



# Online Series

2022. 03. 31. | CO 22-08

## North Korea's ICBM Provocation: Assessment and Outlook

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North Korea conducted an ICBM provocation based on the view that a period of geopolitical crises and regime change in South Korea is an opportune moment to break out of the stalemate with the U.S. North Korea expects to simultaneously accomplish military, diplomatic, security, and domestic political objectives through its provocative actions. However, North Korea's provocation will only result in the systemic and prolonged deadlock, precipitating worse conditions that harm its strategic interests. If provocations continue, North Korea's conventional capabilities and ability to take the initiative will weaken. Moreover, North Korea's hope that a new cold war may be in its favor is unlikely to materialize. North Korea should objectively understand and acknowledge that the initiative for peace has never left its hands.

### Introduction

On March 24, North Korea resumed its testing of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). North Korean state media reported on March 25 that “a Hwaseong-17 missile was launched from the Pyongyang international airport, reached its maximum altitude of 6, 248.5km, flew a distance of 1,090km during 4,052 seconds, and landed

accurately in the intended international waters off the eastern coast of Korea.” It was the first launch in 4 years and 4 months since the test launch of the Hwaseong-15 missile on November 29, 2017. While North Korea claims that it tested a new Hwaseong-17 ICBM, officials in South Korea and the U.S. believe North Korea might have actually test-launched the Hwaseong-15 missile. Regardless of the type, the test launch is a provocation that clearly violates the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

As a result of this recent provocation, the moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile testing self-imposed by Kim Jong-un in 2018 has officially ended.<sup>1)</sup> The U.S. announced proposals for sanctions on North Korea immediately after the test-launch. Also due to the provocation, the Korean Peninsula peace process that the Moon administration has pursued effectively reverted to square one. Meanwhile, the situation on the peninsula faces the prospect of returning to the tense competition of strength versus strength witnessed in 2017. A state’s military actions such as an ICBM provocation are generally influenced by the environment, capabilities, objectives, and strategy. This paper seeks to analyze and assess North Korea’s ICBM provocation based on these aspects mentioned above and provide an outlook for the future.

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1) North Korea had already indicated its intent to renounce the moratorium two years ago during the 5<sup>th</sup> plenary meeting of the 7<sup>th</sup> term of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) held in January 2020. At the meeting, North Korea emphasized its demand of ‘the U.S. first withdrawing its hostile policies against North Korea and then negotiating on denuclearization after,’ conveying its hardline stance that negotiations on denuclearization would only be possible on favorable grounds. Considering how the prerequisites demanded were extremely unlikely to be met by the U.S., this implied that North Korea had more or less abandoned negotiations at the time. Furthermore, North Korea signaled that it had little interest in observing the moratorium by claiming that it would “continue the necessary and preemptive development of strategic weapons for the security of the state both persistently and fervently until the hostile policies against North Korea by the U.S. end and a permanent and stable peace system is established on the Korean Peninsula.” This position was maintained and reaffirmed during a Politburo meeting held in January 2022.

## Context of the ICBM Provocation

There are three broad reasons behind North Korea's ICBM provocation. The first reason is the ongoing stalemate between the U.S. and North Korea since 2019. The deadlock that has persisted for more than three years has resulted in strategic losses for North Korea. The regime has been unable to sufficiently develop its nuclear capabilities despite increasing costs and pains caused by sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the international community. North Korea had likely been confident that they were in control of the timetable. But as the stalemate has become more structured and systemic, North Korea's strategic space has gradually shrunk. Therefore, this disadvantageous strategic deadlock appears to have been a heavy burden that the North Korean leadership needed to quickly absolve.

Second, an opportune moment to break through the deadlock has been presented. This was created by grave security crises that had occurred consecutively in the Middle East and Europe, regions that are strategically important for the U.S. The Eurasia region in which Afghanistan and Ukraine are located is a crucial theatre pivotal for checking the influence of regional great powers, China and Russia. North Korea may have considered the current situation in which the Biden administration is devoting its attention and resources to these areas as a strategic opportunity. Moreover, North Korea may have assumed that it could shrewdly manipulate tensions between the U.S. on the one hand and China and Russia on the other precipitated by these crises.

Third, the most optimal environment in which North Korea could maximize the presence of its nuclear capabilities had culminated. The Kim Jong-un regime has, without exception, blatantly displayed its nuclear capabilities before and after the inauguration of new administrations in South Korea and the U.S.<sup>2)</sup> In addition to security and political objectives, the regime has also sought to influence evaluations

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2) North Korea conducted four nuclear tests and test launches of various types of missiles with its arsenals in 2012~2013 and 2016~2017, both periods when there was a regime change in either South Korea or the U.S.

of North Korea nuclear weapons by these two countries as well as their respective policies on North Korea. Considering how the Biden administration has not yet finalized the specific contents of its North Korea policy and how a new South Korean government will soon be inaugurated, North Korea appears to have concluded that the first half of 2022 is the optimal time to maximize the strategic value and multi-faceted utility of its nuclear capabilities.

### Causes of the ICBM Provocation

The structural, regional, and South Korea–U.S.–related conditions explained above can be viewed as the context in which North Korea conducted recent ICBM provocation. Based on these conditions, it can be assessed that North Korea sought to comprehensively achieve the following four objectives.

#### **Military Objective: Overcoming Relative Conventional Capability Disadvantage**

North Korea's provocation sought to accomplish the military purpose of strengthening its national defense capabilities. Since the beginning of the Kim Jong-un regime, North Korea has striven to bolster its nuclear arsenal.<sup>3)</sup> But in late November 2017, North Korea prematurely declared the 'completion of the nuclear arsenal' without securing the capacity to build and operate ICBMs and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). Over the past four years, North Korea has since focused on improving its short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) rather than advancing its nuclear capabilities that directly target the U.S.<sup>4)</sup> In contrast, South Korea has pursued strengthening its military capabilities mostly

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3) Generally speaking, the combined nuclear capabilities of nuclear states include legal and institutional foundations, acquisition of nuclear material, developing technology for the production of warheads and delivery systems such as ballistic missiles, crafting a nuclear strategy or posture, and establishing systems for nuclear operations.

4) This implies that over the past four years, North Korea has been unable to actively test components necessary for the development of ICBMs such as high-power engines, atmospheric re-entry, and precision approach.

through the air force and missiles.<sup>5)</sup> North Korea should have attempted to improve its air force and establish a missile defense system in response. Instead, North Korea has concentrated on strengthening its asymmetric capabilities due to a lack of capacity and resources. From ‘North Korea’s perspective,’ the past four years have been a period during which the imbalance in conventional capabilities on the Korean Peninsula widened.

In other words, North Korea’s vulnerabilities in conventional capabilities have increased while South Korea’s ability to coerce North Korea militarily has been enhanced over the past four years. Following the failure of the Hanoi summit, North Korea actively began efforts to overcome its military vulnerabilities in the latter half of 2019. North Korea displayed its Hwaseong-17 ICBM during a military parade held in October 2020. Moreover, it strengthened military capabilities centered around its nuclear arsenal as a key policy goal by proposing the project for five major strategic weapons and stressing its intent to acquire strategic nuclear capabilities at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) in January 2021. Therefore, the recent ICBM provocation can be viewed as a part of North Korea’s plan to improve its missile capabilities that are underway in this strategic environment.<sup>6)</sup>

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5) Beginning with an initial purchase of eight jets in 2019, South Korea completed its acquisition of 40 F-35As by late 2021. South Korea has vastly strengthened its air force through measures such as the production of a prototype for the KF-21, a 4.5 generation fighter jet independently being developed by South Korea. In addition, South Korea managed to revise the South Korea-U.S. bilateral missile guidelines that had limited its advancement of missile capabilities while also accelerating its development of advanced missile capabilities for both offense and defense for the Korean Peninsula theatre.

6) Before and after 2020, North Korea had two strategic options, either to maintain the moratorium on nuclear and missile testing and increase its conventional capabilities or to renounce the moratorium and advance its strategic nuclear arsenal. North Korea chose the latter and faced the negative consequences. In the case of the former, North Korea could have allocated its resources to the acquisition of weapons systems that address its military vulnerabilities while still abiding by the September 19 Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA). Such measures would have allowed North Korea to enhance its ability to deny South Korea-U.S. conventional capabilities during crises. However, it appears that North Korea adopted a strategy to solve both security and diplomatic issues ‘all at once’ through the advancement of its strategic nuclear arsenal.

### **Strategic Security Objective: Strengthening the Assured Retaliation Posture**

North Korea conducted the ICBM provocation as part of its security strategy which is closely related to military capabilities. The strategic security goal of North Korea is to establish an environment that guarantees the survival of the regime and the state through strong military power. The direction of North Korea's security strategy is to deny defeat during wartime and actively deter threats to security during peacetime. The Kim Jong-un regime currently believes that tactical nuclear weapons are useful for the former goal, whereas strategic nuclear weapons targeting the U.S. are necessary for the latter. This is the reason why North Korea emphasized the policy of five major strategic weapons focusing on the advancement of strategic nuclear weapons as well as the development of its tactical nuclear capabilities at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the WPK in 2021.

But it is difficult for North Korea to acquire both these capabilities simultaneously and in a short period of time given limitations such as a lack of resources and a restricted production of nuclear materials. The fact that North Korea has focused on test-launches of short-, medium-, and long-range ballistic missiles with multiple uses on which nuclear warheads can be mounted since the latter half of 2021 is likely to reflect this reality. Regardless, nuclear strategy lies at the core of North Korea's security strategy. This is likely to be the posture of assured retaliation and obtaining second-strike capabilities through the use of ICBMs and SLBMs. Therefore, North Korea's recent ICBM test-launch can be assessed as a part of North Korea's establishment of its nuclear strategy through the acquisition of second-strike capabilities.

### **Diplomatic Objective: Implementing Coercion and Wedge Strategies**

North Korea likely sought diplomatic strategic benefits through its ICBM provocation. The Kim Jong-un regime has pursued not only security-related but also diplomatic goals with its nuclear arsenal. North Korea's diplomatic objectives have been promoted through coercion strategy and wedge strategy. First, the Kim

Jong-un regime will actively seek to change the intent, stance, and policy of the U.S. through nuclear coercion in the form of this recent ICBM provocation. The essence of nuclear coercion is an actual highly-advanced nuclear arsenal and aggressive threats. North Korea, which maintains blind faith in its nuclear capabilities, is likely to believe that the U.S. participated in bilateral negotiations in 2018 due to its successful nuclear coercion.<sup>7)</sup> This ‘endowment effect’ on nuclear weapons later influenced the negotiations by increasing North Korea’s demands in exchange for denuclearization in North Korea-U.S. negotiation process. In other words, North Korea believes that it is beneficial to further develop its nuclear capabilities to restart negotiations under more favorable grounds if the North is dissatisfied with the bargaining process.

The goal of wedge strategy is to weaken the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Put differently, North Korea intends to influence the policies of the newly incoming South Korean government as well as the U.S. to disrupt U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral security cooperation. North Korea may have hoped that by increasing the threat of directly targeting the U.S. mainland and South Korea through the high-angle test-launching of ICBMs, the Biden administration might change to a policy of engagement which, in turn, could create frictions with the incoming conservative government in Seoul. North Korea likely also considered the effect of strengthening the counter-alliance against the U.S.-South Korea-Japan coalition by manipulating America’s deteriorating relationships with both China and Russia.

### **Domestic Political Objective: Strengthening Internal Unity**

Lastly, North Korea also considered domestic political objectives. Since the failure of bilateral negotiations with the U.S., North Korea has faced an extreme crisis due to multiple threats in the form of international sanctions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and natural disasters. As during the Kim Jong-il era, North Korea has blamed the

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7) On the other hand, the U.S. probably believes that North Korea prematurely declared the completion of its nuclear arsenal and joined negotiations due to effective sanctions.

greed and betrayal of the U.S. and South Korea as causes of their pain. This is a classic example of rallying around the flag to mitigate domestic discontent by diverting attention abroad. The phrase ‘American imperialism,’ which had been unused recently, has reappeared in North Korean state media. The South Korean government has also been severely criticized through harsh rhetoric. Recently, North Korea has actively sought to uplift the pride of the people by advancing its nuclear arsenal as one of the main ways to overcome domestic difficulties. On February 11, 2022, a few days before the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kim Jong-il’s birthday, the *Rodong Sinmun* fervently praised the ‘development of nuclear weapons amidst the Arduous March’ by referring to the launch of the 1<sup>st</sup> Taepodong missile in August 1998 as one of Kim Jong-il’s greatest accomplishments.

The reason why it is thought that North Korea pursued domestic political objectives through this recent ICBM provocation is that it officially emphasized that the ICBM tested was a Hwaseong-17 missile. There likely was a need for the regime to reveal the ‘existence’ of the new weapons system that it displayed two years ago to the people of North Korea before too much time passed. Moreover, the test-launch occurred at a time when the accomplishments of strategic weapons development project that the regime had announced a year ago needed to be exhibited. In other words, North Korea probably wanted to establish the image of a strong leader full of the love for the people and the state by showing the public the existence of a more advanced weapon that can target the ‘American imperialists’ responsible for their hardship and demonstrate that it could actually be used. North Korea may have rashly disguised a Hwaseong-15 ICBM as a Hwaseong-17 type based on the view that the progress made in the development of missiles is a result of its people biting the bullets over the past four years.

### Assessment of the ICBM Provocation and Outlook

What are the effects and implications of North Korea’s ICBM provocation? And how do they impact whether North Korea will achieve its military, security, and



diplomatic objectives? The following section addresses these questions.

### **Weakening of North Korea's Conventional Capabilities**

First, the deadlock regarding North Korea's nuclear issues will be cemented further. Relations between the U.S. and North Korea have reached a stalemate in which neither side is likely to achieve a quick and decisive victory as competition has continued over capabilities of nuclear weapons vs. sanctions, over strategy in the form of mutual coercion against the other, and over the process of denuclearization. North Korea's ICBM provocation indicates that North Korea's advancement of its nuclear arsenal and strategy of coercion is likely to persist. Given how North Korea has declared that it is only interested in negotiations under favorable conditions, the U.S. is expected to respond with harsher sanctions and greater pressure. Moreover, the probability of the two sides reaching an agreement on denuclearization will decrease as North Korea is highly likely to increase its demands in accordance with its more advanced nuclear capabilities. Considering how Kim Jong-un himself has expressed the need to 'prepare for a prolonged struggle,' North Korea will similarly adapt to the anticipated strategic environment.

But a continued stalemate is disadvantageous for North Korea. It is clear that the likelihood of state failure will intensify due to sanctions which will lead to a lack of resources to invest in the military industry. As a result, the modernization of conventional forces that can match those of South Korea and the U.S.-South Korea alliance will be hindered. As observed in the war between Russia and Ukraine, the use of nuclear weapons on the battlefield is difficult. Therefore, North Korea needs to strengthen not only its nuclear arsenal but also its conventional capabilities in order to comprehensively achieve its objectives. But rather than focusing on the conventional weapons system to address its military vulnerabilities, North Korea has instead chosen to overcome the military disadvantage by focusing on its strengths and further advancing its offensive missile capabilities.<sup>8)</sup> While this may be beneficial under certain conditions such as in the case of preemptive strikes, it is likely to limit North Korea's acquisition of the ability to deny aggression by combined forces

of the U.S. and South Korea in periods of crisis.<sup>9)</sup>

### **Stronger Drive for North Korea to Continue Nuclear Provocations**

The situation regarding denuclearization will extremely deteriorate due to a strong drive for North Korea to attempt various acts of nuclear coercion. North Korea will actively engage in both tests that it can actually conduct and others that it may choose to disguise. This is because North Korea will wish to achieve the military, security, diplomatic, and political objectives simultaneously and as soon as possible, and also because it needs to restore its reputation weakened by the charade involving the Hwaseong-17 ICBM. Considering the anticipated effects related to each purpose as well as issues that North Korea itself has emphasized, tests to further advance its nuclear arsenal are expected in the following four areas; revealing a massive nuclear warhead, resuming an actual test-launch of the Hwaseong-17 missile, declaring the completion of a new type of submarine and disclosing it, and a demonstration of tactical nuclear weapons.

Among these tests, an additional high-yield nuclear explosion is close to impossible given current circumstances, unnecessary from a technological perspective, and is expected to result in negative strategic consequences. The reason why North Korea has abandoned the goal of standardizing nuclear warheads through miniaturization and has instead pursued the enlargement of multiple warheads is to neutralize missile defense systems, maximize fear, and increase its bargaining leverage vis-a-vis the U.S. Whatever North Korea's intentions are, however, they are generally unrelated

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8) On March 28, the *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) reported that immediately after the successful test-launch of the ICBM, Kim Jong-un encouraged national defense officials by stating that "...the goal of national defense construction is set as that...true national defense is indeed a strong offensive capability...to deter and control the threats and blackmail by the imperialists."

9) In order to maximize the operational efficiency of strategic forces centered around offensive missiles, North Korea may soon announce the enhancement of the status of the strategic forces through measures such as general reforms. For example, it is possible that the military rank of the commander will return to being a four-star general while the size of the force may increase to about 10,000 troops.

to second-strike capabilities. It may also increase the risk of preemptive strikes against the country. Above all, it is questionable whether North Korea can credibly develop relevant technology in a short period of time.

The most obvious obstacle is the potential collapse of the nuclear testing site. Since 2016, experts have raised the possibility of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site collapsing. If this occurs, damages from the fallout of nuclear materials will extend to all of North Korea and even impact China. North Korea had reacted sensitively to this issue when the 5<sup>th</sup> nuclear test was conducted.<sup>10)</sup> Underwater nuclear tests will affect parts of Russia and cause massive damage to the fishery industry. Meanwhile, a potential atmospheric nuclear test in the air above the Pacific ocean may incur a military response by the U.S. by activating its missile defense system. There is, however, the possibility that North Korea will conduct a medium-yield nuclear test after reinforcing the underground shafts and over-reporting the results. It may also conduct a test of tactical nuclear weapons after considering the safety of the nuclear testing site,<sup>11)</sup> or conduct a subcritical experiment that does not require a nuclear reaction.<sup>12)</sup> Lastly, there is the possibility that North Korea produces a dummy of a large nuclear warhead with great precision and later reveals it at a military parade.

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10) During the 5<sup>th</sup> nuclear test held in September 2016, North Korea unprecedentedly emphasized its ability to control nuclear tests by stating that “there were no leaks of nuclear material nor was there any negative ecological impact on the environment.”

11) A tactical nuclear weapon test is closely related to military needs. How they are tested will be determined after its development is decided. The development of tactical nuclear weapons with yields of tens of kilotons that some observers have anticipated is both unnecessary and inefficient from North Korea’s standpoint. This is because a strategic nuclear weapon using the same amount of nuclear materials is more useful than a tactical nuclear weapon.

12) A ‘subcritical experiment’ is a type of nuclear experiment that allows the collection of data on nuclear materials and explosives without an actual nuclear explosion. Simply put, it uses a mechanism of applying pressure immediately below the threshold for a nuclear reaction. Generally speaking, existing nuclear states use this type of experiment to confirm whether warheads will explode as calculated when making modifications to their arsenal. South Africa and Israel developed their nuclear weapons with only this method of testing.

### Failure of North Korea to Gain the Initiative on the Korean Peninsula

One of the possible motives for North Korea's strong push to break through the stalemate is to strengthen its initiatives over the situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula. To do so, North Korea will likely try to increase its leverage vis-à-vis the newly elected government in South Korea and attempt to influence America's crafting of its North Korea policy which has not yet been specified. But even if North Korea succeeds in escalating the current strategic environment through its provocations, it will be difficult for North Korea to seize as much control of the regional dynamics as it hopes. Not only will the U.S. not tolerate such maneuvers but also the incoming South Korean government will likely not hesitate to respond with force based on the principles. It can be assessed that the basis for such firm responses by relevant countries is the lack of credibility in North Korea's nuclear capabilities, a result which has been self-inflicted by the regime.

The lack of credibility of North Korea's nuclear arsenal is directly related to the effectiveness of its nuclear coercion strategy. In other words, the efficacy of North Korea's nuclear coercion strategy is impacted by the credibility of its arsenal among the relevant countries and the international community. But if this recent ICBM test launch was a scheme to disguise the missile as a Hwaseong-17 type that was either approved or orchestrated by Kim Jong-un, this can be considered as a compelled blackmail strategy with which the North Korean leadership materialized its bluff to forcefully influence adversaries. As a consequence, North Korea caused its nuclear arsenal to lose credibility by exaggerating its capabilities, and this suggests that the sufficient condition of nuclear deterrence has been weakened. The loss of credibility of North Korea's nuclear arsenal subsequently results in the lesser likelihood of either the U.S. or South Korea changing their respective North Korea policy. Put differently, the ICBM provocation might have negative implications for North Korea's desire to alter the current strategic environment.

## Rejection of Early Nuclear Arms Control by North Korea

North Korea's obsession with an advanced nuclear arsenal demonstrated through actions such as the recent ICBM provocation will make an agreement on denuclearization more difficult and more imperfect. North Korea may have conducted the test-launch to obtain unilateral concessions from the U.S. and eventually acquire the status of a nuclear state. In reality, the provocation might backfire to make the U.S. further reluctant to offer incentives and rewards in return for an agreement on denuclearization. Observing North Korea's actions since 2016, it is clear that North Korea has strategically utilized its advanced nuclear capabilities to strengthen its position and defeat the U.S. during periods of hardline-vs.-hardline policies, and to obtain greater concessions from the U.S. during periods of bargaining. The U.S. is well aware of this strategy, and it appears unlikely that the U.S. will preemptively concede in a significant manner just to prevent further provocations by North Korea. This is why a compromise on denuclearization has become more difficult due to the recent ICBM provocation.

Considering such obstacles to an agreement, North Korea, which has adopted the nuclear strategy of assured retaliation, will not impose restrictions on nuclear weapons spending until it secures second-strike capabilities. Therefore, it is likely that North Korea will either reject or postpone agreeing to and implementing agreements on nuclear arms control as much as possible, even if negotiations on denuclearization resume. This further implies that the substance of a possible agreement will remain incomplete regardless of the format and process of negotiations.<sup>13)</sup> Some claim that North Korea is adopting an asymmetric escalation posture which is less cautious than assured retaliation. According to this view, North

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13) Looking ahead, North Korea will increase the degree of its nuclear and missile provocations as much as possible. North Korea, with its assured retaliation, will not only intensify its provocations but is also expected to reemphasize its no-first use policy. This is strategically intended to highlight the limited utility of nuclear capabilities to leave open the prospect of arms control with the U.S. However, the form of arms control that North Korea wants is predicated on preserving parts of its nuclear arsenal after it acquires second-strike capabilities and is in possession of a sufficient number of nuclear weapons, and does not mean complete denuclearization.

Korea can be expected to need not only strategic weapons such as ICBMs and SLBMs but also a sufficient number of a variety of tactical nuclear weapons. As a matter of fact, North Korea stressed the need to develop tactical nuclear weapons at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the WPK in 2021. However, acquiring the nuclear arsenal for an asymmetric escalation posture will require a sufficiently significant amount of resources even if it is adopted as North Korea's nuclear strategy. This similarly suggests that North Korea will likely reject cooperation on nuclear arms control.

### **Low probability of the New Cold War that North Korea Wants Emerging**

Though some have raised this possibility, a new cold war dynamic with the U.S., South Korea, and Japan competing on one side and China, North Korea, and Russia on the other is unlikely to emerge due to North Korea's ICBM provocation. North Korea's wedge strategy has a low probability of succeeding. So far, the North Korean nuclear problem has been an obstacle to cooperation among China, North Korea, and Russia, not a catalyst. On the other hand, the nuclear problem reinforces the need for and utility of U.S.–South Korea–Japan trilateral security cooperation. China and Russia oppose North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons and remain concerned about the prospect of a nuclear-armed North Korea harming their respective strategic interests. China has been unable to sufficiently support North Korea economically due to the concerns, while Russia has been unable to provide North Korea assistance in overcoming the latter's military vulnerabilities for the same reason. For example, Russia's missile defense systems such as the S-300 and S-400 can not be provided to North Korea unless the nuclear weapons problem is resolved.

Even if China–North Korea–Russia trilateral cooperation forms in a short period of time, it will not likely be sustainable nor will it be highly consolidated. This is because the costs precipitated by the U.S. separately or in trilateral coordination with South Korea and Japan are high for China and Russia compared to the relatively low benefits China and Russia will hope to receive from North Korea. Therefore, North Korea's wedge strategy will be limited to preventing the adoption of UNSC resolutions at best. But regardless of this assessment and outlook, North Korea's

unrealistic hopes for a new cold war might nevertheless result in negative side effects as it fuels North Korea's need to continue provocations.

## Conclusion

The fierce game with North Korea over its nuclear program has resumed. Observing North Korea's future provocations will allow for a more clear and accurate assessment of its objectives and specific strategies. If North Korea pushes forward with the simultaneous development of tactical nuclear weapons and large-scale nuclear tests, despite the strategically unnecessary nature of these actions as well as the regime's limited capacity, the North Korean regime can be viewed as sensitive to political and diplomatic effects. On the other hand, if it concentrates on tests of tactical nuclear weapons and missiles, it can be perceived that North Korea is relatively more focused on military utility. However, such actions by North Korea will become severe obstacles to the path towards denuclearization, regardless of the type and purpose of provocations. Suspension of nuclear provocations by North Korea is the first step toward denuclearization. Further advancement of the nuclear arsenal prohibits a compromise on denuclearization. The longer an agreement is delayed, the more North Korea will face increasing losses and its strategic position will shrink. The likelihood that the four neighboring great powers will allow North Korea to possess nuclear weapons is close to zero. Above all, the two Koreas will not be able to plan for the future of the state and the nation with the burden of nuclear weapons hanging over their heads.

It is extremely difficult for non-nuclear states to develop nuclear weapons under the nonproliferation regime. It is also rare for non-nuclear states to succeed in coercing great powers by mobilizing nuclear capabilities. Conversely, it is equally difficult for nuclear great powers to dissuade non-nuclear states of their nuclear ambitions. No country has ever overlooked a neighboring country's efforts to nuclearize, and nor should South Korea stand idly by. It is once again time for the international community and South Korea to resume efforts in achieving these

challenging goals. Even if South Korea and the U.S. craft a responsive strategy that takes North Korea's deployment of nuclear weapons into consideration, this does not necessarily indicate acknowledging North Korea's nuclear status nor the abandonment of the goal of denuclearization.<sup>14)</sup> Rather, this will only further justify the need for long-term sanctions against North Korea and strengthen military deterrence efforts by the U.S.-South Korea alliance, thereby creating an unfavorable environment for North Korea. As the inauguration of the new South Korean government approaches, North Korea should send messages of peace to the skies, instead of ICBMs. The initiative for peace has never left North Korea's hands. ©KINU 2022

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14) Once North Korea's nuclear arsenal becomes more advanced to the extent that it is ready for deployment in the field, it is possible that South Korea may sincerely consider acquiring tactical nuclear weapons. But tactical nuclear weapons carry both the strategic utility of tactical nuclear weapons as well as the risks involved for the two Koreas. Tactical nuclear weapons increase the ability to prevent unintended escalation of conflict. But it can also create openings for escalation by prompting the need for preemptive strikes by the other side.