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# Managing a Nuclear-Armed North Korea: A Grand Strategy for a Denuclearized and Peacefully Unified Korea

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## Introduction

North Korea's nuclear development is a major threat to South Korea's national security and a key obstacle on the path toward peaceful unification and prosperity for the Korean people. It is in South Korea's vital interest to denuclearize North Korea completely and irreversibly and achieve unification through fundamental changes in the North. South Korea should exercise its full capacity to realize these two national objectives, denuclearization and peaceful unification, and the first step is to have a cool-headed grasp of the situations it faces now. Seoul should have a full understanding of the key issues to be encountered in the course of realizing the two objectives. These include Pyongyang's position on unification and nuclear strategy, great power politics in Northeast Asia, international dynamics on nuclear proliferation, its own ability to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea, international positions on Korean unification, and national capacity and societal readiness to accomplish peaceful unification. That is, South Korea is required to have a clear understanding of its own preparedness, North Korea's intentions and strategies, and the external environment surrounding the Korean peninsula. As the ancient Chinese strategist Sun Zu said, only if we know our enemy and ourselves, can we win every battle.

The concept of 'managing' is meant to recognize that a complete resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue is not feasible for the time being and to focus on preventing further aggravation of the issue and reducing consequential threats.

At the same time, it frankly acknowledges that the various policies to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem until now have failed. 'Managing' neither gives up complete resolution nor believes in immediate resolution of the problem. Rather, it focuses on fostering an environment for complete denuclearization in the future, recognizing that it may take a long time. In addition, it does not consider the object of management—the North Korean regime—as a constructive and equal partner, but rather as a subject that should be reined in to prevent its dangerous or reckless behavior.

North Korea's denuclearization and peaceful unification should clearly be on top of South Korea's national agenda. Thus, South Korea's grand strategy should be formulated to attain these objectives with a long term perspective through the use of all available means and methods. Managing a nuclear-armed North Korea is the essence of South Korea's grand strategy, which should be based on a cool-headed assessment of reality and not on emotional wishes or naïve expectations. Its foundation rests on two pillars. One is to contain the North's military expansion and nuclear coercion by reinforcing ROK-U.S. military preparedness, including the redeployment of American tactical nuclear weapons on South Korean soil. At the same time, arms control talks in nuclear and conventional areas should be pursued to reduce tension and prevent conflict due to misunderstanding or miscommunication. The other pillar is to promote constructive changes in North Korean society and to induce elites and ordinary people to develop a new way of thinking that is starkly different from that of the leadership. By exposing the North Korean people to the world through information provision, people-to-people exchanges, and humanitarian assistance, this second pillar will make the public aware that they have been misled and taken advantage of by the leadership, thereby paving a way for gradual and peaceful unification on South Korea's terms.

In short, managing nuclear-armed North Korea is South Korea's grand strategy to protect the nation's vital security interest in the short term and achieve peaceful unification in the long term. The strategy of management is neither appeasement based on unfounded optimism of the North Korean regime nor an intimidation tactic to overthrow the North Korean regime. Under the assumption that genuine peace or national integration is not possible unless North Korea is

denuclearized and its society transformed, it is a strategy which exercises full vigilance on North Korea and applies all available means and methods to reduce political and military threats from Pyongyang. At the same time, it also patiently encourages gradual and fundamental changes in North Korea as the ultimate path to a denuclearized and unified Korean peninsula. The management strategy understands that no dialogue with North Korea could resolve the nuclear problem at a single stroke, and thus, it keeps expectations and aims low and does not anticipate a sweeping deal to end the North Korean nuclear problem.

This essay consists of two parts. First, based on the author's 28 years of experience in academia and government,<sup>1</sup> it presents eight lessons derived from the policies of the six South Korean administrations over the 26 years since March 1991, when North Korea's nuclear issue was first made public in international society.<sup>2</sup> Second, ten recommendations are presented for fulfilling South Korea's grand strategy, the main objectives of which are denuclearization of North Korea and peaceful unification.

## **Lessons from the Past**

*Lesson One: The North Korean regime will remain stable for the time being.*

Kim Jong Un has a firm grip on power and will remain in charge for the foreseeable future. There is zero possibility that he will give up nuclear weapons completely. Due to Kim Jong Un's brutal and inhumane leadership style, the North Korean public will distance themselves from the regime as time goes by. Consequently, internal cracks will emerge, which could lead to a leadership change in unexpected ways. But even if Kim Jong Un were removed from power, a new leadership could remain stable for a time, contrary to the popular belief that regime collapse or societal chaos would ensue.

North Korea has already experienced the early stages of such contingencies three times (Kim Il Sung's sudden death in 1994, nationwide famine in the late 1990s, and Kim Jong Il's premature death in 2011 before his heir, Kim Jong Un, had consolidated power). Thus, South Korea should not underestimate Pyongyang's internal durability, and its North Korea policy should not be based on an expectation that the removal of Kim Jong Un will lead to a contingency in

one way or another. Whether the new leadership replacing Kim Jong Un will give up nuclear weapons will depend on the nature of the leadership. A reform-minded leader (or collective leadership) is more likely to take steps toward denuclearization than the old guard, fixated on the traditional values of the Kim family regime.

***Lesson Two:** The various policies conducted by South Korean and American administrations over the past 26 years to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue have totally failed.*

The first U.S. action was a unilateral withdrawal of American tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea as a follow-on measure of President George H. W. Bush's Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) in September 1991 that reduced tactical nuclear weapons around the world. South Korean President Roh Tae Woo also relinquished its nuclear option by declaring South Korea's intention not to develop nuclear weapons in November 1991 and confirmed that there were no nuclear weapons on South Korean soil in December of that year. From 1991 to 2017, none of the major diplomatic or military initiatives by four American presidents and six South Korean presidents have borne fruit. During this period, a variety of platforms, including inter-Korean dialogue, the U.S.-DPRK negotiations, the four-party talks, and the six-party talks have been used and occasionally produced major agreements like the Geneva Agreed Framework, the September 19<sup>th</sup> Joint Declaration, and the February 13<sup>th</sup> Agreement. Whenever such deals were made, officials in Seoul and Washington appeared in public, celebrating the deals and proudly boasting of the resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem. But a nuclear-armed North Korea is the stark reality on the Korean peninsula today.

Except the phrase 'policy failure', nothing can properly describe the reality in which one side has succeeded possessing nuclear weapons despite the other side's persistent efforts to block it for almost three decades. Officials in Seoul and Washington have always insisted that they would neither accept nor live with North Korean nuclear weapons, but the reality is exactly the opposite. They cannot mislead the public any longer with eloquent rhetoric. We are now living under North Korea's nuclear threats and our future generations will have to do so for a considerable period of time. That is a horrible price to pay for past

policy failures. We bear in mind the historical lesson that the U.S. withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons and South Korea's own unilateral decision to forsake its nuclear option precipitated North Korea to develop its nuclear weapons without any hindrance. Seoul should discard the hackneyed logic behind the failed policies, in which it claimed that nuclear development in the South would justify Pyongyang's nuclear armaments or, conversely, that Seoul should be a nonproliferation role model for Pyongyang to follow. South Korea should also declare that the Joint Denuclearization Declaration signed in 1991 was a nonstarter because North Korea had already operated a reprocessing facility that was prohibited in the Declaration and has now violated it in totality.

***Lesson Three:** Unless fundamental changes occur in the North Korean regime, complete denuclearization cannot be achieved, irrespective of compensation given to North Korea.*

With the ambitious aim of resolving North Korea's nuclear problem within their terms, every South Korean and American president has offered deals to trade complete denuclearization with political, economic, or even military compensation demanded by North Korea. Such attempts have occasionally produced agreements, as indicated above, but most unilateral or joint initiatives by Seoul and Washington, such as the Peace Regime, Grand Bargain, Denuclearization-Openness-3,000 Proposal, Vision Korea Project, or Comprehensive Deal have been rebuffed by Pyongyang.

An important lesson of policy failures in the past is to recognize the impossibility and infeasibility of offering North Korea such a package of deals and achieving complete denuclearization. The three generation hereditary regime cherishes nuclear weapons as the last resort to guarantee regime survival. Even if North Korea agrees to curb its nuclear capabilities, its chronic habit of noncompliance does not instill any confidence. Now it is time to awaken ourselves from the fantasy that North Korea will forgo nuclear weapons if it is given whatever it wants. As long as the hereditary Kim regime remains in power, complete denuclearization is not a feasible goal. It is merely irresponsible political rhetoric, which is wide of the mark.

***Lesson Four:** The key to resolving North Korea's nuclear problem is to*

*encourage fundamental changes in North Korean society.*

As emphasized above, the Kim Jong Un regime cannot be expected to forgo nuclear weapons. A complete resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue will be likely only if the society undergoes changes that result in elites and the general public recognizing that abandoning nuclear weapons is a better option than possessing them. That is, if and when societal desires for reform and openness break out, a window of opportunity for the complete resolution of the nuclear problem will arise at last.

Fundamental changes in North Korean society will transform individuals' thinking and mindset in accordance with civilized norms of the international community. Regarding how these changes could occur, some South Koreans use such terms as 'Koreanization', 'pro-Korea', or 'South Korea friendly', reflecting their wishes to see North Korea transform on South Korea's terms. Taking account of North Koreans' possible sensitivities to such expressions, it may be wise to use more value-neutral terms. If the direction of societal changes moves toward globalization rather than Koreanization, North Koreans may show fewer reservations. The former has a positive connotation, in which South and North Korea live together for the common values of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while the latter may be misunderstood by North Koreans as forcing them to succumb to the more prosperous South Korea.

***Lesson Five:*** *While keeping vigilant on North Korea, South Korea should maintain stable inter-Korean relations and should not be overambitious to hasten a unification process.*

As North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities expand despite, South Korean and American efforts, it has been the order of the day to exchange venomous rhetoric, and subsequently, tensions are high on the Korean peninsula. Pyongyang's threats to attack the Blue House and the White House, possible preemptive strikes hinted at by Seoul and Washington, and mutual intimidations of decapitating the other side's leadership all indicate that the nature of these threats is stronger than ever. An effort should be made to prevent an unforeseen event from occurring and to keep the situation under control. South Korea should not be caught off guard by the North Korean regime, but it must try to avoid unnecessary tension or clashes due to misunderstanding or misperception.



Unification is not a feasible option as long as North Korea retains nuclear weapons. No country in the world will support unification while the North Korean nuclear problem—a critical international security issue—remains unresolved. South Korea should examine whether it is prepared to bear, in terms of national preparedness and societal capacities, the enormous burden of unification. Rather than rushing into unification, it is desirable to set unification as a long-term objective, to stably manage inter-Korean relations, and to promote the internal transformation of North Korean society, thus eliciting conditions ripe for unification. For the time being, South Korea should build up its material power, refrain from overambitious gestures for unification, and foster internal and external environments auspicious for unification on its terms.

*Lesson Six: For the purpose of dismantling North Korea's nuclear capabilities, South Korea should develop a grand strategy by exerting full national power and implement it persistently and coherently.*

No option should be off the table in countering the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile developments. The South Korean government should be determined to denuclearize North Korea by creating new options, in addition to patiently utilizing all available means. Such efforts cannot be expected to end with each administration, but should be inherited and continued by the next administration for the single purpose of national survival. South Korean officials cannot be allowed to repeat the same mistake of limiting their options under various pretexts for the sake of face-saving justifications. With genuine strategic thinking, South Korea should no longer be forestalled by North Korea and leave the existing security framework produced by North Korea's unilateral nuclear development. Sloughing off habitual, defensive responses to North Korea's initiatives, South Korea should take an aggressive stance by creating leverage in a new security framework, thereby taking the initiative back from the North. In this context, new options, such as reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons or declaring a temporary withdrawal from the NPT and launching its own nuclear development program should deserve more attention.

North Korea's nuclear and missile developments not only threaten South

Korea's vital interests but are also a grave security concern to the countries in Northeast Asia. For example, the Trump administration seems to define a nuclear-tipped ICBM as the final red line, and has begun to implement the strategy of 'maximum pressure and engagement'. North Korea is infamous for proliferation activities, such as exporting an advanced version of the 5MWe reactor to Syria. There are continuing concerns over possible nuclear cooperation between North Korea and Iran, in addition to their known missile collaboration. Thus, the North's nuclear and missile proliferation is a clear threat to world peace that needs joint action with the international community. The South Korean government, in close cooperation with the United States and the rest of the world, should take all available measures in an integrated and systemic way to deter North Korea from further developing missiles and nuclear weapons.

***Lesson Seven:*** *The foundational framework to resolve Korean peninsula issues is the ROK-U.S. alliance.*

South Korea's approach to resolve major issues on the Korean peninsula should be in close consultation with the United States. The ROK-U.S. alliance has been the cornerstone for maintaining peace and security on the Korean peninsula. The alliance was formed to counter North Korea's aggression and has played a critical role in deterring its aggression and maintaining peace. It is an undisputable fact that the prosperity and development enjoyed by South Korea would not have been possible without the strong support of the alliance. The rock-solid alliance is the best way to thwart long-term North Korean attempts to deal only with the United States and bypass South Korea.

Based on its contributions to preserving peace on the peninsula and the spirit of mutual defense, the alliance should play the role of peace keeper in Northeast Asia and adapt itself to changing security dynamics in a forward-looking way. The most serious threat at present is North Korea's nuclear and missile developments. Seoul and Washington must reinforce deterrence and defense to counter military provocations by Pyongyang while using other measures at their disposal to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea.

***Lesson Eight:*** *South Korea should expand areas of common understanding by*



*conducting strategic dialogues with China.*

China's cooperation is an essential element to resolve North Korea's nuclear problem, to maintain stable inter-Korean relations, and to achieve peaceful unification. In reality, South Korea cannot but take careful account of China, which is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a key ally to North Korea, and an economic power competing with the United States. Of course, taking the Chinese position into account and enlisting its cooperation is entirely different from yielding to China's rising power. A case in point is the deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea. If Seoul had taken a firm and clear-cut position since 2014, when the issue was first raised in public, China could not have attempted to exploit the issue to its political advantage. The ambivalent attitudes of the South Korean government at the beginning allowed China to intervene in the issue and turned a simple security matter into a highly politicized and sensitive diplomatic dispute.

While taking firm and unmistakable positions on military and security issues, South Korea needs to work with China to promote friendly economic and social relations. Seoul must keep sending the strategic message that Chinese key interests will be protected in the course of unification and encourage Beijing to play more active role for denuclearization and constructive changes in North Korea. For this purpose, it is imperative to expand common understanding on issues of mutual interest and institutionalize bilateral cooperation by launching ROK-China strategic dialogues at various levels.

### **Policy Recommendations for the Present and the Future**

In order to achieve the two objectives of its grand strategy, South Korea is recommended to implement the following ten policy measures.

#### ***Recommendation One: Hold on to the 'One Korea' principle***

The division of the Korean peninsula started with the ideological struggle between democracy and communism and was firmly entrenched by the Korean War. Which system—either the North's communism or the South's liberal democracy—inherits the Korean nation's legitimacy is a matter of historical

responsibility that cannot be compromised. The history of Korea's division is an ideological struggle and systemic competition that continues to this very moment. From an objective point of view, the rivalry of which side better served the Korean people is already over. Unfortunately, South Korea is still hamstrung by divisive public opinion and ideological disputes.

A strategy of management maintains as its foundation in domestic and foreign policies the 'One Korea' principle. This principle states that the Republic of Korea is the sole legitimate entity to represent the Korean nation on the Korean peninsula. Observing Article 3 of the ROK Constitution is also an inviolable duty, which stipulates that "The territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands." According to the 'One Korea' principle, North Korea is a lost territory to be reclaimed and the North Korean people are our fellow citizens. The previous ROK governments have not highlighted the historical significance and meaning of the 'One Korea' principle. Facing threats to its vital interests by the North Korean regime, stigmatized as an outlier in the international community, it is time for South Korea to promulgate the 'One Korea' principle within Korea and beyond. West Germany never retreated from the 'One German' policy, which was fully respected by the United States when it normalized relations with East Germany. By pivoting on the 'One Korea' principle and committing to implement the Korean National Community Unification Formula, South Korea can take consistent and unwavering steps towards the denuclearization and societal transformation of North Korea.

***Recommendation Two: Make full use of national power founded upon long-term strategic thinking to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea and unification***

Dealing with North Korea's nuclear development is a complex challenge where many sensitive issues—inter-Korean relations, diplomacy, military, intelligence, science and technology, and domestic politics—overlap. It is a major obstacle in inter-Korean relations, a diplomatic issue involving the international community and the four powers in Northeast Asia, a military threat to the nation's survival, and a technological issue to assess and counter Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities. At the same time, it requires intelligence on North Korea's nuclear intentions

and strategy and is also an internal political issue to overcome national division. Since the current North Korean regime is unlikely to give up nuclear weapons in the near future, it is also an issue demanding a long-term perspective and strategic thinking from South Korea. Unification mirrors the nuclear problem in terms of its multi-dimensional nature and importance as a vital national interest.

South Korea is required to furnish itself with long-term perspectives and strategies, exercise full-scale national power, and take an integrated approach to resolve the complicated issues stemming from several policy areas. To attain the two national objectives also requires constant attention and guidance from the nation's highest leadership. In short, South Korea should formulate a long-term grand strategy encompassing denuclearization of North Korea and unification. Under this national strategic framework, minute policy issues must be managed. Such a holistic approach will enable different policy options to be utilized in a mutually complementary way, increase the flexibility and broaden the scope of policy implementation.

***Recommendation Three: Concentrate national resources on countering North Korean nuclear threat and reshuffle the National Security Council***

South Korea should have a nationwide system encompassing all the capabilities of the various governmental branches and manage inter-Korean relations in conjunction with the North Korean nuclear issue. It also needs to create a new policy making culture where experts and officials understand the multi-dimensional nature of the North Korean nuclear problem and are not influenced by the vested interests of their own organizations. It would be desirable to create an institution to take charge of North Korea's nuclear problem, unification, and other related issues under the direct guidance of the ROK president.

There are two possible options. One is to turn the current National Security Council into the National Strategy Council, which would assume the responsibility of the North Korean nuclear problem, inter-Korean relations, unification policy, and long-term external strategy. The other is to maintain the National Security Council but to reassign the tasks of the two Deputy offices. The first Deputy should take charge of strategic issues, including North Korea's nuclear problem and unification, and the second Deputy should coordinate

policies on pending issues in foreign, military, cyber, and crisis management. In order to draw lessons from past policy failures, it is also necessary to make a fair assessment of whether relevant government agencies have been up to their missions. Stark policy failures would not have occurred if they had done their jobs properly. So the first step to remedy these issues is to hold accountable any agency that was at the center of failed policies. In this respect, the Office of Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs must be carefully evaluated and any problems be properly addressed.

***Recommendation Four:*** *Launch an aggressive campaign to promote fundamental changes in North Korean society and to adopt the bifurcation policy*

A basic assumption behind the management strategy is that the resolution of North Korea's nuclear and missile problems precondition fundamental changes in North Korean society. Except for the core leadership, who equates their survival with nuclear-tipped missiles, the elites and the public should be induced to realize that nuclear weapons and missiles are the cause of their miserable economic conditions and that openness and reform is the only path to bring an end to their suffering.

In order to support and facilitate changes in North Korea, South Korea needs to adopt the 'bifurcation policy' to distinguish the leadership from the rest of North Korea. The Kim family leadership has sustained its power by setting up external threats as a means to galvanize internal cohesion. The international community must keep sending positive messages that it is not the people but the leadership who is subject to criticism around the world. The bifurcation policy of discriminating the regime as a subject of pressure and the people as a target of assistance is a strategic initiative that can unravel the governing ideology and philosophical foundation of the Kim family regime. In their narrative, the regime and the people are one flesh and community bound by a common fate. In this regard, a lesson from the Middle East will be useful to Korea. To consider the whole Muslim world an extremist terrorists group, rather than separating a few extremists from the vast majority of moderates, causes anger within Islamic communities and instigates more terror activities. According to the bifurcation policy, sanctions and pressure need to be carefully designed to

minimize collateral damage to the people.

In addition, South Korea should maximize its efforts to send information into North Korea so as to foster a favorable opinion on the ground level for denuclearization and reform. The key to societal changes in North Korea is how often and to what degree ordinary people can access news of the outside world. They can be disillusioned at their reality and begin to search for a new path only if they gain a perspective to compare their country with the outside world. In this respect, it is imperative to reinforce international efforts to make North Korea conform to global standards. The more North Korean society is globalized and public awareness is increased, the more North Korea is likely to distance itself from its obsession with nuclear weapons. The South Korean government also needs to establish a sophisticated monitoring system to watch minute changes in North Korea and to infer their implications correctly. And the international community should keep sending strategic messages that it is economic development and human rights, not the collapse of North Korea that it pursues, and thereby, become closer to and build trust with the people in the North.

***Recommendation Five: Strengthen smart sanctions targeting the North Korean regime***

The international community must pressure North Korea to an extent that the Kim Jong Un regime is totally isolated from the rest of the world. For this purpose, South Korea should take the lead in the United Nations' efforts to sanction North Korea. Seoul should encourage member states to faithfully implement the Security Council resolutions, and also close loopholes by mustering like-minded countries to strengthen their individual sanctions on Pyongyang.

Keeping in mind that the sole purpose of sanctions is to make the leadership change its course, the international community should make every effort to devise sanction mechanisms sophisticated enough to minimize collateral damage to the people. Smart sanctions will put pressure on the leadership to change their positions on nuclear weapons and missiles, and also send a message to the people that unintentional suffering by sanctions is caused by the

leadership in defiance of the world. Smart sanctions could impose primary burdens on the leadership and as a secondary effect, distance the people from the regime, thereby motivating changes in the individual's and society's thinking.

Sanctions and pressure should not stop at simply bringing North Korea back to the negotiating table. They must undermine the Kim Jong Un regime's legitimacy and authority, bring about positive change to North Korea's reckless adventure with nuclear and missiles programs, and hopefully trigger dynamic societal changes in the North. In particular, it is critical that burdens are heavy enough to make the leadership reach the conclusion that its survival is at risk if it continues developing nuclear weapons and missiles. Considering that the Confucian tradition of valuing honor and reputation remains strong in North Korea, political or diplomatic measures undermining Kim Jong Un's legitimacy will be effective. Sanctions to degrade the leadership's authority and dignity will deepen international isolation of the North Korean regime, precipitate the loss of public support, and increase chances of societal changes. In this regard, it should be noted that major political events such as a summit meeting or high-level talks run the risk of legitimizing the Kim Jong Un regime.

***Recommendation Six: Establish a special export-import control regime targeting North Korea***

A smart sanction targeting the North Korean regime would control the major goods, materials, and technologies that flow in and out of North Korea. Since North Korea's WMD and missile capabilities are not only threats to the people of Korea but also threats to peace and stability in the world, South Korea, being faithful to the 'One Korea' principle, should lead international efforts to create an export-import control regime targeting Pyongyang. For controlling exports to North Korea, the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Control (COCOM) of the Cold War era can be a model, which was a ban on sensitive materials and technologies to the communist bloc. For checking imports from the North, member countries of the export-import regime should not receive WMD-related materials and technologies, ballistic missiles or even major conventional armaments from Pyongyang. In short, South Korea should lead international efforts to create a comprehensive 'North Korea Export-Import



Control Regime' (NKEICON) to disrupt and dismantle the technical foundations of the North's WMD and missile programs.

The NKEICON would encompass the rules and regulations of the existing export control regimes, such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), Australia Group (AG), and Wassenaar Arrangement as well as adopting the United Nations Security Council resolutions. Furthermore, the loopholes should be closed to tightly control the flow of goods and technologies in and out of North Korea. Since NKEICON's purpose is to curtail the growing danger posed by North Korea's WMD and missile developments and does not target the people's livelihood, China could not find any logical ground to oppose its establishment.

The NKEICON will send a strong message to the Kim Jong Un regime that its so-called parallel policy to develop its nuclear capability and economy cannot but fail in the end. By blocking North Korea's access to advanced technologies, the NKEICON will make North Korea realize that its economy will continue to suffer the miserable conditions only observed in underdeveloped countries. Once the NKEICON is fully activated, Pyongyang University of Science and Technology will also have to close. As a result, it would be difficult for North Korea to extricate itself from the status of an underdeveloped country without giving up its nuclear and missile programs. Hence, the NKEICON will deliver a heavy blow to a leadership that highly values prestige in all aspects, including economy, science, and technology.

***Recommendation Seven:*** *Apply all available means to guarantee national security and the people's safety from North Korean threats*

Under the assumption that threats posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles will remain for a considerable period of time, the South Korean government should be ready to deal with North Korea's increasing threats and daring provocations by mustering all available means independently and with its ally, the United States. Appropriate measures for deterrence, retaliation capabilities in case of deterrence failure, and assurances to the South Korean public should be taken.

**【Deterrence】**

South Korea should be prepared to thwart North Korea's threats and possible uses of nuclear weapons in full cooperation with the United States. It is critical that the U.S.' extended nuclear deterrence not remain limited to familiar rhetoric or occasional displays of force by heavy bombers and aircraft carriers dispatched to South Korea. Specifically tailored to North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, extended nuclear deterrence should be reinforced. The reintroduction of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea is one option that deserves serious consideration. It will be an equalizer to counteract the strategic imbalance of the North's nuclear monopoly and leverage to help negotiate away its nuclear weapons in future nuclear disarmament talks. If the United States refuses South Korea's request to redeploy tactical nuclear weapons, Seoul should temporarily withdraw from the NPT according to Article X of the treaty and launch its own nuclear development program. South Korea could persuade member states of the NPT that its strenuous efforts to peacefully resolve North Korea's nuclear problem have borne no fruit in the past three decades and make it absolutely clear that the terms of rejoining the NPT will be nothing less than the complete and mutual nuclear disarmament with North Korea.

**【Retaliation】**

South Korea should be ready to deliver a heavy blow to North Korea to the extent that the survival of the regime is threatened, as would be the case of North Korea using nuclear weapons. Retaliation implies absorbing the North's first strike and thus demonstrates the South's intention not to act preemptively, which is in line with its traditional policy of deterrence and defense. A preemptive strike that is not based on clear evidence of an imminent attack by North Korea amounts to nothing more than an invasion and will draw enormous criticism from the international community. There is no guarantee that South Korea could successfully deal with the new situations created in the wake of the preemptive strike, either. Discussions of preemption or decapitation demonstrate the insecurity within a South Korean military that does not possess nuclear capabilities. North Korea responds with its own intimidation of preemptive or decapitating attacks. Belligerent rhetorical exchanges can exacerbate misunderstandings, escalate tension, and might even lead to a

military clash. In this regard, tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea could be beneficial to allay the sense of insecurity that the South Korean military harbors and avoid the danger of overreaction in times of crisis.

### 【Assurance】

As North Korea ratchets up threats and escalates tensions, the alliance should take measures to allay the fear South Korean people could feel. Visible and concrete measures to enhance deterrence could assuage their sense of terror. The redeployment of American tactical nuclear weapons will be useful in this regard. An effective strategic communication and a well-designed plan of action will be essential to draw strong support for the redeployment and thwart any malicious attempts to block it. Similar efforts are necessary to defend against objections or concerns of the major countries in the region and beyond, especially the nonproliferation community. Presumably, China and Russia would oppose, Japan would be suspicious, and the nonproliferation activists would be critical. It should be made absolutely clear from the beginning that the sole purpose of reintroducing tactical nuclear weapons is to deter any North Korean threat or its use of nuclear weapons, and that it is to be used as a bargaining chip to negotiate away the North's nuclear weapons. The end result would be a nuclear-weapons-free Korean peninsula through the dismantling of nuclear weapons in North Korea and the concurrent withdrawal of American tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea.

### ***Recommendation Eight: Strengthen humanitarian assistance and improve human rights for the North Korean people***

Adhering to the 'One Korea' principle, South Korea cannot turn away from the suffering of the North Korean people. It is the North Korean people who are most afflicted by the Kim family regime's frantic obsession with nuclear weapons. Regardless of North Korea's nuclear development or hostile political atmosphere on the Korean peninsula, humanitarian assistance should continue in order to reduce the suffering of the ordinary people in the North. It will help to minimize the impact of the collateral damage caused by international sanctions and also send a strong message to the people that the world is with them, thereby planting valuable seeds for societal changes.

While humanitarian assistance is to give material help to North Korean people, the international community can provide moral support for them by pushing to improve human rights. By constantly putting pressure on the regime to improve human rights, South Korea can reduce and even prevent human rights violations in North Korea. There are signs that North Korean authorities are sensitive to international allegations on their human rights violations. By encouraging ordinary people to have the hope and courage to stand up against the complete disregard for human rights shown by the leadership, such efforts will awaken the public and facilitate fundamental changes in North Korea.

***Recommendation Nine: Keep pursuing inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation within the framework of international norms and rules***

Despite all-encompassing sanctions and pressure, South Korea should keep communication channels open and continue limited contacts with North Korea. Inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation, although restricted in its nature due to international sanctions, can facilitate the flow of information into North Korea, which will be the key to open the window of change. Exchanges and cooperation aim to provide North Korean people with the perspective to compare their current path of nuclear weapons and missiles with an alternative future without them. It creates an environment for people to decide the path for openness and reform in the short term and a denuclearized and peacefully unified Korea in the long term.

Of course, it is important to recognize that as a responsible member of the international community, South Korea should manage inter-Korean relations in accordance with international norms and rules. Any dialogue not in accordance with these norms and rules will be quickly turned to North Korea's advantage and criticized as a naïve appeasement. An overambitious dialogue that does not accept its obvious limits will mislead the South Korean people by creating unrealistic expectations in inter-Korean relations and discredit the South Korean government in the eyes of the international community.

***Recommendation Ten: Launch inter-Korean negotiations for arms control and confidence building***

An action-reaction cycle originating from North Korea's nuclear and missile

developments, followed by international sanctions and the ROK-U.S. responses, has inevitably increased tensions on the Korean peninsula. At present, a dialogue between North and South Korea is needed to prevent tensions from turning into military conflicts and to stabilize bilateral relations.

Arms control talks are to be divided into two parallel tracks: one on conventional arms control and the other on nuclear disarmament. A recent proposal by China and Russia to trade the freezing on North Korea's nuclear and missile developments with that of conventional military exercises by South Korea and the United States is unbalanced in that it gives Pyongyang unilateral strategic advantages and binds Seoul to an asymmetric position detrimental to its national interests. This so-called 'mutual freeze' proposal, if adopted, will surely become another security disaster for South Korea by admitting and succumbing to North Korea's nuclear monopoly. In the history of arms control, there is no precedent in which one side's conventional capabilities are traded with the other's nuclear ones. South Korea and the United States should uphold a principle of 'equal subjects of negotiations' and set two parallel tracks of negotiations—one for nuclear and the other for conventional military issues. The separate arms control negotiations should be able to stabilize the security situation by establishing two mutual deterrence structures—nuclear and conventional, respectively.

For conventional arms control, North and South Korea could agree on confidence building, arms limitation, and nonaggression. The two sides' experiences in the early 1990s can be useful in this regard. They could revise the Nonaggression Declaration agreed in September 1991 to reflect changes in the security environment since then. For nuclear disarmament, the two Korea and the United States could hold a three-party talk to agree on confidence building measures to prevent misunderstanding or misperception arising from nuclear weapons as early as possible and to negotiate away the North's nuclear weapons with U.S. extended nuclear deterrence assets in due course. North Korea is a longtime proponent of nuclear disarmament talks with the United States. As a way to peacefully resolve North Korea's nuclear problem, the mutual reduction of North Korea's nuclear weapons and the U.S. nuclear assets in defense of South Korea could be a pragmatic alternative that deserves closer

attention in Seoul and Washington.

For this purpose, the United States is required to bring back an appropriate number of tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea and use them as bargaining leverage for mutual nuclear disarmament with North Korea. It is far-fetched even to think of reducing American nuclear assets in the mainland U.S. or other areas in exchange for dismantling North Korea's nuclear capabilities. North Korea simply is not a strong enough opponent for Washington to consider strategic arms reduction talks. The U.S. nuclear assets in Europe are not mandated to deter North Korea, and thus, cannot be the subject of mutual disarmament talks. Only if the United States redeploys its tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea and establishes a nuclear sharing mechanism similar to that in Europe could North Korea be led to seriously consider denuclearization to remove the tangible nuclear threat under its very nose. In this respect, the more South Korea has access to U.S. nuclear assets, the higher the sense of terror that will be instilled into the North Korean regime. It thus becomes more likely that North Korea would return to the negotiating table.

If the United States refuses to redeploy tactical nuclear weapons, South Korea should declare a temporary withdrawal from the NPT under Article X of the treaty. It should explicate to the international community that its withdrawal is only an interim measure and that it will rejoin the treaty once North Korean nuclear threat is removed by mutual disarmament. While launching its own nuclear development program, South Korea should propose nuclear disarmament talks with North Korea in parallel in order to denuclearize the entire Korean peninsula. If Pyongyang comes forward to the talks and these talks produce a positive outcome, Seoul will be ready to return to the NPT at a moment's notice.

If the United States and North Korea negotiate in the future, they are most likely to reach a freeze deal on the North's nuclear and missile capabilities at the current level. It is a reasonable compromise between Pyongyang wanting to maintain certain nuclear capabilities and Washington trying to stop further development of North Korea's long-range nuclear-tipped missiles. The agreement will be positively described as a stepping stone to the complete



denuclearization. But a freeze is not a final solution, only a temporary expedient. Thus, there should only be limited compensation for North Korea, if any. Any rush to change the nature of the ROK-U.S. alliance, to replace the Armistice Agreement with a peace regime, or to provide enormous political or economic reparation to support Kim Jong Un's parallel policy of economic and nuclear developments will be recorded in history as another security disaster proceeding from the failure to stop North Korea's nuclear weapons development. In addition, U.S. nuclear assets—most likely tactical nuclear weapons—should be redeployed in South Korea before the freeze deal is reached as a security equalizer to counter the remaining nuclear capabilities in North Korea and to maintain a stable balance of terror on the Korean peninsula.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The Korean peninsula is in a unique and unenviable position. While both sides are still suffering from the painful scars of the war, one side has unilaterally renounced its nuclear option and allowed the other side to monopolize nuclear capabilities. Learning the lessons from the policy failures of the last 26 years, South Korea should make a fresh start with a renewed determination not to repeat the same mistakes. Moving beyond divisive views on North Korea and partisan politics, the South Korean government must consolidate public opinion to implement a grand strategy that can bring a denuclearized and unified Korea into reality—the ultimate guarantor of security and safety for the Korean nation.

Since it is North Korea's inherent nature to necessitate an external threat for survival, the North Korean leadership is not a counterpart with equal standing, but rather a subject to manage with constant vigilance and caution. Proper understanding of this subject is a prerequisite for devising a grand strategy and thus, a strategy of managing North Korea must pivot on the fact that the current North Korean leadership identifies nuclear capabilities with its own survival. South Korea cannot yield to North Korea, but the South cannot have the North succumb to it, either. The North Korean nuclear problem may not be resolved on a short-term basis, but will likely require a considerably longer time, perhaps 10-30 years. Any expectation that North Korea will agree on denuclearization once its demands are met reveals pure ignorance of its nuclear strategy and

deficient strategic thinking on the part of South Korea. A politically ambitious but hasty attempt at resolving the North Korean nuclear issue within a single term of either a South Korean or American president will face a dead-end from the outset and be criticized as having fallen into a trap set by North Korea.

The strategy of management neither recognizes North Korea as a nuclear weapon state nor gives up the determination to dismantle the North's nuclear capabilities. Based on a clear-cut understanding of the reality, it attempts to confront the threat posed by North Korea proactively. The policy failures of the past have been manifested by the fact that it was always Pyongyang that made the first move, with Seoul and Washington trying to keep up. Indeed, the latter were locked in the nuclear framework set by the former for the last 26 years. The core of the management strategy is to make a strategic move decisive enough to break out of this framework. By making a definitive move, South Korea and the United States can take back the initiative and force North Korea to follow their path, and not the other way around. A highly effective and demonstrative move would be for the United States to bring back an appropriate number of tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea. If Washington refuses, Seoul has no choice but to declare its withdrawal from the NPT to the international community and launch its own nuclear development program to defend its vital national interests.

In the end, the key to attain the two objectives of South Korea's grand strategy—denuclearization of North Korea and peaceful unification—is through fundamental changes in North Korean society. Only if ordinary people, as well as the elites, come to their senses and believe that nuclear weapons and missiles do not provide them wellbeing and happiness, much less prestige, a window for fundamental changes will open up in North Korea and the attainment of the two objectives will be within reach. South Korea must continue building up its national power, increase public awareness and readiness, and foster a favorable international environment for a denuclearized and unified Korea. The parallel policy of Kim Jong Un has to be thwarted by severe sanctions and pressure, and humanitarian assistance to reduce the suffering of ordinary people must be maintained. As events develop, a clash of views will occur regarding how to balance sanctions and assistance and the buck will have to stop at South Korea's

president. He or she can galvanize support within and beyond South Korea by keeping a cool-headed perspective on the North Korean leadership, even in high-pressure situations, respecting international norms and rules, consolidating divisive public opinion, and never losing sight of taking care of all Koreans.

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<sup>1</sup> The author worked for the Ministry of Defense from 1990 to 1991, studied various topics on North Korea, Korean unification, and strategic issues from 1991 to 2014 at the Korea Institute for National Unification, and then served as the Secretary to the President for Security Strategy at the Blue House from 2014 to 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Spector and Jacqueline Smith, “North Korea: The Next Nuclear Nightmare?” *Arms Control Today* (March 1991), pp. 8-13.