



North Korea Talks Could Become a Worse Version of the INF Negotiations

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The current President of the United States (US), Joseph Biden, stressed before the Congress that he would seek denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula “through diplomacy, as well as stern deterrence.”¹ In order to produce an effective combination of diplomacy and deterrence to prevent North Korea—or, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK)—from continuously building-up an aggressive nuclear posture, the US has to meticulously alter the previous course of talks. This could lead to the discussions becoming a worse version of the Cold War-era Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty negotiations.

The biggest difference between the INF negotiations and the North Korea talks, which were strongly supported by the President of the Republic of Korea (ROK)—or South Korea—since 2018, was regarding the use of deterrence to back-up diplomacy. In the case of the INF negotiations, advanced discussions co-existed with aggressive military posturing from both sides. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expressed the will for deploying additional US missiles if the Soviet Union rejected talks for withdrawing its INF from Europe. Contrastingly, the US and South Korea commenced discussions with North Korea only after the US ally, under the pressure from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), expressed the position that it would not reinforce deterrence of the US-ROK alliance to North Korea even if it continuously fell short of accepting the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

China increasingly shares North Korea’s objective to restrict US presence on the Korean Peninsula. The US and its allies have to restore their credibility for exercising effective deterrence against North Korea, resisting China’s pressure. Otherwise, North Korea talks could become a worse version of the INF negotiations, giving both China and North Korea greater advantage than the Cold War-era Soviet Union to weaken US-led alliances.

North Korea’s Unilateral Coercion

In January 2021, at the Eighth Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK), the WPK chairman Kim Jong-un released a report clarifying the country’s intention to acquire nuclear capability to “strike and annihilate any strategic targets within a range of 15,000km with pinpoint accuracy.”² Even though Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), which North Korea test fired in November 2017, have a range in excess of 10,000km,³ it was believed that the ICBM could carry only a payload less than 1,000kg for hitting targets in mainland US.⁴ A range of 15,000km would liberate North Korea from such payload restriction in imposing threats to the US. With this capability, it could, with greater certainty, make the US risk its own soil for supporting its Northeast Asian allies in an armed conflict with North Korea.

This concern for decoupling the ties between the US and its regional allies is similar to concerns of the NATO right before INF negotiations. During the 1970s,

the Soviet Union had deployed the SS-20 intermediate missiles to signal its intention of limiting its targets to the NATO members in Europe. This was an insinuation that it did not intend to harm the US, with the intention of dissuading the US from siding with other NATO members. Similarly, Kim Jong-un's speech at the party congress mentioned manufacturing more intermediate missiles, which insinuates North Korea's intention to attack only nearby targets: South Korea or Japan, and not the US mainland—which would necessitate ICBMs. As in case of the Soviets, so in the case of North Korea, the strategy of building an arsenal of both intermediate-range missiles and ICBMs could reduce the incentive for the US to fight for its regional allies, thereby shaking the credibility of its alliances.

Despite the similarity of decoupling concerns between the NATO and the US–ROK alliance, responses from the US allies were extremely different. The NATO's Double-Track Decision of 1979 urged the continuation of arms control talks between the US and the Soviet Union and, simultaneously, expressed its unified will to deploy the American Pershing II missiles to offset the threat from the SS-20s if the Soviets did not sufficiently ease the tension. The NATO openly exhibited the option to reinforce deterrence for coercing the Soviet Union to accept the West European demand in the INF talks. Contrastingly, South Korea separated allied military power from the North Korea talks. About two months before North Korea evinced signs for negotiations, in the end of October 2017, South Korea declared the “three no policies,” which made the North largely immune from facing a strong US military presence: the ROK would not join the US missile defense system; it would not develop the US–Japan–ROK trilateral cooperation into a military alliance; and it would not make any additional deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. Accordingly,

North Korea was able to commence talks with South Korea and the US with little concern that the US–ROK alliance would significantly reinforce deterrence even if it did not seriously respond to the denuclearization demand.

China's Overshadow and Missiles of Regional Power

China clearly influenced South Korea in adopting the three no policies. The Moon Jae-in administration published them in the attempt to induce China to lift what the ROK government believed were economic sanctions imposed on it for accepting the THAAD system deployment.⁵ The PRC, during the process of accepting President Moon's first official visit to China, repeatedly expressed the hope that South Korea would sustain these policies.⁶ A reporter from China's state-run media exerted direct pressure on the ROK leadership when he asked President Moon during an interview immediately before his China visit if the three no policies could be trusted by the Chinese people. The President replied that these policies were “not new positions.”⁷ Given that South Korea emphasized the three existing positions while asking China to ease its economic pressure, China gained leverage to deter South Korea from surpassing these three lines by threatening further economic punishment. Regardless of an official promise to China, the three no policies work as the three red lines that cannot be crossed by South Korea.⁸

China also intended to make it difficult for South Korea to accept additional retaliatory capability from the US. Shortly before the three no policies, China's Foreign Ministry published a statement that the ROK would “stick to its commitments not to redeploy tactical nuclear weapons on the Peninsula.”⁹ Deploying American tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) was actually a South Korean tactic to gain closer access to nuclear capability, and not a strategic

American move.¹⁰ The ROK Foreign Ministry had not made any such promise in its press release,¹¹ but still China made the US ally worry about consequence of allowing the US to improve its retaliatory deterrence on the Korean Peninsula.

A section of South Korean intellectuals argues that President Biden's agreement with President Moon to annul the missile guideline—the US restriction on South Korea's indigenous missile capabilities—could be an option for the US to reinforce deterrence against China.¹² However, South Korea's missiles capabilities most likely represent military self-reliance and not a means of securing US engagement for offsetting the decoupling concern. Neither China nor North Korea bother as much about South Korea's missiles capabilities as about a regional military conflict with the US which can lead to a serious escalation. Despite repeated questions from foreign reporters, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has made no specific remark or reference to South Korea's missiles capabilities.¹³

South Korea defines the termination of the guidelines as the restoration of its “missile sovereignty.”¹⁴ The Cold War revealed two implications of South Korea's quest for equality with other nations. First, satisfying a regional ally's desire for equal status in international relations could stabilize an alliance with it. Early during the Cold War, the US addressed a demand from the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG or West Germany) that the nation should be equally armed as the United Kingdom and France, which were acquiring their own nuclear weapons capabilities.¹⁵ In order to win the FRG over as an ally, the US established the nuclear sharing agreements of the NATO, which allowed West Germany to join policy planning regarding the operations of TNWs.¹⁶ If the termination of the missile guidelines significantly satisfies South Korea's desire for autonomy, which is considered a reason for

its reluctance to reinforce the US presence in the region, it could greatly contribute to the Biden administration's China strategy. For now, the US has achieved only the presidential joint statement with South Korea, which accepted the importance of the “US–ROK–Japan trilateral cooperation for addressing the DPRK” and the “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue” (Quad), falling short of any clear sign to depart from the three no policies.

Second, the NATO nuclear sharing agreements indeed prevented the FRG from possessing nuclear capabilities, allowing only participation in TNW operations planning. Nuclear sharing began because of the US abandoning the Multilateral Forces initiative—it would have permitted sharing of nuclear weapons with the FRG—in order to reach an agreement with the Soviet Union to establish the treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).¹⁷ Non-proliferation of weapon systems represents a shared interest of great powers, because of which they prevent junior allies from acquiring specific weapons capabilities. Therefore, if the US lifts the restrictions on South Korea's missiles acquisition program, it would deprive China of a valid argument to oppose North Korea's missiles development initiatives.

North Korea Preserved Nuclear Options for Talks

The outcomes of the China–South Korea relationship, such as the three no policies, provided North Korea the immunity from coercive response from the US–ROK alliance. North Korea has never saw clear sign of reinforcement of deterrence from the alliance since the 2018 talks, despite it has shown its intention to sustain its nuclear arsenal. First, only about a week before the Panmunjom Declaration of 2018 with President Moon, Kim Jong-un reconfirmed North Korea's nuclear doctrine: “the DPRK will never

use nuclear weapons nor transfer nuclear weapons or nuclear technology under any circumstances unless there are nuclear threats and nuclear provocations against the DPRK.”¹⁸ The doctrine clearly suggests that the country intends to sustain its nuclear arsenal. Second, Chairman Kim Jong-un repeatedly confirmed, before the Panmunjom Declaration and at the 75th anniversary of the WPK in October 2020, that it would take steps toward worldwide nuclear disarmament,¹⁹ which would also include denuclearization of the US. This contradicts the NPT, which mandates only the non-nuclear weapons parties such as North Korea to refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons. This citing of inability to realize worldwide denuclearization is similar to China’s justification of its first nuclear test in October 1964.²⁰

The possibility of North Korea unilaterally threatening the acquisition of more powerful weapons could continue unabated unless the US–ROK alliance restores its credibility for correspondingly increasing deterrence. However, as a negotiation strategy, President Moon demanded the Biden administration to adopt no clear option to reinforce the US–ROK alliance, or trilateral cooperation with Japan in case of North Korea’s continuous rejection of the non-proliferation principle, offering only concessions and carrots. President Moon described the Singapore agreement by President Trump as exchanging concessions and incentives simultaneously for achieving North Korea’s denuclearization, urging President Biden to sustain the course.²¹ President Moon’s joint statement with President Biden, that the Singapore Joint Statement shall be the basis for future denuclearization talks, should support South Korea’s strategy of offering carrots to North Korea.

Contrastingly, North Korea declared that it would adopt the principle of “power,” as opposed to “good

will” if the Biden administration did not meet its demand of rolling back America’s “hostile policy.”²² This is classic coercive diplomacy, aimed at conveying to the US that if it does not comply, North Korea would take more awful steps.²³

This does not mean North Korea intends to trade its nuclear capabilities for concessions from the US. Given its consistent position of maintaining its nuclear arsenal until worldwide denuclearization, it would likely continue to acquire such capabilities regardless of whether the US accepts its demands. Nonetheless, it is acutely aware of the benefits of convincing the US that its nuclear development depends on American concessions. Responding to President Biden’s speech before the Congress, a senior North Korean diplomat said, “We will be compelled to press for corresponding measures” in response to what he described as the Biden administration’s intention to “keep enforcing the hostile policy toward the DPRK.” This suggests that “corresponding measures” like advancing the nuclear program are dispensable provided the US ends the “hostile policy.” The diplomat added, “With time the US will find itself in a very grave situation.”²⁴

China Could Exploit North Korea’s Attempt against US Presence

Preserving the option of imposing “a very grave situation” on the US is North Korea’s way of eliciting security guarantees from the US, which essentially mean restrictions on American regional presence. This version of security guarantees overlaps China’s increasingly negative stance against the US–ROK alliance.

Before Kim Jong-un received President Trump’s commitment to provide security guarantees at the Singapore Summit in 2018, the last time North Korea had described these guarantees was through the DPRK spokesperson’s statement on July 6, 2016—

during the two-year-long nuclear brinkmanship. According to that statement, the security guarantees included not only the assurance that the US will not launch a nuclear attack on the DPRK, but that the latter could also demand withdrawal of conventional US forces from the Korean Peninsula, based on the argument that they held “the right to use nukes from South Korea.”^{2 5} In addition, North Korea indicated its intention to push a demand beyond the North–South joint declaration for denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula in 1992, which did not cover a US-extended nuclear deterrence from the outside of the Korean Peninsula, focusing on preventing the two Koreas from acquiring nuclear weapons. After the Panmunjom Declaration, North Korea released a statement that the two Koreas agreed upon “turning the Korean Peninsula into a nuclear-free zone,”^{2 6} whereas the original Korean text did not say so. In a nuclear-free zone, the US-extended nuclear deterrence cannot continue to exist, unlike in the 1992 declaration.

China overshadows the entire scenario in which the US–ROK alliance is facing the DPRK’s coercive demands. China’s position on the issue since 2016 does not require North Korea’s denuclearization before starting peace talks and strongly suggests that a peace regime opposes the very legitimacy of the US–ROK alliance. This notion of China would allow North Korea to demand a restriction on American military presence on the Korean Peninsula before its own denuclearization; China could exploit such a demand by North Korea against the US. In July 2016, the then Vice Foreign Minister of China, Liu Zhenmin, declared China’s support for the dual-track approach for advancing denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and simultaneously replacing the armistice agreement with a peace treaty, and criticized the US–ROK alliance’s decision to deploy the THAAD system in response to North Korea’s nuclear development.

Citing this deployment as the reason, Mr. Liu stated that “relevant bilateral military alliances are a product of a bygone era.”^{2 7} Since then, China has not budged from its position of demanding a dual-track approach. According to the remarks of China’s Foreign Minister Wang Xi at a press conference at the National People’s Congress in May 2020, the related parties “must follow a dual-track approach” of pursuing both denuclearization and a peace regime simultaneously with respect to Korea.^{2 8} The PRC Foreign Ministry, in its response to the Biden administration’s decision to appoint Ambassador Sung Kim as the US Special Envoy for the DPRK, repeated this demand to the US and South Korea to follow a dual-track approach.^{2 9}

Strong and Credible US Deterrence Required

Even if Kim Jong-un reaches another agreement with the Biden administration for freezing his country’s nuclear development program, it will only renew the same situation in which North Korea can unilaterally threaten to restart its nuclear program, thereby forcing the US or its allies to make further concessions. Unless the US, South Korea, and Japan build a credible and strong deterrence capability to dissuade such nuclear threats, the talks with North Korea could degenerate into a worse version of the INF negotiations, where only the adversary holds coercive options.

Before concluding this article, I would like to highlight that the reinforcement of the US presence in response to North Korea’s behavior is not about escalating tensions, as could be said about the case of the Trump administration in 2017. Temporary military pressure will not become the direct reason for North Korea to retreat from its position because it expects the military pressure to remain below the escalation threshold of a real military attack. This is because it

has non-nuclear deterrence such as long-range artillery and multiple rocket-launchers deployed within range of Seoul since the beginning of the 1990's—even before it embarked on the path of nuclear brinkmanship.^{3 0} This military build-up is the reason that negates a US preventive attack: a military action to obliterate a future threat before such capabilities mature.^{3 1} This has not changed since the time the Bill Clinton administration abandoned the plan of a “surgical strike” against North Korea’s nuclear facilities in 1994.^{3 2} Even though there were advocacies for a “bloody nose” attack—a limited preventive military action against North Korea’s nuclear ambition—it never materialized because of

unsettled concerns over Kim Jong-un’s possible retaliation trajectory and scale.^{3 3} As North Korea has abundant non-nuclear deterrence, Kim Jong-un is able to continue his nuclear diplomacy without any real concern over an imminent American attack.^{3 4}

Neither escalating tensions in the short term nor talks without credible deterrence would prevent North Korea from continuing threatening the US and its allies. Trilateral cooperation among the US, the ROK, and Japan to demonstrate credible deterrence will become progressively important for addressing North Korea’s coercive tactics and China’s shadow of influence over the Korean Peninsula.

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³ Japan Ministry of Defense, Defense White Paper 2020, (Tokyo: Japan Ministry of Defense, 2020) p.95.

⁴ Michael Elleman, “Significant Improvement that may be Ready as Early as 2018,” *38 North*, November 30, 2017.

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⁶ PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference,” October 31, 2017; PRC Foreign Ministry, “Wang Yi tong Hanguo Waizhang Kang Jinghe Juxing Huitan [Wang Yi Holds Meeting with Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha of the ROK],” November 22, 2017.

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¹⁰ Takeshi Watanabe, “In South Korea, NATO is a Reference for Tactical Nuclear Weapon Advocates,” *Briefing Memo* (NIDS), January 2018.

¹¹ ROK Foreign Ministry, “Jae 72cha Yuenchonghwe Gaeki Han Chung Uekyojangkwanhwedam Kaechea Gyorkwa [The Result of Foreign Ministerial Talk in Occasion of the 72th United Nations General Assembly],” August 21, 2017.

¹² “Hanmi Misair Jichim Hwanjon Hajedo Noni: Misairu Jukwon Hwakpo Kidae [The Leaders of the ROK and the U.S. Discussed about the Termination of the Missile Guidelines: South Korea Hopes to Secure its Missile Sovereignty],” *KBS News 9*, May 21, 2021; “Mi Chungkook Kyonje Uido Garryonna? “Hanmi Misair Jichim Haje Noni [Does It Reflet the U.S. Intention to Deter China? The Termination of the ROK-U.S. Missile Guidelines],” *Hankookilbo*, May 22, 2021.

¹³ PRC Foreign Ministry, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference,” May 24, 2021.

¹⁴ ROK Presidential Office, “Chongtang Daepyo Chochong Daehwa Moduparon [President’s Remarks Before Meeting with Representatives from Political Parties],” May 26, 2021.

¹⁵ March Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: the Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), p.236.

¹⁶ Arakaki, Hiromu, *Jyonson Seiken niokeru Kakufukakusanseisaku no Henyou to Shinten* [The Transformation and Development of US Non-proliferation Policy under the Johnson Administration] (Tokyo: Minerva Shobo, 2016), pp.61-63, 96, and 135-136.

¹⁷ Hiromu Arakaki, *Jyonson Seiken niokeru*

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Profile

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