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**“Managing Emerging Threats to East Asian Security:
The Case of North Korean Nuclear Threat”**

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[Draft]

**Managing Emerging Threats to East Asian Security:
The Case of North Korean Nuclear Threat[★]**

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1. Introduction

North Korea presents an unresolved enigma. Despite its economic stagnation, chronic food and energy shortage, and worsening quality of life of its citizens, North Korea has not given up its nuclear ambition. Although the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework was instrumental in freezing its nuclear programs, the North Korean nuclear problem has resurfaced since October 2002, drawing worldwide attention.

The current North Korean nuclear fiasco was triggered by its admission of the highly enriched uranium (HEU) program in October 2002, and subsequent developments have precipitated a major confrontation between North and the United States reminiscent of the 1994 nuclear crisis. Moreover, North Korea's declaration of possession of two nuclear warheads and reprocessing of spent fuel rods for the manufacturing of plutonium on April 23, 2003 during a three party talk in Beijing has further aggravated the nuclear standoff. Although a new breakthrough through the six party talk has opened a new possibility for its peaceful resolution through negotiation, the North Korean nuclear crisis has remained a precarious flash point, threatening peace and security in Northeast Asia.

Keeping its grave regional security consequences in mind, the paper attempts to elucidate the nature of the North Korean nuclear problem and to make a critical assessment of strategies for coping with it. And it will also explore prospects for the peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear stand-off. The paper argues that the best solution to the North Korean nuclear quagmire is through negotiated settlement and subsequent engagement. Neither containment nor military options would work in

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resolving the North Korean problem.

2. Understanding the North Korean Nuclear Threat

The North Korean problem essentially consists in its rogue behavior and failing state functions. Both of these problems have manifested in terms of two inter-related issues, namely nuclear weapons and missiles. The current quasi-crisis on the Korean peninsula has resulted primarily from disputes over North Korea's nuclear weapons development, which involves three dimensions. The first dimension is the suspicion of its past possession of nuclear warheads (one or two) before the signing of the Geneva Agreed Framework (Agreed Framework) in 1994. The second one centers on present nuclear issues related to the reprocessing of 8,000 spent fuel rods stored in a water pond, the manufacturing and exporting of plutonium, as well as the production of additional nuclear warheads which were previously frozen according to the 1994 Agreed Framework. The third dimension is the future nuclear problem associated with the development of a highly enriched uranium (HEU) program. The United States claims that North Korea admitted its existence during the visit of its special envoy, James Kelly, to Pyongyang in October 2002.

The current North Korean nuclear stand-off started with the problem of HEU program, a future nuclear issue. James Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State, revealed that Sokjoo Kang, first vice foreign minister of DPRK, admitted its existence during his visit to Pyongyang in October 2002. The Korea Energy Development Organization (KEDO) suspended the supply of heavy oil to North Korea under heavy pressure by the United States, who argued that the clandestine development of a HEU program was an outright violation of the Geneva Agreed Framework. North Korea officially denied its existence and accused the U.S. of fabricating the fact. According to North Korea, Kang did not admit the existence of HEU program, but simply emphasized its sovereign entitlement to nuclear weapons program. The North began to take a sequence of methodical reciprocal measures by equating the suspension of supply of heavy oil with the nullification of the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework. They included: unsealing the frozen nuclear facilities in Youngbyon, removing monitoring cameras, expelling three IAEA inspectors, withdrawing from the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), and reactivating a 5 megawatt nuclear reactor in Youngbyon.

The situation has worsened as North Korea admitted the possession of nuclear weapons and the completion of reprocessing spent fuel rods during a three party talk in Beijing last April. Although the North Korean claims need verifiable inspection for their confirmation, disputes over the future nuclear problem (i.e., HEU program) aggravated the situation by touching on the past and present nuclear issues.

If North Korea crosses red-lines (e.g., proven reprocessing of entire spent fuel rods and the manufacturing and transfer of plutonium, possession of additional nuclear weapons, nuclear testing, test launching of medium and long range missiles, and major military provocation), devastating conflict escalation in the Korean peninsula cannot be ruled out. More specifically, North Korea can pose several threats:

- North Korean possession of nuclear weapons would not only undermine peace and stability on the Korean peninsula by diminishing the chance for peaceful co-existence between North and South Korea, but also destabilize the Northeast Asian region by triggering nuclear domino effects (e.g., a nuclear Japan, Sino-Japanese nuclear arms race, and a nuclear South Korea).
- A nuclear North Korea would seriously undermine the balance of power on the Korean peninsula, facilitating the continuation of its traditional strategy of communizing the South.
- A nuclear North Korea with its enhanced delivery capability (e.g., Nodong and Daepodong missiles) can pose direct threats to Japan and the U.S., especially American military assets in Japan and South Korea.
- Attempts to punish North Korea (e.g., sanctions) by a coalition of the willing including the United Nations could trigger North Korean conventional or non-conventional military provocations.
- Allied forces' attempts to cope with North Korea's military provocations through preemptive or counter-attacks are bound to escalate into major military conflicts on the Korean peninsula. North Korea's non-asymmetric forces deployed along the DMZ will pose immediate threats to South Korea and American assets in the South.

3. Managing the North Korean Nuclear Threats: Three Options

Military Option and Catastrophe

The first option is the possibility of using military alternatives in dealing with North Korea. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld once stated that "We are capable of fighting two major regional conflicts. We're capable of winning decisively in one and swiftly defeating in the case of the other, and let there be no doubt about it."¹ Richard Perle, a leading figure of the neo-conservative camp, has also suggested the utility of military actions on nuclear facilities in North Korea as recently as June 2003.² In this regard, John Bolton's testimony at Congress draws attention too, as he admitted the possibility of undertaking the three-stage approach of sanctions, interdiction and confiscation, and preemptive military attack, in order to cope with WMD threats from North Korea.³

The United States could deliberate on three possible military options. The first is a preemptive surgical strike on nuclear facilities in Youngbyon, which was once considered during the 1994 nuclear crisis. The second is the combination of a surgical strike and preemptive all-out attack on North Korea. The final option could involve a sequence of surgical attack, North Korea's retaliation, and counter-attack. Regardless of optional types, military actions are likely to result in a major catastrophe through conflict escalation. Even a well planned and conducted surgical strike will eventually escalate into a major conflict.

None of these military options seem feasible or desirable, with several factors making military options less attractive.

¹ "Rumsfeld gets tough on North Korea," Guardian, December 24, 2002, <http://www.guardiana.co.uk/korea/article/0,2763,865094.html> (accessed date: June 20, 2003).

² *Yonshap News Agency*, June 12, 2003.

³ See the testimony of John Bolton, Under Secretary of State, on the House Committee on International Relations. "US to eliminate WMD in all rogue states, by force if necessary," *World-AFP*, June 5, 2003

First is a rather weak rationale for undertaking military actions.⁴ North Korea is willing to talk with the U.S. as well as to accept the American request of verifiable inspection and irreversible dismantling. What it does want is a security assurance in the form of termination of hostile intent and normalization with the U.S. There seems to be no reason why the U.S. should not consider these requests more seriously. It would be extremely difficult for the U.S. to win international support and legitimacy by taking military options, while disregarding North Korea's appeal to dialogue and negotiation, even if the North admitted the existence of nuclear weapons.

Second, geopolitics matters. North Korea is different from Iraq in that China, Russia, and even Japan may strongly oppose American unilateral military actions. The United States cannot win the war with North Korea without winning support from these neighboring countries and utilizing their ground bases. In the worst case, Chinese military involvement in North Korea cannot be ruled as was the case during the Korean War. It is so, precisely because toleration of such aggressive American behavior could bear negative implications for China's own national security.

Third, it seems doubtful whether the U.S. would be able to achieve its political and military objectives. A surgical strike on Youngbyon nuclear facilities cannot satisfy the American goal of destroying North Korea's nuclear capabilities completely. For though it might be able to resolve the present nuclear problem (i.e., reprocessing of spent fuel rods and manufacturing of plutonium) through surgical strikes over the Youngbyon nuclear facilities, it cannot root out the past nuclear issue (one or two nuclear bombs) and the future one (highly enriched uranium). Thus, it would achieve a very limited goal, but with the devastating consequences of major conflict escalation and massive radioactive pollution over South Korea and Japan. Preemptive all-out attack seems questionable too. No matter how backward and ill-equipped, the North Korean military is still the fifth largest in the world. At the same time, the ideology of 'military first politics', widespread anti-Americanism deeply embedded in North Korean people, hostile terrain and fortification of military bases, and asymmetric forces deployed along the De-militarized Zone would not allow an easy victory to the United States.

⁴ Jeremy Brecher, "Terminating the Bush Juggernaut," *FPIF Discussion Paper*, May 2003, <http://www.fpif.org/papers/juggernaut/index.html> (accessed date : June 4, 2003); Leon V. Sigal, "North Korea is no Iraq: Pyongyang's Negotiating Strategy," *Arms Control Today*, vol. 32, no. 10 (December

Fourth, South Korea's opposition will pose another formidable deterrent. Catastrophic consequences of military actions will make South Koreans dead opposed to American military actions. Preemptive military actions without full consultation with the South Korean government could instantly jeopardize the ROK-US military alliance, without which the United States cannot undertake effective military operations. In addition, a large number of South Korean pacifists would cross the DMZ to form human shield against American military attacks.

Finally, both rational calculus and normative considerations do not favor military options. North Korea possesses neither oil nor other valuable natural resources, and American economic gains in post-war era will be minimal, while the costs of war and post-war construction will be prohibitively expensive. Moreover, extension of protracted conflict in Iraq, diminishing domestic support of overseas' military venture, and the coming presidential election in 2004 will make it extremely for President Bush to undertake another war on the Korean peninsula unless North Korea crosses the generally perceived redlines in a provocative manner.

Containment and Protracted Tension

Military options seem less attractive. Cognizant of the constraints and risks associated with it, attention has been given to the containment option, often referred to as a malign or hostile neglect strategy.⁵ Even Ashton Carter, who served under William Perry during the Clinton administration, has suggested it at a congressional hearing on March 6, 2003.⁶ The containment option is predicated on several assumptions and related action programs. The most important assumption is "let North Korea go nuclear."⁷ There is no other option but to recognize North Korea as a nuclear power either because of delayed dialogue and negotiation with the North, or because of North Korea's unfailing intention to develop nuclear weapons for both survival and a

2002), pp. 11-12.

⁵ Sonni Efron, "U.S. Said to be Resigned to a Nuclear Korea," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 2003; "Bush Shifts Focus to Nuclear Sales by North Korea," *The New York Times*, May 5, 2003.

⁶ Ashton B. Carter, "Alternatives to Letting North Korea go Nuclear," Testimony before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, March 6, 2003, <http://www.cfr.org> (accessed date: May 15, 2003).

⁷ Ashton B. Carter, "Alternatives to Letting North Korea go Nuclear," Testimony before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, March 6, 2003, <http://www.cfr.org> (accessed date: May 15, 2003).

bargaining leverage. But allowing the North to be a nuclear power would not pose any immediate nuclear threats to countries in the region since it would require more time to emerge as a full fledged nuclear power.

Another critical assumption underlying this option is that the North Korean nuclear problem cannot be solved without toppling the evil regime in North Korea. As long as Kim Jong-il stays in power, North Korea will want both dialogue and nuclear bomb simultaneously. Removing him from power and creating a new regime in North Korea is the best and surest way to solve the North Korean nuclear dilemma. Thus, the United States and its allies and friends should work together to isolate, contain, and transform North Korea. If they work together, transformation of North Korea will materialize faster than its emergence as a real nuclear power.

The United States has already begun to take a series of actions in this direction. President Bush has already hinted at it by stating that "America is working with the countries of the region to find a peaceful solution, and to show the North Korean government that nuclear weapons will bring only isolation, economic stagnation, and continued hardship."⁸ They include:

- the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) that would allow investigation, interdiction, and confiscation of illicit arms transfers.⁹
- Along with this, the United States has been deliberating on extensive measures to isolate and contain North Korea through a ban on arms-related exports and sales, controls over the export of dual use items, prohibitions on economic assistance, and imposition of miscellaneous financial and other restrictions.¹⁰
- the Japan-US summit in May alluded to the possibility of economic sanctions and a naval blockade if the North Korean nuclear problem further deteriorated.

⁸ George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," United States Capitol, Washington, D.C., January 28, 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030128-19.html> (accessed date: June 8, 2003).

⁹ *JoongAng Ilbo*, June 2, 2003.

¹⁰ Counterterrorism Office, U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002*, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2002/pdf> (accessed date: May 30, 2003), p. 77.

- On June 4, John Bolton made a congressional testimony that the Bush administration is considering a sequence of punitive measures comprised of economic sanctions, naval blockade and confiscation, and preemptive attack, as with Iraq, if North Korea does not show any signs of improvements in nuclear, missiles, conventional weapons issues, as well as drug trafficking, human rights, and terrorism.¹¹

- On June 10, the U.S., Japan, and Australia agreed to undertake selective interdiction of North Korean vessels exporting weapons and drugs.

- On June 12, a G-10 meeting was held in Madrid in order to deliberate on concrete and realistic measures that could wipe out North Korea's exports of arms and drugs.¹²

- Along with this, the United States has called for the suspension of construction of a light water nuclear reactor in Shinpo, and the UN Security Council Chairman's statement denouncing North Korea's nuclear activities can be interpreted as a preliminary step toward a UN resolution on economic sanction on North Korea.

However, the malign neglect and eventual transformation of North Korea do not appear to offer a viable solution to the current crisis either. It reveals several serious limits, constraints, and negative backlash.

First, it would worsen rather than improve the current nuclear standoff, eventually escalating into a major conflict on the Korean peninsula. As Wade Huntley perceptively points out, the malign or hostile neglect approach has become the primary cause of the current crisis and is likely to aggravate rather than ameliorate it.¹³ Moreover, the option seems to rely on faulty assumptions of the effectiveness of isolation and containment. The option can easily become problematic if the Kim Jong-il regime does not quickly collapse, while North Korea becomes a true nuclear power by crossing critical redlines. It seems important to remember the failure of a wishful thinking on the early demise of the Kim Jong-il regime, that was implicitly assumed by

¹¹ *DongA Ilbo*, June 6, 2003.

¹² *JoongAng Ilbo*, June 12, 2003.

¹³ Wade L. Huntley, "Coping with North Korea," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, February 24, 2003,

American negotiators during the negotiation over the Geneva Agreed Framework of 1994.

Second, its proponents seem to commit the fallacy of underestimating regime durability in North Korea. The North Korean people are well accustomed to the march of hardship under the Juche system. As Lewis Coser aptly suggests, outside pressures on North Korea will not only strengthen the position of hardliners in the name of 'military first politics,' but also enhance its internal cohesiveness, weakening the possibility of transformation from within. American efforts to isolate and contain might not bring about the desired shift demise of the Kim Jong-il regime. On the contrary, such measures could solidify the regime and elongate its survival. It is more so because of intense and widespread anti-American sentiments in North Korean society that have resulted from both its people's long lasting memory of American air raid during the Korean War and ruling regime's systematic and prolonged indoctrination.

Third, no matter how persuasive and forceful the U.S. would be, it would be extremely difficult to execute effective enforcement of sanctions against North Korea without the legitimate backing of the UN Security Council. China, Russia, and even France might be reluctant to adopt any Security Council resolution endorsing sanctions on North Korea without exhausting all possible means for a peaceful and diplomatic solution. It is highly unlikely for China and South Korea to join sanctions without United Nations' blessing. The fact that China and South Korea have not joined the PSI can be seen as a reliable predictor of such behavior. Given North Korea's dependence on China and South Korea,¹⁴ their full cooperation will be vital to the success of those sanctions.

Finally, judged on North Korea's traditional behavior, the ultimate destination of the containment strategy might be a catastrophic conflict escalation rather than a happy ending through the demise of the Kim Jong-regime, emancipation of North Korean people, and the permanent removal of its nuclear problem. South Korean cannot accept such a development because their survival and prosperity are at stake.

<http://www.fpif.org/papers/korea2003.html> (accessed date : June 4, 2003).

¹⁴ Institute of Political Education for Unification (IPEU), Department of Unification, *Understanding North Korea, 2003* (Seoul: IPEU, 2003), pp. 149-150.

Negotiated Settlement and Engagement

The two alternative prescriptions appear problematic. Neither military option nor containment seem to be feasible and desirable.¹⁵ To prevent the Korean peninsula from stumbling along a disastrous path to war, both sides ought to consider in earnest, the negotiated-settlement approach of alternating threat and incentive. A nuclear North Korea is unthinkable. It would debilitate South Korea and trigger nuclear proliferation in the region, involving Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and of course China. The undoing of a nuclear North Korea may require military action, causing enormous collateral damage. Needless to say, neither prospect is desirable. A solution should be found between the twin principles of ‘no nuclear North Korea’ and ‘no military conflict’. Therefore, the sooner a negotiated settlement is given a chance, the better the prospect of avoiding the two worst consequences. Several steps can be considered in pursuing the negotiated settlement option:

First, utmost attention should be paid to an immediate freeze of North Korea’s unruly behavior in the direction of becoming a nuclear power, such as verifiable inspection of nuclear facilities, and their irreversible dismantling. Coping with the North Korean threat through isolation, containment, and transformation could be more time consuming and risky.

Second, the six party talk should be continued and effectively utilized. After a long deliberation on the modality of dialogue (e.g., bilateral, three party, four party, five party, six party), the United States and North Korea have finally accepted the six party formula and held its first meeting in Beijing in early September. The first meeting was not successful not only because U.S.-DPRK renewed an old pattern of bilateral confrontation, but also because it failed to produce any agreed principles, objectives, and procedures of the six party talk. But there is no other option but to revive the six party talk. For the breakdown of the six party talk will eventually lead to either an American unilateral action or the adoption of UN Security Council resolution on

¹⁵ See Jung-Hoon Lee and Chung-in Moon, “The North Korean Nuclear Crisis Revisited: The Case for a Negotiated Settlement,” *Security Dialogue* 34:2 (June 2003), pp.135-151.

sanctions on North Korea, both of which would entail catastrophic outcomes. Thus, all parties should make every effort to make the six party talk viable.

Third, it should be kept in mind that the six party talk needs to be utilized for dialogue and negotiation rather than for pressure to foster isolation, containment, and transformation of North Korea. What is critical at present is an immediate freeze of North Korea's nuclear activities and their verifiable inspection and dismantling. In so doing, the United States might have to consider relaxing its precondition of 'dismantle first, security assurance later.' If North Korea does not show any sincere and cooperative attitude in complying with American and international demands of a nuclear freeze and verifiable dismantling, it will be much easier for South Korea, China, and Russia to join the U.S. in undertaking collective punitive measures on the North including sanctions. However, it might be difficult for South Korea, China, and Russia to join U.S.-led outright multilateral pressures without making any meaningful progress in negotiation with North Korea.

Fourth, in setting the agenda, the North Korean proposal of 'bold initiative' deserves prudent attention. If North Korea is willing to make a binding public pledge to abandon its nuclear weapons programs through verifiable dismantling and to continue the moratorium on missile test launching and the export of missile parts and components and technology, its request of a non-aggression document, normalization with the U.S., non-obstruction of its economic cooperation with Japan and South Korea, and alleviation of its energy situation including the Shinpo LWR project, needs to be seriously taken into account. A promising sign recently surfaced on this front. On August 9, 2003, Secretary Powell hinted that U.S. Congress could endorse a resolution assuring North Korea of its non-aggression intent.¹⁶ Although such a resolution is short of a formal non-aggression treaty or pact, it underscores a major policy shift from the previous position of 'dismantle first, negotiation later.' But opposition from the neo-conservative camp is known to abort the gesture, resulting in another round of rigid confrontation at the six party talk.

Finally, the process of a negotiated settlement should be tied to engagement for opening and reform in North Korea. Engagement, as opposed to containment or hawk engagement, should be positively considered for several reasons:

- Engagement will entail trust, the most indispensable element for dialogue and negotiation. Given that the current stand-off has resulted from mutual distrust (i.e., American accusation of North Korea as a violator of the Agreed Framework, and North Korea's fear of American nuclear attack reminiscent of recent developments in Iraq), trust-building should be the first step. Engagement will facilitate the process of trust building between the two.
- Engagement is predicated on the availability of choices for North Korea. While containment forces North Korean leadership to continue to rely on status quo and erratic responses of blackmail and brinkmanship, engagement can induce it to deliberate on more practical choices such as Deng Xiao-ping's or Park Chung-hee's path to economic opening and reform. Despite suspicion of deception on the part of the North, North Korea has usually shown positive responses to engagement. Thus, engagement can bring about a virtuous, rather than vicious, cycle of interactions in dealing with North Korea.
- Engagement might be the least traumatic, most effective, and faster way of transforming the North, while freezing its risky nuclear ambition. Korean history demonstrates that regime change by external forces were always subject to the question of legitimacy. Outside pressures alone, without corresponding formation of domestic civil society, cannot bring about changes in the North. Changes should come from within. In so doing, the formation and activation of civil society is essential, which North Korea currently lacks. Engagement, opening and reforms, and creation and expansion of market interests are vital to the shaping of civil society in North Korea.
- Finally, ensuing debates notwithstanding, engagement has so far worked in inter-Korean relations. Changes in North Korea are by no means fictional. A little more push for a genuine, not hawk, engagement by the United States can produce profound changes in a

¹⁶ *Korea Herald*, August 10, 2003.

rapid manner. Moreover, South Korea does not want a sudden collapse in the North.

5. Concluding Remarks

Resolving the North Korean nuclear problem through a negotiated settlement will not be easy. Negotiations with North Korea can always become unruly and uncertain. However, recent developments reveal some optimistic signs for a negotiated settlement. Although the three party talk involving the U.S., North Korea, and China, which was held in Beijing in April 2003, failed, it paved a way to the six party talk in August, in which the U.S., North Korea, China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia participated. Its outcome was rather dismal because of uncompromising posture of the U.S. and North Korea. North Korea called for a simultaneous exchange of American security assurance and its public pledge to abandon nuclear weapons program. But American position has been firm: unless North Korea undertakes a verifiable dismantling of its nuclear weapons programs, the United States cannot promise any measures related to security assurance. Nevertheless, the six parties including North Korea have agreed to hold another round of negotiation in November.

There is no guarantee that the six party will be successful. A large number of actors, divergent calculus of interests, complex issue-linkages, and procedural difficulties could make the six-party negotiation all the more problematic. Moreover, even if the six party talk is able to produce a negotiated settlement, its implementation involving freeze, verifiable inspection, and enforcement of dismantling will encounter daunting challenges. Thus, it seems too early to predict any successful outcomes.

Yet there are no other alternatives but the six party talk. The six party talk is crucial on several accounts. First, it will certainly defuse the crisis escalation and bring new momentum for the peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis through a sequence of standstill, rollback, and cruise cannot be ruled out.

Second, it is promising because all five parties except North Korea have shown a convergence in the principle of 'no nuclear North Korea.' Joining of China and Russia to the 'no nuclear North Korea' camp will certainly generate fresh pressures on North Korea to give up its nuclear programs.

Third, China, Russia, and South Korea could also exert pressures on the United States to resolve security concerns of North Korea in a more convincing manner.

Fourth, North Korea is keenly aware that the six party talk is its last option. Failure to make a major breakthrough through the six party talk will leave North Korea with no other alternatives but an American unilateral action or a United Nations Security Council resolution. Thus, it has every reason to actively engage in it.

Fifth, it bears profound historical significance because the six parties are meeting for the first time in history in dealing with the Korean peninsula security issue, overcoming the bitter enmity of the past. Their cooperation for common security will bring rays of hope for peace and stability on the Korean peninsula.

Finally, in light of North Korea's desperate efforts to rebuild its economy, the six party talk will be the last chance. Its success will lead to engagement and economic gains for the North, whereas its failure will lead to containment and strangulation.