

Give bombs a chance — for peace

Issue 2020/02 • Feb 2020

by Tongfi Kim

It is almost a year since the United States - North Korea summit meeting in Hanoi ended without any deal on North Korea's nuclear weapons programme. According to a Reuters report a month after the summit, U.S. President Donald Trump made various demands to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, including declaration and inspection of its nuclear programme, and dismantling of nuclear infrastructure and missiles facilities. The North Korean leader remains unlikely to accept such demands, because these measures make the regime vulnerable and, more importantly, weaken Pyongyang's bargaining position in the future. Another part of Trump's demands, however, is a promising basis for a win-win deal: transfer of North Korea's nuclear weapons to the United States in exchange for a partial lifting of economic sanctions.

A rational North Korean leader will almost certainly not agree to give up the entirety of its nuclear arsenal in the current environment, but it is in Chairman Kim's interest to hand over some nuclear warheads to the United States. Transferring a small number of nuclear warheads to the United States does not mean a North Korean surrender of its nuclear arsenal. Since Pyongyang is estimated to possess at least dozens of nuclear warheads, handing over a few of them does not erode its nuclear deterrent. In fact, such a cooperative deal—North Koreans can regard it as arms control or scientific cooperation—will improve strategic stability and can enhance the prestige of the Kim regime. Crucially, North Korea's bargaining position does not weaken as a result of this deal.

Negotiations for North Korea's nuclear disarmament face many difficulties, but an exchange of a few North Korean nuclear warheads and a partial lifting of economic sanctions is a work-around for both North Korean and U.S. concerns. Unlike dismantlement of nuclear or missile facilities, transfer of nuclear warheads does not weaken North Korea's future bargaining position or is susceptible to deception by the regime. In exchange, the United States should offer a partial but significant lifting of economic sanctions because North Korean negotiators have asked for it, no one has to pay for it, and it is a quantitatively adjustable concession according to the number of warheads transferred.

Transferring nuclear weapons means that the United States will have a better understanding of the technical aspects of North Korea's nuclear programme, but the benefit of the deal outweighs the risk to Pyongyang. North Korea can select types of weapons to transfer so that the outsiders will not be able to discern the latest advancement in the North Korean nuclear arsenal. Even if the United States can find out the origins of certain parts or materials, it is not clear how much that will affect the future ability of North Korea to obtain them—that is, if North Korea still needs them

from abroad. North Korea could alternatively offer weapons-grade nuclear material to reduce this risk, but the appeal to the United States will be smaller.

For the United States and its East Asian allies, North Korea's voluntary handover of nuclear weapons means both immediate and long-term improvement of national security. The fewer nuclear weapons the Kim regime has, the safer it is for Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington D.C., provided that the reduction does not increase the chance of a preventive attack against Pyongyang. To avoid decoupling between the United States and its East Asian allies, the focus of the deal should be on nuclear warheads rather than intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capabilities. The Trump administration's excessive focus on the ICBM capabilities has worried East Asians, who will remain under the threat of North Korea's shorter-range nuclear-armed missiles if Washington strikes a deal with Pyongyang on ICBMs. Because the deal still leaves North Korea's nuclear deterrent intact, the effect of the deal on strategic stability should be overwhelmingly positive. In addition to this immediate benefit, the deal would also be a good initial step to a long-term engagement of North Korea by serving as a confidence-building measure. Naturally, the deal does not solve the North Korean nuclear problem by itself, but experts on this issue are well aware of the scarcity of good options to move forward.

There are many reasons for the North Korean regime and the Trump administration to pursue the deal proposed here now rather than later. North Koreans should not miss the opportunity presented by an unconventional U.S. president eager to strike a big deal and a conciliatory South Korean president. U.S. domestic politics are currently a source of uncertainty for North Koreans, and the political capital of President Moon Jae-in, a strong advocate of U.S.-North Korean reconciliation, will only decline in the one-term presidential system of South Korea. For President

Trump, the publicity of receiving North Korean nuclear weapons would be great. Although opponents of the U.S. president may not like the deal, especially before the 2020 election, this would be a meaningful agreement, upon which future U.S. administrations can develop a bipartisan North Korea policy.

Unlike dismantlement of nuclear or missile facilities, transfer of nuclear warheads does not require inspections within North Korea. Inspections are important to avoid cheating by the North Korean regime, but they also present political and military risks to the regime. Most deals to move North Korea's nuclear disarmament forward face this problem of verification, but the transfer of nuclear warheads is easy to verify. Thus, the transfer is a work-around for both parties' concerns.

In exchange for the transfer of nuclear warheads, the United States should offer a partial but significant lifting of economic sanctions imposed on North Korea. North Korean negotiators have asked for it, no one has to pay for it, and it is a quantitatively adjustable concession according to the number of warheads transferred. Political or military concessions such as a U.S. - North Korea peace treaty would be useful in the long term, but many oppose a political settlement because of complex strategic ramifications, for example, on the U.S. - South Korea alliance. More importantly, despite the difficulty of developing politico-strategic concessions to North Korea, they are still unlikely to be a credible security guarantee for the North Korean regime.

Thus, an exchange of a few North Korean nuclear warheads and a partial lifting of economic sanctions is a promising and readily actionable plan. Both the U.S. and North Korean governments should consider the deal before the current negotiation-friendly environment disappears.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr Tongfi Kim is a KF-VUB Korea Chair Senior Researcher at the Institute for European Studies at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) . He is also Assistant Professor and Programme Director of International Affairs at Vesalius College.

tongfi.kim@vub.be

The present publication has been conducted by IES-VUB in full independence.

All KF-VUB Korea Chair publications can be found on www.korea-chair.eu.

The KF-VUB Korea Chair (www.korea-chair.eu) at the Institute for European Studies (www.ies.be) is the primary contact point in Europe on policy issues related to the Korean Peninsula and plays a strategic role in furthering Europe-Korea relations.

As a joint initiative between the Korea Foundation and Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), the Chair acts as an independent platform in Brussels and across Europe to advance academically rigorous and informed discussions on policy questions that are of relevance to Europe and the Republic of Korea. It conducts policy research and discussions on a wide range of areas, with special focus on the security of the Korean Peninsula, Europe-Korea relations and South Korea's foreign policy.

The Chair holder is Dr. Ramon Pacheco Pardo who is also Reader in International Relations at King's College London.

The KF-VUB Chair
at the Institute for European Studies
is a joint initiative between the
Korea Foundation (KF) and
Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)
www.korea-chair.eu

Institute for European Studies
Pleinlaan 5
B-1050 Brussels
T: +32 2 614 80 01
E: info@ies.be
www.ies.be



INSTITUTE FOR
EUROPEAN
STUDIES



KOREA CHAIR