



## Strategic Thinking, Strategic Response by Han Sung-joo

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In a recent article, Henry Kissinger suggested that “[the Obama administration] needs to fulfill its vision with a diplomatic plan.” People tend to demand new policies from their government (especially when a new government comes to power). Strategy means being able to see the bigger picture in certain circumstances and to come up with an appropriate plan befitting the situation. Drawing up a big picture involves establishing a goal that you hope to achieve and then anticipating possible challenges. Strategy is a method for achieving long-term goals. Strategy does not consist of the entire sum of one’s position on every individual problem. Short-term plans must be related to long-term objectives, and a response to one situation should be formulated within the context of other situations.

The South Korean government, which last month was wavering on the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) issue, concluded that it would stick to its decision to participate in PSI. However, the government also decided it would make a strategic choice on the timing for PSI participation. Strictly speaking, we have to see this as one episode in which the strategy itself was not necessarily flawed, but rather the method of implementation (an announcement and tactical elaboration on the announcement) for the strategic decision (to participate in PSI) was problematic. What is more important is whether the Korean government has created a grand strategy that takes into consideration the formation of a new order on the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia, and throughout the world. It is also crucial to ask whether the government is reviewing its strategy and tactics for the North Korean nuclear and missile issues in connection with that strategy and within a particular time frame.

### North Korea, ICBM threat is largely strategic

At the risk of sounding paradoxical, North Korea, as compared to South Korea, is behaving much more strategically. The North Korean Foreign Ministry announced April 29 in connection with its rocket launch and the subsequent move of the international community toward sanctions vis-à-vis North Korea that “if the UN Security Council did not apologize, [DPRK] would resort to a nuclear test and an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test as a self-defense measure.” Experts have tended to interpret this North Korean response as a push for direct negotiations with the United States. The fact that North Korea seems pressed for time due to its own internal problems is also considered a

factor in the response. We should consider whether there is a larger strategic meaning behind North Korea’s behavior.

North Korea’s long-term strategic goal is to make its nuclear and long-range missile capabilities a *fait accompli* and to be recognized as such by using whatever means possible. From a mid-term perspective, one could assume that North Korea has goals in three different dimensions: internal politics, foreign policy, and its weapons system (hardware). For domestic political purposes, North Korea wants to show off its nuclear and missile capabilities to emphasize that the Kim Jong-il regime is strong. At the foreign policy level, North Korea wants to grab the attention of the U.S. and to possess the upper hand in negotiations. At the weapons system level, North Korea, through the latest daring missile launch, is trying to make up for tests in the past that failed or were incomplete and to bring its weapons of mass destruction and delivery vehicles to technical completion. In short, the North Korean plan is to create a “powerful nation (*kangseong daeguk*) through the execution of its military-first policy (*seongun jeongchi*).

Until now, North Korea has consistently pursued a strategy of becoming a nuclear weapon- and missile capabilities-possessing country, despite having to make great sacrifices and taking many risks. North Korea has resorted to brinkmanship tactics, tried to lure negotiating partners to the bargaining table in the name of striking a “grand bargain,” and used “salami tactics,” the slicing of bargaining trade-offs into thinner slices to gain more concessions. North Korea has garnered enough confidence to ask the UN Security Council to apologize for the sanctions measures that have been applied against it.

It is difficult for democratic countries like South Korea and the United States, where governments change periodically, to pursue consistent strategies and policies with the same objective in mind. What is certain is that these countries have to think and respond strategically to North Korea’s strategic behavior. One cannot simply write off North Korea’s behavior as reckless and then wait for the consequences of those actions to catch up with it. Since 2002, South Korea and the U.S. have limited their responses to statements that merely condemn North Korean actions, such as the resumption of nuclear activities (2003), declaration of nuclear weapons possession (2005), and testing of nuclear weapons (2006). From a North Korean perspective, it might be possible to conclude that the U.S. and South Korea have no red line with regard to weapons development and have no time line with regard to negotiations. North Korea made South Korea’s decision to participate in PSI a more serious issue. However, even if South Korea had declared its intention to fully participate in PSI, this still would not have been a strategic response to North Korea’s rocket launch.

## **Prepare a blueprint for the Korean Peninsula**

North Korea has caused a great disturbance in the world order with the development of its nuclear weapons and missiles, despite continuous objections from the five UN Security Council members and the members of the Six-Party Talks. The South Korean government and the new U.S. administration should conduct an in-depth discussion to decide what kind of stance they will take and what type of an effective strategy and plans they will develop to respond to North Korea's policies and strategy. In dealing with North Korea's nuclear and missile issues, a review of the transfer of wartime operational control, as part of the strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance, should be an important part of the response. Now that we are at a crucial transition point, where the major powers surrounding the Korean Peninsula are actively engaged in creating a new strategic board game, it is necessary to come up with a complete strategic response, one that takes into consideration the long-term, the big picture, and the future of the Korean Peninsula.