

France – Korea Second Strategic Dialogue: Waiting for the Singapore Summit

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Focus on the DPRK nuclear crisis

The second France-Korean Strategic Dialogue was held at the Maison de la Recherche in Paris on 28 and 29 May, 2018. It was organized by the Foundation for Strategic Research (French acronym FRS, France) and the Research Institute for National Security Affairs (RINSA, RoK). Both institutes had organized a first round of talks in Seoul the year before, as a sustainable exercise of reflection between the two countries, bringing together national experts willing to share their thoughts on strategic relations between states.

This year again, the DPRK nuclear crisis was the main target of this second exercise during which participants had the opportunity to analyse the Euro-Atlantic and the North East Asian strategic stages as to provide thoughts on the way forward. The dialogue was organized in five main working sessions widening out from the assessment of the DPRK programmes after the nuclear and ballistic testing campaigns of 2017 to the US extended deterrence measures after the release of the *Nuclear Posture Review* in February 2018. Each session was introduced by two speakers. The forum was strictly driven by the Chatham House rule (no attribution of statements and comments), as follows:

1. North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities and strategies
2. Impact of North Korea's crisis: Internal situation and regional strategic stability

3. Engaging the DPRK in 2018: Purpose, format, timing, agendas, and negotiation strategy
4. Verifying and enforcing a potential agreement with the DPRK
5. The US extended deterrence after the *Nuclear Posture Review*: Asian and European perspectives

Engaging the DPRK again

When looking back at the negotiating process with the DPRK from the 1991 denuclearization agreement between Seoul and Pyongyang to forego uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing, to the US-North Korea “leap day” agreement of February 2012, which was meant to suspend enrichment, nuclear tests and long-range missile launches, it could be argued that all negotiating options have already been attempted to address the DPRK nuclear threat. Paved with broken agreements and bad faith, this negotiating process appeared in 2017 to be a way to save time and to advance the nuclear and ballistic programmes of the regime.

A first lesson which had been already shared by all the participants of the dialogue last year is the relentless determination of the Kim family for three generations. It was agreed that such a determination must be taken into account as a prerequisite for any future agreement on the nuclear programme of the country.

Enforcement and verification of a future agreement

Along with military cooperation between allies in the region, wide-ranging sanctions, and non-proliferation mechanisms such as export controls, the United States engaged in two major diplomatic initiatives to have North Korea abandon its nuclear weapons efforts in the past twenty-five years:

1. Faced with North Korea's announced intent to withdraw from the NPT in 1993 the United States and North Korea signed an Agreed Framework: Pyongyang committed to freezing its illicit plutonium weapons program in exchange for aid. Nevertheless, North Korea cut all seals and disrupted IAEA surveillance equipment on its facilities and materials and ordered IAEA inspectors out of the country after December 2002.
2. The second major diplomatic effort started with the launch of the Six-Party Talks in August 2003. The talks arrived at critical breakthroughs in 2005, when North Korea pledged to abandon "all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs" and return to the NPT. In 2007, the parties agreed on a series of steps to implement the 2005 agreement. Following disagreements over verification though, the talks broke down in 2009.

These past events illustrate as two reminders that enforcement and verification are key and fragile at the same time. Since a far-reaching lack of trust still characterizes relations with the DPRK after almost twenty-five years of broken agreements, it was shared that enforcement and verification of a future deal aimed at stopping the nuclear programme would have to be particularly specific and intrusive. All the participants agreed that the verification challenge stands at the heart of the DPRK nuclear issue. But it was also argued that verification and enforcement cannot be addressed *in abstracto* since such processes

fully depend on the type of agreement being considered. It would be premature to address in too many details the verification and enforcement process at this point then.

According to the UN Security council resolutions, denuclearizing North Korea means Complete, Verifiable and Irreversible Denuclearization (acronym CVID), even if there still is a lack of common understanding of what Denuclearization means. Denuclearization, disarmament and dismantlement are three different concepts at the political, legal and operational levels which will need to be specifically defined before being agreed upon.

The argument that complete denuclearization is not a real option for negotiation for the time being was shared by many. The CVID model was designed in the beginning of the 2000s when the DPRK was not a nuclear capable State. It could be said that it is outdated or unrealistic at present, since the challenge of verifying that North Korea is on the way to disarmament has become far greater than it was fifteen years ago. Indeed, it was recalled that twenty to twenty-five nuclear sites all over the country, six nuclear tests and dozens of ballistic tests make a very special approach necessary to verify whatever agreement is implemented on a path towards future CVID, which may not happen for the foreseeable future. In any case, the dismantlement process would last more than fifteen years. The so-called destruction of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site on 24 May 2018 by the North Korean regime in a move towards reduction of regional tensions was described by some participants more as propaganda than a real disarmament initiative based on a verification process.

From nuclear freeze to nuclear capping

In an effort to clarify what could prove a realistic agreement between the DPRK and the US, the concepts of nuclear freeze and nuclear

capping were proposed and discussed.

China's so-called approach of "freeze-for-freeze", whereby the DPRK would suspend its testing activities in exchange for a suspension in US-RoK military exercises, the inception of which seemed to be designed by the 27 April 2018 Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula, was examined. According to the document, the two Koreas first pledged to "fully [implement] all existing agreements and declarations adopted between the two sides thus far", which would imply a range of nuclear agreements since the denuclearization commitment of 1991. Second, "South and North Korea agreed to carry out disarmament in a phased manner", which opens the door to a denuclearization process rather than a CVID in the short run (John Bolton's "Libyan model"). Third, as the document stated, "South and North Korea confirmed the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. South and North Korea shared the view that the measures being initiated by North Korea are very meaningful and crucial for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and agreed to carry out their respective roles and responsibilities in this regard": this mutual commitment recognizes the importance of the nuclear test-freeze by the North and opens the door to a reciprocal initiative by the South which would give substance to the "freeze-to-freeze" approach in the short term.

It was also proposed that the first step in a suspension-to-suspension process could address a ban on nuclear technology exports by the DPRK, along with a freeze on long-range missiles activities (development and testing).

If an interim objective could be reached as a more ambitious step than a simple suspension of testing, it would need an agreement to cap all activities meant to upgrade, to deploy, to increase readiness, and to improve survivability of all the

forces (nuclear payloads and delivery vehicles). Such an approach would constrain all the militarization of forces. Then verifiable qualitative and quantitative limits on further development of weapons and delivery vehicles would have to be agreed upon. Such a capping agreement would also mean more effective monitoring and enforcement of the import of banned equipment and material of proliferation concern. Points of entry in the North's territory would need to be controlled effectively by a specific mechanism and a team of independent custom officers. Pyongyang would have to clarify and to allow for verification of the capabilities it has achieved in the relevant categories of activities at the very start of a deal. An initial declaration would be a necessity and a challenge at the same time, which means that any undeclared activity would have to be stated in advance as constituting a future violation of the deal. Basically five requirements would need to be fulfilled for a capping agreement to be worth considering:

1. The United States should clarify the details of the DPRK's commitment to ending nuclear and missile tests and obtain it as a formal commitment. The 24 May so-called Punggye-ri destruction as a transparency measure would not be accepted as a sufficient mechanism.
2. The United States should insist to include all delivery vehicles with a range of over 300 km and a 500 kg payload.
3. Such a ban would apply to satellite launchers.
4. North Korea's nuclear reactors would have to be shut down.
5. The transfer of missile or nuclear technology to other countries or groups, as well as technical assistance to other countries or groups would also have to be banned under the agreement.

Some significant caveats were developed to qualify the "capping agreement" approach:

1. Theoretically speaking, to monitor and to verify a nuclear freeze and phased dismantlement seems to be the right place to begin such a process. But it is exactly what was claimed in 2003 after the DPRK's withdrawal from the NPT. Then it was argued that such an approach failed in the past.
2. Even a capping agreement would also need a mechanism to access suspected clandestine sites: the DPRK has never agreed to such access to date.
3. Nobody knows how many nuclear weapons are currently operational or under construction (from 20 to 60 depending on sources). Nobody knows where all the nuclear facilities are. It can be argued that an agreement based on warheads could be too difficult to verify.
4. Could a more realistic approach be to focus on ballistic capabilities, rather than on nuclear capabilities, like was done with the US-USSR arms control process in the 1990s?

Next steps

Bearing in mind the complexity of the denuclearization issue in the DPRK as thoroughly addressed by the second France-Korean Strategic Dialogue, the US-DPRK declaration which was signed by President Trump and Chairman Kim on 12 June 2018 in Singapore is not one that can be easily considered to be effective. At the moment, it appears that the two countries have only committed to a working process towards the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. In a nutshell, such a wording can mean anything or nothing. If one considers the glass half-full it is worth mentioning that the Singapore summit is the start of a new negotiating process. But if one considers the glass half empty, it must be argued that no agreement has been so vague since the

inception of the nuclear crisis in 1993.

One particular assessment factor will be critical in the near future: The extent to which the denuclearization process will be considered sufficient by China, Russia, and the RoK in the first place to start lifting the sanctions against the DPRK. In that respect, it must be said that the most recent declarations by China, the RoK and the US after the Singapore summit have proved rather different and competitive.

The nuclear challenge in the DPRK used to be a proliferation crisis in the 1990's. It has since become a strategic crisis for the region and for the international community. The issue may have become to date: Can the final objective towards a denuclearization of the country still be realistic? Will the international community be willing to, and be able to live with, a nuclear DPRK and to what extent is this situation manageable? Is a small nuclear DPRK monitored by arms control agreements acceptable? Or not? To be continued... 



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