THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR DILEMMA:
EMPATHETICALLY NEGOTIATING FOR DENUCLEARIZATION
AND A PEACEFUL KOREAN PENINSULA

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Introduction

Kim Jong-un, the Supreme Leader of North Korea (or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK), yet again made foreign media outlets' headlines in October 2020. However, this particular appearance differed from the usual Western portrayal of Kim being a bellicose madman. Instead, media coverage depicted Kim's tearful apology to North Koreans for the challenging conditions they faced from closing the already limited cross-border in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, and international sanctions.\(^1\) International coverages of this event appear to focus on the fact that the rare display of emotion seems to be symptomatic of internal pressure stemming from the confluence of hardship considerations. However, a closer analysis of the speech also sheds light on a salient irony - the speech was delivered at a military parade to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP), a critical political organ of North Korea. The event also unveiled a new type of Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), representing North Korea's ultimate desire to develop the capacity to strike the Continental United States with nuclear weapons.\(^2\) Such an event is an eye-raising place to emotionally address North Koreans for the difficulties they face when much of their woes stem from international sanctions developed in response to North Korea's nuclear program.

Kim's speech provided insight into a couple of relevant facts. First, the international sanctions, led by the United States (US), have had a considerable impact on North Korea. Sanctions have been employed by the United States and multilateral organizations like the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), but have increased in magnitude and impact after a series of missile tests conducted by North Korea beginning in 2017.\(^3\) While this tearful affair was a culmination of numerous factors on top of the sanctions, such as the current pandemic, North Korea has openly admitted to the difficulties the latest round of sanctions had on the state and its citizenry. The second point, perhaps of even greater pertinence, is the extremities North Korea is willing to go to develop their nuclear program to the point of reliably striking the Continental United States. North Korea has continued its nuclear development scheme for over three decades and through three dictators, starting with the almost-deified Kim Il-Sung. On top of the aforementioned recent economic strifes, North Korea's nuclear ambitions have preserved through (1) the collapse of the Communist bloc and subsequent loss of support from the Soviet Union and, to a lesser degree, China, (2) years of agricultural disasters in the 1990s - made worse by a series of natural disasters - that is domestically referred by the euphemistic term "the Arduous Walk," and (3) any political tensions that arose out of two leadership changes down the hereditary line. In short, North Korea has displayed intense tenacity to develop into a nuclear state - meaning the current multilateral action of punishing North Korea through sanctions to convince the country to drop its nuclear program is not particularly useful beyond a stopgap measure. The current method has failed to yield a long-term

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beneficial result, and the belief that this reality will somehow change in the future fails to grasp the historical contextualization of this issue.

A more realistic and promising course of action towards a peaceful Korean peninsula without nuclear weapons can be charted from understanding the underlying motivations for North Korea's incessant desire to build a nuclear capacity that can reach the United States. For example, this means going beyond the common belief that North Korea has been led by three Kims, each of them irrational. This paper calls for a multilateral, uniform approach by relevant parties to negotiate a markedly better alternative for North Korea than the ideal result that the state seeks from being a nuclear power. Creating a peaceful Korean peninsula without nuclear weapons is predicated on uniformity amongst the invested external parties in approaching North Korea's nuclear ambitions; creating a unitary position would meet the preconditions to negotiate with North Korea a process of denuclearization effectively. The negotiations should be targeted to satisfy North Korea's primary objective of their nuclear program, which is identified as the stability of the country's ruling regime. The terms of denuclearization should present a better alternative to North Korea's goals through its nuclear ambitions. While symbolic gestures may play a role in advancing this purpose, dialogues should focus on (1) economic incentivization and (2) minimizing North Korea's perceived threat of military aggression. Our proposed solution calls for earnest adherence to conditions hypothetically struck by the discussions and a step-by-step denuclearization mechanism to facilitate trust amongst the involved states.

It is essential to make explicit how this paper defines a "peace zone" without nuclear weapons. This paper proceeds by associating such a phrase with peace in the Korean peninsula in a purely diplomatic sense. Diplomatic peace means a peninsula without heightened state-to-state tensions, and both the Korean states lacking a nuclear weapon capacity or even storing such munitions. This qualifier means that cases, such as the daily human rights violations many North Koreans are subjected to, are not reconciled. A peace zone means different things to different entities; this paper not considering their definitions does not make them any less important or real.

Ambitions and Consequences: Contextualizing North Korea's Nuclear Ambitions
Possession of nuclear weaponry has, to an extent, become synonymous with military might - an arguably reasonable connection given the destructive nature of these payloads. It is therefore natural that states possessing such technology are engaged with more caution. For example, the United States and the Soviet Union, which both possessed a vast supply of nuclear weapons, worked to avoid their Cold War escalating into direct conflict with one another. This caution can be manifested in many forms, including foreign-threat deterrence for states possessing nuclear technology and negotiating power with states that perceive threats from such munitions. North Korea's desire to be a nuclear state is rooted in these factors.

While the Korean War was a source of immense trauma for all parties, it was particularly damaging for the DPRK. The United States engaged in a thorough bombing campaign on the Northern half of the
peninsula, razing infrastructures that ranged from buildings in Pyongyang to large dams.\textsuperscript{4} The United States has since maintained a sizable military presence in South Korea (or the Republic of Korea, ROK) and the Japanese archipelago. American presence included their nuclear weapons in the southern half of the Korean peninsula until 1991.\textsuperscript{5} Even if North Korea's diatribes against the United States may at times border on the ludicrous, a pathway for the rationality of the DPRK's disdain and fear can be made. Furthermore, the DPRK has maintained a policy of non-alignment since the Sino-Soviet split of the Communist bloc that began in the late 1950s, meaning independence at least on a superficial level.\textsuperscript{6} While the reasons mentioned above are not exhaustive, it was under such realities that the DPRK developed their \textit{Juche} dogma, which translates to "self-reliance" and calls for political independence, economic subsistence, and military capability to defend the nation on its own.\textsuperscript{7} This brand of independence also gave it the ability to claim legitimacy over the ROK, which was and remains under significant influence of the US.

It is under such circumstances that North Korea developed its nuclear program. Indeed, the initial sources of the DPRK's desire for nuclear technology preceded such an explicit embrace of autarky, yet seeing the continued push for nuclear weapons under the framing of \textit{Juche} allows for a deeper understanding of North Korea's motivations.\textsuperscript{8} The DPRK's push to be a nuclear state has brought considerable political independence by allowing the state to engage bilaterally with the United States - even between states' heads. North Korea in the past has also made substantial monetary gains from its nuclear program - both from selling its technology to other states that seek nuclear power and extractions from the likes of the US, South Korea, and Japan during negotiations towards denuclearization of North Korea.\textsuperscript{9} Finally, the nuclear program has given substance to \textit{Juche}, which in turn gave the North Korean regime stability despite severe difficulties facing its population.

\textbf{How to Approach the Nuclear Question?}

The roots of North Korea's pursuit as a nuclear state and the extremities they are willing to go through to achieve this goal are now established. Their desire is a cause of significant geopolitical tension and consternation. What is a feasible plan for denuclearization and peace in the region? This paper identifies three leading schools of thought: escalation of sanctions, a pre-emptive strike of North Korea, and negotiation to achieve denuclearization.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{4} Mark Clapson, \textit{The Blitz Companion} (London: University of Westminster Press, 2019), p. 149-150.
\item \textsuperscript{5} The United States unilaterally removed the weapons as part of a detente initiative with the former Soviet Union.
\item \textsuperscript{6} North Korea received substantial financial aid from both the USSR and China despite supposed independence.
\end{itemize}
Sanctions
One proposal to resolve North Korea's nuclear program is through coercion imposed by sanctions. This approach has been the dominant method pursued by the United States and the United Nations Security Council. Since 2006, the UN Security Council has passed nearly a dozen resolutions sanctioning North Korea for developing nuclear weapons and related activities. The US and other countries have also imposed unilateral sanctions. The sanctions ban the trade of weapons and military equipment, freeze the assets of people involved in the nuclear program, and restrict scientific cooperation, among other actions.\(^\text{10}\) While the efficacy of the sanctions has long been questioned, it is clear that the most recent round of sanctions, pushed by the Trump administration, has had real damage on North Korea's economy. It has been estimated that North Korea had its already small export industries slashed in the magnitudes of billions of US dollars and suffers from an acute shortage of necessities such as fuel.\(^\text{11}\)

There are proponents of continuing to employ sanctions to resolve the issue of nuclear accumulation whether through (1) rectifying holes in the current sanction orders, (2) coupling the tough sanctions with military deterrence mechanisms in a "comprehensive coercion," or (3) some other combination.\(^\text{12}\) Indeed, sanctions have likely slowed North Korea's nuclear pursuits, showed international solidarity in opposing such pursuits when sanctions were invoked in a multilateral setting and played a key role in Kim Jong-un's latest signalling of willingness to negotiate. Nevertheless, sanctions as the means to an end undervalue North Korea's previously mentioned resolve in being a nuclear state. Sanctions are not useful without some form of a "carrot," although admittedly, it is important in creating an environment conducive to North Korea seeking an alternative path - one that involves denuclearization.

A pre-emptive strike
Another approach that has gained attention is the idea of tackling North Korea's nuclear desire through a premeditated strike on their nuclear development sites. This method's proponents, mostly confined to the national security hawks in the United States, favour this limited strike approach that supposedly would save the world from the acute threat of North Korea possessing nuclear weapons. Even in the best case, such a strike would be a temporary debilitation of North Korea's nuclear program. In the worst case, it may lead to warfare and destruction to the Korean peninsula, the antithesis of a nuclear-free "peace zone."

First, not all of North Korea's nuclear sites are known. It is stated that when former President Obama mulled over striking North Korea in the last days of his presidency, his advisors estimated even if all

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\(^{\text{10}}\) Albert, “What to Know About Sanctions on North Korea.”


goes to plan, approximately 85% of North Korea's known nuclear sites could be destroyed.\textsuperscript{13} A military strike may lead to a severe reduction in capacity, but it would not lead to their nuclear program's destruction. Even assuming that the nuclear facilities are somehow wholly neutralized, the effects would still be temporary. Furthermore, physical destruction does not mean the destruction of the mind. North Korea will likely rebuild their program with an even greater resolve to reach its ideal - after all, North Korea's justification for building nuclear weapons is to protect itself chiefly from the United States. The second point, of even greater relevance, is the potential for a pre-emptive strike to lead to a much greater conflict. For example, Seoul, the highly dense capital of South Korea and the political and economic centre of the country, sits dozens of kilometres from the border with North Korea. The DPRK has droves of conventional and possibly chemical and weapons targeted at Seoul in case of conflict.\textsuperscript{14} An escalation of conflict may very possibly lead to bloodshed and will likely close off any future de-escalation efforts in the peninsula. A pre-emptive strike is based on risky assumptions, and even then lacks the logic to lead to a sustainable, long term peace without nuclear weapons in the Korean peninsula.

**Negotiations**

Another direction, one that broadly is in line with this paper's proposal, is where relevant states enter discussions with North Korea to negotiate denuclearization. Especially in light of alternate methods mentioned above, a path of negotiation is the only secure way to achieve denuclearization while avoiding conflict in the Korean peninsula. Prior efforts were taken by states to negotiate such a result - they will be briefly discussed.

The first set of negotiations took place throughout the 1990s and were initially bilateral - taking place between the US and the DPRK. However, the deal struck also involved support from South Korea and Japan. The negotiations included the 1994 Agreed Framework, which provided North Korea yearly shipments of heavy-oil and two light-water reactors for freezing its nuclear reactors.\textsuperscript{15} This agreement came to an official end after North Korea supposedly admitted to holding highly enriched uranium (HEU).

The second series of negotiations took place a decade later and was a multilateral effort. Collectively called the Six-Party Talks, it involved North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, and the United States. This series of protracted negotiations led to pledges by North Korea that detailed specific commitments in how denuclearization would take place, the only time it has done so.\textsuperscript{16} This period marked the only time the United States stated in writing that it would not attack North Korea, partially


\textsuperscript{16} Cha and Katz, p. 96.
allaying their security fears.\textsuperscript{17} This round also failed after a series of missile tests by North Korea after President Obama's inauguration and subsequent refusal by the DPRK to return to the talks.

The third series of negotiations were initiated by the Moon administration's Olympics detente strategy, followed by a New Year's speech by Kim Jong-un, which suggested room for rapprochement. Despite President Trump's previous bellicose remarks and the imposition of strong sanctions, steps were laid out for two bilateral summits with Trump and Kim. After much fanfare, the discussions stagnated yet again, although a tentative positivity in relations remains despite North Korea's recent missile tests.\textsuperscript{18}

**Towards a Successful Denuclearization**

It is clear that past efforts in negotiations have failed; yet, this paper proposes a solution via negotiations. In an effort to address this reality, the issues in approaches and circumstances of the previous rounds of negotiations will first be outlined. Then, an argument of overcoming past mistakes to a successful and sustainable denuclearization process will be waged.

The first factor to note is that past deals that took North Korea on track to dismantling its nuclear programs appear to have seen terms stretched, or even outright violated, by numerous relevant states. A prime example of this is seen in the aftermath of the Agreed Framework. The US made a unilateral decision to cancel heavy oil shipments to the DPRK, as agreed to by the Agreed Framework.\textsuperscript{19} This decision was primarily motivated by a high-level official in the US Department of State alleging that North Korea confessed to possessing highly enriched uranium, in violation of the same framework's terms. This "confession" was filled with translation difficulties, yet was used as the rationale for the Bush administration to stop the shipments, which it opposed.\textsuperscript{20}

Furthermore, the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), a multilateral organization tasked with building light-water reactors, also a part of the Agreed Framework, failed to deliver.\textsuperscript{21} This construction was to be mainly financed by South Korea, with Japan also significantly contributing. KEDO claims the project stalled due to DPRK's lack of compliance regarding the KEDO-DPRK Supply Agreement, yet the construction of the reactors was a precondition for North Korea's dismantling of reactors.\textsuperscript{22} Meanwhile, intelligence reports suggested that North Korea purchased goods used for HEU development, yet another violation of the Agreed Framework.\textsuperscript{23} These transgressions of terms play into the perception of the violator being an unreliable state to negotiate with. Whether in term violations or tropes that call for unrealistic agreements, more recent actions added into these perceptions and have furthered a sense of distrust when negotiating denuclearization.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Cha and Katz, p. 96.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Lynn, chap. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Lynn, chap. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Lynn, chap. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Lynn, chap. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Lynn, chap. 4.
\end{itemize}
The second point to note is the circumstances of negotiations. The Agreed Framework was concurrent with the leadership change in North Korea after founder Kim Il-Sung's death. Leadership consolidation under Kim Jong-Il's Songun, a military-first policy that is a logical extension of Juche, likely played a role in North Korea's apparent circumvention of the Agreed Framework's terms. Songun was also active through the Six-Party talks. Simultaneously, the Bush administration showed general animosity towards North Korea, highlighted by its decision to label that state as one of the "Axis of Evil," and the Republican Party majority Congress interceded in implementations of the Agreed Framework. To make matters worse, Japanese support for rapprochement with North Korea dissipated in the early 2000s after Kim Jong-Il's stunning admission of his state kidnapping Japanese citizens decades earlier. These are political developments not conducive to the advancement of the DPRK's denuclearization.

Have things changed since these negotiations? The short answer is yes. Recently, Kim Jong Un has admitted his country's economic development plans were a failure. His five-year finance program, established in 2016, has been unable to achieve its goals, and he has described the difficulties facing his government as "the worst-ever" and "unprecedented." The besieged economy of North Korea has suffered from an 80% decline in global trade because of pandemic-related border closings with China and persistent US-led sanctions. The prolonged coronavirus-related lockdown has further destabilized food and foreign exchange markets. In other words, the sanctions and border closings from the current pandemic placed North Korea into a more vulnerable corner. While the DPRK has developed nuclear weapons through extreme financial pressure, this crisis is unique in its damage to the elites of Pyongyang, who are propping up the Kim regime. Kim is then possibly even more receptive to denuclearization provided the right conditions - this willingness to engage is not a sufficient condition, but certainly a necessary one.

Other necessary conditions have to be generated. These conditions include some degree of a unitary position by relevant external states, especially the US, South Korea, and Japan. Unitary does not have to mean solidarity in every minute detail, but rather being on the same page in basic principles. Principles should include step-by-step denuclearization, a process of gradual denuclearization that is parallel with gradual incentive, economic or other. This process is the only logical path given the distrust between North Korea and other states, significantly fueled by the past events outlined above. Calls for a full dismantling of the nuclear program before anything in return, as has been sought after

24 Lynn, chap. 4.
by both the Trump administration and the recent Abe cabinet, is an obtuse and quixotic way of looking at the situation.

Another principle that should be established is the lack of sabre-rattling in conjunction with offering an olive branch to the DPRK. Display of military aggression or might, especially by the US, only reinforce North Korea's perceived notion of using nuclear weapons as an effective deterrent from foreign threats. It is not rational to call for the opposing side to disarm when there are, for example, military exercises that are held across their border. The Trump administration was right to call off joint exercises with South Korea, although it is not as clear if the reasoning emanated from the same source.

The actual negotiating terms should also reflect the principle of lowering perceived military threat. While negotiations in the past have focused on economic incentivization, the Six-Party Talks did lead to a written assurance by the US stating it would not militarily engage North Korea. Negotiations should go further on this principle and actively seek to use concrete actions to lower perceived threats as bargaining chips. Chips can include lowering the number of American troops in South Korea as a part of the denuclearization process. Such methods would not lead to a diminishment of South Korea and the United States' national security - both states are wealthy and would dwarf any aggression posed by the DPRK despite US troops' physical absence - and may lead to real progress in setting the terms for denuclearization. The right mixture and dosage of lowering military threat and economic incentivization may very well present an alternative path that would increase the stability of their rule in the Kim regime's eyes. Other relevant states - chiefly China, which wields influence over North Korea - can play a role of a mediator in finding the right balance; it can serve as an opportunity to mend the damaged relations with the US. Of course, whatever hypothetical terms are struck should be followed by all sides to avoid a scenario similar to the violation of the Agreed Framework. Creating a metaphoric "carrot" that is large enough for North Korea is the soundest way to denuclearize the Korean peninsula and bring about a "peace zone," in a diplomatic sense.

**Conclusion**

If we can take one lesson from North Korea's history, it is that North Korea has displayed incredible tenacity in achieving its goal of being a nuclear state. Accordingly, the current strategy of imposing heavy sanctions, with hopes that Pyongyang will eventually capitulate, will likely not yield long-term positive results. It is much more prudent to formulate a denuclearization framework by studying the underlying motivations behind their nuclear ambitions.

Accordingly, this paper identified North Korea’s ambitions to be rooted in using nuclear weapons as a foreign threat deterrence, chiefly from the US, and a tool to accrue capital, whether through negotiations or selling nuclear technology to external sources. These desires are in line with the state’s *Juche* ideology, which calls for “self-reliance” in the military and political sense, as well as economic self-sufficiency. The paper then analyzed the three prominent views on how to approach the denuclearization of North Korea: sanctions as the main means to an end, a pre-emptive strike, and negotiating a denuclearization process. Siding with the latter of these options, the paper provided
insight into avoiding past negotiating stalls and reaching quantitative progress. A proactive, multilateral approach that is realistic, such as a step-by-step denuclearization, was cited as a necessary condition. Yet another condition was providing economic benefits for North Korea’s denuclearization and lessening North Korea’s perceived threat of military aggression, primarily from the United States. It is argued that only through leveraging both these spheres as negotiating terms will there be a potential to allay North Korea’s concerns and truly open the path for denuclearization.

Admittedly, such a proposal will likely meet substantial domestic opposition from hawkish voices in South Korea, Japan, and the United States. These states’ governments should strive to forge ahead if working towards denuclearization is truly the region’s policy priority. The fact that South Korea and the United States' executive and legislative branches are controlled by the more liberal and pro-North Korea Minju party and the Democratic Party, respectively, means conditions may be more favourable for the aforementioned undertakings.

Another point regarding this proposal is the reality that the proposal, in effect, calls for negotiating terms that would support propping up the North Korean regime, a notorious human rights transgressor. This criticism is a valid one; our solution does lead to moral and ethical implications, not discussed in depth due to space constraints. However, the uncomfortable reality is that the North Korea question is one lacking a perfect answer. There appears to be no feasible way to check both the DPRK's nuclear program and their human rights violations. This paper lays out the logic if denuclearization and peace in the diplomatic sense is the policy priority. North Korea’s nuclear ambitions have been left unresolved for decades, marking the Korean peninsula a persistent geopolitical hotbed. Our proposal of empathetic negotiation serves as a roadmap for changing this status quo and modifying it into a diplomatic peace zone.
References


