On May 26, 2020 (US), the NCAFP convened a Track II video teleconference (VTC) with participants from the US, China, Russia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) to discuss opportunities and challenges in addressing the North Korean nuclear program, as well as risk management approaches to non-traditional security issues.∗

Though each side brought different priorities and recommendations to the conversation, participants mostly agreed on some fundamental observations:

- The effects of COVID-19 on the DPRK remain unknown. It is not credible to accept the DPRK’s assertion that it has seen zero cases, given what is known about the viral spread, though several participants emphasized the DPRK’s relatively high level of scientific knowledge and social control could help to mitigate the country’s poor level of medical equipment and staff.

- The DPRK has largely self-imposed its containment to manage the pandemic. At the same time the DPRK has turned back some of the progress made since 2016 by launching missiles and spurning further inter-Korean cooperation or international development aid programs. The relationship between the two trends is unclear—is the isolation and aggressiveness tactical or a strategic play to set up future negotiations?

- It is unlikely that the DPRK will want to make a deal on denuclearization with the United States until after the November 2020 presidential election. Yet, the actions the DPRK takes now will affect the opinions and attitudes of future negotiating teams, should the DPRK come back to the table in 2021.

- The prospects for multilateralism on non-traditional security issues are dim considering the failure of international institutions and world leaders to cooperate on a response to the pandemic. There is a need for reform based on the lessons of the COVID-19 response, but also a sense that no country or group of countries wants to take a leadership role in preparing for future global crises.

∗Participants were offered the option to submit edited post-event papers to further clarify their perspectives. The papers are attached to this summary report.
Policy recommendations included:

- The time to prepare for North Korea’s return to the negotiating table is now, even though the uncertainty regarding the outcome of the US election likely pushes negotiations to 2021.

- All of the region’s stakeholders should be involved in setting limits and imposing costs on North Korea’s provocations, as well as offering the DPRK the same assistance they would provide to other developing countries dealing with COVID-19. In other words, if the bilateral processes are stalled, it is time to pursue multilateral processes, with or without cooperation from the DPRK.

- The prerequisite to such planning exercises is accurate on-the-ground information on what is happening inside North Korea. Any credible source should be pursued, and credible information disseminated to the larger group.

- International institutions remain the best venue for discussing regional and transnational security threats. The larger powers need to exercise thoughtful leadership within institutions; smaller or middle powers need to insist that major power competition does not spoil these institutions.

- The US and China should find a way to gracefully exit their media feud before misperceptions in public opinion create a self-fulfilling Cold War prophecy.

Further areas of inquiry related to the North Korean nuclear issue included:

- **Bilateralism versus multilateralism.** Several participants called for multilateral discussions to supplement the bilateral negotiations between the US and the DPRK and the ROK and the DPRK. With the DPRK pulling out of these bilateral meetings and with no likely movement for the Trump administration to lead this shift to more inclusion, such an expansion is strictly at the Track II level for now.

- **Retrenchment versus engagement.** One participant reminded the group that North Korea has cycled through periods of engagement and retrenchment over the last 25 years of negotiations on the nuclear issue and thought North Korea would eventually return to the table. Another participant agreed that the most active period of the Six-Party Talks, in 2005 – 2006, fell during a period of DPRK retrenchment. So, progress might be delinked from the cyclical nature of the DPRK’s approach to international negotiations.

- **Short-term versus medium-term diplomacy.** Some participants felt that the immediate need was for crisis management mechanisms—both for the North Korean nuclear issue and US-China relations. They expressed a low likelihood that none of the parties could make progress on the fundamental disparities during a US election year. Some participants assessed the DPRK’s recent return to provocations was tactical, not
strategic, and predicted DPRK negotiators would return to the table in 2021. Other participants felt diplomacy on the bottom-line issues could wait until next year, but the interim period is not without major risks, especially considering the seismic shifts in global industry and society due to the necessary pandemic management measures. Major stakeholders should begin to build consensus and coordinate policy to support future bilateral diplomacy the US and the DPRK. The now rescheduled 2021 Tokyo Summer Olympics may present another opportunity for diplomatic efforts.

- **The role of sanctions now and in the future.** Participants discussed the value and purpose of sanctions from different perspectives. One participant noted that the sectoral structure of sanctions makes it extremely difficult for North Korea to import needed medical supplies and technology, and suggested organizations should lift sanctions for COVID-related imports. Another participant argued that sectoral sanctions are insufficiently targeted to compel changes in elite strategic behavior. Still another argued that sanctions enforcement remains the problem on which the five parties assembled should coordinate and cooperate. But without strong leadership in the P5 of the UN Security Council, it would be difficult to see how coordination and cooperation could improve.

Further points on non-traditional security cooperation and the international system:

- **Major power competition & international institutions.** The major focus of discussion on non-traditional security issues was the US and China’s conditional approach to cooperation. A few participants agreed that neither country wants to provide the global public goods that would be commensurate with a leadership role. An American participant stated that failure of the WHO and the UN to break gridlocks associated with US-China strategic competition implies the diminution of international institutions. One participant argued for ASEAN-centric multilateralism to tackle non-traditional security issues, including food and energy security, transnational crime and dismantling terrorist networks.

- **A New Cold War?** Participants from the ROK, Japan, and Russia wondered to what end the US and China intend to persist in their zero-sum mindset. Those participants acknowledged that all states tend to pursue selfish interests but found the deterioration in US-China relations is bringing many unintended effects, including on supply chain security and private sector stability. Chinese and American participants both called for an end to unnecessarily provocative official public rhetoric and agreed with each other that these media feuds were fueling misperceptions and complicating the environment for de-escalation of unproductive tit-for-tat retaliatory cycles. Such misperceptions would become the basis of a self-fulfilling prophecy in the long term if they permeate and sour public opinions of the other.

For more details on the participants’ perspectives, please see the attached post-event papers.
## THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY (NCAFP)’S
FORUM ON ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY (FAPS)

**PRESENTS**

A U.S.-CHINA-JAPAN-ROK-RUSSIA QUINTILATERAL
VIDEOCONFERENCE

**MAY 26, 2020**

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The Corona Pandemic and Northeast Asia:  
A Korean Perspective

By CHUNG Jae Ho  
June 2020

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Overall Trends

- The COVID-19 pandemic is probably the first global crisis without manifest US leadership. It will certainly have some lasting impact on the post-Corona international order.

- It should be noted that four distinct processes are occurring simultaneously: 1) the return of geopolitics, 2) the 4th industrial revolution, 3) the COVID-19 pandemic, and 4) a global economic crisis. These processes may jointly catalyze a major change in the international order and/or the norms that dictate it.

- Is the Pandora’s Box being opened?
  - We are seeing trends toward deglobalization (a return of borders), the re-rise of protectionism and sovereignty, reshoring, diversification, the spread of automation and domestication.
  - The implications of many of these changes for the structure and norms of international politics and economics remain to be closely monitored.

- Given that most of the G7 nations have been greatly affected by the pandemic, questions are being posed on the new criteria for “advanced” nations.

- Is a premature norm/value war being waged? Examples include:
  - State-dominated model versus market- and non-state-oriented model of governance and crisis management; and
  - The implication of the ongoing debates on the “origin” of COVID-19.

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The Significance of the Year 2020

- The presidential election in the US: what are the implications for US-China relations and the North Korean nuclear conundrum?
  - The timing and tone of the campaigns will most likely reduce room for meaningful dialogues to resolve these problems.
The 70th anniversary of the Korean War: what are the implications for US-China rivalry and the North Korean nuclear conundrum?

The target year of China’s accomplishment of the Xiaokang (moderate prosperity) society

   o It is unlikely that China will fulfill its commitment to the Phase-1 trade deal, giving way to a black swan.

Given the major trends in US-China relations and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, opportunities appear to be scarce for the effective resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem despite the near-containment status self-imposed by North Korea.

Inter-state Communication and Risk Management on Non-Traditional Security Issues

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that inter-state communication at early stages are critical.

Yet, the political nature of the individual state involved dictates a particular mode of response to non-traditional security issues even if the impact may go well beyond its own borders.

The US-China dynamics after the outbreak of COVID-19 shows that great power rivalries easily overshadow the need for cooperation on non-traditional security issues.

   o This is “bad” news indeed for the world as a whole.

Despite the COVID-19 crisis, which deserves primary attention and top priority, traditional security issues continue to spring up (i.e. muscle-showing) in addition to tech-security (e.g. Huawei) and soft-power (e.g. Hong Kong) issues

The priority should be placed on inter-state cooperation on developing the cure and/or vaccine for the pandemic, not on where the virus came from, at least for now.

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CHUNG Jae Ho is Professor of International Relations and Director of the Program on US-China Relations at Seoul National University.
Increasing Necessity of International Cooperation and Persistent Tendency of States to Pursue Selfish National Interests: The Fundamental Dilemma in Contemporary International Relations Highlighted by the COVID-19 Pandemic

By KAMIYA Matake
June 2020

The world today faces a huge dilemma: the international community now requires strengthened policy coordination among states to address the new non-traditional security threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. For that purpose, it is necessary for each state to shelve, at least temporarily, pursuance of narrow, selfish national interests in order to prioritize consideration for the interests of the entire international society. In reality, however, there are countries which have not stopped pursuing selfish national interests and posing traditional security threats to others, even in the face of the rapid spread of COVID-19, skyrocketing death tolls worldwide and the prediction of the most consequential and historical economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Some experts of international relations predict that the world “after Corona” will be totally different from the world “before Corona.” Such a prediction is probably wrong. The world after Corona will likely show a continuity from the world before Corona on one important point. The central challenge for international relations, at least for the past several decades, has been to find ways to control the selfish pursuance of national interests by states in order to promote necessary international cooperation under a state of anarchy (lack of central government). In reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, this challenge has surfaced more sharply and visibly than in the pre-Corona era. It is likely that we will continue to face this challenge around the world after Corona.

North Korea is a typical example of a country that does not stop pursuing its narrow, selfish interests even as the rest of the world is suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 2, 2020, Pyongyang shot two short-range ballistic missiles, the first missile launch since the end of November 2020. Since then, it repeatedly launched both short-range ballistic and cruise missiles, making March 2020 the busiest single month for missile launches in the country’s history.¹ Despite such behavior by Pyongyang, US President Donald Trump sent a personal letter to North Korea’s leader Kim Jong Un and expressed his willingness to help North Korea battle against the novel coronavirus. In the same letter, Trump even explained his plan to “propel the relations between the two countries” to Kim.² However, North Korea’s shooting of any ballistic missiles, even short-ranged ones, represents a clear violation of the United Nations Security Council

resolutions. Such military activities by North Korea constitute a major destabilizing factor to East Asian regional security and a grave challenge for the global nuclear nonproliferation regime. From the Japanese standpoint, in particular, such shootings pose direct threats to Japan’s security and cannot be overlooked.

Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic is not presenting any opportunities to address the North Korean nuclear program. The international community has no alternative but to put collective pressure on Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles by utilizing traditional security measures, including alliances and the maintenance of economic and other sanctions against the DPRK led by the UN Security Council.

In the meantime, the challenge to the international community brought about by North Korea’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile problems may become more serious than before, because many countries around the world, in the midst of the ongoing pandemic, are now paying increasing attention to the necessity of enhancing their “strategic autonomy.” So far, the concept of strategic autonomy has been discussed mainly with regard to non-military fields such as health and economics. It should, however, not be overlooked that this concept may spill over to the military security field.

Japan and South Korea have judged that reliance on the US nuclear umbrella is a more sensible policy option for them than going nuclear, even in the face of increasing threats from North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missiles arsenal. However, if North Korea’s military provocations continue, and if the United States continues its lukewarm responses to the launches, calls for strategic autonomy to deal with North Korea’s threat may become stronger in both countries. It is likely that distrust of North Korea will be deepened in both societies, and the credibility of the United States as a protector of the two countries will be increasingly questioned. In that case, the possibility of South Koreans and even Japanese discussing the nuclear option more seriously cannot be denied, even though a vast majority in Japan still maintain strong anti-nuclear sentiment that originated from their historical experiences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In order to prevent such a possibility in becoming a reality, the international community—particularly the United States, China and Russia, in close cooperation with Japan and South Korea—should maintain a firm and uncompromising attitude toward Pyongyang until it begins to take concrete actions to start abandoning its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

Regrettably, the United States and China also have to be included in the list of the countries that have not stopped pursuing its narrow, selfish national interest as the world continues to suffer from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Trump administration continues to pursue “America First” even though international cooperation is more necessary today than ever. Without the world’s strongest power exercising a leadership role, the international cooperation to fight against the pandemic cannot be strong enough.
For East Asian countries, China’s behavior is even more problematic. Rhetorically, Beijing emphasizes the necessity of international cooperation to effectively tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, and maintains that China as a great power is ready to shoulder the responsibility to lead such international efforts. China stresses that mutual trust and mutual understanding among states is indispensable to promote international cooperation against the pandemic. However, the actual behavior of China is not consistent with its words.

While the pandemic that began in China was causing immeasurable damage to the entire world, China unilaterally declared the establishment of two new administrative districts, “Xisha” and “Nansha,” under the “Sansha” city to strengthen its control over the disputed South China Sea area. (Xisha and Nansha are the Chinese names for the Paracel and Spratly Islands.) China has also strengthened its provocative actions with its official vessels in the area around Japan’s Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Such actions have enhanced the distrust as well as the threat perception toward China from neighboring countries, including Japan.

If China wants to exercise a leadership role in the international efforts to fight against the ongoing pandemic, it is necessary for Beijing to create an international environment in which other countries find it attractive for them to cooperate with China, and Beijing can do this by shelving, at least temporarily, the pursuance of its own narrow national interests.

Besides the COVID-19 pandemic, the international community has been facing other serious non-traditional security threats, including global warming. The strengthening of international cooperation is indispensable to tackling such threats, and that requires the wisdom of every country to set aside its assertions of narrow national interests. The reality is, however, that it will be difficult to achieve this during the current pandemic, as it was during the pre-Corona era, and will continue to be difficult in the post-Corona world. During the past several decades, the leadership of the United States—the world’s strongest power—contributed to mitigating such difficulty. However, we currently live in a very unfortunate situation where neither of the two strongest powers in the world—the US and China—are ready or eligible to assume such a leadership role. This situation may continue for quite a while in the post-Corona world.

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*KAMIYA Matake is Professor of International Relations at the National Defense Academy of Japan.*
What are the major opportunities and challenges in addressing the North Korean nuclear program during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The major opportunities are the following:

1. **North Korea is not likely to upgrade the current levels of its nuclear and ICBM programs.**

   North Korea is unlikely to conduct additional nuclear tests and ICBM launches because the current stability benefits the DPRK. In the event of a new escalation on the Korean Peninsula caused by its own military actions, North Korea could lose the momentum gained from the US policy of pursuing bilateral dialogue with the North. However, ending the program is out of the question because, to the North Korean leadership, it is the only effective deterrence from US aggression, possible invasion and regime change. North Korea has demonstrated that it is capable of continuing to develop its small- and medium-range missiles program through a series of tactical guided missile launches in March and April 2020 despite the ongoing counter-COVID-19 measures.

2. **North Korea is more interested in food and health cooperation.**

   North Korea needs the following medical and technical assistance to treat COVID-19: testing equipment; medicine to treat flu-like symptoms and pneumonia; ventilators; etc. Additionally, North Korea may face greater food shortages this year than usual. Although China and Russia could provide some food aid, it is not guaranteed that the two countries will be capable of providing the majority of aid that the DPRK will need, as the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting food shortages has put food security under severe strain. This situation is unlikely to lead to North Korea bowing to any demands from countries with potential sources of aid, but it may be used to bring the DPRK back to having dialogues and multilateral channels of communication.

The major challenges are the following:

1. **The situation on the Korean Peninsula is unlikely to change before 2021.**

   Any positive changes are not likely due to two reasons. First, there is no active US-DPRK dialogue—the Trump administration is pre-occupied with the elections, and North Korea is inclined to wait until after the results are clear. If Trump wins, dialogue can be resumed if the contacts are facilitated at the highest level by the American side. If Biden wins, the new administration could dramatically harden its stance vis-à-vis the DPRK and end attempts to
resume dialogue. Given the uncertainty, North Korea is willing to wait until after the election results are clear. Second, a vaccine for COVID-19 is not likely to be available before the end of this year. Until there is a vaccine, North Korea will benefit from limiting its contacts with the outside world. Many countries are going to be more preoccupied with domestic agendas due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation is likely to remain at a standstill until at least early next year.

2. North Korea is likely to react to any threat of re-emergence of COVID-19 by closing down the country.

As a fully autocratic country with a largely Soviet-style economic system, North Korea has been very resilient to the challenge of COVID-19 through an extremely high level of societal mobilization and control. Security is habitually valued over economic development. Having survived many years of grave economic crises, the DPRK is much more capable of tackling the COVID-19 crisis compared to other countries with the same level of per capita income. It cannot be considered as a serious threat to the regime. Also, similar to the Soviet system, the DPRK enjoys a large number of fairly educated medical personnel and a generally fair level of sanitary measures. A high level of discipline assumes that the measures and restrictions are followed. However, North Korea dramatically lacks modern equipment and medicine. Drastic measures, including border closures, ceasing of all economic contacts with the outside world (reportedly including a drastic decline of cross-border illicit activity), quarantining of foreigners and cargo, etc., have demonstrated their effectiveness and a large-scale epidemic has been prevented. According to the Russian Embassy in Pyongyang, in mid-May the quarantine was eased and foreigners were allowed to go out in the city using face masks while abiding by other social distancing restrictions. Even if there is another epidemic, the DPRK is likely to repeat the same measures, locking down the country and restricting all contacts with foreigners. However, the number of deaths could be high due to the lack of medicine and equipment. Under such circumstances it will be impossible to address the nuclear issue.

The following could be proposed as foreign policy recommendations:

1. North Korea should receive medical assistance through the World Health Organization, UNICEF, Red Cross and other multilateral and bilateral channels. Sanctions should be eased or exemptions granted through the UN Security Council as the current sanctions regime makes it almost impossible for the DPRK to procure the necessary medical equipment and testing kits. As North Korea is de facto disconnected from the global financial system, it cannot legally acquire the same medical capabilities as other countries. In particular, the shortage/absence of testing equipment; medicine to treat flu-like symptoms and pneumonia; ventilators; etc. need to be addressed.

2. Countries should use the chance to address medical and food shortages and deliver aid as an opportunity to reestablish working channels of communication and multilateral

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dialogue with North Korea, which can be helpful to future discussions of security issues.

3. Prepare a number of negotiating options for North Korea in 2021 to address its nuclear and missile programs and security on the Korean Peninsula, such as: a phased scenario for the denuclearization and reduction of the DPRK missile program in exchange for a number of measures from the US and from other regional states, including establishing official relations and liaison offices, easing sanctions, etc.; several scenarios of limited denuclearization and reduction of the DPRK missile program (i.e. some steps that could be taken without providing the full list of all capabilities by North Korea) and reciprocal measures that could be taken by the US and other regional stakeholders—such as South Korea, Japan, China and Russia. Reciprocal measures may include preparing feasibility studies of joint economic projects to demonstrate the benefits of conducting joint market economic activity with North Korea—with the participation of South Korea, North Korea and Russia—alongside steps to ease sanctions or introduce sanction exemptions that will make these projects possible.

How can we prioritize communication and minimize risk on non-traditional security issues among the five sides?

- Amidst the rise of US-China strategic competition and a deep crisis in Russia-US relations, international cooperation on traditional security threats does not seem possible. However, combating non-traditional security issues is a common goal that should be collectively promoted as much as possible by other powers.

- We should employ ASEAN-centric institutions, such as ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-plus), to sustain multilateral dialogue, support ASEAN centrality and use it as the most inclusive platform for discussing and tackling non-traditional security issues in Asia.

- In addition, we should facilitate bilateral and minilateral dialogues between the states on reducing traditional and non-traditional security threats by establishing military hotlines (if non-existent).

- We should launch consultations on different levels (bilateral, minilateral, multilateral) to address the following issue areas:
  - Nonproliferation of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction, especially ones originating from North Korea;
o Countering terrorism and maintaining channels of communication regarding terrorist threats, especially in cooperation with ASEAN countries, aimed at preventing proliferation of terrorism-related groups in states like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Myanmar so that new terrorist hotspots do not emerge in Southeast Asia after the defeat of the Islamic State in the Middle East;

o Combating transnational crime, including cybercrime, especially in the area of medical equipment related to COVID-19 and critical infrastructure important for the functioning of regional societies;

o Addressing illegal fishing in territorial waters and exclusive economic zones of relevant states, such as by North Korean fishermen, including more contacts between the coast guards;

o Combating piracy in maritime East Asia and the Indo-Pacific in order to ensure freedom of open seas, freedom of navigation, and unimpeded trade flows;

o Preventing ecological catastrophes and degradation of maritime environment by promoting environment-friendly policies;

o Upgrading capacity and establishing multilateral cooperation in the sphere of disaster relief to help the Asian states suffering from natural disasters; and

o Establishing a multilateral dialogue to address food security and food shortages following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 that could help states establish a mechanism to procure and sell agricultural products in an easier way.

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The biggest immediate challenge to addressing the North Korean nuclear stalemate amidst COVID-19 is that the pandemic has reinforced a preexisting turn toward a focus on domestic problems and concerns. The December 2019 Fifth Plenum of the Workers’ Party of Korea revealed North Korea’s turn toward domestic priorities and dimming expectations for negotiation with the United States in 2020, while President Trump’s top priority in 2020 is securing a second presidential term. But COVID-19 has also generated new humanitarian concerns and pressures that might open up new opportunities for interaction as well as a basis for reframing opportunities for bilateral dialogue and exchanges between the United States and North Korea.

In the waning days of 2019, North Korea threatened to unveil a “new strategic weapon” if the United States failed to make the new concessions demanded by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Kim demanded US concessions as a prerequisite to renewed US-North Korea negotiations in his April 2019 Supreme People’s Assembly speech following the failed Trump-Kim Hanoi summit. After a single day of working level talks in Stockholm in October 2019, US Deputy Secretary of State Steven Biegun publicly called Kim’s end-of-year deadline an “artificial deadline” and invited North Korea to return to negotiations.

At the December 2019 fifth party plenum of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, Kim essentially refused Biegun’s offer, prioritizing economic self-help and continued military modernization as the mainstay of North Korea’s policy for 2020. At the plenum, Kim reiterated that North Korea would pursue its own path to guaranteeing its security independent of negotiations with the United States. That message was reiterated at a May 2019 expanded meeting of the Central Military Committee that reiterated the goal of nuclear deterrence and made changes in military personnel and procedures in pursuit of that objective.

While emphasizing the need for economic self-reliance to achieve a “frontal breakthrough” in the absence of prospects for relaxation of international sanctions, Kim articulated his decision to pursue a security-first policy. Although the need to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak and the upcoming US presidential election have reinforced Kim and Trump’s prioritization of domestic

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needs, mitigating the near-term likelihood of conflict, North Korea will likely continue its missile and nuclear development.

Kim Jong Un’s summitry diplomacy was premised on a détente with the United States, not denuclearization, while the United States sought a détente in exchange for North Korea’s denuclearization. But North Korea’s framing of US demands in the context of a perceived US hostile policy ignores the risk posed by an authoritarian leader of a weak state that relies solely on unconventional threats for its security could actually use nuclear weapons.

To highlight the global dimension of the nuclear threat while responding in a humanitarian fashion to the global pandemic, the United States should reframe North Korea’s nuclear program as a threat to international security by revitalizing a coordinated multilateral approach to the North Korean nuclear issue. The emergence of a global pandemic in fact provides an opportunity to move in this direction.

Given this situation, I recommend the following adjustments to US diplomatic strategy and opportunities for multilateral cooperation in the COVID-19 era, to be pursued in parallel with each other:

- Revitalize the UN role by proposing a standing dialogue among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5) plus Japan and South Korea. In light of the failure of bilateral summitry between Trump and Kim, the United States should use the UN Security Council to reframe the North Korea issue as a global security challenge, while also strengthening enforcement of the UN resolutions that North Korea continues to violate. Offering China and Russia a central role in a new diplomatic process involving the P5 along with Japan and South Korea would give those states an opportunity to voice their concerns and shape a regionally acceptable solution in exchange for more active enforcement of the sanctions regime against North Korea. It would also compartmentalize the North Korea issue from rising major power rivalry that could otherwise stymie effective North Korea-focused cooperation.

The first stage of the P5+2 talks would seek to rebuild a region-wide consensus against North Korea’s nuclear program among the seven parties and limit the risks of North Korean provocations while magnifying the consequences of the North’s continued violation of UN resolutions. The dialogue should go further than previous North Korea-focused talks by building out a concrete pathway of benefits and commitments from neighboring states, which North Korea would earn if it denuclearizes and experiences regional economic integration and the easing of its longstanding security concerns. Such a package would concretely present North Korea with the best multilateral offer it can expect through diplomatic negotiations, while reinforcing an international consensus in favor of North Korean denuclearization. After completing an agreed-upon concrete denuclearization-and-peace package, the P5+2 would begin the second stage of the process by inviting North Korea to rejoin a revamped multilateral negotiating process contingent on North Korea’s reiteration of its support for the denuclearization-and-peace process.
Utilize international agencies and bilateral channels to meet immediate humanitarian and public health needs surrounding the global pandemic and impact of COVID-19. The United States and UN have relaxed sanctions on North Korea around humanitarian and public health needs to respond to COVID-19. Such an approach should enable international and humanitarian agencies to provide North Korea with necessary supplies and equipment to support North Korea’s national efforts to contain the disease. North Korea’s quarantine itself has increased economic pressure on the country more effectively than sanctions, but the pandemic provides an opportunity to revise the multilateral sanctions framework both to secure greater multilateral enforcement where needed and to provide humanitarian assistance to both mitigate the effects of sanctions and strengthen public health capacity within North Korea.

Improve the effectiveness of US sanctions against North Korea. To block North Korea from pursuing alternatives to diplomatic negotiations and further isolate and strengthen pressure on North Korean leadership, the US Treasury Department, backed by a reinvigorated intelligence collection and analysis, should refine US sanctions against North Korea from enforcement of sectoral bans on trade to a granular approach targeting internal regime enablers to more effectively target high-level North Korean sanctions violators, mitigate the unintended humanitarian costs of sanctions, counter the North’s evasion efforts, and address other illicit activities, including cyber fraud. The United States should commission a private study on the micro-level effect of sectoral sanctions under UN Security Council resolutions to improve the effectiveness of the existing sanctions regime. The Security Council should likewise update its sanctions regime on North Korea.

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