

Comment on the PSNA Summary

Emeritus Professor Michael Hamel-Green (PSNA Co-Chair),
Victoria University Melbourne

Recent developments on the Korean Peninsula, including the reciprocal exchange of nuclear threats between the leaders of North Korea and the United States, further North Korean ballistic missile tests of ever increasing range, including over Japan, and North Korea's most powerful nuclear weapon test to date (2/9/17), have greatly alarmed regional Northeast Asian states, the United States, and the whole world community. In response, the UN Security Council on 11/9/17 unanimously resolved to impose more severe economic sanctions on North Korea, and appealed for a resumption of the Six-Party Talks to resolve the crisis.

The threats from both sides have so far have been made in a context of “detering” attack by the other side, with North Korea emphasizing its wish to “complete” its capacity for nuclear deterrence of a US attack by acquiring the means for nuclear attack on US territories and mainland, and the US for its part, emphasizing, in President Trump's September 2017 words to the UN, “if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea”. However, such reliance on “deterrence” provides no assurance against the possibility of nuclear war by accident, miscalculation, pre-emption, or escalation from conventional attacks. One less noticed feature of the recent UN Security Council Resolution 2375 (2017) North Korea is the quasi-military imposition of naval interdiction of vessels transporting prohibited items from North Korea. Such interdiction carries the risk of naval conflict with obvious escalatory risks. This is in addition to the potential North Korean misperception of exercise drills carried out in close proximity to North Korea. There may also be risks associated with any US military miscalculation that a pre-emptive attack can potentially be launched against North Korea without catastrophic risk to South Koreans, although any detected move to such pre-emption risks triggering a pre-emptive attack by North Korea. Finally, any moves to “destroy North Korea” are likely to risk wider conflict with China, whose own perceived interests would be critically affected by North Korean regime collapse.

The above risks have highlighted the continuing urgency of the diplomatic solutions discussed and proposed at the 2nd PSNA Panel held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, in June 2017. So far there seems to be an assumption on the part of the US and its allies that the combination of sanctions and military threats will, in and of themselves, bring about North Korean denuclearization, or at least induce North Korea into entering into negotiations. However, as noted in the PSNA Panel discussion of the issues, it may be unrealistic to expect North Korea to immediately surrender its nuclear and missile capabilities. Rather it is important to initiate, without preconditions, a negotiation process that involves a phased process seeking an initial North Korean freeze on its current nuclear and missile testing programs in return for constraints on exercises close to the North Korean border, and then moving on to the possible elements of a longer-term resolution that addresses all parties'

legitimate security needs. These, as discussed by PSNA, include: agreeing on a Korean War peace treaty; moving towards a regional nuclear weapon free zone; providing security guarantee inducements for North Korea to join such a zone; and offering economic and energy incentives to North Korea as part of a comprehensive agreement.

The Panel also, very importantly, highlighted the importance of countries outside the region playing a mediating role in breaking the current impasse on starting negotiations, identifying Mongolia as one such country. Most recently, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, has offered to play such a role, citing the process and relative success of the Iranian nuclear agreement.