

Moving From a North Korean Nuclear Problem to the Problem of "North Korea"

June 1, 2009

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Current Situation after North Korea's Second Nuclear Test on May 25th

North Korea is repeating the same pattern of nuclear diplomacy: raising the level of military tensions by launching a long-range rocket and performing a nuclear test, and then searching for the most favorable position once negotiations resume. This vicious circle composed of North Korea's brinkmanship and the international community's multilateral sanctions will continue to be repeated without any prospect of solving the North Korean nuclear problem in the near future. The so-called "action-to-action" paradigm will not succeed because the most fundamental principles of North Korea and the countries conflict with each other. Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. hope that a "stick and carrot" approach will elicit concessions from North Korea during the process of negotiations, but North Korea will not move on giving up its nuclear program, unless the North Korean leadership feels sure that they are given material guarantees for their survival. As the nuclear program is the last resort to guarantee the survival of the North Korean regime, system, and state altogether, "sticks and carrots" focusing on the specific issues of nuclear negotiations will be far short of solving the problems of "North Korea" as a whole.

Sixteen years have passed since the outbreak of the first North Korean nuclear crisis. The Geneva System based on the Agreed Framework that has lasted

for eight years (1994. 10-2002. 10) has failed to manage the problems of nuclear proliferation, and the "normalization" of North Korea. The success or failure of the new system of Six-Party Talks is yet to be seen. However, as of now, negotiations based on the approach of the Bush administration and, more specifically, the February 13th agreement seems to be in a stalemate.

Diplomacy on the North Korean nuclear crisis has failed to solve the North Korean nuclear problem as well as the North Korean problem. Stalling at the last phase of the second stage of "disablement", the Six-Party Talks are now struggling to find a way of how to get into the third stage of the February 13th agreement. Especially the issue of declaration and verification of North Korea's nuclear program is critical, because it shows North Korea's genuine intention to start the process of giving up their program. Yet, North Korea is desperately trying to strengthen its negotiating position vis-à-vis the Obama administration by first testing a nuclear weapon for the second time, reversing

As an Asia Security Initiative core institution, the East Asia Institute acknowledges the grant support from the MacArthur Foundation that made this research possible.

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the achievement of the disablement stage, and rejecting the Six-Party Talks. North Korea desires to strike a comprehensive deal with the Obama administration through bilateral talks, and longs for a variety of political, economic, and diplomatic rewards such as a peace treaty, diplomatic normalization, economic assistance, the lifting of international economic sanctions, and possibly light-water reactors.

The five countries in the Six-Party Talks except North Korea have tried to evade facing up to and solving the "North Korean" problem, because it is a hard question on how best to influence the future orientation of the North Korean regime, system, and diplomatic position. The structure of Six-Party Talks is also narrowly focused on the problem of the nuclear program, leaving the problem of "North Korea" aside. The Northeast Asian international order that is based on the strict and competitive balance of power will be gravely influenced by the future orientation of North Korea, which makes the five countries deal with the "North Korean" problem directly. But by focusing narrowly on the North Korean nuclear issue, these countries have maintained only minimal agreement on how to manage the nuclear problem, sometimes showing strategic and tactical differences in dealing with specific issues.

In spite of agreement on the Six-Party presidential statement criticizing North Korea's rocket launch on April 9, the five countries have had hard times trying to find common ground to deal with future North Korean problems. The U.S. was determined to impose economic sanctions on North Korean firms with a specific targeting list, as well as punish North Korea diplomatically by not giving serious and close attention to the North Korean nuclear problem. South Korea and Japan maintained a policy of neglecting North Korea for different reasons. The two countries seem to continue minimal interactions with North Korea if North Korea fails to meet the conditions suggested by these countries. China and Russia do not want to take an initiative to punish or side with North Korea, only

reluctantly facilitating cooperation among other countries.

Existing Strategic Options

The North Korean problem is more than twenty years old. North Korea or more specifically Kim Jong-il will not give up nuclear weapons if he is not assured of the possibility of preserving his regime and system in the future. The "Holistic approach" to deal with the North Korean problem and North Korean nuclear problem altogether is necessary, especially when the Obama administration begins with a fresh start in dealing with most foreign policy issues.

However, strategic options under discussion in most countries are narrowly focused on the North Korean nuclear problem, and they can be categorized as follows:

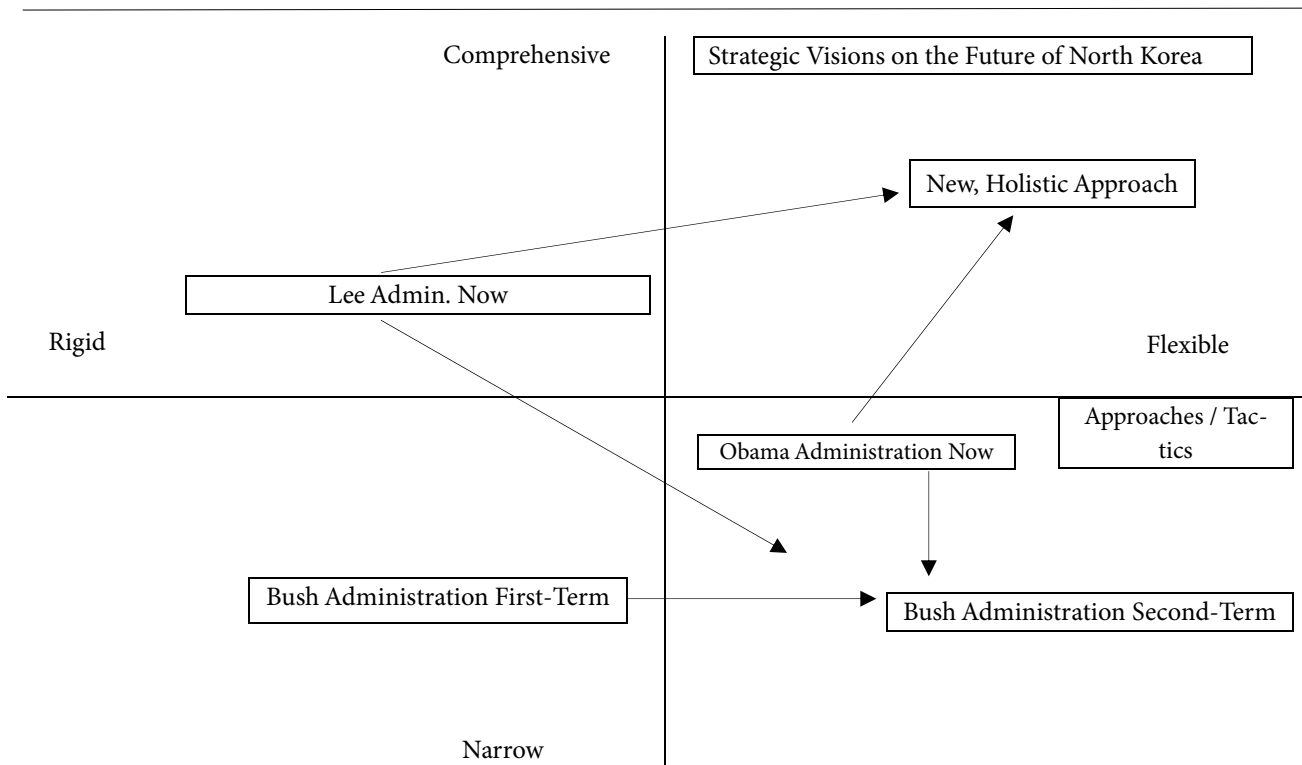
Table 1 Strategic Options

	Contents	Proponents
1. Benign / Malign Neglect	Minimizes interactions with North Korea if conditions are not met	Current South Korean and Japanese Government
2. Wait and See	Assumes that Kim Jong-il will not give up nuclear ambitions and waits for the next leadership's flexibility	Conservatives in Japan, South Korea, and the U.S.
3. Issue-specific Negotiations	Continues Six-Party Talks, especially the February 13th Agreement	Six Party Talks Approach, China and Russia
4. Comprehensive Negotiation	Broadens the span of negotiations including peace treaty, diplomatic normalization and large-scale economic assistance	Neo-Perry Process by the Obama Administration?



We can situate the different approaches of the different administrations in South Korea and the U.S. as follows:

Figure 1 Different Approaches



The North Korean nuclear problem is in essence a political problem related to the survivability of North Korea, as much as it is about the issue of proliferation and military strategy. Against this backdrop, all these options are not sufficient to solve the "North Korean" problem. Even 4. Comprehensive Negotiations (Table 1) are not comprehensive enough to deal with the "North Korean" problem and will face difficulties.

The North Korean Problem and Inherent Dilemmas for the North Korean Leadership

A proper strategic option should include a vision for the future of North Korea which is desirable not just for North Koreans, but also for most Northeast Asian countries. A long-term strategy aiming for the next

decade should at least visualize a North Korea which is post-Kim Jong-il, with a new leadership, nuclear but economically poorer, or non-nuclear but with more international assistance. With this "shadow of the future" in which North Korea coexists with other powers in an appropriate way, Northeast Asian countries will begin to coordinate their North Korean policy. To do this, we need to be clear about the nature of North Korean regime and system.

North Korea is a *divided country*, which means that the strategic miss or failure will increase the possibility of being unified directly by South Korea in a fashion in which the latter absorbs the former. North Korea, unlike any other former socialist country, does not have room for strategic reorientation after failing a transitional phase.

North Korea is a *totalitarian country*, and needs



extremely strong policy control and legitimacy. Separation of the North Korean people from the outside world and persistent tension and threats from the outside world is indispensable to maintain totalitarianism in the 21st century.

North Korea is *a relatively small, failing state*, which cannot go through a long-term process of systemic reform without overall impact on every aspect of society. The wrong plan for systemic reform might bring about a sweeping impact raising the chance of unexpected changes.

North Korea *expects leadership change* in the near future. The personality of the leader in this totalitarian state is crucial in determining the policy orientation of the country. The Third Leader in North Korea, and his strategic vision and his policy environment will be conclusive in all aspects of North Korean society.

From these observations about the essence of the North Korean political situation, come North Korea's dilemmas. North Korea faces almost three insoluble dilemmas in planning its own future: 1) dilemma between the nuclear program and economic and political survival; 2) one between economic reform and political totalitarianism; 3) one between a peace process on the Korean Peninsula and its political legitimacy.

1) The North Korean leadership may know that its economy cannot progress with the current crisis over its nuclear program. North Korea will also lose most of its competitive edge once it gives up its nuclear program because nuclear weapons have the power to narrow the tremendous gap between the two Koreas rather easily. Thus, North Korea faces the dilemma between the option of maintaining the nuclear strategy and the one of giving it up.

2) North Korea, even under a very favorable post-nuclear environment, cannot actively pursue economic reforms and opening, because North Koreans will then have information and material resources with which to question the legitimacy of the dictatorship. North Ko-

rean leaders are very cautious about the possibility of facing public opposition once they are exposed to external influences.

3) North Korea has maintained a militaristic national strategy, culture, and social system by producing domestic tensions and antagonism based on the theory of war against capitalism or imperialism. The Cold War and imagined threats from the U.S. and South Korea provided the North Korean leadership with its political legitimacy and social control power. If North Korea concludes a peace treaty with the U.S. and South Korea, normalizing diplomatic relations with the U.S. and Japan, the threat-selling strategy to the North Korean public will no longer be effective, thereby weakening the North Korean dictatorship.

Strategic Principles to Solve the "North Korean" Problem

It is imperative to clearly state that North Korea will continue to exist in Northeast Asia, as long as North Korea is able to maintain its system and state, while conforming to international norms and standards. North Korea, in official and unofficial documents, has repeatedly presented similar arguments that South Korea, Japan and the U.S. wishes to "pose a threat to the North Korean system," "continue a hostile policy against North Korea," "invade North Korea," "start a nuclear war," and so on. These exaggerated expressions are to be partially countered by clearly declaring that Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. do not have any hostile intention against North Korea in terms of its existence and survival. Vague or mixed expressions on the future of Korea, however, will not help. For example, the former Bush administration stated that North Korea is a "sovereign" state, while it also named it as one of the "an axis of evil." Moral judgment does sometimes deliver unintended messages even though it goes with clear political expressions.



Visualize the future of a Northeast Asian order in which a desirable North Korea coexists with neighboring countries. Verbal declarations that North Korea has a right to exist in a future Northeast Asia will not be persuasive enough for North Korea. More is needed. For example, the way in which North Korea is represented in the future picture of Northeast Asia and strategic discourses of a future Northeast Asia will be a significant basis on which North Korea will situate itself in the future. Only a strategically drawn blueprint co-developed by all Northeast Asian countries will persuade the North that, if it gives up its nuclear program, will there be room for its legitimate role.

Devise a new and future-oriented plan for the most desirable governance on the Korean Peninsula, and adjust the existing plan for reunification according to it. Reunification, for North Koreans, is a very threatening concept, especially when we consider the vast power gap between two Koreas in terms of international status, economy, and future development. Leaving aside unification by absorption, even unification by grand negotiation such as the option of making confederation or federation based on political consent, might pose a threat to North Korean leadership. Economically prosperous and politically democratic, South Korea will dominate the transitional Korean Peninsula in which the North Korea leadership will have a hard time to survive. In that sense, in spite of North Koreans' frequent reference to the ideal of reunification, North Koreans will not accept the policy of engagement by South Korea or the U.S., if they think that the final destination is unification by the latter.

South Koreans will not accept the idea of giving up the vision of reunification just to make North Korea more comfortable. However, when thinking about the rapidly changing political environment in South Korea and in the Northeast Asia region, a long period of coexistence between the two Koreas in the future will be necessary to smoothly pave the way for the future, peaceful, and agreeable governance on the Peninsula. The new phenomena such as increasing integra-

tion at the regional level, deepening socio-economic interdependence among Northeast Asian countries, and the possibility of a democratic peace in the region, might give a new picture to the new relationship between the two Koreas. If North Koreans understand that by transforming its own system, there are numerous other, possibly "postmodern" ways of integrating the two Koreas peacefully, they may feel less threatened by the engagement policy from the South or the U.S.

Then, emphasize the universality of the norm of non-proliferation, and the inevitability of sanctions against any non-conforming acts of North Korea. The norm of non-proliferation is universal, in that it will prevent the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in the regional and global politics. Five countries except North Korea in the Six-Party Talks, agreed to the norm of non-proliferation, because the norm is universal, and non-proliferation is significant to prevent a further arms race and nuclearization in the region. North Korea has always argued that nuclear weapons are for deterrence against the U.S. hostile policy toward the North. North Korea will lose the logical need for developing its nuclear program, if the U.S. and surrounding countries stick to the principle of "guaranteeing the future of North Korea."

Have a long-term plan for North Korea, especially for the Third Leader in the North. It will take some time and effort to convince the North on the above principles and ensuing policies based on that. Also it will be hard for Kim Jong-il to radically change his "Military-First Politics." The system of "Military-First Politics" is the outcome of Kim Jong-il's three years of painstaking efforts following the death of Kim Il-sung and the year 1997 when Kim Jong-il finally came to the fore of North Korean politics. Kim Jong-il might have tried to find a new way to cope with the post-Cold War environment, but after a relatively long period of deliberation, he adopted a conservative and aggressive national strategy in the areas of politics, diplomacy, economy, and society under the name of



"Military-First Politics."

The Third Leader(s) of North Korea who will inherit power from Kim Jong-il will face a similar situation under which he(they) should decide whether to follow Kim Jong-il's "Military-First Politics" or make a sharp break from the past and establish a wholly new national strategy, hopefully a strategy of systemic opening and reform. It will take some time for the Third Leader to evaluate the environment and decide his own strategy. What will be important at that time is clear strategic principle coordinated by surrounding countries for the future of North Korea. If the above-stated strategic principles have been convincingly delivered to the North Korean leadership, the new leadership might seriously consider adopting a new national strategy.

Pre-designed plans for the future of North Korea will help Kim Jong-il as well as the future Third Leader. Kim Jong-il himself will not try to transform "Military-First Politics" for various reasons particularly domestic reasons. However, he may leave a message to his successor that North Korea's dilemmas may be solved with a fresh start of the Third Leader who does not have burdens from the past.

The five countries in dealing with North Korea should take a long range outlook perspective for the future and try to coordinate this vision. Only by devising a long-term North Korea plan, will Kim Jong-il and the Third Leader give a chance to the new strategy of reviving the country without resorting to nuclear program.

Policy Guidelines for South Korea and the U.S.

Devise a common strategy about "the future of North Korea" by having strategic dialogue on that issue, not just on the issue of North Korea's nuclear problem. It has been extremely hard to "study" North Korea due to the lack of data and information. Past experiences in dealing with North Korea for the last sixteen years,

however, have been a learning process for both South Korea and the U.S. about what kind of state North Korea is, what purpose North Korea is really pursuing, and what coercions North Korea really fears. By systematically processing the past experiences and reflecting upon the two countries' policy results, a new policy knowledge network will be established.

South Korea should develop a new discourse and vision about "future governance" on the Peninsula which goes beyond the limited imagination of making one "modern" nation state. Pay special attention to the process of various regional networks, and a new "globalized" South Korea. New visions on the way of how the two Koreas will coexist peacefully under changing environments where the concept of "national sovereignty" is changing slowly but fundamentally will enlighten the future course of a new governance of the Peninsula.

Consult with other countries in the region, especially China and Russia, about a desirable future for North Korea. Make clear suggestions and restrictions for North Korea's future actions. Draw upon the common understanding that transformed North Korea and a new inter-Korean relationship that will not hurt Chinese or Russian national interests, and that North Korea's conformity to international norms will benefit them.

Design a new multilateral framework to deal with the North Korean nuclear problem and the problem of North Korea itself. The current Six-Party Talks are losing momentum not just because of North Korea's provocations, but also due to rising skepticism in other countries as well. To solve the North Korean problem, the Six-Party Talks need to be restructured into a complex network of multilateral, minilateral, and a set of bilateral talks to deal with diverse issues ranging from nuclear ones to ones for normalizing the North.

Strengthen the realist notion of prudence by keeping away from any moral judgment of North Korea and focusing upon specific issues guided by strategic principles. New systems of discourse and speech acts



need to be developed to differently represent North Korea in public discourse. New concepts and new sets of hypotheses will convince not only the public in Northeast Asian countries, but also the North Korean leadership. "Smart" engagement should include both "hard" and "soft" means.

South Korea should devise a long-term engagement plan for North Korea, and establish when it will end its policy of "neglect" and begin to actively engage with the North. South Korea has been faced with North Korea's increasing hostile policy since the inauguration of President Lee Myung-bak. Also the non-reciprocal response from the North to the decade-long Sunshine Policy makes the need to readjust the pace and the contents of the engagement policy explicit. However, without a long-term strategy of engagement that goes beyond both the Sunshinist version of engagement and benign neglect, South Korea's policy cannot succeed. "The Third Approach" with a well-planned engagement on the one hand, and a clear-cut coercion against North Korea's wrongdoings on the other hand will be necessary.

The Obama administration needs to perform a bottom-up review not only on the North Korean nuclear problem, but also on the future status of North Korea in Northeast Asia. For this preparation of the overall plan for the U.S. strategy on Northeast Asia, the future status of transforming the Korean Peninsula should be done first. After North Korea's rocket launch and nuclear test, the U.S. administration will focus on the policy means of economic sanctions and diplomatic punishment, while not pursuing any proactive dialogue, especially a bilateral one. But with a more long-term strategic plan, and a radically new way of thinking of the North Korean problem different from that of the former Bush administration, there will be a better chance to solve the current stalemate.

Search for new policy issues that will contribute to the project of "normalizing North Korea." This should be distinguished from just rewarding the North for its behavior in the process of nuclear negotiations.

The project of "normalizing North Korea" will include political, diplomatic, military, economic, and socio-cultural ones, which is very much a project of "state-building process." We need to convince the North that the common projects of South Korea and the U.S. are for the long-term future of North Korea. These projects might focus on long-term policy areas such as education, infrastructure, and state finance. South Korea and the U.S., then, need to find out new policy issues that will contribute to the most fundamental purposes.

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