

The Great Tragedy of North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Development: How It Went Wrong and What Needs to be Done

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Interviewee

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Summary

How effective has the U.S. “strategic patience” been towards North Korea? Mr. Joel Wit, Senior Fellow at the U.S.-Korea Institute (USKI), Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), claims that a lack of clear priorities among the U.S. and its allies in dealing with North Korea has led the regime to continue developing its nuclear technology and to seek recognition from other countries as a *de facto* nuclear state. In the worst case scenario, Mr. Wit argues that North Korea could possess nearly one hundred nuclear weapons by 2020. While some policy makers, including President Obama, have stated that the North Korea is destined to “collapse” at some point in the future, Mr. Wit makes the case that the Kim Jong Un regime is showing no signs of imminent disintegration and hoping to “wait them out” is not the most effective policy. Nor should North Korean policy be seen as one of simple engagement or non-engagement, he argues. Rather, the international community’s response to North Korean aggression should be one which forces Pyongyang to choose between nuclear weapons and economic development via the strategic use of diplomacy in areas such as making sanctions effective, increasing international cooperation, and considering additional military measures when necessary. In light of the various objectives of the key regional actors, this will not be easy. But Mr. Wit argues that such obstacles should not prevent the U.S. from taking a more proactive stance towards North Korea and its nuclear program in the coming years.

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Problems in Dealing with North Korea's Nuclear Program in the U.S.

- The U.S. policy toward North Korea under the Obama administration has been ineffective. The U.S. has been unable to exert sufficient pressure on Pyongyang to stop its development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, and the regime now continues to seek international recognition as a *de facto* nuclear state.
- It is a long-term fantasy that the North Korean regime will collapse anytime soon. Analysts have constantly underestimated the durability of the North Korean regime, while North Korea has shown for a long time that they are capable of enduring repeated crises.
- South Korea, Japan, Russia, and China all have the divergent interests, and cooperation in regards to North Korea has been difficult to attain. This has been creating space for North Korea to pursue their own agenda.
- It is a mistake to consider denuclearization and nonproliferation as separate issues. Once North Korea acquires more nuclear weapons, the risk of proliferation increases.

Finding an Effective Policy towards North Korea

- The U.S. government should prioritize North Korea's WMD program in order to prevent a worst case scenario in which North Korea could possess nearly a hundred nuclear weapons by 2020. Among other things, this will also mean that South Korea will be increasingly unable to achieve reunification as envisioned by its current policies.
- Informal Track II meetings between the U.S. and North Korea should continue, as they are a valuable way to obtain a more complete picture about what the North Koreans are thinking and the varying strands of thought coming from Pyongyang. The U.S. government should pay more attention to these meetings in order to devise an effective strategy against North Korea.
- The United States and South Korea are the two most important outside parties in terms of North Korean security since North Korea does not consider China, Russia, or Japan as a security threat. These three parties need to reach an agreement if a solution to the nuclear issue is going to be found.
- While it will be difficult for South Korea to take leadership on the North Korean nuclear issue, there are other venues that which Seoul can play an active role such as trying to move forward the inter-Korean dialogue and the Six Party Talks, and enforcing the UN sanctions regime.
- Shaping policy towards North Korea is not about making choices between engagement and not engaging. It is about looking for ways to sharpen the choice for North Korea between nuclear weapons and economic development. This would require making the existing sanctions more effective, pushing China to exert more pressure on Pyongyang, and considering additional military measures to safeguard U.S. and South Korean security. But most importantly, having an effective, active, and aggressive diplomatic strategy would be key in order to realize such goals.

Transcript of the Interview (abridged):

Problems in Dealing with North Korea's Nuclear Program in the U.S.

“I think our policy has been a disaster. I think that it has not had any effect on North Korea’s nuclear or missile programs, that we have not been able to put sufficient pressure on North Korea to change course ... Overall, the effect has been that North Korea has used the past five years to put in place a foundation for rapidly expanding its nuclear program and for seeking the acceptance of other countries of its status as a nuclear power.”

Question: In light of President Obama’s recent remarks on the inevitable collapse of the North Korean regime, there seems to be much confusion about the underlying logic of strategic patience vis-à-vis North Korea. In your view, where do you think the U.S. stands in terms of its North Korea strategy today? What is your assessment of the U.S. effort in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue over the past several years?

Wit: I think the first point is that President Obama’s remarks actually make perfect sense in the context of a policy of strategic patience. Namely, that we are going to wait them out. But we seem to have shifted somewhat in that we have more of an openness to having discussions with North Korea, but the shift does not seem to be sufficient to really move down that road vigorously. So I myself am very confused about what U.S. policy is today. Secondly, in terms of evaluating the past five or six years, I think our policy has been a disaster. I think that it has not had any effect on the North Korean nuclear or missile programs and they are poised to expand rapidly over the next 5 years. We have not been able to put sufficient pressure on North Korea to change course. Overall, the effect has been that North Korea has used the past five years to put in place a foundation for rapidly expanding its nuclear program and for seeking the acceptance of other countries of its status as a nuclear power. So, to me, this has really been a bad policy. I hasten to add that of course we all know that North Korea is very difficult to deal with. This is not an easy issue. But for a policy maker, in any country and no matter what the hurdles are, you need to figure out what approaches might be effective. In this case, the approach has been totally ineffective.

Q: Despite North Korea’s persistence, the idea of “regime collapse” seems to be still prevalent, even among South Korean policy makers. What do you think is the underlying cause for this?

Wit: This idea has been around since the Soviet Union collapsed. When the Soviet Union collapsed, everyone thought that North Korea and China were going to collapse. There were different theories about who was going to collapse next, and of course, none of it has ever happened. I do not know why people think North Korea is going to collapse. But I think the main point here is that we have consistently underestimated the durability of the North Korean regime since the 1990s. So there have been many periods when this idea of collapse came back. I remember after Kim Il Sung died and there was a survey done of former South Korean directors of the NIS about how long Kim Jung Il was going to last. And most of them thought he was not going to last at all. They thought months, maybe. And during that same time period the director of the Central Intelligence Agency basically said North Korea was going collapse soon. I am not sure why but I think it is a fantasy we have, that one day this problem will be solved, that North Korea will disappear and everything is going to be great. But you cannot base policies on fantasies, and that is the bottom line.

Q: Considering the seemingly different set of national interests and priorities, how would you assess the current level of cooperation among the regional stakeholders in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue? Do you think there is more to be done? If so, what are the challenges in doing so?

Wit: I know there are a lot of meetings of government officials to talk about the nuclear issue and resuming the Six Party Talks, and everyone talks about how they support denuclearization. But we have a saying in the United States that “talk is cheap.” So I find that the reality is very different from the public presentation that everyone is working together to solve this problem. The reality is that all of these countries—Japan, South Korea, Russia, China—have different objectives and different interests, and you can see that reflected in actions. For example, Russia may talk about how denuclearization is important and I believe that the concept does have an effect on Russian policy towards North Korea. It limits what Russia would be willing to do with North Korea. I do not think Russia would sell North Korea major weapons systems. On the other hand, Russia may say it is interested in denuclearization but it is also pursuing a lot of different initiatives with North Korea—political, economic, and other initiatives—regardless of what North Korea does with its nuclear program. To me, that undermines the objective of denuclearization. China certainly talks about denuclearization as a priority, but it has other priorities, and everyone knows what those are. They are very clear. So with Japan, South Korea, you could argue the same thing.

My perspective is that regional cooperation is not going well and that everyone is going off in their own direction, creating a lot of space for North Korea to continue to move forward with its WMD programs while also building political and economic ties with other countries, which is the worst of both worlds for us. We want North Korean leaders to choose between nuclear weapons and economic development, but they do not have to choose. I do not know how to fix all that. But at least in the past, the United States was the glue that managed to bring countries all together and mobilize them to a large degree, not entirely, behind that main objective. But right now, it is not in a position to be the glue. We are on the sidelines. And I think, if you are a North Korean, it creates a very good environment for you to get everything you want—your nuclear weapons and your economic development.

Q: Regarding North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, there are some people who want to prioritize denuclearization, whereas others believe it is more important to focus on nonproliferation. What do you think about this perception gap between the nonproliferation camp and the denuclearization camp?

Wit: They are not separable. I think it is a big mistake for people to look at it that way. I assume when you are talking about nonproliferation, you are talking about stopping the flow of nuclear weapons, nuclear technology, out of North Korea to other countries. They are not separable, and there is a very simple logic behind that. The simple logic is that as North Korea develops more nuclear weapons, it is going to have more nuclear goods to dispose of overseas. If I have one nuclear weapon, I am not going to be selling that to someone overseas. I am going to be keeping it for myself. If I have a hundred nuclear weapons, I could sell one or two or three or four or five or six. It is a very simple logic, and indeed, when we reached the 1994 Agreed Framework, that was part of the logic behind that—the fact that our intelligence estimates were telling us that North Korea might have up to a hundred nuclear weapons by the year 2000 and our concern that that would facilitate nuclear exports by North Korea. Your chances of stopping the flow of nuclear know-how and technology out of North Korea to overseas decrease as their stockpile and capability grows.

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Q: What are, or should be, the priorities for the U.S. government?

Wit: The priority is the WMD program—there is no doubt about it. Over the next five years, North Korea’s nuclear program can expand enormously to a point where, in the worst case scenario, North Korea could have almost a hundred nuclear weapons by 2020. There are a lot of implications for having nuclear weapons that go well beyond their military uses: there will be implications for military strategy, for the joint U.S.-ROK strategy in dealing with the possibility of a North Korean attack, geopolitical implications in managing the U.S. alliances in the region, implications for the nonproliferation, and even implications for the South Korean government and its policy of seeking reunification. It is beyond my imagination to think that North Korea with a hundred nuclear weapons will have any interest in reunification along the lines of the policies advocated by South Korea. North Korea is going to want to have reunification on its own terms. So there are lots of different implications for this.

Q: Is there a way to disentangle the logic between regime survival and nuclear weapons?

Wit: Well, there are a couple of points here. The first one is that we need to step back and think about what the problem is and how to deal with it and stop being paralyzed. Many people have been paralyzed by the thinking that North Korea needs these nuclear weapons for regime survival and therefore they will never give them up. This might have been true in 2009, but now the problem has gotten much worse over the past five years. Over the next five years, the problem is going to get even worse. So what should we be doing? Should we be paralyzed and just walk away from this issue because of that logic? Or should we be trying to deflect North Korea off its current course and make this problem not as bad as it is going to get? We are not paying any attention to this problem. We need to drop this logic that is paralyzing us and plays right into North Korea’s hands. They want us to be paralyzed and unimpeded.

Q: Despite the lack of official communications, Track II approaches by the U.S. toward North Korea seem to play an important role in keeping the door open for greater engagement. Having been part of a number of such communications, how would you assess Pyongyang’s willingness to engage in dialogue? Do you think such talks are necessary?

Wit: I think when we engage in the Track II meetings with North Koreans, we meet with a certain group of North Koreans from the Foreign Ministry. I think these people represent one strand of thought in Pyongyang, and it is probably a strand of thought that is more favorably inclined to dialogue than other people in the government. That is the first point. The second point is if you approach these discussions recognizing that reality, you can learn a lot about what these particular groups of people are thinking in terms of diplomacy.

So in our Track II meetings with the North Koreans we were able to get a very complete picture of their views on what they would be willing to do in terms of dialogue and what might happen if dialogue were to resume. I thought it was very interesting. It was a pretty complete picture of what they were thinking. And so in that sense, Track II meetings can serve as a good channel of communication. On the other hand, I have no idea if what we learned was different from what the U.S. government knew or not. The U.S. government was not very open in terms of talking about what it knew. As a general rule, though, I think the U.S. government felt these meetings were not useful and indeed felt that some of the people in our meetings were being fooled by the North Koreans. That is not a very good attitude, but I found there were a number of government officials who acted that way.

Q: What are North Korea's priorities in their diplomatic efforts?

Wit: I think a big objective of North Korea that gets lost in the noise is what I call an "accommodation strategy." It is the objective of getting other countries used to the fact that North Korea is a nuclear power, and in that context, North Korea establishes fairly normal political and economic relations with these other countries. So the way I look at their diplomatic initiatives is that many of them are double-edged swords. They use dialogue as a tool to further the accommodation strategy because it makes them look very reasonable and open to discussion. But discussions are not happening, so what are they supposed to do? All the things you mentioned about driving wedges in alliances, that is all part of what they are doing—there is no doubt about it. But the big picture issue for me is, how do we head off this slippery slope that we are on towards accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state? People think the United States will never do that. That is probably true, but we are just one country. Many countries—particularly developing world countries—are all sliding down that slippery slope. They could care less about North Korea's nuclear programs.

Q: To what extent do you think the nuclear issue can be seen as a multilateral issue in Northeast Asia?

Wit: It is in everyone's interest, to some degree, that North Korea does not have a lot of nuclear weapons, or not even have nuclear weapons. But I think at the core of this issue has to be North Korea, the United States, and South Korea, which are three key countries in terms of dealing with the nuclear issue. And I say that because, from a North Korean perspective, it is the United States and South Korea that are the real security threats. So in order to get at the nuclear issue, the United States and South Korea have to be actively involved in dealing with these core security problems. North Korea does not care about Russia, China, or Japan as a security threat. So the U.S. and South Korea are the key players on the nuclear issue and also on other security issues, such as replacing the armistice with a permanent peace arrangement.

Q: What role can South Korea play in terms of the nuclear issue? What about the U.S.?

Wit: I do not think South Korea can take leadership on this problem. There are some issues that South Korea can, of course, take leadership on, such as trying to move forward with inter-Korean dialogue. I think South Korea can play a very supportive role in trying to get the Six Party Talks back on track. Certainly, the United States and South Korea would have to work together very closely on any initiative for replacing the armistice. South Korea could play an important role on trying to plug up the holes in the sanctions regime if we take regional initiatives in places like Southeast

Asia where the sanctions regime is not enforced well and North Korea imports technology through Southeast Asian countries. So there are many things South Korea can do. The problem is that no one is really doing any of these things. Our policies are a lot of talk. Theodore Roosevelt used to say, "Speak softly and carry a big stick," to describe how the U.S. should conduct policy. Our policy is talking loudly and carrying a small stick.

Q: What should be the end goal of engagement? Conflict resolution? Security and stability? Transformation? Could there be a post-resolution strategy for North Korea beyond denuclearization?

Wit: Let me make a couple of points here. First of all, the choice of an overall strategy is not a choice between engagement and not engaging. That is often the way it is depicted in the media, and that is an incredibly simplistic way of thinking about how to shape a policy towards North Korea. A policy towards North Korea should indeed be forcing them to make a choice between nuclear weapons and economic development. We should be looking for ways to sharpen that choice for them. Right now we are not really doing that. So that means a number of different things. It means, for example, thinking about sanctions and how we might make them more effective. Our policy of trying to get China to support what we are doing over the past twenty years has been a total failure. But we should continue to do the same thing. We keep pushing China to support more pressure, and they keep pushing us to support more dialogue. So we need to think about how to break that logic.

An effective policy may require additional military measures to safeguard the security of the United States, and particularly South Korea. I do not mean attacking North Korea, but I bet there is a lot more that can be done on that front. And finally, an effective policy means diplomacy. It means having an effective, active, aggressive diplomatic strategy. Should we have rejected a recent North Korean initiative on linking exercises to nuclear tests? I say we should have rejected it because it was an unreasonable position and the trade off was unreasonable. I would not suspend exercises for a suspension of nuclear tests, but are there counter proposals we could have made that would have served our interests. So we need a combination of all of these things and we need to become serious about dealing with this threat.

I can tell you from 20 years of dealing with the North Koreans that they are very serious people. They know what they are trying to do and they are going about it in a very steady, consistent, serious way. And quite honestly, we are not being serious about dealing with this problem. We are not paying close attention. We are not trying to put in place more effective measures on all of those fronts that I mentioned. That is what we need to be doing. And it only gives North Korea a lot of running room to build a large nuclear arsenal and to become a state that is effectively accepted as a nuclear weapons state by other countries. ■

About the Interviewee

Joel S. Wit

Joel S. Wit is a Senior Fellow at the U.S.-Korea Institute (USKI), Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). Mr. Wit previously served as an official at the U.S. State Department and as Senior Advisor to Ambassador Robert L. Galluci from 1993-1995 and as Coordinator for the U.S.-North Korea Agreed Framework from 1995-1999. He was also a key participant in the establishment of the Korean Peninsular Energy Development Organization (KEDO). He has written numerous articles on North Korea and nonproliferation and is the coauthor of the book *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004). At USKI, Mr. Wit is managing the *38 North* program (<http://38north.org>), a website devoted to analysis of North Korea.