



NORTH KOREA MUST EARN THE STATUS OF A NUCLEAR POWER

BY MUTHIAH ALAGAPPA

Muthiah Alagappa (muthia.alagappa@gmail.com) is a nonresident senior fellow in the Asia Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Rex Tillerson, the embattled US secretary of state, recently stated at the UN that North Korea must earn its way to the negotiating table. Trying to get North Korea to the negotiating table will be fruitless if Washington continues to insist that the DPRK must be open to becoming a non-nuclear weapon state. The United States must formally or informally accept North Korea as a nuclear-weapon state, attempt to get Pyongyang to subscribe to international norms that will prevent further proliferation by the DPRK, and reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in the Korean conflict.

This conclusion is based on the assumption that countries acquire nuclear weapon capability in light of their security vulnerabilities and that once attained, countries will be highly reluctant to give them up. Having attained or with near capability to strike the United States, attempting to denuclearize the DPRK will be futile. This may have been possible decades ago but no longer is now. It is important for all parties to look ahead by reorienting their goals.

North Korea and by extension the Kim regime have invested heavily in nuclear-weapon capability in the belief that this capability would ensure its security and survival by deterring an attack by the US and allied powers. Now that North Korea has attained or is near attainment of a nuclear-weapon capability that can strike the mainland US, it is highly unlikely to give up that capability.

Staying the present course and emphasizing the military option is likely to increase tension and possibly lead to military conflict that will not be in the interest of either Korea, the United States, or other countries in the region including China and Japan. A military conflict could

result in millions of casualties on all sides and in the worst case lead an obliteration of North Korea.

Accepting the DPRK as a nuclear-weapon state and getting it to accept international norms regarding proliferation will require reorientation of the goals of both Pyongyang and Washington. The DPRK should shift its focus to gaining international acceptance as a responsible nuclear-weapon state. This will take several years and could be costly in political and diplomatic terms.

Concurrently the US goal should shift to making nuclear weapons less relevant on the Korean Peninsula and to demanding that the DPRK engages in actions to prevent further vertical and horizontal proliferation. The combination of these two developments will support peace, security, and development on the Korean Peninsula and more broadly in Northeast and East Asia.

Staying the present courses by Washington and Pyongyang can lead to inadvertent war with highly damaging consequences. It is important to stress here that the intention is not to reward “bad” behavior but to prevent war and advance peace, security and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the region.

Steps to be taken by Pyongyang

Pyongyang must seek to convince the international community that it is on the path to becoming a responsible nuclear weapon state. The paths taken by India and China may be instructive here. Pyongyang’s primary goal has and must continue to be deterrence to prevent blackmail or attack by the US and its allies. It must forego the diplomacy of “bluster” and offense. Pyongyang must make a commitment not to attack nonnuclear weapon states like South Korea, Japan, and other countries. The DPRK should also begin subscribing to nonproliferation regimes and norms to the extent

possible. Commitment not to spread technology and material to terrorists and other nonstate actors would be welcomed by the international community. Likewise, protection of its nuclear facilities and preventing them from falling into the wrong hands would alleviate fear on the part of international community as has been the case with Pakistan. In due course, such efforts would create confidence in Pyongyang.

Internally, the DPRK should begin to liberalize its economy and welcome international investment not only from South Korea and China but from other countries as well. The DPRK should seek to become a regular member of the international community in East Asia and more broadly in Asia rather than a pariah or outcast state. This evolution could be aided by active and positive commitment to nonproliferation norms like those mentioned above and by active participation in ASEAN-centered forums to promote regional peace and stability.

Pyongyang should conduct activities still necessary to complete or further develop its nuclear weapon capability by choosing an opportune moment and making its intentions clear to avoid unduly alarming the international community. The actions outlined above are only some of the steps that could and should be undertaken by Pyongyang. Since this could take several years, patience is essential.

Reorienting the United States

The US and the international community should view the development of nuclear weapon capability by the DPRK as symptomatic of its insecurity. Measures should be instituted to ensure the international security of North Korea and ensure the safety of its nuclear arsenal. Measures must also be taken to ensure the security of US allies in the region. These efforts could prevent further spread of nuclear weapons and promote peace and security in East Asia. North Korea should also be guided by demands from the international community to become a responsible nuclear-weapon state and help advance regional peace and security. Dialogue is vital.

Resurrecting and reorienting the Six-Party Talks

The moribund Six-Party Talks with China in the lead may be resurrected to facilitate dialogue to chart a way for the DPRK to become a responsible nuclear-weapon state and to strengthen peace and security in Northeast Asia. With a change in orientation, the Six-Party Talks could become the security forum for Northeast Asia.

Reorientation of goals and movement in new directions will not come easily or quickly. However, these may be compelled by the interests of affected countries, especially the two Koreas and the United States in preventing the outbreak of inadvertent nuclear war and sustaining the peace that has characterized Northeast Asia since 1955.

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