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How to stop North Korea’s nuclear ambition: failed diplomacy and future options

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ABSTRACT
There are two kinds of hostilities on the Korean Peninsula: hostility between the U.S. and North Korea; hostility between the two Koreas. The nature of North Korea’s nuclear crisis is a mixture of those two hostilities. The crisis was exacerbated by misinterpretation and wishful thinking regarding its intentions. Another reason for North Korea’s nuclear crisis is the failure of the international community to speak with one voice on how to resolve it. Every country is different in its threat perceptions, national interests, and strategic calculations. In the grand scheme of things, however, the North Korea problem seems to be a strategic conflict between the U.S. and China. South Korea’s internal friction prevented any policy from being implemented effectively.

It is not only unfair but unrealistic to handle the two hostilities separately. Any efforts to denuclearize North Korea should not undermine the security of South Korea. For example, the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from the Korean peninsula may be even worse for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula than a nuclear North Korea, if it keeps the current political system and there is no fundamental change in inter-Korean relations.

Like the front and rear wheels in an automobile, the U.S.–North Korean dialogue and inter-Korean dialogue began to operate as two driving forces for a breakthrough in the nuclear crisis. The wheels should be aligned with a strong U.S.–R.O.K. alliance. Then a multilateral format like the Six-Party Talks can resume for a sustainable peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

1 Introduction

Is the year 2018 going to be remembered as a historic year on the Korean Peninsula? A dramatic turnaround began to unfold in Pyongchang Winter Olympics in February 2018, although secret contacts have reportedly taken place between the United States and North Korea in the latter part of 2017. On March 5, Kim Jong-un met with a team of special envoy of South Korean president Moon Jae-in and agreed to have an inter-Korean summit by April. He also offered a talk with President Trump to

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1 It was followed by Kim Jong-un’s New Year’s Address in which he announced the participation of North Korea in Pyongchang Olympics.

2 A team of special envoy was headed by president Moon’s National Security Advisor Chung Eui-Yong, and it was joined by National Intelligence Service Chief Suh Hun.

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discuss the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. It was even more dramatic that President Trump immediately accepted Kim’s offer on March 9 when a South Korean delegation visited him to relay the message. Kim Jong-un surprised the world by visiting Beijing for talks with Xi Jinping on March 25, his first foreign trip ever since he took power. He had five summits altogether within the span of three months: two with China on May 7 and June 19; two with South Korea on April 27 and May 26; with the U.S. in Singapore on June 12.

In spite of such a dramatic turnaround, few observers are truly optimistic about the resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis, and it is not even certain how long it will take. Such caution is due to experiences of past failures, lack of information regarding recent development, and the difficult issues lying ahead. The North Korean nuclear crisis already seemed to have reached its limit to the peaceful resolution in terms of the highest level of nuclear and missile technology, the highest level of military tensions, and the absence of crisis management mechanisms. It will have been more difficult to handle the North Korean nuclear crisis, if this attempt were to fail again.

Where is the North Korean nuclear crisis headed? This paper aims to analyze the origin, the current state, and the future outlook of the North Korean nuclear crisis. More specifically, the paper will try to answer the following questions. Why has North Korea been so obsessed with nuclear weapons? Why did we fail to stop North Korea’s nuclear ambition? Why is North Korea suddenly so eager to talk with the United States? What is the intention of President Trump to establish a new relationship with North Korea and resume the negotiation with North Korea? What is the future outlook? The most important question is related to the nature of North Korea’s nuclear weapons. Finally, what kind of role should South Korea play to resolve the current nuclear crisis?

2 Misinterpreting North Korea’s intention and the nature of nuclear ambition

2.1 Misinterpreting North Korea’s intention

North Korean studies are oftentimes based on analytics. Analyzing North Korea’s intention is the most important first step for crafting an efficient North Korea policy. There have been a lot of misinterpretation with regard to North Korea’s intention, however. It is particularly so, when it comes to the nature of North Korea’s nuclear weapons.

It has become common knowledge that North Korea pursues nuclear weapons. Only several years ago, however, it was a very controversial question. For example, North Korean nuclear weapon program was often perceived as a bargaining chip to negotiate with the United States, a leverage to gain an economic aid, or a political symbol to promote the domestic stability. It was even thought of as a source of electrical energy rather than mass destructive weapons. These perceptions can explain North Korea’s intention only partially, although they are not completely wrong.

There are various reasons for such misinterpretation, which can be classified into three groups: North Korea’s deliberate deceit, unintended errors in human inquiry, and intended misinterpretation. For example, “a bargaining chip to negotiate with the
United States” is a result of unintended errors and North Korea’s deceit combined. These three reasons will be explained in more detail.

### 2.1.1 Being deceived

North Korea’s intention to possess nuclear weapons had never been clear until 2012, when North Korea claimed it is a nuclear weapons state under its new leader Kim Jong-un and revised its constitution claiming itself to be a nuclear power.

In the 1990s, Kim Il Sung said that North Korea had neither intention nor capacity to develop nuclear weapons. North Korea claimed that its nuclear program was solely for electric energy. Under Kim Jong-il, North Korea admitted that it was developing nuclear weapons because of the U.S. hostile policy and that it could abandon its nuclear weapon program in return for the security assurance from the United States.

North Korea agreed on a number of agreements with the international community, in which it promised to denuclearize, but neglected to comply with them: Agreed Framework in 1994, Joint Statement of September 19, 2005, and the Non-nuclear Pact of 1991. It also ignored the UN Security Council Resolution.

### 2.1.2 Unintended errors

People often make unintended errors in personal human inquiry: inaccurate observation, overgeneralization, selective observation, premature of closure of inquiry, and so on. With regard to North Korea’s intention, closure of North Korea’s political system, North Korea’s deceit, ideological bias, and wishful thinking are likely to be added to the misinterpretation. For example, not only North Korea’s technologies and determination to develop nuclear weapons but also the durability of North Korea’s political system was often underestimated. It leads to the misinterpretation that North Korea cannot afford nuclear weapons technically and financially, or that North Korea’s nuclear crisis will be resolved as a result of the collapse of North Korea’s political system. Economic leverages like sanctions and economic aid were overestimated.

Scenario planning is often used to analyze and predict unfamiliar situations without bias. Unintended errors are easily intervened, however. The strength of a scenario technique is to review all the possibilities. On the other hand, its weakness is to allow a scenario with only a little probability that attracts almost the same amount of attention as a scenario with a high-probability.

One of the most popular scenario planning regarding North Korea’s future in the 1990s was reform, collapse, or muddling through. In hindsight, it was clearly biased how “reform” and “collapse” attracted almost the same weight as “muddling through.”

### 2.1.3 Intended misinterpretations

Few people “intend” to misinterpret, which is intellectually, socially, and morally undesirable. Nevertheless, they do make “intended” misinterpretations, because they are not clearly distinguished from unintended errors. Moreover, most intended misinterpretations are made semi-unconsciously. As for North Korea’s intention to develop nuclear weapons, the most popular scenario planning is “power seeker” vs. “security

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3Kim, Kim Il Sung Works, Vol. 44, 169.
4Babbie, The Practice of Social Research, 11–16.
It attracted the attention of those who believe that we can still negotiate with North Korea, although North Korea’s nuclear weapons turned out to be irreversible in 2012. There is no big difference between power seeker and security seeker, however, once it accomplished and possessed nuclear weapons. Dr. Henry Kissinger said that he does not worry about North Korea’s ICBM capability of hitting Washington but does about the possibility of proliferation.

North Korea’s intention is often intentionally misinterpreted to justify policies, which were already decided and implemented. What South Korea thinks North Korea intends to do is more important than North Korea’s actual intention. This causes a serious mistake in policy implementation. They never change their perceptions towards North Korea.

### 2.2 The nature of North Korea’s nuclear weapons

There are two kinds of military hostility on the Korean Peninsula. One is the U.S.–North Korean hostility and the other is inter-Korean rivalry. These hostilities began since the establishment of the two governments in the South and North in 1948, and were exacerbated by the Korean War from 1950 to 1953. During the Cold War era, the United States and the Soviet Union pressed nuclear ambitions of both South and North Korea, which tried to develop nuclear weapons.

#### 2.2.1 “The U.S. hostility”

North Korea has maintained that it is entitled to have nuclear weapons due to “the U.S. hostility” and military threat. There is no reason to possess nuclear weapons if security assurances are provided and the military threats disappear. North Korea is not clear what security assurances mean specifically, but it is a common sense that it is related to the U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula. However, it is a wild exaggeration that the United States may take a military attack against North Korea, even though it is not developing nuclear weapons. It is not convincing to deter the U.S. military threat by a few nuclear weapons which it took three decades to develop. The U.S. hostility means that the U.S. stands by South Korea in case of inter-Korean conflict rather than the direct confrontation between the U.S. and North Korea. It is a longstanding hope for North Korea that the United States does not get involved in inter-Korean affairs. North Korea may believe that nuclear weapons program seemed the odds higher.

From North Korea’s perspective, the southern part of the Korean Peninsula has been occupied by the “imperialist” United States with its armed forces. North Korea has maintained that it fought with the United States to “win” the Liberation War for the Motherland and that the U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula has been a major threat to North Korea’s security. Highlighting the U.S.–North Korea hostility strengthens North Korea’s position that South Korea is a puppet of the U.S. and it is the sole legitimate government on the Korean Peninsula. This is why North Korea would never discuss a nuclear crisis with South Korea. As long as North Korea insists on resolving its security issue through a deal with the United States, a breakthrough is unlikely.

Nuclear weapons could enhance the pride and confidence of the North Korean people in their political system. North Korea refused to open and reform its system, and tightened its control mechanism. North Korea has even argued that nuclear
weapons could contribute to its economy by redirecting the financial resources that were used for the conventional arms to the economy. North Korea declared the dual-track approach of the *Byungjin Line of Economic Development and Nuclear Weapons* in 2013.\(^5\)

### 2.2.2 “Inter-Korean hostility”

Inter-Korean relations have been a struggle for who is the legitimate government on the Korean Peninsula, ever since the two governments were established with different ideologies and political systems in 1948: capitalist South and communist North. The end of the cold war was perceived as a victory of the capitalist South over the communist. The collapse of the socialist countries in Eastern/Central Europe had a critical damage on North Korea’s economy and trade. Shortage of food, crude oil and hard currency stopped factories and public distribution, which had led to disastrous famine, causing hundreds of thousands of casualties. It seemed doubtful that North Korea will remain as an exception of the system transformation that happened to European countries.

North Korea may be concerned about being absorbed by South Korea as the Cold War ended. South Korea’s effort to make peace and unification through engaging North Korea has made North Korea’s threat perceptions reach its peak.

Rivalry between the two Koreas is still a life-or-death game, and in North Korean terms “to eat or to be eaten.” North Korea has never recognized South Korea as a counterpart to discuss the future of the Korean Peninsula. This is why North Korea has never discussed nuclear crisis with South Korea. The most important first step is that North Korea should recognize South Korea as a party concerned and sincerely discuss all the political and security issues, including nuclear issue. In this sense, it is really surprising that the whole denuclearization process was on the table in inter-Korean summit on April 27.

Maintaining its political system, more importantly, the Kim dynastic regime, became North Korea’s foremost concern. North Korea refused to open the door and reform, with tight social control and the military-first principle. With regard to inter-Korean relations, North Korea emphasized a confederal form of unification, which South Korea and North Korea joined with its own political systems and ideology.

Nothing was more reliable than nuclear weapons for its security. North Korean nuclear weapons kicked into high-gear, although it first started in the 1950s. In fact, North Korea’s nuclear weapons turned out to be effective in thwarting South Korea’s optimism for peace and unification and South Koreans began to fight over which one should come first, peace or unification.

### 2.2.3 Evaluation

- **Security Seeker vs. Power Seeker**

It has been controversial if North Korea is developing nuclear weapons just for its security or it is seeking power beyond it. North Korea may believe that its nuclear weapons promote its security by strengthening its deterrence or facilitating peace treaty

\(^5\)On 31 March 2013, Kim Jong un announced the “Byungjin” policy of “economy and nuclear weapons” during a plenary session of the Party Central Committee (PCC).
with the United States. It is a reasonable doubt that North Korea would dominate inter-Korean relations and eventually achieve North Korea-led unification, however, although its immediate concern is survival.

North Korea’s nuclear weapons could be used to upgrade its leverage for negotiations to drive the U.S. troops out of the Korean Peninsula. They were also expected to discourage the U.S. from intervening in inter-Korean conflict for fear of being attacked by North Korea’s nuclear weapons. Proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear security are also as serious as directly targeting the United States.

- Conflict of Interest

North Korea’s way of resolving its threat perceptions towards the U.S. military presence and augmentation forces conflicts with the U.S. global strategy and South Korea’s security concern.

The military presence on the Korean Peninsula should be considered in the U.S. global strategy as well as in the context of denuclearizing North Korea. South Korea perceives the U.S.–R.O.K. alliance to be most important in deterring North Korea’s aggression. The United States policy towards North Korea is reviewed in a way that is looking at North Korea from its wider strategic perspective, including China.

As long as North Korea maintains its position that the U.S. hostility is North Korea’s major security concern and that security assurance from the United States should be guaranteed, South Korea’s position is not fully appreciated and the nuclear crisis cannot be resolved.

It is not certain if Kim Jong-un said to South Korean delegation in this context on March 5, 2018: North Korea is not going to attack South Korea by conventional and nuclear weapons; North Korea does not have to possess nuclear weapons, if security assurance is guaranteed and hostility disappears hostility. North Korea may demand that its security be assured by peace treaty with the U.S., most importantly withdrawal of the U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula.

3 Great power politics and failed diplomacy

3.1 Lost opportunity: the end of the Cold War and a single superpower

The way of handling North Korea’s nuclear weapons has often been deliberately motivated by Great Powers’ interests and policy priorities. When the Cold War ended, the United States seized global hegemony as a single super power. In Europe, NATO expanded to Eastern Europe, where the Soviet army left. In Asia, the rise of China did not appear imminent to challenge the U.S. leadership, although its potential could not be ignored. North Korea’s nuclear weapons justified a strong U.S. military presence in Asia, which may have to face with the rise of China sometime in the future.

On the other hand, North Korea’s survival seemed questionable through the 1990s. It was economically almost bankrupt and diplomatically isolated in the aftermath of demise of Soviet Union and fall of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe. North Korea was faced with a serious shortage of oil, food, and foreign currency. Normalization of relations between China and South Korea in 1992 was truly shocking to North Korea.

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6 Haas and Smith, “North Korea open to relinquishing nuclear weapons”.
and the relationship between the two countries was almost cut off. China did not take systematic action to salvage North Korea, when millions of people died of famine in 1995–1997.

Ironically it was the United States that saved North Korea from collapse. The most important goal in the U.S. policy towards North Korea was “soft landing” and non-proliferation of its nuclear activities. In the latter half of the 1990s the U.S. was the most important benefactor to North Korea’s survival by providing 500,000 tons of heavy oil and hundreds of thousands of tons of grains annually. This is a result of the Agreed Framework in 1994, in which the U.S. accepted North Korea’s argument that its nuclear program was only for its energy and agreed to a supply of two 1,000 MWe light water reactors in return for North Korea’s dismantlement of all graphite-moderated reactors (5 MWe, 50 MWe and 100 MWe under construction) and its responsibility for the delivery of heavy oil as an alternative energy until the power plant project is completed. Moreover, North Korea’s past nuclear activities were not even addressed in the Agreed Framework, because it believed that North Korea’s collapse was likely to happen anytime soon.

The Clinton administration was focused on domestic economy and wanted to avoid military conflict and instability of North Korea. This was the major reason, together with concerns about millions of casualties, as to why the surgical strike at North Korea’s nuclear facilities was not more seriously considered. Since then the U.S. diplomatic efforts with regard to North Korea’s nuclear issue have not been backed up by military options. This U.S. position of the 1990s seemed to be similar with the Chinese today.

North Korean nuclear crisis remained a major security challenge to the United States since the early 1990s, but it has never been the U.S. top policy priority, which was given to Iraq and Afghanistan in the aftermath of September 11, and then Libya, Myanmar, Cuba, and Iran.

### 3.2 The rise of China and the U.S.–China hegemonic competition

As the rise of China became reality in the 2000s, the U.S. wanted China to share the responsibilities with regard to global issues, such as climate change, human rights, nuclear security, terrorism, and so on. Regarding North Korea’s nuclear crisis, the United States wanted to avoid bilateral talks with North Korea because of the experience of the failure of the Agreed Framework. In 2002, North Korea admitted that it is developing nuclear weapons program by using highly enriched uranium.

China was expected to play a more active role in a multilateral format. In 2003, Six-Party Talks was set up with China as a host country to discuss North Korean nuclear crisis, in which the two Koreas, the U.S., Russia, and Japan also participated. Bilateral talks between the United States and North Korea in the 1990s were replaced by a multilateral format in spite of North Korea’s strong opposition.

North Korea did not give up the U.S.–North Korea bilateral talks within the Six-Party Talks. The U.S. policy towards North Korea tended more likely to be designed and implemented in the context of its policy towards China, as the U.S.–China hegemonic competition became more intensive. The U.S. policy towards North Korea was partially affected by Kim Jong Il’s visit to Beijing for summit talks with Jiang
Zemin, which brought the stagnation of relations between China and North Korea to an end in 2000. China’s influence over North Korea was expected to rise.

China is also handling North Korea’s nuclear issue in the context of the U.S.–China hegemonic competition. China acknowledged the value of North Korea as its security buffer. China believed that the best policy is to prevent North Korea’s implosion and explosion, and the solution of North Korea’s nuclear weapons should be made in the long-term. China has maintained a very clear position on North Korea’s nuclear program: North Korea’s nuclear weapons cannot be tolerated, and the North Korean nuclear crisis should be resolved by peaceful means. More importantly, however, China did not want the North Korean regime to sustain too much pressure and become unstable.7 This discourages China from joining the U.S.-led sanctions on North Korea. China also seemed to be very skeptical of North Korea’s technology to develop nuclear weapons and the sustainability of North Korea’s system. China’s effort to protect North Korea’s political stability ended up resulting in strengthening of the relationship among the U.S., Japan, and South Korea.

President Trump was critical of his predecessor’s “strategic patience”, however, and imposed “maximum” pressures and sanctions. Liberal international order is in crisis, which has dominated the world for seven decades,8 and President Trump emphasizes “America First” rather than U.S. leadership in a world of interdependence. The decline of the liberal international order, however, may have a negative impact on U.S. leadership. Nevertheless, President Trump pressures China even harder to play a more active role, although not in a multilateral format. China, together with Russia, is opposed to driving North Korea into a corner. In the grand scheme of things, the North Korea problem seems to be a strategic conflict between the U.S. and China. International cooperation with one voice seems much more difficult.

### 3.3 Perceptions and policies

In international relations perception is often one thing and policy is another. At present, there is little disagreement on the threat of North Korea’s nuclear weapons to the peace and stability of the region at least after the fourth nuclear test in January 2016. In spite of such international consensus of the threat perceptions towards North Korea’s nuclear weapons, the international community has still difficulties with making one voice and one policy on how to resolve it. Small countries do not support military options and economic sanctions by the U.S., owing to different positions held by China and Russia. They are concerned that similar pressures may be applied to themselves. This was what happened in 2004, when the UN COI report announced “accountability of North Korea’s supreme leader for crimes against humanity.” The number of countries, which are opposed to the resolutions increased.9

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7 Choi, “Security Dimensions of China’s Relations”, 172–175.
8 Ikenberry, “The End of Liberal International Order?”, 7–23.
9 UN General Assembly resolution condemning human rights violations in North Korea, adopted by a vote of 116 in favor, 20 against, and 53 abstaining in December 2014. (A/RES/69/188) The number of countries against the resolution increased in the result of COI report affirming North Korea’s human rights violations as crimes against humanity. In 2011, the resolution adopted by a vote of 123 in favor, 16 against, and 51 abstaining. (The resolution was adopted in consensus in 2012, 2013.)
4 South Korea’s role: broker or a party concerned

4.1 Dream and reality

Peace and unification are the key words in inter-Korean relations. To many Koreans both in South and North, the current situation of the Korean Peninsula is not normal but a temporary period of transition because they live in a divided country and technically in a state of war, which was stopped by the armistice. Various surveys conducted during the last decade show that Koreans are losing their interest in unification. People tend to have more negative perceptions towards unification, because of tremendous cost and social chaos it may cause. The number of those who support unification under any circumstances is declining and the number of those who believe that unification should be achieved step-by-step in a gradual manner is rising. You should never be confused or surprised that few people openly deny the vision of unification in Korea, however. Every president has emphasized that “liberation cannot be completed until peace is made and the North and the South are unified.” Indeed, unification is dream of all Koreans, regardless of its feasibility.

The Korean War was stopped by the armistice in 1953, but technically the war will not have ended until the peace treaty is signed. Security threat or threat perceptions has deeply affected every aspect of Korean people’s life. Some people support unification because it is a way of ending South Korea’s security concern once and for all. Koreans are proud that they are “peace-loving” people and they want to build peace and pass it onto the next generation. The making of a unified country based on peace is something Koreans believe they should achieve within their life time.

Koreans could not do much to change this abnormal situation in a temporary period of transition during the Cold War era. South Koreans perceived the end of the Cold War as a victory of the capitalist South over the communist North. There were high-expectations about making peace and unification. To this end, South Korea adopted an active engagement policy, in which the increase of exchange and cooperation between the two Koreas in socio-economic areas will gradually lead to a political integration.

Unprecedentedly an active policy of engaging North Korea stopped in 2008, when the Lee Myung-bak government took office. Although at times some progress appeared to be made, it was ultimately not sustainable and was quickly set back.

4.2 Internal friction

South Korea’s vison for peace and unification suffered a setback not before long, as North Korea’s nuclear ambition frustrated South Korea’s optimism for engaging North Korea, which lead to its political change. At present, the South Korean society is experiencing internal friction, over which one should come first, unification or peace, although the principle of engagement was never officially denied by any governments including those conservative governments of presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. “Unification-first” people believed that inter-Korean relations should be

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10Choi, “Preparing for Korean Unification”, 23–50.
11President Moon Jae-in, Congratulatory Remarks for the 72nd Liberation Day on August 15, 2013.
linked to nuclear weapons, while “peace-first” people believed that inter-Korean relations should develop regardless of the nuclear crisis.

Which one should come first is related to the role of South Korea in the process of resolving North Korea’s nuclear crisis, which also divided the South Korean society. Unification-first people maintained that the nuclear issue should be on the table in inter-Korean dialogue. They believed that inter-Korean cooperation only helps North Korea’s nuclear development. Peace-first group thought that inter-Korean relations should go on regardless of the nuclear crisis, based on the belief that the increase of exchange and cooperation between the two Koreas will change North Korea’s behavior.

By developing nuclear weapons, North Korea was able to directly talk with the United States in 1994, completely bypassing South Korea. The Agreed Framework was the first document signed by the United States and North Korea without South Korea’s participation since the Korean War, although it is a temporary expedient to suspend nuclear crisis.

In spite of South Korea’s hopes, North Korea refused to stop over Seoul before it comes to Washington. In fact, accepting the United States suggestion, North Korea met with South a couple of times before the talk with the United States, but only in a ceremonial way. South Korea’s role was fading away because of its own indifference and North Korea’s refusal.

4.3 Time for talk or time for pressure?

There is a consensus that North Korea’s nuclear crisis is an imminent danger to the peace and stability to the regional security after the fourth nuclear test in January 2016. Few people denied that North Korea’s nuclear ambition should be stopped. However, the fourth test did not end the internal friction over how to do it, and it is still controversial over the length and intensity of pressures.

Their patience was exhausted and they claimed that the fourth nuclear test should become a turning point for Seoul’s North Korea policy. There was growing skepticisms about the past approach to stop North Korea’s nuclear weapons. Some of them claim reintroducing tactical nuclear weapons and producing South Korea’s own nuclear weapons. Considering North Korea’s international isolation and worsening economy, human rights situation and outlook for reform and openness, it has been said that there are no good North Korea policies.

There are other people still eager to talk to North Korea. They maintain that even though sanctions and pressures are inevitable, strategical consideration should be followed on how long and how intensively sanctions and pressures should be imposed on North Korea.

5 Outlook for the solution

What is the outlook for North Korea’s nuclear crisis? In order to answer this question, it is important to understand the following questions in three dimensions: North Korea’s intention, the U.S.–China competition, and South Korea’s perception.
5.1 North Korea’s intention

What made North Korea suddenly change its position and actively pursue dialogue early 2018? It will be much easier to predict the outlook for North Korea’s nuclear crisis, if we know its intentions more accurately. There are three major explanations for North Korea’s intention to change its position: pressures from the U.S., internal uncertainties, and confidence in its nuclear capacity.

5.1.1 Fear of Trump’s pressures

When North Korea began its reconciliatory diplomacy, it was closer than ever to achieving ICBM technologies with nuclear warheads to target any part of the continental U.S. It does not seem reasonable that North Korea voluntarily decided to abandon its nuclear weapons, right after North Korea and declared itself a “complete” nuclear state. Does it make sense that North Korea stopped just before the completion of a nuclear ICBM?

Therefore, some people believe that North Korea’s intention to pursue dialogue early 2018 seemed to be due to the U.S. pressure rather than its voluntary decision. President Trump imposed “maximum” sanctions and pressures on North Korea through economic, diplomatic, and military means. North Korea’s trade volume is expected to decline drastically; 90% of export and 30% of import this year. The chance for military confrontation between the U.S. and North Korea was very high, unless there was a dramatic turnaround. Trump and Kim Jong-un were already engaged in verbal warfare, exchanging provocative words. Tensions were mounting on the Korean Peninsula, as North Korea’s provocations followed only days after President Trump placed North Korea back to the List of State Sponsors of Terrorism on November 20.

North Korea’s nuclear crisis seemed to enter a critical moment; either war or negotiation. It is said that the Korean Peninsula is faced with the most serious security challenge since the end of the Korean War in 1953. North Korea’s advanced nuclear technology paradoxically worsened its economy and deepened its isolation rather than it automatically contributes to its economy.

5.1.2 North Korea’s concern about political turmoil

Some people maintain that North Korea’s sudden change is due to concern about political turmoil.

As far as political stability is concerned, people’s daily life may be the most important in the economic area. Marketization is particularly important because inter-Korean trade stopped and its trade with China is declining. More importantly, what has improved people’s daily lives was marketization. Kim Jong-un has liberalized markets and its market economy has dramatically expanded, unlike Kim Jong-il, who went back and forth between controlling the market and allowing the commercial activities. The number of markets increased as many as 247 all over North Korea, and restrictions on sale items, operating hours, and working ages were lifted according to research from Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), 2017. North Korean authorities do not ask where investors got the money, if it is less than U.S. $100,000. Pyongyang has

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12 North Korea demonstrated its missile technology (the Hwasong KN-15 ICBM) on November 29, 2017.
13 Min, et al. Information on North Korea’s Markets all over the Country.
witnessed growing numbers of restaurants, amusement park, apartments, and taxis. North Korean economy has slowly improved.

As the market economy grows, it is estimated that it accounts for more than 70% of household income and more than 50% of per capita GNP. There is a side effect of marketization: corruption, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and information dissemination. Moreover, as the planned economy shrank and the market economy expanded, grip of the regime over the economy is inevitably loosening. In sum, marketization increases political uncertainties in the longer-term in North Korea, in spite the provision of short-term stability.

Kim Jong-un’s purge of top power elites also reflects his threat perceptions of political power. The victims of reign of terror include his uncle Jang Sung Taek and half-brother Kim Jong-nam. Even Kim Won Hong, head of State Security Agency and commander of “reign of terror” could not escape from Kim’s suspicions.

Becoming a complete nuclear power is supposedly the pride of North Korea. It is not necessarily positive for North Korea’s political stability, however. Nuclear weapons increased expectations of people and power elites of North Korea. If nuclear weapons turned out to be useless in improving people’s daily lives and fail to enforce the U.S. to come to the negotiation table, it is going to be a fiasco threatening political stability.

5.1.3 North Korea’s confidence in a big deal with the United States
Another possibility of North Korea’s sudden change is its confidence in negotiating with the United States. North Korea’s nuclear capabilities seemed to make it confident that the United States cannot but come to the negotiation table and North Korea will be able to get satisfactory results with regard to security assurances such as ending the Korean War, peace treaty, and the U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula. In fact, President Trump committed to establish a new relationship with North Korea and build a peace regime in the Summit talks with Kim Jong-un in Singapore on June 12.

The United States and South Korea made it clear that the issue of the U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula is to be exclusively discussed between the United States and South Korea. North Korea is not demanding the withdrawal of the U.S. troops. In fact, it is not on the negotiation tables with North Korea. Irrespective of the legal background of the U.S.F.K. and North Korea’s demand, however, North Korea expects that the U.S. troop on the Korean Peninsula will inevitably emerge as a pending issue. North Korea may be encouraged by President Trump, who complains the cost of overseas U.S. troops.

North Korea’s confidence is also supported by his strong grip of power elites. There are no political groups or individuals who can ever challenge Kim Jong-un’s political power. Kim Jong-un has particularly tried to tighten the reins of the military of which the role and status was significantly enhanced under the military-first policy of his father Kim Jong-il. Kim Jong-un frequently reshuffled, purged and executed top military elites, and the influence of the military in decision making process was significantly lowered. Kim Jong-un restored the party-state system in the 7th Party Congress, held in May 2016. The silence of the military enabled Kim Jong-un to dominate the nuclear negotiation process with the support of his sister Kim Yo-jung, probably the most reliable advisor.
5.2 The U.S.–China competition

The U.S.–China competition is another factor, which makes the solution difficult. The liberal international order is in crisis. President Trump does not want the United States to play a role as a world leader. He wants to focus on the campaign slogan, “America First.” The U.S.–China competition is getting more intense, but he wants China to play a proactive role in resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis, as his predecessor did. However, Trump is bluffing, far from Obama’s cooperation or leadership, criticizing China’s unfair trade of manipulating exchange rate. It is unlikely that the North Korean nuclear crisis can be resolved, unless the U.S. and China fully cooperate.

5.3 South Korea: a party concerned

Frustration and regret are the most common feelings with regard to North Korea’s nuclear weapons. People regret when they think they did what they should not have done or they did not do what they should have done. When they regret, they want to be compensated for it by retaliation. On the other hand, they are frustrated, when they think that they did their best, but it did not work. When people are frustrated, they want to do it again. This time even harder. Many people are frustrated with North Korea’s nuclear weapons because they cannot stop it.

In the meantime, nobody wanted to take responsibility for the solution, nor take the initiative. Those, who want to make a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations as well as the nuclear crisis, are still eager to talk to North Korea.

The Moon Jae-in government was vowing to take the “driver’s seat” in global efforts to deal with North Korea, although the seat had remained empty for a long time. In order to keep the momentum of Winter Olympic Games, however, South Korea should play a more active role as a party concerned rather than a broker or a facilitator. South Korea should balance inter-Korean relations with the nuclear issue. North Korea’s nuclear crisis resulted from inter-Korean feud as well as the U.S.–North Korean confrontation. What is more important is that South Korea should be careful not to affect great power politics or the changing regional security dynamic.

6 Conclusion

There are two kinds of hostilities on the Korean Peninsula: hostility between the U.S. and North Korea; hostility between the two Koreas. North Korea argues that it developed nuclear weapons because of U.S. hostility and it does not need nuclear weapons if security assurances are provided and military threat disappears. However, the nature of North Korea’s nuclear crisis is a mixture of those two hostilities. In fact, it has more to do with inter-Korean hostility. When the Cold War ended, North Korea’s primary concern may have concerned being absorbed by South Korea after the collapse of its political system rather than being invaded or attacked by the United States. But North Korea has tried to sustain survival through bilateral negotiations with the United States: North Korea is keen to the U.S. strategic interest and seemed to believe that it

14See, for example, Allison, Destined for War; and Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics.
could contribute to the U.S. strategic interest in Northeast Asia. North Korea also hopes that it could keep its nuclear weapons if it improves its relations with the United States. There are two episodes to show North Korea’s imagination. In January 1992, Kim Yong Sun, party secretary of North Korea, met with Arnold Kanter, the U.S. vice secretary of state and supported the necessity of the U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula even after Korean unification to prevent the rise of Japan from threatening regional peace and stability in Northeast Asia. In July, 2007, Kim Kye Kwan, first vice minister of North Korea’s Foreign Ministry said to Dr. Henry Kissinger that the United State underestimates North Korea’s strategic value to help them balance China.

Such behavior by North Korea is an impertinent interference in great power politics, and also conflicts with security interests of South Korea, which perceives the U.S.–R.O. K. alliance as an indispensable deterrence to North Korea. It is not only unfair but unrealistic to handle the two hostilities separately.

North Korea’s insistence on bilateral talks with the United States makes the solution of nuclear crisis more difficult than complexity of great power politics and any misinterpretation made regarding North Korea’s intention. North Korea’s first step should be to recognize South Korea as a party concerned, if it is really interested in overcoming the survival crisis and securing security assurances in return for denuclearization. It will be South Korea that receives the damage the most from the failure to resolve the nuclear crisis. North Korea’s nuclear crisis cannot be resolved properly without the participation of South Korea. There were no driving forces to overcome the nuclear crisis, when South Korea vowed to take the driver’s seat. Various types of policy means have been exhausted: bilateral talks and multilateral talks, diplomacy and pressure, and carrots and stick. The tension has risen and pessimism prevailed.

Not only “strategic patience” of the United States but also “no nuke, but no instability, no war” of China will be remembered as failed policies, together with Agreed Framework in 1994 and September 19 Joint Statement in 2005. Every country is different in its threat perceptions, national interests, and strategic calculations. The U.S. diplomacy failed to resolve North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990’s and 2000’s, North Korean nuclear issue was neglected under the name of “strategic patience,” and then President Trump adopted “maximum pressures” backed up by military options. In the meantime, the United States wanted China to play a more active role in resolving nuclear crisis. China is skeptical of pressures and sanctions, however, because it worried about North Korea’s political stability much more than its nuclear weapons. The North Korean nuclear crisis was too imminent to blame it on someone and do nothing.

Like the front and rear wheels in an automobile, the U.S.–North Korean dialogue and inter-Korean dialogue began to operate as two driving forces in making a breakthrough in the North Korean nuclear crisis. The wheels should be aligned with a strong

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15 In January 1992, Kim Yong Sun, party secretary of North Korea, met with Arnold Kanter, the U.S. vice secretary of state and emphasized the necessity of the U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula even after Korean unification to prevent the rise of Japan from threatening regional peace and stability in Northeast Asia. In July, 2007, Kim Kye Kwan, first vice minister of North Korea’s Foreign Ministry said to Dr. Henry Kissinger that the United States should acknowledge North Korea’s strategic value to the U.S. efforts to balance China.

16 The role of South Korea should be restricted to the nuclear issue and inter-Korean relations. South Korea should be careful not to get involved in anything that affects regional security dynamism. The Park Geun-hye government tried to resume its initiative by securing China’s support for North Korea’s denuclearization. South Korea’s effort to improve its relations with China was perceived as “a pivot changing” from Washington to Beijing.
If the four-wheel drive makes a successful breakthrough, a multilateral format like the Six-Party Talks can resume to bring about sustainable peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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