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TOWARDS PEACE AND SECURITY IN KOREA

A RUSSIAN VIEW

Georgy Toloraya

A NEW era of détente that started in the Korean peninsula in 2018, after the unprecedented nuclear stand-off of 2017, gave rise both to hopes and questions. Russia is eager to assist the peace process and provide serious help in resolving the issues at hand, both as Korea's neighbor and an actor historically involved in the Korean problem.

This is especially important given the many misconceptions as to the nature of the North Korean state, its goals and strategy, and the related tactics for achieving security and liberating the peninsula from weapons of mass destruction.

There were several myths among Western policymakers that have prevented them, and the international community writ large, from hitherto

finding a solution to the Korean nuclear and security problem.

The first was that the North Korean regime may soon collapse. The second was that pressure might coerce the North Koreans into changing their behavior and acting contrary to their long-term interests. The third relied on the habitual presumption that North Korea is a pariah state not prone to changes, and is thus unworthy as a partner to the United States.

American policy was based on the first myth for decades following the 1990s: when global communism collapsed, the expectation was that the North Korean regime would collapse as well. Thus, in order to solve the North Korean nuclear problem, which had by then started becoming serious, the obvious strategy was to contain and

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Photo: Guliver Image/Getty Images

A military parade in Pyongyang on North Korea's 70th anniversary

pressure North Korea, and to assure a “soft landing” for the regime. After this, it was thought, all the problems, including denuclearization, would be solved—for the simple reason that South Korea, a staunch American ally, would take over the North.

This presumption became the basis of policy for the Clinton Administration, which admitted to using the 1994 negotiated freezing of the North Korean nuclear program merely to buy time until the regime's inevitable collapse. During the Obama Administration, such a policy was called “strategic patience.” Attempts to find a negotiated

solution proved futile, as the underlying rationale (on the American side, prompted by conservatives in South Korea) for the talks might have been to achieve the desired result (a North Korean collapse) in an orderly manner, and not to create any conditions for this state to continue to exist, with or without nuclear weapons.

The result is well known. Despite isolation and pressure, the DPRK never collapsed; on the contrary, it managed, under the guise of negotiations and concessions, to create a fully-fledged nuclear force—and to become the third country in the world (after China and

Russia) with the capability to hit the United States with nuclear missiles. This achievement, coupled with creeping reforms that improved economic and social situations, helped the regime to solidify its positions.

To make use of this lesson, it is necessary to understand the nature and goals of the North Korean regime.

North Korea's founding leader, Kim Il Sung, and the insular group of elites around him, came to power with a healthy degree of suspicion and mistrust of outsiders—no doubt a result of their years-long experience in guerrilla warfare. Even though the DPRK's current leader, Kim Jong-un, has broader experience in the world and a more modern outlook, he still cannot ignore the ruling class—an elite tied together with blood relations and common ancestry, birthplaces, and heritage. In fact, this is an aristocratic power establishment that is more united in its opposition to a common enemy than would be the case for an average ruling dynasty.

These “aristocrats” know pretty well that they would not survive should the regime collapse. These elites have

vivid memories of not only fighting the bloodiest war in history (at least 10 percent of the population perished) and almost suffering extermination at the hands of its enemies; they also look at

America's toppling of regimes in Iraq and Libya with a great deal of fear.

The collective history of the Hermit Kingdom's leadership class has taught them to trust nobody, to show no fear, to seek no mercy from their perceived enemies, and to be extremely risk-averse in decision-making that could threaten the survival of the regime.

So, how would these people see a solution to the security issue, of which nuclear capability is just a part? It is unreasonable to expect that North Korea will simply “trust” its erstwhile enemies, and believe it will gain all benefits *after* the ultimate sacrifice has already been made: surrendering their nuclear life insurance policy. Quite the contrary. They are convinced that the only guarantee of regime survival is force, and a balance of power.

The United States has done little to dispel these fears—both before and

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after the Singapore Summit. Indeed, Pyongyang resents the Trump Administration's approach to talks that is based on the presumption that a superpower may benevolently forgive the past misdeeds of a criminal and offer him a chance for a better life. The North sees it the other way around: its relentless struggle of many years has forced the leader of the world's strongest nation to sit down at the same table with its leader and say: “what can I do for you?”

IN SEARCH OF A RIGHT COURSE

The spectacular failure of America's “strategic patience” has become a costly lesson for Washington. It was recognized that President Donald Trump tried to find a more radical (that is to say, military) solution in 2017. However, this proved to be next to impossible, as it would have resulted in unacceptable losses not only to American allies (Japan and South Korea), but to the United States itself. This confirmed the absence of an alternative to negotiations. The obvious reaction—based simply on common sense—was to try to earnestly make a deal, namely “peace for nukes.” This became the essence of the Singapore declaration of June 12th, 2018.

However, it is exactly the second myth that now hinders progress: many in the United States think that it was mainly pressure and sanctions that “brought the North Koreans to the negotiating table.” According to this logic, increasing pressure would create an unbearable situation for the North Korean regime, forcing it to capitulate and give up its nuclear arsenal sooner or later—that is what interests the American side, which is not concerned in the least about the interests of the partner, especially one as “deplorable” as North Korea.

Nothing can be farther from the truth. One should recognize that Kim Jong-un in fact had the upper hand in late 2017, as he had acquired a capability (at least theoretically) to threaten American territory directly. Threatened by the genuine prospect of being hit by inter-continental ballistic missiles, the United States went down the path of negotiations, ruling out a military solution, albeit reluctantly.

Kim therefore believes that he is in a position to conduct negotiations on the basis of “equality,” which naturally involves reciprocal and synchronized steps

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on the part of his opponents, who, in turn, would refrain from pressuring him into unilateral concessions. He is open to discussion on the magnitude of such concessions, if only to a certain extent—as long as he is not treated as a “defeated party.” Thus, the idea of “denuclearization first, rewards after” is a non-starter.

North Korea sees the issue of reciprocity as an indicator of America’s future intentions to reach a mutually satisfactory deal. As long as Washington sees sanctions and increasing pressure as a negotiating tool, the North Koreans will not be prepared to proceed.

The issue of sanction relief has become multidimensional. Moreover, it serves as a litmus test for the North Koreans: the fate of the entire peace process now depends on it.

So, what does the use of sanctions as a political tool now come to? The sanctions are not forcing North Korea into giving more concessions—on the contrary, Pyongyang sees such pressure as evidence of “hostile intent.” This only makes the North Koreans more stubborn, as seen by them reaching the verge of walking out of the negotiations more than once.

The North Koreans want not just the easing of sanctions; they want reciprocity and synchronized movement to achieve their goal of ensuring the preservation of their country.

All of this should be interpreted correctly: the North Koreans want not just the easing of sanctions (although this would be a bonus for the North Korean economy); they want reciprocity and synchronized movement to achieve their goal of ensuring the preservation of their country.

According to North Korea’s official statement of November 2nd, 2018: “We gave all things possible to the U.S., things it hardly deserves, by taking proactive and goodwill measures, what remains to be done is the U.S. corresponding reply.” Unless there is a reply, the DPRK will not move an inch, regardless of how costly that may prove to be.

North Korea’s recent threat that it would restart “building up nuclear forces” if the United States did not ease sanctions should not be taken lightly. What the North Koreans are trying to remind their interlocutors is that they have closed their nuclear weapons test site, started to dismantle the Tongchang-ri rocket engine test stand and launch platform, and expressed a willingness to permanently dismantle the nuclear facilities in Yongbyon.

However, should they see no corresponding steps from the American

side, this course of action could be reversed.

From the American perspective, however, “it is politically impossible for the United States to remove sanctions,” as they are seen as a rightful “punishment” for “illegal acts” by North Korea.

This brings the situation in the negotiations to a deadlock. The North Koreans will fulfill the obligations they have accepted and will do so under certain conditions, though not those that one thinks they have accepted unconditionally—just because “they must.”

Kim Jong-un never promised anything other than to remove his nuclear weapons once the whole Korean peninsula is free of them and he has received all necessary guarantees of security that he finds to be ironclad. Moreover, he never promised not to continue developing his WMD program until an agreement is reached.

CRID

A return of tensions can be avoided if the United States agrees to the strategy dubbed conditional, reciprocal, incremental denuclearization (CRID).

The term was coined by Xin Qiang, a professor at Fudan University and Deputy Director of its Center for American Studies at a November 28th, 2018 conference in Seoul entitled “The ways to peace and prosperity in North East Asia.”

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CRID would essentially mean a process of nuclear arms reduction and a liquidation of certain classes of the most provoking weapons (like ICBMs). At this stage, this can become even more important than the end-result of “full denuclearization,” whatever that may turn out to mean.

In my humble assessment, the best possible outcome would be to curtail the North Korean capability to threaten the United States and remove such rationale from Pyongyang. This is also possible in the case of the creation of a new system of increased security through peaceful means.

Under such a scenario, North Korea would reduce its nuclear program in several phases, abstain from developing new WMDs, and get rid of the danger of proliferation. At some point, North Korea would be left with only a small existing nuclear arsenal, merely as a deterrent.

Of course, if such a situation persists, it would render a blow to the non-proliferation regime. However, such a blow would not be fatal. In the current state of a crumbling world order, it is hard to predict how things might develop in the non-proliferation sphere.

However uncertain, such a state of affairs still holds comparative advantage for Korea, especially if one takes into account the constant nuclear and missile tests, as well as the dangers of war we were able to see as recently as a year ago.

Otherwise, we should brace ourselves for a new cycle of crisis. However, since war has already been explicitly proven not to be a solution, the sides will eventually have to revert to diplomacy. By then, the stakes might become even higher: North Korea may in the meantime improve its WMD capability and become less trustful of the United States. This would only be exacerbated if Kim Jong-un personally encountered an unpreparedness of the Americans to reach a compromise and would himself become less likely to compromise.

It is thus now essential to find some form of reciprocal steps that the United States would be ready to take

in order to pacify the North Koreans. If total sanction relief is now out of the question, perhaps some case-by-case exceptions and moratoria, including unilateral ones, may be used (the exemption recently granted for the North-South railway connection project could serve as an essential precedent).

Also, the North's desire (supported by the South) for a "peace declaration" can be used. The idea that such a plea from the DPRK gives the United States leverage to press Pyongyang for significant and immediate steps toward denuclearization is ill-founded. Moreover,

there is no validity in the argument that a formal end to the Korean War would deprive the United States of its longstanding rationale for the U.S.-South Korean alliance and the presence of American troops in South Korea. The North Koreans may demand a withdrawal, as they have done over the last 65 years for the sake of propaganda at home, but this would not change anything.

Such a declaration could be presented as a "brilliant outcome" of a second Trump-Kim summit, and would give breathing room to American and North Korean negotiators to continue their work. In so doing, the negotiators

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Photo: Gulliver Image/Getty Images

The leaders of North and South Korea in Pyongyang ahead of denuclearization talks

might undertake step-by-step actions to diminish the danger of further nuclearization of North Korea in exchange for political steps from the United States (liaison offices, political contacts, humanitarian and economic exchanges, etc.). The current South Korean administration could act as a facilitator.

NEW PEACE REGIME AS AN END GOAL?

There is no reason to suggest that a new peace regime should be a continuation of the 1953 Armistice agreement, which was not signed by the two respective Korean governments (even the South Korean side)

and was obviously meant to be temporary. A new peace regime, or, rather, a *security and cooperation* system, should be set through an all-encompassing dialogue and negotiations between the concerned parties, both bilateral and multilateral.

Why do I believe the end-result should be a multilateral system? The experience of the failed six party talks may be seen as advising the opposite.

However, the six party talks have kept the peace on the peninsula successfully for several years. And, despite certain setbacks, the talks resulted in

several instances of freezing and even dismantling parts of North Korea's nuclear program.

Were it not for them, North Korea might have passed the "point of no return" in its nuclear development several years ago. The problem was not the multiparty format, but the unclear agenda and priorities of the talks. The American side saw it as centered only on denuclearization, while North Korea considered its security to be on the agenda as well. Had those talks been strictly bilateral, they might have broken much earlier.

The calculus for the usefulness of the multiparty format is also determined by the need to create a "safety net" if and when agreements are reached. The example of the Iran nuclear deal shows that the United States (or some other party) may withdraw from an agreement. However, the participation of other countries keeps the agreement alive and keeps the situation from sliding into catastrophe. Also, the fact that neighboring countries—many of which are deeply historically involved in the Korean issue—have their legitimate security issues and should undersign any agreements reached. Otherwise, no agreement is likely to be durable.

Several stages, combining bilateral and multilateral approaches, would

obviously be necessary to build a cooperative security system for the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia.

The first step might be a non-binding U.S.-North Korea peace declaration—a recognition of the existing reality of the absence of direct military conflict and a statement of general principles that would guide future relations. Such a declaration would symbolize the commitment of both sides to reconciliation and finding solutions to other issues, such as denuclearization. It would not put much of a burden on the United States, as it would essentially reaffirm previous bilateral documents. This would be a clear sign, if not decisive proof, of the change in attitude in the American establishment, and a confirmation to Pyongyang's "doves" that they are moving in the right direction.

The idea of having a North-South declaration and/or trilateral or quadrilateral declaration on the "end of war" is less certain. North and South Korea are not seen as states in each other's eyes. This view is reinforced by the respective constitutions of the two Koreas. Thus, how can a document be signed between North Korea and the American government?

Besides, North and South Korea have already signed a number of such declarations and resolutions (from the

July 4th, 1972 Statement, to reconciliation agreements of 1991-1992, as well as to current summit documents). What North and South Korea might do is sign or adopt some kind of a statement in support and welcome of the U.S.-North Korea declaration on the end of war.

That may be done simultaneously, or within a short period of time, and would be highly symbolic, constituting the actual end of war.

After the issue of ending the Korean War has been addressed, the American-North Korean bilateral process should become the central element of moving forward. With a tangible manifestation of improved relations between the two countries, the focus could then shift to establishing in detail the terms of denuclearization and the road to normalization.

However, this is not enough. Other stakeholders must monitor and endorse the process as moderators and "providers of guarantees" for the fulfillment of subsequent agreements between the United States and North Korea, as well as North and South Korea.

Their first step could be a declaration that would support such a possibility

and readiness from the other four concerned parties to the Six-Party mechanism. A symbolic and visible way to do that would be to draft some sort of joint declaration by these countries' ministers of foreign affairs—as

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a result of a meeting on the margins of the UN General Assembly, for instance. The UN Secretary-General may also be part of it. Additionally, it would not hurt to see a UN Gen-

eral Assembly resolution in support of the aforementioned efforts.

As soon as the first step has been completed, bilateral and multilateral formats should be combined. While the issue of American guarantees and bilateral normalization could be discussed bilaterally, the issue of denuclearization—which would require the participation of several parties (to provide dismantlement, nuclear safety, verification, etc.)—is essential. Obviously, the issue of regional security and peace also demands a multilateral format.

To facilitate this process, it would be useful to establish an institutional arrangement for the supervision of such talks. That type of a "secretariat" may be based on the former Six-Party talks mechanism, within which the working group on establishing a peace and

security mechanism has achieved some initial agreements.

In the final stage, peace arrangements should be made between former adversaries in the Korean War, which should be guaranteed by all six parties and may involve monitoring by the United Nations. After signing bilateral agreements on a lower level, the six parties could then proceed to a politically and legally binding multilateral treaty based on a formal normalization of relations.

Another option would be to sign a set of bilateral treaties between each and every member of the six parties, which would regulate the future of their relations concerning the Korean issue. What this could mean in practice is that, for instance, Russia and China would sign a short agreement to welcome the results of the talks and to support agreements between the United States and the two Koreas, and other parties. It could also include them vowing to help preserve obligations and explore all possibilities (i.e. bilateral political consultations, coordination at the UN, etc.) to promote peace and security. Together with the DPRK and South Korea, China and Russia would

sign separate addenda to their basic bilateral treaties, reflecting their rights and obligations in the new reality.

The U.S.-North Korea agreement would, of course, be much longer and

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could become a formal incorporation of other agreements made at different tracks. The U.S.-Japan agreement would, probably, be the hardest to come by, but there would be no need to wait—other agreements should enter into force immediately after signing (a form, not requiring ratification,

should be used). All these treaties can be deposited in the UN and circulated by the organization.

All of the outlined proposals may be difficult to implement, perhaps resulting in an even greater degree of perplexity when it comes to the preparation and conclusion of treaties. The good thing, however, is that there is no rush at the moment. Denuclearization is a process that will take a number of years, regardless of how one goes about it, and the peace process may develop gradually.

From a political point of view, having a joint statement by the heads of states may kick-start or conclude such

a diplomatic process. The six heads of state could make such a statement on the margins of a UN General Assembly meeting, opting to include the UN Secretary-General as well.

Finally, yet importantly, this process may see the emergence of a North-East Asia Security and Cooperation Organization. Such a mechanism or body would watch how and whether the arrangements are being kept, and report accordingly to the UN and other institutions, as well as to the leadership of

all countries involved. During a later stage, such an organization may become a venue for charting plans on bilateral and multilateral cooperation and integration.

GETTING LUCKY

Why did Kim Jong-un suddenly drop his war-mongering rhetoric and abruptly start “a peace offensive?” Was it a result of sanctions and American pressure, or part of his own strategic plan?

Kim has devoted a lot of effort to developing North Korea’s missile and nuclear capability, which would allow the country not only to deter an enemy strike, but gain a diplomatic card in

its wrangling with much more powerful enemies. When having this sort of deterrent became reality—because of the newfound ability to deliver the nuclear charge to the United States—Kim decided it was the best time to trade off this powerful irritant.

Why did the United States, and especially South Korea, react positively to Kim’s initiative, instead of routinely ignoring it as “propaganda plot,” as both countries have done in the past?

Why did the United States, and especially South Korea, react positively to Kim’s initiative, instead of routinely ignoring it as “propaganda plot,” as both countries have done in the past?

Essentially, Kim got lucky due to a fortuitous combination of factors. First, the advent of the liberal Moon Jae-in Administration in South Korea, long known for its reconciliation policies and rhetoric towards the North (around which its political campaign was mostly built). This was a welcome change for the electorate, motivated by the looming danger of nuclear war.

Second, the Trump factor. The American President used common sense: if previous policies of fostering North Korea’s collapse and pressuring it into dismantling nuclear weapons had failed, it was logical to pursue a compromise—one that would help antagonists solve their problems. Trump also figured out that he could use success in the Korean

case as proof of his ability to solve foreign policy issues and strengthen his political power base.

At the same time, Moon Jae-in acted as an enthusiastic inbetweener, assisting the difficult dialogue.

We now come to two critical questions. Will Kim Jong-un disarm? Will the United States provide security guarantees for the Pyongyang regime, as was agreed in the Singapore summit?

Such an exchange seems to be advantageous for both parties, but alas, unreachable. Nothing in the American political system—with its periodic change of government and policies, and its record of behavior towards international treaties and agreements—suggests that Washington is capable of providing any guarantees to anyone.

I cannot imagine any technical arrangement in which an American President—even with handy support of the U.S. Congress (which is presently not the case)—could come up with a sustainable deal for his counterpart in Pyongyang. Thus, the situation could never come to the point at which Kim would have to honor his promise and completely give up his nuclear weapons.

Does this mean that the diplomatic process is doomed, and a new nuclear standoff is on the horizon? This

is a possible scenario, especially given Trump's worsening domestic standing and North Korea's increasingly obvious pressure tactics.

However, a better scenario is possible: continuing phased mutual concessions, which would lessen both the danger of the North Korean missile and nuclear potential, and the level of external danger to the regime.

Such concessions could include North Korea's sequenced abandonment of further nuclear and missile program advancements; the closing down and dismantling of its military-oriented nuclear, missile, and other WMD objects; and controlling and diminishing nuclear armaments to an adequate enough level for deterrence.

KIM'S STRATEGIC VISION?

Contrary to the third of the aforementioned myths—that the Hermit Kingdom is a pariah state not prone to change—it is hard not to notice that North Korea under Kim Jong-un is transforming. A market economy has set strong roots and, eventually, political liberalization (not threatening the authoritarian regime, of course) might follow.

Understandably, North Korea would prefer to have some breathing space in foreign policy, frustrated both by its outcast status and dependence on China, the suzerain of Korea for centuries.

The North Koreans might be inspired by the Vietnamese example: only a few decades after a bloody war in which the Americans suffered defeat, relations between Washington and Hanoi are on the rise. The American side expresses little to no concern about the communist form of governance in Vietnam, and tries to use Vietnam to contain China. The North Koreans believe that they could deliver the same.

What can be done to sustain détente and political reconciliation between the United States and North Korea? What is the role of other actors?

First and foremost, this will depend on the sustainability of an American policy aimed at reaching a diplomatic solution. Here attention should be focused on what compromises the parties achieve, not on issues on which they have already failed to agree.

Toxic issues—such as the “final and fully verifiable denuclearization” and “security guarantees”—need to be dealt with by professionals in a candid and non-public manner (to begin with, it would be necessary to agree on what these two terms actually mean).

The United States and North Korea are the main actors in this drama. However, all other actors have their particular roles to play.

Obviously, China is the most important factor. Beijing is against arm-wrestling tactics on both sides, and could do a lot to facilitate the diplomatic process by throwing its weight around to motivate all sides to seek compromise, not confrontation.

As the most interested actor, South Korea can do a lot to promote the mood of cooperation and dialogue. Unfortunately, this often causes the displeasure of the United States, which hopes pressure tactics would be more useful and fears the prospect of North Korea undermining the alliance Washington has with Seoul. However, Seoul should stay firm in advancing what is more in its own interest: peace, cooperation, and the transformation of North Korea.

Japan can also play a positive role by establishing dialogue channels with Pyongyang and avoiding the complication of a multifaceted diplomatic process by strictly bilateral issues.

Russia should act as a broker, whose comparative neutrality could provide space for useful advice in resolving certain issues and reaching a compromise. Russia also must—through its political and military might—be able to vouch for the eventual provision of security guarantees for the peninsula on a multilateral basis. ●