

Does Denuclearization Mean Giving up North Korea's 'Treasured Sword'?

Written by Srini Sitaraman

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SRINI SITARAMAN, MAY 6 2018

Undoubtedly the April 27th Inter-Korean summit at Panjamuon was historic and it presented the world with all the right theatrics and the right tone. The leaders of the two Koreas walking together, holding hands, and their *joie de vivre* surely seemed authentic and genuine. The two leaders raised glasses for a toast at a joint banquet, planted trees, and enjoyed sitting out at a park bench engaged in deep discussions. From a Korean perspective, definitely this was a positive development compared to where these two divided countries were in February of this year. The impeachment of the former Korean President Park Geun-Hye and the election of Moon-Jae-In to the Blue House in Seoul has realized the improbable — bringing the two Korea's closer. The sudden rapprochement began with the sponsoring of the joint-Korean team for the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, South Korea. This was followed by the visit of the South Korean pop group (K-pop) Red Velvet, which was proclaimed as a gift to the citizens of Pyongyang by the North Korean leader.

Earlier in March 2018, South Korea's Moon-Jae-In spoke to Trump at length and subsequently Trump agreed instantly to a summit with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un. Since Trump agreed to the summit with Kim there has been a whirlwind of activity and a variety of interpretations have been floated as to what would the future of the peace look like in the Korean peninsula. The South Koreans, including its President, Moon-Jae-In, argue that the North is really serious and sincere about denuclearization. But the real problem is that there seems to be an enormous gap in the understanding and interpretations of denuclearization.

The 2015 United States and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) Joint Statement on North Korea of October 16, 2015 stated that the “complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea in a peaceful manner,” was the common goal of both countries. The joint statement further asserted that the “United States and the Republic of Korea maintain no hostile policy towards North Korea and remain open to dialogue with North Korea to achieve our shared goal of denuclearization.”

During the meeting with the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at Mar-a-Lago, Florida, Trump's Golf Resort on April 17-18, the White House produced a joint statement released that “reaffirmed that North Korea needs to abandon all weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs.” Mr. Abe and Mr. Trump “underscored that the global maximum pressure campaign will continue until North Korea denuclearizes.” The United States also “commended Japan's efforts to prevent North Korean ship-to-ship transfers that are in violation of UN Security Council resolutions.”

Earlier in the month, Marc Knapper, the Acting U.S. Ambassador to South Korea argued that a “complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program remains a “nonnegotiable” US goal in its upcoming talks with Pyongyang” at a forum in Seoul. Knapper further asserted that the United States is “willing to engage with North Korea” but only if “complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” is guaranteed.

The Panmunjom Summit declaration “confirmed the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.” Additionally, South Korea assured that the “measures being initiated by North Korea

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are very meaningful and crucial for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

In a six-point press release or “Six decisions” made public on Friday 21st April 2018 (Juche 107 North Korean calendar), the first point says that they have successfully carried out the “nuclear test and the underground nuclear test, the miniaturization and the lightening of the nuclear weapon, and the project for the development of the ultra-large nuclear weapon and the transportation means sequentially and faithfully realized the nuclear weaponization.”

The fourth point of the “Six decisions” claims that North Korea will “never use nuclear weapons unless there is nuclear threat or nuclear provocation,” and they “will not transfer nuclear weapons and nuclear technology.” Although the second point of the “Six decisions” says they will discontinue the intercontinental ballistic rocket tests” and the third point says that they will suspend nuclear testing and join global disarmament efforts “to halt the nuclear test altogether.” The emphasis is on discontinuation and suspension of testing, which means that they could always be resumed if the situation is not to their liking. There is no indication in any of these “Six decisions” that North Korea will surrender its nuclear weapons. North Korea has only offered to freeze its testing and suspend ballistic missile testing in order to promote peace and reduce hostile relations between the two Koreas to “reconnect the blood relations of the people and bring forward the future of co-prosperity and unification.”

A week before the Inter-Korean Summit, North Korea announced that the quest for nuclear weapons is “complete” and it “no longer needs” to test its weapons capability or its intercontinental ballistic missiles. North Korea has shut down its nuclear test site at Punggye-ri and supposedly commenced the process of pulling cables from the testing tunnels. However, Chinese geologists have cast doubt on the North Korean motive behind shutting down of the test site. Researchers from the University of Science and Technology of China in Hefei argue that the test site has collapsed because of the “stress of multiple explosions caused by the release of huge amounts of heat and energy.” But, another report from the website 38 North suggests that the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test site is still accessible from the South and West side and that it could support underground nuclear testing.

The newly appointed Secretary of State and the former C.I.A Director, Mike Pompeo, who led the secret American negotiations with North Korea earlier this year said at his swearing-in-ceremony on 2nd May 2018 that the United States was “committed to the permanent, verifiable, irreversible dismantling of North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction program and to do so without delay.” This is the original goal as articulated by the Obama administration and which in many ways is the continuation of American policy towards North Korean nuclear weapons. But the statements coming from South or North Korea do not indicate that the North Korea is interested in surrendering the nuclear weapons already in its possession.

There is talk about how the maximum pressure placed by Trump on North Korea and how it compelled Kim to come to the table and negotiate for peace and this makes Trump deserving of a Nobel Peace Prize. However, the North Korean negotiations timeline suggests that Kim’s decision to negotiate for peace may have been guided by other factors such as confidence that North Korea has achieved credible minimum deterrence against the United States. Kim Jong Un has hailed the North Korean nuclear development as a “miraculous victory” and a win because of the “struggle of the Korean people who worked hard with their belt tightened to acquire a powerful treasured sword.” The North Korean leader added that these nuclear weapons provided “the firm guarantee by which our descendants can enjoy the most dignified and happiest life in the world.”

The Panmunjom declaration was consciously vague on denuclearization because the main purpose was to smoothen the relationship between the North and South. It was not designed as a denuclearization document and neither was it aimed at rolling back the North’s nuclear weapons capacity. Denuclearization was deliberately left out of the document so that such issues could be discussed between the United States and North Korea directly. The South Korean bargain was to reduce the hostilities with the North and open the door for conciliation and in that the Inter-Korean Summit seems to have succeeded. Also the South does not have any illusions that the North would easily surrender their deterrent because it would make the regime highly vulnerable to American intervention.

So this brings us back to the question what does denuclearization mean and what is likely to be an acceptable definition for both the United States and North Korea. Early indications suggest that the United States is still working

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with some notion of “permanent, verifiable, irreversible dismantling of North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction program and to do so without delay.” North Korea is already floating several versions of denuclearization that points to “arms control and a world free of nuclear weapons” or maybe even mutual nuclear limitations and reductions, or maybe even a testing freeze that both India and Pakistan have pursued over the past two decades. But both India and Pakistan have continued to expand their nuclear arsenal and remain outside the purview of the major nonproliferation treaty regimes (NPT and CTBT). Taken together, all this suggests that North Korea is aiming to be recognized and treated as a nuclear power on par with other nuclear powers. For whatever it is worth, the North Korean constitution states that it is a nuclear-weapon state. As the Korean expert Chang Hoon Shin said on Twitter, it is hard to imagine North Korea giving up its nuclear weapons and missiles after investing 25 years in developing them, while experiencing isolation and punishing sanctions. We will have to wait and see how the Trump-Kim summit shapes up and whether North Korea is willing to give up its “treasured sword.”

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