Issue Brief=Special Round Table

North Korea's Fourth Nuclear Test and the International Response

The possibility of a miniaturized boosted nuclear fission bomb and the THAAD decision

North Korea conducted a nuclear test on January 6, 2016. It claimed to have tested a hydrogen bomb. But is this true? If so, what impact will it have on the Korean peninsula? How will the international community react and what effect will it have on inter-Korean relations? Senior Advisor Chun Yungwoo, Vice President Choi Kang, Senior Research Fellow Park Jiyoung, and Research Fellow Go Myong-hyun of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies sat down for an urgent discussion.

Moderator, Chief Editor Ahn Sung Kyoo= Let's begin by examining the scientific facts of this test.

Dr. Park Jiyoung= We assess that North Korea amplified the effectiveness of their previously tested nuclear fission bombs. Hydrogen bombs get their energy from the explosive power of nuclear *fusion*, which can be several thousand times more powerful than a fission bomb. It is impossible for such an explosive test to have occurred near Punggye-ri [because of the area's proximity to surrounding residential neighborhoods]. This is why the United States and Russia used to test hydrogen bombs in places like deserted islands, far away from population centers. It is highly probable that, for this first attempt, North Korea used a fission bomb supplemented with hydrogen.

Moderator=In your opinion, is it possible to tell whether or not it was a hydrogen bomb based solely on its explosive power?

Dr. Park= The explosive power of the third nuclear test was about 6,000-7,000

tons of TNT and produced an earthquake with a magnitude of 4.9. With the latest test, China initially announced that the strength of the earthquake measured 5.1, which means that the force was two times more powerful than before. However, the South Korean government has estimated the magnitude at only 4.8 or 4.9. If this is true, it means that the explosion was the same strength or slightly less than the previous test, and thus the amplified fission device failed to perform as intended. While the North's claims of having developed a 'new explosive method' and 'hydrogen bomb' may be technically true, it complicates finding out whether they merely tested a fission device enhanced with hydrogen or one powered by nuclear fusion. But even if the former is true, it shows both that North Korea possesses an unknown quantity of these enhanced fission bombs and also that they are continuing to pursue hydrogen fusion technology.

Moderator= What steps are needed to create this technology?

Dr. Park= North Korea has been developing their nuclear program at a pace in which they reach a major technological breakthrough about once every three years. The four nuclear tests that they have conducted since 2006 have shown increasing technological sophistication. As they enter the final stages of nuclear fusion development, the time it takes to reach another breakthrough shortens. We may see a test of a fully-fledged hydrogen fusion bomb in the next two years.

Moderator= Why did North Korea undertake a nuclear test at the beginning of the year, and what is its connection to the New Year's address? Senior Advisor Chun Yungwoo= The fact that Kim Jong Un failed to mention a nuclear test in the New Year's address was portentous. North Korea never announces their provocations before they occur. This is intentional 'strategic

deception.' One of their primary goals is to ensure that the international community can't predict when they will conduct a nuclear weapons test. So we shouldn't have been deceived by the absence of nuclear rhetoric in the New Year's address.

Upgrading the strength and performance of their nuclear weapons is the most important goal of North Korea's security policy. Because they have freedom to choose the time and manner of the tests, they must consider both the preparedness of the technology and the severity of the repercussions they might face. If they feel that the technology is ready, they then look to the movements of America, South Korea, and the international community. Having decided that the potential costs are manageable, they can decide to move forward with the test.

Moderator= If the North is successful in testing a hydrogen bomb, will it have a bigger effect on the Korean peninsula?

Senior Advisor Chun= This is North Korea's claim, and it is true that conventional weapons are only effective up to a point. However, because North Korea's public announcements are determined more by their political strategy than actual reality, we cannot accept what they say at face value.

Dr. Go Myong Hyun= The first, second, and third nuclear tests followed a pattern in which a missile test preceded them by 1-3 months. But this time the nuclear test came first. At the end of last year, the possibility of an upcoming missile test was widely discussed, but I believe there was a political reason why it didn't happen, such as Chinese official Liu Yunshan's visit to Pyongyang or the possibility of high level talks between North and South. But for whatever reason, it seems they have gone back to testing nuclear weapons every three years. It sheds light on Kim Jong Un's immaturity and sense of urgency. By

testing the nuclear weapon at the beginning of the year, it leads off their nuclear agenda for 2016 and demonstrates their determination to secure recognition as a nuclear power state.

Dr. Choi= At the upcoming Seventh Party Congress, Kim Jong Un will seek to expound upon his achievements, the biggest of which is the nuclear weapons program. In other words, the economy is not doing well. While pursuing the 'Byungjin Line,' he threw his weight behind both economic and nuclear weapons development, but because the economy has failed to live up to expectations, he must use the nuclear test to make up for the policy's shortcomings. But he will not abandon the 'Byungjin Line,' for it is the defining policy goal of his leadership.

Moderator= How will the situation develop from here?

Dr. Choi= Dr. Choi Kang= With the situation worsening in the Middle East, China's faltering economy, and the upcoming presidential election in America, imposing dramatic new sanctions will be hard, even though North Korea has flagrantly violated UN sanctions with this nuclear weapons test. Despite the inevitable condemnation they will face from the international community, the probability is low that tough sanctions will be adopted.

First, the UN Security Council will convene and discuss what further sanctions can be added to Resolution 2094. The United States will pressure China and Russia to adopt stronger sanctions and the Security Council will denounce North Korea's actions and argue for a sincere implementation of the existing resolution. For China, this will be difficult to refuse. However, China will resist participating in long term sanctions that could undermine the regime. After the third nuclear test, they upheld the mandated restrictions for about three months and then quietly returned to the status quo. This time around, even though the

U.S. will apply more pressure, it is possible that China will once again find some pretext under which they can dilute the sanctions.

America will work to strengthen and institutionalize Korea-US-Japan security cooperation. It is possible that America will see this as the right time to address the THAAD issue and bring it up for discussion amongst its allies.

Senior Advisor Chun= The Security Council must agree to adopt sanctions that are strong enough to change the North's strategic calculations. As with previous nuclear tests, North Korea acted with the confidence that China will block such measures. Despite their strong criticism of North Korea, China will again prevent the passage of sanctions that could have a destabilizing effect on the North Korean regime. The leadership in Pyongyang knows this well. We do not know what message Liu Yunshan gave to Kim Jong Un during his recent visit, but we know that China has no real intention of punishing North Korea beyond simply emphasizing to them that they should denuclearize.

Moderator= Is it not embarrassing for China that North Korea tested a nuclear weapon so soon after Liu Yunshan's visit?

Senior Advisor Chun= Perhaps, but China will still not change its stance. As time goes by, China's anger with North Korea will subside and they will return to the policy of maintaining the status quo ante. Although they will expand Security Council sanctions, these measures will not have a major impact on North Korea. Without special sanctions legislation, such as the secondary sanctions that America has used on Iran, the Security Council sanctions will not have a great effect.

Dr. Choi= There is a good chance that the United States will pass some kind of unilateral, secondary sanctions legislation.

Senior Advisor Chun= Right now this legislation is pending in the U.S. Congress, but it hasn't garnered much support. The special North Korean sanctions legislation sponsored by Congressmen Robert Menendez and Ed Royce must be adopted and used to supplement the weak sanctions from the Security Council. Even if the extra measures do not completely dismantle the nuclear program, as they did in Iran, but merely limit the scale of the nuclear program, it would still be a considerable blow to the North Korean regime.

Dr. Go= From America's point of view, the toughest sanctions that can be placed on North Korea are China's energy sanctions. In the past, China limited the amount of crude oil it exported to North Korea, and now they will likely adopt similar measures. But because China always returns to its policy of maintaining a stable, balanced peninsula, the restrictions won't last long. Therefore, whatever America does will be extremely important; if they include secondary sanctions, the bite and effect will be pronounced.

Moderator= If this is the case, then what does South Korea want from the US and China?

Dr. Choi= If we want to demand something from China, we have to ask for it. We are faced with a very serious situation as North Korea increases the speed with which they upgrade their missile technology. We must take measures immediately, which include implementing the THAAD missile defense system and bolstering Korea-US-Japan security cooperation. South Korea must make China realize they need to help control the North's provocative behavior. If South Korea only pressures China verbally but doesn't take any action, China's only response will be to tell us to not worry.

North Korea nuclear development is speeding up, but construction of the KAMD will not be completed until 2023. We will be defenseless during this time. We must take stronger security measures and use this opportunity to

convince China to put greater pressure on the North.

Moderator= So what should South Korea's response be regarding our means to pressure North Korea, such as the THAAD missile defense system? Senior Advisor Chun= In the current situation, not installing a missile defense system would be a careless way of dealing with the lives and safety of our people. A government cannot do that. This is not an issue to debate with China. We need to emphasize that if North Korea does not denuclearize, then we will be forced to try to end the regime. This can be done with the help of other countries, regardless of whether China cooperates or not. The continuation of a nuclear armed North Korea is an impossible basis for peace. Thus they will give up their nuclear weapons or their regime will end. We should have done this after the third nuclear test, but we let the opportunity slip by. In the time between the third and fourth tests too, we should have done this, but lost momentum. Now that we have the momentum, we need to do what we should have done three years ago.

Dr. Choi= If that policy had been in place at the time of the third test, the fourth test wouldn't have happened. Because we were so caught up in trying to interpret North Korea's behavior, this was the result. Even though there were clear signs that Pyongyang was not going to give up their nuclear weapons program, people continued to have the illusory hope that they would.

Senior Advisor Chun= Our answer to the last nuclear test was 'Trustpolitik.' This has proved to be an unrealistic policy, which somehow tried to build trust with a North Korean regime working hard to arm themselves with nuclear weapons.

Moderator= It has been said that President Park Geun Hye and Premier Xi Jinping have a special relationship, but if Premier Xi doesn't take adequate measures in this situation, what will happen? Does it signify a huge policy failure?

Senior Advisor Chun= This belief arose because South Korea interpreted Xi Jinping's words from our own biased point of view.

Dr. Choi= It seems that Xi Jinping was merely quietly nodding his head and listening to the problems of the Korean peninsula, but we interpreted this with misplaced optimism. We believed it when China said they are doing their best to help us.

Senior Advisor Chun= If China really has been paying us lip service all this time, and now proceeds to do nothing, it represents a serious diplomatic failure.

Dr. Choi= When we take part in the Korea-US joint naval training exercises, it is, in fact, China that is most affected. We must use this chance to strengthen the Korea-US defense system and include Japan. At the same time, China must come to realize that it is not acceptable to leave the North Korean situation as it is.

Senior Advisor Chun= China's influence over North Korea is overestimated. They are mistaken to think they can just send an envoy and convince North Korea to denuclearize. That is an illusion and a misjudgment. China has no means of stopping North Korea from pursuing its own ends. They cannot adopt sanctions to bring about regime change and so North Korea will continue to develop nuclear weapons. We were mistaken to think that a China without the will or means to wield influence over North Korea would help us.

In the case that the UN Security Council can't adopt tenacious sanctions against North Korea, then the other countries with a common understanding of the situation will have no choice but to place additional sanctions at the national level. There was one measure targeting North Korean shipping which we tried to pass after the third nuclear test, but it failed to be adopted by the UN Security Council after China blocked the request. If these shipping sanctions had been

implemented, North Korean ships would have been barred from entering all ports, and they would have had no choice except to do international trade via land, carrying their goods in parcels on their backs. On the financial side, the US must place secondary sanctions on transactions over a few tens of thousands of dollars and prevent them from acquiring dual use technology. The secondary sanctions are the strongest. Even if China protests these sanctions, they can do nothing about it. In Iran, the government was unable to conduct business abroad, and the result was the suspension of their nuclear program. These are the kinds of sanctions we need.

Moderator= What should South Korea request from America?

Dr. Go= It is not what South Korea should ask from the US, but what the US should ask from us. The biggest problem is the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Right now President Park is saying that North Korea will pay a huge price for the nuclear test, but she hasn't said anything about Kaesong. South Korea cannot tell other countries to place financial sanctions on North Korea while Kaesong operations continue uninterrupted. We should consider suspending operations. While we say that the North should not be receiving money from outside, the Kaesong complex is doing exactly that. We need to take this chance to stop being held hostage by Kaesong.

Moderator= What measures should be taken on the military side?

Senior Advisor Chun= We need to prepare a strategy in which, even if North Korea possesses nuclear weapons, they are prohibited from using them. Until the KAMD is constructed in 2023 we need to take interim measures with the help of the US to neutralize the North's nuclear arsenal before it is put to use. Yet even with the THAAD, PAC-3, and all the other measures added together, the chance of completely stopping them may be only 1%. Thus, we need to

seriously consider further steps to raise this number.

Moderator= So we must ask America to help with this.

Dr. Choi= Yes. With this fourth missile test, the security situation in Korea has become much worse. We need to request America to provide support with the THAAD system until we can construct our own missile defense system.

Exceptional measures are needed. We are faced with a dangerous, existential threat, and so the paradigm must change. After exhausting all other options, if tactical nuclear weapons cannot be deployed on the Korean peninsula, we should request their placement on Guam or other areas in the region. North Korea is extremely sensitive to the realignment of US strategic assets. When the stealth bomber and nuclear submarines entered South Korean territory a few years ago, North Korea was very worried. Kim Jong Un even disappeared for a month.

Senior Advisor Chun= We must use cutting edge conventional weapons to stop North Korea before they can make use of their nuclear arsenal. We cannot use strategic or tactical nuclear weapons before North Korea does. On the other hand, there is also no reason for us to use nuclear weapons *after* sustaining a nuclear attack from the North. We must have the means in place in South Korea, or in neighboring countries, to destroy their assets before they use them.

Moderator= This will require a large increase in military spending, but is this feasible?

Dr. Choi=After the Yeonpyeong Island shelling incident, the K9 budget increased. I think the government considers this a very serious situation and will now increase the budget.

Moderator= America's military presence in Guam so far hasn't caused

much controversy in US-China relations, but couldn't this change if the Americans followed this strategy?

Dr. Choi= America can't deploy nuclear weapons to Guam just because of North Korea, but they want to. We need to show that South Korea can also take actions that will be a burden to China. It is not acceptable for us to only take cursory steps against the North, predicated on China's reactions. Like North Korea, we need to show how far we are willing to go.

Moderator= What about Japan?

Dr. Choi= We are moving towards a situation in which we will need to manage a communal web of information shared between South Korea, the US, and Japan. Prime Minister Abe has announced his resolve to address the problem of Japanese civilians kidnapped by North Korea but hasn't made any progress in the past year. Now, with the new nuclear test, this issue has resurfaced and provides him with a good chance to set the agenda.

Senior Advisor Chun= South Korea's efforts to influence US policy largely depend on whether we act alone or in concert with Japan. We must speak in the same voice as the Japanese if we are to convince US policymakers to support our plans. With China unwilling to stop the North's nuclear development and the Kim regime's continued provocations, there is no alternative in this heightened situation but to strengthen Korea-US-Japan security cooperation. China has never helped South Korea achieve our security goals, so then why do we feel the need to base our policy around China's reactions?

Dr. Choi= South Korea and Japan must work together to effectively influence the US. There are conversations taking place within both US-Japan and US-South Korea relations about extending deterrence, but Japan is dissatisfied with the US reaction. In this case, it is helpful for Korea and Japan to work together to sway American policymakers. Of course, there is discord in the South Korea-

Japan relationship because of the comfort women issue, but in actuality, the situation now shows that both countries need each other.

Moderator= What will the effect be on inter-Korean relations?

Dr. Choi= This is the end of 'Trustpolitik.' The trust building process was a fiction. It was a good attempt, but we cannot develop trust between North and South because inter-Korean relations are fundamentally a military problem. Our North Korea policy must acknowledge this and attempt to find realistic solutions. Issues like the reunions of separated families and the DMZ World Peace Park are important, but they do not rank first amongst the priorities of inter-Korean relations. We must be able to change the strategic calculations of North Korea, and this will only be possible by addressing the military issue.

Senior Advisor Chun= The South Korean government must reevaluate what they hope to achieve through their North Korea policy. It is clear that North Korea is not going to give up their nuclear weapons. In such a situation in which denuclearization is impossible, the goal must be changed to ending a nuclear armed North Korean regime.

Dr. Choi= Policy change essentially means that North Korea needs to face repercussions for what they've done. If this doesn't happen, we need to reformulate a new policy that moves in the direction of regime change.

Dr. Go= This is a politically difficult option to consider. Pyongyang knows that an aggressive North Korean policy will cause an uproar in South Korea. They would use this political chaos to embark on a peace offensive.

Dr. Choi= At this moment, North Korea has no persuasive power to pursue a soft course. North Korea will need a hardline, confident approach for some time to come.

Moderator= What are the prospects for the direction of inter-Korean

relations in the future?

Senior Advisor Chun= North Korea is pursuing their 'Byungjin Line' of simultaneous nuclear and economic development, and we must cut off their funding. The lifting of the May 24 Measures and the restarting of the Geumgang Mountain Resort tours would supplement these finances,.

Dr. Go= North Korea will say that their nuclear weapons are for use against America, not South Korea. North Korea has no new policy alternative directed toward South Korea.

Moderator= What do you think will be the after effects from this fourth nuclear test?

Dr. Go= I don't think we will see a big change. As time goes by, this test will not be very different from the ones before it, and we will return to the status quo ante. If the Kim Jong Un regime continues to test nuclear weapons, they will shoot themselves in the foot. When Kim Jong II tested nuclear weapons, he divided Northeast Asia. On one side was China and South Korea, and on the other side was America and Japan. But should Kim Jong Un continue to conduct nuclear weapons tests, he will only further isolate himself from the international community. Breaking from their previous behavior, China will impose tougher sanctions on the North. Even though these sanctions will have little effect on the regime, China-North Korea relations will inevitably grow apart. In the long term, this situation does not bode well for the North.

Senior Advisor Chun= South Korea will maintain a vehement position until the Security Council adopts measures. I anticipate that they will be inadequate and watered-down. When sanctions progress into the individual state level, South Korea's position will soften. If tough sanctions like those targeting North Korean shipping fizzle out in 4-5 months, it's highly possible that we will return to talks after the Seventh Party Congress.

Dr. Choi= I agree. When the Kaesong Industrial Complex crisis erupted in 2013, at first we were tough in our resolve, but after one or two months, we went back in the direction that North Korea wanted. If we don't end this kind of behavior, we will have not learned our lesson. As we approach the military security problem in Inter-Korean relations, we must completely break free of this cycle in which North Korea provokes the international community and then concocts some pretext for a return to negotiations.

Senior Advisor Chun= Kim Jong Un's continued development of nuclear weapons is smart- not a sign of immaturity. South Korea's system of cost/benefit analysis may be different, but for Kim Jong Un, North Korea's isolation is less important than securing a military deterrent against the United States and South Korea. Kim Jong Un's survival strategy assesses isolation and sanctions asjustifiable costs for the retainment of this deterrence. There is a clear difference between the North Korean calculation that we can see in their public pronouncements and the actual survival strategy of Kim Jong Un.

Dr. Go= As a young leader, Kim Jong Un promised to raise the living standards of his people. But as he continues to test nuclear weapons, keeping that promise will become more difficult. In this case, will the 'Byungjin Line' policy be a success?

Dr. Choi= This will not be a problem for Kim Jong Un. For the last three years, he has sought to create his image as a loving, caring leader. It actually benefits him to say that he has been working hard to reform the economy for the benefit of his people, but the imperialists have plotted against him and made his policies fail.

Dr. Go= The result of which is still that North Korea's economic situation has deteriorated.

Senior Advisor Chun= But there is no reason for their economy to deteriorate further after this nuclear weapon test. This is because not many places in their

economy are worth sanctioning. Even with numerous restrictions, North Korea is essentially protected. If Kim Jong Un thought anuclear weapons test would disrupt his ability to reach his economic goals or improve the lives of his people, he wouldn't have pursued it. So we have no grounds to claim that Kim Jong Un's judgment was wrong.

Dr. Go= North Korea started the year by weakening their economic capabilities. Sanctions won't affect its nuclear program, but it will dig into the economy.

Dr. Choi= If strong sanctions against North Korea cannot be adopted at the UN, countries with the will to pursue unilateral tough measures have to work together.

Senior Advisor Chun= Economic sanctions and the THAAD missile defense system are part of our right to self-preservation. We must be prepared to use all defensive and military means to prevent North Korea from using a nuclear weapon. Our goal needs to be an end to this regime and their nuclear arsenal. Peaceful coexistence with a nuclear armed state is an illusion.

Moderator= To summarize, we must rid ourselves of the perceived influence that China has wielded over South Korea since the third nuclear test. Inter-Korean relations are something that we must solve without waiting for China. 'Trustpolitik' is over, and we must be ready to add independent sanctions, disband the Kaesong Industrial Complex, and deploy the THAAD missile defense system if we are to have adequate means of self-defense.

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