



Nuclear Negotiations with North Korea

Why Negotiators Should Consider North Korean Narratives



American Security Project



Perspective

Derek Bolton

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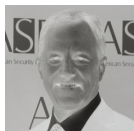
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LtGen Norman Seip, USAF (Ret)

Lieutenant General Norman R. Seip, USAF (Ret) served in the Air Force for 35 years. His last assignment was Commander of 12th Air Force.

In this Report:

This report examines the recent breakthrough in diplomatic activity on the Korean Peninsula and suggests key areas that policymakers must keep in mind as negotiations progress. It argues that national narratives hold important insights into understanding state perceptions and interests, and should be taken into consideration when formulating bargaining positions. To this end, it is vital that policymakers take into account the fact that nuclear weapons provide North Korea both physical and ideational security. Constructing policies that only focus on alleviating the former will in turn lead to flawed bargaining positions.

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IN BRIEF

- National narratives hold important insights into understanding state perceptions and interests.
- The North Korean national narrative, optimized by the concept of *Juche*, has continuously emphasized North Korea as a modern and independent state, non-subservient to, and equal amongst, foreign powers.
- Maintaining this narrative is important since over time it has become fused with the legitimacy of the regime.
- National narratives are also important since individuals have a historic interest in maintaining their communal (national) narratives. While domestic political support dampened in the wake of the North's famine, elements of this nationalist narrative seem to still be prevalent.
- Nuclear weapons have helped to satisfy North Korea's physical *and* ideational security needs by showcasing this national narrative.
- This should be taken into account moving forward, with policies aimed at addressing the North's physical, economic and ideational needs.

About the Author

Dr. Derek Bolton is an Adjunct Fellow at the American Security Project. He recently completed his PhD at the University of Bath, where he is currently a Teaching Fellow. His dissertation sought to construct a new analytical framework around the concept of Ontological Security. This was combined with in-depth discourse and archival analysis on DPRK foreign policy from the 1940s-1990s.

Introduction

On Friday April 27, 2018, North Korean Leader Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in met in the Peace House at Panmunjom for a historic diplomatic summit. Three main topics were discussed: the North's nuclear weapons program, increasing bilateral relations, and potentially ending the Korean War. The day ended with both sides signing the "Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification on the Korean Peninsula," which calls for all parties to work towards peace and denuclearization on the Peninsula.

The current diplomatic breakthrough embodied in the Panmunjom Declaration holds the potential to significantly improve relations on the Korean Peninsula. Much will now depend on the upcoming summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un. In the lead up to these talks, policymakers would be advised to keep an important concept in mind: national narratives matter. That is, in order to discern what North Korea might find acceptable moving forward, it is paramount that negotiators take national narrative into consideration. Doing so allows them to understand how the North's nuclear weapons have helped to satisfy both its physical *and* ideational security needs. Failure to account for the latter will subsequently lead to a skewed interpretation of DPRK perceptions and interests and the formulation of poor bargaining positions.



The April 27th meeting between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in. Photo credit: Republic of Korea / Blue House

The Run-up to Panmunjom

To begin, it is important to see the context in which the North is approaching these most recent talks. At the start of his reign, Kim Jong-un introduced the *byungjin* line. Similar to the policy of "equal emphasis" introduced by his grandfather (Kim Il-Sung) in the 1960s, which called for equal investment into the economy and self-defense, *byungjin* called for equal investment into the economy and into the nuclear weapons program. Since then, the DPRK's focus seems to have been on achieving a level of nuclear development that would allow it to claim victory on the nuclear front. With its recent spat of success in nuclear and missile tests, some scholars were already¹ noting in 2016 that Kim might be seeking to position himself for a pivot to focus on the economy. Signs of this emerged during the 2018 New Year's Address² (a State of the Union of sorts for the DPRK), when Kim hinted at the near completion of the North's nuclear program while simultaneously sending direct overtures to the South. These overtures culminated in the 'Olympic Peace,' wherein follow-up bilateral talks were proposed. By April of this year, an official change in DPRK policy emerged out of the Worker's Party plenum, during which the victory of *byungjin* was formally declared:

...no nuclear test and intermediate-range and inter-continental ballistic rocket test-fire are necessary for the DPRK now, given that the work for mounting nuclear warheads on ballistic rockets was finished...the mission of the northern nuclear test ground has thus come to an end.³

Regardless of whether these moves should be viewed as preplanned posturing by the North, or as concessions in the wake of increased international pressure, Pyongyang has been able to position itself to enter talks in line with *byungjin*. In other words, Kim can attempt facilitating agreements to help the North's economy from the firm footing of having achieved success on the nuclear front. However, in order to examine how the North might approach upcoming negotiations, it is important to look at the larger national narrative of which *byungjin* is a part. The DPRK's national narrative, codified in the ideology of *Juche* (essentially national self-reliance), holds key insights for two reasons:

1. The *Juche* narrative directly upholds the internal legitimacy of the regime.
2. There is a wider argument⁴ that individuals have a vested interest in the maintenance of their communal (national) narratives in order to protect their own conceptions of self-identity.⁵ In other words, individuals are emotionally attached to their nations.

North Korea will thus be seeking to find a compromise that not only helps meet its economic and security needs, but that also aligns with national narrative, both to ensure regime survival *and* to preserve the country's own self-image.

How the DPRK's Narrative Resonates

Juche originally formed as a means of solidifying the post-colonial nationalism⁶ within Kim Il Sung's guerilla faction of the DPRK leadership. Over the course of internal economic debates in the 1950s, Kim's guerillas came to solidify their position in the DPRK leadership, with *Juche* being formally introduced as a concept in 1955. As Kim Il-sung wrote, *Juche* means:

...being the master of revolution and reconstruction in one's own country. This means holding fast to an independent position, rejecting dependence on others, using one's own brains, believing in one's own strength, displaying the revolutionary spirit of self-reliance, and thus solving one's own problems for oneself on one's own responsibility under all circumstances.⁷

This nationalism was largely attractive⁸ to the wider populace of North Korea due to their experiences of colonization and the Korean War. This has traditionally echoed the notion of shared blood given the historical presence of external threat. Over time, however, this genuine nationalist sentiment and ideology was grafted on to the legitimacy of the Kim regime, with Kim becoming the embodiment of the quintessential Korean nationalist and pinnacle mover of Korean history. In the 1970s, *Juche* started to be presented as a philosophy, and began taking on more religious qualities by the 1980s. All of this made it become increasingly hard for the regime to deviate from its official narrative given its function in legitimatizing the leadership and its portrayal of the infallibility of the Kim regime.



The North Korean Mass Games in 2010. Photo credit: Coljac (ColinJ) / Flickr

While the extent to which North Koreans still accept the propaganda of the regime is questionable following the widespread famine and breakdown of social order⁹ in the late 1990s, there does appear to still be a latent nationalism within the populace. For example, Kyung-Ae Park's work on refugees¹⁰ has shown the primary motivation for leaving the country has remained economic betterment, as 87% of the 15,271 refugees who had fled North Korea since 2009 were unemployed or manual laborers residing in the poorest regions of the country. By contrast, there are few elite and middle-class refugees. Moreover, a 2008 survey of North Korean refugees living in Seoul revealed "about 75 percent of them did not show any negative sentiment toward Kim Jong-il's leadership." A separate survey showed an overwhelming majority of child refugees *did not* hope "to become like South Koreans when they grow up." Of the 45 organizations established by refugees in the South, only 4 have the explicit aim of undertaking anti-North Korean activity, while the rest are primarily social organizations.

Park has also found a "sentimentality expressed for the leadership [amongst refugees] even as they expressed anger with the political system." This correlates with Barbara Demick's work¹¹ with refugees, wherein she found many had blamed Kim Jong-il for the country's ills, not the regime at large, though she also cites a deal of political disenchantment within the North. The current Kim regime is therefore likely still walking a tight line. On the one hand there is a dire need to improve the country's domestic situation; on the other, the regime needs to do so in a way that propagates continued internal support by substantiating the current DPRK narrative.

The latent nationalism within the North also brings into line the second point: that conformity is required given the fact many still seem to ascribe to the underlying principles embodied within *Juche*. Narrative maintenance is therefore not *only* linked to regime legitimacy, but also to the larger, and more generic, relationship between individuals and their community. Individuals have a need for at least the perception of possessing a continuous self-identity. The ability to do so is intimately tied with the preservation of one's community, a figurative entity rooted in narrative. In modern times the largest community of man is the nation. To this end, individuals – and policymakers – have an emotional connection and interest in maintaining national narratives so as to preserve the nation and thus their own sense of self-identity. Such an approach follows the long-touted argument that national identity shapes policymakers' perceptions and interests. North Korea is no different in this regard. So what then does the DPRK national narrative consist of?

Elements of North Korea's National Narrative

When one reviews DPRK discourse as found, for example, in the Selected Works of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, the official biographies of Kim Il-sung, the *Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Monolithic Ideological System*, the annual New Year's Addresses, and the various constitutions of the DPRK, it becomes possible to highlight specific themes that have remained consistent and that resonate with *Juche*. The North has consistently seen itself as independent, with an independent economy, and as a unified, dignified, honorable, socialist, modern and advanced state capable of self-defense—the embodiment of the heroic anti-colonial struggle. It has traditionally been allied with the 'anti-imperialists,' those seeking 'world peace,' and the non-aligned peoples. It has overcome the exploitation and backwardness that defined the Korea of the past and continues to, at least until recently, define the colonialism and stooges of imperialism that is South Korea. It opposes imperialism (generally), U.S. imperialism (specifically), and those who are aggressive, exploitative or colonial. Similar conclusions can be found in Jacques E.C. Hymans content analysis of the DPRK New Year Addresses from 1975-2008. Hymans found these speeches are:

...dominated by references to generic foreign others—accounting for 683 out of a grand total of 2,182 external references in the data set (32 percent of the total). Second, beyond their general rejection of everything foreign, when the Kims peer out at the world, clearly the “imperialists” loom largest in their minds. Among the imperialists, the United States certainly is a major focus (288 references, 14 percent of the total). But references to imperialists in general are also quite plentiful (179 references, 8 percent of the total). Japan is also referred to relatively often (69 references, 3 percent of the total), while the silence on the DPRK’s erstwhile “comrades” China and Russia is deafening.¹²

All of this is important when seeking to assess the DPRK’s intentions. Consequently, while North Koreans want peace and prosperity, they also want to maintain their dignity and independence and, linked to this, to become accepted as a ‘normal’ international power. Importantly, the North’s nuclear program is entwined with these desires; that is, it has helped the DPRK assert its national narrative.

Nuclear Weapons & National Narrative

It is important that we view nuclear weapons as satisfying both the physical *and* ideational security interests of North Korea. While the North has held a conventional military deterrent through its artillery along the DMZ, ballistic missiles, and chemical arsenal,¹³ the development of a successful nuclear weapons program has now secured a far more robust response should the regime feel its security to be in immediate danger. Importantly, this *also* allowed the North to ascertain a position of parity of sorts by joining the few nuclear powers of the world. It has shown itself to be an independent, advanced state capable of self-defense, unyielding to the whims of external powers that might seek to curtail its sovereignty, thereby continuing the anti-colonial revolutionary movement.

Examining the historical trajectory¹⁴ of the nuclear program helps to showcase how ideational motivations may have been the primary motivation for the program up until the 1980s, when the North’s security situation began to deteriorate. This helps shift analysis away from those who argue the nuclear program was motivated primarily by systemic factors in the 1990s, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, normalization of relations between China and South Korea, and Russia’s retraction of security guarantees for North Korea. Instead, the record shows how North Korea:

1. Pursued nuclear weapons as early as the 1960s
2. Historically defied those seeking to undercut its nuclear ambitions
3. Maintained its efforts at the expense of its material and security interests

North Korea’s interest in at least a civil nuclear program dates to the mid-1950s,¹⁵ and by the 1960s there were indications it was seeking to pursue nuclear weapons.¹⁶ Importantly, these early efforts often came at the expense of the DPRK’s material interests. For one, it undercut relations¹⁷ with the Soviet Union at a time it needed Soviet support to balance against China, with whom it was on the brink of armed conflict.¹⁸ Secondly, it undermined the ability of North Korea to extract civilian nuclear support despite a growing need for energy assistance by 1968.¹⁹ Even after energy and economic concerns were compounded in the 1970s,²⁰ Pyongyang maintained its defiance²¹ despite economic incentives for a more docile nuclear posture.²² Refusing to adopt a less aggressive nuclear stance, Pyongyang instead focused on further investing in domestic nuclear initiatives, despite costs associated with such a program²³ and questionable strategic needs for such a weapons system.

Scholar Balázs Szalontai in turn suggests Pyongyang seems to have been inspired by Beijing's domestic nuclear weapons program initiated in the early 1960s and the construction of nuclear power plants in Eastern Europe, both of which demonstrated the potential for "nuclear self-reliance."²⁴ Nuclear energy and, perhaps more importantly, weapons, were therefore viewed as a means of showcasing the North as an advanced, modern, independent nation. This position would have been further buoyed by India's nuclear weapons success (and recognition as a de facto nuclear power) in the 1970s.²⁵ By the 1980s, aided by years of domestic research and despite the unwillingness of allies to lend support, North Korea had successfully constructed its own twenty-to thirty-megawatt research reactor.²⁶ The fact it was an RBMK-type reactor highlighted the military intentions behind the construction.²⁷



A North Korean ballistic missile transporter, erector, launcher during the Victory Day Parade. Photo credit: Stefan Krasowski / Flickr

Following this success, the Soviets finally came around to providing broader nuclear assistance, despite a continued North Korean unwillingness to take a more docile nuclear stance.²⁸ The Soviets in turn helped construct a nuclear power plant, which Pyongyang believed would help "to offset the fact that a nuclear power plant is already in operation in South Korea...[and to] enhance the DPRK's economic prestige in foreign eyes."²⁹ All of this provided North Korea further access to nuclear technology, propelling it towards the first nuclear crisis.

As the above overview showcases, North Korea has repeatedly foregone material interests in order to further pursue its nuclear endeavors. Much of this was due to the ideational factors surrounding the nuclear weapons program, which Pyongyang saw as showcasing its *Juche*

national narrative. While the North's deteriorating security environment in the 1980s and 1990s led nuclear weapons to quickly take on a physical security component, it is important not to lose site of the ongoing ideational role they still play.

Addressing Narratives in the Negotiations

In line with the above analysis, negotiators should see North Korea as having three interrelated sets of interests: physical security, economic prosperity, and narrative maintenance. Any settlement must therefore not only allow North Korea to address its physical and economic needs, but do so in a way that also allows it to abandon nuclear weapons while somehow maintaining the prestige and legitimacy they bestowed onto Pyongyang.

The Physical Security of the North

Efforts have been made in the past to try to address the insecurity of the North in the post-Cold War era. However, these moves have been inconsistent, and the North has certainly noted the numerous states that gave up or abandoned nuclear weapons programs only to be overthrown later. While its ability to strike U.S. allies and U.S. forces through conventional means greatly reduces this prospect, there is still a worrying precedent to deal with. But there are already positive signs that some of these concerns might be overcome.

First and foremost is the Panmunjom Declaration's call³⁰ for **ending the state of war between North and South Korea**. Linked to this is the Declaration's call for the **formation of a peace regime** on the peninsula. This is vital in ensuring further cooperation between both sides while reducing uncertainty and insecurity. Specifically, it calls for the formation of a "joint liaison office with representatives of both sides in the Gaeseong region in order to facilitate close consultation." It also specifies the convening of the Inter-Korean Red Cross Meeting to discuss separated families, and for more military contact, including a meeting of Defense Ministers, with military talks at the rank of general commencing in May. Lastly, it requires the cessation of all hostile activity between North and South Korea (such as the now-halted use of propaganda broadcasting along the DMZ) by this May, the transformation of the DMZ into a "peace zone," and the easing of tensions around the Northern Limit Line in the West Sea by creating a "maritime peace zone."

For the U.S., this could all lead to a **freeze of U.S.-South Korean Joint Military Exercises** that have often concerned the North Korean regime. The fact that North Korea has already unilaterally halted nuclear and missile tests, gives further impetus to such a freeze. Linked to this

could be the **reintroduction of a mutual declaration of no hostile intent**, as originally agreed to by President Clinton in the U.S.-DPRK Joint Communiqué in 2000. The Bush administration later refused to reaffirm the declaration, a position maintained by the Obama administration. The reintroduction of this declaration would follow the reaffirmation of the Non-Aggression Agreement between North and South Korea outlined the Panmunjom Declaration.



U.S. and South Korean dive teams training during annual exercises in 2017. U.S. Navy photo.

The Economic Concerns of the Regime and the Populace

On the economic front, the Panmunjom Declaration calls for the **implementation of economic projects agreed to in the 2007 Joint Declaration**. Other areas not addressed, but that could be fruitful, include discussions on reopening the Kaesong Industrial Complex,³¹ and increased **science engagement** with North Korea. Previous scientific overtures have aimed to address critical needs within the DPRK such as wind energy initiatives,³² combatting the mounting issue of tuberculosis,³³ and agricultural development,³⁴ to name but a few. A 2012 meeting of the U.S.-DPRK Science Engagement Consortium also highlighted watershed management, deforestation, biodiversity, salmon hatcheries, and ecological restoration as other potential avenues.³⁵

Perhaps more pressing, however, will be addressing the international sanctions crippling the North Korean economy. To accomplish this, negotiators will require a baseline understanding of North Korea's current arsenal and capabilities. Though the North has already halted its nuclear and missile tests, there is no certain accounting of the extent of its nuclear activities. IAEA inspectors will need to gain access to the North in order to ascertain the extent of the North's current nuclear stockpile. This could in turn allow for partial sanctions relief. From here, it then becomes possible to move towards talks on denuclearization coupled with further moves towards economic assistance.

The Maintenance of DPRK National Narrative

A few things stand out in the Panmunjom Declaration vis-à-vis the North's national narrative. To begin, this was a decision "led by Koreans" to improve and cultivate inter-Korean relations, and the "desire of the whole nation." It "affirmed the principle of determining the destiny of the Korean nation on their own accord" and calls for "more active cooperation, exchanges, visits and contacts at all levels in order to rejuvenate the sense of national reconciliation and unity."³⁶ Moving forward, mutual historical anniversaries will be celebrated through joint events and both countries will partake in international sporting events as a joint entity.

Such wording is important, as it corresponds with the North's own consistent calls for peace and reunification on the Peninsula through the efforts of *Koreans themselves*. This in no way suggests the North believes the U.S.



Kim Jong-un shakes hands with South Korean President Moon Jae-in shortly after crossing the border at Panmunjom. Photo credit: Republic of Korea / Blue House

and China are irrelevant, *but* that great powers are not seen as forcing an accord on the Korean nation. Instead, they are reacting to Korean initiative. It also corresponds with the narrative that the North has not been forced to capitulate to external demands (e.g. sanctions) but that, having showcased its independence and strength through the acquisition of a successful nuclear deterrent, it can now negotiate – and be treated – as an equal of powers like China and the U.S. Finally, it would be imprudent to believe the North *needs to* villainize the South in order to maintain its sense of self or its legitimacy. Bringing about closer relations with the South – seen as part of the Korean nation – coincides with the DPRK's effort of moving the whole of the nation away from its colonial past and back to its rightful spot as an independent and dignified entity – one to be treated with respect. Consequently, policies that allow the North to showcase progress towards this end – of creating a unified, independent nation (even if as two countries) – will be seen in a positive light.

This sentiment will be important moving forward. As of now the Panmunjom Declaration leaves a good deal of opaqueness on the nuclear issue, only citing the "common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula" with each side agreeing to "carry out their respective roles and responsibilities in this regard." Consequently, it will largely be up to talks with the U.S. to make sure such a goal becomes a reality. For its part, the declaration does go on to state that each side does actively "seek the support and cooperation of the international community" towards this end. The question remains, under what condition will the North actually give up its nuclear weapons?

As noted above, there are tangible moves that could be (and seemingly are being) undertaken to solidify the North's security and economic concerns linked to the nuclear issue. What will be important, therefore, is also finding a solution that allows the North to relinquish nuclear weapons while continuing to be able to showcase itself as a modern, advanced, powerful independent state. Merely reducing sanctions or providing economic assistance will most likely not be enough in this regard. This will require ingenuity on the part of all sides to construct avenues through which North Korea can gain the recognition it has historically sought. Examples might include forging diplomatic relations with the U.S. or sitting on a regional council for Northeast Asian security. At the same time, the U.S. will need to showcase that any concessions it grants can be legitimated – and herein lies the tight structure within which both sides will be forced to operate.

Conclusion

The current diplomatic breakthrough embodied in the Panmunjom Declaration holds the potential to significantly improve relations on the Korean Peninsula. However, in order to take advantage of this opening, policymakers must take national narratives into account or risk developing misperceptions that will ultimately scuttle negotiations. Moving forward, negotiators must keep in mind that the North's nuclear program is not solely about physical security and that material incentives alone will not be enough to bring about denuclearization. To this end four points should be reiterated:

1. Nuclear Weapons are entwined with the DPRK's national narrative and *Juche*.
2. Any settlement must therefore find a way for the North to ascertain new ways to assert its narrative of a modern independent state and its quest for recognition and respect.
3. Focusing only on material incentives with little regard to ideational concerns will lead to poor bargaining positions.
4. The Kim regime must be able to "save face," and claim a victory in the negotiations, thereby justifying to its own people whatever compromises it must make with regards to its nuclear program.

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