
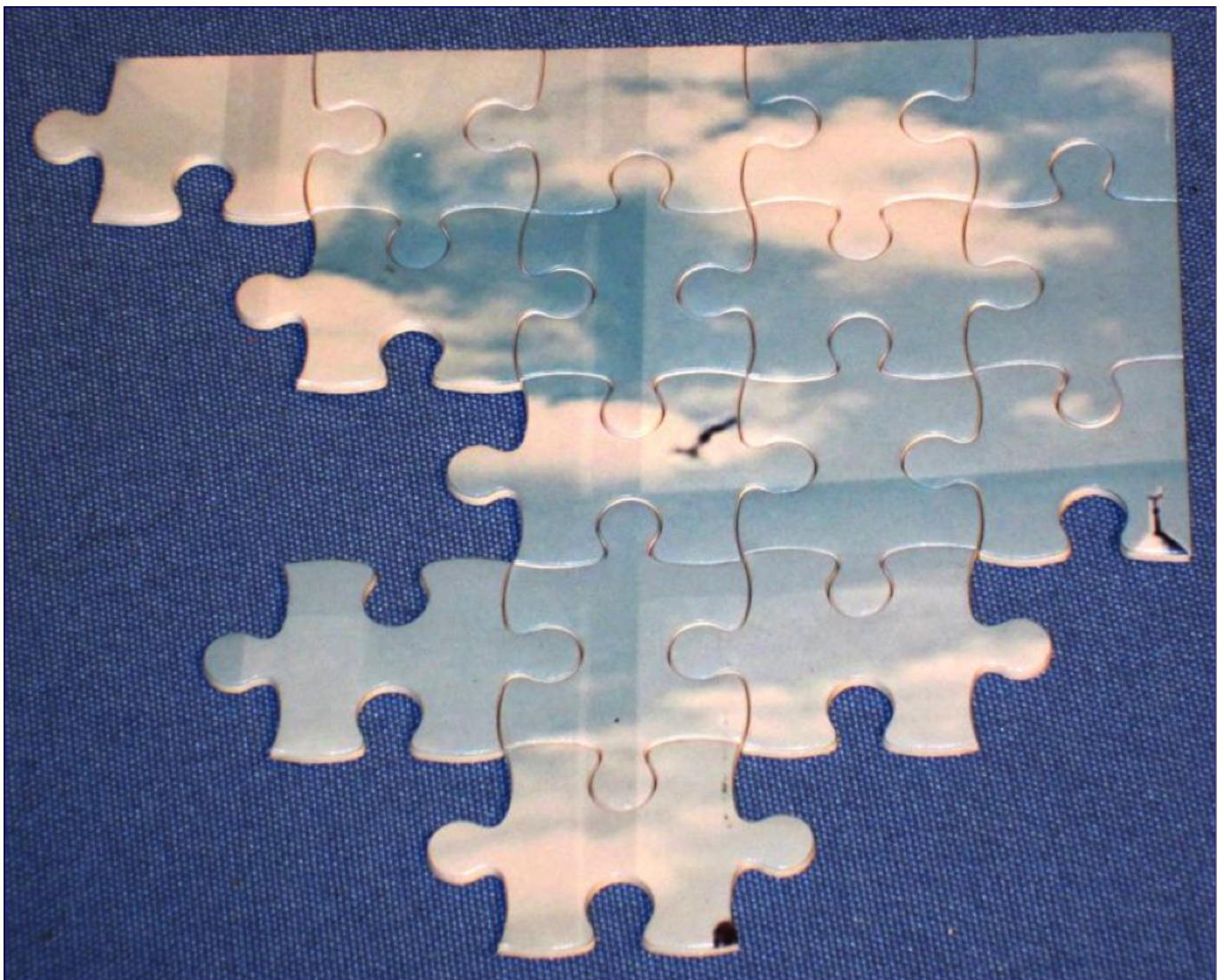


# Nuclear Threat and Korean Reunification

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by Peter Hayes

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## I. Introduction

In this Policy Forum Peter Hayes writes that "reunification will become harder and increase in social, economic, and security cost the longer and deeper the DPRK develops nuclear weapons. The faster nuclear weapons are removed from the scene, the sooner reunification can commence at a cheaper cost, with much lower risk of war and nuclear wear. The longer we wait, the more the policy choice becomes stark and binary."

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## II. Policy Forum by Peter Hayes

### Nuclear Threat and Korean Reunification

This paper addresses two key questions posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons for potential pathways to Korean reunification. These are:

1. Is denuclearization of North Korea a prerequisite for Korean unification?
2. If not, how should we handle North Korea's nuclear weapons program?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to place Korean unification in the context of current inter-Korean, regional, and global security dynamics over short (new few years), medium (next five to ten years) and long (ten to thirty year) timelines.

In considering reunification, which will be a multi-generational process given the depth and longevity of the separation since division, and the previous damage to Korean society from Japanese colonial occupation, the answers to these two questions should be reviewed against what I call the six generation or 200 year rule. This is the need to expand the scope of the analysis from the "immediate" present from now to perhaps 20 years to the "long present" into which 200 years are compressed, that is, the last 100 years of history, there being people alive today for whom these events are still fresh in their minds; and the next 100 years, there being people born today who will

be alive in 100 years, all of whom will play a role in a social process as profound as national reunification. I will return to this consideration in my conclusion.

In sum, my answer to these two questions is that reunification will become harder and increase in social, economic, and security cost the longer and deeper the DPRK develops nuclear weapons. The faster nuclear weapons are removed from the scene, the sooner reunification can commence at a cheaper cost, with much lower risk of war and nuclear wear. The longer we wait, the more the policy choice becomes stark and binary.

### **North Korean Denuclearization and Korean unification**

To answer this question meaningfully, we must define the pace and scope of unification. If we mean by it a full embodiment of an inter-Korean union or confederation of the type considered in past dialogues and agreements, and in which the two Koreas maintain their autonomy as separate states but present a convergent or united policy and face toward the external world—at the Olympics, on contested territories, in combined security activities such as anti-piracy operations outside of the Peninsula—then it is almost certain that such a reunification will proceed in carefully defined stages over a considerable period of time.

The first stage is best described as rapprochement than reunification *per se*, and entails higher and increasing levels of communication and coordination over time, to build the requisite trust and confidence in both Koreas that the social and political bases of deepening the rapprochement has enduring and robust foundations. The later phase of rapprochement—substantial collaboration to create joint product or add value to the lives of millions of Koreans rather than merely communicating, or only coordinating otherwise separated, disparate national activities, would take additional time. Given the time it has taken to develop the Kaesong project, the vicissitudes of other cooperation efforts such as the Mt. Kumgang project, and the on-going and often ferocious animosity between the two Koreas, I will assume arbitrarily that the first stage of reunification, inter-Korean rapprochement, will take at least three electoral cycles in the ROK (in order to demonstrate that the entire political spectrum is on board, not just one party) and a decade of stop-start but ultimately successful process to demonstrate to both Koreas that the process has become irreversible.

The next stage of reunification, based on a more profound, far-reaching set of inter-Korean social, economic, cultural, and logistical integrations and collaborations, will take at least two more decades to construct. Some of these changes, especially in critical infrastructure, are inherently long-term. For example, it will cost \$100 billion or more to rebuild the DPRK's electric power grid around a new urban-industrial geography that would emerge in the process of inter-Korean economic integration. Such a huge task will take then years, at minimum, and should not be undertaken until that new geography is established by mutual agreement. The story is the same across all the worn-out, degraded, and obsolete North Korean infrastructural stocks—mines, railways, buildings, forests, sewage systems, waterways, etc. Such huge investments are unlikely to occur at the outset of the reunification process.

In short, Korean reunification is a massive, multi-generational task, the demands of which should it come to pass would dominate increasingly every aspect of social, economic, and cultural policy of both Koreas.

Thus, the question really has three parts.

In the next few years, will North Korea's existing nuclear weapons impede the first phase of early, limited rapprochement? The answer to this question barely needs stating. In this phase, the critical

issues that block progress on resuming North Korea's denuclearization are almost all political, not military in nature, and could be overcome with political will. Thus, the North's nuclear arms are not terminal to this earliest phase of reunification and could be managed in this period, provided the outcome is incremental, steady, and significant progress towards ultimate nuclear disarmament by the North. However, complete disarmament will take no less than ten years to achieve in a purely technical sense, so longer timelines are required to determine whether reunification and North Korean nuclear armament are exclusive or could somehow co-exist.

Assuming the two Koreas and other parties somehow surpass the obstacle posed by the North's nuclear weapons and the South's nuclear extended deterrence over the next decade--perhaps by resuming talks that go on endlessly thereby generating the illusion of stability, but do nothing to denuclearize North Korea over this period--what then? Left to his own devices Kim Jong Un would likely increase significantly his nuclear forces in ten years. Would this capacity necessarily obstruct a deeper, more profound second phase of inter-Korean rapprochement? The political and psychological threat posed by the North's nuclear weapons in ten years will be significant.

However, it is not *impossible* that increasing rapprochement would induce the North to stop its opportunistic political and psychological use of nuclear threat for compellence, aimed at making the South (or its allies and partners) change their policies towards the North, and for the North to develop a minimalist, purely deterrence-oriented nuclear weapons strategy. So far, the North has not talked in this manner, just the opposite. Nonetheless, this behavior could change depending in part on the external security environment, relations with the South, and internal regime dynamics.

Much would rest on whether South Korea maintains its commitment to a non-nuclear weapons state national narrative in spite of the North's provocations and/or an expanding North Korean nuclear force. In reality, the South is almost certain to sustain its non-nuclear weapons status in spite of loose talk about independent South Korean nuclear weapons or the hosting of re-deployed American nuclear weapons, for the simple reason that the North's attack options are so limited, and the South and American conventional forces are sufficiently credible to provide robust deterrence in almost all conceivable military contingencies involving the North. If this argument is correct, then this scenario requires substantial, not superficial rapprochement in order to provide sufficient mutual interest to overcome the inherent nuclear antagonism created by the North's nuclear weapons.

Let's assume that somehow the reunification process continues and even accelerates concurrent with North Korean nuclear armament after a full decade of rapprochement. At what point does it become impossible for the two Koreas, now increasingly joined at the hip by confederation, for the North to remain a nuclear-armed state while the South remains a committed non-nuclear weapons state?

It is difficult to conceive of the two Koreas being increased aligned and integrated while the North plans to annihilate the South with nuclear weapons, and the South is aligned with the United States and other allies dependent on nuclear extended deterrence aimed the threat of annihilation at the North. Indeed, the contradiction would become even more pronounced if and when the two Koreas begin to design and implement a confederal foreign and security policy. Presumably confederation would entail reconfiguration and redeployment of the DPRK and ROK's military forces, possible joint military forces (for example, coast guards or peacekeeping or anti-piracy or anti-terrorist forces overseas), and a shift for the role of USFK from a partisan to a pivot deterrent force stationed in Korea at maximum. It is not clear that such changes could take place at the same time as the two sides threaten each other with nuclear weapons, directly or indirectly.

Indeed, I would argue that in stage two of reunification in which North Korea is armed with nuclear weapons, and South Korea is armed with advanced conventional forces allied with a nuclear

weapons state, far from moving towards mutual co-existence and convergence in a confederation, the Peninsula would constantly veer towards instability and possible war, including nuclear war, in a dynamic of mutual probable destruction, not mutual deterrence, thereby precluding progress towards peaceful reunification.

All of the above assumes that reunification is only achieved peacefully, that is, without the collapse of the North at one extreme, and by a convulsive war on the other with massive casualties and possible use of nuclear weapons.

These latter two alternative pathways to reunification would pose extraordinarily difficult problems in terms of capturing and removing North Korean nuclear weapons such as de-conflicting US and ROK forces from other forces likely to be involved in a collapse scenarios (especially Chinese forces) in an effort to seize and control North Korea's nuclear weapons and fissile material; or in avoiding, defending against, and surviving possible first-use of nuclear weapons by North Korea in extreme scenarios of military conflict and strategic retreat faced with the South's superior conventional military forces. However, in both these pathways of non-cooperative reunification, while nuclear weapons would be an urgent and possibly huge residual problem to manage, they would neither drive to be an obstacle to reunification itself.

In short, without a serious attempt to denuclearize North Korea that achieves actual disarmament over the next decade, peaceful reunification is increasingly more of a fantastic idea than a realistic prospect. Other pathways are far more likely to predominate.

### **How then should we handle North Korea's nuclear weapons program?**

One can reverse the first question and ask instead whether rapprochement between the two Koreas combined with relaxation of external security pressures are prerequisites for resuming North Korean denuclearization and eventually, realizing the complete nuclear disarmament of the North?

To achieve the requisite conditions whereby the DPRK nuclear issue may be resolved it is necessary to create a comprehensive security settlement treaty. This treaty, which might be titled *A Northeast Asia Treaty of Amity and Cooperation*, must have at least six key elements:

1. Termination of state of war
2. Creation of a permanent security council on security to monitor and verify compliance and deciding on violations
3. A mutual declaration of no hostile intent
4. Provisions of assistance for nuclear and other energy
5. Termination of sanctions
6. A nuclear weapons-free zone.

In this approach, rather than aiming to shape behaviors incrementally, as was tried and failed at the Six Party Talks, future six party negotiations need to focus on creating a new "comprehensive" security settlement in a treaty format that meets the needs of all states in the region to reduce reliance on nuclear threat, and wherever possible, to end it. By reshape, we mean that a comprehensive security settlement should create a new regional framework that:

1. a) Recognizes that all parties have pledged to eliminate nuclear weapons as a basis of their security relationships;

2. b) Reflects the reality that nuclear weapons are of decreasing political and military value; and
3. c) Facilitates reduction of the role of nuclear weapons in their respective political and military policies and postures.

In this approach, agreement on each of these six steps and the requisite outcomes, obligations, sequencing, and pathways, would be agreed simultaneously, on the basis that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.” This up-front approach (plus the fact that a legally binding guarantee of the end of nuclear threat against non-nuclear weapons states or “negative security assurance” would be on the table) is the essential difference to the substance and process of past Six Party Talks, including the September 19 2005 Statement of Principles.

Within this comprehensive framework, a Northeast Asian nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) would be created to manage three of the hardest security issues facing the region, viz, nuclear threats by the nuclear weapons states to non-nuclear weapons states in Northeast Asia, the provision of US nuclear extended deterrence to its allies in the region, and the DPRK’s nuclear armament.

The long-standing and well-tested framework for such a commitment is a legally binding nuclear weapons-free zone, for which there are many precedents around the world spanning four decades. It is therefore timely to discuss the negotiated, multilateral, and legally binding end to nuclear threats by nuclear weapons to non-nuclear weapon states in the context of a comprehensive security settlement in Northeast Asia. Such a settlement requires a regional treaty framework, not just a political agreement, if it is to be meaningful to all the parties including the DPRK. Anything less likely will fail and leave the states in the region to ride the roller coaster of confrontation and standoff, of semi-permanent crisis.

Given Korean War and Cold War history, it is no surprise that the DPRK insists that US nuclear threat towards it must cease before it will revert to non-nuclear weapons status; and that this guarantee must be legally binding. The only framework in which this combination is possible is a NWFZ. In July 2013, the UN Secretary General urged states in the region to consider appropriate action to establish a nuclear-weapon-free zone in North-East Asia, “including by promoting a more active role for the regional forums in encouraging transparency and confidence-building among the countries of the region.” On October 21, 2014, the DPRK announced via KCNA that it proposed “building a nuclear-free zone through peaceful dialogue and negotiations...combined with the method of removing the U.S. nuclear threat by relying on international law.” The United States is in favor of nuclear weapons-free zones in principle, but does not know what the DPRK means in its October 21, 2014 and earlier proposals along these lines. Neither for that matter does the ROK. It is urgent to find out.

Note that reunification is not presented above as one of the six necessary elements in this comprehensive security settlement strategy. Of course, a non-hostility agreement, ending the Korean War and replacing the Armistice are two key elements of a “peace regime” in the Korean Peninsula that would be conducive to reunification. However, reunification *per se* is not a prerequisite for a regional comprehensive security settlement. Such a settlement would create the strategic environment in which reunification would become possible and much easier to realize. Should the two Koreas demand that reunification be addressed as part of a comprehensive security settlement, then a Treaty of Amity and Cooperation could refer to this imperative by declaring that it is a goal of the treaty to facilitate reunification “in accordance with the will of the Korean people,” leaving it to the two Koreas to work out the process.

Thus, if the ROK takes rapprochement seriously as the first step towards reunification, and if one of

the keys to denuclearization is reducing nuclear threat to the DPRK, then it is urgent for the ROK to expand the strategic horizons of its nuclear free Peninsula concept to include the rest of the region in a realistic approach, including Japan and the three neighboring nuclear weapons states, and possibly Mongolia. It would be relatively easy for the ROK to start this process by suggesting that an expert group be established under UN auspices to examine the concept of a NWFZ in Northeast Asia and to report back to the UN, much as has been done with past NWFZs and is in process (albeit slowly) with the Middle East WMD Free Zone.

## **Conclusion**

It has taken six decades of confrontation to create the extraordinary situation on the Korean Peninsula whereby one Korea has become a wealthy modern industrial state with global reach; and the other has become a bankrupt, isolated, and dependent state whose only reach is a means of annihilation. The fastest possible way to destroy the prospect of a unified Korea ever occurring would be to relapse into war that escalates into nuclear war. South Korean leaders have a long view, much longer than most Americans. The challenges posed by the on-going division and confrontation in Korea, including the threat of nuclear war, require that the South's leaders postpone reunification as long as it takes until it is possible to make safe passage—possibly as long or even longer than it took to construct the current standoff. To shorten this time, removing the nuclear barrier to allow the reunification water to flow should be one of the South's highest priorities.

An essential component of this task is for South Korea to promote a comprehensive security settlement while reducing and eventually eliminating the South's own dependence on nuclear weapons and countervailing nuclear threat. Doing so would enable the South to remove needless obstacles to achieving the North's denuclearization and to shape a regional strategic landscape that is conducive to a peaceful resolution of the conflict with the North, and eventual complete and comprehensive reunification over the next two or three generations—a process that must serve all six generations of Koreans who are alive at any point in time.

Image source: [http://yargb.blogspot.com/2011\\_07\\_01\\_archive.html](http://yargb.blogspot.com/2011_07_01_archive.html)

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