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## Loaded language: U.S. denuclearization phrasing puts progress on North Korea in jeopardy

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The Biden administration's "intensive multi-stakeholder North Korea policy review" is nearing completion, but a simple shift in language could prove to be a stumbling block for any talks with the nuclear-armed country — and a sign of obstacles toward greater trilateral cooperation with Tokyo and Seoul.

In terms of its endgame with Pyongyang, U.S. President Joe Biden's team has taken to using the phrasing "denuclearization of North Korea" in a number of official documents and speeches, a seemingly subtle pivot from the previous "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

While couched in nuance, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un may see this change as a worrying portent from the new U.S. administration.

Experts say the "North Korea" formulation implies unilateral disarmament obligations by Pyongyang, while the "peninsula" phrasing has been used in a number of international agreements and statements for nearly three decades, including the Singapore Declaration signed in 2018 by Kim and U.S. President Donald Trump.

But Kim has staked his regime's survival on its "treasured sword," a euphemism often employed in the country's state-run media for its nuclear weapons program.

"The inconsistency is frustrating," Vipin Narang, a North Korea expert and professor of international relations at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said of the apparent shift in language. "These phrases are not interchangeable, at least as far as Pyongyang is concerned."

The North Koreans, in their own words, have been clear about their preferred formulation, stressing that this is crucial for talks to go forward.

"The U.S. must have a clear understanding of the phrase, denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, and study geology, in particular, before it is too late," a December 2018 editorial in state-run media said in a jibe at then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who had attempted to deploy the two phrases interchangeably.

"When we refer to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, it ... means removing all elements of nuclear threats from the areas of both the north and the south of Korea and also from surrounding areas from where the Korean peninsula is targeted. This should be clearly understood."

But the language focusing specifically on North Korea's denuclearization also highlights a noticeable gap in thinking between Washington and Tokyo on one side and Seoul on the other, potentially jeopardizing the U.S. goal of revitalized trilateral ties.

Tokyo-Seoul relations have soured as tensions arising from historical issues touched off a trade dispute that at one point nearly led South Korea to bolt from a joint intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan seen as crucial to defending against North Korean threats.

### **A failure to communicate**

When the U.S. secretaries of state and defense visited Japan earlier this month for the first overseas trip by members of Biden's Cabinet, the two allies released a joint statement referring to their goal of "the complete denuclearization of North Korea."

This formulation was more in line with Japan's long-stated position on the North. Tokyo has maintained a harder-line stance over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs than the position held by Seoul, generally favoring greater pressure over the type of engagement sought by South Korean President Moon Jae-in in recent years.

After last week's test of two advanced short-range missiles, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said the launches had "threatened the peace and security of Japan and the surrounding region." Although Suga has said he is willing to meet unconditionally with Kim and his administration has reportedly pushed for a resumption of high-level U.S.-North Korea talks, Tokyo has demanded that the North relinquish all of its weapons of mass destruction as a prerequisite for any concessions.

Experts say Japan fears the North is attempting to "decouple" it and Seoul from their alliances with the U.S. and use whatever means it can to drive wedges between the two allies and Washington.

Joel Wit, a former U.S. State Department official who helped negotiate the 1994 Agreed Framework with North Korea, told a recent online panel discussion that he suspected the phrasing used in Tokyo was "language the Japanese really like."

"I'm sure the Japanese are not interested in seeing any openings for the North Koreans to play havoc with the alliance system in Northeast Asia," he said.

In Seoul, the second leg of the Asia visit by the U.S. secretaries of state and defense, a joint statement released after meetings with their South Korean counterparts completely avoided the phrasing issue by omitting both versions — and even leaving out the word "denuclearization."

Instead, that statement appeared to look for middle ground, noting that officials from the two allies had in their discussions "emphasized that North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile issues are a priority for the alliance."

Asked about the issue at a news conference after their meeting, South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong drew attention to the differing views, calling the past emphasis on the "peninsula" the "more correct" approach, since it highlights the fact that South Korea no longer retains nuclear weapons and is looking to use this to convince the North to "follow suit."

The U.S. deployed tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea from 1958 until 1991 and in January the following year, after the nukes were removed, Seoul and Pyongyang signed the Joint

Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Although the agreement stalled, Seoul continues to reiterate that it has not diverged from the deal's stated principles.

### **Divisive language**

Experts say the difference in the denuclearization formula could create problems for the Biden administration, which has repeatedly touted the importance of alliances, as it attempts to lay the groundwork for improved ties between Tokyo and Seoul.

“When Biden campaigned and during his first several weeks in office, his insistence on working closely with U.S. allies was a promising sign that Seoul and Washington could get back on the same page in their approach to North Korea,” said Eric Gomez, director of defense policy studies at the Washington-based Cato Institute think tank. “However, the different denuclearization language that each country used throws some cold water on that idea and, at a minimum, raises questions about the Biden administration's ongoing North Korea policy review.”

Gomez said he is “generally skeptical” that any kind of “meaningful” trilateral cooperation will emerge despite the common security concern, due to the differing stances in Tokyo and Seoul.

“Trilateral cooperation with the United States is not impossible, but the ability of trilateral cooperation to yield significant progress is limited so long as South Korea and Japan maintain fundamentally different approaches to the North Korea problem,” he said.

As for the future of talks between the U.S. and the North, maintaining the “peninsula” language would at least remove a fundamental reason why Pyongyang has yet to pick up the phone despite the White House's attempts for contact.

“It seems unnecessary to insist on the ‘denuclearization of North Korea’ if it will simply torpedo attempts to jump-start talks,” MIT's Narang said. “Of course, it's possible Pyongyang is just using this as an excuse, but it's an easy excuse for them to use.”

Still, others admit that while the language could create an obstacle for nuclear talks, North Korea will be far more keen to see what, if any, shifts in actual policy the Biden administration will make.

“Ultimately ... the North Koreans will look less to our phraseology and more to our willingness to engage in a practical, step-by-step diplomatic process to address their concerns,” said Ankit Panda, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace think tank in Washington.