

North Korea

2017-11-01 10:46

[Op-ed] North Korean nuclear challenge and the Moon government strategy

 Listen

By Moon Chung-in

The Korean Peninsula is back at a crossroads of war and peace. We have not stood this close to the point of no return since the signing of the armistice agreement in July 1953. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's reckless military provocations, Washington's offensive rhetoric and military maneuvers, China's tough position over the deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system in South Korea, and domestic polarization have trapped the newly inaugurated President Moon Jae-in in a security dilemma with grave implications. The root cause of this quagmire comes from North Korea's unruly pursuit of its nuclear ambitions.



Moon Chung-in

Reassessing North Korean nuclear threats

In accordance with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), North Korea cannot be recognized as a full-fledged nuclear-weapons state. Judged by its acquisition of nuclear warheads, delivery capabilities, nuclear testing, and the sophistication of its nuclear weapons technology, however, it is nearing the status of a country with undeniable nuclear-weapons capability. International pressure and sanctions notwithstanding, Kim is unlikely to jettison its "Byungjin policy" (the simultaneous pursuit of economic development and nuclear weapons) not only because of its logic of minimal nuclear deterrence and the protection of North Korea's leader, institutions, and people, but also because of its domestic legitimacy-building and international prestige.

The North Korean nuclear threat is thus no longer hypothetical but real, and poses serious security challenges to the Korean Peninsula, all of Northeast Asia, and the world. We cannot tolerate a nuclear North Korea for several reasons.

First, North Korean nuclear weapons would significantly alter the military balance on the peninsula and ultimately impede inter-Korean peaceful coexistence by triggering an immense conventional and nuclear arms race on the peninsula.

Second, the regional security impact would be profound. In addition to strategic instability and spiraling arms races, a nuclear domino effect might lead to proliferation elsewhere in Northeast Asia.

And third, the possibility exists that North Korea will export nuclear materials, technology, and even warheads to other actors, threatening the very foundations of world security in this age of global terrorism.

Two principles and three strategies

President Moon has so far adopted two principles and three strategies to realize a nuclear-free, peaceful, and prosperous peninsula. The first principle is to denuclearize North Korea by believing that South Korea cannot peacefully co-exist with a nuclear North Korea and that Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions should be stopped. The second is that there should not be another war on the peninsula and that the North Korean nuclear problem should be resolved peacefully through diplomatic means. He has said clearly that no country can take military action on the peninsula without prior consultation with and the agreement of the South Korean government.

President Moon has advanced three strategies in order to achieve a nuclear-free and peaceful Korea. They are dialogue and negotiation, sanctions and pressure, and defense and deterrence.

The first strategy is to restore dialogue and negotiation as a viable means of resolving the North Korean nuclear problem. He is well aware of inherent limits to dialogue and negotiation, and absorbed the lessons of the failure of the six-party talks as well as bilateral talks between Pyongyang and Washington. He proposes a two-track approach in which Pyongyang and Washington engage in bilateral dialogues to resolve the nuclear problem, whereas Seoul and Pyongyang resume talks to address issues pertaining to inter-Korean relations within the boundary of international sanctions. But the North has not responded to the proposals and on the contrary has shown a series of provocative behavior such as missile and nuclear tests.

Facing Pyongyang's reckless challenges, President Moon has to take the strategy of sanctions and maximum pressure. The Moon government has closely cooperated with the U.S. and Japan in pushing for tougher sanctions resolutions at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and has fully complied with them. Seoul has also pledged to go along with U.S. unilateral sanctions, including secondary boycotts. More importantly, the Moon government has decided to sustain sanction measures adopted by previous conservative governments such as the May 24 measure that bans exchanges and cooperation with the North and the suspension of the Gaeseong Industrial Complex and the Mount Geumgang tourist project.

His government is also pursuing a strategy of deterrence and missile defense. Deterrence is a strategy aimed at preventing North Korea from acting in a certain way by threatening to retaliate with credible military force. It is composed of two elements. One is conventional deterrence through the strengthening of South Korea-U.S. combined forces and South Korea's self-reliant defense posture. The other is nuclear deterrence through close cooperation and coordination with the U.S. on extended deterrence and the provision of America's nuclear umbrella.

Missile defense constitutes another important component. It is composed of active defense (the Patriot and THAAD systems), passive defense (monthly civil defense exercises), offensive defense (Kill Chain and massive punishment retaliatory measures), and battle management (command, control, communications, intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance).

These three strategies might look contradictory. In reality, however, they are not. President Moon has always placed top priority on dialogue and negotiation. Nevertheless, he has to combine it with other options, depending on changing circumstances. It should be noted that for him, sanctions and pressures are not an end in itself, but the means to bring the North to dialogue and the negotiation table.

'Three Nos'

While advocating three prolonged strategies, the Moon government has also been clear in what it rejects: No nukes, no military action, and no regime change.

First, the Moon government opposes the nuclear armament option by believing that American commitment to extended deterrence and its nuclear umbrella is unquestionably firm and that Seoul's nuclear path will face fierce international pressure and negative boomerang effects such as the demotion of South Korea into a rogue state and the precipitation of a nuclear domino in Northeast Asia.

It also rejects the idea of redeploying and co-sharing of American tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea because it violates the principle of a denuclearized peninsula and undermines the demand for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantling (CVID) of North Korean nuclear programs and weapons. Such deployment could trigger a tense nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia.

Second, the Moon government opposes resolutely unilateral military actions, be they preemption and/or preventive war. This opposition is grounded in basic cost-benefit analysis. Once initiated, a conflict would be difficult if not impossible to contain, and the human and economic costs of war on the peninsula would be staggering. With a huge civilian population living within artillery range and the largest economies in the world within missile range, South Korea, Asia and the world simply have too much to lose from a war with North Korea, which has very little to lose and will fight to the death, while gains from military actions would be questionable.

Finally, the Moon government is also skeptical of regime change involving the removal of the North Korean leadership. On several occasions, including his speech in Berlin on July 6, President Moon clearly said that he will seek neither regime change in the North nor unification by absorption on South Korean terms. He believes these are not desirable because such efforts would undermine mutual trust, while stiffening Pyongyang's hostility, and it is also not feasible in the short run because removing North Korea's leadership is extremely difficult from a practical standpoint.

In sum, sanctions and pressure cannot be avoided as long as North Korea violates UNSC sanction resolutions, and the Moon government will continue to take a tough stance on North Korea in close cooperation with the U.S. and the international community. Despite Pyongyang's provocative behavior,

however, President Moon has not ruled out the possibility for dialogue and negotiation with North Korea and will continue his proactive role in resolving the North Korean nuclear problem peacefully.

Moon Chung-in, a distinguished professor at Yonsei University and special adviser to President Moon Jae-in for foreign affairs and national security, contributed this article on the occasion of The Korea Times' 67th anniversary.

