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***Session III:
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South Korea and the North Korean Nuclear Problem

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North Korea's January nuclear test and a series of missile launches and corresponding responses from the United States and South Korea have once again raised tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang's continued and increasing recalcitrance and threats have renewed international demands for a solution and voices within South Korea to reexamine its nuclear options. While South Koreans differ on their preferred method in achieving peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, they are united in the ultimate goal of denuclearization and eventual reunification. Future South Korean dealings with the North will be shaped by Pyongyang's behavior, the degree of alignment between the allies with new presidents in both Washington and Seoul, and the allies' respective domestic political climate.

South Korean Objective and Approach

South Korean pundits, politicians, and policymakers are united in their combined objective: denuclearization and reunification of the Korean Peninsula. These two paths lead to ultimate stability on the Korean Peninsula and they agree that engagement is an important vehicle. However, their approach is largely divided into two camps: proactive engagement (progressive) and principled, pragmatic engagement (conservative). The former camp believes in offering more carrots than sticks as inducements to change Pyongyang's behavior and calculus on its nuclear and missile programs while sustaining the North Korean regime. The latter will not "buy" positive behavior and even welcomes the collapse of the regime as part of the reunification process. The two camps also differ in their preferred means by which to achieve unification: to put simply, via consensus-based gradual integration (progressive) or absorption whether it is by force or sudden collapse (conservative).

The incumbent Park Geun-hye administration is expected to continue to be hard-lined while keeping the dialogue channel open but at a high price. It came into office rooting principled engagement in a firm deterrence posture that stands ready to retaliate militarily against any North Korean use of force. In her March 2014 Dresden speech, President Park laid out diverse engagement initiatives including people-to-people exchanges. But ensuing North Korean provocations prompted Seoul to take on

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a harder-lined stance including shutting down the Kaesong Industrial Complex—the last economic link between the two countries and symbol of inter-Korean rapprochement—in a dramatic display, declaring “no more business as usual.” Seoul is opposed to discussing a peace treaty with North Korea until enough progress has been made on denuclearization. It is also focused on reunification and preparations for a contingency situation on the Peninsula. The Park administration had been generally more flexible in the preconditions for resuming nuclear talks with Pyongyang, but North Korea’s fourth nuclear test and various missile launches led Seoul to join Washington and Tokyo at the March Nuclear Security Summit agreeing that 2016 will be a year of pressure.

North Korea’s growing nuclear-missile capabilities and increasingly provocative actions coupled with a perceived ambivalence by Washington and Beijing have led many conservative pundits in the South to believe that a policy of regime change (one that induces leadership change or regime collapse) is their only option. Some progressive pundits have also begun to share such sentiments.

Strategic Patience

Most South Korean pundits, thought leaders, and many government officials—despite their level of understanding or misunderstanding about strategic patience—generally believe Washington’s approach is one of negligence and are frustrated at the perceived lack of presidential interest and “proactive policy” toward North Korea.

In December 2009, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton responded to a press question by describing U.S. approach as “strategic patience in close coordination with Six Party allies.” It meant that the Obama administration will not, and has not, jump back too quickly into negotiations with North Korea. Instead, it would set tough preconditions for the resumption of negotiations so that talks are not held for talks’ sake and that negotiations would be credible, meaningful, and authentic about denuclearization.

But the administration would be “strategically impatient” with both North Korea and China by applying pressure through diplomacy, sanctions, and human rights shaming. Such measures include the Executive Order after the Sony attack, the increasingly tougher UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions and sanctions, efforts at the UN to promote the UN Commission of Inquiry Report on NK human rights and its discussion at the UNSC, and demonstrations of strategic deterrence.

The positive aspects of strategic patience include not rewarding bad behavior—i.e., rushing over begging for talks after every provocation and “buying the same horse

twice.” However, the resulting negative consequence of strategic patience is that Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile capabilities have still grown rather than stunted.

In most recent years, the Obama administration has made a distinction: it is open to meeting bilaterally without preconditions but the resumption of six-party negotiations would require Pyongyang to take pre-steps to ensure it is serious about denuclearization. However, after repeated overtures by Washington, Seoul, and Beijing, North Korea has refused dialogue and engagement. Instead, it has demanded that talks be premised on recognizing it as a nuclear-weapon state and granting it a peace treaty.

The Next U.S.-South Korean Alliance

There are two major variables that will shape South Korea’s policy toward North Korea in the near-to-mid-term: 1) who sits in the presidential Blue House in 2018, and 2) the security circumstances and situation on and around the Korean Peninsula. Traditionally, a progressive South Korean president would prefer a more flexible approach with dialogue as the main vehicle of policy and the offering of more concessions seen in recent history during the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations. However, domestic political challenges in South Korea within, what has recently become, two progressive parties have called into question the existence of a clear strategy and detailed policy toward the North. Their present priority is political housekeeping within each progressive party. What is certain, however, is that the progressives have leaned further right in their positions and attitudes toward the North following the regime’s fourth nuclear test, frequent missile launches, and constant threats to destroy the South. Still, it can be expected that a progressive South Korean president in 2018 would opt for a proactive policy of engagement but he would need to balance domestic demands and disagreements, policy coordination with Washington, and relationship management with Beijing that is infuriated over Seoul’s decision to accept U.S. deployment of its ballistic missile defense system called Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD).

Another key variable in future dealings with North Korea will be determined by the alignment between the next U.S. president and President Park, and later between the next U.S. president and new South Korean president. A conservative South Korean president and a democratic U.S. president would likely continue to generally be in sync with their North Korea policies—maintaining a tough stance—but a progressive South Korean president whose approach and policy are drastically different from Washington’s could lead to tensions in the alliance. The U.S. and South Korea have a history of experiencing tough challenges in coordinating and

aligning their policies and approach toward North Korea in each administration since the 1990s.

However, regardless of ideological alignment or discord between the allies, South Koreans will not accept an objective of negotiations with North Korea that falls short of denuclearization. They are also largely united in believing that a peace regime must be established after enough progress has been made in denuclearization. The concern is that nuclear negotiations would be held hostage to peace regime negotiations.

Conclusion

If Pyongyang continues along its current trajectory, a democratic U.S. president in the near-term is likely to continue with pressure on Pyongyang based on the rationale that effective diplomacy should be backed by pressure while placing high importance on alliances. A Republican president's plan or strategy is unclear.

Due to the domestic political climate, it will be difficult for the next U.S. president to engage with North Korea as it has been for the incumbent. She or he will be dealing with the implementation of the Iran Deal, which is still a contentious issue in U.S. domestic politics. Due to the past 20 years of failed attempts to resolve nuclear issue, it has been politically risky to engage North Korea without a degree of predictability that the regime will embark on a path toward denuclearization. The next president will have some very tough decisions to make early on in her/his term.

An urgent issue is halting the North's development of the KN-08 and Musudan missiles that pose a threat to the United States. North Korea will continue testing nuclear devices and missiles—it has every political, technological, and strategic motivation and objective to continue testing. Pyongyang does not seem fazed by sanctions and has learned ways to work around the system. It seems bent on developing fully-functional nuclear-tipped missiles. Of question is what Pyongyang considers as its various milestones in its nuclear-missile development and at what point it will feel confident in holding serious negotiations.

A policy review on North Korea will be conducted by the new administration. It should take place in the first 100 days of office. It should be a top-down, all-around comprehensive review that does not result in merely a new cover page to an old, existing briefing book. The review process and format should resemble the Perry Process with necessary upgrades. The next point-person on North Korea policy and their deputy should have combined regional and nuclear knowledge.

At some point after tensions plateau or subside, Washington and Pyongyang will inevitably need to engage in direct talks. Dialogue is not a reward for good

behavior—face-to-face diplomacy is an essential tool in changing state behavior. It also reveals nuggets of more accurate information about the North, and over time, more effectively aids policy formation with eyes wide open. Conventional and unconventional wisdoms regarding North Korea must be tested repeatedly. The Six Party Talks mechanism should also be retained—with necessary additions including missiles and uranium enrichment—because it addresses all parties’ concerns and provides for various configurations of talks (bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral, etc.) within the six-country framework. Equally important, if not more, the Six Party Talks process lays the foundation for a grander Northeast Asia design: a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula and a Northeast Asian peace and security mechanism.

North Korea’s demand for a peace treaty is widely believed to be a means to divert international attention away from denuclearization. Peace regime talks can be risky if they are not based on a firm North Korean commitment to denuclearization because nuclear talks will likely be held hostage to peace treaty talks. Based on experiences during the Six Party Talks, Pyongyang does not simply desire a signed paper—it wants an arrangement that is legally-binding by the U.S. Congress and institutionally irreversible while requiring the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Peninsula.

Freezing the North’s programs cannot be the ultimate objective of talks, despite growing international belief that Pyongyang will never abandon its nuclear arsenal—the international political market, particularly the U.S.’ closest allies South Korea and Japan, will not accept anything less than complete denuclearization. A freeze should, and has always been, an interim objective. Merely halting the North’s WMD programs without rolling them back will also set a bad precedent for other nuclear aspirants and deal another blow to the global nonproliferation regime.

The immediate challenge for the next U.S. administration will be finding the right formula to jumpstart negotiations (bilateral or multilateral) in the first year of office to take full advantage of a potential eight years. If history is a guide, nuclear negotiations will experience long periods of standstills. The mid-to-longer term challenge would be incentivizing Pyongyang to return to the dialogue table while keeping it engaged in the process and maintaining a strong coalition among the other five parties.