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Response to PacNet #10A “What is North Korea up to with its fourth nuclear test?”

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Yoon’s comment on ROK-China cooperation as the key to denuclearization borders on wishful thinking. The reality is that the North Koreans have gamed this out and understand that whatever the Chinese anger (or reaction), the Chinese (as Kerry learned) are not going to push the North anywhere close to instability. They simply do not want to deal with the risks of collapse, even if it means tolerating a nuclear North Korea. And it is also reality that the South Koreans, while wanting to inflict real pain on Pyongyang, also do not want to push Pyongyang toward collapse.

Years ago while managing the Cambodia-Vietnam issue at State Policy Planning, and after years of our asking others to tell the Vietnamese to get out of Cambodia, I came to the conclusion that if we wanted to get the Vietnamese out we had to talk to the guys who could do the deal, i.e., the Vietnamese, which then Secretary of State James Baker decided to do. That direct contact is what the Vietnamese wanted and it ultimately worked, leading to the road map and normalization.

Admittedly, it’s more complicated with North Korea, a demonstrated nuclear power. And I can’t conceive of Pyongyang giving up its nukes, absent a transformation of our relationship – and that’s not with just a signing of a peace treaty. To get to that, we need an actual state of peace, which can be ratified by a peace treaty. Can we both find a way to move off current maximalist positions – denuclearize and recognition as a nuclear power respectively – and begin some low-level tension reduction measures? But then again we have the Feb. 29, 2012 agreement which the North ultimately blew up. We need some formulation like the “unofficial-official” leaders structure that lead to the Xi-Ma meeting.

This is going to take time, with no guarantee of success. Perhaps there’s something too in the Unofficial Liaison offices that Nixon and Mao agreed to before normalization. Can we “unofficially” propose this?

The following is from an “ANON” senior US government official.

Yoon asserts that previous North Korean nuclear tests were primarily aimed at influencing the US, South Korea, and Japan. Based on what evidence? There is an equal – I would say much greater prospect – that domestic internal political drivers and objectives were a much larger factor.

Yoon then goes on to assert that the fourth test was aimed at China. Again, based on what evidence? On the point of

Chinese influence over North Korea slipping, this has been noticed and discussed for years.

As for why North Korea tested at this time, I find Yoon’s depiction utterly unconvincing. Using Yoon’s own narrative, the key question is why would North Korea feel the need to further demonstrate strategic autonomy, and why do it now! As to why now, it may have been the case that North Korea calculated that the international blowback at present would be less than would be the case at another time. However, if demonstrating strategic autonomy is key, then why would this really matter?

If North Korea was convinced that China was distracted, then why was the test aimed at China as Yoon asserts? For that matter, Yoon never explains why North Korea would focus on China. Why does it benefit North Korea to demonstrate that China’s influence was slipping? That does nothing externally for North Korea that is of strategic benefit. To the contrary, it could spur more international action when externally this nuclear test did little to further demonstrate strategic autonomy.

Finally, toward the end of his piece, Yoon states that only Chinese-South Korean cooperation holds any prospect of getting North Korea to denuclearize. A final question: why would Chinese-South Korean cooperation prove the critical factor in getting North Korea to denuclearize?

The answers to the questions that I pose suggest potentially *very* different approaches to how to pursue our objective of denuclearization.

Sukjoon Yoon (sjyoon6680@kims.or.kr) responds:

Thanks for the opportunity to expand my thinking about North Korea’s fourth nuclear test.

First, unofficial/official contacts might be effective but this has been attempted many times, and without the necessary *trust*, nothing has come of them. The engagement strategies referred to as the “sunshine policy,” articulated by the administrations of Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyon, and Lee Myung-bak, failed to produce any shift in the thinking of North Korean leaders who remain obsessed by a poisonous Cold War mentality. Seeing how ineffectual these efforts have been, President Park argues that dealing with North Korean nuclear issues and missile development requires *trust* before anything will be achieved. Park’s policies represent a clear break with the past, as she insisted during the North-South dialogues of November 2015: “Unless and until you demonstrate your commitment to denuclearization, you will get nothing from the South: you should be convinced of this fact.”

Second, when North Korea’s recent nuclear test is compared with earlier ones, there are real differences in the

geopolitical context, the most significant being that Park is moving ever closer to China. Although the test has been condemned by the US and Japan, there is little they can do to deter North Korean WMD threats, whereas China has more options. Park's diplomatic maneuvering is intended to influence China's attitude toward the two Koreas, as can be seen from her courageous participation in the 2015 China Victory Day Parade, a military occasion, despite strong objections from Washington and Tokyo. North Korea knows well that South Korea is undermining its influence with China, and is greatly disturbed by their rapprochement.

South Korea's China policy allows it to play a bridging role in security cooperation between the US and China, and North Korea is concerned that Washington and Tokyo are opening new lines of communication, and perhaps of influence, by using Seoul to apply pressure to Beijing. This is evidenced by a North Korean proposal last year to talk to the US about denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula if the US, Japan, and South Korea would stop conducting military exercises.

China is also sensitive about such military exercises, which take place mainly in the maritime domain close to China's east coast. But China is deeply involved in North Korea's attempts to project WMD threats, with some analyses suggesting that more than 80 percent of the subcomponents for North Korean nuclear tests and missile launches were obtained via illicit trade with China.

After her September summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, Park told the press that there had been frank discussion of Korean unification issues as an imminent reality given the obvious failures of the North Korean economy. The division of Korea has risen on the regional agenda since her proclamation of the so-called "Unification Bonanza," and she considers a change in China's North Korea policy to be inevitable. North Korea is well aware of this, and it is against this background that its recent nuclear test can be understood as directed at influencing China.

Third, opinion is shifting in South Korea: given Chinese reluctance to back more sanctions after the North Korean nuclear test, many commentators now call for South Korea to play more a proactive role, with some even proposing a preemptive surgical strike against the nuclear test site, and many believing that South Korea should take the lead in pursuing North Korean denuclearization. China has long been skeptical of "strategic patience," the current US policy on North Korean nuclear issues, and insists that only a rapprochement between the US and North Korea, as part of a normalization of relations, offers any prospect of defusing tensions. The Chinese see this as a natural corollary of the normalization of relations between China and South Korea, in progress since 1992.

Too direct US involvement will prompt an exaggerated and unhelpful reaction from China. Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to China on Jan. 28 demonstrated how difficult it is for the US and China to reach agreement to deal with North Korean defiance. The most prudent course for the US is to let South Korea lead in consulting with China about North Korea.

Expectations are low about what China might do to restrain North Korea's provocations, but the strategic status of the Korean Peninsula has changed both for the US and for China, and there is a need to reassess security structures: bilateral and multilateral regional economic interactions, enhanced cultural interactions including tourism, and a generational change in how East Asians think about history, their nations, and their lives. Even North Korea is less isolated than it used to be, and the masses endure, rather than support, the Worker's Party. Its economic competence has been undermined by the popular *Jangmadang*, which resemble car boot sales. Change is inevitable, in North Korea and in China, and South Korea is best placed to take advantage of such developments.

The US and South Korea have long looked foolish because of Kim Jong-un's behavior, and China appears to be following in their footsteps. The North Korean regime sees the US as its nemesis, and the only realistic prospect of progress toward a denuclearized Korean Peninsula is for the US to grant South Korea greater strategic autonomy, so that Seoul can leverage its relationship with China. It is not unreasonable that North Korea should develop more strategic autonomy from China, and when the two Koreas are able to interact and negotiate on their terms, without being overwhelmed by external factors, they are much more likely to reach a settlement that would bring great strategic benefits for all.

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