

## **Bilateral and Multilateral Aspects of a Probable Peace Regime on The Korean Peninsula (The View from Experts in Russia)**

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The process of creating a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula is based both on bilateral tracks (the most important ones are the US-DPRK and the North-South tracks) and multilateral ones. This process is deeply embedded in a framework that involves a larger number of players, including Russia, China and Japan, as well as the United Nations.

The primary bilateral track is the US-DPRK dialogue, the history of which is dramatic; the unprecedented upturn in 2018 gave rise to many hopes that the peace regime may be achieved in exchange for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. North-South dialogue also played a crucial role. What are the reasons that bilateral attempts for a settlement have gone nowhere so far?

As a result, North Korea might have passed a “point of no return” in its drive to reach a nuclear status. At the same time an uneasy confrontational stability has settled on the Peninsula, and paradoxically it, in fact, suits everyone as a lesser of evils. This balance might be institutionalized. A multilateral approach should be tested in order to reconcile the antagonists and create a system of multilateral guarantees for the implementation of agreements. Ideas on roadmap options and synchronizing of the steps to move to the new peace regime are suggested in the article.

**Keywords:** Peace regime in Korea, North Korea-US relations, North-South Korea relations, Multiparty talks on nuclear issue, Russian policy in Korea

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## I . Introduction

The issue of ending the Korean war and introducing a new security system is the key to finding solutions to all other problems associated with Korea, including the nuclear one. The US-DPRK and North-South summits in 2018-2019 were a step in a different direction from previous confrontational approaches. However, both processes went nowhere. With the advent of the Democratic administration in the US, there are chances the situation will go back to pre-2018 confrontation. This is bad news for all involved actors, including Russia. What can be done to improve the prospects?

## II. Russia's Approaches to the Post-Obama Situation

In general, Russia considered the role of North-South dialogue as a catalyst for setting up a new peace system, which would include interested actors. The Moon Jae-in government has early in its tenure made the establishment of a "peace regime" a priority and was consistent both on a conceptual level and by practical actions. The analysis of Russian official documents and experts' opinion (such as works by Anatoly Torkunov, Alexander Vorontsov, Alexander Zhebin, Georgy Toloraya, Konstantin Asmolov, Oleg Kiryaniv, etc.) show that Russia supports this approach wholeheartedly.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said in a phone conversation with President Moon Jae-in on the eve of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries that Moscow will cooperate in efforts to promote peace on the Korean Peninsula. Putin also took note of the Moon administration's push for the normalization of inter-Korean relations and expressed "expectations" for the resumption of dialogue "by the parties concerned."<sup>1</sup>

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1 "Russia Set to Cooperate on Korea Peace: Cheong Wa Dae," *The Korean Times*, September 28, 2020, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2020/09/113\\_296843.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2020/09/113_296843.html).

In Russia's foreign policy concept of 2016, one of the goals related to the Korean Peninsula is formulated as follows: Moscow "will continue its efforts to establish a mechanism to maintain peace and security in North-East Asia and will also take measures to expand economic cooperation in the region."<sup>2</sup>

In the Russian-Chinese Roadmap of 4 July 2017, introducing the double freeze and action for action 3 phase plan, it was suggested<sup>3</sup>: "The opposing parties begin negotiations and affirm the general principles of relations, including the non-use of force, the rejection of aggression, peaceful coexistence, the intention to make efforts to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula in order to comprehensively resolve all problems, including nuclear ones. All parties involved in the negotiation process, in a format acceptable to them, promote the formation of a peace and security mechanism on the peninsula and in North-East Asia and, as a result, normalize relations between the States concerned."<sup>4</sup>

Reacting to the first inter-Korean summit of 27 April, Russia expressed satisfaction that "the summit confirmed the mood of the parties to intensify the political and diplomatic process of solving the entire complex of problems of the Korean Peninsula, including nuclear one. We will continue, in coordination with the countries involved, to make efforts in this direction in line with the Russian-Chinese 'roadmap' of the Korean settlement."<sup>5</sup>

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2 "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (approved by the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)," *Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, December 1, 2016, [https://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

3 "Joint Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China on the problems of the Korean Peninsula," *Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, July 4, 2017, [https://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/cn//asset\\_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/2807662](https://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/cn//asset_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/2807662).

4 Ibid.

5 "Comment of the Department of Information and Press of the Russian Foreign Ministry in Connection with the Inter-Korean Summit," *Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, April 27, 2017, [http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/kr/-/asset\\_publisher/PR7UbfssNfml/content/id/3194904](http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/kr/-/asset_publisher/PR7UbfssNfml/content/id/3194904).

Below are some observations and suggestions based mostly on Russian policymakers and scholars' approaches researched by the authors during the last decade.

The dramatic events of 2018-2020 constitute what may be the last attempt to directly approach the issue of an overall Korea solution, including creation of a new security system. In the course of events, North Korea clearly demonstrated it has neither the need nor desire of giving up its self-proclaimed nuclear status, which would only result in its relegation to the back-burner of global politics and downgrading its international profile. It relies only on its "military deterrent" to maintain stability, which was stressed again by Kim Jong Un in October 2020: "Our Party has already built up the strongest military capability of safeguarding peace, with which to firmly defend socialism, the dignity and lifeline of our people, and to make our people enjoy the benefits of prosperity generation after generation on this land, eternally free from war."<sup>6</sup>

As of now the international community has no leverage to change this calculus. The great powers remain at odds and cannot work out a unified approach to the Korean problem or even to "agree to disagree." The Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) adversaries are reluctant to pay the price of legitimizing the Pyongyang regime and helping it out of the economic isolation it faced prior to denuclearization, rightly judging that denuclearization will not happen even if North Korean requests are met.

The military option proved to be feasible only at the price of a full obliteration of North Korea and parts of South Korea and a risk of retaliation to the US and Japan.

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6 "Kim Jong Un delivers speech at military parade on WPK's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday," *KCNA*, October 11, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1602410467-518152168/kim-jong-un-delivers-speech-at-military-parade-on-wpks-75th-birthday/>.

Sanctions, economic pressure and isolation seem not to work to achieve a change in North Korea's calculus. North Korea is remarkably resilient to all attempts to undermine the regime "from inside." A people's uprising or an elite "coup d'état" is not expected in the foreseeable future.

So, it looks like we have reached a "new normal" on the Korean Peninsula – a "neither peace, nor war" reality, or *confrontational stability*. A conflictologist K. Mitchell notes that the true conclusion of the conflict can be achieved through a process of a long mutual analysis by opponents, both the origins and the content of their dispute, the result of which will be a stable balance between the parties. Any compromise settlement itself is only the result of the successful coercion of one of the opponents to the type of action that benefits the other side or the mediator.<sup>7</sup> Paradoxically, in the Korean conflict, it is the weaker side – North Korea – that coerces its opponents.

It is important to note that, while the Korean Peninsula is generally seen as a hot spot, it has been years since anything catastrophic has happened here. Unlike other crisis regions, the situation has been relatively quiet for 67 years since the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed: armed clashes between the sides, although widely publicized, have been limited to shows of force, with only a few dozen casualties on both sides.

North Korea does not have any reason for aggression, nor does it have the means to engage in an armed conflict with the South. And the US, having come to the realization that the North Korean regime will not collapse as a result of its isolation, has shelved its plans to annihilate the DPRK as a state and have it absorbed by the South. Meanwhile, the people of South Korea, for whom reunification has long been part of the national mentality, have started to come to the realization that annexing the North will bring them enormous problems. This is especially true for the younger generation. Other important actors – China and Russia – do not want to see a conflict breaking out on the Korean Peninsula and call for stability, in the hope that

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7 Christopher Mitchell, "Problem-Solving Exercises and Theories," in *Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice: Integration and Application*, eds. D.J.D. Sandole and H. van der Merwe (Manchester; NY: Manchester UP, 1993), 89-90.

it may eventually lead to the peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas. As for Japan, although the country has an irrational fear of North Korea, it has not developed a clear-cut position on the possibility of a military solution, and in any case, does not have the military might to change the situation on its own.

It seems that the DPRK has already passed the point of no return and considers itself a nuclear power with corresponding legal rights and obligations – something like Pakistan. It claims that it withdrew from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) lawfully, in accordance with Article 10 of the Treaty, which establishes such a right for each party to the Treaty if “it decides that exceptional circumstances related to the content of this Treaty have jeopardized the highest interests of its country.” Promises of denuclearization should probably be considered in the context of the implementation of Article 6 of the NPT, which refers to the obligation of the parties “to negotiate effective measures to end the nuclear arms race in the near future and nuclear disarmament, as well as a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the DPRK apparently considers the elimination of the nuclear threat on a global scale as a condition for its denuclearization.

How then does this uneasy balance of interests, (temporarily) suiting all actors, all other choices being even worse, get translated into a permanent “peace regime”? What are the chances of codification and institutionalization of such a set-up to avoid risks associated with a sudden crisis?

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8 “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” *International Atomic Energy Agency*, March 5, 1970, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070807060917/http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Infcircs/Others/infcirc140.pdf>.

### **III. Can the Two Koreas End War?**

The prospects of peace-building cannot be understood without addressing the roots of the Korean conflict. The war that started 70 years ago became the first proxy war of the superpowers which were the winners of World War 2. Thus, it signified a new era in international relations – replacing the short-lived “concert of winning powers” which emerged as a result of World War 2 with a bilateral confrontation system, which would determine the global landscape for the next four decades. Moreover, this confrontational system gave metastases to the modern period.

Neither of the parties on each side of the Korean conflict reached its goals, and none is satisfied with the outcome. Thus, the war is not over – not only technically but also in substance that there are lingering suspicions on both sides that their adversaries have not fully abandoned the goal of unification (taking control of the other side).

The Korean conflict, although later internationalized, was at its origin a civil war – the fight between two national elites for dominance by way of the complete elimination of the other. For Koreans, the war was not so much about Communism or Capitalism, but about who will be in control of unified Korea and to which camp in the global confrontation system this country will belong to.

This contradiction has not been fully resolved in the decades that have passed since. Influential conservative forces in the South (which dominated Korean politics for much of the previous decades) still cannot accommodate the existence of the DPRK as a separate state and are still looking for indicators of the forthcoming collapse of the “Pyongyang regime.” Accordingly, Pyongyang still pays lip service to “unification” – (and of course, the North Korean military establishment is still preparing for a future war with the South, and not necessarily a defensive one) – and thus the suspicions of South Korea of a possible North’s aggression remain. And such a threat should be checked, including relying on the US’s extended deterrent, which in turn raises the suspicion of the North. Unless this confrontational paradigm changes, any attempts to reach a peace accord would remain futile.

The North Korean attitude is deeply embedded in its bitter experience. With the end of the Cold War and the shrinking of external support, its enemies considered that it was just a matter of time for the North Korean regime to collapse, following the example of other Communist countries. That would also have solved the nuclear issue, so no concessions to the “doomed Kim regime” were necessary in order to find a compromise on its nuclear program.

However, it was a grave mistake, based on inadequate knowledge of the DPRK and on ignoring the analysis of both practical and academic researchers (especially from the former Eastern bloc), who had decades-long experience in studies of North Korea and direct access to the North Korean policy-making process. An example of the Russian experts’ explanation<sup>9</sup> is as follows:

- 1) The DPRK was not a “classic socialist country,” but a clan-based aristocratic “semi-theological” oriental despot, and a very isolated and rigidly controlled one. So, there could be no hope that “a people’s rebellion” (even if assisted from the outside) could sweep away the dictatorship in a Romanian-style scenario;
- 2) The North Korean elite is interwoven by an intricate web of blood and common background relations, and also a meritocracy, built in line with Confucian and feudal traditions. It is very monolithic, displaying a high level of unity – reflecting the concept of “asabiyya.”<sup>10</sup> The explanation lies in

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9 Anatoliy Torkunov, Georgy Toloraya, Iliya Dyachkov, *Modern Korea: Metamorphoses of Turbulent Years* (Moscow: Prosveshenie publishers, 2020).

10 Asabiyya or asabiyyah is a concept, suggested by Ibn Khaldun, a leading Arab Muslim historiographer and historian of 14<sup>th</sup> century. This term implies social solidarity with an emphasis on unity, group consciousness and sense of shared purpose, and social cohesion originally in the context of “tribalism” and “clannism.” Ibn Khaldun also argued that asabiyya is cyclical and directly related to the rise and fall of civilizations: it is most strong at the start of a civilization, declines as the civilization advances, and then another more compelling asabiyyah eventually takes its place to help establish a different civilization. “Asabiyya,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 22, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asabiyyah>; Arno Tausch, Almas Heshmati, “Asabiyya: Re-Interpreting Value Change in Globalized Societies,” IZA Discussion Papers 4459, Institute of Labor Economics (IZA), 2009, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://ideas.repec.org/p/iza/izadps/dp4459.html>.

its “no exit” situation. Unlike other socialist countries, where younger members of elites hoped (and in many cases rightly so) that under a new market system they would become successful capitalists and international luminaries, the North Korean elite knows pretty well that after the victory of the South, their fate will be miserable. Hence, they are “all in one boat” and have to fight to the end, not giving way to internal strife. It would be extremely difficult even for a most sophisticated external influence agent to capitalize on factionalism and contradictions within the elite (which are inevitable in any group), which is strictly controlled through a well-established repressive system. Note that Kim Jong Un, after his ascension to power, repressed many elite members (mostly not touching ordinary people), and new sweeping changes were made as recently as in April 2020, but any hopes for a “coup d’etat” by the dissatisfied elite were futile;

- 3) The North Korean social and economic system has for decades been on a wartime-like footing, and to a large extent isolated (even conservative estimates show that the North Korean foreign trade turnover does not exceed even in the best years 15-20% of its GNP, much less than for other industrialized countries in the globalized world).<sup>11</sup> Therefore, its society is very resilient and can exist even in a forced isolation environment. Look at the management of the coronavirus crisis in 2020 by the DPRK. It closed its borders in January 2020 and contained the pandemics by strict control, keeping the country in isolation for the rest of the year.<sup>12</sup>

It is true that the attitude towards unification is evolving with the generational change. The DPRK strategy in the unification/coexistence issue is becoming more realistic. North Korea in fact is wishing to achieve coexistence on the basis of Korean nationalism and not let “external forces” interfere in this inter-Korean arrangement.

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11 “North Korea Statistics on GNP,” *Bank of Korea*, accessed April 8, 2020, <https://www.bok.or.kr/portal/main/contents.do?menuNo=200091>.

12 “COVID-19 in North Korea: an Overview of the Current Situation,” *NK PRO*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/pro/covid-19-in-north-korea-an-overview-of-the-current-situation/?t=1585543932275>.

The South's position has also changed. The first ROK President Rhee Syng-man was determined to continue the conflict right up until the Korean Armistice Agreement in 1953, asserting that "the Korean people want to live united or die."<sup>13</sup> The mood was changing to an extent that only a fraction of the new generations is interested in this issue now. On last year's Liberation Day President Moon Jae-in pledged "to solidify the foundation so that we can successfully host the joint 2032 Seoul-Pyongyang Olympics and stand tall in the world as one Korea by achieving peace and unification by 2045."<sup>14</sup> Whether it could be a single state is still doubtful as the North Korean elite would have to give up their superior position in such a case.

In principle, the inter-Korean peace-building track is theoretically easier to proceed with, as on the surface it only needs provision of enough political will on both sides.

It is remarkable how much was done on the inter-Korean track within a few months in 2018-early 2019. During the previous "détente" period – the decade of liberal leadership in South Korea (1998-2008), the US played a spoiler role, because the US President George W. Bush opposed "appeasing" North Korea and was seeking, in fact, to contain the reconciliation policies of the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun administrations. In 2018, the combination of Moon Jae-in and Donald Trump factors brought a much more spectacular outcome. However, the dawn of a new era has failed to arrive – and mostly not by the Moon administration's fault.

Especially important is that North and South reached and partly implemented agreements in the security sphere such as on the operation of the Inter-Korean Liaison Office; removal of landmines and discovery of remains of the Korean War soldiers; dismantling of guard posts, etc.<sup>15</sup>

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13 "75 Years after Liberation, Are We Slowly Coming to Terms with a Divided Korea?," *NK News-North Korea News*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/2020/08/75-years-after-liberation-are-we-slowly-coming-to-terms-with-a-divided-korea/>.

14 "South Korea's President Seeks Korean Unification by 2045," *Financial Times*, August 15, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/0fd71f12-bf10-11e9-89e2-41e555e96722>.

The most important for the future peace regime was the de-facto non-aggression treaty – the Comprehensive Military Agreement. It established the buffer zones to ensure that both Koreas will ban hostility on land, sea and air. Both North and South Korea were prohibited from conducting live-fire artillery drills and regiment-level field maneuvering exercises or those by bigger units within 5 km of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL). No-fly zones have also been established along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) to ban the operation of drones, helicopters and other aircraft over an area up to 40 km away from the MDL. Both Koreas also established “peace zones” near their disputed Yellow Sea border. This is a de-facto cornerstone of the inter-Korean peace regime.

However, further events demonstrated again that the two Koreas simply do not have enough ability to solve the regional security regime issue purely by themselves. As the North-Korea-US dialogue stalled after the Hanoi summit, Kim Jong Un was frustrated that the South Korean side had to coordinate its response with the US. Kim was especially dissatisfied personally in 2019 by the South Korean lack of consistency in its Northern policy (“putting a dagger in my back”) by staging military exercises, weakening Kim's positions in relation to his own conservatives. So, the dialogue and implementation of agreements could not but stop.

The symbolic gesture of blowing up in June 2020 the Inter-Korean Liaison Office in Kaesong at the orders of Kim Yo-Jong, the leader's sister, was a culmination of this process. It was not until the fall of 2020 that the two leaders secretly began to communicate again.<sup>16</sup> Moon Jae-in strongly reiterated his desire for a formal end to the Korean War, adding that this “will indeed

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15 “The Pyongyang Declaration: Implications for US-ROK Coordination on North Korea,” *Council of Foreign Relations*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/pyongyang-declaration-implications-us-rok-coordination-north-korea>.

16 “Why Kim Jong Un's letters probably don't mean a shift in South Korea policy,” *NK PRO*, September 26, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/pro/why-kim-jong-uns-letters-probably-dont-mean-a-shift-in-south-korea-policy/>.

open the door to complete denuclearization and a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula" at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on September 22, 2020. He also proposed the Northeast Asia Cooperation Initiative for Infectious Disease Control and Public Health.<sup>17</sup>

However, these initiatives drew mixed reactions both in South Korea and the US as some saw it as a step towards US troop withdrawal from Korea. Russian commentators pointed out that this equals to an admission of failure by Moon Jae-in in that he had to appeal to the international community on this issue, while the US-China conflict makes such an agreement unlikely.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, on that very day, a South Korean citizen, obviously attempting to defect to North Korea, was shot dead at sea by North Korean guards. Kim Jong Un's swift and unprecedented apology for that incident, accepted by the South, created a better atmosphere but also underlined the fragility of North-South relations.

The bitter historic experience and still remaining trauma of the war on both sides, lingering suspicion and misunderstanding as well as differences in social systems have so far been insurmountable obstacles for the North and the South. This reconciliation is probably a matter for a future generation of politicians to solve, when no leaders and opinion-makers who have personally experienced the trauma of the Korean war would be left on both sides of the DMZ. It means we will have to wait for another 15-20 years till a formula for peaceful coexistence of the two Korean states may be found, if not at least earnestly searched for. A possible further integration on the way to a unified nation is still even further away.

But without North-South reconciliation, it is naive even to talk about a peace regime and new security arrangements in North-East Asia.

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17 "Will South Korea's president ever stop pushing for diplomacy with the North?" *NK PRO*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/2020/09/will-south-koreas-president-ever-stop-pushing-for-diplomacy-with-the-north/?t=1601283839736>.

18 "Seoul's new old proposal is to end the Korean War," *NEO*, October 7, 2020, <https://ru.m.journal-neo.org/2020/10/07/novoe-staroe-predlozhenie-seula-zakonchit-korejskuyu-vojnu/>.

#### **IV. The US–DPRK Peace Track Efforts**

Any lasting peace in Korea should start with arrangements between the two primary adversaries – the US and the DPRK. The divide between the positions of the US and the DPRK was unbridgeable for decades. Moreover, as Russian experts see it, each side was and is sure it is right and does not feel the need to comprehend the other partner – a typical “loose-loose” situation. So, a compromise seems to be as far away as ever. Will the gap ever be bridged?

Regardless of propaganda, it looks like North Korea has been more or less sincere, when it has always said that the issue of establishing peaceful relations with the US instead of the formal state of ceasefire is central to the security situation on the Korean Peninsula. This thinking is based on a historic and legal background. Article IV (Paragraph 60) of the Korean Armistice Agreement, signed on July 27, 1953, called for a political conference to be held within 3 months of the signing of the agreement in order “to ensure the peaceful settlement of the Korean question,” although the ROK has not signed the Armistice Agreement.<sup>19</sup> At the Geneva conference of 1954, held with the participation of the US, the USSR, France, China, and North and South Korea, the issue of a peace agreement on the Korean Peninsula was officially raised at the conference by the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. The United States, however, intentionally avoided discussing the “Peace Treaty on the Korean Peninsula,” and the US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles refused to discuss this issue.

Over the years North Korea kept on reminding, both publicly and confidentially, of its desire to conclude such a treaty. At its insistence, in 1975, the UN General Assembly adopted resolutions endorsing the desirability of replacing the Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty and dissolving the United Nations Command (UNC). The US, however, declined the North Korean attempts to start discussions on this issue.

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19 “Armistice Agreement for the Restoration of the South Korean State,” *National Archives*, July 27, 1953,  
<https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/index.html?dod-date=727>.

Pyongyang, nevertheless, continued to call for the peace treaty, seeing it as a core element in its strategy toward the US. At the end of the 1990s, after the signature of the Agreed Framework and subsequent contacts between the US and the DPRK, according to the formula “nuclear freeze for security and aid,” the momentum for that was seemingly created. Liaison offices were about to be open, and the US provided large-scale fuel and other aid to North Korea in exchange for its restraint in the nuclear sphere. The light-water reactor construction started, with the participation of the US, the ROK, Japan, EU and others. Pyongyang kept on publicly reminding that “There is no reason to ignore the treaty ending the war. This is a preliminary and important process designed to lay the foundation for defusing tensions and establishing lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>20</sup> Kim Jong Il sent his deputy Vice-Marshal Jo Myong-Rok to the Oval Office in October 2000 and expected that the US President Bill Clinton might come to Pyongyang and be lured into concluding such a treaty or at least some kind of an intermediate Peace declaration. However, Clinton, despite promising it and even having prepared a sort of “letter of guarantee for security,”<sup>21</sup> chose not to go and the peace process ran aground. Members of Clinton’s administration later admitted that the actual design of the Agreed Framework was to provide a “soft landing” for the Pyongyang regime, as nobody in the US governing structure expected this regime to last much longer, so a long-term settlement would have been illogical.<sup>22</sup>

Russia has consistently supported the idea of substituting the Armistice Agreement with a permanent peace regime. However, there has been a dubious understanding of how Russia could participate in such a process. Some experts argue that a new peace arrangement should be irrelevant to the 70-odd years’ Armistice Agreement. This is understandable, as in case the participants of

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20 “North Korea Proposes US to Conclude Peace Treaty,” *Lenta.ru*, October 2, 2015, [https://lenta.ru/news/2015/10/02/korea\\_peace/](https://lenta.ru/news/2015/10/02/korea_peace/).

21 “Envoy to North Korea Delivers Clinton Letter,” *Global Policy Forum*, May 27, 1999, <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/202/42408.html>.

22 “Washington was on brink of war with North Korea 5 years ago,” *CNN*, October 1999, <http://edition.cnn.com/US/9910/04/korea.brink/>; William, J. Perry, *My Journey at the Nuclear Brink* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

this process would be limited to the original signees of the Armistice Agreement, Russia may find itself pushed away from the solution of a problem vital for its own security and its national interests. Russian officials tried to alleviate these fears by explaining as follows: "... the Declaration [of North-South summit of April 2018] refers to possible dialogue formats concerning the results of the Korean war of 1950-1953, namely, replacing the Armistice Agreement with a peace Treaty ... the USSR did not participate in the Korean war itself, which ended with the signing of the agreement, nor in the negotiations on its conclusion... Russia has no grounds or motives to seek to become a party to such a Treaty." Therefore, these officials continued, attention should be focused not on the past, but on the future – "joint efforts to create a lasting mechanism for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia as a whole, taking into account the interests of all parties involved... We see a comprehensive discussion of the problems of the sub-region in the six-party negotiating format with the participation of Russia as a tool for achieving this goal, and there is simply no alternative to it."<sup>23</sup>

Since the 1990s, the US-DPRK negotiations were such only by name. In Russian IR theory, such a practice was defined as "quasi-negotiations," "instrumental negotiations," and "disguise negotiations."<sup>24</sup> Both sides never sought a compromise-peaceful solution, but rather used the façade of diplomacy to promote the "hidden agenda" of their long-term goals.

It can be argued that the previous US attempts at the negotiation table with North Koreans were not based on the genuine desire to change the North Korean behavior in a way that could become acceptable to the international community. The reason? That would have meant the need for the recognition of the DPRK and to provide security guarantees to its regime,

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23 "The Answer of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia I. Morgulov to the TASS Question about the Role of Russia in Resolving the Situation on the Korean Peninsula," *Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, April 28, 2018, [http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/kp/-/asset\\_publisher/VJy7Ig5QaAII/content/id/3204522](http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/kp/-/asset_publisher/VJy7Ig5QaAII/content/id/3204522).

24 Marina Lebedeva, *Political Conflict Management: Approaches, Solutions, Technologies* (Moscow: Aspect Press, 1999), 42.

totally unacceptable to the US political class for a number of reasons (old trauma of not winning the war, zero tolerance of totalitarianism, geopolitical considerations vis-à-vis China not to let it expand its influence, and the need to keep an extended deterrent in East Asia).<sup>25</sup>

The DPRK, on its side, perfectly understanding this US rationale, was eager, nevertheless, to use the opportunity of direct talks with the “global power center” to explore the ways to improve its security and international standing (it watched with interest the example of Vietnam, which also had fought a victorious war with the US, but later became an important, yet independent US partner in South East Asia). Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il on many occasions privately expressed the desire to be a friend of the USA, seeing the goal of what Kim Jong Il called a “chess game” in not becoming a force that could challenge US influence at least in the East Asian region, but rather a more or less independent actor in partnership with the US, as well as other centers of power, and who is not threatened by anyone.<sup>26</sup>

For the DPRK, the main interest in signing the Statement of 19 September 2005 was to eliminate the threat to national security and obtain “irrevocable” guarantees of non-interference as an alternative to nuclear deterrence. On the DPRK’s insistence, the formula containing the wording “peaceful coexistence” was introduced into this Statement: “The DPRK and the United States undertook to respect each other’s sovereignty, exist peacefully together, and take steps to normalize their relations subject to their respective bilateral policies.”<sup>27</sup>

Realizing that the declared goals were unrealistic or at least remote,

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25 Georgy Toloraya et al., *Troubled Neighborhood. Problems of the Korean Peninsula and Challenges for Russia: A Collective Monograph*, ed. by G. Toloraya (Moscow: MGIMO-University, 2015).

26 Interviews with former Russian officials.

27 “Full Text of 6-Party Talks Joint Statement,” *China daily*, September 19, 2005, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-09/19/content\\_479150\\_2.html](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-09/19/content_479150_2.html); “North Korea Seeks Formal Peace Treaty to Push Out U.S. Forces,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, August 14, 2018, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2018/08/14/north-korea-seeks-formal-peace-treaty-to-push-out-u-s-forces/>.

Pyongyang leaders in fact used the negotiations to “buy time” to develop a nuclear and missile deterrent and therefore strengthen their negotiation position at a later stage. These were the results of every agreement the US has made with the DPRK. Pyongyang arrived at a judgment that the US cannot be counted on to carry through with its obligations and has either no intentions or no ability to do so (for example, because of the Congress’ or Treasury’s position). Reciprocally, North Koreans cheated themselves, stubbornly promoting their missile and nuclear program and causing suspicions of being untrustworthy.

In fact, the US “deep state” has always rejected a prospect for permanent peace with North Korea, seeing the danger in a possibility that “Pyongyang believes the departure of the US forces from South Korea would allow it to coerce the South and, if necessary, apply force to achieve its objectives without US interference.”<sup>28</sup>

During the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, the issue of the peace treaty was on the back burner.

When the new leader, Kim Jong Un, arrived, North Koreans insisted the formula of peaceful relations should be put into his only agreement with the Obama administration, the so-called “Leap day deal” in 2012 (later suspended due to North Korea’s satellite launch). The official statement said: “The United States reaffirms that it does not have hostile intent toward the DPRK and is prepared to take steps to improve our bilateral relationship in the spirit of mutual respect for sovereignty and equality.”<sup>29</sup> However, the concept was not in fact worked out in detail.

The more rational approach was tried maybe for the first time as the US President Donald Trump admitted, under strong influence from President Moon Jae-in’s administration (as well as China and Russia), that the North Korean nuclear issue could not be solved by either a military option or the collapse of the Pyongyang regime.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> “U.S., North Korea in Nuclear Deal,” *The Diplomat*, February 29, 2012, <https://thediplomat.com/2012/02/u-s-north-korea-in-nuclear-deal/>.

The realization was the result of the “practical test” in 2017: North Korea has not succumbed to the “fire and fury” threats and answered “in-kind” showing no fear of a threat of an imminent US strike. It became crystal clear that the US cannot use its military force for a first strike and that their “bark is bigger than their bite,” so North Koreans were in fact entitled to do anything short of a direct aggression against the US or its allies: only such a turn of events would justify a costly (in every sense of the word) military option by the US against North Korea. Pyongyang perceived it as proof of the achievement of a de-facto “strategic parity” with the US.

The first US-DPRK 12 June 2008 Summit Statement mentioned the issue of “establishment of the new US-DPRK relations and the building of a lasting and robust peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. President Trump committed to provide security guarantees to the DPRK and Chairman Kim Jong Un reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>30</sup> The US and the DPRK undertook the obligation to “join their efforts to build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>31</sup>

North Korea did not spare efforts to promote its cause for a “peace treaty with the US.” In October 2018 Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong suggested from the rostrum of the UN General Assembly: “The DPRK government is ready to engage in a constructive dialogue to prevent wars and conflicts on the Korean Peninsula as soon as the United States agrees to replace the ceasefire agreement with a peace treaty without claiming anyone’s ‘provocations’ through the media,” and called his proposal “the best option we can afford.”

However, the peace treaty issue was never on the table of the US strategy planners apart from a short period in the 1990s: but it was then seen not as a tool of recognition of the DPRK’s legal status but rather as a tool to speed up the erosion of the regime.

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30 “The Trump-Kim Summit Statement: Read the Full Text,” *The New York Times*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/12/world/asia/trump-kim-summit-statement.html>.

31 Ibid.

How could the real Kim's endgame be deciphered? Of course, nothing better than an educated guess might be available to anybody but Kim himself and maybe his closest aids. However, we can safely suggest that the price of giving up his nuclear arsenal cannot be measured in monetary terms or any amount of economic aid. The security and the very fate of his state are at stake. Kim needs breathing space for the regime in the hopes to eventually capitalize on the unique position of his country, geopolitically sandwiched between the US and China, to extract something from both sides. That is, first, to get benefits from economic cooperation with China and from Beijing's military-political interest in maintaining stability in its sensitive neighboring areas. Second, exploit the US interest in checking China's expansionism by soliciting US sponsorship in exchange for not fully entering China's sphere of influence.

Becoming thus a servant of two masters, Kim could try to loggerhead them (the way his grandfather did, balancing between the USSR and China, which were then hostile to each other). He may have hoped in the process to achieve an economic miracle in his country by making both sponsors compete, using the country's natural resources, qualified labor force, new technologies and logistical advantages, in order to turn North Korea into a "new Singapore" (President Trump meant something, when he tried to lure Kim with the images of a prosperous North Korea!). For all of the above setting, a new peace regime is essential.

However, Kim might have abandoned these childish dreams after the Hanoi summit in February 2019. Long before this meeting, North Koreans warned that they were not satisfied with the US steps and that they have walked a bigger part of the road. Seeing no reciprocity, Pyongyang decided it will do no more to satisfy the US requirements: the North Korean official statement on November 2, 2018, stated: "Now that we gave all things possible to the US, things it hardly deserves, by taking proactive and good-will measures, what remains to be done is the US's corresponding reply. Unless there is any reply, the DPRK will not move even 1 mm, how costly it may be."<sup>32</sup> Many

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32 Georgy Toloraya, "From CVID to CRID: A Russian Perspective," *38 NORTH*, December

US experts understood it.<sup>33</sup>

The Hanoi failure clearly demonstrated the misunderstanding of motives – North Koreans concentrated attention on the sanctions issue not because it was and is a matter of life and death for North Korea, but because they presumed the issues of an “end of war” statement and political rapprochement had already been in their pocket. The US side mistakenly took the North Korean position as proof of the high priority Pyongyang placed on sanctions relief and concluded that sanctions had been effective – and therefore the sanctions regime should be strengthened and more tangible concessions could be extracted in exchange for sanctions relief.

North Korea equally could not fully grasp the US logic and the role of bureaucracy. They could not have imagined the depth of contradictions within the US administration and thus the lack of consistency in the US policy – in fact, we witnessed a thinly veiled attempt originating from within the US “deep state” to torpedo the US-North Korea dialogue.<sup>34</sup> For example, in his speech at Stanford University shortly before the summit in Hanoi, Special Representative for North Korea S. Biegan said that the American side was

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26, 2018,

[https://www.38north.org/2018/12/gtoloraya122618/?\\_\\_cf\\_chl\\_captcha\\_tk\\_\\_=390240da6e293873643cef6c2af5fb3b7b5efea-1586805506-0-ARK\\_XfjO5ou2WDpEtkrLG-rBklUXZABfQ8z\\_q0hiinxxf5YG7vFkO5scuRfhZ7LGOljzaouaePt8lgHHdtpe6J3Bw3AJ-ZJwMx4CqrixPcPVUrt7EAcDQaTimvK3UdufnMY2xHtyudG2hBIWt4Y6vG-hSU2H1pqN0oc-jQvjxknuDPgtoC2Xrq3hogsIT7e63Ox4N1PdtsFAJ4khtBD-PblTE1ZlQSZpm9KH9v9BpjSnSHGYomBs7F\\_\\_Vv2dJpBrVrxbVOzW53Bq4Awa8lJl-6SvpwPVXyNjki5Dq7bld1y5rg7SQavGDH\\_\\_DTb8c1BiYHccBj0YhIw1klXCR8aM2RnvX8N33W0ClKDCv8kuglGwFylci3T4J1I9SusBjo7TH8xrGZ4X\\_C0SUVD2McfZVlKX4Uk7xjwB0c2-FoSgrRicbnXd3dwNhVhOCVs4obxSn5biySmRmbvejvrPMLFCx8wKqf4FdFrUtgXcdHDkcwK-dzvvwFfrTGJgPy3XcFnilOEQUlJNcsDL4Ne-ce3zj6XZubTokhHTNmBZRfZ5t4dEEJTFxMlvErwnNn3e0Y\\_k2tSrMu0iMuLnfqv3EX4n3c](https://www.38north.org/2018/12/gtoloraya122618/?__cf_chl_captcha_tk__=390240da6e293873643cef6c2af5fb3b7b5efea-1586805506-0-ARK_XfjO5ou2WDpEtkrLG-rBklUXZABfQ8z_q0hiinxxf5YG7vFkO5scuRfhZ7LGOljzaouaePt8lgHHdtpe6J3Bw3AJ-ZJwMx4CqrixPcPVUrt7EAcDQaTimvK3UdufnMY2xHtyudG2hBIWt4Y6vG-hSU2H1pqN0oc-jQvjxknuDPgtoC2Xrq3hogsIT7e63Ox4N1PdtsFAJ4khtBD-PblTE1ZlQSZpm9KH9v9BpjSnSHGYomBs7F__Vv2dJpBrVrxbVOzW53Bq4Awa8lJl-6SvpwPVXyNjki5Dq7bld1y5rg7SQavGDH__DTb8c1BiYHccBj0YhIw1klXCR8aM2RnvX8N33W0ClKDCv8kuglGwFylci3T4J1I9SusBjo7TH8xrGZ4X_C0SUVD2McfZVlKX4Uk7xjwB0c2-FoSgrRicbnXd3dwNhVhOCVs4obxSn5biySmRmbvejvrPMLFCx8wKqf4FdFrUtgXcdHDkcwK-dzvvwFfrTGJgPy3XcFnilOEQUlJNcsDL4Ne-ce3zj6XZubTokhHTNmBZRfZ5t4dEEJTFxMlvErwnNn3e0Y_k2tSrMu0iMuLnfqv3EX4n3c).

33 “Kim Jong Un received expanded U.S. definition of “denuclearization,” *NK NEWS*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.nknews.org/2019/03/kim-jong-un-received-expanded-u-s-definition-of-denuclearization-bolton/>.

34 John R. Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened: a White House Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 187.

ready to “end the war” and discuss “confidence-building measures” with Pyongyang, that is, he proclaimed a sound approach based on the principle of “action for action.” But the hawks, led by J. Bolton, responded by stepping up pressure on Trump in order to prevent him from making concessions in Hanoi, convincing him that the toughness and continuation of the sanctions will bring better results. Kim was insulted by the US “double-dealing” in Hanoi (“breaking the spirit of the Singapore meeting” and “showing a carrot but then withdrawing it”).

At the Vladivostok summit in April 2019, Kim made it clear to the Russian President Vladimir Putin that for him the lifting of sanctions was not a primary goal; it should accompany trust-building, but not as a condition. The North from that moment on abstained from talking about sanctions relief, stating, “We can manage under sanctions, the situation was much worse in the 1990s.” To be sure, sanctions relief would be welcomed, but North Koreans do not feel obliged to make some reciprocal concessions in exchange.

The result of both sides’ frustration in 2019 was the suspension of negotiations, while Pyongyang ceaselessly called on Washington to “change the calculus” and abandon its “hostile policy.”<sup>35</sup> Kim kept on communicating with Trump, not hiding his true feelings on the failure of Trump to keep his promises, for example, to halt military exercises in the South (letter of August 5, 2019, as cited by Bob Woodward).<sup>36</sup>

Eventually, the conclusion was reached in Pyongyang that there was no hope for a genuine strategic decision of the US establishment to co-exist with the DPRK. No doubt, it was a hard decision for Kim Jong Un, as the conservatives around him were secretly pleased that their gut feeling on “no trust to the enemy” turned out to be right, while the young leader’s attempt to “leap across the abyss” ended with a failure. In the working-level meeting

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35 “Fate of DPRK-U.S. Dialogue Depends on U.S. Attitude: DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesperson,” *KCNA WATCH*, April 9, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1570367655-166961772/fate-of-dprk-u-s-dialogue-depends-on-u-s-attitude-dprk-foreign-ministry-spokesperson/?t=1586159225615>.

36 Bob Woodward, *Rage* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

in November in Stockholm, the DPRK side chief negotiator read a prepared statement that Washington came to negotiations "empty-handed."<sup>37</sup>

Predictably Kim Jong Un then chose to return to the old pressure-style diplomacy, combining it with accelerating the development of its missile program as he watched in dismay the conceptual disarray in US Korean policy.<sup>38</sup>

The paradigm in Pyongyang then changed, which was manifested at the Party Central Committee plenum in late 2019, declaring a "frontal breakthrough." According to Russian experts, this meant the following: "In the past, Pyongyang was prepared to work towards some kind of deal involving mutual concessions, where every step towards denuclearization would be accompanied by relevant actions on the part of Washington, for example, a partial lifting of the sanctions against the country. But after Hanoi, this option was categorically rejected by the North Korean leadership. Like they said, "There will no more bargaining" [...] which effectively turned out to be an ultimatum on completely reformatting the fundamental approaches to the North Korean nuclear issue."<sup>39</sup>

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37 "North Korea-U.S. talks in Sweden fail to reach a deal, chief DPRK negotiator says," *NK NEWS*, October 5, 2019, <https://www.nknews.org/2019/10/north-korea-u-s-talks-in-sweden-fail-to-reach-a-deal-chief-dprk-negotiator-says/?t=1585206158590>.

38 This impasse was well described by Spencer Kim: "North Korea must not be allowed to have nuclear weapons... We must force it to give the nukes up... Military attack is too dangerous. Seoul is too close... Let's sanction them into strangulation and capitulation... Trade with China is a lifeline to North Korea, China has to agree to the sanctions... China says the issue should be resolved through negotiations... North Korea will never negotiate away its nuclear weapons... negotiations are worthless; therefore, the Trump and Moon administration are being hoodwinked... North Korea must not be allowed to have nuclear weapons... We must force it to give the nukes up..." - "The real danger in foreign policy," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, February 9, 2019, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3059148>.

39 "Will the Six-Party Diplomatic Project Help Denuclearize the Korean Peninsula?" *RIAC*, September 25, 2020, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/will-the-six-party-diplomatic-project-help-denuclearize-the-korean-peninsula/>.

The COVID-19 disaster dwarfed many foreign policy issues, including the Korean nuclear problem, but the US and North Korea might wish to keep it that way.

## **V. The Multilateral Aspect of a Peace Regime and Some Suggestions**

The Korean “knot” for decades remains one of the few in Asia where the interests of the world’s four biggest powers collide. They all must balance and reconcile their interests as a precondition for peace-building.

It should be admitted that at present in solving the Korean issue the main actors are the US, the DPRK and the ROK; they are the main decision-makers. Other countries and actors play only a supportive role:

“Second tier” – China (whose role is considerably more important in comparison to others), Russia, Japan.

“Third tier” – ASEAN, UN, EU, etc. Difference is that the “second tier” actors can influence the outcome by either playing a supportive or spoiler role while the third tier can just create conditions for eventual progress.<sup>40</sup>

The temporary calm that has unexpectedly fallen on the Korean Peninsula as a result of “détente” in 2018-2019, although uneasy, gives hope that in the future, if we manage to exclude dramatic twists and turns in the North Korean nuclear program, it could be effectively frozen against the background of the sluggish negotiations. If neither side would take any provocative actions, this will suit all parties involved to one degree or other – all the more so given the far more serious global and regional challenges they all face today. To achieve this, a multilateral mechanism for balancing the positions of relevant actors could be created. Its approach should be two-pronged– regulate both

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<sup>40</sup> Georgy Toloraya, “Peace on the Korean Peninsula and Security in East Asia: Russian Perspective,” in *Bridging the Divide: Moon Jae-in’s Korean Peace Initiative*, eds. Chung-in Moon and John Delury (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2019).

arms control and security.

According to US experts, the latter should “include: application of safeguards to all peaceful nuclear activities; a progressive rollback of the nuclear arsenal, with fissile materials transferred irreversibly to safeguarded peaceful use or disposal; and verification measures for possible undeclared nuclear activities.”<sup>41</sup>

No agreed definition of a peace regime exists. A peace and security system should be defined in advance – what components it would include and how verification can proceed. “Denuclearization” may be left as a distant goal, but in reality, the process of arms control and reduction should be initiated. The meaningful stages in this way may include confidence-building measures, reducing military confrontation and the North-South national reconciliation.

It is true that today the main powers – the US, China, Russia as well as former colonial master of Korea, Japan – seem further from reconciliation on any international issue than ever after 1991. The strategic interests of the two “geopolitical triangles” concerning the fate of the Korean Peninsula still collide and will probably do more so in the future. It should be noted, nevertheless, that the issue of North Korean nuclear weapons seems somewhat an exception (with all the countries unanimously voting in the UN Security Council on sanctions against the DPRK).

Russia first advocated the multilateral system on Korean security in the midst of the first nuclear crisis, before the US-North Korea direct talks produced the Agreed Framework, defusing the tensions: on March 24, 1994, the Foreign Ministry suggested to convene a multiparty conference (2 Koreas + 4 big countries + UN and IAEA). However, this proposal was not heard at that time – in April 1996, US President Bill Clinton and the ROK President Kim Young Sam agreed on the – unsuccessful – 2+2 formula of talks, and Russia

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<sup>41</sup> “IAEA Safeguards in North Korea: Possible Verification Roles and Mandates,” *Vienna Center for Disarmament and NonProliferation*, March 19, 2020, <https://vcdnp.org/iaea-safeguards-in-north-korea-possible-verification-roles-and-mandates/>.

was pushed aside to the margins of the political process around Korea.<sup>42</sup>

With the start of the second nuclear crisis in 2002, Moscow offered an idea of peace and security guarantees to North Korea in exchange for its agreement to stop the development of the nuclear weapons (named “package deal”) on a multilateral basis. Russia took the initiative of suggesting it to North Korea in January 2003, and Kim Jong Il said that about 60% of the suggestions could be used – it in fact provided the basis for the six-party talks that started in August 2003.<sup>43</sup>

The Chinese experts suggested a collective security mechanism – a comprehensive cooperative common and sustainable security system, which is inclusive and open to other stakeholders, and addresses both political and economic issues. Such a system may be multifaceted and provides security assurances not only for North Korea, but also for other countries (Australia, Canada, Mongolia, and ASEAN states), which may have the status of observers. The Chinese experts suggest that the negotiations should be a combination of bilateral and multilateral processes, based on such principles as understanding and considering bilateral demands; adhering to basic principles – step-by-step, not all at once; keeping the equality spirit of dialogue (no accuser vs. defendant model); and nurturing the culture of compromise and mutual support. Other parties should have a role in the support and generating proposals.

After meeting with Kim Jong Un in April 2019, Putin stressed: “I don’t know whether it is necessary to resume this [six-party] format right now, but I am deeply convinced that if we get to a situation where we need to develop some guarantees from one of the parties, in this case, guarantees of the security of the DPRK, then we cannot do without international guarantees.”<sup>44</sup> It should be noted that the example of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

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42 Georgy Toloraya et al., *Troubled Neighborhood. Problems of the Korean Peninsula and Challenges for Russia: A Collective Monograph*, ed. G. Toloraya (Moscow: MGIMO-University, 2015).

43 Interview with Russian officials.

44 “Press Conference of Vladimir Putin Following a Meeting with Kim Jong-Un,” *RIA NOVOSTI*, April 25, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190425/1553029975.html>.

in Iran shows that even if the US (or another party) withdraws from a deal, the participation of other countries can keep the agreement alive and prevent the situation from sliding into catastrophe.

The only possible way to build a new security regime, either temporary or permanent, lies in a synchronized phased tension reduction combined with arms control and limitation. The arms control should be based on the concept of "CRID – conditional, reciprocal, incremental denuclearization" (introduced by the Chinese researcher Xin Qiang<sup>45</sup>. The possible goals should be set as curtailing the North Korean capability to threaten the United States and removal of such rationale for Pyongyang by the creation of a new system of security by peaceful means. In the course of such a synchronized process, North Korea may reduce its nuclear programs phase by phase, first by not developing new weapons, removing the danger of proliferation, then set in place a control system for arms limitations and later possible reductions, and at some point would only be left with a small existing nuclear arsenal just to be on the safe side (or even achieve the "Israeli status," when existence of nuclear deterrent is not publicly recognized).

And here comes into play the almost forgotten six-party format. Yes, at the beginning of this century, it did not succeed – simply because in fact no one sought a negotiated solution. The United States only tried to continue the "controlled chaos" in the hope that this way it will be possible to control and weaken the DPRK (also bearing in mind the importance of maintaining a military fist on the borders with China), and Pyongyang only probed the ground for possible future concessions.

Nevertheless, several positive lessons could be extracted from the six-party diplomatic process experience. First, it should be noted that the six-party talks kept stability on the Korean Peninsula for several years and despite setbacks, resulted in several instances of North Korea freezing and even

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45 Xin Qiang is the Deputy Director of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University. He introduced the concept of CRID at the conference "The Ways to Peace and Prosperity in Northeast Asia" held in Seoul, South Korea on November 28, 2018, hosted by the Sejong Institute and the Jeju Peace Institute.

dismantling its nuclear program. If it were not for these talks, North Korea might have passed the threshold in nuclear development several years earlier and might be further down the road to operational nuclear capacity today. Second, the impossibility to provide security for the DPRK (as well as to meet the interests of other actors) on a bilateral US-DPRK basis obviously proves these goals could only be attainable, if at all, in the multiparty format. Naturally, such a format should include China and Russia as well as international organizations—anchors of the international law.

It should be clearly stated that peace-building and denuclearization are separate tracks: they complement but do not determine each other. Thus, all the roadmaps suggested so far are important in terms of synchronizing the steps, leading to reduction of conflict potential and the development of a nuclear program. But it should be understood that none of these goals would probably ever be reached in full. That means, cynically, that the process of negotiations and mutual concessions is more vital than the envisaged results. And experience shows that the security-building steps must precede the nuclear program-related concessions required to initiate them.

This was obvious in the Russia-Chinese proposal of July 4, 2017.<sup>46</sup> It included three stages:

- 1) Suspension for suspension – a moratorium on the DPRK nuclear and missile tests, in return for the US and the ROK suspension of military exercises.
- 2) Signing of bilateral documents among the DPRK, the US, the ROK, and maybe Japan, stipulating the generally accepted principles of relations.
- 3) The six-party talks dedicated to the creation of the Northeast Asia security system to solve such issues as denuclearization, sanctions, military threats and confidence-building.

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<sup>46</sup> "Joint Statement by the Russian and Chinese Foreign Ministries on the Korean Peninsula's Problems," *Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, July 4, 2017, [www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2807662](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2807662).

This plan, however, was criticized and largely ignored by the US, Japan, and South Korea, although some experts did support the idea of a “double freeze.”<sup>47</sup> In fact, however, the events of 2018 in many ways followed this scenario.

In 2019 Russia and China promoted a new initiative – an “action plan” for the comprehensive settlement of the problems of the Korean Peninsula, which lists all the steps that the countries involved must take together and individually to achieve progress not only in the military, but also in the political, economic, and humanitarian dimensions.<sup>48</sup> In December 2019, Russia and China suggested measures of multilateral support to promote the diplomatic process on the Korean Peninsula by easing the UN sanctions to accommodate the position of the DPRK.<sup>49</sup>

The suggested steps included:

*On the DPRK side:*

Continuing test and launch moratorium and reducing the tests of short-range missiles, not developing new types of such weapons;

Closure with the view to the dismantlement of the Yongbyong complex, including production, reprocessing, reactors and storage facilities;

Declaration and implementation of the suspension of weapons-grade fissile materials production; addressing one-by-one disclosure of other nuclear facilities and their verification;

*On the US side:* “corresponding measures” may include:

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<sup>47</sup> “A Strategy for Dealing with North Korea,” *The Asia Pacific Journal*, April 15, 2017, <https://apjpf.org/2017/15/Sigal.html>.

<sup>48</sup> “Russia Has Developed a New Plan for a Settlement on the Korean Peninsula,” *RIA NOVOSTY*, September 27, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190927/1559201513.html>.

<sup>49</sup> “UN Security Council at odds over North Korea,” *NHK*, April 2, 2020, [https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200402\\_15/](https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200402_15/).

Keeping moratorium on military exercises;

End-of-war declaration or statement; establishment of quasi-diplomatic relations;

Lifting of certain UN Security Council sanctions to allow the resumption of humanitarian assistance and inter-Korean projects and exemptions on other vital economic projects (coordinated with the closure of fissile material production facilities) – especially on vital imports and relief on labor exports;

Both sides can try to introduce the CBMs (increased transparency of military drills in the DPRK and the ROK; abolishment of drills within a certain swath of territory along the DMZ and coastline; the invitation of observers; withdrawal of heavy weapons above 100mm caliber and multiple launch rocket systems within the agreed distance of the DMZ; exchange of information about the composition of armed forces and location of deployments within a certain distance of the DMZ).<sup>50</sup>

Some ideas of the multilateral approach to peace-building and arms limitation, discussed in Russian academic circles,<sup>51</sup> suggest how a multilateral process may address concerns of all the parties.

First, the main concern of the United States, as declared, is the denuclearization of the DPRK. The six-party talks will allow for discussing its modalities, stages and deadlines (as mentioned above-becoming a channel for creating a regional arms control system). It is possible to agree on a multilateral basis and verification mechanism. The main outcome even at the early stages would be that the DPRK will be forced to abandon or seriously restrict the development of WMD programs during the negotiations. Such a mechanism could be used to limit and eventually free the Korean Peninsula from all Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The meaningful stages in

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50 Author's archive.

51 Georgy Toloraya, "Peace on the Korean Peninsula and Security in East Asia: Russian Perspective," in *Bridging the Divide: Moon Jae-in's Korean Peace Initiative*, eds. Chung-in Moon and John Delury (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2019).

this way may include confidence-building measures, reducing military confrontation and the North-South national reconciliation.

Secondly, the priority of all participants (albeit to varying degrees) is to preserve peace and security in the region. The negotiation process would avert the threat of a military conflict and allow the resumption of a dialogue on security cooperation, including in the field of conventional weapons. It is possible to develop confidence-building measures and other time-tested mechanisms in other regions that would cover all of Northeast Asia.

Third, the pursuit of economic and social development goals can be discussed to agree on the gradual lifting of sanctions against the DPRK in exchange for significant steps on its part, and to facilitate its return to the international financial and economic system to help restore its ties on a verifiable basis with the world economy. This could contribute to the marketization of the economy, and on this basis – a certain liberalization and evolution of society. In addition, within the framework of the six-party process, it is possible to single out the track for regional economic cooperation. It would be possible to revive previously started multilateral projects (railway, gas, electric power) and explore new ones.

As each party participating in the six-party talks has its own national interests and national strategies, which are characterized by growing contradictions, 6PT is a convenient platform to adjust the evaluation of regional processes and to compare notes.

If one would have an ambitious goal of creating a “concert of powers” mechanism, which is already actually operating in the mode of bilateral diplomatic consultations, this would allow us to harmonize interests. It is even possible that in the long run the needs of the permanent diplomatic process, using the advantages of the online era, will make it necessary to create a kind of permanent Secretariat. It is true, that too much in the global order must change for this to happen. However, the six-party format in Northeast Asia (where there have never been such regional organizations) can become a field for an experiment in creating a new type of power center relations.

Thus, there are many advantages in the multilateral negotiation process, but only one serious disadvantage – the tacit recognition of the de facto nuclear status of the DPRK. However, this will also happen under any other kind of scenario other than a military solution. DPRK does not need anyone's recognition to maintain this status, and in the absence of dialogue, it has a free hand to further strengthen it.

Is it possible to overcome idiosyncrasy in the name of a concrete result—reducing the military threat and preventing the growth of the DPRK's nuclear potential?

One idea to address this issue may be to “separate” two tracks: one on denuclearization, another on “corresponding measures.”

The technical and practical issue of how to deal with the Korean nuclear program should be dealt with in the “3+1 format”: relevant nuclear weapon states (the US, China, Russia and the DPRK). It should be reminded that in accordance with Article 2 of the NPT, non-nuclear weapons states are prohibited from any access to nuclear weapons technology and thus cannot be a part of discussions.

Another aspect of the “3+1” format should be centered on discussion of the modalities of “security guarantees,” normalization of relations, “bright economic future” for North Korea, etc. It should bring together the countries on which the solution of these issues depends – the US, the ROK, Japan, plus the DPRK.

All these processes may run in parallel. Eventually, when both of these formats lay the groundwork and prepare the relevant blueprints, in the endgame they would merge into the 6-party format that would be in a position to find a comprehensive solution to the Korean problem.<sup>52</sup>

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52 Georgy Bulychev, “How to Put Korean Peace-Building Right: A View from Russia,” *Global Asia*, June 25, 2019, [https://www.globalasia.org/v14no2/feature/how-to-put-korean-peace-building-right-a-view-from-russia\\_georgy-bulychev](https://www.globalasia.org/v14no2/feature/how-to-put-korean-peace-building-right-a-view-from-russia_georgy-bulychev).

These ideas may be discussed first in the format of a former six-party talks working group on establishing a peace and security mechanism in Northeast Asia, first with the participation of officials in the private capacity and then proceed to official track.

On the official track, a *Heads of States Joint Statement* may kick-start a diplomatic process once the bilateral understandings are reached. The six heads of state may conduct it, for example, at the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, also with the participation of the Secretary-General of the UN.

At the final stage, the six parties could adopt a politically and legally binding multilateral treaty "On Security and Cooperation in NEA." It can be combined with legally-binding deals between the former adversaries of the Korean war.

Another option or maybe the continuation of the process after a multilateral declaration or agreement, named in #2, is a set of bilateral legally binding treaties between each member of the six-party talks, which would regulate the relations between them in the part concerning the Korean issue.

Such agreements should be an addition to the existing bilateral (and multilateral) pacts. For example, such a new agreement between the US and the ROK should be based on their basic alliance treaty and later bilateral documents and not contradict them, unless some amendments would be needed.

While some bilateral agreements would come by harder than others, there will be no need to wait – other agreements should enter in force immediately after signing (a form, not requiring ratification, should be used). All these treaties also can be deposited in the UN and circulated by it.

To be sustainable, these agreements would need supervision and guarantees for implementation, which can be provided by other members of the six-party format and may involve monitoring by the UN. That means a monitoring mechanism (such as the UN committee or a six-party "secretariat" or both) would watch how the arrangements are kept and report accordingly to the UN and other institutions and to the leadership of all the countries.

In this process, the Northeast Asia Security and Cooperation Organization (NEASCO) may emerge. At a later stage, it may become a venue charting the plans for multilateral and bilateral cooperation and integration.<sup>53</sup>

In conclusion, we would like to stress again an opinion that in peace-building in Korea, the process is more important than the result. A protracted negotiation process is beneficial for all. Even in the absence of an immediate breakthrough, it can achieve much:

It would cap North Korea's nuclear and missile development programs, at least the ones that can be observed;

It would ease tensions on the Korean Peninsula;

It would help build trust and enable confidence-building measures;

It would provide room for North Korean marketization and cooperation, and eventually the easing of political regime pressure, as North Koreans actually want to be "like others."

Understandably, all of the above seem to be too far-fetched a scenario to be ever realized under the existing global realities, and it would probably take decades, so no one now can predict how the world will look by that time. But it is in interests of all the actors to try this approach, as no other one is working.

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53 Georgy Toloraya, "Towards Peace and Security in Korea - A Russian View," *CIRD*, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2019-issue-no-13/towards-peace-and-security-in-korea>.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The forthcoming administration change in Washington may trigger North Korean attempts to raise tensions. The brinkmanship may resume, as now North Korea has a military edge it did not have 4 years ago, including ICBMs and thermonuclear charges. Also, the support of DPRK by China and Russia, locked in a confrontation with the USA, has increased. North Korea was quite cautious in reacting to Biden's taking power in order to understand how the US position might change under the Democrats and what of the Republican legacy may be sustained. At the same time, North Korea ignores the South Korean role considering Seoul cannot do much in changing the basic Washington approaches (although support of ROK might be welcomed for resuming dialogue). Other actors, including Russia, are not happy with the possibility of another crisis in their neighborhood and are designing measures to prevent it. The multilateral approach gives a chance to avoid conflict with USA and its allies and maintain confrontational stability, now prevailing in Korea. This is a far better option than a new crisis and gives all the parties an opportunity to work for decreasing tensions and arms control on the road to a new peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

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