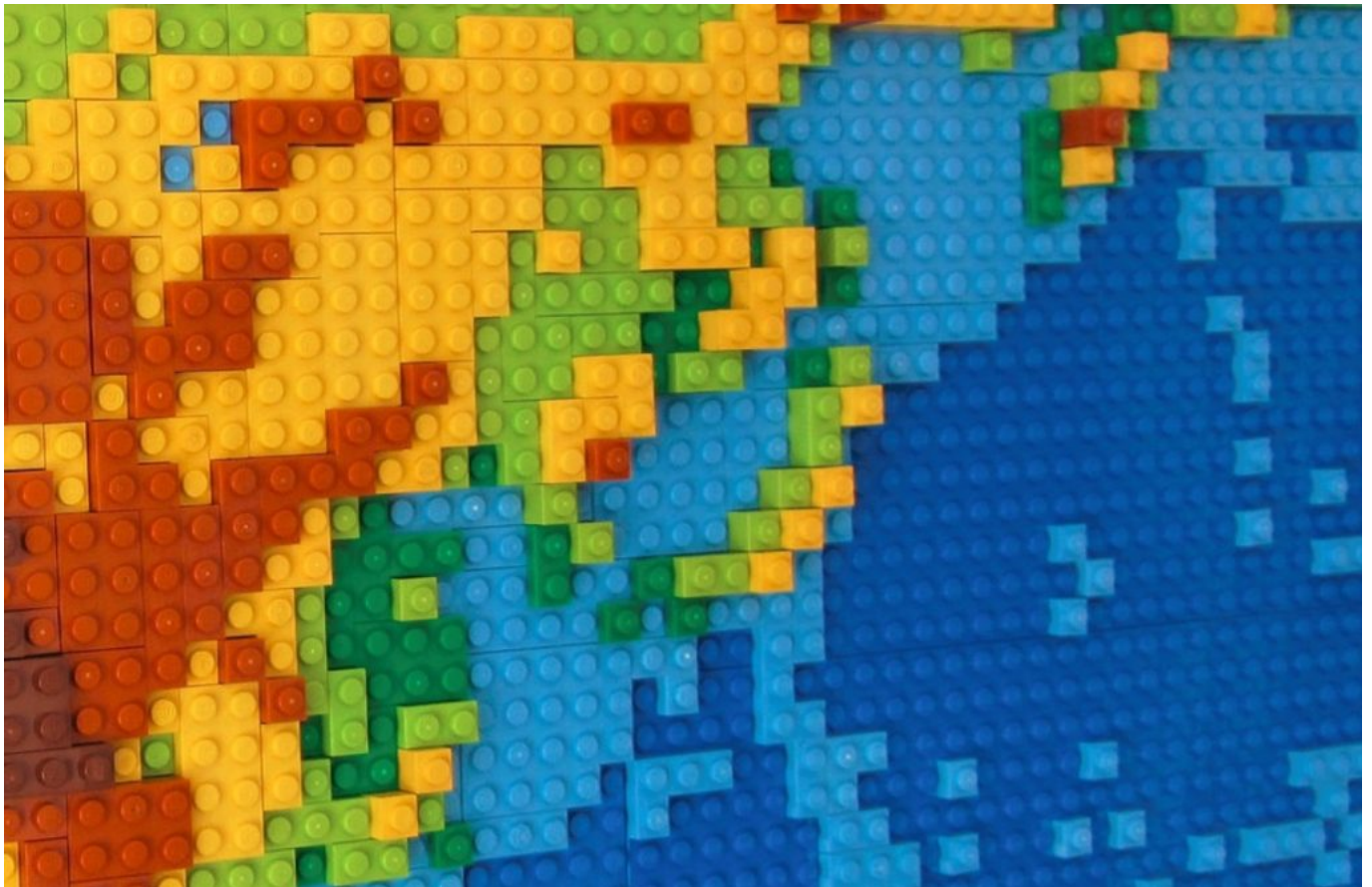




FROM ENEMIES TO SECURITY PARTNERS: PATHWAYS TO DENUCLEARIZATION IN KOREA



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I. INTRODUCTION

In this essay, the authors examine the pros and cons of shifting from enmity to a security partnership with the DPRK in which US Forces Korea might play “a pivot-deterrent role between the two Koreas as well as a stabilizing role in the regional security environment; and develops trilateral cooperative and collaborative security relationships with the Korean People’s Army and the South Korean defense force via a transformed mission for UN Command.”

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Banner Image: Lego map of East Asia from [dirks LEGO world map 10 asia here](#)

II. NAPSNET POLICY FORUM BY MORTON HALPERIN, PETER HAYES, THOMAS PICKERING, LEON SIGAL, PHILIP YUN

FROM ENEMIES TO SECURITY PARTNERS: PATHWAYS TO DENUCLEARIZATION IN KOREA

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Summary

In this essay, the authors examine the viability of a possible North Korean *quid pro quo* for its complete nuclear disarmament and the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, that is, the DPRK’ possible demand that the United States commit to a security alliance with the DPRK to overcome sixty five years of unrelenting mutual hostility. They conclude that it is difficult to conceive of the United States embracing the DPRK to this extent because of the antithetical values at the core of US and North Korean political, social and economic institutions, but also because doing so might alienate its South Korean and Japanese allies, and motivate China to withhold crucial support for the denuclearization deal—especially its financing of infrastructure in the DPRK. Instead, they suggest

that the United States explore the possibility of a “security partnership” with the DPRK in which US Forces Korea plays a pivot-deterrent role between the two Koreas as well as a stabilizing role in the regional security environment; and develops trilateral cooperative and collaborative security relationships with the Korean People’s Army and the South Korean defense force via a transformed mission for UN Command. A security partnership between the United States and the DPRK also implies that the United States and China create a comprehensive regional security framework in Northeast Asia, including a variety of mechanisms to implement a denuclearization deal such as a regional nuclear weapons-free zone.

Strategic Stakes

On multiple occasions, North Korea has committed to “complete denuclearization.” Yet skeptics are convinced it will never give up all its nuclear weapons. Current differences over nuclear diplomacy with North Korea reprises a fundamental policy debate that has raged on within the United States for almost 30 years – one that at its core boils down to three questions: (1) is North Korea willing to give up all its nuclear weapons and weapons programs and submit to high-confidence verification; (2) if so, what does North Korea need to give them in return; and (3) are the United States, South Korea and others politically willing to provide what North Korea asks for?

The answer is we don’t know for sure. But we do have a way to find out because American and South Korean officials can talk on an extended basis with only person who really matters in North Korea, Kim Jong Un. And most importantly, as long as we engage in diplomatic give-and-take and keep our commitments, we can track if North Korea actions match whatever they say they will do.

Talks with North Korea can and must be viewed as a rare opportunity – one we have not had in years – to determine if the North Korean nuclear weapons question can be resolved diplomatically, or if we must take another approach. In short, it is a crucial moment to test the hypothesis that denuclearization through negotiation is possible.

Speculation in Washington has tended to assume that what North Korea wants is aid or investment, even a Marshall plan to boost its economy, or recognition as a nuclear weapons state. Those of a more suspicious cast of mind warn the North seeks the end of the US alliance with South Korea, abandonment of the nuclear umbrella, withdrawal of US forces, even unification of Korea by force. Others think it will be satisfied with security assurances against US attack. .

By contrast, the authors of this paper think that Pyongyang has something much more strategic in mind and it is important to find out if that is so. Our surmise, based on two and a half decades of informal discussions with senior North Korean officials is that it wants to counter the growing military and economic might of China by seeking an end to enmity – what they call the US “hostile policy” – with the United States, as well as with South Korea, and Japan.^[1] That, they say, has been the Kim’s aim ever since 1988 when Kim Il Sung, who had played off China and the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War, reached out to all three in anticipation of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the rise of China.

If the past is any guide, the DPRK ultimately may want a full-fledged alliance with the United States like the one with South Korea. This will surprise many.^[2] but Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has hinted at a willingness to do just that: “We want to achieve a fundamentally different strategic relationship between our two countries.”^[3] Again, how can anyone be sure what Kim wants? Sustained negotiation and faithful implementation is the only way to find out.

That possibility raises the question, is an alliance the best way for the United States to assure its security and that of its allies in the region? Or, is there an in-between alternative – short of an

alliance but no longer outright enemies – such as “security partners”? And would the United States countenance such a relationship with a regime that it regards not only as dangerous, but also odious in the extreme?

North Korea As US Ally?

What better way for North Korea to be secure against its powerful near neighbor than to ally with a distant United States? DPRK diplomats have long spoken of Washington as an ally in informal contacts with Americans. North Korean military representatives even hinted at that possibility in the early 1990s in military-to-military talks at Panmunjom. And Kim Yong Sun broached the subject with Undersecretary of State Arnold Kanter at the first high-level talks between the two nations in January 1992.

An alliance would certainly address the DPRK’s desire for security and a hedge against Chinese overreach and Japanese resurgence. It would unambiguously spell an end to what Pyongyang calls US “hostile policy.” Holding out the prospect of an alliance would constitute the most compelling inducement for Pyongyang to undertake truly “complete denuclearization.”

An alliance does have serious downsides, however.

The idea that North Korea may seek an alliance with the United States seems lost on most of the American foreign policy establishment, never mind the news media, and is highly unlikely to gain a favorable reception on Capitol Hill, which would have to approve such an arrangement. And a close bilateral security relationship would mean legitimating an autocratic and brutal North Korean regime.

And what of South Korea? North Koreans have said you can have two allies at the same time. Conservatives in South Korea are not likely to regard that prospect with equanimity. Nor is Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, who has resisted negotiations by anyone with North Korea. Opposition in Seoul and Tokyo may prove difficult for the administration to overcome, given the lack of enthusiasm around Washington.

A reversal of alliances by North Korea, especially if US troops remain as guarantor on the peninsula, would alter the balance of power in Northeast Asia. That is likely to arouse suspicions, if not outright antagonism in China, which will not enhance security for anyone in the region. Xi Jinping’s repeated meetings with Kim Jong Un likely underscored China’s concerns about such a radical shift. Russia is also likely resent being left out of any solution.

Given the downside risks, is there a better way to accommodate the concerns of other regional players and enhance the security of all?

A Comprehensive Security Solution

Although the DPRK wants to negotiate denuclearization bilaterally with the United States, a comprehensive security approach would necessarily involve all the regional players in parallel negotiations at an appropriate time and assure that their security concerns are addressed.

What would a comprehensive settlement look like? It has six inter-locking essential elements, most of which were agreed in the September 2005 Six-Party Joint Statement but never carried out:

1. Begin a three-party peace process to replace the Korean Armistice with a peace declaration, committing to negotiate a peace treaty or to establish what the September 2005 Joint Statement refers to as a “peace regime.”

2. Declare non-hostility and move to normalize relations.
3. Gradually relax sanctions over time.
4. Provide humanitarian assistance to the DPRK and economic and energy aid, especially aid which benefits the whole region by completing many types of energy, telecom, logistics, transport, mobility, trading, financial networks that link the land-bridge from Eurasia to the ROK and Japan via North Korea.
5. Set up a Six Party Northeast Asia Security Council.
6. Establish a nuclear weapons free-zone (NWFZ) in which to re-establish DPRK's non-nuclear commitment in a legally binding manner that provides a framework to dismantle its nuclear facilities and weapons and to manage the nuclear threat in the region in a manner that treats all parties, including North Korea, on an equal basis.

The first five elements have long embodied the end of enmity for the DPRK. If, as we suspect, the lack of progress in implementing these steps jeopardized progress toward denuclearization in the past, it is difficult to imagine that denuclearization will make much headway now without parallel efforts to satisfy its objectives.

The DPRK has already suspended nuclear and missile tests, stopping short of demonstrating an ICBM with a working reentry vehicle and a proven thermonuclear weapon. The United States, in turn, has signaled a willingness to end enmity by having President Trump hold a summit meet with Kim Jong Un and sign a joint statement with him, the first American president to do so, and suspending joint exercises with South Korea. Trump has also indicated a willingness to normalize diplomatic relations and negotiate peace in Korea.

To demonstrate its commitment to denuclearization, the most urgent next step is for North Korea to suspend all fissile material production and deployment of intermediate- and intercontinental-range ballistic missiles. In addition, it needs to disclose the location of all its enrichment facilities and declare how much plutonium and highly enriched uranium it has and how many nuclear weapons it has made.

In return, the United States and the DPRK could move to normalize diplomatic relations and initiate a process to establish a "peace regime" in Korea. It would begin with a peace declaration promulgated by the three parties with armed forces on the peninsula - South and North Korea, and the United States. It would include a commitment to a non-hostility declaration and to a peace process involving military confidence-building measures and culminating in the replacement of the Korean Armistice with a peace treaty acceptable to all parties. If necessary to finesse the two Koreas' reluctance to recognize each other as states, such a treaty could be structured as a multilateral UN convention like those the Koreas have signed in the past.

Six Party talks or a comparable multilateral forum could be convened and establish a regional security structure including a Northeast Asia Security Council, which would take initial steps to create a Northeast Asian security and economic community and cooperative security measures on a range of shared security concerns. South Korea will initiate discussions with the other five on a Northeast Asia peace regime.

The other five parties could establish and implement a legally binding nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) for eventual acceptance and entry by the DPRK in lockstep with specific actions to eliminate nuclear weapons in return for lifting of multilateral and unilateral sanctions, large-scale energy-economic assistance package as part of a regional development strategy, successful experience with

no US hostile intent and conclusion of a peace treaty, and a calibrated nuclear negative security assurance to the North from the Nuclear Weapons States beyond that in the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

While the issue is unlikely to arise soon and the North Koreans might hesitate to embrace this arrangement despite past expressions of support, a NWFZ agreement has important advantages over a bilateral alliance and denuclearization deal. First, while both are legally binding, to the extent that a NWFZ brings in other parties it would strengthen the legal and political bonds, which would help enhance the DPRK's perception of the durability of any proposed deal. Second, it may also be more enduring because it affects how the nuclear weapons states use nuclear threats against all the non-nuclear weapons states party to the treaty, and thereby against each other. Third, it could entail security commitments beyond those in the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Finally, a NWFZ can serve as an effective substitute for a security alliance by providing the DPRK, once it is certified as nuclear weapons-free, with a guarantee that it will not be the subject of nuclear threat or attack from the United States and will be defended against attacks by another nuclear weapons state or ally of such a state.

Such a NWFZ treaty is a standard UN multilateral convention that both Koreas have had no problem signing in the past and would not confront the constitutional issue that otherwise makes the two Koreas loathe to sign treaties with each other because that might affect their respective claims to exercise sovereignty over the entire Korean peninsula. Moreover, the other four parties may be skeptical as to the durability of a Korea-only denuclearization agreement and prefer the multilateral rather than unilateral guarantees provided by the Nuclear Weapons States to an NPT-compatible nuclear weapons-free zone treaty. A UN NWFZ with the two Koreas as founding non-nuclear weapons states would be made accessible to other non-nuclear weapons states in the region such as Japan or Mongolia. They could choose to join at the outset; or at a later date.

Old and New Relationships and Tasks

In this approach, the US-DPRK relationship would change from enemies to security partners, that is, the DPRK would be neither an enemy nor an ally, but somewhere in-between, albeit on cooperative end of the spectrum. It does not mean that all differences and potential sources of conflict would disappear, but the United States does have relationships like this with, for instance, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia. And such a partnership might yield more leverage than we have had in the past for dealing with other issues, such as human rights.[\[4\]](#)

In past overtures, Americans have ignored or rebuffed North Korean suggestions that it might become an American ally. It is now timely to address the underlying concerns revealed by these overtures and to explore if there is an alternative relationship that would improve everyone's security and facilitate the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

A security partner is a state that is not a full-fledged ally and may in some instances still have serious security conflicts with the United States or its allies.

Under such conditions, a security partnership involving US forces and the Korean People's Army of the DPRK would not end of the US-ROK Combined Forces Command, with wartime US operational control of ROK forces. Deterrence would remain in play until military tensions ease to point where war is no longer a plausible option for either Korea, which may take decades. In short, a security partnership with the KPA is compatible with US extended deterrence to its allies. .

But USFK would also play a pivot deterrent role that reassures both Koreas that neither will attack

while also reassuring Japan and China that the situation in Korea will remain stable.

Nor would the end of the Armistice Agreement spell the end to the United Nations Command. But its military mission might be amended in a post-Armistice role to change how extended deterrence is maintained on the Korean Peninsula, such as where US troops are positioned or how and where exercises are conducted. And the UN Command could undertake revised missions, especially in areas under UN Command jurisdiction such as the Joint Security Area and the western islands that might entail collaboration with the KPA and the ROK's military forces.

Alternatively, it might mean some change in the way that extended deterrence commitment is demonstrated on the Korean Peninsula, such as where US troops are positioned or how exercises are conducted and where. And the UN Command could undertake revised missions especially in areas under UN Command jurisdiction such as the Joint Security Area and the western islands that might entail collaboration with the KPA and the ROK military forces. Alternatively, it might evolve into a Combined Command with a peninsula-wide span of operations. For instance, an Open Skies agreement might permit overflights across the DMZ to reassure both sides about force dispositions and movements and observers from both sides would routinely monitor exercises.

Under this rubric, DPRK forces might be engaged cooperatively in a variety of joint operations, for instance:

- Joint search-and-rescue operations and other coast guard functions in Korean waters;
- Joint traffic control in the West Sea and facilitating its transition from a zone of conflict to a zone of peace;
- Anti-piracy operations in Korean waters and elsewhere;
- Military-to-military training and counterterrorism operations;
- Joint management of mine clearance and peaceful development of the DMZ;
- CFE-like confidence-building measures, redeployment, and demobilization; and
- Participation by a joint South-North force in UN peacekeeping.

Finally, there is a good chance that South Korea would support this approach in that the Moon Jae-in Administration appears to be moving forward quickly to normalize relations with the DPRK and is clearly hard at work to fundamentally change the nature of its relationship with Pyongyang as called for in the Panmunjom Declaration.

Conclusion

As President Trump has recognized, the failure of the international community—including the United States—to achieve denuclearization should spur all parties to the Korean conflict to rethink their approach. North Korea's growing nuclear weapon and missile capabilities has allowed the country to increase its leverage, giving even more reason to think outside the box. So it is well worth testing the hypothesis that a fundamentally different relationship might bring about the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula in ways that past approaches did not.

Of course, the United States can't realize denuclearization on its own, even with a recast approach based on shifting from enmity to security partnership. The United States needs the ROK, to support fully this complicated endeavor because no US policy toward North Korea can succeed without the support of Seoul.

Aside from the political necessities associated with maintaining the core of the US-ROK alliance, the ROK likely would have to not only lead the building of inter-Korean military-military cooperation that would be central to a trilateral approach; it will also have to finance a substantial share of the infrastructure costs of denuclearization and to consider diplomatic normalization with the DPRK. If the United States addresses critical DPRK security concerns, and the ROK shoulders the political and economic costs of constructing peace with the DPRK, then Japan, Russia and China would have no choice to come to the table. China's interest in extending the Silk Road to the Korean peninsula and the Belt to the East/Sea of Japan, and Russian interest in refurbishing the Eurasian railway and bulk shipment of oil, gas, and electric power to the ROK, could embody a comprehensive security solution in Korea, with important geopolitical implications for US-ROK, US-Japan, and US-Australian security relationships.

Such a cooperative solution, facilitating the stabilization and denuclearization of the Korean peninsula by transforming the US-ROK alliance, the role of USFK, and the mission of UN Command, would avoid the risk that a US-DPRK alliance might aggravate US-China differences and spur a further fracturing of Northeast Asia. Together with the operation of a Northeast Asia Security Council, it could contribute to a more constructive relationship among all the regional players.

Thus, it is possible that a US-DPRK security partnership would help to stabilize the Korean Peninsula, end North Korea's nuclear arming, and enable the creation of a regional comprehensive security system that would be based primarily on cooperation and diplomacy rather military force and even nuclear threat. In short, treating the DPRK as a "security partner" may serve American, allied, and regional security interests better than either ally or enemy.

III. ENDNOTES

[1] Perhaps the high point in relations came in October 2000 with the issuance of the U.S.-DPRK Joint Communiqué, which read in part: "the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have decided to take steps to fundamentally improve their bilateral relations in the interests of enhancing peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region. In this regard, the two sides agreed there are a variety of available means, including Four Party talks, to reduce tension on the Korean Peninsula and formally end the Korean War by replacing the 1953 Armistice Agreement with permanent peace arrangements. Recognizing that improving ties is a natural goal in relations among states and that better relations would benefit both nations in the 21st century while helping ensure peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and in the Asia-Pacific region, the U.S. and the D.P.R.K. sides stated that they are prepared to undertake a new direction in their relations. As a crucial first step, the two sides stated that neither government would have hostile intent toward the other and confirmed the commitment of both governments to make every effort in the future to build a new relationship free from past enmity." In 2001, as the 1994 Agreed Framework was unraveling, the Foreign Ministry spokesman issued this plea, "All the pending issues related to the DPRK-U.S. relations originate from the U.S. hostile policy, a big threat to the DPRK. If the U.S. has a true will to drop its hostile policy and have a dialogue with the DPRK, it should, first of all, adopt as topics of discussion practical matters related to the implementation of the provisions of the DPRK-U.S. Agreed Framework and the DPRK-U.S. joint communiqué as agreed upon." KCNA, "Spokesman of DPRK Foreign Ministry on Bush's Statement on Resuming Negotiations with DPRK," June 18, 2001. Or, as the Foreign Ministry spokesman put it nearly a decade ago, "Our aim to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula is, above all, to remove the U.S. nuclear threat to the DPRK that has lasted for the past half century. The nuclear issue surfaced on the Korean Peninsula because of the U.S. hostile policy toward the DPRK and its nuclear threat resulting from it ..." KCNA, "DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman Dismisses U.S. Wrong Assertion," January 13, 2009. Or, as Kim Gaye Gwen said recently, "We have already stated our intention for denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and

made clear on several occasions that precondition for denuclearization is to put an end to anti-DPRK hostile policy and nuclear threats and blackmail of the United States.” KCNA, “Press Statement of First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of DPRK,” May 15, 2018.

[2] A signal exception is: Richard Ellings, “The Unthinkable with North Korea: A Tilt at the Fulcrum of World Power?” The National Bureau of Asian Research, May 23, 2018, at: <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=865>

[3] US Department of State, Secretary State Mike Pompeo, Interview with Yui Hideki of NHK, June 7, 2018.

[4] Michael Kirby pointed to the responsibility of the international community to address the core conflict in the Korean Peninsula in his landmark report to the United Nations. “The legacy of the Korean War remains unresolved. The Armistice Agreement recommended a political conference within three months of the ceasefire. The 1954 Geneva Conference was attended by the Republic of Korea, the DPRK, China, the Soviet Union, and 16 of the 17 states that had contributed forces under the United Nations Command. After two months, these talks collapsed and have not resumed. There has not been a comprehensive peace treaty. On both sides of the border, there remains fear of invasion and infiltration. In the DPRK, this fear has been instrumental in maintaining a state of emergency invoked to justify harsh governmental rule and its accompanying human rights violations. In this context, perceived political dissidents have been branded as spies in the service of foreign powers. Shortages in food and other essential means of survival have been blamed on a hostile outside world. The ROK likewise experiences the insecurities of the unresolved war, which the country addresses through general conscription and other security measures. These security measures include restrictions that appear to infringe on the human rights of its citizens in particular respects such as the freedom of expression.” In spite of the narrow mandate, Justice Kirby’s final recommendation in para 1225 j, ignored mostly by human rights advocates since his report was filed, is: “Without prejudice to all the obligations under international law that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea must immediately implement, the United Nations and the states that were parties to the Korean War should take steps to convene a high-level political conference. Participants in that conference should consider and, if agreed, ratify a final peaceful settlement of the war that commits all parties to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, including respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. States of the region should intensify their cooperation and consider following such examples as the Helsinki Process.” See *Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*, February 7, 2014, at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/ReportoftheCommissionofInquiryDPRK.aspx>

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