

'Denuclearization': More Than Just Two Divergent Conceptions

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Introduction

With the forthcoming April 27th inter-Korean summit meeting and a potential U.S.-North Korea summit meeting in May, there is growing hope of realizing a nuclear-free and peaceful Korean peninsula. Since North Korea's nuclear weapons program is what has brought about these historic opportunities, there is no doubt that the main agenda of the two summits should be denuclearization. The fact that there exist two divergent conceptions of denuclearization will be a critical obstacle to the success of the summits. While South Korea and the United States' denuclearization means the two Koreas' renunciation of nuclear weapons programs and nothing more, North Korea's denuclearization aims at prohibiting South Korea's nuclear development, pushing American forces out of the peninsula, and breaking up the ROK-U.S. alliance. The two sides pursue starkly different objectives under the same banner of denuclearization; we are two different people wearing the same hat.

This fundamental conceptual difference is not well understood because it was forged about 30 years ago when the North Korean nuclear issue first arose. Carrying the banner of denuclearization, North Korea has created smoke screens by pretending to give up its nuclear development. It has purposefully confused the original meaning of denuclearization and deceived South Korea and the United States. Whenever signing major agreements on denuclearization, Pyongyang lured Seoul and Washington into believing that it would dismantle its nuclear programs, while never giving up the ultimate objectives of its nuclear program: domination over South Korea, eviction of U.S. forces from the peninsula, and the destruction of the ROK-US alliance. North Korea and the ROK-U.S. alliance are dreaming two different dreams while lying in the same bed.

North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ)

It is an age-old North Korean position to denounce the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea and to establish a nuclear weapon free zone (NWFZ) on the Korean peninsula. The first official record was the letter of 7 November 1956 from the Supreme People's Assembly to the members of South Korea's National Assembly. While North Korea occasionally raised the nuclear issue in the 1960s and 1970s, it began to present detailed proposals from the 1980s. For example, at the 6th Congress of the Workers' Party in December 1980, Kim Il Sung proposed to establish a nuclear weapons free/peace zone as a measure to fulfill North Korea's ultimate goal of unification on its own terms. A more comprehensive plan was presented on 7 November 1988, suggesting a three-year timetable. According to the plan, the U.S. would pull back its forces and nuclear weapons below 35

degrees latitude (i.e., a line running between Busan and Jinhae) by the end of 1989, and the withdrawal of U.S. ground forces and nuclear weapons from the peninsula would be completed by the end of 1990.

In the 1990s, North Korean proposals were refined. In the Disarmament Proposal for Peace on the Korean Peninsula on 31 May 1990, Pyongyang presented a ten-point proposal for confidence building and arms reduction. The following measures were related to nuclear weapons: (1) joint efforts should be made to get all the nuclear weapons in South Korea withdrawn immediately; (2) nuclear weapons should not be produced or purchased; (3) foreign planes and warships loaded with nuclear weapons should be banned from entering or passing through Korea.

It was the 4th Inter-Korean High-Level Talks in October 1991 where North and South Korea began a formal discussion on nuclear issues. At the meeting, North Korea proposed a draft of Declaration on Establishing a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ) on the Korean Peninsula:

1. To forbid testing, manufacturing, introducing, possessing, and using nuclear weapons,
2. To prohibit transit, landing, and visiting of nuclear capable aircraft and ships,
3. To prevent an agreement guaranteeing a nuclear umbrella and not to allow deployment and storage of nuclear weapons,
4. To ban military exercises involving nuclear weapons,
5. To withdraw U.S. forces and nuclear weapons from Korea
6. To simultaneously inspect North Korea's nuclear facilities by the IAEA and South Korea's military bases by North Korea
7. To demand nuclear weapon states not to threaten the two Koreas and to respect the NWFZ status of the peninsula.

South Korea and the United States' Denuclearization

South Korea had been passive until the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced in August 1991 that it could discuss military matters with North Korea, including the issue of nuclear nonproliferation. A nuclear talk with North Korea would have raised concerns of being entrapped in North Korea's anti-nuclear campaign and infringing the policy of "neither confirm nor deny" (NCND). On September 24, in his address at the 46th United Nations' General Assembly, President Roh Tae Woo announced that South Korea is willing to discuss conventional disarmament and nuclear issues if North Korea gives up nuclear weapons and builds confidence with South Korea.

At the 4th High-Level Talks, South Korea urged that North Korea, without any conditions, should stop developing nuclear weapons and accept international safeguards inspection. In addition, South Korea maintained that it needed U.S. nuclear protection and thus should allow U.S. ships and aircraft to pass through or visit South Korean territory. In order to deal with North Korea's aggressive anti-nuclear campaign, South Korea decided to come up with its own counterproposal. President Roh issued a Declaration on Denuclearizing and Building Peace on the Korean Peninsula on 8 November 1991. The term 'denuclearization' first appeared in this declaration, focusing on renouncing all nuclear programs of the two Koreas.

1. To use nuclear energy solely for peaceful purposes,
2. Not to manufacture, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons,
3. To comply with the NPT and the IAEA safeguards obligations,
4. Not to possess nuclear fuel reprocessing and enrichment facilities,
5. To participate in international efforts toward completely eliminating the WMD

At the 5th Inter-Korean High-Level Talks in December 1991, North Korea tabled its previous nuclear weapons free zone (NWFZ) proposal, and South Korea presented a Declaration on Denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula which updated President Roh's November declaration. At the meeting, the two sides produced the most comprehensive agreement since the division of Korea, which would have been a framework to promote peace and stability if North Korea had adhered to it. Responding to international concerns that the meeting failed to resolve the nuclear issue, South and North Korea held a series of further meetings in late December. To Seoul's surprise, Pyongyang withdrew its previous position on the NWFZ and proposed a Joint Declaration on Denuclearizing [emphasis added] the Korean Peninsula. North Korea not only accepted South Korea's word, 'denuclearization,' but also adopted virtually every element of the South Korean proposal.

After intense negotiations, the two sides finally reached an agreement on the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (JDD) at the third meeting on 31 December 1991. The two sides agreed:

1. Not to test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy, or use nuclear weapons,
2. To use nuclear energy solely for peaceful purposes
3. Not to possess facilities for nuclear reprocessing and uranium enrichment
4. To conduct inspections of objects chosen by the other side and agreed to by the two sides
5. To establish a South-North Joint Nuclear Control Commission (JNCC).

A Tactical Setback and Persistent Deception by North Korea

It was a tactical setback for Kim Il Sung to abandon his long-standing NWFZ position and adopt virtually every element of South Korea's denuclearization. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries alarmed the leadership in North Korea and caused them to seriously worry about whether North Korea might be next. Kim Il Sung made a strategic decision to reach out to South Korea and the international community to ward off regime-threatening dangers. Besides improving relations with South Korea, North Korea launched active diplomatic campaigns to normalize relations with the United States and Japan. But the international community demanded that North Korea give up its nuclear program and accept international safeguards inspections before improving relations. In short, in order to extricate itself from the most difficult circumstances since the end of the Korean War, North Korea had to take steps to show the world that it intended to give up its nuclear program.

When it was signed, the JDD was heralded as a historic document to end the North Korean nuclear problem. In hindsight, North Korea's acceptance of denuclearization and its signing of the JDD was a

harbinger of its long-standing deception strategy. Pyongyang has never given up the strategic objectives of the NWFZ: prohibition of South Korea's nuclear development, eviction of U.S. forces off the peninsula, and the break-up of the ROK-U.S. alliance. In subsequent negotiations, North Korea vigorously attempted to fulfill these strategic goals by creating a smoke screen of denuclearization while continuing its nuclear developments covertly or overtly.

For example, at the first Joint Nuclear Control Commission meeting in March 1992, North Korea presented a document for implementing the JDD. All the major points of its NWFZ proposal were resurrected in the document as follows:

1. To ban storage or deployment of nuclear weapons of foreign countries
2. To ban entrance of foreign nuclear weapons in the Korean peninsula
3. To ban participation in operation or training where nuclear weapons are involved
4. To ban operation or training in Korea where nuclear weapons are involved
5. To ban signing an agreement that provides nuclear assistance
6. To ban import of plutonium or HEU to produce nuclear weapons
7. To make common efforts to have nuclear weapon states guarantee the status of NWFZ on the peninsula and cope with external nuclear threats

At the first U.S.-North Korea High-Level Talks in June 1993, the head of the North Korean delegation, Kang Sok Ju, demanded the permanent end of the ROK-U.S. Team Spirit exercises, the inspection of U.S. military bases, a promise of no use of nuclear weapons against North Korea, the end of the nuclear umbrella to South Korea, and the withdrawal of U.S. forces in Korea.

Since signing the JDD in 1991, North Korea has pursued a persistent, three-pronged deception strategy:

- to create a smoke screen to mislead South Korea and the U.S. into believing that North Korea might abandon its nuclear weapons programs
- to accelerate its nuclear weapons development by blaming the ROK-U.S. alliance and using hostile U.S. policies and threats as pretexts
- to accomplish the strategic goals of the NWFZ proposal

It is a typical North Korean tactic to put the elements of the NWFZ proposal ahead of its own denuclearization as preconditions for South Korea and the United States to meet. Meanwhile, North Korea has never abandoned its three-generational strategic goals. What Kim Jong Un reportedly said at the meeting with Xi Jinping in March¹ is another manifestation of North Korea's long-held ambition of realizing a NWFZ on the peninsula.

Denuclearization was offered by South Korea and the United States to counter North Korea's aggressive NWFZ campaign. Its fundamental idea is to ban nuclear weapon developments from both Koreas and keep an American presence in South Korea with the bilateral alliance intact and separate from any nuclear discussions. Facing an unprecedented existential threat in the wake of the collapse of communism, Pyongyang submitted to denuclearization, contrary to its NWFZ. Undoubtedly,

retreating from its long-held NWFZ stance was a humiliating setback for North Korea. General Kim Yong Chol, head of the United Front Department and right-hand man of Kim Jong Un, was a member of the North Korean delegation for ad hoc nuclear negotiations in December 1991. At that time, Kim reportedly grumbled that 90% of the language in the JDD originated from the South Korean proposal and stated that “this is your agreement, not our agreement.”²

Although North Korea changed its ensign from the NWFZ to denuclearization, its words and deeds have never changed. In fact, North Korea has aggressively exploited the word ‘denuclearization’ and has deceived South Korea and the United States, earned enough time, collected handsome rewards, and finally succeeded in acquiring nuclear weapons. The history of nuclear negotiations with North Korea is one big drama based on deception and lies in which North Korea makes a fool of South Korea and the United States. It provides a chilling lesson that self-complacency of one’s achievements and ignorance of the other’s true intentions could lead to an utter strategic failure. The Korean peninsula is completely under North Korea’s nuclear monopoly and people in the South are *de facto* hostages to its nuclear intimidations.

Whenever facing international pressure to give up its nuclear program, North Korea has used the word ‘denuclearization’ to lure South Korea and the United States into a false belief and pocket economic compensation, while continuing its overt nuclear program. From the 1991 JDD to the most recent Leap Day Deal in 2012, no agreement has ever succeeded in denuclearizing North Korea. Its chronic noncompliance is a superficial explanation, but fundamentally, North Korea has never intended to denuclearize and has taken the path of realizing the NWFZ. Today, North Korea demands that the United States abolish its hostile policy, remove security threats, and guarantee regime survival as conditions for denuclearization. But this is just new camouflage to hide its true intentions, deceive South Korea and the United States, and achieve its strategic objectives.

Can Kim Jong Un Go Against His Forebears’ Dying Wish?

In his briefing on the meeting with Kim Jong Un, South Korean National Security Advisor Chung Eui Yong remarked that it was notable for Kim to say that the objective of denuclearization is his forebears’ dying wish.³ Suh Hoon, director of South Korea’s intelligence agency, also remarked that it was meaningful that, for the first time, Kim has made a promise of denuclearization.⁴ A high-ranking South Korean official visiting Washington also said that North Korea’s denuclearization was not different from that of South Korea and the United States, and its definition was written in the JDD.⁵ During her interview with the CBS TV, South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung Wha also said that “this is the first time that the words came directly from the North Korean supreme leader himself, and that has never been done before.”⁶ In fact, North Korean authorities have often said that denuclearization was the dying wish of previous leaders. Besides various official statements, Kim Jong Il, father of the current leader, claimed this at the meetings with South Korean special envoy Chung Dong Young in 2005, South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun in 2007, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in 2009, and his interview with Russia’s TASS News Agency in 2011. In the summit meeting with Xi Jinping this March, Kim repeated the long-standing position on denuclearization: “It is our consistent stand to be committed to denuclearization on the peninsula, in accordance with the will of late President Kim Il Sung and late General Secretary Kim Jong Il.”⁷

In order to remove the fog of confusion surrounding the word ‘denuclearization’, it is essential to clarify what Kim truly means by saying denuclearization is his forebears’ dying wish. What if Kim’s denuclearization is indeed nuclear dismantlement, as South Korean authorities believe? This means that Kim has committed treason by violating his forebears’ dying wish because, rather than denuclearizing, he accelerated the country’s nuclear development and finally declared “the accomplishment of the great, historic cause of perfecting the national nuclear forces” in the 2018 New Year’s Address.⁸ Is it possible that an inherited leader could go against his predecessors’ will in a three-generational hereditary system like North Korea, a modern embodiment of an old dynastic system? Violating the will of his forebears can neither be accepted by the Kim family nor by the North Korean people, many of whom still respect the founder Kim Il Sung. This amounts to nothing less than treason. Hence, it is a clear manifestation that North Korea’s denuclearization is not nuclear dismantlement, but a crafty camouflage to hide its true intention. In the 2018 New Year’s Address, Kim boasted of the nuclear button on his desk, and said that nuclear weapons are forebears’ wish and people’s mighty sword.⁹

Urgent Tasks to Seoul and Washington for the Upcoming Summits

Anticipating the April 27 summit between North Korea and South Korea and a potential U.S.-North Korea summit in May, this paper strongly recommends that the following steps be taken by Seoul and Washington.

1. The major mission of President Moon Jae In in the upcoming summit is to clarify whether North Korea and South Korea are on the same page regarding what denuclearization exactly means. He should ask Kim Jong Un two questions:
 - Is denuclearization as proposed by his forebears identical with the abandoning of the nuclear program as understood by South Korea and the United States?
 - How different is Kim’s denuclearization from his predecessors’ wish and how compatible it is with the “people’s mighty sword,” as he proclaimed in the 2018 New Year’s Address?
2. South Korea and the United States should no longer use the word denuclearization. North Korea has deliberately confused its original meaning and deceived South Korea and the United States. From now on, ‘nuclear dismantlement’ should be used instead by the international community, meaning unequivocally removing North Korea’s entire nuclear capabilities and programs.
3. The upcoming inter-Korean summit must exclusively focus on the nuclear issue and bring forth a clear understanding of what North Korea means by denuclearization. Considering that North Korea’s nuclear weapons pose an existential threat to South Korea, there can be no other topic than the nuclear issue from South Korea’s perspective. The very short time to prepare for this summit inevitably precludes a comprehensive or a package solution to cover a variety of issues. This means that the April 27 summit must be ‘a one-point meeting,’ fully focused on the nuclear issue, rather than being ‘a one-shot meeting’ embracing many issues of lesser importance at once.
4. Immediately after the summit, President Moon must visit Washington and make a detail briefing to President Trump on the result of the inter-Korean summit. American authorities

believe that denuclearization is meant to remove North Korea's nuclear weapons and ongoing programs. When President Trump accepted North Korea's summit offer, he obviously expected denuclearization to be more than just a freeze.¹⁰ The White House stated that Kim Jong Un agreed to discuss nuclear dismantlement.¹¹ Hence, the worst case scenario would be for Kim and Trump meet face-to-face and say starkly different things using the same, but misleading, vocabulary: denuclearization. As the new National Security Advisor John Bolton said, the summit could end up being a very short meeting.¹² If President Trump thinks that he is fooled by North Korea and misled by South Korea, he may decide to take military action. Only full cooperation and frank discussions between Seoul and Washington can prevent another tragedy from ever happening again in Korea.

A Long-Term Alliance Strategy for Managing a Nuclear-Armed North Korea

After Kim Jong Un's remark that denuclearization is his forebears' dying wish, a high-ranking official at the Blue House made an optimistic comment that unlike gradual approaches in the past, the Moon administration considers a possible package solution covering a wide range of issues like officially ending the Korean War, easing sanctions, and building a lasting peace regime, similar to cutting the Gordian knot.¹³ While rightly recognizing that America's North Korea policies in the past failed to achieve denuclearization, President Trump has shown his clear determination not to repeat the same mistakes.¹⁴ A sense of urgency from Seoul and Washington is desirable only to a certain extent. The lessons from earlier North Korean nuclear negotiations teach us to be on guard against excessive ambition to leave a political legacy, hubristic underestimation of North Korea's firm resolve, undue reliance on economic incentives/sanctions, and hasty attempts that result in half-baked deals.

There is virtually no possibility to reach a sweeping deal that can guarantee a complete dismantling of North Korea's nuclear weapons. Only a general war or an unconditional surrender to North Korea's NWFZ demands could possibly produce such an outcome, both of which cannot be options for South Korea or the United States. The alliance should share a common judgment that North Korea's nuclear crisis cannot be resolved at a single stroke. A prolonged strategic contest is taking place in Korea, which will only intensify in the midst of emerging great power competition between revisionist powers, China and Russia, and the United States. The ultimate goal of possessing nuclear weapons to North Korea is to achieve unification under its terms as rightly pointed out by high-ranking American officials.¹⁵ A window of opportunity for denuclearization can open when the current Kim family regime is replaced by a new, reform-minded leadership. When North Korean society is fundamentally transformed, allowing its people to freely express their opposition to the leadership in the form of organized dissent, (at least to the level of Iran), we can expect to achieve CVID in North Korea.

South Korea and the United States need a joint long-term strategy to manage a nuclear-armed North Korea, similar to the U.S. containment strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union during the Cold War.¹⁶ In the meantime, Seoul and Washington need to strengthen their deterrence posture to counter North Korea's imminent nuclear threat. The Korean peninsula has entered a nuclear age, as Western Europe did 70 years ago. The ROK-U.S. alliance must break away from years of fruitless attempts at denuclearization and take firm steps to bolster nuclear and conventional deterrence. A critical component would be to redeploy American tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea and establish a

nuclear sharing mechanism. At the same time, we need to launch an aggressive, prolonged, overt/cover, and systematic campaign to foster gradual but fundamental changes in North Korean society. As long as North Korea retains nuclear weapons, crippling sanctions must remain in place to make the regime realize that its people will continue to suffer extreme hardship. Only when these joint efforts bring about a peaceful unification under South Korea's terms, will the alliance have fulfilled its historic mission.

* This article was published on April 18 at Small Wars Journal, an online magazine focusing on international conflict. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

¹ "The issue of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula can be resolved, if South Korea and the United States respond to our efforts with goodwill, create an atmosphere of peace and stability while taking progressive and synchronous measures for the realization of peace," Xiang Bo, "Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un hold talks in Beijing," *XINHUANET*, March 28, 2018, http://xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/28/c_137070598.htm

² Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997), p. 264.

³ *The Yonhapnews*, March 6, 2018. (in Korean)

⁴ *The Chosun Ilbo*, March 10, 2018. (in Korean)

⁵ *The Kookmin Ilbo*, March 12, 2018. (in Korean)

⁶ Transcript: South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha on 'Face the Nation', *CBS News*, March 18, 2018.

⁷ Xiang Bo, "Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un hold talks in Beijing," *XINHUANET*, March 28, 2018,

http://xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/28/c_137070598.htm

⁸ Kim Jong Un's 2018 New Year's Address, <https://www.ncnk.org/node/1427>

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ "Kim Jong Un talked about denuclearization with the South Korean Representatives not just a freeze." Mark Landler, "Trump accepts North Korea's invitation to discuss its nuclear program," *New York Times*, March 18 2018.

¹¹ Michael Gordon, Michael Bender, and Felicia Schwartz, "Trump on Kim talks: 'tell him yes'," *Wall Street Journal*, March 9, 2018.

¹² "Interview: Trump-Kim talks to be 'a very short meeting' if Pyongyang won't discuss denuclearization," *Radio Free Asia*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/interview-bolton-03232018130326.html>

¹³ *The Chosun Ilbo*, March 15, 2018. (in Korean)

¹⁴ Dino-Ray Ramos, "Donald Trump says he "won't fail" with North Korea," <http://deadline.com/2017/10/donald-trump-twitter-north-korea-rex-tillerson-kim-jong-un-war-little-rocket-man-1202180169/>

¹⁵ General H.R. McMaster said in his Fox News interview on December 3, 2017 that the ultimate purpose for nuclear weapons to North Korea is to dominate South Korea and reunify the Korean peninsula under its terms. CIA Director Mike Pompeo and Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats reportedly expressed the same view before a Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Hearing on Worldwide Threats on February 13, 2018. Admiral Harry Harris Jr. echoed an identical viewpoint during testimony before the House Armed Services Committee on February 14, 2018.

¹⁶ Seong Whun Cheon, "Managing a nuclear-armed North Korea: a grand strategy for a denuclearized and peacefully unified Korea," *International Journal of Korean Studies*, XXI, 1 (2017), 120-148.