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# Disarm North Korea, through talks

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*North Korea's nuclear ambitions are best tackled through diplomatic methods.*

North Korea's third nuclear test on February 12 has severely challenged regional security and the missile and nuclear non-proliferation regime. This test, coming after successful firing of long-range missiles, has brought a new threat to the US.

South Korea and Japan face the prospect of a nuclear-armed neighbour with whom they have troubled relations. The UN Security Council was once again shown up as a "paper tiger". The US and EU are considering a new set of sanctions to bring North Korea to heel.

It is important to understand why this impoverished country of 23 million, with huge conventional armed forces, has gone down the nuclear road. The seeds were sown in the fifties and nurtured by a series of failed negotiations, leading to the present bitter harvest.

## Background story

North Korea first faced the threat of nuclear weapons when the US unilaterally abrogated Article 13(d) of the 1953 Armistice agreement and deployed nuclear weapons for the first time on the Korean peninsula in 1958.

The State department's view that this step was illegal was overruled by the Pentagon and the then US president. This step was justified on the grounds of deterring North Korea from an invasion of the South, with budgetary limitations on the strength of US forces there.

In the face of this threat, North Korea sought unsuccessfully to obtain nuclear technology from USSR and China. In 1985, it began operating an indigenously constructed Magnox type reactor (based on declassified data on the reactor at Calder Hall, used in the UK for Plutonium production) that could operate using natural Uranium.

In 1985, it joined the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) under Soviet pressure and in 1992, agreed to put its nuclear installations under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards.

In 1994, it signed a key framework agreement with the US under which it agreed not to complete two more large Magnox reactors and dismantle its nuclear programme in exchange for two civilian light water nuclear reactors and economic assistance.

However, the agreement ran into implementation problems, opposition within the US Congress and wrangling over budgets, and eventually broke down in 2002 during the Bush administration, which designated North Korea as a member of the 'axis of evil". North Korea resumed its fissile material production, and withdrew from the IAEA and the NPT.

## Nuclear tests

Several rounds of six-party (the US, Russia, China, Japan and the two Koreas) talks since 2003 failed to yield results. Meanwhile, North Korea carried out nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009, using Plutonium separated from used fuel from its graphite reactor (using natural Uranium) at Yongbyon. Pakistan reportedly transferred centrifuge-based Uranium enrichment technology. In turn, North Korea supplied missile technology to Pakistan and several other countries such as Iran, undermining the entire western missile and non-proliferation regime.

North Korea's nuclear programme is now poised for a major take-off, unless diplomatic negotiations can be put on track. It has about 4 million tonnes of high-grade Uranium deposits and is developing its enrichment programme. It has announced further nuclear tests to develop a miniaturised warhead. It is rapidly extending the range and accuracy of its missiles to reach the US land mass.

It is suspected of collaborating with Iran and supporting the latter's nuclear and missile programmes. It has massive conventional forces — fifth largest army of 1.2 million, over 4,000 tanks, 1,700 aircraft, and 900 ships, making any military intervention impossible.

## Diplomacy is best option

Western efforts are focused on tightening the package of sanctions to cut off North Korea's access to financial institutions, and strangle its economy, cut off fuel and food supplies and thereby force North Korea to negotiate.

The assessment is that the one-party regime could be de-legitimised and weakened by its inability to meet the economic and development needs of its people.

However, this depends crucially on the sanctions being rigorously implemented by China, which fears a collapse of the regime and influx of refugees.

Partial sanctions would at best be ineffective, while motivating North Korea to draw closer to Iran and further develop its military capability to face "US hostility".

It seems, therefore, that the diplomatic track is the only way to move towards defusing the growing crisis.

The six-party talks must be started at the earliest, with a view to restoring the key 1994 framework agreement, this time with agreed implementation measures. US-North Korea talks should also be resumed, without preconditions on either side.

In 2012, secret talks between US and North Korean officials were held, in the wake of change in leadership in North Korea. Easing of sanctions on North Korea could be linked to progress in these talks.

If diplomacy fails, the consequences could be severe and costly. North Korea could resume work on two more graphite reactors of 50 MWe and 200 Mwe and increase the supply of Plutonium.

It could further build up its uranium enrichment programme as Iran has done, arguing that it needs to develop nuclear power. It could further refine its arsenal of chemical weapons, and its missile capability.

In this situation, pressures on Japan and South Korea to develop matching programmes would increase. This could raise the potential of maritime and other disputes in the region to flare up into armed conflict. Under sanctions pressures, North Korea could collaborate more closely with Iran.

While the US and EU are putting together tighter sanctions, the importance of resuming the alternative diplomatic track should not be lost sight of. China would certainly welcome and support a diplomatic solution and it should use its influence to bring this about before it is too late.

(The author is former ambassador to Cuba and Greece.)

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