

# North Korean Nuclear Issue: Where do we stand and what next?

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## 1. Where do we stand?

- The international community has been struggling with the North Korean nuclear issue for more than two decades now.
- Despite all the diplomatic efforts that have been devoted to denuclearizing NK, the situation has taken a consistently downward path. NK has been resourceful enough to successfully fool and outmaneuver the international community in almost every step of the way.
- The five nations participating in the 6PT have vital stakes in the denuclearization of NK and possess enormous combined diplomatic and other means to change NK's choice and course. However, they have miserably failed to defuse by far the most serious challenge to peace and security of Northeast Asia.
- The 6PT process looks like the Greek myth of Sisyphus who was condemned to push an immense boulder up a hill, only to see it roll back down and to repeat this action forever.

## 2. Why have we failed?

- There is no shortage of factors which explain the failure of such magnitude with far-reaching implications for regional peace and security. In my view, two fundamental factors stand out among others.
- First, NK's determination for nuclear armament is far stronger than the combined determination of the international community to denuclearize NK.
  - NK views nuclear weapons as the holy grail of the regime and a source of salvation from their existential crisis and an ultimate insurance policy for survival. Therefore, the North Korean leaders are determined

enough to pay a disproportionate price to retain and improve their nuclear capabilities, even at the expense of economic development and the most basic needs of daily life for the ordinary people.

- On the contrary, the international community has failed to break NK's unwavering resolve by effectively imposing a prohibitive price. In short, the half-hearted sanctions enacted by the Security Council and individual countries have proved bearable for NK as insurance premium for the insurance policy they find in nuclear weapons.
- If the international community could show the determination they were able to muster to stop Iran's nuclear program, we would not be where we are with NK. By all indications, Iran is not yet developing nuclear weapons. However, sanctions imposed on Iran in order to halt its enrichment activities are comprehensive and powerful enough to cover all major sources of revenues, including oil and gas industries, while sanctions on NK are limited to entities and items related to the military.
- Secondly, the lack of coordination among the key stake-holders also played a part.
  - The five nations participating in the 6PT together hold an immense combined leverage to change Pyongyang's behavior and induce its strategic decision to abandon nuclear ambition. China, in particular, has more powerful means of pressure than other countries.
  - However, they have failed to bring their collective weight to bear down upon NK in a way that leaves no alternative to denuclearization.
  - With better coordination in the use of their respective means, they could have made difference.
  - For instance, NK was allowed to go around the sanctions in place and destroy their effectiveness by drastically expanding trade with China and thus continue unabated to fund their nuclear and missile programs. As such, what one hand does would be undone by the other hand.
  - Messages sent out to Pyongyang could also have been better coordinated. When China puts stability in NK before denuclearization in its official discourse and actual policies, NK would take it as a license

for nuclear armament with impunity. Even if China changes its discourse putting denuclearization before stability, Pyongyang may not take it seriously until such reordering of priorities is followed up by concrete actions to be heeded.

### 3. A way forward

- A flurry of diplomatic activities are apparently under way in order to jumpstart the 6PT process. I still believe in the utility of the 6PT as a venue for working out a diplomatic solution acceptable to all major stakeholders.
- However, the best time to reconvene the 6PT is when there is a reasonable chance to produce anything positive. Another failure of the 6PT could destroy whatever residual credibility it may still retain and end up reinforcing the cynicism about the utility of diplomacy with NK.
- A prerequisite for the resumption of the 6PT is NK's commitment to denuclearization. Without NK's strategic decision to abandon its nuclear ambition once and for all on the basis of the September 19 Joint Statement, the 6PT will go nowhere. It would become nothing more than a talk shop where NK would keep playing games, while demanding the repeal of the sanctions and treatment as a de facto nuclear weapon state until they find a pretext for the fourth nuclear testing.
- NK should demonstrate its commitment to denuclearization and seriousness about the 6PT through minimal confidence building measures, including voluntary declaration of its clandestine enrichment facilities and monitored shutdown of its known nuclear facilities.
- Given the sacrosanct value Pyongyang attaches to nuclear weapons, the chance of denuclearization is close to zero even under the best of circumstances. Under the current circumstances, NK has no reason to abandon its nuclear ambition. However, I do not agree with those who argue that NK will never give up its nuclear capabilities at any price under any circumstances.

- There still remains a chance only if the five parties can change NK's strategic calculus. This, of course, is a tall order.
  - Pyongyang has been successful in withstanding international pressure for denuclearization primarily because the insurance premium in the form of sanctions is still affordable given the utmost value they attach to nuclear weapons as an ultimate insurance policy for survival.
  - If the international community can muster their collective political will to raise the insurance premium to the point of threatening the regime stability, it would force Pyongyang to review and hopefully change its strategic calculus in favor of denuclearization.
- If NK is given no other choice but between regime collapse with nuclear weapons and survival without them, there is a chance that they will opt for the latter, although I would not rule out the possibility of Pyongyang preferring a collapse with nuclear weapons.
- Sanctions are not a panacea. And there is collateral damage to worry about. However biting they may be, the sanctions by themselves cannot denuclearize NK. All we can expect from tightened sanctions is to change NK's strategic calculus and bring them back to serious negotiations. They are helpful in the way of increasing the chance for diplomacy.
- At the same time, the structure of incentives for denuclearization should be made more palatable for NK by showing them what specific political, security and economic benefits are in store for a denuclearized NK.
- Finally, those countries threatened by the combination of NK's nuclear and missile capabilities should work together to effectively counter and defend against NK's threats. Such water-tight military preparedness against NK's threats will help in convincing the North Korean leadership that all the scarce resources they have invested in destructive capabilities and the sacrifices they had to endure in the wellbeing of the people have been in vain and ended up making NK less secure.