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North Korea's Denuclearization Is the Essence

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North Korea's Fourth Nuclear Test - Escalation of North Korean Nuclear Threat

North Korea unexpectedly conducted the fourth nuclear test. Although the authenticity of the thermonuclear (h-bomb) test remains in doubt, it appears that North Korea has acquired the technology to miniaturize nuclear warheads and a part of nuclear fusion technology. What matters is whether North Korea holds the technology to produce a miniaturized nuclear warhead that is deployable. In the government statement issued immediately after the nuclear test, North Korea insisted that it “scientifically verified the power of smaller h-bomb... There can neither be suspended nuclear development nor nuclear dismantlement on the part of [the] DPRK,” even if the world collapses. Considering the precedents, four nuclear tests could be understood as having the technology to deploy nuclear weapons. Irrespective of North Korea's development of h-bomb, the fact that North Korea may have succeeded in developing nuclear miniaturization technology that enables it to deploy nuclear weapons is worrisome.

Through the four nuclear tests, South Korea became the immediate target of North Korean nuclear threat. North Korea has installed Scud and Rodong missiles with ranges between 300km and 1300km, which could carry nuclear warheads and reach all parts of South Korea. In the case of Taepodong series missiles (long-range) that aim to target U.S. mainland, it is on the experimental stage and is uncertain to be perceived as an actual threat noting the level of North Korea's current technology. The most crucial element in assessing North Korean nuclear threat is that South Korean security is at the receiving end of this threat.

North Korea's submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) adventures also need to be thoroughly scrutinized. During the former Soviet Union, Golf-class diesel submarines carried three SLBMs and North Korea seems to build Sinpo-class submarines on its own, applying this technology. North Korea imported several Golf-class submarines with missile launching devices attached from Russia in the form of scrap metal after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite the new Sinpo-class submarine being smaller than a Golf-class one, it is presumed to have the capacity to carry at least one SLBM. North Korea's SLBM tests are assumed to be aimed at obtaining the technology to ignite the missile on air after it is launched from a barge underwater and not from the new Sinpo-class submarine. North Korea deployed Musudan intermediate-range ballistic missile without any test-fires in 2007, and it is generally known that the missile is based on Soviet Union's SLBM R27. SLBM Pukkuksong, which North Korea recently tested, and Musudan missile are analogous models.

Hence, one could predict that North Korea revamped Musudan to SLBM Pukkuksong and that it could deploy SLBMs without any test-fire after the Sinpo-class submarine is completed. While this is illogical as per military common sense, it enforces a large sum of defense expenditure to the side that has to defend. If North Korea is able to miniaturize nuclear warheads, it is not that difficult to attach it on to Pukkuksong missile, an SLBM. Whereas a Sinpo-class submarine with SLBM is

incomparably inferior to large state-of-the-art nuclear submarines of the U.S. and Russia, Seoul should face the fact that this itself could reduce the deterrence effect of South Korea's Kill Chain and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD).

South Korea's Security Is The Priority

Washington pronounced its determination to defend the Korean Peninsula through forward-deploying the B52 strategic bomber and a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier every time when crisis occurs. Since the fourth nuclear test, it has expressed the intention to deploy THAAD on South Korean soil. Despite being an effective measure responding to the North Korean nuclear threat, THAAD is a defense system. Moreover, this is a countermeasure to the situation when North Korea deploys nuclear weapons.

It is impossible to intercept every missile with Patriot missiles and THAAD — U.S. anti-ballistic missile system. U.S. missile defense (MD) system rests on the doctrine that once an enemy preemptively strikes with a nuclear weapon, the U.S. effectively defends this and annihilates the enemy with more aggression. Nonetheless, in places like the Korean Peninsula where the area of the battlefield is small, this logic has drawbacks. Since missiles travel a short distance, the likelihood of detecting, tracing, and intercepting the missile diminishes, and targets for simultaneous interception are inevitably limited. Korean Peninsula bears the geopolitical limitation of being at risk by a single nuclear warhead.

The problem is that the Korean public, the U.S., and China react sensitively to the deployment of THAAD, a defense system, on South Korea and not to the South Korean security that is under the North Korean nuclear threat. A nuclear-armed North Korea poses a direct threat to South Korea, and no solution exists other than the fundamental solution to the North Korean nuclear issue. Neither the

disagreement between Washington and Beijing nor the issue of THAAD deployment is the essence of North Korean nuclear crisis, and the arguments polarizing the public over these issues are rather futile. We must face the fact that South Korea's security is under threat.

There Is No Perfect Solution Other than Denuclearization

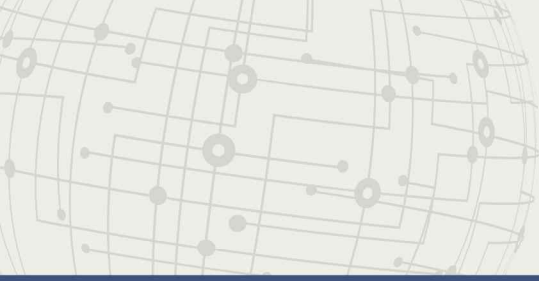
There is no solution that could completely remove the North Korean nuclear threat except the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Considering the fact that it relies more than a quarter of its trade on China, South Korea is China's valued friend. This is why China should take interest in the security crisis of South Korea, the direct target of North Korean nuclear threat. In addition, it is the reason that China should lend an ear to President Park Geun-hye's words, "a friend in need is a friend in deed." Beijing ought to respect decisions and contemplations of Seoul who participated in the V-day celebrations and joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

South Korea and the U.S. have coped with the tough times together, and most Koreans are sympathetic to the significance of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Nevertheless, at the same time, many Koreans are fully aware of the fact that the nuclear weapon is the only credible defense apparatus against an hostile force with nuclear weapons. Both MD and THAAD are literally missile defense systems, and this is applicable under the premise that the North Korean nuclear threat approaches as a perceived threat. If THAAD can ultimately unravel the nuclear crisis, South Korea need not to ruminate. However, an impeccable missile interception system does not exist.

South Korea has supported U.S.- and China-led international resolutions to untangle the North Korean nuclear crisis including the six-party talks. However, this yielded North Korea's fourth nuclear test—which Pyongyang insists it as h-bomb test—emerging as a crucial and critical threat to South Korean security. Seoul hankers for North Korea's full denuclearization. The fact that the U.S. and the USSR possessed a vast amount of nuclear weapons to retaliate against the potential enemy denotes the conventional logic that nuclear weapons are the only instrument to respond to other's nuclear weapons. It is because second-strike capability is the most definite means to deter a preemptive nuclear strike from a potential adversary.

It is overly optimistic for Koreans to think that the U.S. and China will solve the problem while North Korea deploys missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead and submarines with SLBMs. The self-evident fact is that more South Korean people will demand the country to “go nuclear” once the North Korean nuclear threat is visualized. With the presidential election in 2017, the opinions for a nuclear-armed South Korea will be difficult to prevent from spreading when the international efforts to tackle the North Korean nuclear crisis lead to nowhere. Rarely do we find cases where the future leaders resist the temptations to comply with domestic political demands.

Under this reality of international order, South Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons is neither desirable nor beneficial to its national interests. However, if the U.S.- and China-led resolutions to the North Korean nuclear issue continues to fail, the proponents of a nuclear-armed South Korea will inevitably gain voice among the public and one must be cognizant that this will increase instability in Northeast Asia. Due to this fact, the U.S. and China, two global powers responsible for international order, have to take the lead in solving the issue. It is undesirable to expose difference in opinion between Washington and Beijing over the response to the North Korean nuclear issue like the current situation. The two states need to build trust and shape an active cooperation framework at least over the North



Korean nuclear issue while recognizing the urgency of the matter. In this process, it is logical to prudently hear the views of Seoul, the most direct stakeholder in this issue. It is high time to genuinely ponder upon what the South Korean leader meant when she said, “we cannot have nuclear weapons above our heads.”

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