The Biden Administration and a New Approach to Denuclearization?

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Will the new administration of President Joe Biden change tack on North Korea policy, finally jettisoning the “maximum pressure” approach in favor of a more practical attempt to work simultaneously toward peace and denuclearization? For now, this issue remains firmly in the realm of speculation. Biden’s personnel choices affirm a commitment to pragmatic and principled diplomacy, yet, there are few concrete indicators on which to assess how they might influence the administration’s policy review of the North Korea question.

The most hopeful news thus far for proponents of a new policy comes from a February 9 State Department press briefing, in which spokesman Ned Price stated, “Our focus in formulating this new policy and approach and undertaking these consultations [with allies] will be on reducing the threat to the United States and our allies, as well as improving the lives of the North and the South Korean people…. [a]t the core, we do remain committed to the denuclearization of North Korea.” Notably, Price mentioned that the policy review would examine “ongoing pressure options and potential for future diplomacy.”

This early pronouncement – presumably language vetted within the State Department and not seen as prejudicial to the outcome of the interagency policy review – is a positive sign of new directions.

review – suggests three plausible, intersecting aims of U.S. policy toward North Korea’s nuclear program going forward: a coordinated alliance approach; threat reduction; and long-term denuclearization. If Washington adopts a policy to achieve these aims, it could mark an important departure from past practice.

The key issue is whether Washington opts for the default policy or an entirely new approach. If the Biden administration continues to apply “pressure” via multilateral sanctions, the probability of progress toward threat reduction and denuclearization is, as it has been for the last decade, close to zero. If, on the other hand, the administration starts from new premises about how to establish conditions under which North Korea could eventually disarm, then the probability of progress could be considerably higher, though still far from assured. Principally, a new policy would have to bridge the gap between threat reduction and denuclearization. The logical framework for such a policy is arms control.

Negotiating arms control with North Korea to reduce threats and ultimately eliminate its nuclear weapons remains a controversial proposition. It may not be more likely to succeed than efforts to utilize sanctions to force North Korea to disarm, though this remains an untested proposition. At the very least, it would be a long and winding road, with plenty of hazards and potential blockages along the way. In this essay I explore three questions about each of the Biden administration’s prospective aims in its North Korea policy to identify some of those hazards and what they might mean to the long-term prospects of denuclearization.

**Can the Allies Agree?**

For the Biden Administration, the objectives of strengthening alliances and coordinating its policy toward North Korea with Seoul and Tokyo make ample sense. Rebuilding alliances is one of the clear pillars of Biden’s foreign policy agenda, reflecting the perceived need to repair the political damage done by the Trump administration. This will require sustained political investments in relations with South Korea and Japan, in addition to new efforts to assure the allies of the credibility of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence guarantees. The Biden administration will also lean heavily on South Korea and Japan to rebuild ties frayed in recent years by disputes over islands claimed by both and by Korean demands for Japanese restitution and resolution of abuses stemming from Japan’s pre-World War II occupation of the Korean Peninsula.

As a result of this focus on repairing alliances, there will be a strong impulse among the Biden administration to develop and sustain a coordinated approach to North Korea. For Washington, such coordination is seen as critical both for prospective diplomacy and sustained deterrence. Washington will want to avoid perceived splits with allies that could be exploited by Pyongyang, Beijing, or Moscow. Affirming this orientation to allies, in the February 9 press briefing Price avowed, “...it’s very important that we do the diplomatic legwork that – before we undertake any approach [to North Korea] – that we know what our strategic objectives are, but as importantly, our partners and our allies also know what our strategic objectives are. And of course the underlying goal there is to harmonize them, to make sure our approach is coordinated and, in turn, the most effective.”

Though a goal of coordinated policy toward North Korea is laudable and undoubtedly correct, it does create potential adverse consequences. The most challenging of these is the perverse incentives for Seoul and Tokyo to use Washington’s desire for coordination as leverage to advance their particular policy preferences. Essentially, each might attempt to hold hostage a coordinated position in an attempt to tie Washington’s hands in diplomacy. Seeking coordination among the allies could inadvertently accentuate the differences between them.

It is a truism of North Korea policy that South Korea and Japan are rarely in alignment. In reality, the two probably share broadly similar visions for the desired end state of denuclearization, including the long-term necessity of a U.S. military presence in the region to address growing challenges from China. However, the two states perceive different threats
from North Korea and have different priorities for negotiation. For South Korea, the main issues have been conventional military threats from the North and the aim of improving inter-Korean relations, whereas for Japan the nuclear missile threat has loomed larger and there is the lingering issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea. Seoul has regularly opted for an engagement strategy; Tokyo has preferred pressure.

Such differences in priority and approach could cause diplomatic headaches for Washington and narrow the room for maneuver by the Biden administration. Getting both to agree on the types of steps and incentives involved in a new strategy based on an arms control logic would therefore require heavy lifting and artful diplomacy.

Is Threat Reduction Merely Denuclearization by Another Name?

State Department Spokesman Ned Price’s use of the phrase “reducing the threat” posed by North Korea’s nuclear weapons makes a noteworthy addition to the U.S. denuclearization lexicon. “Threat reduction” has a far different implication than the continued use of pressure to force a strategic decision to disarm. Instead, threat reduction evokes a process of lowering temperatures to avoid conflict, which by necessity would involve some sort of negotiation. Indeed, this term brings to mind the “cooperative threat reduction” program established by the United States to reduce Russia’s Cold War nuclear arsenals, secure its fissile materials, and eliminate excess weapons capability.

But threat reduction is not actually denuclearization by another name. Having achieved the security of nuclear weapons, Kim Jong Un is unlikely to relinquish them until such time as he perceives no need for nuclear weapons. Even if he agrees to reduce the threat posed by these weapons — through a variety of potential means, including test freezes, deployment limitations, or other types of constraints — that does not necessarily mean that he would be taking steps toward denuclearization. Threat reduction is not threat elimination. In fact, threat reduction probably requires that nuclear weapons remain, and that nuclear deterrence persist.

The U.S. cooperative threat reduction program in Russia was, essentially, a mechanism to implement the nuclear weapon reductions agreed by the two countries under the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. It involved considerable access by U.S. technical personnel to sensitive Russian facilities. It is worth keeping in mind that the U.S. initiated this program following the breakup of the Soviet Union — i.e., a change from the Soviet regime. Importantly, the arms control monitoring and verification that permitted these reductions pre-dated the end of the Soviet Union, and threat reduction became a means to fulfill Russia’s commitments. Had the Soviet Union persisted, it is doubtful that cooperative threat reduction would have been possible.

This brings up an important contextual question about threat reduction in North Korea. In a situation of regime continuity, could arms control be possible and lead to threat reduction activities? Presumably, a similar underpinning would be required: explicit agreement that nuclear weapons in North Korea would remain and that deterrence with North Korea would persist, but that mutual steps to reduce threats would be welcome by all parties. With this foundation, arms control-type measures could become a possible means to reduce the threat posed by North Korea’s arsenal.

Of course, it is not clear that this is what the Biden administration means by “reducing the threat” from North Korea. It could be merely an attempt to differentiate its policy from the Trump administration’s approach through new terminology. However, if threat reduction is in fact code for arms control, then it offers hope for a fresh approach. In that case, perhaps officials in the Biden administration have concluded that “threat reduction” is more salable than “arms control,” and this choice of terms is therefore due more weight than appearances might suggest.

How to Reach Denuclearization?

For years, “denuclearization” has served as the
catch-all term to describe the desired outcome with respect to the elimination of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. There is no shared agreement about what this term means, nor about the broader conditions in which it could occur. That the Biden administration continues to repeat it is not surprising, however. Some fear that ceasing to pay lip service to denuclearization as the objective could somehow undermine South Korean and Japanese faith in U.S. extended deterrence or signal acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear-armed state. The politically expedient approach is to repeat this mantra, even if it does little to help achieve it.

The simple logic inherent in the “maximum pressure” approach was appealing in part because it elided the hard issues associated with implementing a phased denuclearization. But reality dictates the need to deal with North Korea as it is – armed with nuclear weapons, with all the crisis escalation and nuclear risks that entails – even if it does not comport with neat policy. The introduction of an arms control logic points to a possible way to build a more realistic bridge to an agreed end-state of denuclearization, however it may be defined.

There are two necessary elements of an arms control approach. The first is recognition that mutual deterrence exists and is in fact a necessary condition to permit threat reduction activities that could reduce the chances of war, as well as the potential consequences if war were to occur. The second is investment in a parallel track that establishes, to the extent possible given North Korean sensitivities, more normal relations among states. (This second pillar is often encompassed by the notion of a peace regime.) These elements then translate to two parallel negotiating tracks: threat reduction and peace process. Progress on both tracks ideally would be phased or synced to ensure sufficient incentives for all parties to continue, and disincentives for any party to defect.

Each track, of course, has enormous complexity – even before a negotiation on how to sync them. For example, some elements of the peace regime track related to North Korea’s integration into international financial systems may run aground on financial transparency requirements that Pyongyang may refuse. Similarly, some elements of the threat reduction track could involve changes to U.S. force posture in Asia which may be disagreeable to allies. Moreover, asymmetries between South and North Korea in conventional and nuclear capability, situational awareness, and trade and economic interests could prove exceptionally thorny to address. These challenges are the reality of the messy process of making progress toward denuclearization.

**What Next?**

Given the unwillingness of the Trump administration to undertake a planned and peaceful transfer of power to the Biden administration, as well as the overriding concerns with managing the COVID-19 pandemic response, it could take many weeks before a North Korea policy emerges from a rigorous interagency examination.

In Washington, North Korea is mainly perceived at this point as a problem to manage, not to solve. As such, there is a strong chance that the policy review results in something resembling the status quo, though probably with new terminology to distinguish it from Trump’s policy. Yet, the downsides of continuing to manage the problem are manifest and increasingly hard to ignore: more North Korean nuclear weapons, growing crisis escalation risks, and WMD technology proliferation to other regions.

If the Biden administration wants to succeed in its three aims – alliance cohesion, threat reduction, and denuclearization – a status quo policy will not suffice. This sets up a consequential choice. Will the Biden team attempt a new diplomatic initiative along the lines considered here, with all the complexities and risks of failure it involves? Or will it opt instead for the status quo, hoping that through deterrence and containment it can limit the damage North Korea might cause, as well as the risk of a cataclysmic conflict? The U.S. North Korea policy review may not frame the issues in such stark terms, but these are the stakes it must wrestle with.