

The Republic of Korea: Lessons in Deterrence and Diplomacy

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The President of the Republic of Korea (broadly known as South Korea) *Yoon Suk-yeol* held an impressive speech on the occasion of the *Liberation Day*, 15 August 2024, in which he reaffirmed Seoul's commitment to the unification of both parts of the Korean peninsula. President Yoon Suk-yeol went so far to declare that his country would 'keep the door to inter-Korean dialogue wide open'; and even more significantly, he did so despite Kim Jong-un's announcement at the end of 2023 of a new Two Koreas Policy, which defined the so called Democratic People's Republic of Korea (i.e., North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (a.k.a. South Korea) as 'two belligerent states', thus abandoning the policy of 'peaceful unification' which had been the declared objective of the Communist North since decades, at least in theory.

In this context, there was much speculation following the October 7–8 session of the so called Supreme People’s Assembly (read: the North Korean parliament) about whether the assembly had indeed revised the DPRK’s constitution to remove unification-related language and define North Korean territory according to Kim’s instructions in early 2024. It seems that North Korea made at least one revision related to inter-Korean issues — defining South Korea as ‘a hostile state’ — but it remains unknown whether it made other related amendments.

As a matter of fact, the North Korean regime never responded to President Yoon’s Liberation Day speech – which implies, per se, a lack of interest in improving relations with the South. To the contrary, Kim himself reacted promptly to President Yoon’s Armed Forces Day parade speech on 1 October 2024; the North Korean dictator even leveled an unusually direct nuclear threat that the so called DPRK would ‘use without hesitation all the striking forces in her possession, including nuclear weapons’, against South Korea if her sovereignty was violated.

In the light of the above it becomes obvious that dialogue with North Korea — no matter how desirable — is not a realistic option for the foreseeable future. This raises the question of what is the best way forward for the Republic of Korea.

It must be taken for granted that Kim’s Two Koreas Policy is here to stay. It is an outcome of a fundamental policy reorientation that occurred over a period of more than four years, going back to the failure of the talks held by Kim and the then U.S. President Donald Trump during the Hanoi Summit in 2019. Kim’s call for the development of tactical nuclear weapons and the revised nuclear law, which implicitly expanded the scope of nuclear strike targets to South Korea, were just two of multiple indicators.

The policy change of the so called DPRK vis-à-vis the Republic of Korea should be seen within the context of a wider foreign and security policy reorientation of the Communist regime. North Korea has given up her three decade-long policy of normalisation of ties with the United States through

denuclearisation as well as her policy of non-alignment with the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation.

Kim's decisions appear to increasingly be driven by the opportunities he sees in the shifting international geopolitical landscape, notably the emerging multipolar system and the subsequent Great Powers rivalries, which provide him remarkable opportunities of repositioning his country on the international chessboard – and even less motivation to come closer to Seoul.

Pyongyang's repositioning in the rising multipolar world order is spectacularly manifested in the new bilateral treaty signed by the so called DPRK and the Russian Federation. Evidently, Kim's strengthened ties with Moscow encouraged him to dispose of the doctrine of the Korean unification, his forefathers' very legacy by the way.

On the ground of the above facts and reflections, the most pragmatic way for the Republic of Korea concerning her relations with the North is to balance deterrence with dialogue.

Under the current circumstances, priority must be given to deterrence. In terms of Political Realism, the Republic of Korea should continue to make efforts to advance her weapons systems and boost trilateral security cooperation with Washington and Tokyo. Yet, military power is not a goal per se, but a tool for reaching a political goal. In the concrete case of the Korean peninsula this means that the Republic of Korea – while strengthening her own military capabilities and ties with her allies – should at the same time send clear signals to the North that she is truly interested in the inter-Korean dialogue.

In this regard, it might be smart for Seoul to avoid copying the bad habit of American Liberals – and of their European fellows – of weaponising human rights and similar issues. *There is no doubt worldwide that the Republic of Korea is a beacon of liberty, a model democracy in Asia, and a success model in terms of institutional, economic, educational and technological development.* Hence, there is no need for South Korea to use a didactic

language that the North finds hostile — at least not in her public messages addressing North Korea.

Last, but not least: if there is a lesson learned from the past this is that North Korea's regime will not trade its nuclear weapons for economic compensation. Sure, it does not sound nice, but if truth be told, international developments since the end of the Cold War have clearly demonstrated that states which were convinced to give up their nuclear arsenal, or to not develop one, had to pay a heavy price in the end of the day. In an international environment of increasing strategic uncertainty and military interventionism it only was 'logical' that the 'Vision 3000: Denuclearisation and Openness' – a remarkable initiative by former President Lee Myung-bak's administration – failed; and so did the even more impressive 'Audacious Initiative' started by current President Yoon.

There is no doubt that striking the right balance between deterrence and dialogue is equivalent to the equation of a circle. Nonetheless, it is time for the Republic of Korea to recognise that North Korea's strategic interests have changed, understand the reasons for this and draft out realistic policy options.

