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LOSING THE POLITICAL FOREST FOR THE NUCLEAR TREES: DENUCLEARIZING NORTH KOREA IS NEITHER A SUFFICIENT NOR NECESSARY CONDITION FOR PEACE

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"Denuclearization" has been an essential goal of US policy toward North Korea since well before Donald Trump took office. But this administration's latest effort at negotiations has had a nearly single-minded focus on nuclear weapons, relegating issues like human rights, internal reform, and – most importantly – normalization of North Korea's relations with its neighbors and the wider international community, to the backburner.

This approach to North Korea risks the long game. Although nuclear weapons do threaten global security, and nonproliferation and disarmament should be long-term priorities, a narrow focus on North Korea's nuclear weapons could detract from more fundamental US interests. Simply put, the core issue is peace. A peaceful nation in possession of nuclear weapons is less of a threat than a belligerent nation without them. Peace will not come to the Korean Peninsula until North Korea transitions from belligerent threat to cooperative partner; ridding itself of nuclear weapons is neither a sufficient, nor necessary, condition for such peace.

North Korea's nuclear program is not the primary cause of regional instability; it is a symptom of that instability. North Korea has been threatening South Korea's territorial integrity, its people, and the US armed forces participating in Korea's defense since long before it attained a nuclear weapon capability. Historical examples of negotiated or voluntary nuclear disarmament have largely taken place in the context of wider efforts by the disarming countries to normalize relations with their neighbors and join the international community as responsible, peaceful stakeholders. Only by working toward these more comprehensive goals were these nations able to lower security risks to their neighbors and establish paths toward long-term regional stability. In many cases, surrendering nuclear weapons did not spur normalization, but was instead a result of such normalization.

South Africa is a case in point. Long an international pariah and mired in a seemingly endless war with Namibia (then occupied by South Africa), Angola, and Cuba, the South African government took a series of steps beginning in 1989 to normalize its relations and rejoin the international community. It signed a peace accord to end its 23-year war in 1990, reformed its internal government to end apartheid, set out to establish truly popular sovereignty, and cancelled its nuclear weapons program, which had successfully built six functional bombs by 1989. Denuclearization was merely one aspect of a larger normalization effort and bore little weight on the lifting of international sanctions, since South Africa did not announce the existence or cancellation of its program until 1993, after most sanctions had already been lifted.

Similar cases, albeit on a smaller scale, can be found in Argentina and Brazil. Since the end of the South American wars of independence in the 19th century, the two countries had competed economically and politically. Tensions would periodically flare, worsened by the fact that both governments were in the hands of military dictatorships in the latter half of the 20th century. Each country pursued nuclear weapons as a security measure against the other, driving a security dilemma in the process. As each country transitioned from dictatorship to democracy, however, normalization of relations and increased international economic participation led to a shift from nuclear weapons rivalry to nuclear power cooperation, with each nation ratifying the Non-Proliferation Treaty in the 1990s. Abandoning the pursuit of nuclear weapons did not spur the reduction of tensions but was instead a result of it, as new

democratically elected governments in both countries sought to build better regional relations.

Most illustrative of the idea that denuclearization does not necessarily lead to improved relations and security are the cases of China and Iran, but in opposite ways. China continued to possess nuclear weapons while simultaneously building stronger ties with the international community beginning in the 1970s, suggesting that denuclearization is not a necessary condition for joining the world order. If Nixon had arrived in China in 1972 and demanded that Mao surrender all of China's nuclear weapons as a prerequisite for further cooperation, the engagement effort would have likely sputtered out. It increasingly looks like the same may be true for North Korea. The inverse scenario has played out in Iran thus far. Iran agreed to abandon its nuclear weapons program in 2015 in exchange for sanctions relief, but it has since done little to seek greater cooperation with its neighbors and the international community as a whole. It continues hostile relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia and has worsened regional security through its military interventions in Syria and Yemen. Denuclearization did not spur a more responsible foreign policy on the part of Iran. Conversely, China joined the international community without giving up its weapons, showing that denuclearization is only effective as part of a larger initiative to establish normal relations with other countries.

Denuclearization of North Korea is a noble goal, especially from the standpoints of nonproliferation and overall safety, but in the long run it may turn out to be the wrong one. The Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia, and the US will not be markedly safer if North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons without improving relations with its neighbors, international organizations, and the world at large. Kim Jong Un may hand over every warhead, but as long as thousands of artillery shells and rockets are aimed at Seoul, it will be difficult to meaningfully reduce the threat. The hard truth is that "Complete, Verifiable, and Irreversible Denuclearization" may no longer be a realistic aim. The negotiations that have taken place so far are by no means a waste, however, if they can serve as a basis for a more comprehensive process of normalizing North Korea's foreign relations. Kim Jong Un, given his recent public focus on the North Korean economy, may be seeking something similar to China's opening up to the world order in the 1970s and 80s – "Socialism with North Korean Characteristics," to borrow the parlance of China's reform leader Deng Xiaoping. If that is the case, and if North Korea can be persuaded to eventually join the international community as a responsible stakeholder, then denuclearization may no longer be necessary.

We are unaccustomed to thinking about nations like North Korea in these terms, but it is helpful to remember that no one fears that responsible, internationally engaged, nuclear-armed states like the UK will resort to the use of nuclear weapons. Even if the Falklands War had escalated beyond the South Atlantic, the very notion that the UK would initiate a first strike sounds preposterous. Such use would likely have been universally condemned and resulted in the UK being ostracized from the international community. The UK was and is so ensconced in the international order that it could not afford to go rogue and use nuclear weapons even if doing so was in its short-term strategic interests. The US should strive for a similar, though obviously more modest, outcome with North Korea. If the US cannot verifiably denuclearize the Kim regime, which looks more likely every day, the aim should be, while exacting concessions and reaching compromises, to pull North Korea into the world order. Doing so may be the only chance to reduce the likelihood of war.

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