



North Korea's Fast Developing Missiles and Nuclear Weapons—Between a Freeze and Further Sanctions



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The Institute for Far Eastern Studies at Kyungnam University has commissioned a series of four special issues of Issues and Analysis to discuss the situation that the new Moon Jae-in administration of South Korea faces. The first issue dealt with restoration and normalization of North-South Korean relations, and the second discussed THAAD and Sino-US/Sino-ROK relations. This third issue focuses on North Korea's rapidly developing missile and nuclear programs. The fourth and final issue considers the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

Just ten days after the new Moon Jae-in administration took office in Seoul, North Korea tested new types of missiles on two separate occasions. The speed of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs is truly frightening. It is difficult to predict how the Donald Trump administration would respond if North Korea is able to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tipped with a nuclear warhead capable of hitting the continental United States. No one can say with any confidence whether China and South Korea can persuade the United States to remain patient and show restraint. The feared military option may become a reality.

On May 17, 2017 while visiting the Ministry of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the first time since becoming president, President Moon Jae-in expressed such fears: "North Korea's nuclear and missile programs are rapidly developing and fast becoming a reality." Given that North Korea's rapid development of nuclear weapons and missiles further deepens insecurity on the peninsula, it is clearly an issue that urgently needs addressing. However, this is not just a matter of security. It is a significant challenge in finding a way to fully resolve the North Korea nuclear problem.

North Korea under Kim Jong-un has set forth a line of 'parallel development of nuclear forces and the economy'. However, this is impossible to actually achieve under the current sanctions regime. Thus they are caught in a bind: to give up nuclear weapons for the sake of economic growth, or keep them for security. Whilst the North Koreans assert that nuclear weapons are not a potential bargaining chip in negotiations with the United States, it is only through negotiations with the United States that the issue of North Korea's survival can be resolved.

With a new administration under President Trump, the United States is presented with a fresh opportunity to make a deal with North Korea. However, Kim Jong-un shows a growing obsession with his country's missile and nuclear programs. It is a measure of the impatience on the North Korean side that it is doing everything it can to make the Trump administration perceive North Korea's nuclear and missile programs as being the most pressing of issues in order to get the US to the negotiating table. Even if the game cannot be sped up, Pyongyang seems to be doing what it can to improve its hand in negotiations.

One of its potential cards is a working ICBM, and such a bargaining chip is feared in Washington. The United States has so far attempted to use the hint and threat of military

action—including the dispatch of a nuclear aircraft carrier taskforce and strategic bombers to the region—in order to pressure North Korea to put its missile and nuclear programs on hold. It is also attempting to get China to apply additional pressure. However, these efforts have thus far yielded no substantial results.

There are perceptible signs indicating the possibility of dialogue between the United States and North Korea, in spite of the latter's continued missile launches. In a meeting with Hong Seok-hyun, a South Korean special envoy to the United States dispatched on behalf of President Moon Jae-in, President Trump said he was willing to engage (in dialogue) for peace if the conditions were right. It would be unrealistic to make a North Korean promise to give up nuclear weapons a prerequisite for talks. But a freeze on further development is possible. The US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, has said that the United States will engage in dialogue if North Korea stops all nuclear and missile-related tests. A freeze on missile launches and nuclear tests is now rising in the minds of policy makers as a potential start on the long road to North Korea's full denuclearization.

Complete denuclearization remains the ultimate goal, and this is not negotiable. However, denuclearization is a process, not a single event. The lesson of failure from the policy of strategic patience indicates that waiting just means more nuclear and missile development, and this makes a solution ever more distant. The immediate priority is to suspend additional missile and nuclear tests in order to stop further development from happening. If such a suspension is an important bargaining chip for the North Korean side, then expecting them to cede it merely for the promise of dialogue is little different to strategic patience. While waiting for North Korea to comply, additional missile and nuclear developments will happen. Thus, it may be easier to agree on a suspension in North Korean nuclear and missile development activities by not placing preconditions on dialogue, but rather to just start dialogue on an unconditional basis.

First of all, a suspension in nuclear tests and missile launches can freeze development going forward. Next, current nuclear capabilities must be dismantled, sealed, and verifiably made unrecoverable, with all working weapons rendered inoperable and unusable. However, without compensation, this will be impossible. The United States will have to consider what they are prepared to offer North Korea, in stages, in order to induce North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons.

It is likely that North Korea will first demand the repeal of sanctions as a condition for a suspension, rather than material compensation. They may also separate nuclear tests from missile tests as a salami tactic. If ICBM tests prove successful, then additional cards will be placed at North Korea's disposal. An agreement will be difficult to find on the issue of suspension and sanctions. The conditions that the United States and North Korea might place on serious dialogue on denuclearization following a freeze may also be different. Thus, whether a compromise between the two sides can be achieved will prove crucial. First, the start of dialogue aimed at both a suspension of tests and a softening of sanctions can begin, but ending of sanctions can proceed gradually with the return of IAEA observers and the resumption of their activities.

It is too early for the United States to re-center toward dialogue. Currently, it is doing little on its own to resolve the problem of North Korean nuclear and missile developments. Many other issues exist for the US side to deal with. Even if a suspension is the start, it will be difficult to accede to North Korean demands for the ending of sanctions. There is a large gap here, a gap that South Korea can fill. We must urge the United States to begin a dialogue with the North Koreans aimed at resolving the nuclear issue. At the same time, we should restore relations with the North and resume aid and cooperation as permitted under existing sanctions and in areas not directly linked to the nuclear issue. This will not only provide justification for modifications in sanctions going forward, but also make it possible to pressure the United States to engage in dialogue, and press China to cooperate.

We now have a new government in Seoul, five months after the Trump administration assumed office. We are five steps behind, but with the opportunity to take a step ahead of developments.

If South Korea does not get ahead, it could again be sidestepped. With growing fears of ‘Korea passing’—the term is derived from the phrase ‘Japan passing’—be it ‘denuclearization through Six Party Talks’, or be it ‘a peace system through a Four Party Forum’, South Korea’s voice must be heard, and North-South relations should occupy an important position. South Korea and inter-Korean relations are a catalyst for US-DPRK talks and denuclearization, not an impediment. If the US-ROK alliance and North-South relations are organically connected, and an improvement in relations with China presages their active cooperation, North Korean nuclear and missile developments can be halted and a table for dialogue created. In addition, utilizing the unique relationship between the two Koreas, aid and renewed cooperation can provide a justification for the ending of sanctions, with North-South relations prefiguring what comes next. Now is the time for a staged (suspension-freeze-disabling-denuclearization), diverse (Six Party Denuclearization–Four Party Peace Forum–North-South/US-North Korean), inclusive (security-economy), and detailed Korean roadmap for the future.

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