

The US and ROK Consider “Deterring North Korea’s Use of Nuclear Weapons”

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From reading the previous [article](#), one could get the impression that, against the background of North Korea’s unprecedented missile activity and the likelihood of a seventh nuclear test by Pyongyang, there are growing calls in the US for an end to Pyongyang through sanctions, a pre-emptive strike or the deployment of nuclear weapons on the peninsula. However, the author points to a different trend: voices calling for recognition of the DPRK’s nuclear power status and a review of the policy of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Here are some examples.

On October 26, 2022, ROK Minister of Defense Lee Jong-sup said the focus of efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue should shift from deterring their development to deterring the use of [nuclear weapons](#). “We have put our focus on trying to prevent North Korea from conducting additional nuclear tests and advancing its nuclear capabilities, but it’s time to change our strategy.” Now “the priority should be on deterring the use of nuclear weapons,” giving the North Koreans an understanding that if the DPRK attempts to use nuclear weapons, it will result in the termination of the North Korean regime.

In a similar vein, ruling party chief Chung Jin-suk said, “We have entered a completely new phase in North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats. We need to reexamine our entire response system to the North’s nuclear threats... We should also have an overpowering defense system so local provocations do not evolve into a full scale war.” Conservative MP Han Ki-ho, who heads the DPRK Threat Response Committee, also noted that “denuclearization policies we have pushed for until now have failed.”

Although South Korean conservatives speak not of negotiation but of a forceful response to force, such deterrence is also a form of control. But far more important is the opinion of US officials. At the 2022 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference in Washington, US Deputy Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said that if Pyongyang is willing to return to engagement, an arms control treaty could eventually be [worked on](#). Jenkins added that the US and North Korea may have different interpretations

of “arms control” and “nuclear disarmament,” which have complicated related discussions and proved to be serious obstacles during the Trump era engagement, but “building a foundation by defining a goal” would be the starting point of any potential negotiations, which she said would take time.

It should be noted that this is not the last US government official to speak out, but the basic official position is still the same. In response to a question about Jenkins’ remarks on October 31, US Department of State Spokesman Ned Price said that “there has been no change to US policy. Our DPRK policy remains the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” The United States does not and will not recognize North Korea as a nuclear state: “That is not our policy. I do not foresee that ever becoming a [policy](#)”.

The US and South Korean experts and retirees are more outspoken. As former Minister of Unification under the Moon Jae-in administration Jong Se-hyun told The Korea Times,

“after the midterm elections, the US will have no options but to start arms control talks with North Korea based on the North’s commitment to the non-proliferation of its [nuclear weapons](#)”.

As former US special envoy for talks with North Korea Joseph DeTrani points out, North Korea has no intention of getting rid of its nuclear weapons in exchange for economic incentives or normalization of diplomatic relations, so offering Pyongyang such “carrots” in exchange for disarmament will [not work](#). According to DeTrani, North Korea wants to be accepted as a nuclear state like Pakistan, while stressing that its nuclear program is for deterrence and will not be used for offensive purposes. The US, on the other hand, has openly said that it does not accept the DPRK as a nuclear state, as this would lead to a nuclear arms race in the region and create opportunities for nuclear proliferation, fissile material falling into the hands of a rogue state or terrorist groups.

Robert Kelly, a professor of political science at Pusan National University, also believes that persuading North Korea to abandon its nuclear program will not be easy, while Seoul has no options. The only thing that can be achieved is arms control: “we might get some constraints, maybe we’ll get some inspectors to get the North Koreans to cap it at like 200 strategic missiles and warheads or something like that, but they’re never going to go to zero.”

Soo Kim, a policy analyst at the RAND Corporation, thinks the US, like South Korea, is running out of options “because there just aren’t that many creative ideas to bring North Korea back to the negotiating table, and to actually convince Kim Jong-un to give up some aspect of his nuclear program.”

Kim Jong-dae, a former South Korean defense official and visiting professor at Yonsei University, also thinks that complete denuclearization of the North is something that cannot be achieved at all and developing discussions with North Korea in terms of arms control is a very realistic idea.

A recent Bloomberg article states that the policy of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, pursued in recent decades, has failed. The US and its allies must accept the DPRK’s status as a nuclear power and learn to operate in the new environment. Criticism has also been levelled at anti-North Korean sanctions, which have had no effect other than to create food shortages for millions of North Koreans.

Earlier, Jeffrey Lewis, an expert in nuclear non-proliferation at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, spoke of the need to recognize North Korea's nuclear status in the interest of easing tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Journalist Donald Kirk, who specializes in East Asia, also wrote that hopes of talks with Kim Jong-un on the nuclear issue were a fantasy. He called for a focus on strengthening defense capabilities, describing the North's adoption of a nuclear doctrine at the legislative level as a [real threat](#).

Statements of this kind are based not only on an assessment of the DPRK's military capabilities, but also on public opinion: the proportion of those who consider the DPRK's threat serious is declining in the US, while the number of supporters of a constructive solution is rising.

In August-September 2022, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs conducted an opinion poll on how important certain foreign policy issues seem to the average American. It was found that only 52% of Americans believe that North Korea's nuclear program poses a "serious threat" to the United States (compared to 75% in 2017 and 59% in 2021). There is a split on "what should be done to get North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons," with 46% of respondents believing that the US should establish formal diplomatic relations with the DPRK, while 31% are of the opinion that the US should use military force under favorable conditions.

Commenting on the poll results, experts from the Chicago Council noted that the DPRK issue is currently overshadowed in American consciousness by events in Ukraine, as well as economic problems. As a result, North Korean issues have been put on the backburner in Biden's policy.

On September 22, the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University released the results of a poll showing that 92.5% of respondents are convinced that North Korea will not give up its [nuclear weapons](#), which is the highest score ever. 55.5% were in favor of Seoul possessing its own nuclear weapons, the highest score on record as well. Compared to last year, there was a 10% increase.

It should be noted that the "arms control treaty" is what Pyongyang has demanded in past years. However, negotiating arms control is not an easy process for the US, as it would mean recognizing the North as a nuclear state and thus fundamentally changing US policy towards the DPRK, because Washington has always maintained that North Korea's nuclear program is illegal and subject to United Nations sanctions.

Nevertheless, Russian experts, such as Aleksandr Zhebin, have repeatedly stressed that the West should accept reality and move on from talks on denuclearization to talks on arms control, given that the DPRK positions itself as a responsible state that adheres to the doctrine of nuclear non-proliferation. All attempts to find evidence of nuclear smuggling and/or technology (which was actively sought for the sake of the new stranglehold) were unsuccessful.

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