



**Thinking the Unthinkable on the Korean Peninsula:
Nuclear North Korea & Reunification**

By MJ Chung

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Thinking the Unthinkable on the Korean Peninsula: Nuclear North Korea & Reunification

by

M.J. Chung, January 21, 2014¹

Thank you, Jim Kelly, chairman emeritus, Pacific Forum CSIS, for your kind introduction and I would also like to thank the Honolulu International Forum for this opportunity.

It is great to be back in Hawaii. In the Korean heart, Hawaii holds a very special place. In 1903, the first Koreans to immigrate overseas arrived in Hawaii. Dr. Syngman Rhee, the founding president of the Republic of Korea, made Hawaii his home base during his decades-long struggle for Korean independence from Japanese colonial rule.

Today, Hawaii is home to many Korean-Americans. Hawaii is also home to the US Pacific Command which has played a critical role in ensuring peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Today, I would like to talk to you about the North Korean situation and share my thoughts on how we may be able to resolve it. Given that this is such a heavy topic, allow me to start with a joke to lighten things up a little bit. Recently, it was reported that China has finally begun to put some pressure on North Korea to stop developing nuclear weapons. In particular, China has warned North Korea about starting a war. China told them flat out, “Do not fire any missiles at the United States at least until after we get our money. They owe us \$3 trillion. Wait until then.”

Last year marked the 60th anniversary of the ROK-US alliance as well as the Korean War armistice. Next year will mark 70 years of Korean independence, but at the same time, national division. The division of the Korean Peninsula was the result of a reckless compromise between great powers based on short-term tactical expediency rather than long-term strategic vision.

Korea was divided because the US invited Stalin to join the war against Japan and then was caught off-guard. Near the end of World War II, fearing a couple million casualties, the US begged the Soviet Union to enter the war against Japan. Only too pleased, Stalin broke the Soviet-Japanese Non-Aggression Pact and declared war on Japan on Aug. 8, 1945, a week before the Japanese surrender.

On Aug. 10, stunned that the Soviet army had already entered Korea, the US hastily drew up a plan to stop the Soviet advance. Lt. Col. Dean Rusk and a fellow junior officer drew the 38th parallel as the demarcation line between the US and Soviet occupation zones. It was said that they used a National Geographic map to draw the parallel. No one was interested in Korea.

The first elements of the US forces arrived on the Korean Peninsula on Sept. 8, a month after the Soviets. Korea was liberated from Japanese rule but only at the cost of national division.

¹ This speech was also delivered at the John Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) on January 30, 2014. Part of this speech was adapted from the 2013 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference Address on April 9, 2013.

The Korean War was also the result of US policy makers' gross negligence and misjudgment. Even though China was communized in 1949, the US pulled 30,000 troops from South Korea that same year. In a speech in January 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson left South Korea out of the "US defense perimeter" in the Pacific. Five months later North Korea started the Korean War, a war that resulted in over 5 million casualties.

To be sure, it was the US intervention in the war that prevented the entire Korean Peninsula from being communized.

I was born in the southern port city of Busan in 1951 at the height of the Korean War. Had it not been for the US intervention, I would not be here today. Knowing what we know today about North Korea, I shudder at the fate that might have befallen us had it not been for the US. Thank you for coming to our rescue. All Koreans who enjoy freedom today thank you very much.

However, our work is not done. For the past 70 years, Koreans have been yearning for reunification. Each time North Korea threatens us with yet another provocation or nuclear annihilation, or each time we learn about the political terror and humanitarian disaster gripping North Korea, reunification becomes a moral imperative. Without North Korea's denuclearization and the ultimate reunification of the Korean Peninsula, lasting peace in East Asia will never be realized.

However, with North Korea arming itself with nuclear weapons, a lasting peace in the region or Korean reunification is increasingly becoming a distant dream.

Nuclear North Korea

From the beginning, many misunderstood the nature of the North Korean regime and misjudged its intentions. Most thought that North Korea would give up its nuclear program in exchange for a suitable economic aid package and normalization of relations with the US. Others thought that the regime would collapse and the problem would simply disappear.

The Six-Party Talks created to denuclearize North Korea was chaired by China and supported by the US. However, the US and China often failed to adopt a common stance, allowing North Korea to play the two superpowers off each other. The US was distracted by its wars in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and the Iranian nuclear issue. The Chinese either thought that North Koreans were incapable of building the bomb or it allowed its strategic rivalry with the US to blind it from seeing the true nature of the threat arising from a rogue state on its border.

But first and foremost, we Koreans blame ourselves. Our national security policy was hijacked by domestic politics. Successive presidents were consumed by the wish to hold a summit with the North Korean leader. An inter-Korean summit was regarded as a symbol of statesmanship. The blind pursuit of a summit often saw South Korean presidents paying off North Korea while manipulating and misleading international as well as domestic public opinion.

A former president reportedly said that North Korea has neither the will, nor the capability, to develop nuclear weapons and that he would take responsibility if they did. Another said that it was "rational" for North Korea to develop nuclear weapons.

South Korea's policy makers not only refused to face reality, but sometimes fabricated it. In 2002, Jim Kelly, then the Assistant Secretary of State, confronted the North Koreans with evidence showing they were developing highly enriched uranium. Even though the North Koreans admitted this to be true, top advisors to the South Korean

president accused the US of creating a crisis by making unfounded accusations. They became North Korea's advocates. It is estimated that during 10 years of "Sunshine Policy," South Korea transferred nearly \$10 billion worth of cash, goods and aid to North Korea.

Now, North Korea has nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles.

Ten years ago, even before North Korea's first nuclear test, Graham Allison, the founding dean of Harvard Kennedy School, warned in his book, *Nuclear Terrorism*, that "On the current course, North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and a nuclear weapons production line promises to become the greatest failure in the nearly 230-year history of American foreign policy." Unfortunately, few heeded his warning.

Now, it has become clear to everyone that North Korea will not and cannot give up its nuclear weapons voluntarily. Like his father, Kim Jong Un himself is a prisoner of the system.

The international community needs to reset its North Korea policy by making the denuclearization of North Korea its highest priority. We have to formulate a clear-cut policy that can show the North Koreans that keeping and developing nuclear weapons are not at all conducive to the regime's survival.

Economic Sanctions against North Korea

To do so, we need to put all options on the table, including the unthinkable.

First, we must strengthen sanctions against North Korea. Iran is reportedly beginning to dismantle its nuclear weapons, but North Korea is not. Currently, both North Korea and Iran are under UN sanctions. However, because China and Russia are not enthusiastic about implementing sanctions against either North Korea or Iran, UN sanctions currently in place are toothless.

The UN sanctions against North Korea are limited to very few individuals and entities with direct ties to the North Korean military. The measures leave untouched the civilian side, which is where the regime earns its revenues. The ineffectiveness of the UN sanctions is amply demonstrated by the fact that North Korea's trade with China has doubled between 2008 and 2012, while its import of luxury goods has also increased since the sanctions were imposed!

If the UN Security Council resolutions against Iran and North Korea are toothless, then why has Iran changed its mind? It is because of the unilateral sanctions imposed by the concerned countries, namely the EU and the US. When the UN sanctions became ineffective, the countries affected by the Iranian threat devised their own solution.

The United States has already put into place a comprehensive ban on trade with Iran since the 1990s, and since 2012 it has imposed strict sanctions against Iran's maritime shipping, metal industry, and insurance underwritings. The EU has also been enforcing an embargo against Iranian oil exports since 2010, and prohibits London-based insurance firms such as Lloyd's from providing insurance to maritime shipping to and from Iran. As a consequence, the Iranian economy shrunk in 2012 and is likely to do so again in 2013. Its oil export dropped from 2.5 million barrels per day to 1.1 million barrels per day.

Iran has never tested a nuclear weapon and denies that it is developing one. North Korea has conducted three nuclear tests and declared itself a nuclear power. However, the international sanctions regime against Iran is far more robust than the ones against

North Korea. The reason for the US and China's lack of enthusiasm about sanctioning North Korea is our own apathy and lack of principles.

Currently we have no measures in place against hundreds of ships that dock at North Korean ports before visiting ours. There is already concern that our ports have become a hub for North Korea's illicit activities. If a North Korean agent were to place explosives on a third-country ship and detonate them after entering the ports of Busan or Incheon, we would be defenseless.

The international community has at its disposal the means to strengthen the sanctions regime against North Korea. So far the most effective sanction measure against North Korea has been the financial sanction against Banco Delta Asia (BDA) in September 2005. This was the reason behind North Korea's agreement to shut down the Yongbyon nuclear facility in February 2007.

Iran's case clearly shows that sanctions can be effective. International sanctions experts all say that it is still possible to build an economic sanctions regime against North Korea that is much more robust than the one in place today.

The Unthinkable

If North Korea still refuses to surrender its nuclear weapons then we have to make the ultimate choice. The Cold War stayed "cold" only because of the mutual deterrence by nuclear weapons. The lesson of the Cold War is that nuclear weapons can only be countered with nuclear weapons.

If North Korea keeps insisting on staying nuclear then it must know that we will have no choice but to go nuclear.

As the PACOM Commander Adm. Locklear recently noted in a speech, "The flash to bang for what can happen in Korea is very, very, very short."

Facing an extraordinary threat to national security, South Korea may exercise the right to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty as stipulated in article 10 of the treaty. South Korea would then match North Korea's nuclear progress step-by-step while committing to stop if North Korea stops. South Korea should be given this leeway as a law-abiding member of the global community that is threatened by a nuclear rogue state.

It is like a member of the gun-control lobby in good-standing whose neighborhood gangster just acquired assault rifles and threatens him. In order to buy a gun to protect himself and his family against the gangster, he now wishes to withdraw his membership temporarily.

Those who are opposed to such an alternative claim that it would trigger a nuclear domino in East Asia. However, the nuclear domino has already started. It started the moment North Korea developed nuclear weapons.

With an unpredictable young leader in North Korea who has vowed to keep his nuclear weapons, neighboring countries must now start to work with a unity of purpose. Time is running out.

South Korea-Japan Relations

This is why the current state of South Korea-Japan relations is of deep concern for all of us.

Japanese Prime Minister Abe's recent visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, and his continuing refusal to take responsibility for the Japanese military sex slaves during the

war is unfortunate. Regardless of the prime minister's intention such acts have been perceived by both Koreans and Chinese as indicative of the Japanese leader's refusal to come to terms with Japan's militarist past. Such mutual distrust and suspicion is poisoning relations among the region's neighbors that are so vital to dealing effectively with North Korea's nuclear threat and building a lasting security cooperation regime for the region.

According to a recent Asan Institute poll, although anti-Japanese sentiments among South Koreans have increased after Prime Minister Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, 58 percent of the respondents agreed that it is necessary for President Park to seek more active approaches to improving Korea-Japan relations. South Koreans still recognize Japan as an important partner in Northeast Asian security.

One-Korea Policy

The ultimate solution for enduring peace in the region is Korean reunification. As the last vestige of the Cold War, the division is perpetuating the pain and suffering of the North Korean people while constantly undermining regional security.

South Korea has pursued a "Two-Koreas Policy" for the past 25 years. This policy stance became the principle behind our foreign policy when President Roh Tae-woo announced "Nordpolitik" in his inaugural speech in 1988. We did not demand China to break off diplomatic relations with North Korea when ROK-China diplomatic normalization took place in 1992.

However, the Two-Koreas Policy was a complete failure when it came to the original aim of stimulating change in North Korea. It is about time we abandoned the Two-Koreas Policy. We, as well as neighboring countries, should no longer ignore a regime that violates international norms and rules, threatens neighboring countries with weapons of mass destruction, and starves and slaughters its own people.

We should ask neighboring powers – including China – as well as the international community to make strong demands on North Korea to denuclearize and improve its human rights situation. We should also ask them to support a ROK-led reunification of the peninsula.

Some are concerned about the cost of reunification. However, as President Park Geun-hye mentioned during her recent press conference reunification would be a "bonanza" for Koreans. It will also be a "bonanza" for the whole of East Asia, and the world. The removal of a nuclear-armed state run by an unpredictable young dictator will be a boon for the security as well as the economy of East Asia.

To be sure, the process of Korean reunification will be messy. It will require far greater courage, wisdom, and vision on the part of the leaders of the region than they have been able to muster to date. However, the returns will more than justify the effort.

Biography



MJ Chung

MJ Chung is a seven-term member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea. He is Chairman of the board of trustees of Ulsan University and the ASAN Foundation. Previously, he was Chairman of the Grand National Party and a presidential candidate in 2002. He received his PhD in international relations from the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at the Johns Hopkins University, MS from the Sloan School of Management at MIT and BA in economics from Seoul National University.