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Applying the Lessons of South African Nuclear Disarmament to North Korea

Liang Tuang Nah

Structured Abstract

Article Type: Viewpoint

Purpose—This article explores the possibility that South African nuclear disarmament might serve as a model or template for North Korean military denuclearization.

Design/methodology/approach—Just as favorable national security, economic and norms based conditions brought about South African nuclear disarmament, similar conditions favorable to Pyongyang can also bring about denuclearization in the DPRK.

Findings—Examining the failures of the 1994 Agreed Framework and 2007–2008 nuclear disarmament compromises to effect the DPRK's denuclearization, we can see that they either failed to satisfy North Korea's security and economic needs or did nothing to assure the DPRK's national security. The failure to holistically address Pyongyang's security, economics and norms based concerns results in continued nuclear arms intransigence.

Practical implications—This article helps policymakers understand that one-sided denuclearization strategies do not work. It is only by effectively addressing Pyongyang's security fears, economic concerns and norms-based pressures that nuclear rollback can be accomplished.

Originality/value—There appears to be no other articles comparing South African nuclear disarmament with the North Korean case. Also, multi-dimensional

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denuclearization analysis involving security, economics and norms perspectives is lacking.

Key Words: North Korea, nuclear disarmament, nuclear proliferation, nuclear rollback, South Africa

Introduction

Satellite imagery has revealed steam coming from the renovated North Korean nuclear reactor at Yongbyon,¹ implying that Pyongyang has renewed efforts to accumulate plutonium, which can be processed from the reactor's waste products, in order to expand its stockpile of nuclear warheads. If this is true, it represents a fresh phase of nuclear escalation from North Korea, made all the more serious since this action nullifies previous disarmament progress made in 2008 when Pyongyang demolished a cooling tower at the Yongbyon reactor,² partially disabling its nuclear weapons program.

Worryingly, the reactor needs to run for at least a year before spent fuel rods can be removed for plutonium harvesting, and the predicted date when the DPRK can begin reaping fresh weapons grade plutonium is fast approaching. Additionally, North Korea has a uranium enrichment program, which was first detected in 2002, and could also produce uranium-based nuclear arms. Despite the lack of concrete intelligence regarding the efficacy of Pyongyang's uranium enrichment for weapons building, it would be fair to assume that if left to its own devices, the DPRK's pool of nuclear explosives is set to grow.

However, Pyongyang's behavior does not preclude an improvement in disarmament prospects leading to nuclear rollback. Turning to the South African nuclear disarmament model, hope for North Korean nuclear disarmament can be salvaged by the fact that Pretoria decommissioned its entire nuclear munitions manufacturing capability along with all operational atomic bombs. Hence, if the latter can relinquish its nuclear deterrent, so can the former.

Learning from South Africa's Nuclear Disarmament

Revisiting the decommissioning of the South African nuclear weapons program from 1990 to 1991,³ permits the parsing of ideas for North Korean denuclearization despite the disparate nature of both states. South Africa's status as the only country to indigenously build and dismantle its nuclear arsenal should provide pointers as to how North Korea can be encouraged to relinquish nuclear arms.

Concerning factors driving President F.W. de Klerk to order the dismantlement of Pretoria's nuclear weapons program in 1989, it can be substantiated that: (1) weakening Soviet support for Angola and Mozambique lessened the security threat that these two adversarial states posed against South Africa's northern borders⁴; (2) years

of sanctions due to the imposition of apartheid had battered the South African economy, leading to a desperate need for externally driven economic rehabilitation⁵ (which would be jeopardized by pariah status from nuclear arms possession) and; (3) De Klerk strongly believed in the morality of nuclear disarmament.⁶

As such, South African nuclear disarmament was brought about by a pacification of serious national security threats, the realization that sanctions induced economic autarky was intolerable, and the positive effect of international non-proliferation norms. Correspondingly, if the North Korean security paradigm improves, benefits from economic interdependence become tangible and prestige or legitimacy from rogue status cessation can be gained, Pyongyang might agree to denuclearize.

North Korean Economic, Norms-Based and National Security Realities

North Korea has a moribund economy. Despite the autarky promoting state ideology of *Juche*, North Korea seems incapable of surviving without foreign assistance. For instance, its economy suffered a dip as soon as socialist support was withdrawn in 1991⁷ and shrunk by almost half from 1990 to 1999.⁸ Additionally, the North Korean economy only grew once from 2009 to 2011 with gross domestic product only increasing by 0.8 percent in 2011.⁹ Moreover, the DPRK has been constantly unable to feed its population in contemporary times with crop failure in 2014 brought about by drought,¹⁰ and serious food shortages from 1995 onward due to natural disasters and economic mismanagement, thereby degrading labor productivity and societal sustainability. Notwithstanding any aid or foreign investment from China and South Korea, it is obvious that North Korea needs extensive upgrades to its industrial and agricultural infrastructure, access to foreign funds or assistance to achieve this, ready overseas markets for its products, and sustained large scale food aid. However, all of this is unobtainable as long as it remains an international pariah because of nuclear arms proliferation.

Concerning nuclear non-proliferation norms, these are too strong for the Kim regime to ignore and even serve to gain state legitimacy and prestige. Specifically, despite the military balance of power favoring the U.S.-South Korean alliance over North Korea, President Kim Il-sung, in his last days in 1994 stated as a dying wish that the Korean peninsula be nuclear free.¹¹ As dying men are apt to be concerned with their moral rather than material legacies, it can be deduced that norms driven nuclear rollback was what influenced Kim. Nonetheless, his venerated status within North Korea still sustains his request as former premier Pak Pong-ju reiterated Kim's wish in a 2005 speech¹² and Kim's successor, Kim Jong-il told Russian media in 2011:

The denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is a testament of the great President Kim Il-sung, and it is the invariable position of the government of our Republic. [...] Resuming the Six-Party Talks without preconditions [...] and thereby implementing the denuclearization of the entire Korean peninsula, this is

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the unchangeable and high-principled position of ours¹³ [ITAR-TASS, 19 October 2011].

Despite belligerent rhetoric, it is evident that based on essential principles, Korean nuclear disarmament is still a desired norm and underpins the disarmament process where Pyongyang would welcome the prestige and legitimacy of a successful nuclear disarmament deal.

Turning to national security, it is difficult for Pyongyang to trust the U.S. since the latter's actions can be apprehensively interpreted by the former. Taking history as a guide, the U.S. has dropped dummy atomic ordnance on Pyongyang in 1951,¹⁴ stationed nuclear weapons in South Korea from 1958 to 1991, enunciated a willingness to deploy aforesaid weapons against North Korea during the Cold War¹⁵ and even developed contingency plans for employing nuclear weapons against it in the 2002 Nuclear Posture Review.¹⁶ Additionally, Pyongyang receives annual reminders of the advanced capabilities of the U.S.–South Korean alliance through the latter's joint military exercises which of late featured powerful offensive weapons like the B-2 stealth bomber¹⁷ and the B-52 strategic bomber.¹⁸ Hence, with China as its sole ally, which has recently been diplomatically distancing itself from the DPRK since President Xi of China has had two summit meetings with the South Korean president whilst never having met Kim Jong-un,¹⁹ and without the financial resources for military modernization, Pyongyang has selected nuclear arms as a strategic equalizer.

Pyongyang's Key Concerns vis-à-vis Nuclear Disarmament

Having seen that favorable security, economic and norms-based conditions supported South African disarmament, the 1994 Agreed Framework and disarmament compromises reached during the fifth round of the Six-Party Talks in 2007 will be evaluated to ascertain their effectiveness in meeting North Korean security, economic and norms based concerns.

Regarding the 1994 Agreed Framework, the agreement stipulated that: (1) efficient electricity generating but proliferation resistant light water reactors (LWR) would be built for North Korea; (2) 500,000 tons of annual fuel aid would be provided; (3) the U.S. and North Korea would reduce existing barriers to economic ties, open diplomatic offices in each other's capitals and work towards normalization of relations; and (4) the U.S. would provide formal assurances against the threat and use of nuclear weapons. In return, North Korea would freeze its nuclear program, permit international monitoring, allow proliferation-prone materials to be removed from North Korea and dismantle its existing nuclear facilities by the completion date of the LWRs.²⁰

Essentially, the agreement theoretically meets Pyongyang's future and present economic needs via electricity provided by the LWRs and fuel aid which can sustain North Korean export industries while the reduction of barriers to economic ties will

promote North Korean exports and attract foreign capital. As for national security, the assurances against U.S. nuclear weapons and the normalization of U.S.–North Korean relations point towards respect for North Korean statehood and help lessen Pyongyang's self-preservative anxiety. Lastly, the signing of a *de facto* denuclearization treaty with the world's sole superpower soon after Kim Il-sung enunciated his denuclearization hopes, hints at the prestige gained from U.S. recognition and power of non-proliferation norms on the Kim regime.

However, history tells us that the Agreed Framework did not meet Pyongyang's needs as it sought a way out with a Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) program that was discovered in 2002 and led to the agreement's repudiation soon after.²¹ Upon closer examination, the framework's implementation was flawed since: (1) the construction of the LWRs was clearly behind schedule and could not be completed by the agreed upon deadline of 2003²²; (2) the U.S. did not formally assure Pyongyang against nuclear weapons use; and (3) the U.S. did not implement full normalization of political and economic relations as there was no movement toward a peace treaty, no exchange of liaison offices and North Korea was still listed as a terrorism sponsor which subjected it to U.S. trade sanctions.²³ Hence, despite mass media demonization of Pyongyang, motivational analysis would argue that it resorted to a HEU program because neither economic pressures (which would have been ameliorated with the LWRs and normalized U.S.–North Korean economic relations) nor national security concerns (which could have been assuaged with normalized U.S.–North Korean political relations) were addressed even as North Korea adhered to its normative obligations and suspended its plutonium-based nuclear program (the HEU program was not covered under the 1994 Agreed Framework).

When the disarmament compromises from the Six-Party Talks in 2007 are examined, it is seen that the U.S. made the first move with the release and transfer on June 25, 2007, of previously frozen North Korea monies totaling about 25 million USD.²⁴ In return, Kim Jong-il shutdown the Yongbyon reactor after receiving 6,200 tons of South Korean fuel aid²⁵ and thereafter, a 7,500-ton shipment of fuel was sent from South Korea after the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed the shutdown on July 16.²⁶ Encouragingly, reciprocal concessions carried on into 2008 with Pyongyang surrendering papers concerning its nuclear program to the U.S. State Department on May 10, 2008,²⁷ the submission of a declaration about DPRK nuclear capabilities to the chairman of the Six-Party Talks on June 26, and the destruction of a cooling tower at the Yongbyon nuclear reactor.²⁸ In response, the U.S. removed North Korea from the former's State Sponsors of Terrorism list on October 11.²⁹

Yet, despite progress made, Pyongyang inexplicably decided to launch a satellite-bearing rocket on April 5, 2009.³⁰ Suspecting that it was a disguised test of an Inter-continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), the UNSC passed a statement which condemned the launch and demanded that Pyongyang cease further testing.³¹ This restarted a vicious cycle where Pyongyang withdrew from the Six-Party Talks, disavowed obligations from previous agreements, expelled IAEA inspectors and announced the resumption of her nuclear weapons program,³² which was confirmed

when the DPRK's second nuclear test was conducted on May 25, 2009.³³ Even as some have proposed that Kim lost his grasp on rationality with his 2009 rocket launch, informed analysis would argue that the change in North Korean behavior can be explained by domestic politics, as the event that supposedly precipitated the rocket launch was Kim Jong-il's severe stroke in 2008. As a dictator at the apex of the North Korean power structure, his incapacitation caused a secession planning panic because Kim's successor, Kim Jong-un, was inexperienced and lacked the leadership credentials to assume the mantle of apex leader. Hence, it is argued that the rocket and nuclear test were conducted to rally national pride around Pyongyang through demonstrations of technological achievement, thereby providing a stable leadership platform for Jong-un.³⁴

Analyzing the above, Pyongyang's economic and even norms-associated prestige needs were met but security pressures on North Korea remained. With regard to its economic needs, the release of the frozen state funds would have been welcomed as foreign currency reserves are needed for economically vital imports. Additionally, the fuel aid could provide power to export industries while declassifying North Korea as a terrorism sponsor improves its reputation and makes it easier to obtain loans from international creditors. Thus, the benefits helped to rehabilitate the North Korean economy via facilitating export production and trade. With reference to prestige gains from conforming to non-proliferation norms, the successful conclusion of a disarmament agreement via the Six-Party Talks where the sole global superpower, the U.S., agreed to remove North Korea from the former's list of terrorism sponsors, constituted a tangible recognition of North Korean legitimacy. The fact that it was able to win this diplomatic victory, despite being labeled as a member of the "Axis of Evil" in 2002, diminished North Korea's pariah status.

But while 2007–2008 represents the period with the most nuclear disarmament progress, it can be posited that more could have been accomplished if Pyongyang's national security worries were addressed. Putting aside the 2009 rocket launch and nuclear test as panicked manifestations of insecure domestic politics, it is obvious that nothing in the agreement from the 2007 Six-Party Talks dealt with conflict de-escalation on the Korean peninsula. Instead, the opposite happened when the U.S. and South Korea conducted extensive military exercises from March 25 to March 31, 2007 (after the Six-Party Talks agreement on February 13, 2007), in South Korea codenamed "Foal Eagle" which included the amphibious landing of over 3,000 U.S. and 1,400 South Korean marines.³⁵ Subsequently, even as major North Korean and U.S. concessions were exchanged in 2008, another extensive U.S.–South Korean "Foal Eagle" military exercise took place in the same year involving a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier strike group,³⁶ while in 2009 before Pyongyang's rocket launch, a third "Foal Eagle" U.S.–South Korean exercise was held involving approximately 12,800 American and 200,000 South Korean troops.³⁷

Without the economic wherewithal to bridge any technological deficiencies that the North Korean military has and cognizant of the possible reluctance of Beijing to back Pyongyang in a renewal of Korean War hostilities, since this would jeopardize Chinese economic development, Pyongyang would view any military exercises in

South Korea as aggressive and threatening. As long as North Korea's security is not guaranteed by a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War or other concrete security assurance provided by the U.S., it would arguably be foolish of Pyongyang to relinquish nuclear arms. Notwithstanding the disarmament concessions that Pyongyang acquiesced to as a result of economic interdependence and norms-based benefits, serious steps in implementing verifiable and irreversible disarmament would be unrealistic.

Taking the 1994 Agreed Framework and 2007 Six-Party Talks compromises in totality, it can be summarized that both agreements only provided temporary fixes to Pyongyang's economic interdependence needs and norms-based prestige desires via fuel aid, delisting as a terrorism sponsor, the prestige of signing a quasi-treaty with and being recognized as a negotiation partner by the U.S. Ultimately, North Korean security pressures were sidelined.

Conclusion: Whither the Prospects for North Korean Disarmament?

It would be unrealistic to credit international nuclear non-proliferation norms as the principle reason for why South Africa gave up nuclear weapons. While President de Klerk supported nuclear disarmament norms, the pressure to give up Pretoria's nuclear arms would have been greatly weakened if international norms driven sanctions to coerce disarmament did not threaten to impede South African economic overhauling via interdependent globalization. Also, the effective elimination of serious invasion risks to South Africa's northern frontier due to waning Soviet backing for Angola and Mozambique, removed the *raison d'être* for Pretoria's atomic warheads. It would be hard to envision South African denuclearization if this did not hold true.

Similarly, even as the strength of global denuclearization norms is too great for Pyongyang and it welcomes the prestige and legitimacy from a disarmament agreement, it should be remembered that norms are intertwined with interdependent economics. Regarding the need for economic improvement via globalized interdependence, this is related to disarmament norms in that economic assistance of the quantum North Korea needs will only be granted for disarmament actions since the developed world will refuse to deal with a nuclear proliferating rogue state. However, even though Pyongyang is cognizant of norms-based disarmament pressures and realizes that nuclear weapons impede economic rehabilitation, the fact remains that there has been no concrete offer by the U.S. to assure North Korea against any threat or use of force, nuclear or otherwise. Consequently, in the face of annual U.S.–South Korean military exercises which emphasize their power projection capabilities while reminding Pyongyang of North Korean military backwardness, it is difficult to convince the Kim regime to relinquish its psychologically important nuclear deterrence. Indeed, the U.S.–ROK alliance still remains a prime threat to North Korea as U.S. President Barak Obama has framed the DPRK as an adversary by stating that the

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latter poses a threat not just to the region but to the U.S. as well.³⁸ Furthermore, Obama also enunciated that North Korea is “a weak pariah state that would rather starve its people rather than feed their hopes and dreams.”³⁹ Bearing in mind that Washington has supported authoritarian regimes guilty of human rights abuses in the past, when it suited the former’s political interests, such derisive comments against Pyongyang indicate animosity that cannot be ignored. Likewise, South Korea does not seem eager to make peace with the DPRK since Seoul rejected Pyongyang’s July 1, 2014, proposal to halt all hostile military activities, including U.S.-ROK military exercises by declaring that, “North Korea’s proposal is nonsensical and lacks sincerity.... North Korea must show sincerity in resolving the nuclear issue, which poses a fundamental threat to peace on the Korean peninsula.”⁴⁰

With reference to the likely restarting of the Yongbyon nuclear reactor, it can be reasoned that this action is significantly motivated by national security anxiety. Notwithstanding previous disarmament progress utilizing economic interdependence and norms-based prestige inducements, the complete and verifiable nuclear disarmament of North Korea can only be realized once Pyongyang’s security worries are conclusively assuaged as part of a concrete and holistic disarmament benefits package. After all, if popular opinion accepts South Africa as the poster child of nuclear disarmament, it should be acknowledged that just as South African security, economic and norms requirements were adequately met, so too should similar North Korean needs be satisfied in order to effect nuclear rollback.

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