

3. A Step-by-Step Strategy for Denuclearization and Peace on the Korean Peninsula: The Road Not Taken after Singapore

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The US-ROK Alliance Should Not Give Up on Denuclearization of North Korea

The international diplomatic effort to achieve North Korean denuclearization has been at a standstill at least since the second Trump-Kim Summit in Hanoi in February 2019. At that meeting, President Trump rejected Chairman Kim Jong Un's proposal that would have traded dismantlement of parts of the Yongbyon nuclear complex for relief from the broad economic sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council on North Korea in 2016 and 2017.¹¹⁷ Though many observers—particularly in the administration of ROK President Moon Jae In—were disappointed in the outcome, Trump was praised at the time by US commentators—even by longtime critics like Nancy Pelosi—for standing firm.¹¹⁸

Ultimately, agreeing to so much sanctions relief for North Korea in exchange for a significant, but still modest, concession on its nuclear program seemed inadvisable. Even among those US commentators who favor a “step by step” approach, there was general agreement that such sweeping sanctions relief could only come at a later stage, as

part of a “big deal” encompassing more far-reaching steps toward denuclearization by North Korea.

Most US observers have since drawn the conclusion—long the US intelligence community's view—that Kim Jong Un was probably never serious about entirely giving up his nuclear weapons in the first place, despite his pledge to work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula at the first Trump-Kim Summit in Singapore in June 2018.¹¹⁹ As a result, many now argue that Washington, Seoul, and the international community should “face reality,” give up on denuclearization, and shift to a long-term strategy focused on either containment of the North Korean threat or peace and reconciliation.¹²⁰

While this may be a realistic analysis of Kim's intentions, to entirely abandon full denuclearization as the shared objective of the US-ROK alliance would mean accepting North Korea—de facto, if not de jure—as a nuclear weapons state, one that continues to improve its capabilities to threaten the US mainland as well as US and allied forces in the region. This is a decision that would have far-reaching, long-term consequences for global and regional security and stability and should not be taken lightly. Over time, acceptance of a nuclear-armed North Korea could, for example, increase domestic pressure on Tokyo and Seoul to acquire nuclear weapons of their own, or demands from Seoul to redeploy US nuclear weapons to the Republic of Korea until North

¹¹⁶ The author would like to thank his Atlantic Council colleague Markus Garlauskas, former US National Intelligence Officer for North Korea, for his advice and assistance on this article.

¹¹⁷ “Senior State Department Official Remarks to Traveling Press,” US Department of State, media release, February 28, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/senior-state-department-official-remarks-to-traveling-press-3/>.

¹¹⁸ Hyonhee Shin, “No deal blow for Moon's vision of ‘peace-driven’ Korean economy,” Reuters, March 1, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-moon-idUSKCN1QI405>; David Ignatius, “It made sense for Trump to walk away in Hanoi,” Washington Post, February 28, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/02/28/it-made-sense-trump-walk-away-hanoi/>; Clare Foran and Ashley Kilough, “Pelosi on North Korea talks: ‘I'm glad that the president walked away,’” CNN, February 28, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/28/politics/pelosi-trump-north-korea-kim-jong-un-vietnam-summit/index.html>.

¹¹⁹ Daniel R. Coats, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2019, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR--SSCI.pdf>; “Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit,” the White House, press release, June 12, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/>.

¹²⁰ Harry J. Kazianis, “Forget War: Containment Is The Best Way To Deal With North Korea,” *American Conservative*, June 27, 2018, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/forget-war-containment-is-the-best-way-to-deal-with-north-korea/>; Daniel R. DePetris, “Peace in Korea Can Happen Without Denuclearization,” *the Diplomat*, July 31, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/peace-in-korea-can-happen-without-denuclearization/>.

Korea gives up its own—which would further exacerbate regional tensions.¹²¹

The speculation surrounding Kim Jong Un’s absence from public appearances in April 2020 serves as a reminder of how much North Korea’s reliance on a single all-powerful leader with an unclear succession plan heightens the potential for instability—which would hold far greater risks if it occurred while North Korea remains a nuclear-armed state. Were Kim to die or become incapacitated suddenly while North Korea remains nuclear-armed, a succession crisis could lead to fragmentation of control over nuclear weapons and material, leading to potentially much graver consequences for any ensuing civil war, a military confrontation, or even external military intervention.

Further, the unchallenged authority of the leader in North Korea’s personalized decision-making process is also a reminder that North Korea’s intentions toward denuclearization could shift rapidly and dramatically. Kim Jong Un will not always be the leader of North Korea, and we cannot rule out that the individual or collective leadership that follows him could be influenced to have a very different view of the relative costs and benefits of denuclearization. Meanwhile, Kim’s own thinking on denuclearization could change with time and under the influence of strong incentives—while he has the power to impose a different view on anyone in North Korea who remains wedded to nuclear weapons. This means that the long-term prospects for North Korean denuclearization should not be dismissed, even if one believes its current leader does not currently intend to denuclearize.

Therefore, the United States and the Republic of Korea should uphold complete denuclearization as the ultimate goal, and Washington should seek to restart negotiations on the basis of the Joint Statement issued at the end of the Singapore Summit. That document, while ambiguous in some of its formulations, lays out the goals for a series of parallel tracks: normalization of US-North Korea relations to ensure peace and prosperity, establishment of a lasting peace regime, and denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.¹²² While lacking many essential details, the Singapore statement is largely consistent with the principles agreed upon fifteen years ago in the September

2005, Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks, and with the inter-Korean Panmunjom Declaration of April 2018.¹²³ These agreements still represent a potentially viable basis for a comprehensive settlement not only of the North Korean nuclear issue but also of many of the security challenges on the Korean peninsula—if Pyongyang can be convinced to recommit to them.

Envisioning a Multi-Track and Step-by-Step Approach

Conceptually, the underlying premise of this multi-track approach is that there can be no permanent peace or security on the Korean peninsula or normalization of political and economic relations with Pyongyang without denuclearization of North Korea. At the same time, it accepts the reality that we will not be able to achieve denuclearization without convincing Pyongyang that North Korea will be both more secure and more prosperous after giving up its nuclear weapons. In essence, denuclearization, peace and security, and economic revitalization are three “prongs” to a single trident and must be implemented in parallel. Such framing is very much in line with the Moon administration’s policy toward North Korea, which has the goals of: 1) Resolution of the North Korean Nuclear Issue and Establishment of Permanent Peace; 2) Development of Sustainable Inter-Korean Relations; and 3) Realization of a New Economic Community on the Korean Peninsula.¹²⁴

In practical terms, this means not only a three-pronged approach but also a step-by-step process of building trust in the relationship between the US-ROK alliance and North Korea, leading incrementally to a comprehensive deal. In this process, movement toward denuclearization, toward a new peace regime, and toward North Korea’s economic revitalization need to move at roughly the same pace along parallel tracks, so that Pyongyang, Seoul, and Washington can minimize the additional risks they are accepting and see tangible benefits at each step. This would allow the North Koreans to progressively gain confidence that their security will not be diminished or undermined, and that their economy will benefit, if they halt nuclear and ballistic missile testing and production, give up nuclear weapons

121 Toby Dalton and Ain Han, “Elections, Nukes, and the Future of the South Korea—US Alliance,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 26, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/26/elections-nukes-and-future-of-south-korea-u.s.-alliance-pub-83044>; Byong-chul Lee, “Don’t be surprised when South Korea wants nuclear weapons,” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, October 23, 2019, <https://thebulletin.org/2019/10/dont-be-surprised-when-south-korea-wants-nuclear-weapons/>.

122 “Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit,” the White House, June 12, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/>.

123 “Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks Beijing, September 19, 2005,” US Department of State, press release, September 19, 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/53490.htm>; “Translation: Panmunjom Declaration,” Wikisource, accessed November 2020, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Translation:Panmunjom_Declaration.

124 Ministry of Unification Republic of Korea, “Three Goals,” accessed November 2020, https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/policyIssues/koreanpeninsula/goals/.

and delivery systems, and start dismantling ballistic missile and nuclear production infrastructure.

For their part, Washington and Seoul need to work together closely and plan carefully so that progress can be made on all tracks, while mitigating the risks to the alliance and avoiding opportunities for Pyongyang to exploit different approaches from Washington and Seoul. Washington will be most concerned that Pyongyang will not be able to pocket a peace treaty or other security guarantees and economic inducements favored by Seoul in a way that would allow the regime's negotiating goals to be satisfied without ever "going all the way" to full, verifiable denuclearization. Since 2018, there have been concerns in Washington that Seoul wants to move too far along the path of peace and economic incentives without progress in denuclearization, while Seoul has sometimes bristled at Washington's perceived interference in inter-Korean initiatives—leading to the establishment of a new working group to resolve or manage these differences.¹²⁵

In addition to preserving negotiating leverage and avoiding an opportunity for Pyongyang to play Seoul and Washington off against each other, it will be vital to ensure that the US-ROK alliance remains solid, and that the US extended deterrent against North Korean aggression remains credible throughout the denuclearization process. This must be done, however, in a careful way that does not provide North Korea with renewed justifications for its past claims: that its security is being threatened by alliance military coordination, that Seoul is "meddling" in bilateral US-North Korea denuclearization dialogue, or that Washington is interfering in the inter-Korean reconciliation process.

Realistically, these parallel processes would need to be carried out in stages, based on the "action for action" principle, with economic incentives at every stage in order to lubricate the process and increase the costs of "backsliding." Indeed, the pressure of sanctions and the prospect of sanctions relief may provide far more leverage for denuclearization than steps along the peace track, at least in the short term, given the evident impact of sanctions on Kim's economic goals. While we should aim to complete all three processes as quickly as possible, a step-by-step approach is one that requires patience to work as intended.

The scope and scale of eliminating all elements of North Korea's nuclear capabilities and infrastructure, with

comprehensive verification—even without considering the time necessary for negotiating the details at each step—would realistically take longer than a single four-year presidential term (barring total surrender by Pyongyang). Meanwhile, working out the details of establishing and implementing a permanent peace mechanism and economic relief would also take time, even under ideal circumstances, and would take even more time to deliver sufficient results that Pyongyang could be confident in the enduring benefits. A quick, "big bang" approach, though understandably desirable from Washington's perspective, is not realistic.

Even the best formula for sequencing is no guarantee that the North Koreans will actually give up their nuclear weapons completely. But without the proper sequencing and observance of the "action for action" principle, the negotiations will remain stuck at the starting gate, and we will, once again, miss an opportunity to limit or even roll back the expansion of North Korea's nuclear and missile capability. That would, in turn, increase the risks of divergence between Washington and Seoul, while exacerbating the security dangers in Northeast Asia.

This, unfortunately, is what has happened after the Singapore Summit. Even if one glosses over President Trump's declaration after the summit that there was no longer a nuclear threat from North Korea, it is clear that the apparent level of optimism in Washington and Seoul in the aftermath of the summit was unwarranted. In the end, momentum toward denuclearization proved difficult to establish, absent any mechanism to work out the detailed "action for action" follow-up on the Singapore Declaration.¹²⁶ Despite the appointment of a new US special representative in August 2018, and his inclusion in a trip led by the secretary of state to meet with Kim Jong Un in October, North Korea would not agree to a working-level process to follow up on the Singapore Summit.¹²⁷

Even the prospects of working out additional details between the secretary of state and North Korean lead negotiator Kim Yong Chol quickly grew dim by late 2018, with Pyongyang canceling a November meeting between the two at the last moment.¹²⁸ Pyongyang apparently held to the belief that it could get the best deal by engaging with Trump himself, which led to Kim Yong Chol visiting the Oval Office in January 2019, to secure President Trump's support for a second summit, which ultimately took place the following month in Hanoi.¹²⁹

125 Christy Lee, "US, South Korea to Launch Joint Working Group on North Korea," VOA News, November 3, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/2os3kafh>; "Ministries embark on reforming Korea-US working group on N. Korea policy: lawmaker," Yonhap News Agency, September 29, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/mhpmiyst>.

126 Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "Before taking office people were assuming that we were going to War with North Korea," Twitter, June 13, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/1qpqn2dx>; "Trump claims North Korea is 'no longer a nuclear threat,'" CNBC, June 13, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/1wk6xzvv>.

127 Kylie Atwood, "Pompeo's six hours in Pyongyang - a reporter's notebook," CBC News, October 15, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/1elbqox>.

128 Simon Denyer, "Pompeo's meeting with North Korean counterpart called off at last minute," Washington Post, November 7, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/fpcn7yqo>.

129 Barnini Chakraborty, "White House: Second nuclear summit between Trump, North Korea to be held in February," Fox News, January 18, 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/trump-to-meet-north-korean-official-in-the-oval-office-in-possible-prelude-to-2nd-nuclear-summit>.

The biggest challenge of a step-by-step approach is establishing simultaneous incremental steps at every stage of the process that are mutually acceptable to Pyongyang, Washington, and Seoul (as well as any other key stakeholders involved in providing incentives to Pyongyang) to build the foundation of trust needed to achieve full denuclearization and durable peace on the Korean peninsula. As the Hanoi Summit demonstrated one year later, a virtually “all-or-nothing” approach to sanctions relief from either side is likely to lead to a dead end.

It was disingenuous of the North Koreans to assert right after Singapore that the order of paragraphs in the Joint Statement required that an end-of-war declaration come *before* any steps toward denuclearization.¹³⁰ But the North Koreans had reason to expect movement in parallel. Movement along the peace and security track, such as a joint US-ROK end-of-war declaration, would have been one way for Seoul and Washington to show Pyongyang that the United States was serious about ending its “hostile policy” and about transforming relations, which could have persuaded North Korea to make a significant step on the denuclearization path.

Picking up Where Singapore Left Off: An Illustrative Approach to Sequencing

What would be a more realistic approach to sequencing that could move the negotiations incrementally toward the twin goals of denuclearization and a peace treaty? A “declaration for declaration” would be a good way to get the ball rolling on implementation of the Singapore Joint Statement. Under this formula, North Korea would agree to provide a declaration of its nuclear weapons programs and agree to an international verification mechanism for this declaration. In return, the United States and the Republic of Korea would issue a joint political declaration together with North Korea and China announcing the end of the Korean war and their agreement to initiate negotiations on a permanent peace treaty to replace the 1953 Armistice. As a necessary condition, of course, Kim would also have to reaffirm North Korea’s adherence to his previous pledge not to test ICBMs or nuclear weapons, in essence nullifying his declaration at the end of 2019 that he no longer feels bound by these pledges.¹³¹

The United States and Republic of Korea would make clear that the political declaration has no immediate legal

consequences for the United Nations Command (UNC), Combined Forces Command (CFC), or US Forces Korea (USFK), although it could be accompanied by reciprocal military confidence-building measures, such as mutual pullbacks of missiles or artillery to an agreed distance away from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Such measures could build upon the Comprehensive Military Agreement between the North and the Republic of Korea, instituted after the Pyongyang inter-Korean summit of September 2019.¹³²

An end-of-war declaration alone would almost certainly not provide sufficient leverage to persuade North Korea to agree to a full and verifiable declaration of its nuclear programs and infrastructure; they will likely insist on limiting the scope of the declaration and on sanctions relief as well. Some significant, but reversible, steps to ease sanctions would be needed to secure agreement to a more comprehensive declaration encompassing previously-undeclared facilities and material outside of the well-known Yongbyon complex. This could include suspension of restrictions on inter-Korean economic projects (especially those that benefit the nascent private sector in North Korea) and temporarily easing some of the sectoral import or export sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council.

Even if the North Koreans agreed to provide a comprehensive declaration, they would probably balk at the stringent verification requirement—so this could be the stage at which the process came to a screeching halt. In that case, any sanctions relief could be quickly withdrawn and progress toward a new peace mechanism suspended. But Washington and Seoul should be prepared to provide sufficient flexibility—such as allowing for the declaration of programs and establishment of a verification mechanism to be carried out in two or three stages—to put Kim Jong Un to the test while ensuring that he would bear the blame for any breakdown.

In the more optimistic scenario in which North Korea agreed to a verifiable declaration-for-declaration package, we would then enter the stage of denuclearization—the actual, step-by-step dismantlement and destruction of the North Koreans’ nuclear weapons and programs. To maintain the “action for action” framework, we would need to break up the negotiations on a peace treaty and sanctions relief into several incremental steps to be carried out in parallel to the different stages of denuclearization.

130 Alex Ward, “Exclusive: Trump promised Kim Jong Un he’d sign an agreement to end the Korean War,” *Vox*, August 29, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/8/29/17795452/trump-north-korea-war-summit-singapore-promise>.

131 Choe Sang-hun, “North Korea Is No Longer Bound by Nuclear Test Moratorium, Kim Says,” *New York Times*, December 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/31/world/asia/north-korea-kim-speech.html>.

132 Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain, The National Committee on North Korea, September 2018, <https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/Agreement%20on%20the%20Implementation%20of%20the%20Historic%20Panmunjom%20Declaration%20in%20the%20Military%20Domain.pdf>.

On the denuclearization side, we should aim to begin with some “front loaded” steps—a down payment by which the North Koreans could demonstrate that they are ready to take concrete steps to eliminate real capabilities (weapons, delivery systems, infrastructure) that threaten both the Republic of Korea and the United States. This could include the removal of five to ten ICBMs and ten to twenty warheads to a third country and a halt to fissile material production at all known facilities, together with a full moratorium on ballistic missile and nuclear weapons tests. There could also be reciprocal reductions in conventional forces by the US-ROK alliance and North Korea in tandem with the initial steps toward denuclearization.

Following this down payment, a second stage of denuclearization could involve taking all ICBM and IRBM launchers out of military garrisons to verifiable long-term storage sites for future dismantling or disabling; removing additional ICBMs and warheads to a third country and/or beginning their dismantlement and destruction inside North Korea under international verification; and shutting down Yongbyon and other fissile material production sites. There could, again, be accompanying conventional arms reductions and confidence-building measures.

In subsequent stages, there would be further dismantlement and destruction of weapons, delivery systems, and production facilities, culminating in the final stage in North Korea’s adherence to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear weapons state—at which point we would declare that North Korea has achieved full, final, and verifiable denuclearization (FFVD).

Slicing the peace treaty negotiations into stages would be more complicated, but it would be essential to maintaining negotiating leverage vis-à-vis Pyongyang. A first stage could involve the United States and the Republic of Korea declaring that they have no intention to invade or attack North Korea and no intention to reintroduce nuclear weapons to the Korean peninsula, using language drawn from the September 2005, Joint Statement of the Six Party Talks.¹³³ The four parties (adding China) would then commence negotiations on a peace treaty, with the United States coordinating as necessary with other UN Sending States.¹³⁴

As denuclearization proceeds to the next stage, the four parties could agree on the main elements or the actual text of the future peace treaty. Ideally, this should include not only a permanent cessation of hostilities to replace the 1953 Armistice but also additional provisions such as a mutual

non-aggression pact, declaring the Korean peninsula to be a nuclear weapons-free zone, and reciprocal arms control and confidence-building measures to ensure conventional military disengagement and de-escalation of the military confrontation on the Korean peninsula. As an additional incentive, the United States could offer the opening of diplomatic liaison offices in Pyongyang and Washington and facilitate bilateral economic and trade development projects, with full diplomatic relations and the opening of embassies taking place upon entry into force of the peace treaty.

The third stage, which would be close to the end of the denuclearization process, could be the actual signing of the peace treaty and agreement to apply its provisions provisionally pending completion of denuclearization. The final stage would be the ratification and entry into force of the peace treaty, upon completion of FFVD and North Korean re-accession to the NPT as a non-nuclear-weapons state.

Throughout the process, Washington and Seoul, working with the UN Security Council, would suspend and eventually lift virtually all economic sanctions in incremental fashion as the denuclearization process proceeds. As noted above, economic incentives may provide stronger leverage for denuclearization than movement toward a peace treaty. Along with sanctions relief and direct economic aid and investment that would likely be offered by China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and possibly Russia, Seoul and Washington could offer to facilitate engagement between Pyongyang and various international organizations and investors. To this end, certain US and ROK domestic measures and laws would have to be waived or rescinded, such as the US Trading with the Enemy Act.

The approach set forth above is only one possible way to address the sequencing of denuclearization and a peace treaty. Starting with a “declaration for declaration,” some argue, is likely to fail; they point out that the North Koreans have stated that a full declaration can only come near the end of the process, since an early declaration of the locations of their weapons would supposedly make them more vulnerable to a US preemptive attack and force them to negotiate “without any clothes on.” If that proved to be the case, denuclearization could begin with more limited steps such as a partial declaration that includes reestablishing an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) presence at Yongbyon to supervise the shutdown of fissile material production there. But deferring a detailed declaration for too long would make it harder to verify North Korean fulfillment of their commitments to denuclearization.

133 September 19, 2005 Joint Statement of the Six Party Talks, The National Committee on North Korea, 2005, https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/September_19_2005_Joint_Statement.doc.

134 The Armistice was signed by a US general on behalf of the United Nations Command, not just the United States and ROK, so other troop-contributing nations such as the UK, France, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Norway, Turkey, and the Netherlands, would need to be consulted.

A key part of developing the increments of “action for action” would be a clearer common understanding among the relevant officials in Washington and Seoul of the actual leverage provided by various types of economic sanctions.¹³⁵ Given the dramatic decline in international enforcement of UN sanctions for over a year now,¹³⁶ some types of sanctions relief early in the process might be a relatively small concession if this relief were offered in areas where there has been little international political will or practical ability to robustly enforce sanctions.

Despite the growing pessimism about the effectiveness of sanctions, some suggest that, if we use our economic leverage judiciously, we can afford to move toward an end-of-war declaration and a peace treaty at a faster pace than denuclearization. US and ROK security would not be jeopardized, in this view, since a peace treaty would only affect the status of the UN Command, and not the status of US Forces Korea or the US-ROK Combined Forces Command, whose legal justifications are not tied to the Korean War armistice. President Moon has advocated for revitalizing the peace process as a priority, with the intent for this to “jump-start” progress on denuclearization.¹³⁷

This approach could have potential downsides, however. With the potential removal of UN Command from the equation with the end of the armistice, it would remove US allies and neutral nations, like Switzerland and Sweden, from playing their positive role for peninsular stability, now exercised through the UN Command, the UN Military Armistice Commission, and the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission.¹³⁸ More fundamentally, it could encourage North Korea to take the money and run—pocketing the end-of-war declaration, peace treaty, and associated incentives, and then renouncing denuclearization forever even as a long-term goal. It would therefore be even more important in this scenario to first ensure that suspended sanctions could be easily “snapped back” with China’s support in the event Kim Jong Un failed to deliver on his end of the bargain. Alternate methods to involve US allies and trusted neutral nations in the peace mechanism could also be pursued, though North Korea would likely oppose their inclusion.

Conclusion: Seek Denuclearization Through Multilateral Diplomacy

As noted above, many believe that, no matter how carefully we deal with sequencing, and despite the commitment to “Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” in the Singapore Joint Statement, the North has no intention of actually giving up its nuclear deterrent, and that this is why the process is now at an impasse. They argue that Kim Jong Un has seen what happened to countries like Libya and Ukraine after giving up their nuclear weapons voluntarily; he will therefore make unacceptable demands for reciprocal US “denuclearization” to force the United States and the international community to accept North Korea as a de facto nuclear weapons state. He would, in this scenario, use a step-by-step approach to denuclearization to obtain economic benefits and security guarantees while retaining at least some of his nuclear weapons capabilities. The US intelligence community has repeatedly stated its assessment that this is Kim Jong Un’s intention for negotiations.¹³⁹

The most we may be able to achieve, in this case, would be partial denuclearization, with Kim Jong Un retaining significant, albeit reduced nuclear weapons and ballistic missile delivery capability in the short and medium term. In this scenario, we would need to decide what partial steps along the security and economic tracks (such as diplomatic normalization or limited sanctions relief) were still in our interest as part of a long-term containment and risk-reduction strategy. We would also need to decide how much to increase the pressure and incentives for the North Korean regime to go further in denuclearization, or whether to assume a posture of strategic patience.

Limiting the further qualitative improvement and quantitative expansion of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal that would come from some sort of “freeze” could be worth significant concessions from Washington and Seoul, even if this meant reducing the pressure on the regime to fully denuclearize for an extended period of time. Measures going beyond a freeze, such as a permanent reduction in the size of North

135 Markus V. Garlauskas, “A New Framework for Assessing Sanctions Is Vital for Any New US Strategy on North Korea,” 38 North, Stimson Center, October 22, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/10/mgarlauskas102220/>.

136 Stephanie Kleine-Ahbrandt, “Maximum Pressure Against North Korea, RIP,” 38 North, Stimson Center, November 7, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2019/10/skleineahlbrandt100719/>.

137 Lee Chi-dong, “Moon proposes declaring end to Korean War, requests U.N.’s support,” Yonhap News Agency, September 23, 2020, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200922010200315>.

138 “UNC FAQs,” United Nations Command, accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.unc.mil/Resources/FAQs/>.

139 Daniel R. Coats, Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 29, 2019, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>.

Korea's arsenal, would be a significant step forward, one that could justify even more substantial measures in response.

However, even in this circumstance, we should not abandon the goal of complete denuclearization and accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state. Besides the prospect that Kim Jong Un, or a future North Korean leadership, could eventually change its mind about full denuclearization, such acceptance of a nuclear-armed North Korea would pose significant dangers to regional stability and global security, as discussed above. Abandoning denuclearization would further undermine the global non-proliferation regime, further reduce the credibility of the UN Security Council, and undermine strategic stability in Northeast Asia.

Whatever approach we take to renewed negotiations, we need to establish some sort of successor to the Six Party Talks to coordinate with all the major stakeholders, not just between the United States and the Republic of Korea, and not just with China, but also including Japan and

Russia. The lack of such a mechanism in the run-up to the Singapore and Hanoi Summits made it impossible to present a common line to the North Koreans on sequencing and the criteria for sanctions relief. This may have contributed to Kim's perception that, by dealing directly with President Trump, he could gain a much greater degree of relief than Washington would accept for what Kim was willing to offer.

Although multilateral diplomacy can sometimes be cumbersome, such a mechanism is essential to prevent the North Koreans from playing the various stakeholders off against one another, from further circumventing or weakening enforcement of sanctions, and from falling victim to misunderstandings that could arise from mixed messages from different capitals. To prevent the sanctions regime from collapsing and mitigate the risk of North Korean wedge-driving, we need a mechanism similar to the Six Party Talks but founded first and foremost on building a consensus approach between Seoul and Washington.