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An arms control deal with North Korea? The good, the bad, the realistic

By [Ramon Pacheco Pardo](#) | 9 June 2021

Key Issues

- An arms control deal might be the only realistic option to cap and roll back North Korea's nuclear programme, since Pyongyang can now be considered a de facto nuclear power.
- Advantages of an arms control deal include creating the conditions for controlling North Korea's nuclear programme, opening the doors for inter-Korean reconciliation, and helping to put the focus on Pyongyang's human rights abuses.
- Potential disadvantages of an arms control deal include rewarding North Korea for its 'bad behaviour', sending the wrong message to other would-be proliferators, and leading South Korea and Japan to consider going nuclear.

North Korea is a nuclear power, and it is unlikely to give up its nuclear weapons any time soon – if ever. This should be the starting point of the US's, South Korea's, and the international community's approach towards the North Korean nuclear issue. Otherwise, Pyongyang's nuclear programme will continue to be the problem that never goes away. This has been the case since at least the first North Korean nuclear crisis of 1993–94, and especially since Pyongyang conducted its first-ever nuclear test in 2006 – already 15 years ago.

There has been a growing public debate about the need to settle for an arms control deal with North Korea, at least in the short and medium terms. For example, in the years before taking office US Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Tony Blinken argued that pursuing complete denuclearisation, at least in

the short term, was unrealistic. Furthermore, in recent months a growing number of analysts in Washington have joined their many South Korean counterparts who for years have been arguing that the US should settle for an arms control deal.

If settling for an arms control deal with North Korea is now a realistic proposition, and assuming that the Kim Jong-un regime would agree to it – for some a big leap of faith – the question is what are the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach. The ultimate goal for South Korea and the US remains North Korea's full denuclearisation, so the benefits of the change in paradigm for which many advocate should outweigh the drawbacks. Otherwise, pursuing an arms control deal would both become politically untenable and produce an outcome detrimental to both Seoul and Washington.

The good

Arguably, the biggest advantage of an arms control deal with North Korea is that it would cap and create the conditions to roll back Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programmes. Effectively, there has been no agreement with North Korea to try to stop the development of its programmes since the Six-Party Talks implementation deals of 2007. Neither the Barack Obama administration's Leap Day agreement of 2012 nor Donald Trump's Singapore Joint Statement of 2018 were implemented. In other words, North Korea has had a free hand to develop its nuclear and missile programmes for over a decade. And it has made good use of it, testing ever more sophisticated nuclear devices with growing yields as well as missiles with ever larger ranges.

An arms control agreement with robust monitoring mechanisms would prevent the Kim Jong-un regime from continuing to improve and expand the number of its nuclear warheads and missiles. As of 2021, some estimates indicate that North Korea has enough fissile materials for up to 60 bombs according to the US Army report North Korean Tactics from 2020. Pyongyang is also in possession of thousands of ballistic missiles, including dozens of ICBMs that could reach the US mainland. Unchecked, North Korea is only going to continue to increase its arsenal regardless of sanctions that have failed to prevent Pyongyang from developing its nuclear weapons and missile programmes.

In addition, an arms control deal with North Korea would open the door to pursuing other goals as important as denuclearisation but that often are treated as secondary. To begin with, focusing on arms control would give South Korea the political space to pursue inter-Korean reconciliation. This is a priority of the Moon Jae-in government, which has made clear that it will continue to press ahead with its policy of engagement during its last year in office. Arguably more important, a majority of South Koreans continue to support reconciliation with North Korea.

Yet, the Trump administration effectively curtailed inter-Korean reconciliation efforts in the aftermath of the Singapore Summit and the Panmunjom Declaration and Pyongyang Joint Declaration that

the two Koreas signed in 2018. Washington insisted that inter-Korean projects could only proceed in tandem with US–North Korea denuclearisation efforts. Since the latter did not make any progress, nor did inter-Korean reconciliation. But negotiation and application of an arms control deal would ideally include provisions to advance economic and people-to-people exchanges between the two Koreas. This way, arms control and inter-Korean reconciliation would reinforce each other. Actually, this has been the working premise of the Moon government, which believes that any hope of North Korean denuclearisation has to build on better relations between Pyongyang and the outside world – including with Seoul.

An arms control agreement with Pyongyang would also hopefully serve to improve the lives of ordinary North Koreans. The Joe Biden administration has indicated that addressing the human rights conditions of North Koreans will be part of its policy towards Pyongyang. This is in sharp contrast with the Trump administration, which was unconcerned with human rights in general. An arms control deal with North Korea could and should be part of a broader process of which human rights discussions are also part – above all, because morally improving the plight of North Koreans should be as much of a priority as the country's nuclear weapons.

The Kim regime is obviously the main culprit behind the dire living conditions that ordinary North Koreans face compared to people in neighbouring countries. But sanctions have only served to exacerbate the problems that ordinary North Koreans face, without changing the calculus of the Kim regime. When addressing human rights, the economic rights of North Koreans should also be taken into consideration. An arms control deal with North Korea would inevitably have to include sanctions exemptions, if not relief. The Kim regime would certainly benefit, but so would the North Korean population.

If history serves as a guide, agreements with North Korea which include arms control provisions actually slow down progress of its nuclear and missile programmes. The Bill Clinton administration's Agreed Framework shut down plutonium nuclear facilities until 2002. North Korea also complied

with a moratorium on missile tests between 1999 and 2006. And Pyongyang has complied with a self-declared moratorium on nuclear and ICMB tests dating back to 2018, even if Kim Jong-un has indicated that his country is no longer bound by it. Looking at the case of Iran – a country often compared with North Korea in relation to its nuclear weapons programme – Tehran complied with the JCPOA agreement it signed with the Obama administration. So it is likely that North Korea would comply with an arms control deal, especially if robust monitoring measures are included.

The bad

Certainly, an arms control deal is not without its risks. Critics would argue that it would reward Pyongyang for its ‘bad behaviour’. In other words, offering North Korea an agreement after years of disregarding UN Security Council resolutions demanding it stop development of its nuclear and missile programmes would be counterproductive. It would send the message to North Korea that its

Herein lies an important risk for those considering to settle for an arms control deal.

In addition, an arms control deal would run the risk of sending the wrong message to other would-be proliferators. Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction, and a US-led invasion ended his regime. Muammar Gaddafi agreed to give up Libya’s weapons of mass destruction programme, only to see the US and several European countries provide support to rebel fighters that eventually toppled his regime. In sharp contrast, Kim Jong-un remains in power. North Korea has repeatedly argued that its nuclear weapons programme is insurance against a potential invasion. Regardless of whether this is true, it should be clear that many other would-be nuclear powers may be tempted to think such programmes are the best way to prevent an invasion.

The de facto recognition of North Korea as a nuclear power through an arms control deal would also run the risk of leading South Korea and/or Japan to



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(illegal) actions effectively have no consequences. Arguably, this has been the case with India, Pakistan, and even Israel – three nuclear powers which are now accepted as such by most of the international community, and which suffer no big consequences from their possession of nuclear arsenals.

Even if Washington is extremely unlikely to ever recognise North Korea as a nuclear power de jure, an arms control deal would de facto imply recognition. Under this scenario, the Kim Jong-un regime could be tempted to continue to engage in other activities such as cyber-attacks without fear of retribution from the US or the international community at large.

conclude that they should develop nuclear weapons programmes of their own. Arguably, this scenario is less likely than sometimes is implied. Seoul and Tokyo would be going against international law if they decided to develop their own nuclear weapons programmes, remain under the US nuclear umbrella, and would have to overcome domestic opposition to go nuclear – particularly in the case of Japan, where a large majority of public opinion is against it. But a nuclear North Korea coupled with doubts about Washington’s commitment to their protection could tilt the balance in favour of those in South Korea and/or Japan who want an independent nuclear arsenal.

It should be added that a powerful argument by those opposed to an arms control deal with North Korea is that Pyongyang does not keep its word. They point out that Kim Jong-il did not adhere to the spirit of the Agreed Framework, and arguably not to the law either. They also draw attention to North Korea's withdrawal from the Six-Party Talks agreement. And they can point out that Kim Jong-un breached the Leap Day agreement only a few weeks after it was reached. Therefore, there would no reason to think that Pyongyang would behave any differently were it to agree to an arms control deal. And no amount of monitoring, however intrusive it might be, could fully guarantee that North Korea would not breach such an agreement.

The only realistic option

Ultimately, however, the benefits and drawbacks of an arms control deal might be secondary to a simple truth: As of 2021, it seems to be the only realistic option to address North Korea's nuclear weapons programme. Denuclearisation agreements have not served to curtail Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programmes. Sanctions have failed, even if their proponents will insist that it would be necessary to impose even more. The reality is that North Korea will remain a nuclear power for the foreseeable future, barring a complete change in policy from the Kim Jong-un regime.

Under this scenario, it would make sense for the Biden administration to try to maximise the benefits of an arms control deal. Given its commitment to 'work with partners', ideally this would include consultations with the Moon government to try to find common ground and agree on the incentives that the US, South Korea, and others could offer Pyongyang in exchange for a cap and rollback of its nuclear weapons and missile programmes. At the end of the day, South Korea would bear the biggest economic brunt in any process designed to bring North Korea in from the cold and try to reverse its nuclear programme. Therefore, it does not make sense to exclude it from discussions about an arms control deal.

Were North Korea to agree to such an agreement, it would not be necessary for South Korea and the US to move away from denuclearisation as their ultimate goal. But if denuclearisation is a possibility at all at this stage, it will only happen after inter-Korean relations and US–North Korea relations have undergone a fundamental transformation. An arms control agreement would be a step in that direction; it should come together with other measures to reduce tensions with North Korea, and would therefore not be an end by itself. It would be 'only' one of the moving parts in a much bigger picture.



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