



Nukes and North Korea: A New Direction

John Feffer

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North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons has changed the nuclear balance in Northeast Asia. But it hasn't altered the way politicians and diplomats approach the question of arms control and disarmament in the region. The debate among influencers continues to revolve around two versions of "more of the same."

Containment advocates argue that North Korea has never truly been squeezed hard enough to force capitulation. Engagement advocates counter that serious tit-for-tat negotiations have never tested North Korea's willingness to freeze or shut down its nuclear program in exchange for good-faith incentives. Both camps maintain that some additional variable—failure of leadership, bureaucratic inertia, the perfidy of North Korea, the resistance of the U.S. Congress, the ambivalence of China—has undermined the integrity of the containment or the engagement approach. Politics and/or geopolitics, in other words, continually interfere with the workings of a perfectly good plan.

There is a third category of options: try something new and different. Into this category falls a regional proposal like a nuclear-weapon-free zone for Northeast Asia. Unfortunately, it remains as marginal to the debate today as it was when it was first proposed. Even though the rationale for such a zone has arguably grown stronger, the political will in the principal capitals—Washington, Pyongyang, Beijing, Tokyo, and Seoul—is lacking. Not surprisingly, the greatest interest in this proposal has come from Mongolia, a country that has not been central to the nuclear politics of the region.

But significant changes are on the horizon. The coronavirus pandemic poses a new, collective threat to the region. China is emerging from this crisis in a stronger, and more aggressively nationalist, position. The United States may well have new leadership in 2021, and its strategic thinking about the region is evolving regardless of who occupies the White House. The surprising resignation of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in September has shaken up Japanese politics, while the engagement-friendly Moon Jae-in administration has a more powerful parliamentary majority in South Korea after the 2020 elections.

Ordinarily such changes would merely shift the needle slightly toward one of the status quo positions, probably a renewal of tit-for-tat negotiations—between the United States and North Korea on the one hand and North Korea and South Korea on the other—within a narrow spectrum of options. However, frustration over several decades of failed engagement and containment strategies could push pundits and policymakers to explore the third category of options, including a nuclear-weapon-free zone.

The State of Play in Washington

The election of Donald Trump introduced a new dynamic into nuclear politics in Northeast Asia in three ways. Trump was interested in demonstrating his reputed negotiating skills in resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis, a stand-off that frustrated his predecessor, Barack Obama. The new president showed little interest in shoring up traditional alliances, such as the military pacts with Japan and South Korea. And he demonstrated a marked indifference to non-proliferation norms, suggesting at one point that the United States should remove the nuclear umbrella from Japan and South Korea and allow the two countries to develop nuclear weapons of their own.

Despite three direct encounters between the U.S. president and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un as well as repeated U.S. attempts to extract more money in host-nation support from Tokyo and Seoul, Donald Trump has not substantially changed the status quo in the region. North Korea has added to its nuclear deterrent. Japan and South Korea have bristled at Trump's extreme burden-sharing demands. Relations between the United States and China have significantly worsened. But the U.S. nuclear umbrella remains in place, as does the U.S. alliance system. As a recent Stimson Center report notes, the stalemate on the Korean peninsula persists and will likely to continue despite the coronavirus.

Over the last six to nine months, U.S. pundits have churned out variations of their past positions, updated to reflect Trump's erratic policies, Kim Jong Un's hardening stance, and the outbreak of the coronavirus. Trump's own vacillations between a "fire-and-fury" threat of military response and his seeming willingness to negotiate a comprehensive deal personally with Kim Jong Un have provided hope and concern to both sides of the debate.

Containment advocates have argued, for instance, that the United States and its allies haven't really tried to squeeze North Korea. Some presidents have crafted what they have called campaigns of maximum pressure. But Bradley Bowman and David Maxell of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies have argued that what is needed is Maximum Pressure 2.0 in which all tools of national power, including diplomacy, military, cyber, sanctions, and information and influence activities are brought to bear on Pyongyang. Other conservative thinktanks have offered variants of this. "There is no diplomatic solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis—or to be a little more precise, no solution acceptable to Pyongyang that also involves security for the United States and her allies," argues Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute. "Thus the only viable Western option for dealing with the North Korean nuclear menace is 'threat reduction'—a concerted and unremitting project to diminish the regime's killing force materially by unilateral outside action, without Kim Jong Un's assent." Focusing on the more immediate, COVID-19 era, Bruce Klingner of the Heritage Foundation has put it simply: no relaxation of sanctions in exchange for a "partial, flawed agreement."

Engagement advocates, meanwhile, argue that the United States and its allies haven't really tried to negotiate properly. While those favoring containment propose different combinations of sticks, those favoring engagement offer different combinations of carrots. Most recommendations boil down to stepping away from an all-or-nothing approach and offering some partial sanctions relief for a freeze of North Korea's nuclear capabilities, as both the Carnegie Endowment's Ariel Levite and Toby Dalton and Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution argues. Often, as with Michael Fuchs and Haneul Lee of the Center for American Progress, there's a plea to repairing U.S. alliances or, as with Kristine Lee, Daniel Kliman, and Joshua Fitt of the Center for a New American Security, an additional realpolitik rationale, in

their case a bid to deny China influence over North Korea. Sanctions relief for a freeze is possibly feasible, Sue Mi Terry of the Center for Strategic and International Studies agrees, but Trump took this option off the table through his ham-fisted negotiating style.

Few in the Washington advocacy community think it useful to step away from this tug-of-war to propose something new. Jessica Lee of the Quincy Institute hews to the engagement line but puts a few more carrots into the mix, not only partial sanctions relief but also declaring an end to the Korean War and establishing a liaison office in Pyongyang in return for North Korea dismantling some of its nuclear facilities over the course of one year. Perhaps the most radical suggestion comes from the Cato Institute, where Doug Bandow argues that normalizing relations with Pyongyang should precede further negotiations and thus transform the entire diplomatic framework. I have made a similar argument, referencing the U.S.-China deal of the Nixon era.

What has been noticeably absent from discussions has been a regional approach that involves all parties. For a while in the mid-2000s, the “six-party talks” arrangement gained traction, even in the United States where the Bush administration was eager to avoid one-on-one negotiations with North Korea. A nuclear-weapon-free zone could have flowed out of such a process. But it has largely faded from the diplomatic agenda.

What would it take to get such an idea back on the agenda?

Zoning Out

A nuclear-weapon-free zone for Northeast Asia has been on the drawing board since 1972, at least in U.S. arms control circles. Hiro Umebayashi, the Japanese arms control expert, has delineated perhaps the most detailed version of the proposal.

In his 2011 proposal to inject a nuclear-weapon-free zone proposal into the moribund Six Party Talks, Morton Halperin argued that the prospect of either or both Japan and South Korea going nuclear in response to North Korea’s nuclear ambitions made it imperative to conclude a comprehensive approach to regional security. Such a zone was only one of six elements of this comprehensive arrangement, which also included ending the state of war, turning the six-party talks into a permanent regional security council, a mutual declaration of no hostile intent, provision of nuclear and other energy sources to North Korea, and removal of sanctions.

The zone, according to most versions, would cover North Korea, South Korea, and Japan. The United States, China, and Russia would pledge not to store nuclear weapons in the zone. The United States would maintain its nuclear umbrella over both its military allies but with some modification.

In 2016, South Korean security expert Moon Chung-in updated the proposal in light of North Korea’s expansion of its nuclear program. He recommended that a “first step toward establishing a nuclear-weapon-free zone would be for the six parties to request that the UN secretary-general and the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs convene an expert meeting to examine the concept behind the zone. Parallel efforts could be conducted by civil society organizations such as the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament.”

Most recently, Mongolia has taken the lead in pushing the idea at the UN as well as the civil society level. Jargalsaikhan Enkhsaikhan of the NGO Blue Banner acknowledges the difficulties of pushing forward a nuclear-weapon-free zone at a time when North Korea is unlikely to

negotiate away its nuclear program simply as part of a region-wide non-proliferation strategy. Rather, he proposes as a first step a declaration of “non-nuclear deterrence” from all the parties which “would contribute to greater predictability and stability and hence would avert a possible uncontrollable chain reaction leading to the regional nuclear arms race. This would also lead to ‘denuclearizing’ regional war planning and military exercises.”

Toby Dalton of the Carnegie Endowment’s Nuclear Policy Program, one of the few policy analysts in Washington to incorporate a nuclear-weapon-free zone into his analysis, suggests that the NWFZ can serve a useful function in negotiations as a commonly agreed-upon endpoint. To reach this endpoint using Halperin’s model, Dalton argues, requires the substitute of “cooperative security” for the current nuclear deterrence model. Such a transformation would in some sense provide a new language for the negotiations so that the two sides would have a better chance of not talking past one another. A NWFZ then becomes like a more advanced text that can only be read and understood by the participants once they’ve gone through the earlier language training in “cooperative security.” Importantly, Dalton sees this process as Korean-led rather than primarily a negotiated calibration of U.S.-North Korean relations, which is also a departure from most Washington analyses.

Assessing the Likelihood

The Six Party framework no longer exists. Mongolia has been a valuable diplomatic partner in many regional initiatives in Northeast Asia, but it doesn’t have the kind of convening power necessary to overcome the deep ideological divides and profound imbalances of power in the region. “Cooperative security” is indeed a powerful language to substitute for deterrence, and a Korea-led process is indispensable. But deterrence remains a deeply rooted status quo, and the two Koreas are too far apart to lead on anything at the moment.

On top of all this, the U.S. Senate has never been very enthusiastic about nuclear-weapon-free zones. It ratified the Latin American zone during the Reagan years but didn’t take any action on the protocols connected to the African, Central Asian, and South Pacific zones that the Obama administration submitted. The United States has not signed the protocol recognizing the Southeast Asian zone.

It would seem, on the face of it, that there is no foundation upon which to place a Northeast Asia nuclear-weapons-free zone. Still, here are some hopeful signs.

First, on the U.S. side, the election in November could put Joe Biden in the White House where he would likely advance the (albeit conflicted) disarmament agenda of Barack Obama. Moreover, a shift of the Senate to a Democratic majority could provide a historic opportunity to move forward on a number of stalled arms control and disarmament initiatives. An intensifying conflict with China, which has bipartisan support among U.S. policymakers and pundits, mitigates any optimism about the United States participating in regional threat reduction. On the other hand, an evolution in U.S. strategic posture in the region away from what the Pentagon describes as a “targetable footprint”—most recently evidenced by the removal of strategic bombers from Guam—anticipates the kind of U.S. pullback that could support a future nuclear-weapon-free zone.

Second, neither Japan nor ROK has pushed ahead with a program to acquire nuclear weapons, despite North Korea’s advanced nuclear status. The current leadership in Japan precludes any

serious commitment to regional threat reduction much less a shift to cooperative security. However, the current government of Yoshihide Suga enjoyed an initial post-inauguration surge of support, but an election between now and October 2021 could nudge the country in a very different direction. Thanks to the Moon Jae-in government in Seoul, South Korea is already the most amenable to regional threat reduction, but it has been cursed by a lack of partners. That may change with elections in Washington and Tokyo, which could represent the “disruption and realignment” that Scott Snyder of the Council on Foreign Relations argues is necessary for any change of status on the Korean peninsula.

In the 2000s, China supported turning the Six Party Talks into an institutional framework for addressing regional security. Since then, Xi Jinping has presided over a more assertive and strident expansion of Chinese influence in practically all directions. Closer to home, Beijing has mended fences with Seoul, its relationship with North Korea remains vexed, and it continues to eye Japan with suspicion. As Cho Kyung-Hwan explains, however, a multilateral framework in Northeast Asia still makes sense for Beijing, for it “believes that the framework could reduce regional suspicion of China’s hegemony, deter Japan’s military buildup, and lessen US military deployment and the chances of US intervention in the region.”

North Korea remains the real question mark. Now that he has a credible nuclear deterrent, Kim Jong Un has focused on improving the country’s economic performance. A reduction of sanctions and a diminution of military threat are certainly on the North Korean leader’s agenda and, as in the past, could motivate a series of protracted, step-by-step negotiations on sanctions relief for steps toward nuclear disarmament. But Pyongyang will not likely waste time on regional negotiations—predicated on cooperative security and with a nuclear-weapon-free zone as an agreed-upon endpoint—without some concrete, immediate benefits.

Given North Korea’s pragmatism in this regard, a reframing is necessary, and COVID-19 points in the right direction. The current pandemic is a potent reminder that trans-border problems require collective, cooperative action. Regional environmental problems, and the effects of climate change more generally, represent an even larger challenge. In the spirit of Dalton’s reframing, it’s critical to view challenges such as the pandemic and climate change not simply as narrow environmental or health challenges but as security problems under the heading of “human security.” Establishing a Northeast Asia multilateral framework for addressing these issues under such a rubric would bring countries to the table to discuss actionable problems in a technical fashion. It would also, necessarily, involve non-political experts and NGO advocacy groups. And it could provide the immediate benefits—such as scientific cooperation and resource-sharing—that North Korea looks for in international initiatives. Reducing the risk of pandemic infections in North Korea and maintaining the country’s low rate of carbon emissions would also represent significant benefits for the region as a whole.

Once mechanisms and institutions of concrete cooperation have been established and once a measure of trust has been created, such a “human security” reframing could ultimately incorporate parallel discussions of more traditional security questions, including nuclear weapons, at which point Dalton’s recommendations would kick in. In this way, the mutually-agreed-upon endpoint of a nuclear-weapon-free zone can be approached not directly but in a sideways manner.