

The North East Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Proposal: new windows of opportunity for regional denuclearization

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A new window of opportunity has opened up for North East Asia to follow the example of many other regions, Latin America, South Pacific, Southeast Asia, Africa, Central Asia, and Mongolia, in establishing a regional nuclear weapon free zone (NEANWFZ), rigorously verified under international and regional safeguards, and securing binding negative security guarantees against nuclear attack or threat of attack from the five NPT-recognised nuclear weapon states, the US, China, Russia, France and UK.

The historic April 2018 Panmunjom Summit and Declaration of April 2018 between North Korea’s Kim Jong-un and South Korea’s president Moon Jae-in, together with the initial positive June 2018 Trump-Kim Singapore Summit, opened the path towards potential negotiation of a final peace settlement of the Korean War and to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Both North Korea and the United States in their own ways have already taken some positive initial unilateral steps in the form of North Korea suspension of nuclear and long-range missile tests, and US/ROK temporary suspension of large-scale military exercises close to the North Korean border. While the February 2019 second Trump-Kim Hanoi Summit foundered over the issue of continued full or partial application of current UN sanctions on North Korea, both President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un have recently spoken of the possibility of holding a third Summit, hopefully with more preparation and prior agreement than was evident at the Hanoi Summit.

The early 2017 exchange of nuclear threats between the US and North Korean leaders most certainly concentrated the minds of both the peoples and leaders of the region, and the whole global community. This was similar to the way that the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis concentrated the minds of Latin American leaders and the world community, and led directly to the 1967 establishment of the Latin American Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (Tlatelolco) Treaty. This treaty is now universally ratified within Latin America and guaranteed by all five of the NPT-recognized nuclear powers. It provides an important barrier against nuclear proliferation by regional parties. As in the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Trump-Kim 2017 exchange of nuclear threats once more raised the spectre of an unprecedented catastrophe, involving millions of deaths in both North and South Korea and wider environmental, economic and climatic effects that would have affected crop production and caused billions of deaths from famine.

North East Asia stands at a critical juncture, both in the short and longer term. The much-welcomed thaw in relations between North and South on the Peninsula, and new willingness of the US and North Korea to enter into direct negotiations, may potentially lead to a final Korean War peace settlement and very necessary agreement on either freezing or eliminating North Korea nuclear capabilities in return for economic assistance. However, such bilateral diplomatic agreements may prove as evanescent as previous moments of agreement, including the brief lived 1992 Korean Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the 1994 Agreed Framework Between the US and the DPRK, and the 2007-8 Six Party Talks.

What is urgently required now is agreement on a permanent regional security council, involving the two Koreas, Japan, China, Russia and the US, with the power and mandate to negotiate a legally-binding and internationally verified region-wide nuclear weapon free zone treaty encompassing not only the two Koreas but also Japan (and potentially some other neighbouring areas, including Mongolia).

Failure to include the wider region will inevitably lead to concerns from both Koreas about future Japanese nuclear intentions, given Japan's stockpiling of plutonium, and technical capacity to acquire nuclear weapons and delivery systems at very short notice, especially in the context of some potential future Japanese nationalist-militarist government.

As in the case of the Tlatelolco Treaty, a NEANWFZ treaty could have a flexible mode of entry so that North Korea could be given time to assess the security and economic benefits of acceding to it, with a defined period by which North Korea would need to decide whether or not to join. Neither Japan nor South Korea currently possess nuclear weapons, and their reliance on extended US nuclear deterrence to putatively deter North Korean nuclear attack would become unnecessary once North Korea denuclearized under the treaty as internationally verified. In the event of subsequent North Korean reneging on its denuclearization obligations, the treaty would, of course, be rendered null and void, and Japan and South Korea could return to the status quo ante of either extended conventional deterrence as offered by allies, or extended nuclear deterrence.

In the new context, what steps or initiatives would be important in seeking regional and global support for a NEANWFZ?

As in other regions where NWFZs have been successfully established, it is crucial to have at least one or more national leaders taking pivotal advocacy roles. In the case of North East Asia, there is now the example of President Moon Jae-in, who has already been relatively successful in achieving breakthroughs in inter-Korean relations, encouraging dialogue between North Korea and the US, and cooperation in confidence-building measures aimed at denuclearization. It will be vitally important for civil society to persuade political leaders within and beyond the region to develop a partnership with

President Moon Jae-in in exploring and evaluating the NEANWFZ solution, and to potentially taking the first steps to make a NEANWFZ a reality.

Such first steps might consist of establishing a working group on the NEANWFZ concept through the current trilateral US-DPRK-ROK negotiating framework, or through a similar format to the Six Party Talks; and then - possibly under the auspice of more formal regional security arrangements as yet to be established - a declaration of support from the relevant leaders to enter into negotiations on a treaty. Such a declaration would be followed by formal negotiations under either agreed regional security arrangements or structures, or through a specially convened series of conferences.

As a cooperative initiative between the UN, concerned civil society groups, and regional governments, one concurrent or preparatory step towards NEANWFZ negotiations, could be the convening of a regional conference on the humanitarian impacts of a nuclear war in the North East Asian region. This would follow the successful example of the three international conferences on humanitarian impacts of nuclear war that culminated in the Nuclear Ban Treaty. Such a conference could commission similar research and analysis of policy implications to that conducted on South Asia and presented at the 2014 Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons. Such a conference could potentially be hosted by the UN Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in the Asia Pacific Region, which, following Japanese Government financial support, played a key role in fostering the the negotiations for the Central Asia NWFZ.

Alternatively, given President Moon Jae-in's March 2019 diplomatic visit to three ASEAN countries (Malaysia, Brunei and Cambodia) and expressed wish to engage more closely with Southeast Asia and ASEAN, including agreement to hold an ASEAN-South Korea Special Summit later this year, consideration could be given to a joint conference with ASEAN on the humanitarian impacts of a nuclear war in the wider East Asia region. Such a conference could also potentially involve the adjoining NWFZ member states of the South Pacific Nuclear Weapon Free (Rarotonga) Treaty, the Central Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone member states, and Mongolia.

A further step, perhaps in conjunction with civil society disarmament campaigns in support of ratifications of the UN Nuclear Weapon Prohibition Treaty, would be for civil society groups in the Asia Pacific region to develop a coordinated campaign of lobbying of government representatives, political parties and parliamentarians, to advocate for a NEANWFZ, and to address counter arguments on the assumed security benefits of extended deterrence.

At a track-two level, there could be encouragement of both government experts and associated advisory panels (such as Japan's Eminent Persons Group) to prepare working papers on the feasibility and desirability of establishing a NEANWFZ for circulation at the 2020 NPT Review Conference, with the aim of including the possibility of NEANWFZ zone negotiation in the next NPT Action Plan.

NEANWFZ advocacy in the mainstream media is an equally important step that will be needed both to explain the safeguards and benefits of such a zone and to counter the predictable opposition from adherents to traditional Cold War or nuclearist mindsets. Some of the recent RECNA and Nautilus discussion papers could be further republished in op-ed form to contribute to public debate on the NEANWFZ concept.

In the wider Asia-Pacific political environment, there are some potentially positive developments that could lead to Asia Pacific neighbour states providing support and encouragement for NEANWFZ establishment. New Zealand has seen the advent of a new Labour Government strongly committed to the Nuclear Ban Treaty and very active in the UN New Agenda Group. Many of the Pacific Island states are equally strong supporters of the new treaty. In Australia, while an Australian Labor Government was not elected in the May 2019 federal election, the Opposition Labor Party has committed a future Labor government “to sign and ratify” the Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty and to “work to achieve universal support for the Ban Treaty”. 78% of all federal Labour parliamentarians have now signed a parliamentary pledge to keep these promises. There is now a new basis for seeking New Zealand and South Pacific diplomatic support in UN and other international forums for a NEANWFZ; and for potentially joining with North East Asia and ASEAN countries in convening a regional Asia Pacific conference on the humanitarian impacts of a nuclear war in this region.

At a more technical level, PSNA could continue to foster further detailed research work on such aspects as: (1) the modelling of a NEANWFZ that is tailored to the special conditions of North East Asia; (2) verification systems, both central and regional, that would ensure confidence in such a zone; (3) the legal and diplomatic steps for implementing the zone regionally and internationally; and (4) the modalities of treaty negotiation.

If no agreement between North Korea and the Trump Administration emerges within the next two years, and there is a return to status quo ante exchanges of nuclear threats, resumption of DPRK nuclear tests and missile launches, and US/ROK large-scale exercises close to the demilitarized zone, then such dangerously destabilizing developments will need to be countered by a major mobilization of civil society and concerned governments, regionally and worldwide, to have the parties return to the negotiating table.

We are now at a watershed moment when North East Asia must decide whether to continue, or turn away from, its current nuclear-weapon-dependent path (whether through direct possession of nuclear weapons or through extended nuclear deterrence). This path poses the risk of not only deliberate use of nuclear weapons but also the ever present threat of accidental, pre-emptive, or miscalculated, nuclear war that would be catastrophic for the region and the whole world. Reliance on so-called missile defence systems will only aggravate the risk by increasing adversaries' resort to deploying ever greater numbers of nuclear-armed warheads to ensure the overwhelming of such 'defences'.

The North East Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone proposal offers a cooperative diplomatic solution (based on successful precedents in other regions) that addresses both the immediate and longer-term threats to regional and global security posed by continued reliance on nuclear weapons and extended nuclear deterrence within the North East Asia region.