The Danger of Passive Containment and Ignoring North Korea

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News of North Korean missile strikes are now so routine they tend to raise no more than a passing curiosity in the western media. So familiar is the story that the visual template for such reports are instantly recognisable, usually depicting South Korean citizens watching a domestic broadcast about a North Korean missile launch on a big screen in a bank or airport. As such, it is easy to just treat the latest fusillade of more than two dozen missiles fired into the sea off the east coast of Korea on November 2nd this year as another one of Pyongyang's petulant cries for attention during joint US and South Korean military drills. And yet this launch stands out as it saw the first instance of a missile fired over the Northern Limit Line (NLL) from the North in the history of the divided Korean Peninsula. It also triggered the first air raid alert in the South since 2016 for Ulleung Island residents before landing in the waters of the Sea of Japan off the coast of South Korea's Gangwon Province (which borders North Korea). This follows a series of increasingly aggressive provocations by the North following South Korean President Yoon Seok-yeol's announcement about his vision for reviving the peace process with the North in August. Since then, his overtures have been met only with personal rebukes and for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to officially declare themselves a nuclear state.

This article explores how the domestic political divide in South Korean politics has shaped North Korea policy and why the legacy of the authoritarian military regime (1961-1987) still casts a powerful shadow over modern and democratic South Korea. President Yoon's announcement of a 'Bold Plan', rather than providing a blueprint for reconciliation, instead reveals far more about how the internal South Korean political battle over North Korea has seen policy lurch between containment and engagement. This article will illustrate how ignoring the North and letting the peace process whither in the face of North Korea's provocations is fraught with danger. In light of the high political stalemate in inter-Korean relations, this article also seeks to provide a possible way forward through what has now become a moribund peace process. The most urgent question is therefore: How can the Korean peace process be reimagined so as to bypass the deadlock at the inter-governmental level and revive the cause of engagement?

A Bold Plan

Almost 100 days after his inauguration, the newly-elected President Yoon used South Korea's 15 August Liberation Day to announce a landmark 'Bold Plan' (Also translated as 'Audacious initiative') to restart the peace process with North Korea. Although specifics were vague, the key bargain he offered was to provide the North with extensive investment and aid in return for an agreement on denuclearisation. In particular, his offer included six proposals for cooperation on everything from food assistance to modernising ports.

Yoon's initiative, however, is yet another round in the now wearily familiar containment strategy, only by another name. Superficially, this approach involves the exciting prospect of the South engaging more deeply with the North. Taken on their own, each of the six proposals addresses issues which could indeed be usefully exploited for building sustainable inter-Korean cooperation. The problem is that Yoon has chosen to leverage these offers of support and technology transfers in return for a North Korean commitment to a phased process of denuclearisation backed up by inspections. Yet this is something that has been steadfastly rejected for over a decade.

In 2012, the North amended its constitution which subtly referred to its nuclear status, but had deliberately remained vague and stopped short of an official declaration until September this year. The timing of the announcement is not mere coincidence, but a very pointed rejection of any peace offer made contingent upon denuclearisation. Yoon is therefore guilty of being a hopeless optimist, or is banking on an angry North Korean rebuke. Neither option portends progress towards a more peaceful inter-Korean relationship.

Yoon has made it clear that 'denuclearisation' for his administration means nothing short of Complete, Verified and Irreversible Denuclearisation (CVID). The North has responded, with some justification, that the South is itself covered by the US nuclear umbrella and therefore not fully denuclearised. That the South no longer hosts US nuclear weapons within its territory and has never developed its own indigenous nuclear weapons programme is of course ignored by Pyongyang.

More credibly, the North has made it similarly clear that progress on sanctions is the price for any talks on the nuclear issue. Not surprisingly, North Korea wasted no time in rejecting Yoon's 'Bold Plan'. At the seventh session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly on 9 September, Kim Jong-un passed legislation that again confirmed North Korea's official nuclear status in law. This is likely to be the only tangible result of Yoon's North Korea overtures and now looks like a diplomatic dead end. More ominously, the North is purportedly readying itself to conduct a seventh nuclear test.

Yoon's 'Bold Plan' fits into a tradition of passive containment dressed up in the clothes of meaningful engagement by conservative presidents. After North Korea survived the tribulations of the 'Arduous March' years of 1994-1998, when anywhere between 1 to 3 million North Koreans perished due to famine, it is clear that the state is not going to simply collapse. Non-engagement and containment is inherently destabilising and risks both South Korean and regional security. Even though North Korean denuclearisation may indeed be an unattainable goal at this point, Yoon could better use his presidency laying the groundwork for thicker and deeper cooperation in the future. Taking truly 'Bold' action would begin by reforming the last vestiges of the anti-Communist South Korean state so as to unleash the full potential of NGO and grassroots citizens groups to reach out across the DMZ, independent of Seoul's control and oversight.

Containment Again?

South Korean media immediately pointed out how similar the Yoon plan is to former President Lee Myung-bak's 'Vision 3000' – an initiative which was announced and rejected in the space of only a month by the North in 2008. Vision 3000 failed to entice a then much weaker North Korea with the promise of investment in return for denuclearisation, and Lee's subsequent rehashing of his plan with his so-called 'Grand Bargain' in 2010 again went nowhere.

Yoon's conservative predecessor Park Geun Hye pursued a North Korea strategy that was also similarly dismissed as she tied support for the restoration of the North's decaying ecosystems to denuclearisation. The only difference between Lee and Park's failed strategies and Yoon is that the North issued an even more emphatic rejection by firing two cruise missiles into the Yellow Sea in the early hours of 17 August. The North has now shrugged off attempts by the South to leverage offers of cooperation and investment for hard security concessions on its WMD programme several times over the last 14 years.

Of course, the dwindling popular domestic support for Yoon and the crisis his party faces after a narrow victory in the presidential election in April this year could be a factor. His new plan could be subject to the same lack of inspiration Yoon has shown in other policy areas. However, past parallels are too hard to ignore now that the pattern has repeated itself three times over the last decade and a half during the terms of three conservative presidential administrations.

Again and again seemingly grand gestures of support are announced and made contingent upon the North agreeing to the impossible red line of denuclearisation. The sincerity of such plans for genuine peacebuilding should therefore be doubted as these initiatives have so far amounted to nothing more than a form of containment little different to the

default position the South maintained before Kim Dae Jung's watershed victory in 1997. It has become a tradition for conservative presidents to make overtures to the North that are ostensibly more about being seen to be engaging, while banking on a hostile rejection to absolve them from having to put forth a genuine reconciliation plan.

The Dangers of Passive Containment

It should be clear by now that denuclearisation is the very last step on the road towards full peace and reunification. The ground has not been laid for such a breakthrough, and by leveraging forms of cooperation that have potential albeit on a smaller scale, Yoon not only damages inter-Korean relations but also ensures continued stagnation in the peace process. It also taints more mundane opportunities for cooperation that have potential such as smaller scale investment in port modernisation or support for the vital task of restoring North Korea's forests. These more feasible avenues for inter-Korean cooperation have been set aside in order to seek a concession on weapons that the North has spent the better part of Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un's regimes developing.

In addition, the impact on the South's standing in Pyongyang will only be further eroded and Seoul will continue to sit on the sidelines as the North increasingly looks to China and international NGOs for support with development projects over inter-Korean cooperation. This is a significant problem for South Korean leaders as it is an inevitable side effect of the robust regime of sanctions that have been imposed on the DPRK. For the Kim regime it is a simple question: Why would they waste time talking with the South when it is the US that holds all the keys to progress on sanction relief? The previous Moon administration (2017-2022) actively sought closer links with the North in an effort to break this deadlock and give South Korea greater influence over security on the Korean Peninsula in accordance with the 2000 Joint Declaration. However, after the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration, progress on even low stakes issues made almost no headway and the ephemeral victories of 2018 were quite literally detonated in 2020 with the demolition of a liaison office in the North built at Seoul's expense.

The straitjacket that the strengthened UN Security Council sanctions regime now imposes upon the South's freedom of action is such that even high level talks on re-opening the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mount Keumkang Tourist Region were unable to proceed. These totemic symbols of inter-Korean reconciliation had been the defining successes of the 'Sunshine Era' (1998-2008) when cooperation had flourished, but now fell foul of current international sanctions. This will only be exacerbated by the Yoon administration's resurrection of an already failed CVID approach even with sweeteners in the form of development aid and investment. It signals to the North that the South will settle-in over the next few years for a de-facto policy of what the US calls 'Strategic patience' but which is really little more than passive containment. Many in the South and in friendly capitals such as DC will be happy with this status quo and embrace ignoring the seemingly intractable problem of North Korea.

However, this complacency risks letting the problem fester and emboldens the North to up the ante with yet more acts of provocation. The North is unlikely to remain static and pull back from a more belligerent course when their WMD programmes have been yielding increasingly rapid and impressive results since 2011. The now secure Kim Jong-un has already relegated his father and grandfather to historical figures in the 2019 constitutional revisions. The new 'Kim Jong-un Constitution' from 2019 ensures that he now has complete control, and the damage from the collapse in trade with China during the Pandemic has not made the DPRK more conciliatory.

The North is unlikely to take being ignored and served up already rejected 'Grand Bargains' from the South lightly. Historically they have not reacted well to strategic patience. The last time the DPRK was so ignored by the international community and especially the US was in 2009 with the incoming Obama administration. That was followed by a nuclear test, the sinking of the *ROKS Cheonan* and a series of border attacks that killed several South Korean civilians.

Since August, North Korean provocations have continued to make the headlines and missile strikes into the Yellow Sea have been followed up with far more dangerous and escalatory acts such as the firing of a ballistic missile over Japan. The risk of accidents and an unintentional strike only grows. This risk is not limited to the North's dilapidated armed forces. During a joint US-ROK military drill, ROK forces experienced a launch failure for a short-range ballistic missile (Hyunmoo-2C) which fortunately only struck an empty field in Gangwon-do. Nevertheless, an exchange of fire

in October 2022 along the disputed maritime border in the West Sea and the first ever missile launch over the NLL towards Ulleung Island makes the second half of the year a particularly active one for border clashes.

A little discussed secondary impact of a worsening relationship with the North would be the support it generates in the South for the development of a home-grown nuclear deterrent. The South as a long time leading country in nuclear energy with its own successful domestic space programme can quickly develop an indigenous nuclear weapons programme. An increasingly aggressive North with recourse to WMD and potent delivery systems could encourage an arms race in the region. The South has already broken free from Cold War era restraints on ground based long range missiles and is the only non-nuclear power to operate Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBM). Although a sudden regional rush to adopt nuclear weapons is unlikely, the North is now poised to roll out its own SLBMs that have access to safer and more reliable solid state fuel technology.

Furthermore, as ever when dealing with the Korean Peninsula, the risk of wider Northeast Asian regional security competition cannot be ignored. The South is increasingly becoming home to more powerful and advanced US missile defence systems such as THAAD and that deployment has already incurred the wrath of Xi Jingping's People's Republic of China. Increasing security competition between the two Koreas will only draw in regional and global powers. Ignoring the North and containing it behind insincere plans for denuclearisation is therefore not a viable long-term strategy and simply kicks the can down the road. Bismarck once remarked that the Balkans were not worth a single Pomeranian grenadier, but it was a Balkan crisis that sparked the Great War. Conventional thinking may prefer to view the North as a threat that can be bottled up, but it only guarantees that it remains a source of regional instability.

NGOs & The Potential for a New Era in Inter-Korean Relations

The problem for those who oppose containment is that the failures of the Moon administration loom large and have seemingly made the cause of engagement look hopeless. But Moon was too concerned with showy and ultimately empty headline grabbing milestones without being in a position to deliver what the North wanted in return for such breakthroughs. They were for example in no position to meet the North's 2018 request for 73 million USD in order to support afforestation and reforestation in the DPRK due to the existing sanctions regime (Kim, Jeong & Park, 2020). Trying to placate the North also cost Moon domestic political capital over everything from trying to clampdown on civil groups dropping leaflets over the border to the horrendous fallout following the killing of a South Korean official by North Korean border guards in 2020.

Moon did though accomplish several breakthroughs in reforming the South Korean state to continue the still incomplete process of breaking free from the last vestiges of the authoritarian state. In August 2018, his government abolished the Garrison Decree (□□□) that empowered the military to be deployed ostensibly for the protection of military discipline and facilities. In reality it gave the President enormous power over the military as it could be enacted by presidential order without the consent of the National Assembly. During the Yushin Era, under former dictator Park Chung-hee it had been used against the Masan protesters in 1979. This decree was first passed in 1950 and it is by no means the only example of Korean War era laws first drafted during a period of authoritarian rule that still exist on the statute books, today.

These barriers continue to make it almost impossible for South Korean groups to work on development projects in North Korea. However, during the brief flowering of inter-Korean cooperation during the Sunshine Era (1998-2008), civil society organisations were at the forefront of building transboundary partnerships. At that time, only NGOs were given permission to deliver aid and conduct activities in the North. The advantage of South Korean groups working in this area was that they had local knowledge and expertise which was of real value to the North. For example, pest control projects in the DPRK's Kangwon Province were provided with effective support as groups active in South Korea's border province, also named Gangwon, faced exactly the same challenges. Pest species like the Gall Midge and Pine Caterpillar afflicted trees over the human imposed line of division in much the same way as they damaged pine trees in the South. In the heyday of cooperation, these groups were able to mobilise legions of enthusiastic volunteers to support everything from tree planting to pest control clearing events (Lee, Shin, Park & Park, 2010).

Harnessing their expertise as well as the mobilising and organisational power of the South's dynamic civil society groups could potentially lay the groundwork for more expansive and thicker inter-Korean cooperation. By removing the legal obstacles that prevent them from attempting to operate independently in the North, Yoon could usher in a new era where cooperation is no longer filtered through an inter-governmental bottleneck that continually gets bogged down by high political wrangling.

It is exactly in this area that the Yoon administration has had much more success as it enjoys great bipartisan support for a push towards repealing the 1948 National Security Law (□□□□□). This foundational piece of legislation has in the past been wielded as a weapon against internal opposition. In the democratic era, it has continued to be used to ensure the government's monopoly over how South Korean groups and individuals access media and every type of published material relating to the North. Yoon is on the cusp of revolutionising the South and in the process demonstrating that the fear of North Korean influence is outdated and unlikely to unduly influence an already politically savvy South Korean citizenry.

International organisations operating in the South already possess far greater freedom to work in the DPRK than home grown groups. Barriers imposed by the South have only resulted in sidelining South Korean NGOs on the Korean Peninsula (Kim, 2019). By continuing in this direction and removing all the remaining legal impediments to independent contact, liaison and even cooperation in the North the Yoon administration could achieve the sort of progress in inter-Korean relations that would be truly bold.

Conclusion

The six proposals detailed in Yoon's plan are not original, but they do offer a vision for the future of how the South can regain its influence on the Peninsula and start to establish some forms of sustainable cooperation with the North. A prerequisite for such cooperation though would be that these proposals are no longer tied to high security goals such as denuclearisation. A policy of veiled containment might be the traditional approach for a conservative President, but Yoon could reap greater domestic rewards by establishing cooperation on issues linked to energy and environmental conservation which enjoy broad support among the South Korean public.

Looking to the long term, Yoon could lay the groundwork for putting South Korea in control of its own North Korea policy by following through with the only promising aspect of the announced plan: to create an economic development committee in advance of any concessions on denuclearisation. This would be an important step towards allowing the South to make targeted offers of support for the North on smaller projects to support South Korean NGOs. The promise of unlocking such financial and technical resources without the baggage of having to agree to terms with Seoul first could make working with newly liberated South Korean civil groups far more attractive to Pyongyang. By sacrificing direct control, the South can help transboundary people-to-people projects to proliferate and establish the right foundations for real progress towards more sustainable inter-Korean cooperation.

More than laws, what is required is a mindset shift in regards to North Korea that will inevitably be much more difficult to resolve. Politically, the prospect of a liberal attitude towards opening up access to the DPRK by citizens groups beyond the monopoly of the Ministry of Unification seems slight. However, if the stagnation that inter-Korean cooperation now faces is to be bypassed, then there needs to be a new approach that offers a route to engagement beyond leveraging economic support for denuclearisation.

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