

How Diplomacy with North Korea Can Work: A Narrow Focus on Denuclearization Is the Wrong Strategy

Philip Zelikow
University of Virginia

PHILIP ZELIKOW is the White Burkett Miller Professor of History at the University of Virginia. He has worked on Korean issues off and on during the last 25 years, in government and out.

* 이 글에 포함된 의견은 저자 개인의 견해로 제주평화연구원의 공식입장과는 무관합니다.

At the end of last week, the next phase of U.S.-North Korean diplomacy got off to a rocky start in Pyongyang. Following a set of talks with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the North Korean Foreign Ministry criticized Washington's "unilateral and gangster-like demand for denuclearization." Pompeo maintains that the meetings were "productive." Pompeo was right, in the sense that the talks again showed why too narrow a focus on denuclearization has been and continues to be a recipe for failure. A one-track devotion to ending the nuclear program will force all other important issues to queue up behind it. As pressure mounts to resolve the lead issue, the whole diplomatic process could stall or even fail, leading to crisis once again. In contrast, a broader process would actually do more to ease progress on denuclearization, as well as multiple other fronts.

The Next Stage

The recent crisis created by North Korea's continuing nuclear and missile tests was quite dangerous. It now appears that around the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018, the North Korean government decided to suspend its test program and make a big shift to concentrate instead on reform of the North Korean state and economy. Despite the flood of commentary, outsiders have very little evidence about when and why Pyongyang made this decision.

Although South Korean diplomacy and the inter-Korean summits certainly mattered, it is hard to know whether the U.S.-North Korean summit and the related concessions were necessary to get the

suspension of the North Korean tests. But with the crisis temporarily defused, what matters now is to construct a diplomatic strategy for the next phase.

The strategy should assume that the North Korean government is itself uncertain about what comes next. And as the just-concluded talks in Pyongyang illustrated, the strategy should not assume that North Korean denuclearization will or can occur rapidly.

A key objective for the next stage should be to sustain diplomatic momentum over the next year or so, 2018-19, to create an environment in which North Korean leaders might make the hard choices that go with the development they seek. Another is to make it harder for North Korea to resume nuclear and/or missile tests, while building support for action if North Korea wrecks a real peace process.

Absent a war, it may not be possible to force a rollback of the existing North Korean nuclear and missile program as rapidly as possible, by any means necessary. The United States has already shown itself willing to tolerate, for a time, a North Korean program that has gone this far, but not further. Also, at a time when the United States is escalating its confrontations with both Iran and China, a coercive rollback objective seems unwise. And it is useful to remember that Iran and North Korea have at times worked together. It is not in the U.S. interest to drive them now into a more intimate military embrace.

So back, then, to the challenge of crafting a diplomatic strategy that can sustain at least some progress. The best approach to realize these objectives is to build an ambitious, broad peace process during 2018 and get it underway in 2019.

Why Broader Is Better

Right now, the default mode of Korean diplomacy is triangular. On one side of the triangle is U.S. bilateral work with North Korea, mainly on denuclearization. On another side is South Korean bilateral work with the North Koreans, on a still undefined peace regime. The base of the triangle would be a hope that the U.S. and South Koreans could coordinate their progress. Unfortunately, this setup is unlikely to work. The limiting factor is likely to be the U.S. progress on denuclearization, the usual source of breakdown in the past.

A diplomacy focused on denuclearization has three basic weaknesses. First, the scale of effort needed for the difficult and dangerous work of North Korean denuclearization has always required the process to be broken down into different stages and steps, each of which takes time. One of the

more careful recent efforts to map out a cooperative denuclearization process sketches out a ten-year timeline with massive U.S. and South Korean assistance for the needed work on-site. Such a plan also implies a much broader easing of tensions going into its rollout.

Step-by-step denuclearization has been tried again and again. It has always failed. North Korea offers to give up something it does not really need, or is deceptive, in exchange for getting some short-term payoff that is too limited to have very great value. Both sides usually end up dissatisfied, and the situation becomes even worse. Meanwhile, the real motivations behind the North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile programs are not really addressed.

Second, the denuclearization track necessarily puts the United States and North Korea at the center of the diplomacy. North Korea has usually preferred to treat the United States as its peer on the nuclear issue, with South Korea treated as an American puppet state. Nuclear-focused diplomacy thus reinforces Pyongyang's preferred image and tends to sideline Seoul and the South Korean people.

Third, because this mode of diplomacy puts nuclear and missile issues and experts front and center, it tends to become detached from Korean realities and thus becomes politically sterile. As negotiations progress, the arcane technical points raised move further and further from core political issues and are not well understood by political leaders or publics.

For all these reasons, design for a broad peace process is more promising than one focused on denuclearization. The process most likely to work on the Korean peninsula should be thought of as a multi-lane highway, not a one-lane toll road. Denuclearization is of course important, but there should be opportunities for all sides to discuss whatever issues they want to raise. In the diplomacy that ended the Cold War, for example, the strategic nuclear issues (in the form of the START talks) were not forgotten. They merely ran parallel as other negotiations worked on issues more primal to Europe's future.

A Six-Track Proposal

This broader approach could begin with a statement, perhaps negotiated for announcement toward the end of 2018, that hostilities on the peninsula have ended and that it is time to build a durable peace. To do so, the statement could map out an ambitious peace process to start work during 2019, along six tracks. This may seem like a lot. But it is worth recalling that, in the diplomacy that took place toward the end of the Cold War, the United States was negotiating on more than a dozen different tracks, simultaneously.

The first track should clarify the nature and future of inter-Korean relations. The recent inter-Korean summit declaration envisioned an official end to the Korean War, but arriving at a satisfactory statement could be tricky. If the war is over, is the 1953 armistice agreement—which sets up the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and Military Demarcation Line (MDL) null and void?

An inter-Korean border could be either permanent or interim. One possibility, based on European precedent, is to turn the MDL itself into an inter-Korean border, regarded as inviolable, subject only to peaceful adjustments agreed to by the parties concerned. North and South Korea could also discuss their views on a future confederation or even unification process as part of the talks. The process for this track should be “two plus two.” As the two Koreas reach an agreement, it should be ratified by both the United States and China, who were signatories to the 1953 armistice.

The second track should focus on economic measures, most notably sanctions. A broader peace process should afford all parties more ways to gauge cumulative, total progress across the board as they decide whether or when to seek sanctions relief from the UN Security Council. Right now, the North Korean government appears to be considering a variety of reform ideas—from something resembling China’s gradual opening in the 1980s to Vietnam’s combination of economic opening and political repression to some sort of melding with South Korean industrial powerhouses. If it develops a program that is gradual, with experimental measures, then it would make sense for Washington and its allies to consider specific sanctions relief in stages as opposed to a general relief across the board. The process for this track could be “two plus UNSC,” since targeted sanctions relief would probably require a new UN Security Council resolution of some kind.

The third track should target nuclear security, including long-range ballistic missile issues, which are relatively familiar and obviously important. The process would at least involve the United States and North Korea. But there is a good case for including at least South Korea as well, since its assistance and expertise may be vital in actually implementing any agreement.

The fourth track can be devoted to general security. This includes the size and deployment of conventional armed forces on the peninsula, including shorter-range ballistic missile systems and other kinds of artillery. Ideas for how to approach negotiations could draw on the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe treaty signed in 1990, a large-scale and reasonably successful precedent which defused the largest conventional military confrontation in the world.

This track would also cover chemical and biological weapons. Here too there are existing institutions that could provide negotiators guidance, namely the Chemical Weapons Convention and its Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, as well as the Biological Weapons Convention.

North Korea may wish to raise the presence of U.S. forces on the peninsula in these talks.

Washington and Seoul should not fear this; they can raise issues of their own. In deciding the future of its military presence, Washington should ultimately defer to Seoul. South Koreans and Americans fought and worked for many years to help South Koreans have a democracy. In the end, Washington should respect that democracy's choice. At the end of the Cold War, when the issue was raised about foreign forces in Germany, the U.S. position was that the Germans themselves should decide the matter, freely.

Track five could focus on humanitarian and cultural issues. In creating new inter-Korean relations, South Koreans may wish to discuss concerns they have about human rights and the treatment of their fellow Koreans. These are topics that also concern the wider international community, including the fate of Japanese citizens who were kidnapped and brought to North Korea against their will.

The final track should focus on regional security issues. Neighboring countries, most notably China, Japan, and Russia, take an understandable interest in the future of the Korean peninsula. There should be a venue for them to discuss this. This was one of the original reasons for creation of a "Six Party" process, to include those three countries plus the United States in addition to the two Koreas.

This track could be convened once there is enough progress on the other tracks to present issues for discussion. At a public dialogue about peace negotiations held in South Korea in June 2018 between the author and South Korean professor and presidential adviser Chung-in Moon, Chinese diplomat Ning Fukui suggested that the Six Party process could hold off until "later." He was right.

The Political Potential of a Peace Process

Washington and its allies should devote immediate attention in 2018 to creating an ambitious peace process to sustain momentum and prevent a slide back into crisis. Results from that process may not materialize until 2019 and beyond.

The broad approach does not assume that the parties are ready for great change, only that they are genuinely ready to consider it. The job of the diplomacy is to create a variety of opportunities for the Koreans to do that. This design puts the Koreans at the center of the action, while engaging the United States and other key countries in appropriate ways.

A broad peace process will cover issues that ordinary people can connect with and understand. North Korea has long asked for such negotiations and has agreed to them in principle. A peace process could electrify the political environment throughout the Korean peninsula. No one can confidently predict how these dynamics will play out. But it is time to try an approach that offers fresh

political energy and possibilities.

**This essay was originally published on Foreign Affairs. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2018-07-09/how-diplomacy-north-korea-can-work?cid=int-fls>ype=hpg>) An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity, June 27, 2018.*

The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not reflect the position of the Jeju Peace Institute.

posted on July 10, 2018

저작권자 © 제주평화연구원, 무단 전재 및 재배포 금지

