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The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D
Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu
Seoul 04548
Republic of Korea

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www.eai.or.kr

How Should the World Respond When Countries Such as North Korea Develop Nuclear Weapons and Ballistic Missiles?

Chaesung Chun

East Asia Institute & Seoul National University

North Korean nuclear weapons serve multiple purposes. First, North Korea repeatedly states that its nuclear weapons are to deter a U.S. nuclear attack, arguing that the United States excluded North Korea from the object of nuclear no-first-use policy.

Second, Kim Jong-un wants to perpetuate a totalitarian regime and consolidate his power by personalizing control over North Korea. Given the country's struggling economy, nuclear weapons provide Kim with political legitimization of his economically ineffective rule by showing his militant resolve to fight the prime enemy, the United States. By continuing to enhance the North's nuclear capability, Kim sends the message to his people that increased external security threats justify the military expenditure and the poor attempt to revive the economy.

Third, when political use of nuclear weapons for power consolidation is no longer required, Kim can begin to deal with outside powers to elicit economic assistance. This is an old pattern: North Korea nuclearizes, then receives generous economic assistance for denuclearization and requires more rewards in peace negotiation vis-à-vis South Korea (Republic of Korea, or ROK) and the United States.

Fourth and final, Kim could use nuclear weapons purely for offensive purposes. North Korea could start an all-out war using nuclear weapons with the confidence of being able to control the crisis and win it if it is confident of

U.S. reluctance to retaliate with nuclear weapons. It is also probable that Kim relies on the slim chance of continuing his dictatorship even after a disastrous nuclear confrontation and war.

North Korea obviously wants to progress toward a more developed nuclear arsenal and sophisticated missile force and ultimately toward intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). It is almost certain that Kim will try to muddle through to the point of attacking the U.S. homeland with nuclear missiles, perhaps even acquire second strike capability. At that point, Washington would be forced to negotiate, and Kim would come to the negotiation table asking for comprehensive economic rewards, a peace treaty with the United States to include nuclear arms reduction talks, and recognition of North Korea as a nuclear power. The situation would raise significant decoupling concerns for South Korea and Japan, which could lead to an increased possibility of their obtaining nuclear arms.

President Donald J. Trump considers "every option on the table," and pressuring China on more cooperation is the first. China, anticipating the party congress later in 2017, needs a favorable international environment and successful crisis management, which requires mutually beneficial relations with the United States. Washington pressuring Beijing on its trade and currency policy, a worsening

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North Korean nuclear problem, a strengthening U.S.-ROK alliance, and U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral security relations will hurt President Xi Jinping’s political situation. Using military options to solve the North Korean nuclear problem will drive China into a far more difficult position. After the U.S.-China summit meeting in April, Xi seems to have put more pressure on North Korea, persuading Kim to come to the negotiation table for gradual denuclearization and to conclude a peace treaty with the United States, which meets the Chinese expectation of the so-called parallel negotiation.

However, it is hard to predict whether North Korea will come back to discuss denuclearization. That will be decided by how painful international sanctions on North Korea will be and whether Kim will think that diplomacy would be beneficial to the preservation of his personal power and regime. China could suggest a complete or partial cut of oil supply, implicitly recognize U.S. surgical strike, disregard its alliance obligation to North Korea in case of military clashes, and support more severe economic sanctions. Kim will not change his strategic calculus if he can maintain his totalitarian rule under severe Chinese sanctions to the point where he succeeds in developing ICBMs.

Despite China’s efforts to conform to Trump’s requests, it will be extremely careful not to let North Korea collapse and be absorbed by South Korea, which has strong alliance ties with the United States. Being uncertain of ROK and U.S. intent toward a denuclearized—and consequently weaker—North Korea, China will try to prevent North Korea from collapsing due to severe economic sanctions.

More strategic dialogues and consensus on the post-sanction, even post-denuclearization, stage among China, South

Korea, and the United States will therefore be critical. Details regarding the initial point for reopening the negotiation for denuclearization and the conditions for a peace treaty could differ among them, which could turn the situation back to the pre-sanction period.

When, or if, North Korea comes back to the negotiation table, negotiations will be long and painful. The South Korean government has been skeptical of the parallel tracks. North Korea will take full advantage of both negotiations and establish a link between two games. The North will propose unacceptable conditions for peace, such as the elimination of anti-North Korean campaign by the United States, the withdrawal of the U.S. Forces Korea, mutual reduction of arms and personnel, and the termination of joint U.S.-ROK military drills. North Korean allegations that conditions are not met for peace could stall the denuclearization process. Because the peace process affects the posture of the alliance, the parallel tracks will not be an easy process.

North Korea under Kim Jong-il reversed the course of denuclearization negotiations several times after receiving economic assistance. Only an unacceptably high cost of reversing the course of negotiations will ultimately eliminate a repeat of such betrayal. It will therefore be necessary to maintain a particular level of economic sanctions, particularly in close coordination with China. If Kim Jong-un is fully aware that severe sanctions await if North Korea continues its nuclear ambitions—countered by incentives of development assistance if he reverses course—he will pursue a genuine course of negotiation.

On the other hand, both South Korea and the United States need to make clear that peace talks should not only demand North Korea’s denuclearization but also guarantee

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the regime’s survival if it denuclearizes, as well as include trust-building measures in security affairs and guidelines for arms control.

Durable peace will be possible only if South Korea guarantees the survival of a denuclearized North Korea and pursues a plan to engage with it. The strategy of engagement comprises several elements. First, the country that wishes to engage should reassure the other country that it is neither threatening nor antagonistic. Second, it should initiate a policy of reconciliation and peaceful exchange to invite the other to cooperate. Third, the gradual building of trust will create structural bases that will foster changes in the system and behavior of the target country.

Last, a scenario in which North Korea succeeds in developing ICBMs, making the U.S. mainland vulnerable to nuclear missile attacks, is possible and the United States should be prepared for it. Combined efforts to deter the North Korean threat by denial and massive punishment, to minimize the possibility of decoupling the U.S.-ROK-Japan security alliance, and to show the military futility of North Korea’s nuclear missiles would weaken Kim Jong-un’s expectation for entirely beneficial negotiations after developing viable nuclear weapons. ■

— *Chaesung Chun* is chair of the International Relations Studies Center at the East Asia Institute. He is also professor of the department of political science and international relations at Seoul National University. He received his Ph.D. in international relations from Northwestern University.