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Our dangerously defensive leader

A good leader should seek out the best option even under the worst circumstances.

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In this swelteringly hot summer, we seem to be enduring one scandal and controversy after another. Senior former and incumbent prosecutors have been implicated in corruption scandals and the country is in a hot spot diplomatically and domestically over the plan to install the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (Thaad) system.

Inter-Korean relationships are at their worst. Symbolic joint-ventures, the Mt. Kumgang tourism program and Kaesong Industrial Complex, are dead. Pyongyang has ramped up its threats while Seoul remains stubbornly inflexible.

The two have stopped talking and show no sign of making any attempt at a breakthrough, raising pessimistic concerns that bilateral ties will never improve.

Moreover, the government does not seem to mind the status quo. Does it have that much confidence in the president's diplomatic skills and statesmanship?

It appears to be blinded by wishful thinking that North Korea will reach a tipping point and bring about lasting peace in the land. But from what we have seen on the security and diplomatic fronts, we have to wonder how the government could be so naive and complacent.

The most mysterious factor is the government's policy stand. President Park Geun-hye unveiled inventive plans early on, such as the trust-building process, a peace cooperative platform in Northeast Asia or the so-called jackpot unification theory.

But with mutual trust at an all-time low, envisioning regional peace seems like a waste of energy. Foreign policy has lost its balance after Seoul chose to accept Washington's powerful missile system in spite of strong opposition from Beijing and Moscow, and a

presidential committee preparing for unification is hardly helpful.

The president or government has nothing to say, even as their signature agenda has gone down the drain. The foreign and unification policy of the incumbent administration has become more vain and more irresponsible than the rhetorical slogan of the so-called 747 campaign platform by former President Lee Myung-bak that promised to deliver 7 percent growth for the economy, \$40,000 per capita income and make the country the seventh largest economy in the world.

The government's approach to the controversial deployment of Thaad is another puzzle. The president broadly challenged opponents to come up with a better deterrent to growing nuclear and missile threat from North Korea.

But the presence of a single battery unit installed at Seongju, North Gyeongsang Province, can hardly act to deter North Korea from using weapons of mass-destruction. Aside from being equipped with a powerful radar, the system is focused on defense interception.

The government is about to pay a dear price at home and abroad by hosting an weapon that has a questionable defense capacity but is highly controversial and risky in terms of foreign relations.

The president is even losing the faith of her stronghold in Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province. The move could be fatal to a president who has not much time left in office. Opposition from Beijing and Moscow was expected, though it was also known that traditional South Korea-U.S. ties would not be impaired if Seoul refused to install the missile system in Korea.

And yet Beijing's vexation after the decision is beyond imagination. Was it really worth it?

Another concern is a foreign policy that is oriented towards Cold War ideology. Strong sanctions and pressure against repeatedly provocative North Korea are understandable. But the stick must not be the only diplomatic tool.

The president's bilateral and multilateral summit talks are entirely focused on isolating North Korea. And mustering support for a hard-line stance on North Korea during all her

state visits to developing countries is the sort of thing we would expect from a South Korean head during the Cold War days in 1970s.

The Constitution defines the primary role of the chief of state as being the protection of public safety and assets. This is why leaders of democratic states take conservative stances to avoid war and minimize danger to public safety and lives.

But our president strangely does the opposite.

It's hard to understand why she makes things worse by insisting on her hard-line stance and ruling out all other options through dialogue and talks. Her belief that the country could be completely safe with Thaad and the Patriot missile systems, or that war is inevitable, are putting her people and the country in terrible danger.

During the Cuban missile crisis in 1971, U.S. President John F. Kennedy avoided a full-blown nuclear showdown with the Soviet Union by striking a back-door deal with Moscow and offering to dismantle the U.S.-built Jupiter medium-range ballistic missiles system deployed in Turkey and Italy if the Soviets did the same with their weapons in Cuba, taking them out of the country.

Kennedy was criticized for plotting secretly behind the people's backs, but he nevertheless saved 200 million from unimaginable consequences. A good leader should seek out the best option even under the worst circumstances. Is it too much to ask for such inventiveness and courage from our state leaders?

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