

Does It Really Matter If North Korea Denuclearizes?

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Despite the June summit between President Donald Trump and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, Pyongyang has yet to allow America to dispose of its nuclear arsenal. As a result, a rising chorus of policymakers are declaring the prospective denuclearization deal to be dead, merely a smokescreen for the North's continued nuclear development. Weirdly, among the most fervent critics have been liberals who a year ago were excoriating the president for threatening war.

In fact, convincing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to disarm, after all three ruling Kims devoted so many resources to developing nuclear weapons—and based their political legitimacy on defending their nation from dangerous enemies—was always a long-shot.

Even if Kim is in principle prepared to disarm, as President Trump and South Korea's President Moon Jae-in insist, he won't do so without receiving benefits and assurances in return. President Trump styles himself a master negotiator; surely he realizes that giving away one's leverage at the start is no way to get a good deal. Had Kim done so, he could have found himself in the position of Star Wars' Lando Calrissian when Darth Vader announced: "I am altering the deal. Pray that I don't alter it any further."

Indeed, Kim and his officials have clearly and consistently insisted that denuclearization is the culmination of a process. First must come improved relations. Second, a peace regime on the peninsula. Third, disarmament. Many analysts, like me, remain skeptical that Kim will ultimately yield his nukes. But if he is willing, the process laid out in the joint summit statement makes sense. The North is saying: if you want our bombs, we want to know you won't take advantage of us. Why should Kim trust the mercurial leader of an aggressive superpower ever ready to impose regime change?

For this reason, South Korean national security advisor Chung Eui-yong has argued that steps toward denuclearization "must come after concrete measures are taken to build up trust by both sides." Seoul and Washington have clashed over sanctions relief for the North and the Inter-Korean Military Pact, which reduces military activities around the Demilitarized Zone. Unfortunately, the Trump administration has done nothing to increase trust. Chung quoted Kim as saying that providing a nuclear inventory, as desired by Washington, "is the same as telling us to submit a list of targets for attack."

However, there is an easy way for Washington to resolve its role in the North Korean nuclear standoff. President Trump should follow his instincts and bring home the 28,500 American troops stationed in the ROK. South Korea doesn't need them any longer, and they entangle the

U.S. in what is essentially an unresolved civil war, turning America's homeland into a potential target if fighting erupts again.

Pyongyang would not target the U.S. if the U.S. did not threaten the North. Washington inked a "mutual defense treaty" with the ROK, guaranteed the latter's security, based troops in South Korea, stationed reinforcements in Okinawa, staged military exercises on the peninsula, sent bombers and ships (an "armada" in this president's words) nearby, and threatened to attack. Indeed, President Trump recently declared that "we were very close" to war last fall. Lacking a conventional equivalent, the DPRK sought nukes as a deterrent.

The only solution is to take America out of the picture.

Washington should enter into alliances only when doing so enhances its own defense. The ROK mattered during the Cold War when it was vulnerable to renewed hostilities by the DPRK backed by the People's Republic of China and the U.S.S.R.

However, those days are long over. South Korea has raced past its northern antagonist, with 50 times the GDP and twice the population. Russia and post-Mao China would not back another North Korean invasion and probably wouldn't save the North if it faced defeat, as in 1950. Seoul is well able to protect itself.

Unfortunately, for many American policymakers the alliance has become an end rather than a means. Some view the U.S. military presence in South Korea as nonnegotiable: Pyongyang should give up everything and America should give nothing. Indeed, argued Canadian Lieutenant General Wayne Eyre of the U.N. Command, the U.S. should not even agree to an end-of-war declaration since it would be "a slippery slope then to question the presence of U.S. forces on the peninsula."

Amazing. If allowed to choose between a nuclear-free Northeast Asia with no American garrison on the peninsula and a confrontational North Korea with nuclear weapons facing a U.S. army division and other units in the South, these analysts would choose the latter. Opined the American Security Project's William Lucier, since the troop "presence serves vital national security interests, their full withdrawal should not be included in any nuclear deal with North Korea." Better the possibility of American cities being turned into the proverbial "lake of fire" than South Korea augmenting its armed forces to defend itself.

Why?

The Korean peninsula is not vital, in any normal meaning of the word, to American security—truth be told, few foreign countries are—and the ROK no longer needs U.S. support. As public choice economics would predict, alliance advocates responded to changed circumstances by concocting a variety of new justifications for an outdated security guarantee. For instance, it is said, the U.S.-ROK alliance now covers more than the South's security. Yes, but such cooperation neither depends on nor justifies America's defense guarantee.

U.S. deployments are justified as containing the PRC, "a hedge against a rising China," in Lucier's words. Although he imagines Washington using Kusan and Osan air bases against Beijing, Seoul is unlikely to allow America to do so unless the ROK is attacked, which is highly unlikely. Why should South Korea make itself a target and permanent enemy of its neighbor to

advance U.S. objectives, such as protecting Taiwan or backing Japan's claim to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands?

Anyway, a modest presence in the South is not likely to prevent Beijing from aggressively asserting its interests elsewhere. Moreover, the perception that this force is supposed to "contain" the PRC is likely to make China less helpful in dealing with the North. Why should it contribute to its own containment?

The American presence is also supposed to magically forestall conflict, prevent arms races, maintain stability, promote democracy, and much more throughout the region. Such claims are oft asserted but never proved. However, withdrawing forces from the South does not require eliminating them from the entire region. Nor are they needed elsewhere, given the transformation of East Asia and increasing cooperation of smaller states with both India and Japan. Other states increasingly can deter Beijing.

Despite occasional tensions, war hardly appears imminent in East Asia. And if it was it would be in Washington's interest to stay out. Indeed, an arms race would help constrain China without U.S. involvement. Americans do not benefit when their government gets entangled in all manner of conflicts all over the world.

The main argument is that what has ever been must ever be. After all, to withdraw would, "it is feared, do grievous harm to U.S. credibility with its allies," worried Clint Work at the University of Utah. However, security treaties and deployments should be based on circumstances. They are a means to an end, American security, not an immutable objective to be preserved, enshrined, and worshipped.

What of the North's nuclear threat to South Korea? Washington could maintain its nuclear umbrella even after withdrawing conventional forces. In fact, the latter merely act as nuclear hostages, putting Americans within easy range of North Korean attack. And the U.S. has nothing at stake in the region worth risking a nuclear attack on the homeland. Losing Los Angeles—or Seattle, Chicago, or Houston—while defending Seoul would be a bad deal indeed.

It might be better to indicate that if the North does not halt its program, Washington will not stand in the way of its allies developing competing arsenals. This might not be a great solution, given the uncertainties of further proliferation, but would make clear the costs of a DPRK bomb to both Pyongyang and Beijing. And it would disentangle America from Northeast Asia's existing antagonisms and potential conflicts.

Washington once played an essential role in defending South Korea. Those days are long over. Having dramatically shaken up North Korea policy, the president should go a step further: announce plans to end America's treaty guarantee and military presence. As America's armed services depart the South, U.S. diplomats will head to the North to establish diplomatic relations—just as America talks with China, France, India, Israel, Pakistan, Russia, and the United Kingdom, nuclear powers all. The DPRK would then become a problem for its neighbors, not Washington. That would truly be an America First approach to the Koreans.

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