

# China and the Prospect for North Korea's Denuclearization

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China is surrounded by more nuclear powers and nuclear-capable states than any other country in the world. A nuclearized North Korea does not serve China's interests. If North Korea decides to denuclearize, its relations with China will immediately improve, as evidenced by the fact that shortly after President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un agreed to meet face-to-face, Kim was welcomed to Beijing and met with President Xi Jinping in March 2018. Xi even accepted Kim's invitation to visit North Korea at a convenient time. Kim subsequently paid two additional visits to China in May and June 2018. Some thought that the Kim-Trump meeting in Singapore might marginalize China. Kim's visits to China not only bolstered his bargaining position vis-à-vis Trump, but also reaffirmed China's central role in Korean affairs.

China's position on the North Korean nuclear issue has been consistent. China has three main objectives: peace and stability in Northeast Asia, denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and peaceful reunification of Korea. It has recently proposed the "dual suspension" plan: North Korea suspends nuclear and missile tests in exchange for suspension of joint US-South Korea military exercises. On this basis, North Korea's denuclearization can be achieved step by step.

Successive US administrations have preferred to use sanctions, backed by joint US-ROK military drills, to bring North Korea to its knees. Some people believe that China holds the key to the North Korea problem while the Chinese government argues that the United States and North Korea are the principal actors and must talk to each other directly to resolve the issue.

In theory North Korea and China are still "allies"; in reality the relationship is ambiguous. The

Chinese generally look down upon the Pyongyang regime and feel sympathetic for the North Korean people. The North Koreans reportedly despise the Chinese who, in their views, betrayed North Korea in 1992 when Beijing established diplomatic ties with Seoul. China-DPRK relations deteriorated after Kim Jong-il died in 2011. Despite the deep freeze in the relationship between 2011 and early 2018, Sino-DPRK relations seem durable, especially when international situations change.

Even before Kim Jong-un's surprise March 2018 visit to China that repaired bilateral relations, Beijing's *Global Times* in an editorial asserted that friendly Sino-DPRK relationship should not be disrupted by other countries. It suggested that North Korea was a country to be respected since it "has high degree of independence and autonomy", which is very rare in Northeast Asia now. The editorial also argued that maintaining friendly relations was in the interest of both countries.

After the Trump-Kim meeting in Singapore, expectations have grown regarding North Korea's denuclearization. However, with rising tensions between China and the United States on trade and other issues, China is likely to maintain good relations with North Korea in the near future, which will make North Korea's denuclearization more complex. As relations between North Korea and China, Russia and South Korea improve, it will be more difficult to keep sanctions on North Korea.

What can be done about North Korea's denuclearization from China's perspective? Most importantly, denuclearization must be achieved peacefully and gradually. Dialogue at the bilateral and multilateral levels must be promoted. The United States, China and other stakeholders must seriously address the North Korea issue from the broad context of East Asian security and political economy. There is no simple or immediate solution, and a package of agreements and frameworks will likely be the outcome of such serious discussions. Denuclearization is an objective, not a pre-condition, of peaceful talks. Without security guarantees, it may be wishful thinking to expect North Korea to voluntarily denuclearize.

Broadly speaking, there are three approaches to addressing North Korea's nuclear issue: continuation of the sanction-based policy to force North Korea to denuclearize; military actions to destroy North Korea's nuclear facilities and perhaps the North Korean regime once and for all; and returning to the negotiation table and seeking a mutually acceptable solution.

Sanctions have proved ineffective, and military actions are too risky. The only viable option is to return to the negotiation table. Demanding North Korea to abandon its nuclear program before negotiations can start between the United States and North Korea is like putting the cart before the horse. Without incentives or compensations, why would North Korea denuclearize? China's "dual suspension" proposal is a realistic and pragmatic way to get the ball rolling.

Some people in Washington do not support U.S. engagement with North Korea since they believe

talking to a rogue regime is to reward its bad behavior. Such a condescending attitude is not conducive to peaceful resolution to any disputes. Diplomacy is an art of reaching a mutually acceptable solution to a dispute without war. Negotiators do not have to like each other, but they share the common goal of peaceful resolution.

Possessing nuclear weapons does not necessarily make North Korea more dangerous; it's the intention to use them that does. As Kim Jong-un's 2018 New Year's Day message reveals, North Korean leaders are not irrational or suicidal; they are unlikely to use nuclear weapons without provocation. With political and economic incentives North Korea is more likely to join the international community. Developments in 2018 including the Kim-Trump meeting, reconciliation between the two Koreas, and improvement of Sino-DPRK relations are promising. The United States and its allies used to pay more attention to restrictions on North Korea than addressing its security concerns. The Trump administration's reaching out to North Korea is a positive step in the right direction. Moving forward, all relevant parties, particularly China and the United States, must work together to encourage North Korea to denuclearize and welcome it into the international community.



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