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PRACTITIONER TO  
PRACTITIONER  
SERIES

# Talking Points: North Korea

## Part 3

Talking Points on Military Spending, Objectives of Nuclear Armament, Nuclear Negotiations, "Hostile Policy," a Peace Treaty, and an End-of-War Declaration

Author  
Ambassador Thomas Schäfer

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**Editor's note:**

The three-part "Talking Points: North Korea" papers are the inaugural publications in the Center For Asia Pacific Strategy's "Practitioner to Practitioner" series which seeks to provide practical and actionable policy recommendations for practitioners from practitioners.

**Talking Points: North Korea Series**

by Ambassador Thomas Schäfer

**Part 1:**

Encouraging A Different Mindset In North Korea: Introduction And Recommended Talking Points On Agriculture, Food Security, Private Economic Activities, And The Enterprise Reform

**Part 2:**

Talking Points On Private Foreign Investment And Special Economic Zones

**Part 3:**

Talking Points On Military Spending, Objectives Of Nuclear Armament, Nuclear Negotiations, "Hostile Policy," A Peace Treaty, And An End-Of-War Declaration

Ambassador Thomas Schäfer served two tours in Pyongyang as the German Ambassador to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) or North Korea, and is the most qualified practitioner with direct knowledge of and experience with the North Korean regime to provide the recommendations included in this three-part series.

## INTRODUCTION

Contrary to what Pyongyang's propaganda wants us to believe, North Korea is not a "monolithic" country with everybody wholeheartedly following the Workers' Party's line to the letter, but composed of different interests and social groups that pull into different directions. That there are different views in the elite, has occasionally been admitted to foreigners residing in Pyongyang. There have also been internal policy discussions that have been reflected in official media, albeit only to some extent and at certain times. The leadership is under pressure as not only the elite, but ordinary North Koreans are well aware of the huge gap between official propaganda and reality, and of the fact that life in neighboring China and South Korea is far better than their own. General discontent and differing opinions within the elite provide an opportunity for the international community to exert some influence on policy discussions among North Koreans.

Based on its overall motto "From Practitioners to Practitioners", the Center for Asia Pacific Strategy aims to provide actionable recommendations and solutions. In the case of secluded and self-isolating North Korea, one of the challenges of the international community is to make the best use of the scarce opportunities of interaction with North Koreans. This paper contains proposals for suitable topics and –in the form of talking points (in bold type) followed by background information- for possible ways to present them. The suggested topics in the realm of economic policy including agriculture, private economic activities, enterprise reform, foreign investment, special economic zones have all been controversially discussed in the country's leadership in the last twenty years. Talking about them might help relaunch such discussions.

In addition, some talking points are suggested that might be raised in the course of security policy discussions. Even if these points refer to statements or policies by Pyongyang in the past, the interlocutor's answer might help shed a light on fundamental North Korean attitudes.

Depending on the context, it is suggested to actively address human rights – or particular cases - although Pyongyang has often reacted with protests and

refusals to talk whenever the topic was brought up. The regime in Pyongyang cares about its image abroad, and the North Korean population should not get the impression that the trampling of human rights in North Korea is of minor interest to foreign countries. Moreover, in the case of North Korea, appeasement tactics generally do not work.

This paper is based on the author's experience who has had countless conversations with North Koreans. As North Koreans often try to evade delving into details or even skip some topics altogether, the talking points were selected with a view to help provoke substantial talks about North Korean policy choices. They are suggestions only and should be complemented and adapted to the specific situation. Their objective is not only to get information but to encourage the voices in North Korea that advocate reforms.

North Korean officials are well trained in trying to unsettle or divide foreign interlocutors by flattery, brusqueness or even insults. In most cases, it seems best to ignore flattery, react seriously to insults while remaining friendly in general – and speak one's mind, as any other reaction would be interpreted as weakness. Being persistent might help.



## TALKING POINTS ON MILITARY SPENDING

**Military spending was extraordinarily high under Kim Jong Il, but has further increased since Kim Jong Un took office. In the (non-public) discussions before the Policy of Parallel Development was announced in 2013, it was argued that while substantial additional resources for the development of missiles would be needed in the short and medium term, the new policy would allow for long-term savings in conventional forces, since deterrence would then be guaranteed by nuclear weapons. Has this expectation materialized? Has the military's share of the national product been cut back in recent years?**

**The People's Army has been vaunted for its role in some traditionally civilian sectors like fishing or construction. Are there plans to reinforce again the civilian part in the North Korean economy to the detriment of the military's role in "socialist construction"?**

Background:

In his first public speech in April 2012, Kim Jong Un promised that the population would never have to tighten its belt again. Only one year later, in March 2013, he reneged on that promise. The "Policy of Parallel Development," also known in Korean as Byungjin, that is, the simultaneous development of nuclear weapons and the economy, was announced. The term "parallel development" seemed to imply a departure from Kim Jong Il's Military-First Politics, although it indeed reinforced it. The new policy accelerated the build-up of a nuclear force and granted additional budget and income opportunities for the military, which had already been given preferential treatment under Kim Jong Il. In private conversations, this was occasionally admitted by North Korean officials. A senior official said that the Parallel Development Policy "puts nuclear armament at the center" and that "in second place," it was "about economic development." Another senior official said that the population "tightened its belt" because the Policy of Parallel Development meant "spending the bigger part of the gross domestic product on the military for many years."

As even during Kim Jong Il's time, there had been discussions about whether military spending did not impose excessive burdens on the national budget, the plan to adopt the Policy of Parallel Development became the subject of controversial debate in the leadership. Proponents justified it with long-term savings. The increasing role of the armed forces in economic sectors like construction or fishing was reinforced by the adoption of the new policy. The official news agency KCNA described the result in April 2016: "The Korean People's Army has played a big role in creating people's wealth, holding aloft the slogan 'Let the People's Army take charge of both national defense and socialist construction!' ... They are now playing a key role in all fields of building a thriving and highly civilized socialist nation."

### **Talking Points on the Objectives of Nuclear Armament**

**Why does DPRK want nuclear weapons? It seems to be more than deterrence. Sometimes DPRK links nuclear weapons to the creation of "international justice." And sometimes they are compared to a sword to liberate the Korean peninsula from the US. What is meant by this?**

Background:

Nuclear weapons: Not just for deterrence

When asked by foreigners why North Korea needs nuclear weapons, North Korean officials usually mention only one point: deterrence. They say that the US would not have overthrown Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi if Iraq and Libya had possessed nuclear weapons, and want to make sure that something like that does not happen to North Korea. The argument seems plausible, but is only part of the truth.

Since the start of Kim Jong Un's reign, the DPRK has placed nuclear weapons development in a new context. In 2014 e.g., the weapons were described not only

as a "self-defensive deterrent" but also as a "precious sword of justice that should break the United States' cursed nuclear stick and should establish a fair global order." The US was warned that "the plan to eternally sit astride on the Korean Peninsula is an anachronistic daydream that hastens the United States' disgrace and ruin. ... The United States' aggressive attempt to permanently occupy South Korea is a delusion that can never be realized forever and ever." There were similar statements in the years that followed. The Foreign Ministry, for example, said in 2017 that the nuclear weapons would "contribute to regional peace and security and genuine international justice." In his 2018 New Year's speech, Kim Jong Un declared that the country would only use nuclear weapons if its "sovereignty or interests were violated." However, it would "resolutely respond to acts of wrecking peace and security on the Korean Peninsula."

Threats to use nuclear weapons for undefined "protection of interests" or to achieve an equally undefined "international justice" go beyond deterrence. What exactly Pyongyang has in mind, however, is not clear. It might mean arms proliferation or cyber attacks. Even more worrying is the link between nuclear weapons and the prospect of terminating the "American occupation of South Korea": Pyongyang apparently believes that possessing nuclear weapons will help it in its endeavor to stop the deployment of US troops and to free South Korea from US influence. It has not been explicit, however, on how this should be done, that is, whether by force or through political pressure.

Political and military provocations have long been part of North Korea's toolbox. Provocations are used to test the opponent's reaction; they are meant to show fearlessness and convince North Korea's enemies that it would strike back immediately in the event of an attack. For decades, Pyongyang has repeatedly staged incidents on the inter-Korean border while declaring that it would shoot back if the opposing side responded militarily. It is possible that some North Korean generals believe that Pyongyang's nuclear weapons expand the scope for such provocations because they trust that their nuclear weapons will deter South Korea from responding vigorously.

## **Talking Points on the Nuclear Negotiations, "Hostile Policy," a Peace Treaty, and an End-of-War Declaration**

### **DPRK has repeatedly asked for a peace treaty or at least an end-of-war declaration. What would be the content of such documents?**

Background:

Since Kim Jong Il's death at the end of 2011, Pyongyang had been saying more often than before that progress on the question of denuclearization could only be made if the US abandoned its "hostile policy" -without clearly explaining what was meant. When, in private talks, North Korean officials were repeatedly asked for a definition of the "end of hostile policy" slogan, they emphasized the end of maneuvers and the withdrawal of US troops from the Korean peninsula, whereas the lifting of sanctions was subordinate. When North Korea intensified calls for a peace treaty in 2014 and 2015 (without explaining in public what the peace treaty should include), the answers of representatives of various institutions were similar: the end of maneuvers and the withdrawal of U.S. troops and, sometimes, the withdrawal of the U.S. nuclear umbrella were called indispensable elements of any peace treaty whereas sanctions relief was only mentioned incidentally. Inquiries about the content of an end-of-war declaration would probably result in similar answers.

The insistence on an end of the maneuvers and troop withdrawal has to do with the division of the country. Fearing the influx of destabilizing ideas and a German-style reunification "by absorption" (as Pyongyang calls it), South Korea is considered by the North Korean regime as an existential threat which it can only hope to somehow neutralize once the alliance between South Korea and the US has been weakened. Moreover, large parts of the current North Korean leadership view any cooperation with any foreign country (as all of them permit more personal freedom and are economically better off) as a latent threat to the stability of the regime.

The overriding intention to push the US off the Korean peninsula, the scope of

Pyongyang's nuclear objectives, and the fear of "spiritual pollution" does not bode well for efforts to convince North Korea to change course. Past nuclear negotiations, e.g. the Six-Party-Talks, were essentially based on the international community's hope that confidence-building measures, security guarantees, and the prospect of economic development, including the lifting of sanctions, would suffice for North Korea to renounce nuclear weapons. However, arms control agreements can at best contain, but not satisfy, Pyongyang's offensive ambitions. The intention to oust US troops and destabilize South Korea, and the fear of foreign ideas, cannot be negotiated away. This requires a shift in opinion in Pyongyang.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



H.E. Thomas Schäfer hails from Oldenburg, Germany and he is a member of the Board of Advisors to the Center for Asia Pacific Strategy. During his career in the German Foreign Office, he was posted several times to East Asia and is the former German Ambassador to North Korea (2007-2010 and 2013-2018), and Guatemala (2010-2013). He has PhD in German history from the University of Kiel in 1985. He is the author of the book, *From Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un: How the Hardliners Prevailed: On the Political History of North Korea (2007-2020)*.

See full biography on the CAPS website [here](#)

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