate wholesale transformation in narrative, incremental steps might make it possible for the regime to navigate a fundamental change in the way it seeks legitimacy at home.

Conclusion: In Pursuit of Decent Options Regarding North Korea

Especially since the eclipse of the collaborative “Sunshine Policy” dating back to former South Korean presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, foreign-policy debates on North Korea have been filled with gloom and doom. North Korea is the “land of lousy options,”¹⁰ it is the place where “we must be careful what we wish for,”¹¹ and also the place where the current standoff is akin to “Russian roulette.”¹² Given that North

Korea has cheated its way out of previous negotiated agreements and has recently snubbed even Chinese proposals that, on balance, seemed quite favorable to Pyongyang, any proposal for negotiating with North Korea has to reckon with the possibility, even the probability, of failure.

That history of setbacks, however, should not deter future action but should instead prompt creative and innovative thinking about what might be done next and how the next overtures might be different than before. Less sweeping and more gradual efforts might better set the stage for compliance from North Korea. Trust building from all sides through a step-by-step process might defy the apparent odds. Even if denuclearization is a goal unlikely to be reached in the immediate term, it is also a goal that can't be given up. As Terence Roehrig of the US Naval War College has pointed out, negotiations in the meantime can lower the tension levels “that generate the conditions for miscalculation, mistakes and violence.”¹³

For those who ask, “Why would North Korea willingly put itself in a position in which it gradually gives up its nuclear weapons?,” the fact is that North Korea does have substantive, self-interested reasons to cut back on its nuclear weapons. It must be given the right kinds of assurances that it will not be attacked as well as the prospect of a peace treaty ending the Korean War.

The most obvious reason for North Korean negotiation is that a North Korea free of nuclear weapons, as well as free of a perceived existential threat from the United States, could redirect its limited resources into the economic and social development of the country and its people and gradually build up a new and far more reasonable basis for the political legitimacy of the regime. Most important, the goal of a peaceful, nuclear-free Korean Peninsula must not yet be written off as out of reach—it isn't. Indeed, the future prosperity and stability of Northeast Asia depends in no small measure on the fruition of that nuclear-free goal.

¹ Robert S. Litwak, *Preventing North Korea's Nuclear Breakout* (Washington: Wilson Center, 2017), p. 59.

² Ibid.

³ Joel Wit, "Trump and North Korea: A looming foreign policy crisis," *The New York Times*, February 15, 2017, <https://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/trump-and-north-korea-a-looming-foreign-policy-crisis/>.

⁴ RAND Corporation, "A nuclear North Korea," <http://www.rand.org/research/primers/nuclear-north-korea.html>.

⁵ James Clapper, "Getting North Korea to give up nuclear bomb probably 'lost cause': U.S. spy chief," Reuters, October 26, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-nuclear-clapper-idUSKCN12P2L7>.

⁶ Yonsei professor Moon Chung-in, a foreign policy adviser to South Korean president Moon Jae-in (no relation), caused a stir when he made this suggestion while visiting Washington in May 2017—but it remains a realistic option for negotiations.

⁷ Ben Rhodes, a deputy national security adviser to former US President Barack Obama, suggested in September 2016 that the United States would reconsider its deployment of THAAD to South Korea if North Korea were to give up both its nuclear-weapons and ballistic missile programs. See Sarah Kim, "North could reverse Thaad decision: Rhodes," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, September 9, 2016, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3023634>.

⁸ Ralph Cossa, "Dealing with the DPRK: exploring the Trump administration's options," *Pac Net 87, Pacific Forum CSIS*, December 1, 2016.

⁹ Mike Mullen and Sam Nunn, "How to deal with North Korea," *The Washington Post*, September 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/mike-mullen-and-sam-nunn-how-to-deal-with-north-korea/2016/09/15/3baa4ade-7ab1-11e6-ac8e-cf8e0dd91dc7_story.html?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.edb1959aabc4.

¹⁰ Victor Cha, quoted by Paul Eckert, "Analysis: N. Korea pulls U.S. back to a 'land of lousy options,'" Reuters, November 23, 2010.

¹¹ B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why it Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2011), p. 171.

¹² John Everard, *Only Beautiful, Please: A British Diplomat in North Korea* (Stanford: Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2012), p. 239.

¹³ Terence Roehrig, "Fixing America's impossible, unchangeable North Korea goals," *The National Interest*, June 7, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/fixing-americas-impossible-unchangeable-north-korean-goals-16495>

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