



Realistic Expectations of ‘Denuclearization’ Needed for Upcoming Kim Jong-Un-Donald Trump Summit

by Adam P. MacDonald

In the aftermath of the [recent summit](#) between the leaders of North and South Korea there has been a healthy amount of both [cautious optimism](#) and [realistic skepticism](#) as to whether this will lead towards Pyongyang ultimately dismantling and relinquishing its entire nuclear arsenal and program. On the one hand Kim Jong-Un holding talks with President Moon Jae-in in South Korea was truly historic, with the day-long summit ending with a [written commitment](#) by both towards mutual disarmament along their land and maritime borders, formally ending the Korean War and the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, the summit was largely ceremonial and aspirational in nature, providing little details as to when and how such processes would unfold, including the role of outside powers like China and the United States, and the timeline and exact sequencing of events to achieve these objectives. The lack of specifics raises suspicions that this diplomatic entente is not so much breaking new ground as much as returning to well-trodden terrain defined by previous such summits and negotiations pledging peace and denuclearization but ultimately [ending in failure](#) with Pyongyang ceaselessly progressing their goal of becoming a nuclear power. North Korea has at times frozen major parts of their nuclear and missile programs as part of these processes, but they have never [comprehensively halted](#) them in their entirety.

As the United States prepares to participate in an [unprecedented meeting](#) between President Trump and Kim Jong-Un, determining whether the North Korean leader is serious about negotiating complete disarming and dismantling (also known as rollback) of his nuclear arsenal, and if so under what conditions, is of the highest priority. Much remains unknown about the upcoming leaders’ summit, most importantly expectations which hinge on the issue of denuclearization. There are very good reasons for being skeptical of Kim Jong-Un’s willingness to negotiate the surrender of his entire nuclear capacity under any circumstance.

The Staying Power of Nuclear Weapons – Security Guarantee, Regime Legitimizations, and Status

First, nuclear weapons are the [ultimate security guarantee](#) against foreign military attack including in the service of regime change, effectively neutralizing conventional force asymmetries defining the balance of power between North Korea and the United States and her allies. North Korea does not need to possess a similar sized nuclear force as the United States for even the slight possibility of them being able to conduct a limited nuclear strike capacity induces severe caution in Washington and other regional capitals in using force against them in almost all contexts. Recent history, as well, is littered with examples of states which had their nuclear programs destroyed or surrendered them only to fall victim to great power aggression, including Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and the Ukraine.

[The case of the Ukraine](#) is particularly illustrative as Kiev relinquished its inherited nuclear arsenal following the break-up of the Soviet Union in exchange from economic inducements and security guarantees from both the West and Russia only to see Moscow annex Crimea and support a major

separatist civil war in the east of the country two decades later. The case of Gaddafi, as well, is telling as the dictator's overthrow - almost a decade after he [gave up](#) his Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Program in exchange for normalizing relations with the West - was predicated not on his behaviour towards his neighbours but due to Western arguments of protecting civilian lives as the Libyan military gained the upper hand in the civil war against a number of rebel groups in 2011. Could North Korea, even with a peace deal and security guarantees from Washington in place, be victim of future American/Western attack on account of its internal behaviour towards its citizenry? In this vein, it somewhat comical the [recent suggestion](#) of the new National Security Advisor John Bolton of using the WMD agreement struck with Libya as a framework for upcoming negotiations with North Korea (given his [hawkish views](#) towards the use of military force against North Korea, the irony was almost certainly not lost on him). The almost near-certainty, as well, of President Trump [annulling](#) the Iran Deal is another reason for Pyongyang to be skeptical the United States will negotiate in good faith and be able to provide sufficient security guarantees to obviate the need for retaining a nuclear capability. Fear of future uncertainty of actions by great powers, specifically the United States, has and will continue to be a major overarching pressure on North Korea to retain nuclear weapons.

Second, nuclear weapons are not just an outward looking security measure but have become an integral component of North Korean regime and the Kim Dynasty who have been progressing the program for over three decades. Under Kim Jong-Un, nuclear and missile programs have improved and expanded rapidly cementing the legacy of both his father and grand-father (who first started the program) as well as [taking centre stage](#) in his own regime. Nuclear weapons have been enshrined in the [state constitution](#) and project an image of North Korea as a technologically sophisticated state joining an elite club of states in possession of not only a nuclear force, but one which can reach almost any part of the world. Nuclear weapons, as well, are demonstrative of and contribute towards the self-depiction by the North Korean regime as existing in a hostile environment (being subject to sanctions, diplomatic isolation and constant American military exercises and strategic forces deployed nearby) necessitating totalitarian governance, massive allotment of limited capital and resources towards the military, and the mobilization of society onto a permanent war time footing. Given up nuclear weapons would not solely be a security policy change but rather could have large and wide ranging regime-changing effects. In particular, significant amelioration of relations between North Korea, her neighbours and the United States to the extent of nullifying the need for nuclear weapons, a project costing billions and taking decades to come to fruition, could also undermine the totalitarian logic underpinning the entire state and usher in new and unexpected changes in domestic power dynamics.

On this point it is important to remember that South Africa is the only state to have dismantled and fully rolled back an indigenously built nuclear arsenal. While Belarus, Kazakhstan and the Ukraine were 'born nuclear' following the break-up of the Soviet Union due to the placement of large nuclear forces on each of their homelands, they [all relinquished them](#) in relatively short order for a number of practical issues (specifically they could not use them as they did not have access to the control systems) and a mixture of inducements (economic assistance, security guarantees) and pressures (being treated as pariah states if they did not return them). South Africa remains the only state to build a nuclear weapons arsenal and then dismantle it with this entire three decade process being conducted entirely in secret. This singular case nuclear rollback was not simply due to the improvement of Pretoria's external security environment (namely the retrenchment of the Soviet Union from southern Africa as part of the winding down of the Cold War and the termination a number of regional conflicts), but as well due to the installation of a new President in FW De Klerk who [was determined to terminate](#) the secret program as part of a broader effort to transform both the nature of the state (specifically the ending of the Apartheid regime) and South Africa's relations with the international community (escaping pariah status and opprobrium). We do not know what the true intentions are of Kim Jong-Un, but he has [followed in the footsteps](#) of his father and grand-father in cementing his grip over the totalitarian state. How far is he willing to establish a new relationship with South Korea, the United States and the world given the

possible internal, unexpected power ramifications which may result if the external threat narrative undermining and legitimizing the regime dissolves? Is Kim Jong-un such a transformational figure, or does he rely on to a certain extent international hostility and conflict in order to maintain his grip on power?

Finally, nuclear weapons are an important status symbol for North Korea which [strengthens](#) their position on the international stage. After years of regular nuclear and missile tests combined with hyperbolic threats towards the United States and her allies 2018 has seen a remarkable pivot by Kim Jong-Un towards a more conciliatory and diplomatic approach. There is a common belief that the ‘maximum pressure’ campaign by the United States has resulted in North Korea’s volte face in wanting to negotiate, but Kim Jong-Un’s position is not entirely precarious or based on desperation. He has acquired a [large nuclear arsenal](#) – dozens of weapons and long-range missiles including those capable of reaching the continental United States – which strengthens his bargaining position by giving him options in demonstrating his commitment to ‘denuclearization’. North Korea has already [announced](#) an indefinite moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile testing as well as the closing of the nuclear test site at Pyongge-ri. Such concessions, though, are low hanging fruit as Pyongyang has had over a decade of tests to progress nuclear and missile technologies and may feel confident they [do not need](#) to conduct more (and leaves open the question of whether these ban will cover further Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) and ‘satellite’ launches which are not explicitly mentioned) and the test site appears to be [unusable](#) given its partial collapse. These decisions, also, could be easily reversed if desired. Nevertheless, such unilateral decisions demonstrate the degree of flexibility Pyongyang has to play with given its large and multi-faceted nuclear program and arsenal compared to previous periods of negotiations when they possessed a far smaller and cruder force.

Safe in the possession of a rudimentary but credible nuclear force, Kim Jong-Un has become the [‘belle of the ball’](#) in Northeast Asia with numerous countries lining up to have bilateral summits with the reclusive leader. After years of consolidating his power base at home, Kim Jong-Un appears to be coming into the role of a statesman travelling to both China and South Korea to conduct meetings with their respective Head of State. North Korea has entered the nuclear power club which confers international condemnation but also an acknowledgement of the need to negotiate with them. Bilateral summitry, specifically with the United States is a major propaganda victory for North Korea conferring the impression of equals due to their nuclear status.

Doubt over ‘Denuclearization’

The willingness of North Korea to negotiate, however, should not be entirely dismissed as easing sanctions pressure and resetting regional relations is important to Kim Jong-Un and his [Byungjin policy](#) based on North Korea becoming a nuclear power as well as developing economically. Having secured the first objective, Kim Jong-Un appears to be pivoting towards the second with a newfound willingness to make concessions in order to secure sanctions relief. He has not, however, unambiguously stated his commitment upfront to the entire and swift dismantling of North Korea’s nuclear program and arsenal. The recent release, also, of North Korea’s [‘six points’](#) governing their nuclear policy, appear more in line with a ‘responsible’ nuclear power – commitment to non-proliferation of nuclear technology and resources to others; only using nuclear weapons if threatened; and joining in the worldwide effort of global denuclearization – than one which is ready to negotiate them away.

North Korea’s commitment to denuclearization has been largely filtered through South Korean interlocutors involved in the negotiations instead of a clear, unambiguous statement from Pyongyang. Kim Jong-Un did commit in writing to the complete Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (DOTKP) at the conclusion of the inter-Korean summit, but said nothing to that effect in his verbal comments nor is there any formal agreed upon definition as to what this term actually means. DOKTP has been in constant

usage for years with negotiations with North Korea, but never has there been agreed to operationalized definition of it, most likely on purpose to allow flexibility in diplomatic manoeuvring for all sides. For example, North Korea may see denuclearization as part of a larger arms reduction/control process, possibly to include the removal of all or part of American forces from the Peninsula and region (such as missile defence systems and long ranger strategic bombers) and the termination of their alliance with South Korea including extended deterrence. The ending of Washington's 'hostile policy' towards them is commonly voiced by North Korea as a necessary condition of denuclearization, though again few specifics are listed as to what this means in terms of the nature and extent of policy/practice changes Pyongyang expects. The United States, on the other hand, generally interprets denuclearization as unilateral disarmament on Pyongyang's part in exchange for normalization of diplomatic and economic relations, and not necessarily with respect to mutual reduction of specific forces or alliance commitments. Washington's position is based on the Complete Verifiable Irreversible Denuclearization, requiring extensive and intrusive verification measures ensuring the goal of complete dismantling of their nuclear arsenal (weapons and delivery vehicles) and disbandment of the nuclear program.

Before the summit between Kim Jong-Un and Donald Trump begins, therefore, there must be a [common understanding of denuclearization](#), or at least an acknowledgement of the differing ones each side holds to avoid incommensurable definitions and demands torpedoing the meeting even before it begins. Within this process South Korea plays the pivotal position of translator for both sides and laying the ground work, but what is to be negotiated and agreed upon remains unclear. On this point North Korea's vagueness is matched by that of the United States. There has been no formal definition of denuclearization provided by the White House. A press release following President Trump's recent meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe detailed denuclearization [would include](#) all North Korean WMD and missiles, not just nuclear weapons and ICBMs. New Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's [comments](#) seems to be confirm this thicker definition, mentioning that all North Korean WMD programs and assets fall under this term. Such a shifting yardstick, incorporating an ever increase list of items which must be relinquished, threatens to make any agreement with Pyongyang extremely problematic if not impossible. Does denuclearization, also, include all delivery vehicles (including all land-based missiles, SLBMs and some aircraft) on top of all WMDs and plutonium and uranium stockpiles?

The President's insistence that he will not be duped and [will leave](#) if negotiations are not fruitful is a sound position given previous failures in negotiations with a mercurial North Korea. There is hope that specific details are being discussed in private through South Korea and/or [directly with North Korea](#). Given, however, the turbulent nature of the Trump Presidency and his propensity to use social media as an off-the-cuff policy changing mechanism (whether he realizes this or not) could jeopardize the upcoming summit. It remains difficult, also, to discern how much effort, coordination and planning is underway in Washington given Trump's belief in his own deal making abilities and [apparent eschewing](#) of professional advice and opinion from policy experts. How much time, furthermore, he can dedicate to preparing for such a historic meeting given the plethora of ongoing, [high profile scandals](#) concerning him and members of his Administration? Given that it is the President himself that is meeting with Kim Jong-Un, extensive predatory work must go into how to deal with expected North Korean opposition, obstruction or agreement to something less than Washington's definition of denuclearization. Failure to do so could leave the President feeling personally humiliated and slighted, possibly motivating him back towards [ad hominin attacks](#) against Kim Jong-Un and [threats of retaliation](#) against North Korea which defined much of 2017 and ultimately derailing the diplomatic momentum which has been generated over the last few months.

Perhaps the most important question which has to be answered and be clear to the President before he attends the summit is: what is the purpose of the meeting? It is most likely not to finalize a deal or secure some grand bargain complete with swift timelines. Rather it will be the building of a roadmap

towards a mutual agreed upon end-state, with a series of sequential, reciprocal measures being implemented over a negotiable timetable. The latter depiction is stated in the joint Korean press release wherein a phased approach would be pursued to reach lasting peace and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. Legitimate doubts about the sincerity of Kim Jong-Un to make and abide by any such deal are balanced by the requirement of South Korea and those around President Trump to not rest everything on securing some quick, all-encompassing deal right off the start. Progress towards a more stable and peaceful relationship with Pyongyang is important with [evidence demonstrating](#) the crease in hostile acts by North Korean during periods of negotiations.

Considerations Informing Negotiations

As the United States prepares for the upcoming summit, the following issues should be included in the planning and execution to ensure they do not become subsumed by nor obstruct the reaching of a possible framework of agreement with Pyongyang:

- 1) Attempts to Create Divisions Between the United States and allies: Washington will have to ensure they are not characterized as the unreasonable other which is unwilling to negotiate after the ‘concessions’ announced by Pyongyang (testing ban; closing of test site) and the aspirational framework laid out following the Summit between Kim Jong-Un and President Moon Jae-in. The United States and her allies need to [remain committed](#) to their defensive alliance but have the flexibility to negotiate concessions, including to some extent militarily, in exchange for concrete and meaningful North Korean cooperation to dismantle their nuclear force and program. The termination of such alliances should be stated as non-negotiable, even if in exchange for complete denuclearization by Pyongyang.
- 2) The Consequences of the American Position in Asia: Any decision to concede certain military assets as part of providing security guarantees to Pyongyang must be thought of in larger strategic terms with respect to their effect [on American standing and position in Asia](#). Any removal of forces, especially power projection ones, will benefit not only North Korea but China who is positioning itself to take a greater leadership role in regional affairs and diluting American power and influence. Reaching a quick win with North Korea, therefore, may have negative, long term implications for American position in the region. This is, however, a careful balancing act as the United States must take a leadership position in making positive efforts to diffusing possible source of tensions with North Korea. Reverting back to threats and musing about limited military strikes as in 2017 is a dangerous path for if the United States initiated a series of events which lead to nuclear war and/or extensive conventional one their alliances and standing in the region would be [seriously eroded](#) If not completed terminated. China is an important and necessary partner in ensuring stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula but Beijing has potentially much [to gain strategically](#) if American credibility is compromised given its mishandling of upcoming negotiations.
- 3) Denuclearization Does Not Equal Full Normalization of Relations: Even if North Korea agrees and implemented a complete nuclear rollback, the United States should not offer complete normalization of relations. Sanctions regarding nuclear weapons developments should be rescinded, but those pertaining to missile developments and [human rights abuses](#) should remain. Nuclear rollback is the desired outcome, but this in and of itself does not mean North Korea will enjoy full, carte-blanche relations with the United States. Denuclearization is and should remain a separate issue, not one which is a lynchpin for the entirety of their relationship. A breakthrough in

denuclearization negotiations, however, must be based on and support the transformation of security relations between the two allowing for new and peaceful forms of engagements to become the new norm underpinning their relations.

- 4) Sanctioning Regime Remains in Place Until North Korea Fully Denuclearizes: The United States should be prepared to deal within a phased approach with a number of benchmarks and conditions outlining a gradual move towards denuclearization. Again it remains far from certain that Pyongyang and Washington have an agreed upon definition of denuclearization but substantial moves to halt and rollback their nuclear program should be rewarded with an easing of the sanctioning regime. This will require, though, intrusive and regular inspections of North Korea sites which will undoubtedly be a source of tension in negotiations. As long as North Korea retains nuclear weapons, therefore, sanctions in some form need to remain in place. This also includes enforcement mechanisms to monitor adherence to them as demonstrated by the recent announcement of Australia and Canada to [deploy surveillance aircraft](#) to monitor any illegal ship to ship illegal transfers to North Korea.
- 5) Do Not Obstruct the Peace Process: In all likelihood North Korea is not prepared to fully rollback its nuclear (and other WMD) program, weapons and delivery vehicles. Even if they are, this process will be long, tedious, and most likely include stalls, setbacks and reversals. Rollback of an already indigenous existing nuclear arsenal is exceedingly rare in history. Denuclearization should continue to be the benchmark to strive for, but it should not obstruct meaningful progress of establishing a permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula. It could be argued that such a condition cannot exist so long as Pyongyang possesses nuclear weapons, but if Kim Jong-Un is serious about mutual disarmament along their border with South Korea and formally ending the Korean War this should not be conditioned on agreeing to and implement CVID beforehand. Denuclearization should be progressed in parallel with peace talks, not necessarily a pre-conditioned for the latter. The United States does not want to be cast as the obstructionist other holding up a formal ending to the Korean conflict which could help reduce tensions. It needs to be made clear, however, to North Korea that sanctions, pressure and military support to regional allies will remain in place for as long as they possesses nuclear weapons. The removal of conventional forces and establishing new regimes governing their land and maritime borders should be encouraged and supported. It will signify American commitment to working with North Korea in a new context besides military confrontation while backstopping South Korea and Japan in the preservation of their security in the face of existing North Korean nuclear and WMD capabilities. It is not a matter of removing military balancing from the equation, but how to transform it from a hard to latent form thereby facilitating new relations to emerge which overtime may lead to further changes in the military and political relations on the Peninsula.

Progress is Possible

It is a reasonable position to be suspicious of the latest détente on the Korean Peninsula. The world has been here before with inter-Korea summits in 2000 and 2007 which ultimately ended in failure. Since that time Pyongyang has developed a sizeable nuclear arsenal with global reach. The strategy behind the diplomatic 180 of Kim Jong-Un remains a constant source of speculation, though it should not be assumed he is acting out of desperation or from an extremely weak position. Given the historical penchant for states to retain their nuclear weapons after developing them (regardless of changing threat environments) and their specific importance to North Korea as a status and regime legitimization tool, it is highly unlikely Kim Jong-Un is serious about complete denuclearization. This does not imply, though,

that he is not willing to negotiate a halting and/or possible partial reduction in his arsenal, material stockpiles and overall program in order to establish a new, peaceful relationship with South Korea and the international community as a whole.

Fears that Pyongyang would become insatiably revisionist in evicting American forces from the Peninsula and forcing reunification under its terms have not come to pass. North Korea, like all other nuclear powers, is falling into the pattern of behaviour wherein nuclear weapons -regardless of force posture, strategy and policy -are only useful as a deterrent, not to compel changes to the military and political status-quo. With this in mind, the United States should simultaneously pursue denuclearization alongside reaching a more permanent and stable peace on the Korean Peninsula. The latter does not entirely rest on the achievement of the former. As long as North Korea retains nuclear weapons they should face sanctions and efforts to encourage their relinquishing of them. Securing an agreement, with a defined timetable, of sequential actions taken by all sides should be the American objective but they should not be obstructionist in not progressing other avenues of engagement/easing of tensions as well. If North Korea, however, continues to adopt a deterrent based approach governing their possession, eschewing weapons tests and threats, it will be possible to make progress on reducing the risk of war on the Peninsula and transforming relations over time. Stability on the Korean Peninsula, therefore, is not necessarily [unacceptably imperiled](#) by the maintenance of North Korean nuclear weapons.

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