

Moving from a North Korean Nuclear Problem to the Problem of North Korea

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The Current Situation

North Korea, in conducting its second nuclear test on May 25, 2009, is repeating its earlier 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 other countries' multilateral sanctions will continue without any prospect of solving the North Korean nuclear problem in the near future. The so-called action-to-action paradigm cannot succeed, because the most fundamental principles of North Korea and the countries conflict with each other. Japan, South Korea, and the United States hope that a "stick and carrot" approach will elicit concessions from North Korea during the process of negotiations, but North Korea will not take steps toward giving up its nuclear program, unless its leaders feel sure that they are being given reliable, material guarantees for the survival of their entire regime, system, and state. Because their nuclear program is their ultimate bargaining chip, "sticks and carrots" focusing only on specific issues of the negotiations will be fall 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 in 1993. The Geneva System, based on the Agreed Framework signed by the United States and North Korea in Geneva in

1994, lasted for eight years (from October 1994 to October 2002), but failed to manage the problems of nuclear proliferation and the normalization of relations. The success or failure of the new system of Six-Party Talks is yet to be seen, but as of now in 2009, negotiations based on the approach of the George W. Bush administration and, more specifically, the February 13 agreement of 2007 seem to be in a stalemate.

The North Korean problem is older than the North Korean nuclear problem. From the perspective of North Korea, the latter is its desired solution to the following questions: How will North Korea survive in the post-Cold War world, in which most socialist countries are no longer socialist? What kind of regime and system can North Korea sustain in this environment? How will North Korea compete with South Korea and resist absorption by the South? North Korea developed a nuclear program and pursued militaristic diplomacy as the most plausible shortcuts to solve the problems indicated by these questions.

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For countries outside of North Korea, diplomacy has failed to solve either the North Korean nuclear problem or the more general North Korean problem. The Six-Party Talks that have been held by South Korea, the United States, Japan, China, and Russian Federation, and North Korea are stalled at the last phase of the second stage of what is termed “disablement,” and participants are now struggling to find a way to get into the third stage of the agreement of February 13. Reaching the issue of North Korea’s declaration and verification of its nuclear program is critical, because it will demonstrate a genuine intention to begin the process of giving up its program. Yet North Korea is desperately trying to strengthen its negotiating position vis-à-vis the Obama administration by first launching a long-range rocket and then by testing a nuclear weapon for the second time, reversing the achievements of the disablement stage and rejecting the Six-Party Talks altogether. North Korea desires to strike a comprehensive deal with the Obama administration through bilateral talks, and seeks 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 the North Korean problem, because it is difficult to know how best to influence the future orientation of the North Korean regime, system, and diplomatic position. The structure of the Six-Party talks has also been narrowly focused on the problem of the nuclear program, leaving broader questions aside. The Northeast Asian international order, which is based on a strict and competitive balance of power, will be gravely influenced by the future orientation of North Korea, and therefore it is appropriate for the five countries most affected to deal with the North Korean problem directly. But by focusing so narrowly on the North Korean nuclear issues, these countries have maintained only minimal agreement on how to manage the nuclear problems

that are involved, sometimes showing strategic and tactical differences on various specifics.

In spite of the five countries’ agreement on the Six-Party presidential statement criticizing North Korea’s rocket launch on April 9, they have had a hard time finding common ground to deal with future North Korean problems. The United States has been determined to impose economic sanctions on North Korean firms by using a specifically targeted list, as well as to punish North Korea diplomatically by refusing to give serious and close attention to the North Korean nuclear problem. South Korea and Japan have maintained a policy of neglecting North Korea for different reasons. The two countries seem to continue minimal interactions with North Korea even if the North fails to meet the conditions suggested by these countries. China and Russia do not want to take the initiative either to punish or to side with North Korea, and only reluctantly facilitate cooperation among the 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 future preservation of his regime and system. A “holistic approach” to both the nuclear and the more general problems, is necessary. Such an approach is more feasible now, when the Obama administration has the advantage of a fresh start with most foreign policy issues.

However, strategic options under discussion in most of the countries that are involved are still narrowly focused on the North Korean nuclear problem, and they can be categorized as shown in Table 1.



Table 1 Strategic Options

	Results	Proponents
1. Benign / malign neglect	Minimizes interactions with North Korea if conditions are not met	Current South Korean and Japanese governments
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 South Korea, Japan, and the United States
3. Issue-specific negotiations	Continues Six-Party Talks, especially the February 13 agreement	Six Party Talks approach, China and Russia
4. Comprehensive negotiations	Broadens the span of negotiations, including peace treaty, diplomatic normalization, and large-scale economic assistance	Neo-Perry Process by the Obama administration?

We can also graph the approaches of the different administrations in South Korea and the United States (see Figure 1).

The North Korean nuclear problem is as much a political problem related to the ability of North Korea to survive as it is a problem of proliferation and military strategy. Against this backdrop, all the options outlined so far are not sufficient solutions. Even the four comprehensive negotiations in Table 1 are not comprehensive enough to deal with the "North Korean" problem and will face difficulties.

The Inherent Dilemmas for the North Korean Leadership

A proper strategic option should include a vision for the future of North Korea that is desirable not just for the populations of North Koreans, but also for most Northeast Asian countries and the United States. A long-term strategy aimed at the next decades should at

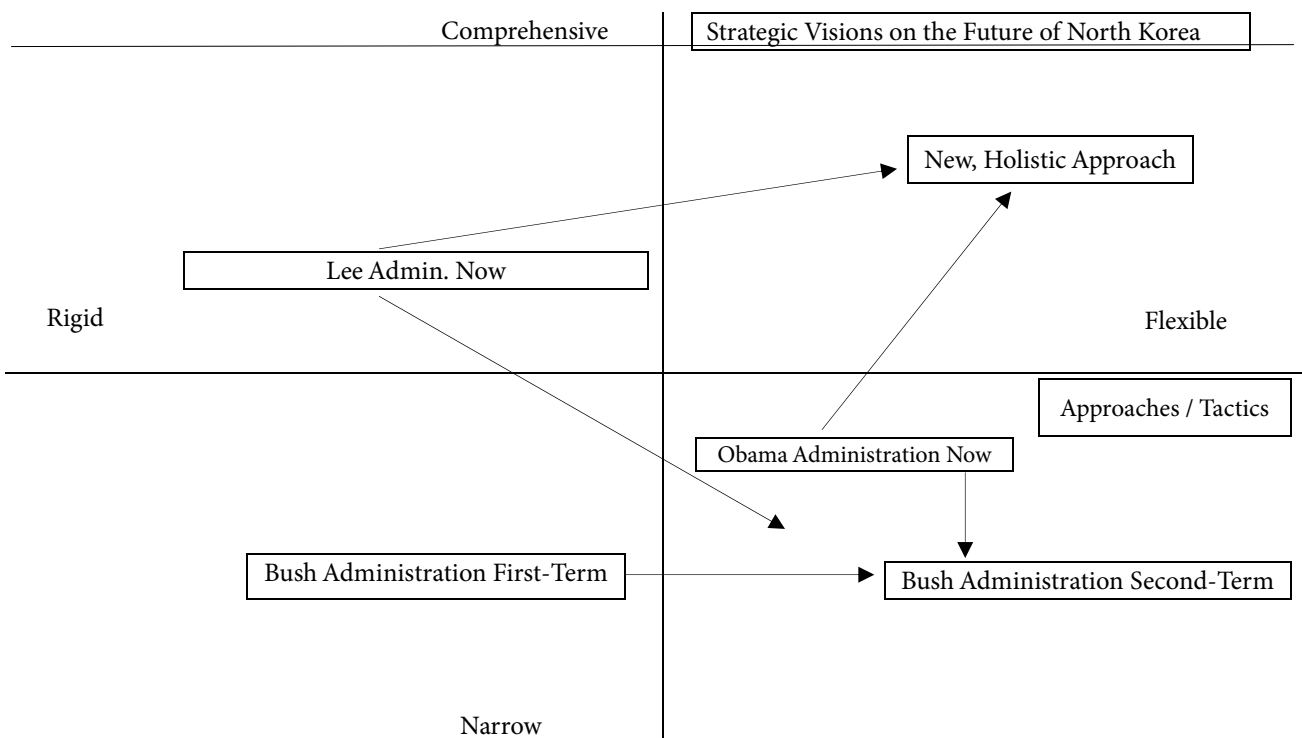


Figure 1 Different Approaches toward North Korea



least visualize a North Korea that is post-Kim Jong-il, with a new leadership, nuclear but economically poorer, or non-nuclear but with more international assistance. Looking ahead to a time when North Korea will coexist with other powers in an appropriate way, Northeast Asian countries will begin to coordinate their North Korean policy. To do so, neighbors will need to be clear about the nature of the North Korean regime and system.

North Korea is *a divided country*, which means that a strategic failure will increase the possibility of its 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 persistent tension and real or perceived threats from the outside world is indispensable to enable the country's leaders to maintain totalitarianism in the twenty-first century.

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

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, whatever his strategic vision and policy environment turn out to be, will have far-reaching effects on all aspects of North Korean society.

From these observations about the essence of the North Korean political situation come the country's dilemmas. North Korea faces three almost insoluble dilemmas as it plans its own future: (1) a dilemma between its nuclear program and its economic and political survival; (2) a dilemma between its need for eco-

nomic reform and its need to maintain political totalitarianism; and (3) a dilemma between participating in the peace process on the Korean Peninsula and maintaining its political legitimacy.

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

Dilemma 2. North Korea, even in a very favorable postnuclear environment, cannot actively pursue economic reforms and opening, because its people will then gain information and material resources with which to question the legitimacy of the dictatorship. North Korean leaders are very cautious about the possibility of facing public opposition if the public is exposed to external influences.

Dilemma 3. North Korea has maintained a militaristic national strategy, culture, and social system by producing domestic tensions and antagonism based on its theory of war against capitalism and imperialism. The Cold War and the proclamation of imagined threats from the United States and South Korea have provided the North Korean leadership with its political legitimacy and powerful social control. If North Korea concludes a peace treaty with the United States and South Korea have provided the North Korean leadership with its political legitimacy and powerful social control. If North Korea concludes a peace treaty with the United States and South Korea, normalizing diplomatic relations, its strategy of selling the threat of the outside world to the North Korean public will no longer be effective.



Strategic Principles to Solve the North Korean Problem

1. *Clearly state that North Korea will continue to exist in Northeast Asia, as long as it is able to maintain its system and state, while also conforming to international norms and standards.* North Korea, in official and unofficial documents, has repeatedly argued that South Korea, Japan and the United States wish 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 can be partially countered by clearly declaring that Japan, South Korea, and the United States do not have any hostile intention against North Korea in terms of its existence and survival. Vague or mixed expressions on the future of the North, however, will have a negative effect. For example, the former Bush administration stated that North Korea was a "sovereign" state, while it also named it as one of the "Axis of Evil." Moral judgment may deliver unintended messages even if it is accompanied by more benign political expressions.

2. *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, however: North Korea will need to be more convinced. For example, the way in which North Korea is represented strategic discourses about 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 it to play a legitimate role.

3. *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. Not only is the idea of unification by absorption beyond the pale, but unification by grand negotiation to pursue options such as making a confederation or federation based on political consent might also pose an unacceptable threat to North Korean leadership. Economically prosperous and politically democratic, South Korea would dominate a transitional Korean Peninsula in which the North Korea leadership would have a hard time surviving. In that sense, despite North Koreans' frequent reference to the ideal of reunification, they will not accept a policy of engagement by South Korea or the United States, if they think that the final destination is unification by the South.

South Koreans, for their part, will not give 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, the South should recognize that a long period of coexistence would be beneficial and necessary for the two Koreas to pave the way to some form of future peaceful and agreeable governance on the Peninsula. The new phenomena such as increasing integration at the regional level, deepening socio-economic interdependence among Northeast Asian countries, and the possibility of a democratic peace in the region might forecast what a new picture to the new relationship between the two Koreas could look like. If North Koreans understand that by transforming their own system, there will be numerous other, possibly "postmodern" ways of integrating the two Koreas peacefully, they may feel less threatened by an engagement policy on the part of the South or the United States.

4. *Then, emphasize the universality of the norm of nonproliferation, and the inevitability of sanctions against any nonconforming 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 not only regional but global politics. Five countries except North Korea in the Six-Party Talks, agreed to the norm of nonproliferation, seeing it as a crucial step to prevent a further arms race and nuclearization in the region. North Korea has always argued that nuclear weapons are for deterrence against the United States' hostile policy toward the North. North Korea will lose any logical need to develop its nuclear program if the United States and surrounding countries stick to the principle of "guaranteeing the future of North Korea."

5. *Have a long-term plan for North Korea, especially for the Third Leader.* It will take time and effort to convince the North other countries' commitment to the above principles and ensuing policies based on them. It will also be hard for Kim Jong-il to radically change his "Military-First Politics." That system 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 forefront 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 system or make a sharp break from the past and establish a wholly new national strategy, such as, one might hope a strategy of systemic opening and reform. It will take some time for the Third Leader to evaluate the environment and decide on his own strategy. What will be important for the region during that time will be clear strategic principles coordinated by surrounding countries. If the strategic principles discussed here are convincingly delivered to the North Korean leadership, the new leaders may give serious consideration 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 ones, may leave a message to his successor that the three North Korean dilemmas could be solved with the fresh start of a new Third Leader who does not have burdens from the past.

The five countries in dealing with North Korea should take a long-range perspective for the future and try to coordinate their visions. Only by devising a long-term North Korea plan, will they be able to encourage Kim Jong-il and the Third Leader to embark on a new strategy to revive the country without resorting to a nuclear program.

Policy Guidelines for South Korea and the United States

1. *Devise a common strategy for "the future of North Korea" by engaging in 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. Experience in dealing with North Korea for the last sixteen years, however, has allowed a learning process for both South Korea and the United States to find out what kind of state North Korea is, what purposes North Korea is really pursuing, and what coercions North Korea really fears. By systematically processing these past experiences and reflecting upon the results of the two countries' policy, a new policy knowledge network will be established.

2. *South Korea should develop a new discourse for "future governance" on the Peninsula that goes beyond the idea of making one "modern" nation-state, a concept that lacks imagination.* Instead, pay special attention to the functioning of various regional networks and the new "globalized" South Korea. New visions of how the



two Koreas can coexist peacefully under changing environments are needed, and may be found outside Korean borders. The concept of "national sovereignty" is changing slowly: it will enlighten the future course of a new governance of the Peninsula, but not right away.

3. *Consult with other countries in the region, especially China and Russia, about a desirable future for North Korea.* Also make clear what future would be undesirable, and suggest restrictions that might need to be placed on North Korea's future actions. Draw upon the common understanding that a 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.

4. *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 examine diverse issues ranging from nuclearization to normalizing the North.

5. *Strengthen the realist notion of prudence by keeping away from any moral judgment of North Korea; focus on 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.

6. *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. The lack of a reci-

procal response from the North to the decade-long Sunshine Policy also makes the need to readjust the pace and the content of the engagement policy. Without a long-term strategy of engagement that goes beyond both the Sunshine version of engagement and the strategy of benign neglect, South Korea's policy cannot succeed. "A Third Approach," with a well-planned engagement on the one hand and a clear-cut scale of coercion to be applied against North Korea's wrongdoings, on the other hand, will be necessary.

7. *The Obama administration needs to perform a bottom-up review not only of the North Korean nuclear problem, but also of the future status of North Korea in Northeast Asia.* For this, preparation of an overall plan for the United States' strategy toward Northeast Asia, will need to be done first. After North Korea's rocket launch and nuclear test, the United States administration will also initially 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 in place, and a radically new way of thinking of the North Korean problem unlike that of the former the George W. Bush administration, negotiators will have a better chance to break through the current stalemate.

8. *Search for new policy issues that will contribute to the project of "normalizing North Korea."* This effort should be distinguished from simply 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 steps, which will be very much part of a state-building process. We need to convince the North that the common goal of South Korea and the United States is to further the successful long-term future of North Korea, so long as it functions within global norms. Projects might focus on long-term policy areas such as education, infrastructure, and state finance. South Korea and the United States, then, need to explore where their contributions will serve the most fundamental purposes. ■



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