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Speech at the side-event to the NPT RevCon, “North Korea: addressing the nuclear challenge”

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The FRS-KF Korea Program on Security and Diplomacy aims to provide a better understanding of key issues on the Korean Peninsula through the organization of conferences, the publication of interviews and articles. This program is not limited to inter-Korean relations alone and aims to address South Korea more broadly as a global power on

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This publication is the text of a speech pronounced at the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations, during a side-event to the Xth NPT Review Conference, on August 1st, 2022. Participants included HAM Sang-wook, Deputy Minister for Multilateral and Global Affairs, Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Philippe BERTOUX, Director for Strategic Affairs, Security and Disarmament, French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs; Elisabeth SUH, Research Fellow, Security and Defense Program, German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP); and Jenny TOWN, Senior Fellow and Director of 38 North, Stimson Center.

The North Korean nuclear and ballistic crisis remains the most significant nuclear and ballistic missile proliferation crisis of the 21st century. For decades, North Korea has remained uncompromising in its objective to develop nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles and other weapons of mass destruction in the face of various international negotiation strategies based on sanctions and incentives, in bilateral or multilateral formats. Yet not only are North Korean capabilities continuing to grow in a highly concerning way, but the situation could get worse in the coming months.

The nuclear and ballistic missile programs are in a phase of consolidation after considerable technical progress, and they have been gradually institutionalized. All phases of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program are currently continuing, including efforts to further miniaturize its nuclear warheads and improve their deliverability, reliability, safety and security.

North Korea has a large number of facilities, from uranium mines to refineries, nuclear fuel plants, nuclear reactors, reprocessing facilities and research facilities. The Yongbyon nuclear centre, located 80 kilometers north of Pyongyang, is the most publicly acknowledged, but contains only a limited proportion of the facilities that are scattered throughout the country.

While the regime has announced that it has ‘miniaturized, lightened and diversified’ its weapons, questions remain about the operability of North Korea’s arsenal without further testing, including its ability to equip long-range missiles with nuclear warheads. Nonetheless, North Korean capabilities, as well the proliferation risks, should not be underestimated.

Since Kim Jong Un came to power, these weapons have been institutionalized. North Korea’s Constitution was revised by the Supreme People’s Assembly ten years ago to make the country a ‘nuclear-weapon State’. North Korea is the only country to have constitutionalized the possession of such weapons. The gradual institutionalization of these weapons means that they are no longer simply owned by the regime; they are also an integral part of its identity, making their abandonment almost impossible in the short term.

These weapons now appear to be not only deterrence weapons, but also identity weapons as part of the regime’s survival strategy, which has a dual, external and internal, dimension. In this sense, nuclear weapons are also political weapons that, in a multifactorial way, reinforce the legitimacy of Kim Jong Un and his regime.

North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs are inseparable, and it should be noted that the latter has accelerated considerably in recent years, well beyond the program based on Soviet Scud technology from the 1970s and 1980s. Between 1994 and 2011, Kim Jong Il oversaw three space launches and 13 missile tests from two launch sites. Between January 2012 and August 2022, Kim Jong Un oversaw three space launches, and 160 missile launches from close to 30 sites.

The regime states that these ballistic capabilities have been dispersed throughout its territory, and that it trains its missile units for warfare rather than simply testing the technical specificities of missiles, which is essential for credible conventional and nuclear deterrence.

As the tests have multiplied, many new systems have also been tested, significantly increasing the potential range of North Korean ballistic missile capabilities. These include solid propulsion and high mobility systems for the first time. Since the last RevCon in 2015, North Korea has tested nuclear weapons three times but also its first SLBM in 2015, its first IRBM in 2016, its first ICBM in 2017; its first MaRv in 2017 or 2022.

North Korea is increasing its tactical and strategic ballistic missile capabilities, seeking to protect its territory while also developing new in-theatre capabilities. This could potentially lead to a conventional rebalancing and allow greater military flexibility of action, including a growing ability to implement a strategy based on the graduation of strikes from the tactical to the strategic levels, greater accuracy for short- and medium-range targets and greater certainty regarding effects. There could also be better capacities to defeat or degrade the effectiveness of missile defenses in the region, as well as a new capacity to manage a potential crisis on the peninsula.

A majority of studies underestimate the importance of short-range missiles, and two fundamental parameters: the precision of these missiles and their capacity to penetrate adversary defenses. In this context, the proliferation of certain technologies, particularly in the field of guidance and propulsion, creates new risks for European interests.

And yet, despite these continuous developments since 2015, we remain in a diplomatic impasse.

In 2018, during a side-event to the PrepCom in Geneva, and while all eyes were on a possible diplomatic breakthrough between the two Koreas and between the US and the DPRK, I insisted we should keep a very cautious optimism and I was not mistaken.

The first reason for caution was the historical precedents set by agreements that have not been respected, be they bilateral between North Korea and the USA (the Agreed Framework of 1992 and the Leap Day Deal of 2012), or multilateral as part of the Six-Party Talks (the Joint Statement of 19 September 2005).

The second reason for caution was the depth of the recent negotiations. The three presidential meetings between President Trump and Chairman Kim were unprecedented but working-level negotiations had been more limited. If a top-down approach is essential, partly due to the political nature of the North Korean regime, negotiations at the working level are also crucial to move towards a comprehensive and technical agreement.

The third reason for caution was the inherent difficulty in defining key concepts when negotiating with North Korea, which allows Pyongyang to maintain strategic flexibility.

Today, I could even say that we should move from cautious optimism to cautious pessimism, and I will conclude on that. I note four main current trends that explain this cautious pessimism

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and oblige us to redouble our imagination to address the nuclear challenge. These four trends are trivialization, distraction, miscalculation, and division.

Trivialization because many are getting used to North Korean tests, especially ballistic ones, while underestimating the new developments of short-range missiles; and because the response to these violations of UNSC resolutions is no longer automatic.

Distraction because while the war in Ukraine is legitimately at the top of the agenda, North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic developments seem to be driven to the background. In recent months, North Korea has conducted several ICBM tests and the media coverage has been infinitely less than in 2017.

Miscalculation because, just as in the 1990s, when it was envisioned that the North Korean regime would collapse, there is a tendency to underestimate the resilience of the regime and to overestimate its fragility. Despite international sanctions and even the country’s total self-isolation in the context of the pandemic, the regime is holding out, especially thanks to China’s unwavering support.

Division, last but not least, because for the first time since 2006 two permanent members of the UNSC have vetoed a resolution to condemn and sanction North Korea for its violations of international law last May, which calls into question the very credibility of the UNSC.

In this context, key questions remain: How do we prepare for what comes next? What about a seventh nuclear test? What about a conventional, short-range, accurate ballistic strike? And, of course, how do we keep the NPT as the cornerstone of nuclear non-proliferation while North Korea keeps violating it? What credible and concrete steps do we expect from North Korea? How do we make sure nuclear and ballistic non-proliferation is fully taken into consideration when discussing Indopacific affairs?

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