

# The American Conservative

## North Korea Will Not Denuclearize

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Should the U.S. risk Los Angeles for Seoul? President Joe Biden thinks so. And he spent most of his recent summit with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol attempting to convince his guest that he would. The meeting was filled with smoke and mirrors, as the administration hoped to suitably impress South Korean leaders while offering little of substance. The most important achievement of the trip, other than Yoon's bizarre White House karaoke moment, was the unimaginatively titled "Washington Declaration."

The much-hyped document affirmed that America and South Korea were committed allies and that the U.S. really would defend the ROK, even at the risk of nuclear attack. However, Washington's latest attempt to reassure Seoul is unlikely to quiet demands in the South to develop nuclear weapons.

The Korean War ended seventy summers ago with an armistice. No peace treaty was negotiated, and the peninsula has periodically suffered violent outbreaks. South Koreans continue to expect America to defend their well-developed nation. For years U.S. presidents insisted that North Korea must not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons. Alas, the ruling Kims ignored Washington's instructions and their nation is now a growing nuclear power.

Pyongyang probably possesses enough fissile material for 45-55 weapons, though some estimates run higher. Alas, the future looks much grimmer: North Korea could have as many as 240 nukes before decade's end, on par with other second tier nuclear states. The Kim regime also is developing solid-fueled intercontinental ballistic missiles with multiple warheads capable of targeting the U.S. homeland.

South Koreans recognize that the coming threat to American cities will inevitably undermine extended deterrence, that is, Washington's willingness to go to war on the South's behalf. After all, for the U.S., the safety of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York is infinitely more important than the status of Seoul. Would an American president really risk the former for the latter? Hence strong ROK support for its own nuclear bomb. Last fall even Yoon mused about that possibility, unsettling U.S. policy circles.

At the summit the Biden administration was full of promises to convince the South Koreans to eschew such a course. However, despite the fulsome praise and apparent camaraderie—like the

“American Pie” sing-a-long—Washington offered nothing new or tangible. Instead, more consultations were promised, some conducted in new forums with impressive titles. Alas, seldom has so much verbiage been used to describe so little action:

The Alliance commits to engage in deeper, cooperative decision-making on nuclear deterrence, including through enhanced dialogue and information sharing regarding growing nuclear threats to the ROK and the region. The two Presidents announced the establishment of a new Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) to strengthen extended deterrence, discuss nuclear and strategic planning, and manage the threat to the nonproliferation regime posed by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). In addition, the Alliance will work to enable joint execution and planning for ROK conventional support to U.S. nuclear operations in a contingency and improve combined exercises and training activities on the application of nuclear deterrence on the Korean Peninsula. In keeping with the Presidents’ commitments, the Alliance has established a new bilateral, interagency table-top simulation to strengthen our joint approach to planning for nuclear contingencies.

All this is intended to convince South Koreans that they have a share of nuclear-decision-making, even though President Biden made clear that is not the case. Yes, “we’re going make every effort to consult with our allies when it’s appropriate,” he allowed, but “I have absolute authority as Commander-in-Chief and the sole authority to use a nuclear weapon.” Translation: Ultimately I will act as I wish, irrespective of Seoul’s wishes.

Indeed, the Washington Declaration highlighted the fact that extended deterrence contemplates nuclear war:

President Biden reaffirmed that the United States’ commitment to the ROK and the Korean people is enduring and ironclad, and that any nuclear attack by the DPRK against the ROK will be met with a swift, overwhelming and decisive response. President Biden highlighted the US commitment to extend deterrence to the ROK is backed by the full range of US capabilities, including nuclear. Going forward, the United States will further enhance the regular visibility of strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula, as evidenced by the upcoming visit of a U.S. nuclear ballistic missile submarine to the ROK, and will expand and deepen coordination between our militaries.

However, whether America is forced to act on this pledge depends on North Korea. *Nuclear* North Korea. Talk of denuclearization is from a bygone era. With the DPRK on course to build hundreds of nuclear weapons, the notion of complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement/denuclearization (CVID) is a fantasy.

It is time to accept reality and adopt an arms control approach to the North that seeks to limit Pyongyang’s arsenal in return for sanctions relief, improved relations, and security assurances. The latter strategy offers no guarantee of success—the Kim dynasty has ruthlessly played a weak hand well for decades—but provides more hope than the administration’s policy, begging for talks over denuclearization, which the North’s Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un has explicitly rejected on multiple occasions.

Waiting for a miracle is not an option. Kim heralded the new year calling for an “exponential increase” in nuclear weapons production. He also insisted on improvement in the DPRK’s “preparations to mobilize for war” and “actual war-fighting capabilities.” This is not mere rhetoric. Most of the nearly 100 missiles launched last year and some twenty so far this year, concluded the Carnegie Endowment’s Ankit Panda, “are parts of military exercises. They are rehearsing for nuclear war. And that, I think, is the big picture this year.” The longer the U.S. waits to seriously engage by refusing to talk to Pyongyang about what it wants to talk about, the closer the North will come to possessing the capability to target the American homeland.

Although Washington is largely bereft of anyone who believes that North Korea is prepared to give up its nuclear arsenal—only South Africa has ever yielded actual bombs—proposals to recognize the obvious and act accordingly cause wailing, gnashing of teeth, and rending of garments on a biblical scale. But why continue to follow today’s failed course?

Coercion is not a serious alternative. Despite President Donald Trump’s consideration of a “bloody nose” strategy, any military action would be mad, risking full-scale war on the peninsula. What little we know about North Korean decision-making suggests that the regime would respond violently. What would have been merely catastrophic three decades ago when considered during the Clinton and Bush administrations would be suicidal today, given the North’s nuclear and missile arsenal.

Sanctions are a dead end. China and Russia won’t help, and Pyongyang survived even after effectively sanctioning itself, closing its borders in response to Covid-19. All that is left is negotiation, which appears impossible if the U.S. continues to demand denuclearization.

Unfortunately, endlessly repeating past arguments won’t convince Kim Jong Un that he is better off entrusting his security to U.S. promises than North Korean nuclear weapons. After Iraq, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Syria, Ukraine, and especially Libya—remember Muammar Gaddafi’s ugly fate—North Korea’s nukes will have to be pried out of Kim’s very cold and dead fingers after he takes the lives of thousands or perhaps millions of people.

Some analysts appear to hope for a miracle. Maybe Kim or a successor will rise one morning and decide to give up his dearly bought arsenal. They also might close the prison camps, schedule elections, and fly to the Hague to turn themselves in for committing crimes against humanity. But not likely. Unfortunately, waiting for denuclearization would effectively foreclose negotiations to limit armaments. Yet almost anything would be an improvement over the Kim regime’s apparent plans for an unlimited nuclear building program.

Indeed, arms control could move along a path that would yield denuclearization if the stars align. Freezing the DPRK’s program would be the logical first step of any denuclearization plan, which would be complicated and take months or even years if agreed to by the North. The U.S. need not drop CVID as an aspiration. Rather, it should stop demanding that Pyongyang agree to CVID.

Perhaps the strangest criticism of pursuing arms control is that the North cannot be trusted to live up to any agreement. Of course, that is why verification is required. If an arms control agreement

could not be enforced, then neither could a denuclearization agreement. If Pyongyang would cheat on arms limits, then it would cheat on denuclearization. Enforcement would be difficult whatever program was negotiated but starting small is more likely to yield a workable, verifiable agreement.

Would switching to arms control undermine U.S. relations with Seoul and Tokyo? They undoubtedly would complain, but neither has offered a plausible means to achieve denuclearization. They just want America to be willing to sacrifice its cities on their behalf. Waiting for the lion and lamb to lie down together, when Kim will surrender and Pyongyang will fortuitously disarm, is no strategy. The larger North Korea's nuclear arsenal grows, the greater the danger to both South Korea and Japan.

Some analysts are determined to uphold the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Alas, it is too late for the world to regain its nuclear virginity. None of the original nuclear powers have shown the slightest interest in fulfilling their obligation to move toward denuclearization. Moreover, Washington has accepted Israel, India, and Pakistan as nuclear weapons states. Anyway, ongoing U.S. threats will only impel the DPRK to build an even larger and more sophisticated arsenal that more ostentatiously undermines nonproliferation. A continuing unsuccessful denuclearization campaign, leaving the North as a full-fledged medium nuclear power, would leave the NPT even weaker than conducting a successful arms control campaign.

Still, critics worry, deemphasizing denuclearization could accelerate regional proliferation, increasing South Korean support for building an independent deterrent, which would trigger a debate in Japan about doing the same. Taiwan and Australia might not be far behind. This specter confuses cause and effect. CVID is not the issue. North Korea's nuclear program is the issue. In pursuit of CVID or not, political pressure will grow in the South to respond to an expanding DPRK arsenal. Acknowledging the obvious is unlikely to be an important independent factor.

The most important coming challenge for the U.S. is the policy of extended deterrence. Once Pyongyang is capable of targeting American cities, does it make sense for Americans to risk everything defending a country not vital to their own defense? Deciding no—the only sensible if controversial answer—would provide a major impetus to friendly proliferation. The latter might be a second-best solution, but there are only second-best solutions in addressing the North.

Yoon has returned home and the hard work remains. Washington must focus on bringing the North into negotiations, which requires abandoning denuclearization as the formal objective of any resulting talks. Only by admitting the obvious does Washington have a realistic hope to prevent the worst. Today the DPRK is a nuclear state. Tomorrow will determine how powerful a nuclear state it becomes.

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