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Why It's Nearly Impossible to Denuclearize North Korea

*Despite the optimism after the Trump-Kim summit, it's difficult to imagine Pyongyang ever giving up nuclear weapons. In this article, **stars alumnus CUI Lei, Associate Research Fellow with China Institute of International Studies**, a foreign policy think tank based in Beijing, gives five reasons why we might never see a denuclearized North Korea in our lifetime.*

After the historic summit in Singapore between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and U.S. President Donald Trump on June 12, it seems the odds of denuclearizing North Korea are increasing. There are some reasons to be optimistic about the prospect of denuclearization: The sanctions imposed on North Korea seem to have worked and will probably continue to force Pyongyang to comply if not easily relieved. Moreover, the mood in the U.S. Congress seems favourable to facilitating the conclusion of a potential peace treaty that can make security assurances to North Korea legally binding and therefore more credible. However, despite the above arguments, we have more reasons to be pessimistic.

First, recent developments in international politics might discourage North Korea from honouring its commitment to denuclearization.

On the one hand, North Korea can leverage the growing competition between the United States and China to achieve its goal. With the United States now launching a trade offensive on China, it is natural for China to take retaliatory measures. If the trade dispute escalates, which is very likely, it may spill over to the security field. If once again in the future North Korea refuses to take further steps to denuclearize, and the United States tries to persuade China to impose tougher sanctions on North Korea, it is likely that China may decline the demand as retaliation on the United States for its trade offensive.

On the other hand, the united front to exert pressure on North Korea to denuclearize is unravelling, at least for now. Just before the summit with Kim, Trump openly admitted that denuclearization needs a process, which implied that the United States has accepted the North Korean position of phased and synchronized denuclearization. China holds similar positions. In addition, China is thinking about sanctions relief. It is reported that bans on cross-border trade have been relaxed along the China-North Korea border. Russia has already been advocating sanctions relief as well. And with inter-Korea relations getting warm, the Moon Jae-in administration in South Korea is prioritizing peace over denuclearization.

Second, nuclear weapons are too precious in Kim's eyes to be traded away for any rewards achieved after denuclearization. Promised sanctions relief or economic prosperity is not very appealing to Kim because it may lead to regime instability, as China experienced in the late 1980s. Instead, minimal opening up and quasi-isolation will more likely keep the regime secure, holding unfavourable foreign influence at bay.

Simply put, Kim wants absolute security. If he did not pursue 100 percent security, he would not have imposed extremely tight controls on the flow of people and information into and out of the country as his father and grandfather did. If he could take risks, he would not have secured his position by purging his potential adversaries and their family members, and assassinating his half-brother even though the latter constituted no political challenge to him. If he did not pursue absolute security, he would not have had hundreds of trains in north and northeast China make way for his special train when he visited Beijing in March.

Following this logic, it is hard to swallow that Kim will opt to give away the security of possessing nuclear weapons. Suppose the United States provides a security assurance to North Korea and withdraws all its troops from South Korea and even Japan — the U.S. military still poses security threats to North Korea as its intercontinental ballistic missiles can target North Korea from Guam, Hawaii, or the North American continent.

Third, North Korea has the potential to follow the Indian model. Some analysts say that, inherently different from North Korea, India has demonstrated rationality and international responsibility with regards to non-proliferation. To refute the above argument, Kim can launch a charm offensive, as he did in Panmunjom and Singapore, and persuade other countries to believe that North Korea has the same traits as India. If India can get international acquiescence to its nuclear program without punishment, then North Korea can do it too.

Fourth, North Korea needs to overcome internal obstacles to denuclearize. It has been written into the constitution that the DPRK is a nuclear weapons state. It would be hard for Kim to explain to the people why it is necessary for North Korea, as a nuclear power, to dismantle nuclear facilities. The vested interests related to the nuclear and missile programs will be another obstacle to denuclearization. Nuclear scientists and engineers will be unemployed and the military will lose a great number of posts if all the elements of the nuclear program are eliminated.

Fifth, the technical nature of denuclearization offers North Korea chance to renege sometime in the future. No doubt, it will take years to complete denuclearization as it is extremely complex. Nuclear programs involve many elements, including nuclear material, reactors, weapons, command and control systems, testing facilities, delivery vehicles, personnel, and so on. Moreover, denuclearization requires such time-consuming procedures as the capping of nuclear operations, declaration of inventories, inspections of facilities, dismantlement and verification. If Stanford scientist Siegfried Hecker's roadmap for denuclearization, or an updated version of it, is adopted by the Trump administration, it will take about 10 years to complete the denuclearization process, which is full of uncertainties and risks. If a future U.S. president does not see North Korea as an imminent threat to the United States and loosens pressure on it, North Korea could manage to preserve minimal nuclear capability and become a nuclear threshold country. If need be, Pyongyang can resume nuclear development in a short period of time with preserved technologies and know-how. In another scenario, if Kim asks for an astronomical amount of remuneration for implementing a certain procedure of denuclearization and the United States dismisses the demand, North Korea will have a good excuse not to take further steps.

To sum up, sadly, we might never see a denuclearized North Korea in our lifetime. If we can list so many reasons why Kim will not denuclearize — aside from those having been put forward by other analysts — and if it is hard to refute most of them, then the prospect of denuclearization is desperately dim. Perhaps, barring military options that entail catastrophic and unbearable consequences, the only thing we can do may be, through a prolonged negotiation process, to make North Korea as incomplete of a nuclear power as possible.

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