

Can Diplomacy Work with North Korea?

By [Georgy Toloraya](#)

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Based on recent interviews with North Korean representatives, both senior level foreign establishment representatives and experts, I am persuaded there is still a chance for diplomacy to head off a conflict over the country's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. The latest (visibly premature) declarations by Pyongyang that it has completed its nuclear force signal its readiness for dialogue. Taking advantage of this fleeting opportunity requires stronger leadership from the United States and more effective cooperation among the other key stakeholders.

What Does North Korea Want?

In recent discussions, North Koreans reiterated Pyongyang's standard policy goals: reach "strategic parity" with the US by creating a credible nuclear deterrent and compelling opponents to conclude a peace treaty with the North, recognize the sovereignty and independence of the DPRK, and provide security guarantees to enable the country's further economic development. The North Koreans with whom I spoke with argued that without a "nuclear deterrent," the hostility of the US and many of its allies toward North Korea will sooner or later result in "crushing down" the country. However, they did nothing to dispel the suspicion that, in fact, Pyongyang might also aim at aggression and concessions extortion from South Korea if it gets a deterrent against the US.

It is my impression that policymakers in Pyongyang believe the only purpose of US policy is to liquidate the DPRK as a state or even "physically destroy" the country and its leadership. The regime does not believe that removal of North Korean nuclear weapons *per se* is very significant to the US, and rather sees this demand as an attempt to undermine the country's deterrence and gain advantage for a military solution of the Korean issue or regime change by other means.

It was clear from my discussions with the North Koreans that internal debates over the country's nuclear doctrine have not yet been settled and there is no clear picture of what a nuclear war-fighting doctrine would look like. Nor did they seem to understand that having an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capability only gives rise to suspicions that the North wishes to unify Korea by force while using its nuclear capability to protect it from US interference (a common theory among South Koreans and Americans). Going forward, a declaration that North Korea does not have these intentions and a codification of this pledge in official documents might be essential along with an explanation of the country's nuclear doctrine, which seems to have evolved considerably during the last couple of years. But these ideas, from what I heard, have not been considered by the regime.

The North Koreans stressed that unless the “root cause” of the nuclear stand-off—the “hostile policy” of the US—is removed, nuclear weapons will remain the sole guarantee of the country’s security. The examples of “hostile policy” cited include exercises aimed at “decapitation,” rehearsing attacks on Pyongyang and efforts to undermine the North’s “socialist system,” including covert activities, psychological warfare and sanctions. Nothing I heard gave any hint that North Korea’s nuclear weapons status is anything other than non-negotiable.

All of this is pretty standard fare, but when I asked if denuclearization would be possible if the US ended its “hostile policy,” the North Koreans admitted that they are not, in principle, against a “nuclear-free zone” in and around Korea. They stressed that before the early 2000s, their country was the only one in Northeast Asia to not possess or deploy nuclear weapons, and upon achieving nuclear parity with other parties, the balanced reduction and eventual denuclearization of the whole area is not impossible.

Even if these North Koreans were propagandizing, the declaration of a loosely-defined nuclear-free zone on the Korean peninsula or in Northeast Asia as the final goal of a diplomatic process could create space for the eventual denuclearization of North Korea, and such a formula could be on an agenda during “talks about talks” with Pyongyang.

Framework of a Possible Dialogue

In thinking about how a possible dialogue could be structured, there are some important clarifications that will be needed upfront. That includes asking the question of what constitutes a nuclear weapons program. The answer, while it may seem obvious to some, is far from clear. For example, does it include, in North Korean eyes, just the weapons themselves? Or is it the weapons and the fissile material production? Does it include delivery systems—and does that encompass all ballistic missiles or just the long-range missiles? Does that include the “space” program as well? Depending on the answers to those questions, an important proposal might be considered – that is, possible asymmetric concessions between North Korea and the US. This proposal takes into consideration what seems to be the highest priorities for each country, and would suggest capping North Korea’s ICBM capability—which enables North Korea theoretically to attack the continental United States—while allowing North Korea to keep its “nuclear weapons”—that is, possibly the charges, but not specific delivery systems—as the “sacred cow.”

Although Seoul and Tokyo might not see this proposal as a viable final solution they have been living in the range of a North Korean nuclear strike (possibly delivered by some unconventional means) for years. So bringing down the tensions at least temporarily and giving a chance for diplomacy might be good option—at least as a start. However, the US will have to explain it and chart a clear perspective, should such an option emerge.

It should be understood that North Koreans have not thought about this yet, but their statement of “completing [its] nuclear force” gives room for compromise. If they consider there is no need to further pursue its missile technologies, such as creating a “Hwasong-16,” and a pause is possible, why not start something like “strategic arms limitation talks?” It is true, that the North Koreans still have plans to develop submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) systems, such as the Pukguksong-3 that has been referenced, but perhaps a cap on this project could be part of a deal, provided the right return concessions. And it should be taken into account that most experts agree the North does not yet have a working,

weaponized ICBM, as the operability of current systems, especially re-entry technology, is still unproven. However, we should do our best not to compel North Koreans to demonstrate such an ability, such as firing a ballistic missile with a conventional warhead to a target somewhere in Pacific.

So far, the discussions in the UNSC do not promise a swift and heavy retaliation for the latest ICBM test, so the time is right to think about a softer approach to North Korea's continued testing. The re-listing of the DPRK by the US as a state sponsor of terrorism and consequent sanctions made news, but were not unanticipated and by no means exclude a quiet compromise.

As additional actors consider the "freeze for freeze" idea as the basis for more extensive agreements down the road, opportunities for incremental steps might be explored. The Chinese concept of "parallel advancement" might begin with some form of voluntary restraint of North Korean missile tests, excluding overflying other countries' territory and airspace. In exchange, the US would refrain from sending strategic assets (like B-1 bombers, aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines) to Korea. And both sides would mute their bellicose rhetoric toward the other.

However, the "window of opportunity" will close once the US and South Korea start preparing for spring exercises. Thus, the upcoming Winter Olympic games in Pyeongchang, South Korea, should be used as a good opportunity for a truce (the Moon administration is already [eager to postpone](#) the exercises till at least end of March). Both sides should exercise restraint and avoid any actions that may be considered provocative. I believe that closed-door quiet contacts should be made to agree on an "Olympic truce," that is, refraining from provocation and hostile propaganda (including, if possible, inflammatory tweets) at least until the successful completion of the games. Such contacts may include not only the US and North Korea, but also South Korea, whom the North, of course, would like to exclude. However, the fact that the issue is the Olympics being held on ROK soil is discussed makes its participation mandatory.

There is No Alternative to Diplomacy

Diplomacy could be effective if only the United States would accept the reality that denuclearization of the DPRK is not possible at this moment. Short of regime change, neither the US nor China can force North Korea to surrender its nuclear potential. Not even the US shooting down a North Korean missile or attacking it on the launch pad would solve the nuclear problem. Some argue that it may still not lead to an all-out war—North Koreans would most likely answer symmetrically by attempting to sink a US ship or destroy another "military asset," after which both sides would stop short of escalation and a frightened North Korea would then be compelled to capitulate. No North Korean I spoke with found this plausible. However, it is unfortunately clear that such a scenario would make negotiations and compromise more urgent and might brush away illusions and help formulate a sober approach.

At the end of the day, a nuclear but peaceful Korean peninsula would be a better outcome than a war-torn Northeast Asia. The need to admit the failure of US policy toward North Korea's nuclear program may be hard to swallow, but it is needed to formulate more realistic policy choices (including, unfortunately, living side by side with a nuclear North Korea). Only American leadership can avoid war and lead toward a diplomatic resolution.

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Articles by: [Georgy Toloraya](#)

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