



AN END-OF-WAR DECLARATION WOULD IMPROVE RELATIONS ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

BY JOSHUA NEZAM

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Holding the US-North Korea relationship hostage to denuclearization will continue to strain the US-ROK alliance. An end-of-war declaration is equally – if not more – important for South Korea as it is for North Korea. It was the Moon Jae-in administration that [originally proposed](#) an end-of-war declaration for obvious reasons: it is insurance against a return to provocations and entrapment in what it perceives as Washington’s war. President Moon, in his 2018 Liberation Day Speech, stated that [“taking responsibility for our fate ourselves”](#) is the way to peace and prosperity on the Peninsula. The US-ROK alliance relationship has navigated polarized politics in Seoul with opposing visions for how to best achieve both security and autonomy. Moon’s policies support national sovereignty, and he has undertaken [defense reforms](#) undergirded by the progressive ideological legacy of *jaju gukbang*, or self-reliant defense. Through an unprecedented investment in [indigenous defensive capabilities](#) along with reconciliation with Pyongyang, Seoul is seeking to expand its sovereignty while maintaining security.

Moon also campaigned on a promise to transfer wartime operational control (OPCON) to the South Korean military. Seen as an antiquated structure infringing on the sovereignty of a country that views itself as a middle power, the issue of OPCON transfer

has become a symbol of a deeper historical legacy of foreign control and stifled South Korean autonomy. Many young South Koreans – both on the left and the right – are now eager to be treated as a peer partner of the United States. In light of these sentiments, withholding a peace declaration only fuels the sense in Seoul that Washington’s hardline nonproliferation priorities serve as a veto on Korean sovereignty and an opportunity for peace.

Experts in Washington worry about the unintended consequences of a declaration, but robust institutionalized channels of US-ROK alliance coordination are in place to meet such challenges. An end-of-war declaration is a non-binding political gesture that would create a pathway to an eventual legally-binding peace treaty. What North Korea views as intermediary steps between a symbolic declaration and a formal peace regime need to be fleshed out. While they may very well contradict US and South Korean views, the fear that a declaration is a tactic that will entrap the alliance in an unraveling process highly underestimates its numerous coordination mechanisms. Despite the longer-term [risks](#) that a declaration could catalyze a divide in Washington and Seoul’s approaches to regional security, the recently formed [US-ROK Working Group](#) and [Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group \(EDSCG\)](#), along with the established [Security Consultative Meeting \(SCM\)](#), are in place to ensure close consultation on progress toward denuclearization and peace on the Peninsula. To allay US fears of a hollowing out of USFK force posture, Moon has also [insisted](#) that a peace treaty is not linked to troop presence.

A peace declaration also reduces the risk of nuclear proliferation in South Korea and the wider region. 2017 [polls](#) showed that 60 percent of South Koreans supported the pursuit of indigenous nuclear capabilities and nearly 70 percent favored redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons. The Moon administration has heretofore [opposed](#) calls from conservatives to redeploy nuclear weapons to the peninsula. However, whether South Koreans ultimately pressure their government to obtain nuclear weapons is contingent upon their perceptions of security. A revitalized US-ROK alliance and a

hostility-free relationship with the North – even with minimal nuclear capability – is possible. But without a new relationship prompted by an end-of-war declaration, mounting perceptions of insecurity coupled with undercurrent desires for nuclear sovereignty and self-reliant defense could spur a nuclear security dilemma in East Asia.

Reduce the North Korean threat by improving the political relationship

North Korea only represents a grave threat if it remains an adversary. The singular focus on the quantity and disposition of North Korean capabilities overlooks the political dimension of the threat and draws attention away from practical arms control measures to manage it. Analysts still debate the role of nuclear weapons in North Korea's defense strategy. If Kim views their utility as defensive – as North Korea's 2013 [law](#) outlines – the threat is tolerable in circumstances short of preventive war. While North Korea has hinted at the intention to launch pre-emptive strikes to deter an invasion, a rehabilitated political relationship would significantly reduce misperceptions and therefore risk of use or miscalculation. One expert [highlighted](#) the real dangers of miscalculation when Trump's 2017 maximum pressure approach rubbed up against North Korea's strategic-cultural response to pressure. A renewed relationship would end explicit threats and reduce risks of inadvertent escalation as well as the [risks posed by North Korea's non-transparent command and control system](#).

Former US National Security Advisor Gen. H.R. McMaster operated under a hardline [assumption](#) that North Korea views nuclear weapons as providing offensive utility – namely to launch an invasion of South Korea and deter US involvement by credibly threatening the homeland with nuclear-capped ICBMs. Under Kim Jong Un's tenure, North Korea's behavior and public statements offer little evidence of such intent. Further, North Korea has yet to demonstrate re-entry and miniaturization technology, nor reliable control of targeting and detonation. It is also unlikely that North Korea's rudimentary capabilities would embolden it to credibly threaten countries under the umbrella of a superior US arsenal. But this could all change if a deadlock ensues.

Opening liaison offices and declaring an end to the Korean War are steps toward peaceful relations that could transform North Korean society's perceptions of the US and create a new economic pillar for Kim's regime legitimacy. In September 2018, the North Korean Foreign Ministry claimed a declaration was an [urgent step](#) toward a peace regime on the Peninsula. Kim's 2019 New Year's [speech](#) reiterated support for the Worker Party's new strategic line and the directive to focus national efforts toward economic construction. A declaration could help Kim cultivate the political will to re-allocate resources away from the nuclear enterprise and toward this second component of the [byungjin policy](#). Critics argue that North Korea does not want a declaration because state propaganda relies on the omnipresent threat of US aggression to validate its socialist policies. However, if Kim seeks to pivot toward a new pillar of legitimacy to contend with the [growing influx of information](#) and an era of unprecedented marketization in North Korea, a declaration could catalyze a fundamental transformation.

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