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ROUNDTABLE: [NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR WEAPONS: WHAT NOW?](#)

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Basis for a breakthrough in Pyongyang statement?

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Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have worsened in recent months. In March, [the United Nations tightened sanctions](#) against the North because Pyongyang had tested a nuclear weapon and launched a satellite earlier in the year. On July 6, [the United States imposed sanctions](#) directly on North Korean leader Kim Jong-un due to his involvement in human rights violations. Pyongyang called the US sanctions "a hideous crime." Soon afterwards, Seoul and Washington announced joint plans to deploy a US-led missile defense system in South Korea. Pyongyang threatened "physical counteraction" against the system and announced it was [closing a channel for US-North Korean dialogue](#) that had operated through the North's UN mission.

Yet amid all this—just hours before Washington announced its sanctions against Kim—a spokesman for the North Korean government issued [an interesting statement on denuclearization](#). The statement made five demands of the United States and South Korea; promised that the North would take "corresponding measures" if the demands were met; and held out the possibility of a "breakthrough" in the peninsula's nuclear stalemate.

First, the statement demanded, "all nuclear weapons of the United States" in South Korea "must be publicly disclosed." Second, all nuclear weapons in the South (along with the facilities where they are based) "should be dismantled and verified." Third, Washington must guarantee that it will not deploy offensive nuclear weapons in South Korea and "its vicinity." Fourth, the United States must commit to never using nuclear weapons against North Korea. Finally, Washington must withdraw from South Korea all troops "holding the right to use nukes."

Seoul immediately rejected the proposal as a "deceitful act" meant to undermine efforts to strengthen sanctions. Washington, meanwhile, made no meaningful response. But careful

examination of the proposal—even if, at first glance, it looks like typical rhetoric and propaganda—suggests that it might have some merit as a starting point toward a negotiated settlement of the nuclear dispute. Some of Pyongyang's demands are quite easy to meet. The others might be satisfied through compromise and negotiation.

The first two are easily met because they concern nonexistent US nuclear weapons in South Korea. Washington withdrew its nuclear weapons from the peninsula in 1991. It has never reintroduced nuclear weapons. Indeed, a joint statement released at the conclusion of six-party talks in September 2005 clearly indicated that the United States had no nuclear weapons in South Korea—and North Korea, of course, signed on to the joint statement. The North's demand for verification should present no great obstacle either: General Charles Campbell, then-commander of the US Eighth Army, expressed willingness in a 2005 newspaper interview [to allow nuclear verification at US military facilities in the South](#) (link in Korean).

Skipping forward for a moment, the fourth demand likewise presents no overwhelming problems. Essentially, the issue is a negative security assurance and a no-first-use policy toward the North. But Washington has many reasons not to use nuclear weapons against North Korea, especially first. The reasons range from humanitarian considerations, to commitments made under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the 2005 joint statement, to the likelihood of negative strategic reactions from China and Russia.

The third demand, however—for a US guarantee not to deploy offensive nuclear weapons in South Korea and "its vicinity"—might be problematic. Such a guarantee might require suspending South Korea-US military exercises that involve strategic weapons such as nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, and strategic bombers.

The fifth demand, for troop withdrawals, might also be problematic because most South Koreans consider US troop withdrawals taboo.

Still, these points could be negotiable. For example, South Korea and the United States could exclude offensive strategic weapons from their joint military exercises. And regarding US forces on the peninsula, former northern leader Kim Jong-il once mentioned to former southern leader Kim Dae-jung that Pyongyang could tolerate US forces in South Korea as long as they weren't hostile to the North. In any event, Pyongyang's statement doesn't

mention an outright withdrawal of troops—rather, the announcement of an intention to withdraw.

South Korea and the United States should seriously examine North Korea's proposal. To be sure, Seoul and Washington would find it difficult to approach the negotiating table based on nothing more than Pyongyang's current demands. To draw Seoul and Washington to the table, the North would have to specify the reciprocal measures toward denuclearization it would take if its demands were met. But if specificity were forthcoming, Pyongyang's recent statement might well furnish a basis for serious dialogue and negotiation.