

Meiji Institute for Global Affairs

MIGA COLUMN GLOBAL DIAGNOSIS

May 23, 2017

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Short Curriculum Vitae – Ippei Kamae

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The Crux of the North Korean Nuclear Arms and Missile Development Problem: Why Can't the World Solve the Problem?

North Korea – rushing to obtain nuclear arms and missiles

On May 21, North Korea launched one Pukguksong-2 ballistic missile. It had just launched one Hwasong-12 in another missile test conducted only one week before, on

May 14. This new launch more clearly underscored its determination and stance to forge ahead in steady improvement of its missile technology, without buckling under foreign pressures to abandon its development of nuclear arms and missiles. In both of these missile tests, North Korea launched medium range ballistic missiles, not intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of reaching the continental United States. However, the tests were apparently also not entirely unconnected with ICBM development. In the past, some cases like France and China, the transition from intermediate-range ballistic missiles to ICBMs required a long time. In any case, it is only a matter of time and it would be correct to assume that, in the not-too-distant future, North Korea will come into possession of ICBMs, inclusive of the technology to miniaturize nuclear warheads and having them successfully reenter the atmosphere.

As long as it is dominated by a dictatorial regime headed by Kim Jong-un, North Korea giving up its nuclear arms, that is, a denuclearized Korean peninsula, will not be achieved. This is because of the strong possibility that North Korea believes it absolutely cannot let go of nuclear arms if it is to continue to exist as an autocratic state. North Korea is well aware of the fate of countries around the world that were autocratic states and tried but failed to acquire nuclear arms. In Iraq, President Saddam Hussein once aspired to acquire nuclear arms. In March 2003, the United States and United Kingdom attacked the country on the pretext of preventing this, thereby setting in motion the Iraq War. Ultimately, the war resulted in the death of not only President Hussein but also his first and second sons, who presumably would have succeeded him. In December of the same year, the Libyan dictator Colonel Gaddafi, who had made no secret of his ambition to acquire nuclear arms, made concessions to the international community by abandoning his program of nuclear development. But in 2011, he was killed by the rebels following the airstrikes led by Western forces. Putting aside the domestic circumstances in these respective countries, in light of these precedents, the abandonment of nuclear arms development would be nothing but an irrational move in the eyes of the autocratic state of North Korea.¹

Dialogue and pressure to date – An unsuccessful track record

Concerned countries in Northeast Asia have thus far tried various approaches to coax

North Korea to abandon its nuclear program. Those based on dialogue and incentives, offering it something in return, have all ended in failure. The program for provision of light-water reactors through the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) likewise reached an impasse, and the six-party talks between North Korea and five concerned countries (the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia) collapsed because of an inability to reach an overall consensus, with agreement on general issues but disagreement on specific ones. Under the “Sunshine Policy” pursued by the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, South Korea took an appeasement-oriented line of North-South dialogue, but there are no signs of elements that would justify optimism and suggest North Korea is leaning toward giving up its nuclear ambitions as a result.

It must be said that approaches based on sanctions aimed at punishing North Korea also have their limits. In the past, there were expectations that the strain of economic sanctions would shake the dictatorship (if not topple it) and make North Korea finally abandon its nuclear program. There is certainly one case in which sanctions encouraged North Korea to soften its attitude and pushed nuclear talks with it forward. Between 2005 and 2007, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed financial sanctions on Banco Delta Asia (BDA), a Macao bank with which North Korea had dealings. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether or not such sanctions can yield effects that go beyond playing for time. Furthermore, sanctions will have less of an effect if they are not imposed with the cooperation of all concerned countries. At present, secondary sanctions on Chinese companies dealing with North Korea are also under consideration, but protests from China are inevitable if they are imposed.² Furthermore, as preposterous as the very notion of an all-out military conflict between the United States and North Korea may seem, if North Korea is driven unnecessarily into a corner, the possibility of North Korea finding a rationale for waging war on the United States, as Japan did in the run-up to its attack on Pearl Harbor, cannot be ruled out. Once it gets its hands on mobile ICBMs with solid fuel, the surprise attack it could launch would go far beyond anything on the scale of Pearl Harbor.

The Second Korean War? Possible but not probable

Every time there has been an incident, North Korea has declared that it will turn South Korea and Japan into a “sea of fire.” It is not lying. Seoul, for example, has a population of roughly 10 million and lies only about 50 kilometers away from the North-South military demarcation line. In an instant, North Korea could wreak tremendous destruction on the city even without firing its short-range ballistic missiles, by aiming at the city with its new rocket launchers. It reportedly has approximately 300 of these launchers close to the demilitarized zone (DMZ), and there are no effective means of preventing this destruction.³ North Korea’s Nodong medium range ballistic missile has virtually all of Japan within its range (with about 50 vehicles that can launch Nodongs⁴). It could launch a saturation attack with these and then strike Japan again with its medium-range missiles such as the Hwasong-12, Pukguksong-2, and Musudan, by launching them in an ultra-high altitude lofted trajectory or, on the other hand, in a low altitude depressed trajectory. In this case, it may not be possible to intercept all of the missiles with the Aegis-launched SM-3 or PAC-3 interceptor missiles that the Japanese Self-Defense Forces have. North Korea’s assortment of missiles is anticipated to improve in both quantitative and qualitative terms. To counter this threat, the Japanese government is planning to introduce the Aegis Ashore missile defense system and the new SM-3 Block IIA. But even if it does, there will be no change in the fundamental situation, which is a harsh one for the defensive side.

After North Korea announced that it was withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the United States considered the prospect of attacking North Korea’s nuclear development facilities and began preparing for a war with that country. These activities were pursued under the leadership of the Department of Defense, which at the time was headed by William Perry. According to the plan for operations prepared in 1994, it was projected that, if it were attacked, North Korea would attack Seoul in retaliation. It was estimated that this attack on Seoul would claim the lives of anywhere from hundreds of thousands to millions of people.⁵ In addition, the plan estimated that U.S. military casualties in the first 90 days would reach 52,000.⁶ Considering the appalling immensity of loss and destruction, the anticipated opposition by China, reluctance among the U.S. public, and the legitimacy of starting such a war, it is

extremely doubtful that a U.S. military strike on North Korea could be a realistic option, even more so now than back in 1994.⁷

Viewed in this light, the war option is not going to become more realistic simply with the nuclear aircraft carrier (CVN) Ronald Reagan joining another CVN Carl Vinson, which began operating in waters near the Peninsula in late April for a diversion against North's nuclear testing. In fact, on May 19, U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis stated that with respect to the North Korea issue, "If this goes to a military solution, it's going to be tragic on an unbelievable scale. So our effort is to work with the U.N., China, Japan, South Korea to try to find a way out of this situation," indicating a search for a diplomatic solution.⁸ In South Korea, Moon Jae-in, who was just inaugurated as President on May 10 and is viewed as a successor to Roh Moo-hyun, repeatedly made statements emphasizing North-South dialogue right from the election campaign. Given this development, it is highly unlikely that North Korea fears a war and be deterred.

North Korea as a nuclear power and the problem of nuclear deterrence

Now that things have come to this juncture, the world has no choice but to accept North Korea as a nuclear power, like it or not. This is a natural, logical conclusion seeing that, as is clear from the foregoing analysis, that there are absolutely no prospects for denuclearization of the Korean peninsula unless the dictatorial regime disappears. Because the internationally isolated regime is certainly not going to disappear spontaneously, it would have to be forcibly removed through either war or revolution. If war cannot be tolerated and change due to foreign pressure cannot be expected, the only choice is to accept that reality. However, the concerned countries are seeking two mutually incompatible agenda, in other words, the coexistence of North and South Korea and the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, as policy objectives. While no particular country is to blame for this, it simply reflects the contradiction among the United States, China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia, all attempting to find a solution that suit their own specific interests.

However, the logical inconsistency of trying to achieve both coexistence of the two

Koreas and denuclearization of the Korean peninsula could possibly be resolved by the “America First” line taken by President Trump. This, nevertheless, may not mean a brighter future for Japan. At the U.S.-Japan summit meeting held in February 2017, President Trump told Prime Minister Abe that the United States stood 100% with its ally, Japan (in connection with the North Korean problem), but there is no guarantee that this position will remain unchanged.⁹ This is because, even if it appears that the United States has drawn a red line (whose crossing would trigger military action) at North Korean acquisition of ICBMs, it can still deter a nuclear attack on itself with its own nuclear arsenal if North Korea crosses that line. In other words, the pledge of “America First” will be fulfilled even if the United States recognizes North Korea as being, in effect, a nuclear power, as it has done with India and Pakistan. In the context of the U.S.-Japan relationship, this decision could lead to a decline in the credibility of the nuclear deterrence provided to allies, as it would amount to what is termed “decoupling,” which once drove a wedge between the United States and European members of NATO during the Cold War. In short, it would raise suspicions that the nuclear umbrella supplied by the United States to Japan actually cannot be opened. From now on, Japan will be increasingly troubled with the old but once again new worry: whether the United States will really protect Tokyo to the point of exposing Washington D.C. to danger.

¹It has long been reported that North Korea has embraced this kind of thinking. Recently, for example, *the Rodong Sinmun*, the organ of the Worker’s Party of Korea, stressed the need for strengthening the nuclear program. In an article that appeared in mid-March 2017, it pointed out that “abandonment of the path to a stronger military brought Libya only misery and civil war as a small and weak country.” - “North Korea Stunned by the Trump Administration – ‘Gaddafi Died Because He Abandoned Nukes,’” *Sankei Shimbun*, April 7, 2017.

²In February 2016, the US passed legislation for tougher sanctions on North Korea that would also cover Chinese banks. In response, China issued a statement opposed to the law through its Foreign Ministry spokesperson. In this statement, China requested all concerned parties to exercise prudence in their actions and not to deliberately cause trouble. It added that any problem whatsoever could not be resolved simply by sanctions or pressure. It also stated that any acts detrimental to the interests of third parties would not assist in resolving problems and would only further complicate the situation. “‘Don’t Deliberately Make Trouble’ – China’s Foreign Ministry Objects to the Possibility of Chinese Banks Being Targeted by Tighter US Sanctions on North Korea,” *Sankei Shimbun*, February 19, 2016.

³For details, see for example the source below. “Seoul Hit by 9,000 Rockets in the Event of a Military Clash, Turning it into a ‘Sea of Fire’ in One Day – VX Gas in the Skies over Japan,” *Sankei Shimbun*, April 27, 2017; “The KN-09, a New Weapon Greatly Heightening the North Korean Threat,” *Toyo Keizai*, April 9, 2014.

⁵ “Tension – The Depths of the North Korean Crisis,” *NHK Special*, Broadcast on May 20, 2017.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Yoshiki Mine, “Six Reasons Why Trump Cannot Attack North Korea,” *Toyo Keizai*, April 13, 2017.

⁹ “Japanese and US Heads Criticize North Korea – ‘With Japan 100%’ Says Trump,” *The Nikkei*, February 12, 2017.