



Online Series

2021. 07. 09. | CO 21-21

The Characteristics and Outlook of the Competition of Strategy between North Korea and the U.S.

Chung, Sung-Yoon

(Research Fellow, Unification Policy Research Division)

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the characteristics of the mutual competition of strategies between the U.S. and North Korea currently underway to anticipate the future of North Korea-U.S. relations. In order to do so, this paper assesses the competition by examining the primacy strategy against each other adopted by both the U.S. and North Korea, the coalition and wedge strategies, and each side's strategic position varied depending on the time. As a result, the study argues that while the likelihood of cooperation in the North Korea-U.S. relationship is low from a structural perspective, South Korea may actually face a situation that provides opportunities for a wide range of strategic choices. Moreover, this study concludes that a strategic environment that is disadvantageous to North Korea will form if the stalemate in North Korea-U.S. relations becomes protracted.

Introduction

The first half of 2021 has passed. But the stalemate in bilateral relations between North Korea and the U.S. remains unchanged. This is because both sides are strictly

maintaining their own demands while refusing to accept the other's. But underneath the surface, there is a fierce strategic competition ongoing between the two countries as they seek to gain the upper hand under the current circumstances and occupy the relatively more advantageous position in the future. And inherent in each side's strategies is unwavering confidence and optimism regarding their own capabilities. This study examines the characteristics of both North Korea and America's strategies against each other and the strategic competition between the competing strategies and seeks to explore the path for bilateral relations between the two countries through an analysis.

The North Korea Policy of the Biden Administration

In May, the Biden administration declared that it would pursue the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula through diplomacy based on a practical approach. Moreover, it emphasized that it would rely on neither the pursuit of a package deal like the Trump administration nor adopt the strategic patience approach deployed by the Obama administration. This indicates that the Biden administration will continue America's traditional and official goal of striving to achieve the complete denuclearization of North Korea through diplomacy. Furthermore, it suggests that the Biden administration is open to agreeing to gradual steps and actively engaging North Korea to accomplish its objectives. A method that supersedes the overarching goal can not be adopted. Therefore, while the Biden administration will be cautious about a package deal that entails the risk of resulting in an 'incomplete' denuclearization, it will also not refuse necessary and sufficient agreements required for the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.¹⁾ But America's specific

1) The North Korea policy of the Biden administration reflects the perceptions and assessments of U.S. strategists and the foreign policy establishment. The characteristics of the Biden administration's perceptions of North Korea can be summarized as a 'reflection of history.' The policy stance suggested by decision-makers in the Biden administration carefully and objectively borrow from the lessons on North Korea-U.S. relations from the previous Obama and Trump administrations. Expectations about cooperation, mistrust of failed and authoritarian states, and hostility resonating from

strategies designed to achieve these goals also reflect deep-rooted mistrust as well as hope. America's position that while diplomacy with North Korea is not impossible, diplomacy alone may be insufficient remains unchanged.

Given these facts, the North Korea strategy of the Biden administration can be assessed as having the following three characteristics. First, it is a primacy strategy.²⁾ The Biden administration seeks to prevent further development of North Korea's nuclear arsenal and negate the effectiveness of its provocations through its overwhelming military power. Moreover, it attempts to impact the resolve, preferences, and choices of North Korea through its greater diplomatic power and influence. That is supported by the following: the Biden administration has expressed its intent to firmly deter North Korea while also strictly enforcing sanctions and maintaining its critical view of human rights in North Korea despite stressing practical diplomacy. Through a robust primacy strategy, the U.S. will try to gradually narrow the range of options available to the North Korean leadership and consequently create an environment in which North Korea is forced to preemptively concede.

Second, the Biden administration is strongly pursuing the consolidation of strategies centered around its alliances. The Biden administration is trying to achieve denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula based on a system of strong diplomatic and security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan. This reflects the diplomatic tradition of the U.S. Democratic Party that emphasizes international coalitions and is in stark contrast to the approach of the Trump administration which marginalized its importance. The Biden administration fears that strategic disintegration among alliances may precipitate cracks in its North Korea policy. Therefore, the Biden administration has stressed that it will seek to enhance both strategic integration and policy coordination with America's allies.³⁾ Through these

nuclear threats are all mixed in the minds of strategists.

- 2) The primacy strategy adopted by the U.S. is a strategy that has been consistently adopted by U.S. administrations regardless of the inclinations of Democratic or Republican governments, though there is some difference in terms of degree. Moreover, it is a foreign policy and security strategy that is frequently embraced by great powers against relatively weaker states.
- 3) The consolidation of strategies not only prevents strategic gaps between great powers and their weaker

efforts, the U.S. hopes to not only maintain its diplomatic and security influence over South Korea and Japan but also effectively consolidate its strategic assets needed to solve the North Korean nuclear problem and keep China in check.

Third, the Biden administration will flexibly approach the question of diplomatically engaging with North Korea. Rather than adopting a rigid approach based on deterrence and coercion when deterrence fails, the Biden administration has emphasized strategic flexibility between the strategies of deterrence, diplomacy, and coercion. Such an approach is similar to past U.S. administrations given that it establishes the strengthening and maintenance of deterrence as the basic foundation of North Korea policy, but indicates that the Biden administration will appropriately utilize diplomacy and coercion tactics to substantially achieve its policy objectives.⁴⁾ The Biden administration has defined this approach as the ‘practical method.’ The reason why the Biden administration has maintained existing sanctions on North Korea and refused to offer incentives to resume talks despite emphasizing diplomacy is that it has concluded that such an approach will actually be effective for its diplomacy with North Korea.

The U.S. Policy of North Korea

North Korea will also reflect its perceptions and assessments of the current situation in its strategy. North Korea likely had hoped for a successful deal with the U.S. since 2018.⁵⁾ Regardless of how sincere it was towards abandoning its

allies as they respond to a common threat but also includes the features of a joint strategic mechanism resulting from the simultaneous implementation of America’s policies on China and North Korea.

- 4) In other words, it is extremely unlikely that the Biden administration will choose either diplomacy or coercion that harms the foundations of deterrence as the future relationship between North Korea and the U.S. is established and develops. Such fundamental changes to the strategic basis can be expected after the Korean Peninsula Peace Regime has been considerably advanced.
- 5) By reflecting on the situation from the second half of 2017 to the first half of 2018, the strategic preferences that the North Korean leadership could rationally list were the following five: ① to exchange its nuclear weapons for sufficient concessions; ② to exchange incomplete denuclearization

nuclear weapons, North Korea's top preference is to maintain its nuclear arsenal and also normalize relations with the U.S. at the same time. But this scenario is improbable unless the U.S. either accepts North Korea as a nuclear state or is completely fooled by North Korean deception. Therefore, given that North Korea has participated in negotiations on denuclearization, North Korea's goal for negotiations with the U.S. is likely to be one of the following three: ① to exchange its nuclear weapons for exceedingly sufficient concessions; ② to exchange part of its nuclear capabilities for adequate concessions or; ③ to strategically utilize negotiations to cultivate an environment to further develop its nuclear capabilities. Objective ① will require North Korean sincerity towards negotiations with the U.S. Objective ② will involve both sincerity as well as the possibility of deception based on North Korea's obsession to partially retain its nuclear capabilities, while the risk of deception by North Korea is inherent to objective ③.

But North Korea perceives that the U.S. is refusing sufficient and appropriate concessions in return for its denuclearization and is instead compelling North Korea to unfairly concede through the implementation of sanctions. North Korea is likely to conclude that this attitude of the U.S. does not meet their expectations and that an environment in which neither of their three objectives listed above can be realized has been created. If so, what are the current goals of North Korea's U.S. policy? North Korea probably believes that 'fundamentally,' the Biden administration is no different from the Trump administration. This is because North Korea will focus on the strictness of the U.S. on sanctions and criticism of its human rights. Therefore, it is highly probable that North Korea has chosen changing America's policies and attitude towards the U.S. as a major policy direction. Assuming this, what strategies will North Korea adopt in order to negate the effectiveness of U.S. policy on North Korea and cultivate an advantageous strategic environment? Future U.S. policies of

while retaining part of its nuclear capabilities for adequate concessions; ③ buy time to further develop its nuclear capabilities, ④ continue the mutual game of coercion with the U.S., or ⑤ conduct a preemptive attack by misinterpreting coercion by the U.S. Considering North Korea's behavior since 2018, it appears likely that North Korea deliberated among options ①, ②, and ③.

North Korea can be anticipated as having the following three characteristics.

First, similar to the U.S., North Korea is also adopting a primacy strategy. But if the U.S. is focused on its ‘primacy of capabilities’ based on its strong ability to impose sanctions and overwhelming nuclear arsenal, North Korea seeks to dominate its opponents through the effectiveness of its strategies. This is North Korea’s traditional strategy towards the U.S. intended to negate the opponent’s superior capabilities and maximize the operational impact of its smaller asymmetric capabilities in various ways.⁶⁾ This is also why North Korea considers its nuclear weapons as a “universal sword” or silver bullet. North Korea may likely conclude that the reason why the U.S. agreed to talks in 2018 is their nuclear program which they managed to develop rapidly and, at the same time, also believe that the reason why the U.S. did not respect their interests is that their nuclear capabilities are not destructive enough yet. If so, it is difficult to exclude the possibility that North Korea will continue to obsess over the effectiveness of its nuclear arsenal with the expectation that it will make it easier for their existing demands to be met.

Second, North Korea will actively deploy a wedge strategy. The core of wedge strategy is the division and weakening of the opposing coalition.⁷⁾ North Korea will vigorously respond to the Biden administration’s consolidation of strategies centered around its alliances.⁸⁾ But a response centered around a trilateral coalition among North Korea, China, and Russia is both insufficient and unrealistic. China and Russia are participating in UN sanctions on North Korea as they agree with the goal of denuclearization and therefore can not be expected to unambiguously support North Korea’s position at the risk of enduring friction with the U.S in the foreseeable future.

6) North Korea has traditionally focused on targeting America’s vulnerabilities and highlighting sensitive issues. This is because there are considerable side effects to competing through capabilities as there is a substantial gap in the power of the two countries.

7) Wedge strategy is a strategy that was used by the U.S. during the early stages of the Cold War to weaken Sin-Soviet relations and by the Soviet Union in 1950 to maintain the division in U.S.-China relations. It is a strategic method often used when a certain country finds it difficult to directly respond to a coalition of adversarial countries.

8) North Korea has traditionally resisted vigorously against international coalitions that targeted them. Kim Jong-un’s new year addresses since 2016 have included its hostility towards the international ‘bloc’ against them as well as North Korea’s strong resolve to respond.

As a result, North Korea will, in addition to forming a counter-coalition, try to weaken the opposing coalition, specifically the bilateral alliances centered around the U.S. and trilateral security cooperation among South Korea, the U.S., and Japan. In particular, it is likely to try to precipitate discord in the South Korea-U.S. alliance by leveraging inter-Korean relations. The fact that North Korea has fiercely criticized South Korea's attitude regarding their American ally since 2020 by mentioning the U.S.-South Korea working group can also be considered a part of this strategy.

Third, North Korea will, for the time being, remain strategically patient to observe the situation and search for opportunities. This is because it is highly probable that North Korea is discontent with the situation in which the U.S. is refusing to accept their conditions for the resumption of negotiations, and because the specific details of the Biden administration's North Korea policy remain uncertain. North Korea may have concluded that it is much more urgent and important to manage the domestic situation by controlling the COVID-19 pandemic and revitalizing its weakened economy as well as bolster its insufficient nuclear capabilities, rather than partially accept the conditions set by the U.S. or lower its demands under the current circumstances which are both unsatisfactory and uncertain from North Korea's perspective. The period of patience will be relatively short, however, as it is certain that the losses due to sanctions will accumulate while the temptation of military provocations may arise based on North Korea's assessments of America's North Korea policy.⁹⁾

The Characteristics of Strategic Competition between North Korea and the U.S.

The most striking characteristic of the current situation on the Korean Peninsula

9) Compared to how the North Korea policy based on 'strategic patience' adopted by the Obama administration hoped for non-voluntary concessions by coercing the other side based on its advantageous strategic position, North Korea's 'strategic patience' differs in that it must depend on the (non-) voluntary withdrawal of policies by their opponents while it bears the costs imposed by the other side.

and North Korea-U.S. relations is that the strategies of both the U.S. and North Korea described above are mutually competing, resulting in the structuralization of the stalemate in bilateral relations between the two sides. The structuralization of the stalemate has the following three aspects and characteristics from the perspective of three levels.

First, there is the likelihood that the situation will become protracted given the low probability of mutual cooperation between North Korea and the U.S. This means that an environment will persist in which both ‘unbearable losses’ due to preemptive concessions and the ‘expected benefits’ resulting from preemptive deception are both high. If neither side abandons their primacy strategy adopted with the hopes that the other side will meet their respective demands, they may later face the temptation of trying to actualize their strategic effect through the implementation of coercive measures. If this scenario unfolds, the opportunities for cooperation will gradually decrease due to escalation and repetition of mutual coercion which, in turn, may precipitate circumstances under which each side tries to conclude the cycle through the defeat of their opponent. As such, if current relations between North Korea and the U.S. are unable to escape the chicken game or the deadlock game, North Korea-U.S. relations will more likely deteriorate rather than improve from a structural perspective.

Second, South Korea’s opportunities for strategic choices may actually expand, even if the conditions for cooperation worsen from a structural perspective. This is because it is probable that the U.S. is more considerate of South Korea’s position compared to the past for the sake of strategic coalition with alliances, whereas North Korea may either choose the South Korea-U.S. alliance or inter-Korean relations as the weak link in the opposing coalition and resume tactical engagement with South Korea. In particular, the Biden administration is expected to more earnestly respect South Korea’s views than the Trump administration based on the condition that it aligns with America’s national interests and policy principles. Therefore, South Korea’s involvement in policy can increase as the U.S. will respect South Korea’s positions on the method and process of solving the North Korean nuclear problem,

as long as there are no negative influences resonating from issues such as U.S.-China relations, global regime on nonproliferation, as well as US Forces in Korea and the safety of American citizens.

Third, while limited cooperation between North Korea and the U.S. may be possible in the future, complete denuclearization may be difficult to achieve during a considerable period of time. Both strategic engagement by the U.S. and strategic patience by North Korea indicate that large-scale talks may be difficult, even if smaller-scale dialogue may resume. North Korea will continue to try to confirm the real intentions and details of the Biden administration's policies towards North Korea. Understanding that North Korea is not refusing dialogue itself, the U.S. may consider various policies of engagement with North Korea. But the path towards complete denuclearization will be long and challenging as it is unlikely that the U.S. will immediately concede on the issue of sanctions which North Korea considers the most important, while it is similarly unlikely that America's skepticism regarding North Korea's willingness to denuclearization will dissipate. But if North Korea is able to, through any means or methods, increase its resilience against sanctions and thereby decrease America's strategic effectiveness, or if the U.S. becomes confident about the 'completeness' of denuclearization, we may hope for large-scale talks and implementation of measures between North Korea and the U.S.

The Outlook for North Korea-U.S. Relations

It is difficult to expect huge changes to North Korea-U.S. relations for the foreseeable future. This is because both North Korea and the U.S. are extremely cautious about preemptively conceding as they hope that the other side will change their policy first as a result of the competition between the strategies that they have respectively adopted. In particular, the outcome of the competition between the ability of the U.S. to sanction North Korea and the nuclear capabilities of North Korea, the foundation of their respective primacy strategies, will be hard to observe any time soon. Moreover, the competition between the coalition strategy and the wedge

strategy will also not yield any meaningful results in the short term considering the increase in the number of relevant actors, the complexity of relations, and the wide-ranging extent of its ramifications. And because both North Korea and the U.S. are confident in their primacy strategy and consider time to be in their favor, the competition between strategic engagement and strategic patience by the two sides will not result in a hasty situation.

The resumption of talks between North Korea and the U.S. itself will also not be easy. As the U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim has recently mentioned, the U.S. has emphasized diplomacy and urged the unconditional resumption of negotiations, but North Korea has maintained its position since 2020 that the ‘withdrawal of U.S. hostile policy against North Korea’ is a precondition for dialogue. Though North Korea has never specified, it is likely that ‘hostile policy against North Korea’ includes sanctions, human rights, and joint military exercises between South Korea and the U.S. North Korea might privately hope that the U.S. changes to a more flexible position on these matters. However, the maximum corresponding measures that the U.S. might consider as concessions are likely to be mentioning the conditional easing of sanctions or a reduction of the size of the joint military exercises between South Korea and the U.S. It doesn’t appear that North Korea will be satisfied with these measures.

What sort of situation will unfold if the stalemate becomes protracted? In short, it is likely that a strategic environment that is less favorable to North Korea compared to the U.S. will develop. This is because while North Korea is considerably vulnerable to America’s primacy strategy, America’s ability to reject North Korea’s strategy remains robust. Even if North Korea further develops its nuclear capabilities, America’s strategic and capability advantage will remain relatively untouched. Rather, the U.S. will further strengthen its extended deterrence towards its allies while the allies’ reliance on the U.S. will increase in the short-term, and America’s strategic position will ultimately strengthen as it steadfastly leads international sanctions against North Korea. In this process, North Korea may face an even more difficult situation both at home and abroad as the extent of its state failure worsens.

The aggregate power and unity among states that support each side in the competition is also another factor that is unfavorable to North Korea. The effectiveness of North Korea's wedge strategy will be minimal. This is because both South Korea and the U.S. mutually have a relatively high mutual dependence on the alliance regardless of the North Korea issue. In particular, there are limits to the degree of friction with the U.S. that China can afford over North Korea within the context of strategic competition between the U.S. and China. Above all, China will not allow North Korea to retain any nuclear capabilities. Of course, there remains the possibility that the U.S. will coerce China to compel cooperation on the North Korean nuclear problem, much like during the Trump administration.

The incompetence of North Korea in designing its foreign policy and security strategy will also precipitate an unfavorable situation.¹⁰⁾ Unless misinterpretation and misperceptions of the current environment, over-confidence regarding the strategic value of its nuclear capabilities, and inability to rationally assess the weakness of their opponents as well as their own vulnerability are corrected, North Korea will likely face increasingly difficult circumstances strategically. The lesson from international relations that the relatively weaker state can not resist an adversarial stronger power forever remains valid. It is also difficult to ignore findings from recent studies that the effect of coercion based on nuclear capabilities is weaker than expected or can even backfire. Above all, a brilliant and realistic plan for the North Korean regime to overcome state failure caused by international sanctions does not seem to be on the cards. ©KINU 2021

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).

10) Examples of inability of diplomatic strategy are as follows: North Korea rushed to make a demand to the U.S. that the sanctions be lifted thereby making known its own vulnerabilities; North Korea is also causing a stalemate in inter-Korean relations by emphasizing the attitudes of the ROK.