

Time for “Plan B”: The Denuclearization Illusion, the DPRK’s Strategic Game Plan, and the U.S.-ROK Alliance

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Summary

The United States has long sought to convince or compel North Korea to make a strategic decision about its nuclear weapons program. We now have that decision, but it is neither the one we had hoped for, nor is it the one President Trump has assured us that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has made.

Direct dialogue with Kim and his inner circle, together with Pyongyang’s actions and rhetoric, tell us that North Korea intends to retain its nuclear capabilities, freeze nuclear and ballistic missile testing, and offer Washington only the distant prospect of denuclearization – a prospect never to be realized. The Pyongyang regime believes it can simultaneously keep its nuclear program, improve ties with Washington, assure the world that it will be a “responsible” nuclear power, remove the U.S. military “threat,” and end international sanctions.

Washington’s “Plan A” – engaging directly with the North Korean leader to convince him to denuclearize – has failed. It is now time to think about “Plan B.” For the United States failure to adjust course is bound to result in what several U.S. administrations have vowed never to allow: A permanently nuclear-armed North Korea.

The United States must review its assumptions and policy goals and take to heart what we have learned about Pyongyang’s intentions. Such a review will show that the DPRK strategic game plan now includes:

- Securing international acceptance of North Korea as a de facto nuclear weapons state;
- Gaining acceptance as a “normal” country and reliable dialogue partner (albeit a nuclear-armed one);
- Shifting the subject of dialogue with the United States from denuclearization and towards the DPRK’s preferred agenda: removing sanctions, ending the U.S. “threat,” and terminating the state of war on the Korean Peninsula in order to remove the rationale for the U.S. military presence in Korea;
- Creating the illusion that it is denuclearizing, while retaining its nuclear weapons; and,

- Driving a wedge between the United States and its ROK ally.

Today, there are troubling signs that Pyongyang is doubling down on its effort to split the U.S.-South Korea alliance. In his 2019 New Year's address, Kim Jong Un all but demanded that Seoul dismantle the U.S.-ROK alliance or risk damaging North-South reconciliation.

Kim Jong Un's assault on the U.S.-ROK relationship, his appeals to sympathetic elements in the South, South Korea's preoccupation with reconciliation and reunification, and the enigmatic impulses of an American president who questions the value of the U.S.-ROK alliance are taking U.S.-South Korea relations into uncharted and dangerous waters.

Introduction

For over a quarter of a century, successive U.S. administrations have tried to convince the North Korean regime to end its nuclear weapons program. At the core of this approach has been an effort to press North Korea to make a "strategic decision" to cease its reliance on nuclear weapons and ballistic missile delivery systems for security. It was hoped that the right balance of pressure and engagement, punishment and reward, and sanctions and sanctions easing would compel the regime to make the "right" decision.

During this period, U.S. negotiators engaged intensively with DPRK diplomats in search of a path to denuclearization. They offered inducements and security guarantees, as well as threats. The United States tried increasing, and then relaxing, sanctions. U.S. policymakers used both isolation of North Korea and promises to bring the DPRK into the community of nations to force Pyongyang make that strategic decision.

These efforts yielded occasional progress, leading to hopes that denuclearization was possible. But in the end they produced only bitter disappointment. The best work of America's diplomats brought about several agreements that seemed to slow the North's nuclear and missile programs. But each agreement proved transitory and each ultimately collapsed under the weight of mutual mistrust, North Korean perfidy, and the DPRK's evident determination to retain its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities, regardless of the cost.

Reflecting on this experience, some veterans of past negotiations with the DPRK, including this author, argued that if the goal was to convince North Korea to permanently abandon its pursuit of unclear weapons, Washington needed to engage directly with the North Korean leader and his inner circle of advisors.¹

¹ Evans J.R. Revere, "Facing the Facts: Towards a New U.S. North Korea Policy," Brookings, October 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/16-north-korea-denuclearization-revere-paper.pdf>; see also Evans J.R. Revere, "Re-Engaging North Korea After Kim Jong-il's Death: Last, Best Hope or Dialogue to Nowhere?" Brookings, January 2012, Policy Paper Number 29, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/re-engaging-north-korea-after-kim-jong-ils-death-last-best-hope-or-dialogue-to-nowhere/>

North Korea's stovepiped and vigorously top-down political system meant that only the leader could make the "strategic decision" we sought. Relying on the past practice of negotiating with lower-level bureaucrats and diplomats would only continue to leave the United States in the hands of DPRK negotiators whose main job had always been to delay, obfuscate, evade, and use negotiations to extract benefits in return for promises and commitments that ultimately proved to be of little value.

Engaging with the North Korean leader, on the other hand, would get around the "filters" and roadblocks of the North Korean bureaucracy. It would enable the United States to convey, directly and authoritatively, the intentions and commitments of the U.S. president to the top. It would allow the United States to test the DPRK's leader's intentions, and to hear his unvarnished response to concrete U.S. proposals and assurances.

It was understood that establishing such a channel would not guarantee success. It was entirely possible, perhaps even likely, that the North Korean leader would reject even the most sincere U.S. offer. Nevertheless, it seemed worth trying, since it had never been tried before, other options had all failed, and it might yield the definitive decision the U.S. had long sought.

To Reach Out, Or Not?

The proposal failed to gain traction during the Obama Administration, which saw its hopes for better relations with the DPRK dashed early on, resulting in the adoption of an approach towards the North that began with "strategic patience" and ended with a single-minded focus on sanctions and pressure.

After Barack Obama's election, North Korean officials said they had no interest in dialogue and hinted that a decision to pursue nuclear weapons and missile development had already been made.² That decision was made dramatically clear by the North's May 2009 nuclear test (its first such test in almost three years) and long-range rocket and short-range missile tests in April and July of that year. These tests convinced the administration that there was nothing to be gained in potentially risky diplomacy with Pyongyang. The DPRK's violation of the so-called "Leap Day" agreement in early 2012 further solidified the Obama Administration's aversion to expending political and diplomatic capital on North Korea negotiations.

Kim Jong Un Moves...

Donald Trump inherited a hard-edged North Korea policy from his predecessor and immediately acted to make it even tougher. Verbal threats, military posturing, and biting sanctions and diplomatic measures formed the foundation of the Trump Administration's "maximum pressure" campaign, which sought to raise the rhetorical temperature, boost the burden of sanctions on North Korea, and intensify Pyongyang's isolation.

But the new American president had another agenda. President Trump's passion for theater and showmanship, his determination to reject his predecessor's policy, and a

² Author's conversation with DPRK official, November 5, 2008.

desire to do what no previous American president had dared do propelled him down an unprecedented path with North Korea – a path that ultimately led to the historic summit with Kim Jong Un in June 2018.

Kim Jong Un opened the door to a summit and other possibilities in a remarkable speech on January 1, 2018.³ He reached out boldly to South Korea. He proposed direct dialogue, North Korean participation in the Winter Olympics, and made the case for an unprecedented reconciliation process between North and South.

Kim appealed to pan-Korean nationalism and the blood ties between the two Koreas, striking an emotional chord with many South Koreans. He declared that the ultimate goal of South-North dialogue should be “independent” and “national” reunification, “by our nation itself.” The context made clear this was intended to warn the ROK that its relationship with the United States was unacceptable to the North. Kim charged that the main obstacle blocking Korean unification was the United States and South Korea’s alliance with America. The implication was clear enough: South Korea would have to change its relationship with the United States in order for reconciliation and reunification to happen.

A more important implication was that North Korea intended to force the South to choose between reconciliation with the North and its alliance with the United States. In retrospect, Seoul’s immediate and enthusiastic response to the North’s outreach almost certainly reinforced in Kim’s mind that his goal of separating the United States and the ROK might just be achievable.

It is often overlooked that the basis for Kim’s confident outreach to the South and the United States was stated in the opening paragraphs of his 2018 New Year’s Day speech. Kim declared that the DPRK had conducted “... tests of various means of nuclear delivery and (a) super-intense thermonuclear weapon, [and] attained our general orientation and strategic goal with success.” Having achieved that goal, he continued, “...Our Republic has at last come to possess a powerful and reliable war deterrent, which no force and nothing can reverse.”

Kim then declared that because of this success, “We have realized the wish of the great leaders...and we have created a mighty sword for defending peace...” North Korea was able to move in a new strategic direction *because* it was now a full-fledged nuclear-armed state. Subsequent assertions by governments in Seoul and Washington that North Korea has decided to give up its nuclear weapons fly in the face of the self-confident determination reflected in Kim’s words.

...and Trump Responds

Seoul’s positive response to Kim’s speech set in motion a process that eventually resulted in Kim’s expressed willingness to meet with President Trump. The U.S. president leapt at Kim’s proposal when South Korea’s national security advisor conveyed to him in March 2018. President Trump’s ready acceptance of the offer

³ “Kim Jong Un’s 2018 New Year’s Address,” The National Committee on North Korea (NCNK), January 1, 2018, <https://www.ncnk.org/node/1427>

reportedly confounded his own staff.⁴

The January 2018 speech may have been partly designed to begin pressing the United States to ease and ultimately remove sanctions and other measures by enlisting the aid of the Republic of Korea. South Korea's progressive president proved more than willing to help the North make its case. His government argued that U.S. engagement with the North and willingness to consider sanctions easing in return for the denuclearization of the DPRK would ease tensions and advance North-South reconciliation. Little did the South Koreans realize that, in making the case for a U.S.-DPRK summit, they were pushing on an open door.

The Trump Administration has insisted that its "maximum pressure" campaign forced Pyongyang to come to the negotiating table. But it seems more likely that it was not the immediate impact of sanctions, which had only just begun to bite, but rather concern over their eventual impact if they were not ended. By meeting with Trump, Kim sought to eliminate this concern.

From Diplomatic Malpractice to Strategic Clarity

In deciding to meet Kim Jong Un, Donald Trump defied precedent and decades of U.S. policy. In contrast with his predecessors, Trump had no qualms about engaging with the North Korean leader. Indeed, he seemed oblivious to the downside of such a meeting and personally convinced that, unlike his predecessors, he was uniquely qualified and capable of achieving success where they had produced, in his mind, only failure.

The Singapore summit was a flawed event that was heavy on made-for-television optics and drama but sorely lacking in substance. Both at the time and in subsequent months, it appears to have done nothing to bring about actual progress in the denuclearization of North Korea. The impulsive U.S. decision to hold the summit meant that there was little time to agree with North Korea on what the meeting would produce other than an oddly brief and vaguely worded summit declaration that the two leaders signed.

The leaders went into the summit without a common definition of "denuclearization" and the summit ended with the two sides as far apart on this as ever. For the United States, the word means the verifiable, complete, and final end of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program.

For Pyongyang, "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" and the "complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" – the operative phrases in the joint statement – meant what they have always meant for the DPRK: the elimination of the "threat" posed by the United States, its alliance with the ROK, its military presence on and around the Korean Peninsula, the nuclear umbrella the U.S. extends over the ROK and Japan, and the strategic and tactical military assets that America could bring to bear against North Korea in a conflict. In an important sense, "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" means the elimination of America's ability to wage war against North

⁴ Mark Landler, "Planning Begins for Kim Jong-un Meeting Some Trump Aides Believe Never Will Happen," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/us/politics/trump-kim-jong-un-meeting-planning.html>

Korea and the neutering of the U.S. military deterrent.

Despite this radical difference in interpretation, the U.S. president agreed to include North Korea's language in the joint statement – a remarkable concession since the meaning of these words was well known to U.S. negotiators. President Trump also agreed that the joint statement would require only that the DPRK “work toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” Kim Jong Un was surely eager to affix his name to a statement that both affirmed the DPRK's definition of “denuclearization” and required little concrete action on North's part.⁵

Kim was no doubt equally pleased when the U.S. president unilaterally announced suspension of major U.S.-ROK defensive military exercises at the summit. The president's decision stunned defense and foreign policy experts and also came as a surprise to U.S. officials. There is no evidence that the president asked the North Korean leader for a reciprocal suspension of North Korean exercises, which have continued. No less surprising was the president's description of the exercises as “war games” and “provocative” – language that could usually be found in North Korean propaganda.⁶

The summit joint statement had many faults, not the least of which was that it allowed the two sides to depart Singapore with markedly different views of what the meeting had actually achieved.

The United States, on its part, declared after the summit that the DPRK leader had agreed to denuclearize. To this day, senior U.S. officials insist that the summit produced an agreement on the North's denuclearization.

For the DPRK, the summit was not about denuclearization, at least not in the sense that the United States defines it. Rather, it was aimed at improving bilateral relations, building mutual confidence, and establishing a new pattern of relations between the United States and the DPRK. In North Korea's view, this process would lead to enhanced security for the DPRK by removing the U.S. “threat” – which eventually would enable the North to consider denuclearization. Pyongyang's subsequent public statements have repeatedly stressed this interpretation of the summit agreement and rejected the United States' insistence that the two sides had agreed on denuclearization.

The gap between Washington's and Pyongyang's interpretations of the summit outcome was evident immediately after the Singapore meeting. Secretary of State Pompeo visited Pyongyang in early July 2018 to press the DPRK to set an agenda and timetable for denuclearization. Pompeo reportedly hoped to “fill in the details” of a denuclearization agreement, but his visit proved both contentious and unproductive. He

⁵ “Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit,” The White House, June 12, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/>

⁶ Eric Schmitt, “Pentagon and Seoul Surprised by Trump Pledge to Halt Military Exercises,” The New York Times, June 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/12/world/asia/trump-military-exercises-north-south-korea.html>

also failed to meet with Kim Jong Un, although Kim had received him on two previous visits to Pyongyang.⁷

As the Secretary of State flew home, the DPRK foreign ministry issued a blistering attack on Pompeo, describing his denuclearization demands as “cancerous.” “The U.S. is fatally mistaken if it went to the extent of regarding that the DPRK would be compelled to accept, out of its patience, the demands reflecting its gangster-like mindset,” the statement declared.⁸

The American Secretary of State, representing a U.S. president who had declared on June 13th that the North Korean nuclear threat had ended, had travelled to Pyongyang to negotiate the specifics of Pyongyang’s denuclearization. North Korea’s resounding rejection of this agenda spoke volumes about its intentions.

U.S.-DPRK dialogue on denuclearization has been at a virtual standstill since Pompeo’s ill-fated July visit. Tellingly, a planned trip by Pompeo to North Korea in August was cancelled by the United States because of insufficient progress on denuclearization.

During an October visit, Pompeo managed to meet with Kim Jong Un, who offered to allow outside experts to visit a nuclear weapons test site that Pyongyang claimed had been destroyed. While hardly a denuclearization step, some saw the gesture as evidence of North Korean good faith. But in reality the test site had already outlived its usefulness and mountainous North Korea offered other prospective sites if Pyongyang decided to resume nuclear testing.

Pompeo and Kim reportedly discussed a second Trump-Kim summit. Convening a second meeting with Trump is now a major priority for Pyongyang, and Kim Jong Un emphasized his willingness to meet President Trump again in his January 1, 2019 address to the nation.⁹

Pyongyang is clearly dissatisfied with what it has been hearing from Secretary Pompeo and other senior U.S. officials and is eager to go over the heads of the president’s aides in order to engage directly with President Trump. This explains why a planned follow-on visit to the United States in November by Kim Yong Chol, Pompeo’s North Korean counterpart, was cancelled at the last minute. In pursuing a second meeting with the U.S. president, Kim Jong Un may hope to wring concessions from an eager, malleable,

⁷ Hyonhee Shin and John Walcott, “Pompeo hopes to ‘fill in’ details on denuclearization on North Korea trip,” Reuters, July 5, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-pompeo/pompeo-meets-north-koreans-hopes-to-fill-in-details-on-denuclearization-idUSKBN1JW0A0>;

Nick Wadhams, “Inside Pompeo’s Fraught North Korea Trip,” Bloomberg, July 8, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-07-08/one-night-in-pyongyang-inside-pompeo-s-fraught-north-korea-trip>

⁸ Veronica Stacqualursi, “North Korea pans ‘gangster-like’ mindset of US as Pompeo signals ‘progress’ in talks,” CNN, July 7, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/07/politics/mike-pompeo-north-korea-nuclear-talks/index.html>

⁹ “Kim Jong Un’s 2019 New Year Address,” National Committee on North Korea, January 1, 2019, https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kimjongun_2019_newyearaddress.pdf/file_view

and embattled American leader. Kim's evident success in Singapore provides him with some basis for that hope.

The current impasse in denuclearization talks is the product of a U.S. demand that North Korea take specific denuclearization steps, together with the DPRK's insistence that the Singapore agreement is about improving relations and removing the U.S. threat. An objective reading of the summit joint statement suggests that Pyongyang's interpretation has some validity. Nevertheless, the fact remains that if denuclearization of North Korea was the U.S. goal going into the Singapore summit, we are no closer to achieving that goal than we were before June 12, 2018.

Importantly, however, the Singapore meeting and subsequent developments have provided the United States with strategic clarity about North Korea's goals. In what may eventually be recorded as one of history's great ironies, an ill advised, impulsively arranged, inadequately prepared, and problematically executed U.S.-DPRK summit appears to have helped provide the United States with the North Korean "strategic decision" that Washington has long sought.

Direct dialogue with the North Korean leader and his inner circle, together with North Korea's actions and public rhetoric, have given us a clear picture of North Korea's game plan. It is now evident that the DPRK intends to retain its nuclear capabilities, freeze nuclear and ballistic missile testing, negotiate the elimination of sanctions and the removal of the U.S. military "threat," and normalize relations with both Washington and Seoul, while holding out the possibility of the eventual denuclearization of the DPRK – even if that denuclearization will never be achieved. That, not the denuclearization of North Korea, is Pyongyang's plan.

The Denuclearization Illusion

President Trump tells us that the North Korean threat has gone away. He and ROK President Moon have claimed that North Korea is committed to denuclearization and that the DPRK is moving to carry out its denuclearization commitments. South Korean National Security Advisor Chung Eui-yong said recently, "The denuclearization process of the Korean Peninsula has begun to enter an irreversible phase."¹⁰ None of these things appears true.

The U.S. intelligence community, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and leading experts on North Korea have all concluded that North Korea is in fact enhancing its nuclear weapons capability, albeit without conducting the kinetic testing of warheads.

The DPRK is producing solid-fuel missiles capable of striking American allies and U.S. military bases in the western Pacific.¹¹ Pyongyang may be using a separate facility to

¹⁰ Yonhap, "Top security adviser says N. Korean denuclearization is irreversible," Korea Herald, December 20, 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20181221000635>

¹¹ Scott Neuman, "North Korea Reportedly Expanding Ballistic Missile Production Facility," NPR, July 2, 2018,

build new intercontinental ballistic missiles to target the United States.¹² Work at the plutonium production reactor at the Yongbyon site is continuing, and analysts believe that a second uranium enrichment facility is producing fissile material for nuclear weapons.^{13 14}

Nuclear weapons testing may have been suspended, but nuclear weapons development is continuing apace. Meanwhile, there are reports that North Korea has carried out tests involving missile telemetry equipment and the transmission of data related to its ICBM program.¹⁵ North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs are alive and well.

The DPRK is carrying out these steps in accordance with its leader's instructions. In his New Year's Day address of 2018, Kim Jong Un exhorted the nation to build a "powerful socialist country by taking the historic victory in the building of the DPRK's nuclear forces as a springboard for fresh progress." Kim directed that "The nuclear weapons research sector and the rocket industry should mass-produce nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles, the power and reliability of which have already been proved to the full, to give a spur to the efforts for deploying them for action." Continuing, he warned, "...We should always be ready for immediate nuclear counterattack to cope with the enemy's maneuvers for a nuclear war."

Kim Jong Un amplified these instructions in remarks delivered to the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee on April 20, 2018.¹⁶ In those remarks, he turned his exhortations of January 1 into strategic guidance. Kim highlighted the success in building a "state nuclear force" and emphasized that no further nuclear or missile testing was needed because the DPRK had "finished" the work of mounting nuclear warheads on ballistic missiles.

<https://www.npr.org/2018/07/02/625267839/north-korea-reportedly-expanding-ballistic-missile-production-facility>

¹² "North Korea renews work at long-range missile factory, US intelligence officials say," The Telegraph, July 31, 2018,

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/07/31/north-korea-renews-work-long-range-missile-factory-us-intelligence/>.

¹³ North Korea's Nuclear Reactor Center: Testing of Reactor Cooling Systems; Construction of Two New Non-Industrial Buildings," 38 North, July 6, 2018,

<https://www.38north.org/2018/07/yongbyon070618/>

¹⁴ Ankit Panda, "Exclusive: Revealing Kangson, North Korea's First Covert Uranium Enrichment Site," The Diplomat, July 13, 2018,

<https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/exclusive-revealing-kangson-north-koreas-first-covert-uranium-enrichment-site/>

¹⁵ The Yomiuri Shimbun, "N. Korea continues missile development," The Japan News, December 30, 2018, <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0005450685>

¹⁶ "DPRK Report on the Third Plenary Meeting of the Seventh Central Committee," National Committee on North Korea (NCNK), April 21, 2018,

https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/dprk_report_third_plenary_meeting_of_seventh_central_committee_of_wpk.pdf

The central point of Kim's report to the Party was that North Korea could now shift its focus to economic development precisely *because* it had achieved its goal of developing a nuclear force. Nuclear weapons now served as the foundation of the DPRK's strategic game plan for developing its national economy.

As suggested earlier, nuclear weapons also allow North Korea to proceed with confidence as it engages the United States and the Republic of Korea. As Kim put it to the Central Committee, nuclear weapons are "the firm guarantee by which our descendants can enjoy the most dignified and happiest life in the world." There is no indication that Kim's guidance has changed.

It is worth noting, however, that in Kim's January 1, 2019 speech he claimed North Korea had ceased to "make" nuclear weapons – the first time the North has made such an assertion. Kim's claim is directly contradicted both by the communiqué issued by the Party Central Committee in April 2018 and by the U.S. intelligence community. It remains to be seen whether by making this assertion Kim was signaling willingness to suspend further warhead production in return for corresponding U.S. steps.

The DPRK's advances in its nuclear and missile programs have contributed to the current impasse in U.S.-DPRK talks. The hopes generated by the Singapore summit have run headlong into the cold reality of North Korean actions and Pyongyang's true intentions.

Those intentions were on display when Pyongyang restated its definition of the phrase "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" in a commentary carried by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on December 20, 2018.¹⁷ Pyongyang blamed the roadblock in U.S.-DPRK dialogue on the United States' "mistaken understanding" of that phrase. The commentary pointed out that the words "North Korean denuclearization" do not appear in the Singapore summit joint statement. This was both a reminder of the U.S. failure to include its own definition of denuclearization in the document, and a not-too-subtle reminder that the denuclearization which Pyongyang has in mind is not its own.

The article castigated Secretary Pompeo for "almost drunkenly" claiming that the DPRK had promised complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization. It urged the United States to "study geography" in order to understand where denuclearization needs to take place. The commentary said, "When we say Korean Peninsula, that includes the territory of our Republic along with the area of South Korea, where US armed forces of aggression are deployed, including nuclear weapons, and when we say Korean Peninsula denuclearization, that means removing all nuclear threat factors not only within the territory of the North and South, but starting with [those in] the surrounding area that are aiming at the Korean Peninsula."

¹⁷ Ankit Panda, "Removing the U.S. nuclear "threat": What to make of Thursday's KCNA commentary," NK Pro, December 20, 2018, <https://www.nknews.org/pro/removing-the-u-s-nuclear-threat-what-to-make-of-thursdays-kcna-commentary/>

While the commentary contained nothing new in terms of North Korean policy, it was a valuable reminder of the DPRK's longstanding position that the burden of denuclearizing the peninsula rests squarely on the United States, and that Washington must remove the "threat" posed by America's military capabilities. Only when that is done will North Korea be in a position to contemplate its own denuclearization.

The DPRK understands that the United States, even under President Trump, is unlikely to dismantle its alliances, remove its forces, withdraw its strategic and tactical assets from the region, eliminate the nuclear umbrella, and take the other steps Pyongyang has called for. So the DPRK's demands may best be understood as Pyongyang's way of telling us that it intends to retain its nuclear weapons and "national nuclear force" forever.

"Plan B", Pyongyang's Game Plan, and Alliance Coordination

The current impasse in U.S.-DPRK talks is deeply revealing. There is powerful evidence – including in Kim Jong Un's own words – that Pyongyang is not serious about denuclearization. The evidence actually suggests that North Korea intends to keep and even strengthen its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, even as it pursues talks with the United States. President Donald Trump has declared that everything is "just fine" in terms of U.S.-DPRK dialogue.¹⁸ Clearly this is not the case.

Today, the prospect of a second U.S.-DPRK summit in the coming weeks means the United States may be in danger of compounding the errors of the first. The most egregious of these was the assurance to the American people that North Korea had agreed to denuclearize when the facts, including the DPRK's own words, said otherwise. It is time for the United States to acknowledge that Pyongyang is not acting in good faith and does not intend to give up its nuclear capabilities.

Today, it is clear that Washington's "Plan A" – using direct dialogue with the North Korean leader to convince him to denuclearize – has failed. The highest levels of the DPRK regime have revealed their intentions to us. It is now time to think about a "Plan B" that would compel Pyongyang to denuclearize. Failure to adjust course and pursue a new approach will likely result in what several administrations have said the United States will never accept: a permanently nuclear-armed North Korea.

At a minimum, the situation calls for a reassessment of the assumptions and policy goals that underpin the current approach with North Korea. No less important will be for the United States to thoroughly review what the facts tell us about Pyongyang's intentions. A revised policy approach can then flow from a careful study of the results of this review.

Such a review is likely to conclude that the DPRK's strategic game plan includes the five objectives listed below, each of which carries serious dangers and presents major

¹⁸ Rebecca Morin, "Trump claims he's in 'no hurry' to reach North Korea nukes deal," Politico, December 14, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/12/14/trump-north-korea-denuclearization-negotiations-1065565>

challenges. For each, a word of advice to policymakers is provided.

Nuclear Acceptance. North Korea believes the United States and the international community will eventually accept it as a de facto nuclear-weapons state. While Pyongyang has no illusions that this will take place in any formal way, it has already sought to create a new reality through Kim Jong Un's declaration on January 1, 2018 that the DPRK had completed the development of its "state nuclear force."

Significantly, Kim Jong Un saw no need to make specific reference to his nuclear forces in this year's address. In not doing so, he was effectively treating North Korea's self-declared nuclear status as a given.

Pyongyang declared one year ago that it had formally arrived as a nuclear power. Subsequently, North Korea sought to ease international concerns by suspending nuclear weapons and ballistic missile testing and by assuring the international community that it would be a "responsible" nuclear power. Kim Jong Un conveyed that assurance in his report to the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee in April 2018, and he reiterated it in his January 1, 2019 remarks.

As evidence of its "good faith" and "responsibility," North Korea has also assured the United States and the international community that it has disabled or dismantled elements of its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile testing programs. Having developed what it believes to be a credible deterrent, including a ballistic missile delivery system that could reach the United States, the DPRK believes it can now eliminate those parts of its program that are superannuated, unusable, or which could be easily reconstituted if the need arises.

Going forward, U.S. policymakers must be particularly mindful of North Korea's ambition to be "accepted" as a nuclear power. They should understand that Pyongyang intends to reassure the world about its nuclear and missile programs in the hope that this will make the international community more amenable to the North's nuclear status.

The North Korean regime may even offer to eliminate or freeze components of its programs as evidence of its "good faith," even as it retains its core nuclear weapons and missile capabilities, in the hope that this will satisfy the United States and the international community.

We should not be surprised if the DPRK offers to permanently suspend, or even dismantle, its ICBM program – a canny step that the U.S. administration might find appealing, but one that would leave the North's medium- and short-range missiles pointed at America's Japanese and South Korean allies, and at U.S. bases in the Western Pacific.

Pyongyang has also suggested in the past that it wishes to pursue an "arms-control" negotiation with the United States in which it trades freezes, cuts, or caps on its nuclear and missile capabilities in return for steps by the United States to reduce or eliminate capabilities aimed at the DPRK, including those deployed on U.S. territory.

Regardless of its other possible approaches, Pyongyang may also try to convince the United States to engage in a long-term negotiating process in which the stated goal is denuclearization, but with the path to that goal divided into stages. Ideally for

Pyongyang, the harder, more substantial, verifiable, and irreversible steps that it would have to take would be deferred to the distant future in such a negotiation. For North Korea, which is nothing if not adept at exploiting negotiations with the United States, this would provide just the vehicle it needs to ensure it remains in possession of its nuclear arsenal for a long time to come. For North Korea, time is its friend.

The core point for policymakers is that Pyongyang wants to keep its nuclear program, improve relations with the United States, reassure the United States that it will not use its nuclear weapons or engage in proliferation, remove the U.S. military “threat,” and end international sanctions. That collection of disparate and contradictory goals should not be acceptable to the United States or its allies, but it is the essence of what North Korea hopes to achieve.

Normalization. The DPRK seeks to “normalize” its relations with the ROK, the United States, and China through summitry and by opening up new dialogue channels. The goal here is to gain legitimacy and acceptance as a “normal” country and dialogue partner – albeit a nuclear-armed one.

The opening salvo of this normalization effort was Kim Jong Un’s January 1, 2018 speech, which largely focused on ties with South Korea. By proposing participation in the Winter Olympics, offering an olive branch to the South, and calling for reconciliation and reunification, Kim Jong Un set in motion a process that subsequently drew in the United States and China, and which ultimately may include high-level engagement with Russia and Japan.

Importantly, the North’s outreach was premised on its “arrival” as a nuclear weapons power. *Because* North Korea had completed its nuclear- and missile-related goals, it was now able to conduct robust diplomacy with the South and others. This explains the swagger with which Kim Jong Un and his inner circle have engaged the world over the last year.

North Korea has largely succeeded in its ‘normalization’ goal. The speed with which the ROK – and the United States – responded to Kim’s initial overtures was astonishing. Any qualms that Seoul or Washington had about engaging robustly with a nuclear-armed North Korea quickly disappeared, swept away by the prospect of historic summitry and progress on denuclearization that has proved elusive.

We witnessed this phenomenon again on January 1, 2019, when South Korea’s Blue House reacted immediately and enthusiastically to Kim Jong Un’s New Year’s address. This was despite the fact that Kim’s speech offered nothing new on denuclearization, and despite the fact that Kim called for the ROK to effectively abandon its alliance with the United States as the price for continued North-South cooperation.

Kim Jong Un has sought to portray himself as a “normal” leader, a reasonable interlocutor, and a statesman. Here, too, he has succeeded. The U.S. president has praised Kim’s talent as a negotiator and called him “honorable” and a man of “courage.”¹⁹ South Korea’s president has been similarly fulsome in his compliments.

¹⁹ See, for example, Adam Taylor, “From ‘Rocket Man’ to a man of ‘Courage,’” The Washington Post, September 28, 2018,

Meanwhile, the appearance of key figures from the Pyongyang regime in the VIP box at the Winter Olympics (including figures under international sanctions) only a few feet away from the U.S. vice president and the ROK president was a testament to Pyongyang's ability to gain the legitimacy it has long sought.

We should expect further attempts by Pyongyang to convince the U.S., the ROK, and the international community that the DPRK should be welcomed into the community of nations, despite its possession of nuclear weapons. U.S. policymakers would be wise to avoid responding in ways that confer legitimacy or normality on North Korea as long as it remains a nuclear power.

Changing the Subject. Central to the DPRK's approach to dialogue with the United States is the need to shift the main topic of negotiations away from the issue Washington wishes to emphasize – denuclearization – and to the topics that Pyongyang prefers to discuss.

For North Korea, dialogue with the United States must focus on removing the “obstacles” to improved relations. This means eliminating the military threat the United States poses to the DPRK, ending sanctions and other measures, and terminating the state of war on the Korean Peninsula. That latter goal is particularly important for Pyongyang, since it would eliminate the rationale for the continued U.S. military presence in Korea.

The DPRK has repeatedly emphasized that the Singapore summit joint statement's call for a “new relations” between the U.S. and the DPRK, establishment of a “stable peace regime” on the peninsula, and “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” requires the United States to act first in the above areas if it expects to achieve the North's eventual denuclearization. In Pyongyang's view, the DPRK has already taken significant steps by suspending missile and nuclear testing, and it is now past time for the United States to reciprocate.

That was the main message Kim Jong Un conveyed to the United States in his January 1, 2019 speech. Delivered with a hint of irritation and impatience, Kim demanded that the United States relax its sanctions and pressure campaign and cease its “unilateral demands” – i.e., its requirement that the DPRK take concrete denuclearization steps.

These demands are hardly new, but they have now been made personally by the North Korean leader, and were delivered with a warning that U.S. failure to respond would compel the DPRK to “explore a new way to defending the sovereignty of our country and supreme interests of our state.” This is tame language compared with Kim's claim a year ago that the “nuclear button” was on his desk, but the implied threat is clear enough.

While Kim did not specify what the “new way” might be, it is not unreasonable to conclude that he intended to remind the United States that the North's nuclear and ballistic missile testing programs have been suspended, not ended, and that Pyongyang can easily resume testing and accelerate the development of nuclear weapons and

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/09/26/rocket-man-man-courage/?utm_term=.e13581571b1a

ballistic missiles if it chooses. Contrary to the assessments of some, North Korea's denuclearization is by no means on an inevitable or irreversible track.

The core concern here is that Kim Jong Un is demanding that the United States compensate him for actions that do not constitute denuclearization. North Korea's position is that the United States must reward Pyongyang even if it has not taken the concrete, verifiable, and irreversible steps Washington demands. Recent reports claim that the United States is contemplating taking some compensatory steps to recognize North Korea's testing suspension. If those reports are true, Washington may be putting itself on a slippery slope by buying into Pyongyang's concept of negotiations and by eliminating any timeline for denuclearization.²⁰

Creating the Illusion of Denuclearization. On a related note, Pyongyang has characterized its suspension of nuclear and ballistic missile testing and the destruction of the entrance tunnels at its nuclear testing facility as "denuclearization" steps. Both U.S. and ROK officials, including the U.S. president, have occasionally agreed with this characterization.

To be sure, Pyongyang's actions have reduced tensions and limited the DPRK's ability to rapidly improve its nuclear and missile arsenal. But they do not mean North Korea is denuclearizing. The evidence clearly suggests the DPRK's program is continuing, even in the absence of kinetic testing of weapons and missile delivery systems.

Meanwhile, Pyongyang has been unwilling to provide a detailed declaration of its nuclear facilities, weapons, and stockpile of fissile material for nuclear weapons. Such a declaration is essential if we are to make an accurate inventory of the North's program and to understand the scope of the denuclearization task.

The DPRK reacted angrily when Secretary Pompeo reportedly sought such a declaration during his July 2018 visit. Providing a declaration would be clear evidence of the DPRK's seriousness about denuclearization. So would inviting IAEA or other international inspectors to visit its nuclear facilities to begin to put safeguard measures in place. But instead of taking steps that would generate confidence in its intentions, Pyongyang has portrayed the actions it has taken as something more than what they are.

North Korea has achieved some success in creating the illusion that it is engaged in "denuclearization." To the extent that U.S. and ROK officials give credence to this assertion, they allow North Korea to shirk its responsibility to denuclearize and to divert attention away from the fact that it is continuing to advance its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. U.S. and ROK policymakers must not allow Pyongyang to redefine denuclearization, nor should they accept anything less from Pyongyang than concrete and verifiable steps that lead to the end of its nuclear program.

Sharpening the Wedge. For the U.S.-ROK alliance, perhaps the most consequential

²⁰ Kim Ji-eun, "U.S. divides N. Korea denuclearization objection into short-term and long-term goals," Hankyoreh, December 31, 2018, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/876401.html

element of the DPRK's game plan is its attempt to divide the United States and its South Korean ally. There are troubling signs that Pyongyang is doubling down on this effort and that the DPRK now sees a real opportunity to damage the alliance.

North Korea's ultimate goal remains the unification of the Korean Peninsula under its rule. This cannot be achieved as long as the ROK is allied with the United States. While Pyongyang cannot drive the United States off the peninsula, it understands only too well that political dynamics within South Korea and difficulties between the United States and its ROK ally are ripe for exploitation.

Pyongyang recognized early on that the collapse of Park Geun-hye's presidency, the implosion of conservative rule in the South, and the election of a progressive government in the ROK offered an opportunity. The North wasted no time in taking advantage of it.

Kim Jong Un's January 1, 2018 speech was cannily crafted to appeal to pan-Korean nationalism, to a sometimes-romantic South Korean vision of reconciliation and reunification, to Korean pride, to latent anti-American sentiment, and to an ideological stratum of South Korean society that remains sympathetic to the North. Kim's message struck a powerful chord in the South.

Seoul moved with remarkable speed in responding to Kim's overture. Olympic participation, dramatic North-South summits, a family reunification event, establishment of a North-South liaison office in Kaesong, reconnection of military hotlines, demining of sections of the demilitarized zone, dismantling of some guard posts in the DMZ, cultural and sports exchanges, establishment of a no-fly zone near the DMZ, discussion of railway, road, and electrical power grid reconnection, hints about the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Zone and the Mt. Kumgang tourism facility, and much more occurred with head-spinning rapidity.

Progress and the potential for progress was so rapid that it raised concerns in Washington that the pace of North-South reconciliation was exceeding what the politics, diplomacy, and the military realities on the peninsula could sustain. Clear contradictions arose between the pace and scope of North-South dialogue that Seoul was pursuing, and the U.S. position that sanctions needed to be tightened and that demands be intensified for concrete denuclearization steps by the North. Of particular concern were military steps taken by the North and South that had the potential to undermine readiness, intelligence-gathering capabilities, and bilateral U.S.-ROK training. Increasingly, breakdowns in coordination and communication between Washington and Seoul were becoming evident.

No less problematically, Seoul occasionally seemed to be serving as North Korea's "friend in court," making the case to the United States and the international community for preemptively easing sanctions in order to induce the North's cooperation on denuclearization – a position that ran directly counter to U.S. policy.²¹ Seoul even argued for positions that Pyongyang had stopped pursuing, such as pressing the United

²¹ See, for example, Dasl Yoon and Laurence Norman, "Moon's Push to Ease North Korea Sanctions Falls Flat," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 19, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/mons-hail-mary-for-eu-to-back-easing-north-korea-sanctions-1539952687>

States to consider a “peace declaration” ending the Korean War.

In his January 1, 2018 speech, Kim Jong Un charged that the United States and its “vassal forces” (i.e., the South Korean military) were responsible for aggravating the situation on the peninsula and obstructing reunification. He called for Seoul to end the “abnormal situation” on the peninsula in which South Korea has sided with the United States against the North. Kim’s call for Seoul and Pyongyang to pursue “sovereign” or “independent” reunification was therefore a call for the South to fundamentally change its relationship with the United States.

Kim picked up this theme again in his January 1, 2019 remarks, making Seoul’s choice even starker. He called for the South to cease joint military exercises with “outside military forces” (i.e., the United States) and to suspend its acquisition of “war equipment, including strategic assets, from outside.” By placing these demands in the context of next steps to be taken to improve North-South ties, Kim was effectively telling the South that the time had come for it to choose between reconciling with the North and maintaining its traditional alliance ties with the United States.

In light of problems in U.S.-ROK alliance coordination and especially in light of the DPRK’s determined effort to exploit U.S.-ROK differences, the recent establishment of a U.S.-ROK joint working group to coordinate the allies’ approaches on diplomacy with the North, denuclearization, sanctions implementation, and inter-Korean relations was a necessary and timely move.²² Reports of policy disconnects between the allies have now decreased, and it is hoped there will be fewer policy surprises between the allies.

Nevertheless, Kim Jong Un’s January 1, 2019 speech suggests he may believe that Seoul has now become a soft target for the North’s appeals to pan-Korean nationalism and anti-American and anti-alliance sentiment. Kim is probably encouraged in thinking along these lines by reports that prominent South Korean figures are saying the ROK government should “coach” North Korea on how to deal with Washington, that the U.S. should preemptively ease sanctions on North Korea, and that a peace treaty will lead to the end of the United Nations Command – a long-sought North Korean goal.²³ North Korea may also be taking comfort from those in the ROK who argue that South Korea should rid itself of its alliance with the United States.²⁴

We should expect Kim Jong Un to continue to press the ROK to reassess and revise its alliance relationship with Washington. North Korea will also seek to portray the United

²² Noh Ji-won and Hwang Joon-bum, “S. Korea and US to establish working group for N. Korea’s denuclearization and US measures,” Hankyoreh, November 1, 2018, http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/868408.html

²³ See, for example, Kim Bo-eun, “Kim Jong-un should meet Moon before Trump,” The Korea Times, December 31, 2018, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/01/356_261233.html

²⁴ Uri Friedman, “A Top Adviser to the South Korean President Questions the U.S. Alliance,” The Atlantic, May 17, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/05/moon-south-korea-us-alliance/560501/>

States as standing in the way of Korean reconciliation and blocking the two Koreas' path to reunification. That message will appeal to those in the South who have traditionally suspected the United States of supporting Korea's continued division.

Kim Jong Un is also no doubt encouraged by the recent resignation of Secretary of Defense Mattis, who had been one of the strongest advocates of the U.S.-ROK alliance. The surprising decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria and Afghanistan was surely welcome news in Pyongyang.

Mattis' departure leaves the U.S.-ROK alliance open to the impulses of an American president who has made no secret of his opposition to America's traditional alliances and who has called for the end of the U.S. military presence in the ROK. The situation is not helped by the fact that U.S.-ROK burden-sharing talks have broken down, which could encourage the worst instincts of President Trump, who sees the alliance in purely transactional terms.²⁵

Kim Jong Un's attack on the U.S.-ROK alliance, his appeals to sympathetic elements in the South, Seoul's preoccupation with reconciliation and reunification, and the enigmatic impulses of a U.S. president who has questioned the value of the U.S.-ROK alliance are taking U.S.-South Korea relations into uncharted and dangerous waters.

²⁵ Mark Landler, "Trump Orders Pentagon to Consider Reducing U.S. Forces in South Korea," The New York Times, May 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/world/asia/trump-troops-south-korea.html>; see also Joe Gould and Leo Shane III, "Trump's proposed troop moves in South Korea raise concerns for lawmakers," Defense News, June 12, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/news/pentagon-congress/2018/06/12/trumps-proposed-troop-moves-in-south-korea-raise-concerns-for-lawmakers/>