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ROK-US POLICY BRIEF

THE US
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION
IN 2024 AND
THE FUTURE OF
DENUCLEARIZATION

BY SYDNEY A. SEILER



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Email: tongil@snu.ac.kr

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Email: gwiks@gwu.edu

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Seiler worked over 42 years in the U.S. Government focused on Korean Peninsula issues as a senior policymaker, negotiator, executive manager, and intelligence officer. He served as the National Intelligence Council's National Intelligence Officer for North Korea from 2020-2023, where he oversaw production of Intelligence Community-wide strategic analysis on key national security, political, economic, military, and social issues, serving as the DNI's senior subject matter expert on North Korea. As the Senior Analyst for Commander USFK from 2016-2020, he oversaw the analytic efforts of the USFK intelligence enterprise and served as the principal expert on Korea Peninsula security policy issues to the Commander USFK as well as senior Department of Defense and Joint Staff leadership. Prior to that Mr. Seiler served as the U.S. Special Envoy for Six-Party Talks, responsible for North Korea-related diplomacy and strategy while acting as the U.S. side of the New York Channel for dialogue with North Korea. Prior to that, Mr. Seiler served as the White House National Security Council Staff's Director for Korea Affairs, and the Senior Analyst for Commander, U.S. Forces Korea from 2012-2015.

Mr. Seiler had assignments across the Intelligence Community in senior management, analysis, and operations. With experience in all-source analysis, human intelligence, signals intelligence, and open source, Mr. Seiler's assignments include those with the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, and Office of the Director for National Intelligence.

Mr. Seiler served over 17 years in Korea, has native-level fluency in Korean, and was a member of the Senior National Intelligence Service 2006-2023. He was awarded the Presidential Rank of Meritorious Senior National Intelligence Officer, and is the recipient of the National Intelligence Superior Service Medal, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Distinguished Civilian Service Award, and the President of the Republic of Korea's Cheonsu Medal Order of National Security Merit.



Sydney A. Seiler

Senior Adviser
Center for Strategic and International
Studies Korea Chair

Edited by Jungchul Lee (*Head, Center for Unification Studies, Seoul National University*)
and Yonho Kim (*Associate Director, Institute for Korean Studies, The George Washington University*)

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ALL EYES ON WASHINGTON? WHAT ABOUT PYONGYANG?

To no one's surprise, 2024 is turning out to be a unique U.S. election year in which speculation about changes in U.S. foreign policy under each of the two candidates if elected far exceeds actual comments or insights provided by either camp. Candidate Trump is, not surprisingly, leaving options open and speaking more in terms of where President Biden is allegedly failing, while the Biden team is defending its current policy and avoiding suggestions that fundamental changes are necessary. Filling the vacuum of substantial policy debate thus far are experts across the political spectrum, and of course the North Korea issue is not exception.

There is much rumination about possible new policy directions regarding North Korea and its growing nuclear weapons program. There is universal consensus North Korea's nuclear capability poses a growing dangerous threat that will challenge the winner of this year's election for the coming four years. The foundational questions being asked boil down to two: "If reelected, does President Biden have any North Korea Plan B for term two?" and "What would a resumed Trump-Kim Jong Un relationship yield?"

There is an otherwise predictable claim of a failure of Washington's current policy toward Pyongyang and an unacceptability of the status quo. Predictable, since this is what foreign policy wonks are paid to do, not necessarily because there exist alternative policies superior to those in place now that would have a better chance of success. There are growing calls for shifting away from the goal of complete and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea to an allegedly [more reasonable arms control approach](#)¹ that would accept the reality that North Korea has nuclear weapons and find ways in which the threat those weapons posed might be mitigated or at least controlled. Others focus on the need for Washington to somehow identify the right incentives that would bring Pyongyang back to the

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/13/opinion/international-world/north-korea-us-nuclear.html>

table, assuming Washington is largely to blame for the stand-off while asserting, despite [evidence to the contrary](#),² that somehow Pyongyang is ready to talk in a way it so far has refused to do under the current Biden Administration.

Missing or marginalized as distant secondary considerations are Pyongyang's agency, what its current diplomatic goals might be, and whether Kim Jong Un will ever envision the need to put all or part of his nuclear program on the table. If considered at all, it is usually accompanied by the claim that [North Korea wants nothing more than dialogue with the United States](#)³, is frustrated

with US policy inaction, and will continue to build its arsenal until it has Washington's attention. It has been hard for such commentators to accept, to borrow from the movie title, that Pyongyang is just not that into us.

All that said, January 20, 2025 will be upon us before we know it, and it is worth examining what Pyongyang might be looking for over the coming four years. The U.S. election results (hopefully) will be final, additional North Korea missile launches and other shows of force will have taken place, and an authoritative statement of some type from Kim Jong Un will have been issued around New Year's Day that will fuel even more discussion about possibilities for dialogue going forward. Examining the past history of North Korea policy shifts tied to the U.S. election cycle can provide insights into how the current situation unfolded over the past years, and how much skepticism, or on the contrary, how much optimism is warranted of any change going forward.

LESSONS OF THE RECENT PAST

Having been the Korea Director on the National Security Council staff during the transition from Obama Term One to Obama Term Two in 2013, I can understand the optimism, even if guarded, that presidential transitions provide new opportunities for change with North Korea. Candidate Obama had promised he would reach out his hand to adversaries who would unclinch their fists, and this openness to dialogue extended to Pyongyang throughout the first term, in spite of being responded to with a Taepo Dong-2 long-range rocket launch in April 2009, North Korea's second nuclear test in May 2009, and Pyongyang's abrogation of the modest but important February 2012 Leap Day Understanding with the United States that sought to lay the groundwork for improving U.S.-DPRK ties while opening a path back to multilateral Six-Party Talks that had closed in late 2008.

These actions did not discourage the administration in the last half of 2012 from exploring how it might use a second term to work with Pyongyang to move diplomacy forward. What the United States sought from North Korea in terms

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² <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-kim-jong-un-south-korea-tensions-ef006cbc4e167ba8b8fb160239f3838f>

³ <https://www.38north.org/2024/01/is-kim-jong-un-preparing-for-war/>

of a phased approach to denuclearization was quite clear, as were the political economic, diplomatic, and security benefits to Pyongyang for moving down the path. How would North Korea greet Obama in term two?

It did not take long to find out. Just after the November 2012 election, North Korea again launched a Taepo Dong-2 long-range rocket in December, conducted its third nuclear test in February 2013, and shortly thereafter declared that it was going to expand its nuclear program even further as it pursued its so-called [“byungjin” or parallel pursuit of both nuclear and economic development](#)⁴. From this point onward, Pyongyang rejected denuclearization talks, ignoring repeated calls from both Washington and Seoul for dialogue, and rejecting Beijing’s efforts to coax Pyongyang back to negotiations on its nuclear program. Despite South Korean President [Moon’s assertion to the contrary](#)⁵, although Kim Jong Un put the “denuclearization” word back into play in 2018, there was little optimism at the time among experts that Kim was prepared to move beyond Pyongyang’s definition of “denuclearization of the whole Korean Peninsula” as beginning first and foremost with the elimination of the threat posed by the United States to North Korea, which in other words removing the U.S. security commitment to the Republic of Korea. Ultimately the Trump administration’s efforts elicited the same response of Pyongyang engaging, probing possibilities for exacting concessions, and walking away when it was clear that nothing more was to be gained through the process.

LESSONS LEARNED: EXPECT THE WORST...

There are two important lessons learned through these experiences. First, North Korea was not bluffing when it [repeatedly stated it did not intend to surrender nuclear weapons](#)⁶ as the cost for either normalized relations with the United States or for economic assistance. We should not assume Kim Jong Un is waiting to engage either of the

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two potential U.S. counterparts in 2025 with a desire for improving relations with the United States while finding relief from his current economic hardships. This is often difficult to understand or accept even for those who follow North Korea for a living, let alone casual observers inclined to say, “How could a good relationship with the United States and a path to economic prosperity not motivate Kim to walk away from his nuclear weapons?” Difficulties in resolving the North Korea nuclear issue do not result from either the United States not knowing what Kim wants or Kim not knowing what the

United States wants, and what we are prepared to offer through the process. Understanding why this is the case is

⁴ <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2013/201303/news31/20130331-24ee.html>

⁵ <https://www.chosun.com/english/opinion-en/2024/05/20/SWCF7WCJDBGY3GCAQMYOAOYH4/>

⁶ <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1451887950-107822991/dprk-foreign-ministry-spokesman-dismisses-u-s-wrong-assertion/>

key to understanding why every package of incentives put before North Korea by the United States has failed to motivate Pyongyang to move forward with sustained denuclearization.

...BUT KEEP TRYING

The second lesson is that the U.S. remains undeterred in its pursuit of a negotiated settlement to the nuclear issue. The Obama team - as with the Trump team and later the Biden team facing the same dire assessment - did not respond by closing the door to diplomacy and negotiations. This is an unfair and under-informed accusation designed to blame the incumbent administration for Pyongyang's recalcitrance. The good news is that assessments on the likelihood of success in any negotiation can help inform diplomatic strategies while not becoming obstacles preventing leaders from leaving the door open to negotiations. On the North Korea nuclear issue, no US leader over the past 30 years has said "This is too difficult, let's quit." In short, Pyongyang has remained committed to its nuclear program in spite of multiple available off-ramps, and consecutive US administrations have kept those off-ramps available while seeking to find a way back to negotiations.

WHAT ABOUT A KIM-TRUMP REDUX?

The Trump years, for as unique as they were in terms of U.S. interaction with North Korea, proved ultimately to follow the same pattern. Increased pressure was made possible by Pyongyang's unprecedented missile launches of 2016-2017, and Kim's pivot to diplomacy on the occasion of the 2018 Winter Olympics spelled the beginning of the end to that pressure. Kim's inflexibility in Hanoi and Pyongyang's disinterest in picking up the pieces throughout the remainder of the Trump term - proved the skepticism about Kim's posture toward denuclearization to have been correct.

SO WHAT OPTIONS REMAIN?

Deterrence: Although limited, a handful of policy options remain. First, a deterrence strategy is required that is flexible and expanding to match the quantitative and qualitative growth of the North Korea nuclear program. Long gone are the days when the North Korea [nuclear threat could be characterized as just a negotiating tool](#)⁷, or just a last-resort weapon of survival that Kim would never dare use. The partially [declassified National Intelligence Estimate](#)⁸ published by the National Intelligence Council in 2023 provides some scenarios through 2030 and beyond in which North Korea might leverage nuclear weapons, to include possible limited use options. Military planners must continue to prepare for such scenarios, while policymakers and diplomats consider strategies to complement deterrence and help shape North Korean behavior to prevent a "sum of all fears" scenario from unfolding. North Korea's recent drumbeat of authoritative threats to South Korea need to be taken seriously.

⁷ <https://thebulletin.org/2010/05/negotiating-with-the-north-doubting-its-enrichment-claims/#post-heading>

⁸ <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Declassified-NIE-North-Korea-Scenarios-For-Leveraging-Nuclear-Weapons-June2023.pdf>

Pressure to slow and impede. Pressure continues to have an important role to play in North Korea strategy. While threats to the traditional sanctions system grow, there is still value in creative and aggressive diplomacy to encourage other countries to join our efforts at curtailing revenue that funds the DPRK's nuclear program, enforcing export controls on materials that could find their way into North Korea's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and conventional weapons, and applying reputational costs for Pyongyang for its unwillingness to engage in denuclearization negotiations. Included here is pressure directly applied on Moscow - and also importantly indirectly on Moscow through Beijing - to halt its growing security and economic ties with Pyongyang. Amid denials from both Moscow and Pyongyang about weapons transfers, and hollow promises that Russia will continue to work within the parameters of current sanctions on North Korea, a constant messaging effort that builds upon what has already been done concerning developments in Russia-North Korea relations will keep the issue on everyone's mind, enabling our diplomats to increasingly expand the diplomatic consensus to pressure Moscow. North Korea's diplomatic strategy is designed to lock in the inevitability of its nuclear status with one country at a time. We must counter such efforts to discourage Pyongyang from believing it will succeed.

There is still value in creative and aggressive diplomacy to encourage other countries to join our efforts at curtailing revenue that funds the DPRK's nuclear program, and applying reputational costs for Pyongyang for its unwillingness to engage in denuclearization negotiations.

Keeping an open door. Finally, the door to negotiations must be left open, but not recklessly so. Pyongyang will continue to message, echoed by Beijing and Moscow, that the current stand-off in dialogue is entirely attributable

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to U.S. hostile policy. Their goal is clear: to get the United States to grant sanctions relief, renounce pressure as a diplomatic tool, and reduce military extended deterrence actions. Over time, the temptation to give consideration to these options and chase after Pyongyang can overwhelm even the most principled policymaker or diplomat. That temptation must be resisted. The limited levers the United States wields that contribute to deterrence and threat reduction - such as military exercises, extended deterrence

demonstrations, pressure and sanctions enforcement, etc. - must not be preemptively sacrificed in the name of creating an environment conducive to dialogue with no indication such talks would succeed in anything but the short-term appearance of tension reduction.

PHASED APPROACH AND ARMS CONTROL, LESS LIKELY TO SUCCEED?

Phased approach / arms control. Advocates of a phased, interim, step-by-step approach - whether those who call for an open declaration of accepting North Korea as a nuclear power and moving on to arms control or not - are well-intentioned but fall short on several fronts. A phased approach is not a new idea: a step-by-step approach was the foundation of the 2005 Joint Statement of the Six Party Talks and its initial two action statements of 2007, as well as of the 2012 Leap Day Understanding. It was also essentially the approach of the Trump Administration as well. At no time has the United States made “preemptive complete denuclearization” a prerequisite for agreeing to talks with North Korea. Our pursuit of complete and verifiable denuclearization has not caused us to miss opportunities, when they existed, for interim progress. Pyongyang has a long record of rejecting, or accepting and subsequently rejecting, phased approaches toward denuclearization. There is no current sign that they would be any more receptive. [An authoritative statement in January 2024 bemoaning “wasted time”⁹](#) in allowing then-ROK President Moon Jae-in to seek to mediate U.S.-DPRK talks likely signals Pyongyang may no longer see a need for, or value in, charm offensives during which negotiations resume and nuclear and missile testing subsides. Why go through the motions, in other words, when there are missiles to be tested, threats to be made, and work-arounds with Russia and other countries to circumvent pressure?

PEACE-ENABLED DENUCLEARIZATION OR DENUCLEARIZATION-ENABLED PEACE?

Some have argued that the situation on the ground has become so tense that it warrants putting peace ahead of denuclearization. It is not so easy, since it is the North’s nuclear program that is far and away the greatest threat to stability since the early 1990s. That is why the principle guiding sequencing of actions in the Six-Party Talks process was that only demonstrated progress in denuclearization would enable progress on the peace and security, economic, and diplomatic fronts. Peace talks would only be meaningful if denuclearization were making clear progress. DPRK-US and DPRK-Japan normalization would be possible as a denuclearizing Pyongyang turned to address the various issues of concern to Washington and Tokyo. Large-scale economic and energy assistance led by South Korea would be made possible by the rapprochement and long-term improvement of the security situation on the Peninsula that denuclearization would enable. Without denuclearization, any actions limiting the U.S.-ROK military posture, providing economic benefits to North Korea, or reducing diplomatic pressure risks empowering and enabling North Korea and its WMD program even further, thus resulting

What would renewed inter-Korean dialogue look like with North Korea as the clear dominant power given its nuclear status and stated policy of seeking the subjugation of South Korea?

⁹ <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1704456345-448822361/press-statement-of-vice-department-director-of-c-c-wpk-kim-yo-jong/>

in reduced security and stability. Saying no to short-term, mostly symbolic feel-good agreements can be difficult, but is crucial to avoid weakening the limited levers and tools that we have.

This is not a mere theoretical or academic discussion: Whether peace on the Peninsula, inter-Korean rapprochement, and normalization of relations with Washington and Tokyo are imaginable without denuclearization is a question that will shape policy for years to come, particularly as Pyongyang’s diplomatic objectives are to eventually have Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington move beyond the nuclear issue and accept the DPRK for what it is. Recent reports speculating of a possible DPRK-Japan summit quickly raised concerns about the benefits Pyongyang would accrue from a breakthrough on the abductee issue that would result in significant rewards from Japan without progress on the nuclear issue. Would restored efforts at peace talks such as those discussed toward the end of the Moon Jae-in administration be worth pursuing as the DPRK flagrantly grows its nuclear and missile capabilities and threatens Seoul of being the target of a potential first use by North Korea? What would renewed inter-Korea dialogue look like with North Korea as the clear dominant power given its nuclear status and stated policy of seeking the subjugation of South Korea?

CONCLUSION

Over the course of the past 30 years, the United States has had multiple opportunities to test North Korea, and Pyongyang has had many chances to consider the potential benefits of denuclearization. During this period, none of the agreements reached – the Agreed Framework (1994), the Joint Statement of the Six Party Talks (2005), the Leap Day Understanding (2012), or the US-DPRK Singapore Joint Statement (2018) – were inherently flawed. They were good agreements negotiated by talented U.S. negotiators achieving as much as possible given the circumstances they faced. These agreements did not fail due to incomplete preparation by the United States, bad faith U.S. responses to denuclearization steps taken by North Korea, an inflexible “all or nothing” approach, or a flawed understanding of DPRK intent. It is North Korea and its sustained, unchanging commitment to a nuclear

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weapons program that eventually doomed each of these agreements, and made future agreements or even negotiations to potentially generate such agreements increasingly less likely over time.

There are no easy answers, but then again, these are not new questions or challenges. I do not think it would be overly generous to say that our current policy toward the Korean Peninsula is the best possible policy given all of the factors described above. The ball remains in Pyongyang’s court: Wishing it were different does not make it so.

The ROK-US Policy Brief is a joint publication between the Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) and The George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS) dedicated to exploring current Korea-related policy matters within regional and global contexts.

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