

Crisis on the Korean Peninsula: time for “Plan B”? by Sukjoon Yoon

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The Korean Peninsula remains technically at war, and military confrontations are a constant source of instability for the wider region. Recently, the security situation has further deteriorated after North Korea conducted a fourth nuclear test and tested an ICBM, calling it a satellite launch. A new policy for the Korean Peninsula is needed, one that requires concessions by all stakeholders, not just the two Koreas. Security cooperation in the region needs to become both wider and deeper, with the two Koreas restrained from risky behavior by an understanding between the regional superpowers, China and the US, who share an interest in regional peace and good order. With North Korea on the verge of acquiring an operational nuclear weapons capability, allowing matters to drift will trigger a potentially catastrophic military build-up across the region. War is coming if nothing is done. There will be no winners – all parties involved will be losers. It is time for a “Plan B” to prevent this disaster.

Playing “Chicken” on the Korean Peninsula

Since the end of the Korean War there has been almost continuous tension on the Korean Peninsula, with recurring cycles of provocation and reaction. While China and the US have been deeply engaged in the ensuing regional turmoil, Koreans bear the greatest responsibility. North Korea has undermined regional security, but South Korea’s stance has not helped defuse such threats.

Although North Korea is trying to develop nuclear ICBMs, South Korea has overreacted to the recent nuclear and missile tests: by proposing to abandon the long-stalled Six-Party Talks and substituting a five-party process without North Korean participation; by implicitly suggesting that the South might acquire nuclear weapons to counter the threat from the North; by suddenly deciding to allow the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to be deployed on its soil; and by unilaterally closing down the Kaesong Industrial Complex, which makes products worth \$3.2 billion and comprises 99.7 percent of trade between the two Koreas. Such policies are a rehash of failed attempts to coerce North Korea.

North Korea, meanwhile, has chosen to freeze North-South economic interactions by expelling South Korean businessmen from Kaesong. It justifies its nuclear ambitions as self-defense, and has responded to stronger sanctions under UNSC Resolution 2270 by firing short-range ballistic missiles. Thus, both Koreas have provided one another with excuses for their own destabilizing actions, making the situation worse.

A deal between China and the US?

China and the US are clearly pursuing their own interests, which are becoming less aligned with those of their respective clients. While South Korean President Park Geun-hye reacted emphatically to the latest tests, the *Wall Street Journal* has reported that the US went behind her back by conducting secret talks with the North, offering a peace treaty in exchange for denuclearization. China seems uninterested in facilitating peace on the Peninsula. Despite sending an envoy to Pyongyang before the recent missile test, China continues to provide economic support and diplomatic cover for North Korea.

Both great powers have legitimate regional security concerns, but the interests of Korea are low on their agendas. Both have indulged in saber-rattling, supposedly on behalf of their clients. China has reprimanded the US for its decision to deploy advanced strategic assets, especially THAAD. The US has made a show of expanded military capability, implementing a new combined contingency doctrine, the so-called “Operations Plan 5015 (OPLAN 5015),” intended to deal with the collapse of the North Korean regime. In practice, however, the great powers’ main focus is each other. Last month, the US attempted to expand its influence in Southeast Asia by holding an ASEAN summit, but pro-China members prevented any mention of “China” or “South China Sea” in the communiqué, and it seems more than coincidental that UNSC Resolution 2270, with its newly strengthened sanctions to punish North Korea and restrain its WMD programs, was passed as Washington began backpedaling on the urgency of South Korean THAAD deployment.

South Korea’s strategic dilemma

The prospect of a deal between China and the US, which privileges the needs of the great powers over those of the residents of the Korean Peninsula, presents a strategic dilemma for South Korea. Are China and the US really interested in defusing current tensions? Can either of them be considered a reliable partner in facilitating strategic cooperation to limit the chances of war, cold or hot?

Some commentators argue that South Korea has squandered the possibility of playing a constructive role by overreacting to recent North Korean provocations; others believe that China and the US have set up South Korea as a scapegoat to avoid being blamed for the tensions of the Korean Peninsula; and some portray the two Koreas as “teenage lovers” who, if left to themselves, could sort out their differences through strategic engagement, but their “parents” sternly forbid it.

Meanwhile, the situation continues to deteriorate. With upcoming elections in both the US and South Korea, opposition parties articulate tougher policies to deal with

North Korean defiance: a South Korean opposition party has abandoned its traditional engagement strategy toward North Korea, substituting a more hardline attitude. And the US has never seemed more determined to bring North Korea to heel by any means possible, urging Seoul and Beijing to take a tougher stance toward Pyongyang, and trying to force North Korea to abandon its nuclear aspirations by starving its people.

The consequences of current policies

Pursuit of timeworn policies will have serious consequences. First, implementing tougher sanctions of UNSC Resolution 2270 is not an answer. Despite the embargo on supplying specific “sectoral” products, such as aviation fuels, electronics useful for missiles, etc., the provision for case-by-case exemptions on humanitarian grounds is likely to allow many items to leak through the barricade. Sanctions are also likely to prove ineffective against falsely labeled shipments with several layers of fake paperwork, complex foreign supply chains, and disguised by repackaging. This fourth set of UN sanctions is not a panacea for resolving North Korean WMD issues.

Second, current policies and the blame for failure seek to persuade the North Korean regime to abandon its nuclear program. Even the related threat of nuclear proliferation has received little attention and other issues affecting the Korean Peninsula have been virtually ignored. Current policies are all stick and no carrot. Why has there been no discussion of incentives to motivate North Korea to denuclearize?

Third, South Korean policies on North Korea are rhetoric, bereft of constructive actions. The so-called “Unification Bonanza” anticipates the collapse of the North Korean regime due to internal power struggles that the South would try to precipitate. This is a betrayal of Korea’s long history of peace and noninterference. Such ideas are being used to provide a context in which current overreactions sound more reasonable. For instance, although North Korea’s nuclear weapons are an obstacle to the peaceful unification of the Koreas, conservative voices insist that South Korea should develop its own nuclear weapons and that this represents some kind of solution!

Fourth, the existing approach will not cause the collapse of, or a change in, the North Korean regime. Neither the US nor China has shown any desire to destabilize North Korea: it is a South Korean obsession. It would suit both great powers best for the two Koreas to take a step back, to provide them with breathing room. They would prefer a mutual cessation of hostilities between the two Koreas to restore the status quo on the Korean Peninsula.

What does “Plan B” look like?

The two Koreas are in a Gordian knot. There is an opportunity, however, to end the stagnation by assembling a grand bargain: normalization offers a path to prevent war by maintaining the status quo, which all parties should find acceptable.

There will need to be several stages before such a grand bargain can be realized. First, tit-for-tat tensions between the two Koreas can only be defused by a *simultaneous* discussion of North Korean denuclearization and a peace treaty between

North Korea and the US. As a first step, North Korea and the US should resume their recent secretive dialog to deal with the avoidance of specific “what if” scenarios. Such talks should be explicitly limited to Korean Peninsula issues. This should limit the scope for overreaction and provide a foundation for much more. South Korea should be a party to these talks, though its actual status will require diplomatic finesse.

Rather than giving into pessimism about resolving the crisis, the initial target should be crisis management. A mechanism must be established to mediate between the two Koreas, to restrain provocations and escalations, with China and the US working together to implement enforcement measures.

The South Korean and US presidents should be patient: the early stages of the process will involve creating space for North Korea to reassess its long-term strategy. This may well be the first and last chance to realize a grand bargain, since the North Korean WMD programs are still immature. Once they are fully developed, options will be reduced.

So, even while ramping up sanctions against Pyongyang, the US should be negotiating with the North, and South Korea should not panic about the possibility of a peace treaty between North Korea and the US. In dealing with such an opaque and uncooperative state, any nuclear deal has to go far beyond the model of the successful US-Iran deal.

South Korea and the US should allow China a wider role in articulating China-South Korea-US security cooperation. There needs to be a framework that can withstand unplanned physical conflict between the two Koreas, or even the collapse of the North Korean regime, without the regional security situation getting out of control. For South Korea, the security alliance with the US and the strategic cooperative partnership with China are both essential: it makes no sense to choose one over the other. China appears ready to be pragmatic, as the recent THAAD drama shows. In the long-term, North Korean denuclearization would render such defenses unnecessary.

At present, however, South Korea is adopting an unyielding stance predicated on the worst-case scenarios. President Park has made a 180-degree turn from her earlier North Korea policy: after advocating *Trustpolitik* and peaceful unification, now she plans for unification in the wake of regime collapse, as OPLAN 5015 anticipates. Now that threat of war is imminent, South Korea’s best option is direct engagement with North Korea, while China and the US work together to deal with North Korean WMD threats.

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