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[Column] Nuclear N. Korea: Beyond deterrence and recognition

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As one expert put it, progress on North Korea will only come once we look at things from its point of view



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un speaks to the Supreme People's Assembly on Sept. 8, in this photo released by state-run media. (KCNA/Yonhap)



By Moon Chung-in, chairman of the Sejong Institute

The situation on the Korean Peninsula is growing perilous. When North Korean leader Kim Jong-un announced the adoption of a law detailing the state's nuclear policy in a speech at the Supreme People's Assembly on Sept. 8, he described it as a "noteworthy event" and a "historic cause."

"Nuclear weapons represent our nation's dignity and honour; they mean the absolute might of our Republic and a source of the great pride of the Korean people," Kim went on to say, leaving no doubt that the North's status as a nuclear weapons state is irrevocable.

"There will never be such a thing as our abandonment of the nuclear weapons or denuclearization first, nor will there be any negotiations to this end or bargaining chip in these processes," he added.

The newly adopted law addresses in detail matters that had hitherto been left vague: the mission of North Korea's nuclear weapons; their composition; their command and control structure; the process of deciding to use them; the principles behind that use; the conditions of their use; measures for the safe maintenance, management and protection of the weapons; the quantitative/qualitative improvement and upgrade of nuclear weapons; and ways to prevent their proliferation.

In short, this is an attempt by North Korea to present itself as a responsible nuclear weapons state to audiences at home and abroad. The part that's most troublesome is the North's adoption of an aggressive doctrine that officially endorses the preemptive use of nuclear weapons and the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons, going beyond the deterrence strategy of the past that focused on the use of nuclear weapons in the form of retaliation.

The South Korean government's response has focused on reinforcing nuclear deterrence against the North.

"I seek to find the answer in strengthening the extended deterrence based on a strong South Korea-US alliance," South Korean President Yoon told the New York Times on Sept. 18. "Extended deterrence includes not only the use of nuclear weapons based in American territory, but also a package of all possible means and methods to deter nuclear provocations by North Korea."

South Korea and the US have fleshed out Yoon's plan of deterrence against North Korea through the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group, a channel for dialogue between diplomats and defense officials at the vice-ministerial level. The two countries have announced that they will hold tabletop exercises for extended deterrence to explore military responses at three stages — North Korean nuclear threats, imminent use of nuclear weapons, and actual use of nuclear weapons.

But this strategy of further strengthening deterrence in response to North Korea is liable to prompt Pyongyang to further toughen its own nuclear forces or doctrine, a perfect example of the vicious cycle known as the security dilemma.

For that reason, the Yoon administration has sent North Korea a message for dialogue in the form of the "audacious initiative" — promising that "a bright economic future awaits North Korea if it chooses denuclearization" — even as it emphasizes extended deterrence against the North.

But Pyongyang has rejected dialogue with South Korea, dismissing Yoon's plan as an "audacious delusion."

The South Korean government has set North Korea's denuclearization as a nonnegotiable objective, adopted a basic doctrine of launching not only retaliatory strikes but also preventive strikes given the possibility of North's preemptive use of nuclear weapons, and stressed the principle of not entering nuclear arsenal reduction talks with North Korea under any circumstances. In light of that, it doesn't seem likely that dialogue would open the door to diplomatic negotiations.

Michiel Hoogeveen, a Dutch member of the European Parliament, advocated a position contrasting that of the Korean government in a lecture at the Yonsei Institute for North Korean Studies on Sept. 19. Not only does North Korea already possess nuclear facilities, materials, warheads, and missiles, but it has greatly expanded its nuclear arsenal by carrying out six nuclear tests and making its nuclear devices smaller, lighter, and more diverse, Hoogeveen noted, concluding that North Korea is a nuclear weapons state in all but name.

Setting complete and irreversible denuclearization as the immediate goal of diplomatic negotiations in disregard of all that is unrealistic, the Dutch lawmaker argued. Furthermore, North Korea would never accept such a demand from South Korea, which is under the US' nuclear umbrella.

Therefore, Hoogeveen said, the best course of action at the current stage is to seek the path of peaceful coexistence with North Korea. That would require a flexible policy on North Korea sanctions and an enthusiastic effort to ease tensions and build confidence.

Could that be the answer?

If the Yoon administration's absolute insistence on denuclearization and its support for more extended deterrence are of limited utility as we seek a fundamental solution to this issue, Hoogeveen's advocacy of recognizing North Korea as a nuclear weapons state and pursuing peaceful coexistence with a nuclear-armed Pyongyang would be a hard pill for South Korea to swallow.

Indeed, given the sentiment of the South Korean public, such a step would be unimaginable.

Neither the narrative of denuclearization nor acceptance of the status quo is a viable alternative. Therein lies the rub.

"We ought to stop bringing up the North Korean nuclear issue and only talk about peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula," said Lee Jong-chan, former director of Korea's National Intelligence Service, in a recent interview with news magazine Sisa Journal. "The only way to make progress on North Korea is to see things from North Korea's point of view. It's time we spoke our minds both to the US and to China."

Lee's position can be summarized as follows. First, he believes we can prime the pump for denuclearization while making peace, rather than believing that peace will only come if North Korea's nuclear weapons are immediately eliminated. Second, he calls for strategic empathy, which means understanding North Korea's intentions on their own terms rather than as we would like them to be. Third, he wants South Korea to take creative initiative for finding broad-minded solutions rather than blindly following the US or China.

This seasoned veteran's insightful appeal for a solution grounded in the principles of common sense, reason, and the empirical tradition rings louder now than ever before.

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