



Security on the Korean Peninsula: The Latest from RUSI

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A flurry of recent activity on the North Korean diplomatic front has kept researchers in the Proliferation and Nuclear Policy programme at RUSI extremely busy over the past few months. Their latest research findings indicate that policymakers should focus on pursuing small gains over a grand bargain, as well as balancing Tokyo's long-term view and scepticism of China with Seoul's focus on short-term security guarantees

The situation on the Korean peninsula is best understood as a complex and multi-faceted issue to be managed, rather than a set of security challenges to be solved. There is more value in small gains on the peninsula than there is in grand bargains; and sustained diplomatic processes have the potential to establish channels of communication that offer the means to rapidly exploit opportunities when they arise. Consequently, policymakers should work to develop and systematise engagement between North and South Korea, the US and Japan, such that constructive interaction between the four parties benefits from the impetus and authority provided by periodic leadership summits, but which does not require these summits to continue.

Throughout 2018, RUSI has engaged with prominent governmental and non-governmental experts from China, Japan, South Korea and the US to explore views on North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes and the prospects for the current process of engagement with North Korea. This research has uncovered insights into the views and preferences of key actors on the Korean peninsula, and suggests opportunities for advancing the diplomatic process while protecting key alliances and negotiating capital. Based on data gathered from semi-structured elite interviews held in Seoul, Tokyo and London, and less formal engagements in Beijing, this analysis reflects the state of play of the security and diplomatic

situation in the region. Thoughts on near-term confidence-building measures are based on a structured analysis of North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, which benefited from consultation with a small group of experts with experience in other nuclear weapons programmes. Combined with RUSI's substantial research background in North Korean weapons programmes, and participation in several Track II dialogue activities with key players in the Korean nuclear issue, the work of RUSI researchers forms a sound basis on which to form well-balanced policy.

The broad findings of RUSI research in this area can be summarised by five key themes: perceptions of broader security issues in the current diplomatic process; diverging priorities between South Korea and Japan; the perceived role of North Korean Leader Kim Jong-un; the future of North Korea's nuclear programme; and the intersecting timelines of the different parties.

A New Focus on Security Issues

Interlocutors in Seoul and Tokyo, including those sceptical of current approaches towards North Korea, almost universally welcomed the link now explicitly drawn between the broader peninsular security environment and discussions on the nuclear and missile issue. Food aid and economic concessions, which have formed substantial parts of the offer to Pyongyang in the past, do not directly

address the driving forces behind North Korea's development of nuclear weapons. Seoul should take note of the surprising positivity in Tokyo towards its current approach's focus on security, given the tendency of South Korea to assume that Japan is entirely uncomfortable with its strategy. While it is true that Tokyo fears that too many security concessions will be granted to North Korea before concrete efforts to alter its nuclear and missile programmes have been verified, there is broader acceptance that at least some movement on regional security issues will be necessary early in the process. Japan's lack of direct engagement to date is more directly attributable to the domestic political constraints imposed by the [unresolved abductees issue](#), and to its recognition that it is not a primary player on Korean security issues; many in South Korea appear to mistake this as animus towards the process as a whole.

Additional South Korean and US action on security issues will be necessary if progress is to be made. For now, South Korea and the US have granted greater concessions to North Korea than have been publicly offered in return. But since these efforts have not yet compromised regional security, they remain reversible and can be expanded if seen to be advantageous. South Korea, Japan and China are positively disposed towards regional arms control in principle, but the complexity of their interlocking capabilities and interests make this an extremely challenging goal. As such, there is substantial



scope for, and interest in, new military confidence- and security-building measures on the peninsula.

Diverging Views in Tokyo and Seoul

Despite convergence on the centrality of regional security, substantial differences remain between Seoul and Tokyo in several areas. Tokyo is particularly concerned by North Korea's intermediate-range ballistic missiles and the decoupling effect of its intercontinental ballistic missiles, for example: with the potential for North Korea to target the continental US, allies could begin to doubt Washington's commitment to extended deterrence guarantees. From the South Korean perspective, the North's conventional capabilities – particularly long-range artillery and massed special operations forces – are more of a concern. More fundamentally, Japan takes a longer-term view of the situation on the Korean peninsula, identifying China as the key adversary. Most South Korean analyses address shorter timeframes, and either neglect the Chinese dimension or simply feel that it is less important. While it is entirely understandable that South Korea should emphasise factors relating to the North, the longer-term

challenges posed by China are generally underestimated in Seoul.

The Role of Kim Jong-un

The analyses encountered by RUSI researchers in Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing and – to a lesser extent – Washington reveal a surprisingly strong emphasis on perceived differences between Kim Jong-un and his father. There is a widespread opinion that Kim is smarter and more flexible than his father, and, by inclination, is more focussed on economic concerns than security issues. Most also felt that he has a longer-term view of the future of the Korean peninsula and his place in it. Consequently, Kim is judged to be more likely to compromise on the nuclear issue. However, this analysis is problematic in two main ways.

First, there is little reliable evidence on which to base it. Analyses of Kim's personality and interests solely based on observations of his highly performative public appearances should be treated with extreme caution. Second, this personalisation of the issue neglects the influence, or indeed the existence, of internal regime dynamics. There is little dependable insight into the relationships among power-bases that Kim would need to satisfy. Therefore,

it is difficult to know how free Kim is to pursue objectives with which others in Pyongyang disagree. This characterisation of Kim that RUSI researchers encountered may still be correct, but in the absence of stronger evidence, it serves as a poor basis for policymaking.

Nuclear Futures

While there is broad acceptance among all major actors that North Korea is increasingly likely to retain some of its nuclear and missile capabilities, a clear agreement on what this could reasonably look like is lacking. On North Korea's nuclear future, the only area in which there appears to be anything approaching agreement is the issue of transparency by North Korea. Most analysts indicate that a complete declaration of its nuclear and missile programmes is a highly desirable, possibly even necessary, early step. A complete rollback of the country's nuclear programme on the other hand is vanishingly unlikely, as North Korea is likely to retain a latent nuclear weapons capability even in the event of a declared rollback.

Insisting on a complete declaration may therefore be counterproductive, causing more opportunities to lose

trust than to build it. North Korea would inevitably conceal aspects of its programme, leading, as it has in the past, to a collapse in the diplomatic process. Instead, the target should be a declaration that is as complete as possible, to be updated over time. A minimum baseline would be an update of the [declaration provided by North Korea in 2008](#) as part of the Six Party Talks, which reported the size of fissile material stockpiles, but excluded their locations. This could be complemented by reciprocal familiarisation and information exchange visits between the US and North Korea, and by the early engagement of the International Atomic Energy Agency or other relevant bodies as technical observers.

A useful short-term focus could be to box in the North Korean nuclear programme by seeking a ceasure of activities that can be effectively verified through optical satellite imagery, and thus not requiring on-site inspection. This would require a formalisation of the pause on missile and nuclear testing at one end of the nuclear proliferation process, and pausing uranium mining and milling activities at the other, as well as pausing many significant activities at the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Centre, North Korea's main nuclear facility. Further down the line, a strategy for successful rollback might focus first on less sensitive areas such as mining and milling, prioritising the stemming of North Korea's nuclear materials supply at their source and limiting future expansion, if a cap on more sensitive operations remains in place. This could be allied with peer-to-peer dialogues between nuclear specialists on less-sensitive topics, such as the use of radioisotopes in medicine, agriculture and industry, or nuclear safety and security, which would be valuable to Pyongyang but would also help build understanding of its nuclear programme and tacit capabilities.

Time Pressures

The [current suspension of joint military exercises](#) between South Korea and the US is not a simple military risk reduction or confidence-building measure. It imposes increasingly severe risk of capability degradation on

US–South Korean joint forces over time. RUSI's research indicates that losing two exercise cycles in a row would lead to serious interoperability problems, which would therefore be around eighteen months to two years from now. The absence of the usual [Ulchi Freedom Guardian](#) command post exercise this year has already dealt some damage, and another serious capability hit would arise if the combined [Key Resolve/Foal Eagle](#) exercises were not run in spring or summer 2019. Planning for these exercises must begin approximately six months in advance. In other words, a decision will have to be made very soon as to whether planning for these exercises – which has also been suspended – is to restart.

A complete rollback of North Korea's nuclear programme is vanishingly unlikely

There are also political time pressures to consider. In the US, midterm elections in November may alter the current administration's ability to act as it wishes, and US President Donald Trump will face re-election in 2020. If re-elected, he may outlast South Korean leader Moon Jae-in, who will leave office in 2022. Neither can play the long game as Kim Jong-un or Chinese President Xi Jinping can, but equally Kim may well prefer to seek a deal with the Trump administration than with whatever comes after it – and the US has repeatedly messaged North Korea in public and private that this deal must be done by January 2021 (despite [recent signs](#) that US timelines may in fact be more flexible). The key question is whether North Korea will pursue a lasting deal in this timeframe or, as is more likely, will seek to use the inter-Korean dialogue to create facts on the ground that insulate it from the risk of US military action.

Before the end of the year we are likely to see another meeting between Trump and Kim, potentially to be announced before the US midterm elections and held after them, where

all these issues will be at play. If the US pursues a maximalist approach on denuclearisation, it is likely to be disappointed. If it fails to secure significant concessions in exchange for the gradual capability degradation to which joint US and South Korean military forces are being subjected, then its future leverage will further diminish. An appropriate way forward would be to retain the objective of denuclearisation in North Korea while acknowledging that there should be two short term priorities. First, the US should look to sustain meaningful dialogue and limit nuclear risks through a broad programme of [military](#) and [nuclear](#) confidence-building measures, which should not simply be gifts to North Korea but should instead be truly two-sided co-operative measures. Second, the US should prioritise efforts to restrict the future expansion of the nuclear and missile programmes through as deep a programme of freezing and capping capabilities as possible, rather than the attention-grabbing but ultimately problematic idea of removing existing North Korean nuclear weapons without first understanding the scope of the programme that produced them.

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The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation, the Korea Foundation and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office in funding the various research activities that contributed to this article and the policy brief on which it is based. The views expressed in this article are the authors', and do not necessarily reflect those of RUSI or any other institution.