

‘SLOW AND STEADY WINS THE RACE’ FOR NK NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

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Despite all the sanctions in place, North Korea has managed to continue its ballistic missile tests. On May 4, 2019, it tested a tactical guided weapon – their first test since the Vietnam summit between the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump, which ended without agreement.

This action shows that North Korea has no plans to end all of its nuclear and associated missile projects without a strong commitment towards their economy by the international community, including the United States. Kim has departed from his father’s “military first” approach and instead has presented a “dual track” policy to advance his nuclear program and economy.

On the other side, the Trump administration wants a quick, comprehensive agreement for the complete denuclearization of North Korea. The Hanoi document was presented by Trump to secure a “big deal” under which all sanctions would be lifted once North Korea gives up all of its weapons. The document bluntly demanded the transfer of Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons and bomb fuel to the United States. The Trump administration also demanded that the North move first by providing a complete inventory of its nuclear material and production facilities. This document called on North Korea to provide a comprehensive declaration of its nuclear program and full access for international

inspectors, a halt to all related activities and construction of any new facilities, elimination of all nuclear infrastructure, and the transition of all nuclear program scientists and technicians to commercial activities.

So far, both countries have different definitions of complete denuclearization. Second, closing all the North Korean nuclear sites and their associated institutes and projects is not possible in a single step. Third, what will be the future of all those scientific and technical staff? This job cannot be done in weeks or months and it needs a solid plan with complete financial support that will run in the billions of dollars. So both the US and North Korea must develop a step-by-step strategy to complete this process. South Korea so far is playing a role as mediator while also the main partner in this issue, so they need to come up with an economic solution. The rest of the world will be not much interested in taking the lead on this as they don’t come under any direct threat from North Korea. Just as China maintained that its nuclear, defense and “One Belt One Road” policies do not pose any threat to any other nation, the same narrative ultimately could come from North Korea.

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After the Hanoi summit, the confidence levels of both countries are again at a low, and the mood is also dampened by the recent missile test by North Korea. What’s more, satellite images from April 2019 and intelligence information reported movement at North Korea’s main nuclear site that could be associated with the reprocessing of radioactive material for bombs.

To bring dialogue back on track as a confidence building measure both parties need to present their preferred sequential approach instead of looking for a “big deal.” It can start by fulfilling North Korea’s demand that Washington join South Korea in declaring an end to the Korean War. This step would commit to initiating a peace process that would include military confidence-building measures to reduce the risk of deadly clashes in the contested waters of the West (Yellow) Sea and the Demilitarized Zone and culminate in a formal peace treaty. This demand was repeated by Kim Jong Un on his visit to Moscow. His first face-to-face meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin took place on Russky Island in eastern Russia. “If North Korea is given security guarantees, North Korea would be willing to denuclearize,” Kim said.

This dialogue should be multidimensional and multilevel so that a solid framework can be established. Next, this framework can be shared multilaterally as Putin has showed a willingness for another round of Six-Party Talks to discuss North Korea's nuclear program. The Six-Party talks were a series of meetings, involving North and South Korea, Russia, the U.S., China and Japan, held from 2003 through 2009, until North Korea abruptly withdrew.

It seems that the “big deal” model – based on a similar, successful effort with Libya – will not work with North Korea and only a slow and steady model will bring about the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

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