



North Korea is a Nuclear Weapons Power: Should the U.S. Accept Reality?

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Sydney Seiler, a national intelligence officer in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, believes that North Korea is unlikely to give up its nuclear weapons. Its objective, he observed, is to gain acceptance as a nuclear state.

He seemed almost irritated with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) saying it, "simply squandered away an opportunity to move forward with it, with the United States in a better relationship." Despite Washington's best efforts, Seiler complained, "We have made clear in all of our negotiations—what it is we expect from the North ... and what benefits would accrue to the DPRK." Alas, "until now, the regime just has simply not wanted to take these exit ramps." Indeed, in Seiler's view at the failed Hanoi summit "once again, North Korea was unwilling to go down the credible path of denuclearization."

However, Pyongyang isn't acting irrationally. The greatest, if inadvertent, advocates of nonproliferation are the existing nuclear powers which have shown no inclination to yield their own nukes. India, Israel, and Pakistan all acquired nuclear weapons against Washington's wishes.

Nuclear weapons have turned the DPRK into a global player of sorts. They offer prestige and the potential for extortion. More fundamentally, they are, Seiler allowed, "a capability that's designed to ensure the survival of the Kim regime. It's not necessarily good for the nation state but it's not meant to be. It's meant to pursue this—to protect the system and protect the regime."

If this is the case, the odds of convincing the North to abandon its nuclear program are minimal. There is no more powerful impulse than self-preservation. Since dictators see themselves and, in the case of North Korea, the ruling dynasty, as synonymous with the nation, yielding a weapon necessary for self-preservation is tantamount to suicide.

Which necessarily raises doubts about the viability of a strategy based on denuclearization. If it is inconceivable that Kim is prepared to give up all his nukes, why continue demanding that he do so?

Still, Seiler rejected accepting the North as a nuclear power. He explained: “It is the abandonment of an ally with the Republic of Korea (ROK). It is a proclamation that we have given up on our global nonproliferation principles. It is a signal to other aspirants who are thinking—‘Should we or shouldn't we?’—that they can get away with it.”

None of these are persuasive reasons, however. The alliance with the ROK doesn't require eliminating North Korean nuclear weapons, even though they greatly complicate the security relationship. Particularly ominous are estimates that within just a few years the North could have 200 nuclear weapons. However, not doing the impossible—ridding the DPRK of its nuclear weapons—does not constitute “abandonment.”

Nor does accepting the inevitable mean dropping nonproliferation as a priority. In regards to the latter, the U.S. already has done so. Washington opposed the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Israel but then responded with private acceptance, applying no punitive penalties once Israel acquired its arsenal. Today Washington never raises the issue, simply ignoring the embarrassing fact. And if the issue was officially raised, the Israeli embassy could host a celebratory party and most members of Congress would show up.

Washington took a less friendly stance toward India and Pakistan, but sanctions were a complete bust. The imperatives of confronting each other and China created enormous pressure on both to become nuclear powers. The U.S. eventually accepted their status, particularly that of India. Nonproliferation concerns fell by the geopolitical wayside, since treating New Delhi as an enemy would drive away an important counterweight to China without causing India to yield its nuclear weapons.

As for signaling other nuclear aspirants, Washington already has done so in two important ways. The first, as noted earlier, is accepting India, Israel, and Pakistan as nuclear powers. America has abandoned its principled nonproliferation policy which cannot be reclaimed.

The second, and equally important, factor was turning nuclear weapons into an essential deterrent for weaker states. Once American officials decided that they had been anointed by

providence to run the world, they sent a message that the world was divided in two: countries that bombed other states, and countries that got bombed.

That played out in practice in Iraq (twice), Afghanistan, the Balkans, Libya, and more. However, Washington treated nuclear powers with much greater respect. As in, the U.S. did not attack them. The Libyan lesson was particularly powerful, since Muammar el - Qaddafi traded away his missile and nuclear programs for international respectability. For a time he was feted in Western capitals, but the moment he seemed vulnerable during the Arab Spring his new friends deserted him. Ultimately, he was pulled out of a storm drain in the city of Sirte and met an unpleasant end. The obvious lesson: Any dictator stupid enough to give up his nukes risked a similar fate.

Kim Jong-un evidently isn't stupid. If there is any chance to get him to disarm, it requires convincing him that he would be safe from attack from the current and future administrations, even if an opportunity for regime change arrived. That would require more than empty words and meaningless gestures. The Singapore summit statement places the importance of a better bilateral relationship and improved regional environment before denuclearization, which North Korean officials have told me was intentional. And it makes sense though, of course, following those steps wouldn't ensure that Pyongyang would then denuclearize.

As a matter of policy, there is no need for the Biden administration to formally and publicly acknowledge a nuclear DPRK. However, in practice Washington should accept reality and develop a policy of arms control, offering sanctions relief and other concessions to limit and, hopefully, ultimately reverse the North's program. The final objective would be denuclearization. However, the immediate goal would be to forestall the world foreseen by the RAND Corporation and Asan Institute for Policy Studies—North Korea as a middling nuclear state, alongside India, United Kingdom, and even China.

Insisting that an existing nuclear power cannot be a nuclear power demonstrates the otherworldly character of current U.S. policy. The Biden administration should root relations with the North to current reality. Success still might prove illusive. However, at least there would be a chance for success.

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