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North Korea at the Crossroads

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North Korea is now at the crossroads. It needs to make a strategic decision on whether to defend its nuclear program and “military-first politics” against the pressure of increasing international sanctions or to denuclearize and pursue “economy-first politics.” Depending on which decision Kim Jong-il makes, his successor will face either the path of opportunity or the path of peril. Currently, Kim faces the challenge of ensuring a smooth transition of power to his successor. At the same time, he must negotiate with an international community that is trying to induce Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear program by simultaneously imposing sanctions on it while offering a comprehensive negotiation package. In this situation, the surrounding countries must construct an international environment that is favorable to convincing North Korea to abandon its nuclear program and join the international community. Furthermore, the neighboring countries need to actively support and develop a clear formula for establishing a lasting peace framework on the Korean Peninsula.

Since the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994, Kim Jong-il has faithfully followed the will of his father, who stated that North Korea will denuclearize if and only if the United States withdraws its hostile policy and nuclear threat toward Pyongyang. Amidst the backdrop of its increasing international isolation in the post-Cold War era, the North Korean regime made the decision to develop nuclear weapons as to safeguard its survival. However, this decision brought it into sharp conflict with the United

States, who strongly opposed Pyongyang’s nuclear program. The United States could not allow a nuclear-armed North Korea that would destabilize the East Asian region. Subsequently, its strategic decision to pursue the nuclear military-first politics has led North Korea to become a “weak and vulnerable nation” rather than a “strong and prosperous nation,” enduring hardships along the “arduous march.”

Compared to circumstances in 1994 and 2003, the current situation confronting Kim Jong-il is far more complex and difficult. Not only must he revive a shattered economy but he must also adroitly manage the sensitive process of leadership succession that is still ongoing. If Kim fails to take the initiative to give up his nuclear program and allows the nuclear military-first politics to dominate the succeeding regime, it will become even more difficult for North Korea to make the transition toward a non-nuclear economy-first politics. Given the fact that external pressure from the international community for denuclearization and internal pressure of attenuating stability will only continue to increase, the succeeding regime will be in a position where giving up the card that guarantees its survival is impossible. Moreover, it would be political suicide for the new regime to abandon the nuclear military-first politics. As the son of Kim Il-sung who is the embodiment of *Chuche* ideology, Kim Jong-il needs to make the critical decision to abandon North Korea’s nuclear program. There is no other method

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for resolving the tense situation without denuclearization. Nuclear weapons might be a shot of morphine to ease the pain temporarily, but it cannot be the remedy to cure a dying patient.

This new road of “strong and prosperous nation” in the 21st century for North Korea, which can be only taken by Kim Jong-il himself, would be to abandon its nuclear arsenal and to adopt the economy-first politics. Kim can set this road by creating an internal and international foundation for the economy first politics so that his successor inherits the transition. For the North Korean leadership, denuclearization implies a *de facto* regime transition. Therefore, unless Kim Jong-il himself undertakes the risk of giving up the nuclear weapons, his successor will lack the ability to maneuver out of the ongoing nuclear crisis. That is not to say that giving up nuclear weapons is an easy strategic decision to make. Nevertheless, North Korea should strive to secure its regime through bilateral and multilateral cooperation with its neighbors and pursue a path of economic prosperity. It would be almost impossible for the succeeding regime to drive the transition toward a non-nuclear economy-first politics independently. A more realistic option is for Kim to build a political environment that will allow those who support the military-first politics to accept this transition, even after his death. Without this firm decision by Kim and the strategic cooperation of the surrounding countries, it is unlikely that North Korea will choose to embark upon the path of non-nuclear economy-first politics. There will be much to gain if Kim makes this strategic decision. It will lead to diverse discussions on not only how to unravel the North Korean nuclear issue but also how to establish a lasting and

peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula for the 21st century.

To resolve the nuclear crisis, North Korea must step forward first. However, the North Korean regime has long stated that a prerequisite to any denuclearization is the United States abandoning its “hostile policy and nuclear threat” towards Pyongyang; in essence, the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from South Korea, the severance of the U.S.-ROK alliance, and open disarmament talks on issues such as the reduction and relocation of U.S. nuclear forces in the Asia-Pacific region. These demands are not only unrealistic, but they will not secure the North Korean regime. Even if Washington were to meet its demands, North Korea would still be in range of the United States’ intercontinental ballistic missiles and would therefore never be secure from American retaliation. The key issue here is how to guarantee the North Korean regime’s survival and its national security through comprehensive political agreements. Pyongyang should realize that in order to build a more desirable international environment for the survival and prosperity of the regime, it needs to move forward first.

Solving the nuclear issue requires not only monumental effort by North Korea but also bold moves by the surrounding countries. The unilateral efforts of one party will not be enough to solve all the problems; rather, it will require the concerted effort of all the members of the Six-Party Talks. For the comprehensive, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea to take place, Pyongyang’s fears in regards to abandoning its nuclear arsenal must be addressed. Once its sense of insecurity is mitigated, the North Korean leadership will view itself at the crossroads between life and death, rather than a slow

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death and a quick death. That will make the leadership more induced to take the strategic decision for denuclearization. If Pyongyang begins to earnestly pursue the process of denuclearization, the other parties must ensure that North Korea does not fall out of step. These parties need to develop and share the vision and plans for North Korea’s future so that Pyongyang can assure itself that denuclearization will not be a futile effort that throws away its card for survival; instead, denuclearization will be the solution that secures its own survival and prosperity.

Working with the United States, South Korea should initiate the first step towards change in North Korea by developing a new comprehensive package. Previous comprehensive alternatives failed to produce any substantial results, largely due to the discord between the two allies, South Korea and the United States. On August 15, 2009, the Lee Myung-bak administration presented the blueprint of a “Korean-style comprehensive package,” mainly consisting of economic aid and the disarmament of conventional forces. But lessons from the “sunshine policy” suggest that economic assistance alone will not be enough to unravel the complicated North Korean nuclear issue. In addition to economic aid, the new package needs to be more comprehensive in political and security issues. The point is whether Seoul and Washington can provide what North Korea’s succeeding regime wants, especially concerning the issue for the normalization of relations and security assurances. South Korea and the United States should develop a concerted vision about what the end point will be with the North Korean nuclear issue. They need to be prepared to start comprehensive negotiations with North Korea as

soon as Pyongyang makes the strategic decision to give up its nuclear weapons. China’s role is also critical in this matter. The two allies should not overlook the fact that closer cooperation with China is as important as a strong mutual consensus between South Korea and the United States. For the North Korean leadership, China has the most credibility among all the interested parties. In this respect, China’s active participation is vital for the successful negotiation and implementation of a comprehensive package. However, China’s support is not unconditional. Beijing will support South Korean and American efforts to denuclearize North Korea only when it is confident that Seoul and Washington are not seeking regime change in Pyongyang. International cooperation for North Korea’s denuclearization is required as well. In addition to the participants of the Six-Party Talks, the European Union, the United Nations, and other international organizations need to assist in efforts to make North Korea a stable state, not another failed state. Through these multifaceted efforts, a vision for the future can be presented in which a denuclearized North Korea coexists and coevolves with its neighbors, thereby inducing Pyongyang to choose the road leading to denuclearization and prosperity. ■