

**Evolving Inter-Korean Deterrence as a Bridge to a NEANWFZ**

Toby Dalton

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One reading of the logic structure established by the June 2018 Singapore Summit between American President Donald Trump and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un—an interpretation favored by Seoul and presumably Pyongyang—places denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as a function of a peace regime. In turn, disarmament of North Korea's WMD would have to precede establishment and implementation of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in Northeast Asia (NEANFZ), making disarmament a critical middle step in this process.<sup>1</sup> Where in this continuum spanning peace regime to NEANWFZ do inter-Korean initiatives have greatest significance, especially in facilitating disarmament? Perhaps ironically, it is mostly not in the nuclear sphere that the two Koreas could have the most impact in reaching a NEANWFZ, rather in evolving the conventional military deterrence environment on the Korean Peninsula in order to diminish the salience of nuclear weapons.

A necessary condition for sustaining the journey from peace regime to NEANWFZ is the careful replacement of nuclear and conventional military deterrence with cooperative security as the foundation of inter-Korean relations. Substituting cooperative security for deterrence will be a lengthy process. It will require creation of multiple intergovernmental structures and institutions, at various levels of governance and involving multiple different actors (not least the United States and China). And it must be sustained by unilateral, trust-building steps that signal changed intentions and reduced military threats. Trust is obviously in short supply on the Korean Peninsula, meaning that leaders in Seoul and Pyongyang must employ new methods and take greater risks to overcome the significant hurdles.

A peace regime could comprise some of the initial steps involved in replacing deterrence, but by itself does not mean the end of deterrence, which is and will remain the dominant security paradigm for the foreseeable future. Nor is a peace regime a sufficient condition for cooperative security. Nuclear weapons will remain Kim Jong Un's long-term insurance policy against externally-driven regime change. Weaning Kim off nuclear deterrence requires, in addition to cooperative security between the Koreas, U.S. statements and actions to diminish the perceived value of nuclear weapons for deterrence or coercive purposes, steps that go beyond a peace regime.

If and when North Korea completely disarms its WMD, conventional deterrence would still play a role in inter-Korean relations, even as it is slowly replaced by cooperative security. Perhaps only when there is a confederation of the two Koreas (setting aside the issue of disposition of the US military presence on the Peninsula) would inter-Korean deterrence become obsolete, by which time denuclearization would have

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, we must assume that the North Korean leadership shares the objectives of peace, denuclearization, and the ultimate achievement of a NEANWFZ. Further, we should assume that North Korean leaders believe that it is possible to reconcile such major changes in North Korea's security environment was the continuity of the Kim regime, which presumably remains the paramount objective of the North Korean state. Both of these assumptions are problematic and, at best, are barely supported by available evidence. Indeed, the record of inter-Korean agreements is a litany of broken promises and failed implementation.

been completed and other obstacles to a NEANWFZ removed. The point here is that the timelines involved in reaching a NEANWFZ suggest that deterrence would remain a part of the picture until close to the achievement of the zone, but also that deterrence is so critical to reaching the end that it must be a focus from the very beginning.

During the transition from deterrence to cooperative security, it is imperative that military-related steps taken are mutually reinforcing of denuclearization objectives. Put another way, the goal is to re-shape deterrence during denuclearization to make nuclear weapons unattractive and unnecessary for Kim Jong Un to retain for regime survival.

There are a number of elements that need to be considered in planning for the transition from deterrence to cooperative security. A notional list includes the following:

- Legal and political frameworks (including how to treat North-South relations)
- Conventional military force posture and readiness
- Political/deterrence signaling
- Measures for military incidents and accidents and preventing escalation
- Inter-Korean and 2+2 (US/PRC) military and political processes
- Making the process resilient against political sabotage
- Verified disposition of WMD and monitoring for reconstitution

Many of the items on this list are specific to the inter-Korean track, and relate to the conventional deterrence space in which there is the most room for the two Koreas to re-make their relationship. Unlike with nuclear issues, which inevitably engage other powers and global regimes at a level that suppresses inter-Korean initiative, in the conventional military arena Seoul and Pyongyang have considerable agency. Just as they decided in the 2018 Pyongyang Summit, the two Korean can implement a range of discrete steps that begin to remake their conventional military relations. This agency alone – that Seoul and Pyongyang can take some command over the process exclusive of other parties – makes a focus on conventional military deterrence for inter-Korean efforts significant for progress toward a NEANWFZ.

Another reason for prioritizing changes to conventional deterrence among inter-Korean initiatives is the necessity of building a conflict escalation firebreak. A long-standing concern about conflict on the Korean Peninsula is that small-scale operations, often termed tactical provocations, could get out of hand and lead to major war, or even use of nuclear weapons. North Korea's leaders may be emboldened by their possession of nuclear weapons to engage in riskier behavior during such crises. However, if conflict escalation is made less likely, then nuclear weapons become less valuable both as instruments of deterrence and coercion.

Simplistically, the DPRK and ROK operationalize deterrence at three levels: tactical (counter-provocations, pro-active strategy); operational/conventional (large conventional military forces, U.S.-ROK alliance); and strategic (nuclear, U.S. extended deterrence). One way to change the deterrence environment is to create a break in the escalation ladder that could exist between these three levels, to close conflict pathways that bring nuclear weapons into play. Practically, that necessitates a break at the operational/conventional level of conflict.

The 2018 Pyongyang Summit produced a military agreement that makes a modest start in this direction. Most of the initiatives contained in this agreement modify military practice, such as establishing no-fly zones, and covering artillery batteries. A few also began to address infrastructure, like destroying guard posts. These steps are useful building blocks, and also good for atmospherics. But to succeed in making a clear firebreak, bigger steps are needed to close off escalation pathways from the tactical level. In particular, both sides would need to signal willingness to invest security in the hands of the other party, by taking “costly steps” that demonstrate trust the other side will not exploit vulnerabilities. Other reciprocal steps would begin to change the fundamentals of conventional deterrence. Such measures could include:

- Force exclusion zones near the border and cooperative border management
- Asymmetric, parallel reductions or proscriptions in certain force concentrations
- Fewer military exercises, changed scope to diminish perceived offensive elements
- Reduced readiness and related politico-military signaling

After a promising start in 2018 and an inevitable slowdown in the first half of 2019, where could the two Koreas take this process from here? Further incremental steps of the type suggested here could be possible pending larger breakthroughs in the U.S.-DPRK track. For instance, adding transparency and monitoring arrangements to implementation of the Pyongyang agreement would be valuable for multiple reasons. One could also imagine other quasi-military steps, such as joint exercises for humanitarian assistance delivery and typhoon disaster recovery.

Notwithstanding the argument above about the agency that the two Koreas can exercise in this space, the looming presence of the United States and China is a manifest constraint. How far the inter-Korean process could adapt conventional deterrence without U.S. and Chinese input is a matter of debate. But this issue goes beyond the presence of U.S. Forces Korea and the UN Combined Forces Command during and after a peace regime. The longer-term question is: how do Beijing and Washington view the Korean Peninsula in their growing strategic competition? To the extent that Washington and Seoul refocus the alliance on containing Beijing, then that could limit South Korean flexibility in adapting conventional deterrence with North Korea. Similarly, China might pressure North Korea not to accept U.S. and ROK military capabilities that are directed at Beijing. China might also exert greater coercive pressure on South Korea, as it did during the THAAD dispute in 2016.

In the three inter-Korean summit meetings in 2018, President Moon Jae In and Chairman Kim Jong Un expressed a clear, shared desire to take more ownership of the future of the Korean Peninsula and dismantle frozen Cold War security structures. Geopolitics and history make that a difficult challenge. Imagination and persistence, along with risk-taking by leaders of the two Koreas, are imperative. Reshaping mutual security by evolving conventional military deterrence is a significant way in which inter-Korean initiatives can help (to borrow a phrase) “create the environment” under which establishment of a peace regime can ultimately lead to a NEANWFZ.