

Foreign Policy of Kim Jong Un's 10 Years: Relentless Maneuvering among Options

Ildo Hwang*

This paper summarizes the political directions Pyongyang has displayed in its nuclear diplomacy for the past ten years in a time sequential manner. The particular focus has been on Pyongyang's insistence on maintaining various options to choose from and its political ability to materialize them. The study has looked into North Korea's major policy transitions and the changes in position prominently demonstrated in its diplomacy with the U.S., China, and South Korea.

During the period studied, Pyongyang has shown flexible attitudes, which include: 1) its radical transition from aggressive nuclear and missile capacity building to returning to the negotiation table; 2) its transition of the main issue from demanding corresponding security measures to demanding sanctions relief; 3) its transition of the up-front goal from showing off its retaliation deterrence capacity to strike the U.S. mainland to completion of nuclear war-fighting capabilities in the regional arena; and 4) its transition from hedging against China, focusing on its possible negotiation with the U.S., to hedging against the U.S., focusing on its possible closer ties with China. Such flexibility has been quite successful as a way to realize the strategic objectives that North Korea wanted to achieve in the first place.

Keywords: Strategic Nuclear Forces Construction Initiative, Nuclear negotiation with North Korea, Pendulum diplomacy, the U.S-China Rivalry, Sanctions

* Ildo Hwang is Assistant Professor at IFANS, Korea National Diplomatic Academy, Seoul, where he teaches North Korean issues and military security. He can be reached at shamora0125@gmail.com.

I . Introduction

North Korea's movement for the past ten years under the Kim Jong Un regime can be interpreted from various points of view, but at its core, there lies an undeniable national strategic goal of "completion of a reliable nuclear force." This goal best explains North Korea's economic and social policies, as well as its diplomatic moves to key countries such as the U.S, China, and South Korea. In short, North Korea's foreign policies for the past ten years can be summarized as a process through which it has been trying to realize possible paths catered to the changing situation. However, at all times, it has never stopped prioritizing its nuclear force as its prime value.

From this vantage point, it is believed that North Korea's foreign policy during Kim Jong Un's time in power can be divided into four stages: 1) Phase 1 began right after Kim Jong Un took control. He struck an agreement with the U.S. on February 29, but the deal swiftly collapsed. 2) Phase 2 lasted from 2016 to 2017, when the focus was on repeated missile launches and nuclear tests to extend North Korea's ICBM range to reach the U.S. mainland. 3) Phase 3 covers the year 2018 and the first half of 2019, specifically until the Hanoi Summit, when the effort was made to secure economic rewards, such as lifting sanctions, in return for giving up the "nuclear future" by shutting down the Yongbyon site. 4) Phase 4 began in mid-2019, when it became clear that North Korea's diplomatic endeavor in Phase 3 had ended in nothing but failure. The focus was now on achieving the modernization and sophistication of short-range missiles to achieve nuclear war-fighting capabilities that can best be utilized within the region, including the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, North Korea seems to have been seeking ways to be recognized as an official nuclear state, leveraging the ongoing strategic rivalry between China and the U.S.

The point is that, looking back, Pyongyang does not seem to have displayed a willful and inflexible movement toward its predetermined goals. For example, in 2018, when North Korea thought it faced an impasse in achieving its goal of building a complete nuclear deterrent, it pondered deeply to come up with other policy options to use as a bypass or

alternatives to overcome the challenge. This explains North Korea's tendency to be evasive, as it least appreciates a situation that has only a single option or path—North Korea always tries to maintain a variety of options to enjoy the best flexibility.

When we think about the discourses or political assets that Chairman Kim mobilized before the Hanoi Summit, we cannot say that his moves were all simply deceptive or that they were measures to delay time. To put it differently, it seems evident that North Korea included the option to give up its nuclear development capacity in a limited scope after considering the actual feasibility of completing nuclear deterrent, the efficacy of its nuclear forces, and its possible side effects and aftermath. When that option was smashed in Hanoi, it swiftly moved to another playbook that is, prioritizing the short-range capability that could be best utilized in the region while continuing to leverage the U.S-China rivalry.

As such, this study aims to summarize North Korea's flexible policy maneuvering for the past 10 years in a time-sequential manner. While doing so, it will look more closely at North Korea's preference for retaining a wide variety of options as possible and the changes in its relations with the U.S., China, and South Korea. To do this, it will be necessary to focus on prominent cases where North Korea chose to make a sudden transition in its policies or positions. Indeed, such a tendency is not a characteristic unique to the Kim Jong Un regime only, but is a pattern that has become all the more conspicuous as North Korea's nuclear build-up has gotten on the full-fledged track.

II. 2012~2015: A time of confusion or preparation

Since the demise of the former chairman of North Korea, Kim Jong Il, in December 2011, the Kim Jong Un regime has spent a significant amount of time solidifying its power and stabilizing its internal political landscape. The character of this period is well represented by several executions: those of General Ri Yong-ho, Director Jang Song-thaek, and Defense

Minister Hyon Yong-chul. Considering the level of domestic political instability, it is only natural that we didn't see a specific direction in its foreign policy during that time. Therefore, it is safe to say that North Korea experienced a high level of confusion in its foreign policy. At best, one can see this period as a time of readying its nuclear/missile capability for further strengthening. In particular, with regard to nuclear negotiation with the U.S., Kim Jong Un was still in an immature stage and did not know how to handle the power that had just been handed over to him. Thus, it is relatively more difficult to deeply analyze his foreign policies during this time.

A definitive case in point was North Korea's agreement with the U.S. on February 29, 2012, and its quick collapse. As noted, in April 2012, Kim Jong Un officially took the position of First Chairman of the National Defense Commission and the First Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea. In other words, the deal with the Obama administration was discussed, agreed, and then collapsed all before the official formation of the Kim Jong Un regime. It has been well acknowledged that the agreement was mainly about North Korea's consent to suspend missile launches and nuclear tests and the nuclear moratorium at the Yongbyon Site, including the uranium enrichment in return for 240 million metric tons of nutrition support from the U.S. However, on April 14, just two months after the deal was struck, North Korea blatantly carried out a long-range missile launch, arguing that it was part of the space program and for peaceful purposes.

In fact, it was just two weeks after the deal was made, when Pyongyang announced its satellite launch plan in March, insisting that this rocket was irrelevant to the missile moratorium, as it was solely to advance its satellite system. However, those sitting at the negotiation table on the U.S. side recalled that the North was fully aware that such "satellite launch" should be enough to make the deal fall through, and there should have been no way for Pyongyang to be too naive not to know such simple fact. It had been a crystal-clear principle long before the negotiation that any rocket launch should be considered equivalent to an ICBM.¹

Against this backdrop, one conclusion we can draw is that the Kim Jong Un regime either tried its best to ignore or dared to risk the possible collapse of the agreement. Either way, it is not easy for us to determine why it agreed to strike a deal in the first place. In the preceding research, various scholars brought up diverse analyses, noting that: 1) As the negotiation had been initiated during the Kim Jong Il era, Kim Jong Un was not subject to the content of the agreement; 2) Kim Jong Un took a hardline position in the early stages of his regime to show off his strong leadership image; and 3) during this time, the nuclear diplomacy strategy of North Korea took a radical turn from a denuclearization negotiation to a priority on nuclear possession.²

Although nobody was sure how well thought out the change was, everybody knew that it carried huge repercussions. As noted, the Obama administration, which was determined to have a nuclear negotiation with North Korea in its early years, quickly lost trust in Pyongyang and changed its stance to so-called "strategic patience." There were discussions of possible negotiations with North Korea at times, but they failed to gain momentum. Moreover, as President Biden took office in 2021, the key players who led this process during the Obama administration returned to their key positions in U.S. diplomacy. Their painful memory of the agreement in 2012 is limiting the Biden administration's negotiation options with North Korea, and the Kim Jong Un regime seems to be paying a huge price for the confusing decisions it made in the early stages of its foreign policy.

1 Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, *The Two Koreas: A contemporary history* (UK: Hachette, 2013), ch. 19.

2 Refer to Jin-Ha Kim, "The Revisionist Origins of North Korea's Militaristic and Coercive Diplomacy," *Defense Study* 63, no. 1 (2020); Sangkeun Lee, "Kim Jong-Un's Leadership and North Korea's Foreign Policy Change," *Korea and World Politics* 33, no. 4 (2017); Sukhoon Hong, "An Analysis of Kim Jong-un's New Foreign Policy Orientations and Strategies," *The Journal of Political Science & Communication* 18, no. 2 (2015) for relevant preceding research.

A similar example occurred around the time of the execution of Jang Song-thaek in December 2013. Pyongyang carried out its third nuclear test before President Xi in China took office in March 2013. Moreover, the regime executed Jang Song-thaek, who had been in charge of the North Korea-China economic cooperation project since the Kim Jong Il era. After the execution, all relevant joint ventures and projects were wasted, the China-North Korea economic cooperation entered into an unprecedented slumber, and relations between the two countries suffered a long cooling-off period until 2018.

As noted, Jang Song-thaek's execution is generally understood to have occurred as a result of power politics in Pyongyang. Especially according to the mainstream analysis, he was embroiled in ever worsening conflicts with powerful agencies such as the North Korean People's Army and the State Security Department, as he tried to deprive them of the privilege to earn foreign hard currency via autonomous export of natural resources, and monopolize the business to the Party only.³ From this point of view, it is true that after the execution of Jang, the Kim Jong Un regime was able to stabilize its reigning power successfully. Nevertheless, this event left a massive scar in North Korea's relationship with China, meaning that Pyongyang made choices that cooled its relationship with the U.S. and China simultaneously during this period. It was an unusual decision even for North Korea, which has had quite a unique diplomacy pattern.

Such limitations were repeated in its nuclear/missile capability development, following a similar pattern. North Korea launched its missiles three or four times annually from 2012–2013 but suddenly increased its launches in 2014. However, such an increase did not have much technological significance as they were all more or less simple demonstrations meant to show off its strong image to the outside world by utilizing the existing weapon systems of KN-01, KN-02, FROG, Scud, and

3 Hyeon Jung Park et al., "The Dynamics of the Competition for Power and Interest under Suryong Dictatorship and the Purge of Jang Sung-thaek," *North Korean Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (2014).

Rodong.⁴ It was true that North Korea made certain level of achievements by launching long-range rockets during this time, which allowed it to verify the trajectory control and stage separation technology necessary for ICBM development. However, the Rodong engine clustering technology used here was different from the ICBM finally completed after 2017. The only prominent result related to North Korea's missile capability-building effort was the SLBM ejection test from the Sinpo-class submarine in May 2015.

In other words, during this time, North Korea's foreign policy displayed neither clear direction nor particular achievement from the perspective of nuclear capabilities build-up or its negotiation effort. Instead, it displayed a confusing pattern in its decision-making. Based on this, we can only assume that the Kim Jong Un regime put much heavier weight on domestic political stability and solidifying his legitimacy during those years and utilized foreign policy to achieve this internal goal.⁵ Under such logic, the main elements of foreign policy had to be put on the back burner and settled far behind the domestic policy. Since this period, the outside world has started to build a biased perceptual framework to interpret the country's every single external move as a result of internal factors.

However, we should consider a few measures that North Korea carried out in the latter part of 2015. For example, Chairman Kim, during this time, made a total generation change. He replaced all the personnel in charge of missile capability development, appointing Ri Man-gon as director of the Party's Munitions Industry Department (MID), Ri Pyong-chol as first deputy director of MID, and Kim Jong-sik as deputy director of MID.⁶ These

4 CSIS Missile Defense Project, "North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests: 1984-Present," Center for Strategic & International Studies, October 29, 2021, accessed November 12, 2011, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present/>.

5 Jongjoo Lee, "A Study on Kim Jong-un's Coercive Diplomacy and Nuclear Weapons," *North Korean Studies Review* 22, no. 3 (2019): 98, 202.

6 Min Hong, "Analysis on North Korea's Main Nuclear-Missile Activities," *KINU Insight*, no. 1, Korea Institute for National Unification (2017), 26-30.

are the key figures who have successfully built up the country's missile capability until recently. In addition, some analysis suggests that the RD-250 engine design from the former Soviet Union, a prototype of the Paektusan engine, was first acquired around this time.⁷ Against this backdrop, we can evaluate that technical preparation was completed during this phase to initiate the nuclear build-up process in earnest from 2016.

III. 2016~2017: Changes in attitude dependent on technological confidence⁸

Looking at North Korea's nuclear/missile development process, one cannot miss the clear characteristics displayed during the two-year period from its fourth nuclear test in January 2016 to the test launch of the Hwasung-15 type in November 2017. Compared to the previous phases during which its nuclear/missile capability had been demonstrated only intermittently, during those years, North Korea was able to enhance its capacity according to a very compressed development schedule. Regarding this progress, North Korea used the term "Strategic Nuclear Force Construction Initiative," implying that it had set a frame differentiated from all the other development phases.⁹

7 Michael Elleman, "The secret to North Korea's ICBM success," *Survival* 59, no. 5 (2017).

8 Part of content in this section is based on the analysis results contained in Ildo Hwang, "Analysis on Two Years of North Korea's Strategic Nuclear Forces Construction Initiative," *Analysis of Major International Issues*, no. 6, Korea National Diplomatic Academy (2018), which was later revised to fit an academic article format and reflected in this paper.

9 It was not until the DPRK Nuclear Laboratory Statement declared right after the 5th nuclear test in September 2016 that the North Korean state broadcast outlet and official announcement started to adopt the phrase, "according to the DPRK Strategic Nuclear Force Construction Initiative." The same expression appeared in the same vein when the same agency announced the same statement upon the completion of the 6th nuclear test in September 2017. Compared to this, in January 2016 when the 4th nuclear test took place,

The distinguishing point of Pyongyang's relevant activities at that time was particularly revealed in its specific sequencing. For example, since 2006, it used to conduct its nuclear tests when tensions in the international community intensified, following the country's long-range missile launch and when the UN Security Council started to discuss concrete sanction measures. For North Korea, a nuclear test was a tool to protest against the international community, which "unduly oppressed North Korea and tried to prevent it from enjoying its due right to hold a rocket launch." Conversely, in January 2016, North Korea carried out its fourth nuclear test, at an unexpected time point when it did not launch a rocket at all. During its first to third nuclear tests, Pyongyang put much effort into attracting the attention of the U.S. and the international community. Since its fourth nuclear test, however, the focus has been on literal nuclear technology development.

In the same vein, until 2016, the missile launch had been centered on the old short-range platform that had already been deployed. Since 2016, on the other hand, it has launched missiles with various engines, such as Musudan, Paektusan, and Bukguksong within a brief time interval, demonstrating its differentiated missile capability. Based on this, we can assume that the primary goal of the Strategic Nuclear Force Construction Initiative was to make North Korea's nuclear delivery capability a given fact, and for this, Pyongyang tried to verify the relevant technologies that it had had long possessed but had not disclosed.

it was only expressed as "according to WPK's strategic decision," and even such an expression was not founded in previous nuclear tests. Because the 7th Congress of the WPK was held in May 2016 between the 4th and 5th nuclear test, it should be a reasonable assumption that the term "Strategic Nuclear Force Construction Initiative" was officially adopted in the meeting. As noted, the 7th Congress was a venue that made the "Five-Year Economic Strategy" official under the basis of the dual policy of nuclear and economic development initiated in 2013. In other words, the Strategic Nuclear Force Construction Initiative and Five-Year Economic Strategy started to represent the specific two pillars of its long-held dual policy. Refer to Hwang, "Analysis on Two Years of North Korea's Strategic Nuclear Forces Construction Initiative": 3-5 for more information.

During this period, North Korea's attitude toward nuclear negotiation can be divided into three stages. The first stage was from January 2016 to March 2017, when the launches were centered on Scud, Rodong, and Musudan. Here, Pyongyang displayed a relatively open attitude towards negotiation. A case in point was North Korea's remarks about its prospects on dialogue in May 2016. Back then, Pyongyang sent positive signals in various forms, including: 1) a public letter from the NDC that proposed a two-Korea military dialogue calling for a positive response from the South; 2) remarks by Kim Ki-Nam, Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department, who said "anybody who wishes to improve relations should come to the negotiation table for communication"; 3) remarks by the chief director of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland, who said "Instead of listing unjust preconditions such as nuclear abandonment, we need to start a dialogue right away"; and 4) a letter from People's Armed Forces' General Political Bureau, which called for a military dialogue.

By the end of 2016, on the major 1.5 track dialogues, key players in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in North Korea maintained their stance that the "dual freeze" concept could be discussed through which both ROK-US military drills and North Korea's nuclear/missile test would be simultaneously suspended. Simply put, during this stage, North Korea called for a dialogue as soon as possible, whereas the U.S. and South Korea refused to participate, insisting on denuclearization measures as a precondition.

One of the reasons behind North Korea's attitude might be the disappointing performance of the Musudan engine, the original technology for mid-/long-range missiles. As opposed to the estimates about dozens of Musudan missiles already deployed in the field, only one out of the eight missile tests was found to be successful. KN-08 and KN-14, demonstrated previously during military parades, were all based on the clustering of the Soviet 4D-10 engine, which was also used for the Musudan missile. Therefore, such failures of the Musudan missiles meant that there would be technical uncertainties when developing IRBM or ICBM, which

had both been expected to fly longer and farther than the Rodong missile.

As mentioned above, the diplomatic stance of the North at that point was a pretty unusual pattern for Pyongyang to propose. Such an exceptional move should have something to do with its failures in the Musudan missile, which exposed its low missile capability and limitations in its usable doctrine. This development leads to another hypothesis: After launching Musudan missiles several times, North Korea found that the results were not as good as expected, and its technical prospects for ICBM became quite uncertain. Therefore, North Korea ended up doubting whether to use it as a possible play card for a negotiation.

The second stage was from March to November 2017. On March 18, North Korea successfully conducted a rocket launch test with an advanced Soviet RD-250 engine. This engine was later named a "Paektusan engine," and it was, two months later in May, used for Hwasong-12 IRBM and was successfully launched. Another two months later in July, the engine was built into Hwasong-14 ICBM and was launched successfully two times in a row. Lastly, the North made another successful ICBM missile launch with Hwasong-15 in November. All of the new mid-/long-range missiles with demonstrated flight performance were made possible by the clustering of the Paektusan engine. To attest to this, the Musudan missile disappeared after its last test in April 2017, along with KN-08 and KN-14, which were not demonstrated in a military parade until February 2018. Since then, mid-/long-range ground-to-ground missile forces have all been reconstituted with the Paektusan engine variants, and they still maintain such a posture today. In other words, the acquisition of the engine can be considered as the turning point that finally completed Pyongyang's long-range missile technology.

At the same time, the North started to take a hardline stance on dialogues or negotiations. Equally notable were North Korea's remarks that appeared in the *Rodong Sinmun* on September 22, 2017, regarding the "path of the China case." After China carried out its first nuclear test in 1964 and a hydrogen bomb test in 1968, the Nixon administration started its

détente with China in earnest in 1972. After this, the two countries normalized their relations, and the U.S. accepted China becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council. North Korea kept using this reference in various central broadcast outlets and public papers, proclaiming itself as a state that had successfully developed nuclear/hydrogen bombs and ICBM, just like China in the past. It repeatedly suggested the idea of a "normalization of relations" between the DPRK and the U.S as proper nuclear states. By saying "Just as the U.S. came to détente with China in 1970, it can do the same with North Korea," Pyongyang started to proclaim itself as, *by fait accompli*, a "nuclear power."

Once this had become a basic premise of its frame, ICBM technology was considered the core leverage that makes an actual negotiation between nuclear states possible. Therefore, for the North, the best way to maximize the possibility of becoming a nuclear state was to show off its ICBM technology as soon as and as reliably as possible. Since then, the regime has started to maintain a significantly hardline position regarding possible dialogue or negotiation on nuclear issues, including the "dual freeze" concept. A reasonable hypothesis that can rightly explain the situation is this: As the technology to complete the ICBM was placed within reach, North Korea set a new target to "complete the capability as soon as possible despite any challenges" by quickly scrapping its previous option of "using the current state of the process as a playing card to trade the best we can get in return."

The third stage occurred from November 2017 to the opening of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games and was characterized by specified responses of the U.S. to Pyongyang's moves. During this time, the Trump administration swiftly realized various measures through the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and the Nuclear Posture Review. The measures taken here included: 1) bolstering its missile defense capacity by reinforcing the ground interceptors in Alaska; 2) adopting SLBM and SLCM mounting low nuclear yield warheads; 3) developing a deployment plan of the Aegis Ashore Defense system by Japan; and 4) deploying the USFK THAAD system. These measures were

a summarized response to North Korea from the U.S, sending the message that the U.S. can easily deter North Korea's limited number of missiles with its enhanced interception capability. This was a clear expression from Washington that there is no way the U.S would, albeit tacitly, acknowledge North Korea's nuclear projection capability to the U.S. mainland and have an "arms control negotiation" with North Korea.

As the U.S. sent a clear signal on its unwavering stance through public documents and a chain of announcements, North Korea made a subtle change in its attitude towards negotiation. The change started with an article published in *The Choson Sinbo* newspaper on February 12, 2018, in which North Korea alluded to the possibility of a nuclear/missile moratorium under the premise of a continued two-Korea dialogue. The article said that "a resumption of ROK-US military drills will destroy the inter-Korea relation," urging South Korea and the U.S. to join the "dual freeze" frame. As noted, such changes in the atmosphere led up to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games in February, the two-Korea summit in April, and the U.S.-North Korea summit in Singapore in June.

Back then, the reasons behind the North coming back to the negotiation table with the dual freeze frame as its precondition could be as follows: 1) Even if the ICBM technology were completed, it is not likely for them to see a fundamental improvement in their nuclear deterrence structure against the U.S.; and 2) the mutual nuclear deterrence structure is impossible to build without accumulating enough ICBMs to exceed the saturation point of the U.S. missile defense system or making a second-strike capability to the U.S. by demonstrating long-range SLBM capability. To achieve the capability mentioned above would take a significant amount of time, considering the technical development status of the country. Therefore, the North likely concluded that it did not mean much even if they repeatedly show off ICBM technology further. Instead, what would be strategically more meaningful would be to keep a variety of options on the table, including negotiation, while leaving in place a certain level of ambiguity regarding ICBM capabilities.

This summary shows that North Korea's Strategic Nuclear Forces Construction Initiative, as opposed to its initial big picture, has experienced significant ups and downs. Their first option for an ICBM engine based on Musudan, which had already been deployed, suffered from a disastrous failure. Again, the North believed that the U.S. would, albeit reluctantly, accept a "nuclear arms control" frame for negotiation, if they demonstrated its initial technology path or rudimentary ICBM technology. However, this rosy picture also collapsed at an early stage. When faced with these setbacks, Pyongyang did not rigidly adhere to its original plan nor approach it. Instead, it repeatedly changed its policy in an impromptu manner, reflecting the limitations of each weapon system and a nuclear doctrine full of weaknesses.

In particular, the change in the North's attitude toward diplomatic solutions meant that in the process, they had made a significant change in direction by reflecting the verified level of internal capability and changes in the external environment. Regarding Pyongyang's transition to a negotiating phase in 2018, many speculated that it must have been based on confidence that it had completed more than a certain level of nuclear capability. However, if we cautiously reflect on what was happening back then, North Korea was more open to negotiations or dialogue when it believed that the goal was not easy to reach.

Additionally, the same logic can be applied when we consider that North Korea promoted the long-range missile technology development process with multiple engines such as Musudan, Paektusan, and Pukgukseong as options. For North Korea, it was evident that if it relies solely on a single engine and should it fail, the repercussions would be disastrous. In fact, such a nightmare became reality when North Korea witnessed repeated Musudan missile launch failures in 2016. In other words, North Korea secured multiple engine options prior to its commitment to the Strategic Nuclear Forces Construction Initiative,¹⁰ and this would be a case in which the North's behavioral pattern, such as the

10 Elleman, "The secret to North Korea's ICBM success."

continuous pursuit of diversified options, can be glimpsed in terms of the technological aspect.

IV. 2018~2019: Transition between security corresponding measures and lifting of sanctions

There can be various evaluations from end to end, regarding the results and implications of North Korea's active engagement with the outside world that started in 2018. On one hand, it might be interpreted as a deceptive tactic of Pyongyang to avoid the possible military option taken by the Trump administration, while on the other hand, Pyongyang might have made such a decision with its decisive willingness to denuclearize, but that chance was lost due to the rigid decision-making system inside the Trump administration.

Nevertheless, what is obvious is that we have seen some signs that make it difficult to dismiss that Kim Jong Un's summit diplomacy was simply a tactic of deception. As noted, during this time, state media outlets used phrases such as "earth-shaking diplomacy" to emphasize that Chairman Kim's "creative move" transcended the existing perception framework or fault line in the international landscape, such as imperialism vs. anti-imperialism.¹¹ What is more, prior to the Hanoi Summit, North Korean media outlets delivered Chairman Kim's diplomatic moves in detail to residents almost in real time. In case of a summit failure, those reports would have directly contradicted and undermined the belief that "Chairman Kim never gets anything wrong." Thus, such an enthusiastic news tone showed Pyongyang's high expectation on positive results of the Summit.

Particularly noteworthy is that North Korea's official discourse

11 Ildo Hwang, "North Korea's Recent Perception on International Political Landscape: Implication on Nuclear Negotiation," *Analysis of Major International Issues*, no. 36, Korea National Diplomatic Academy (2019): 1.

explained that its diplomatic moves during this period were meant to "create an external environment favorable to economic development." In the same context, key players who can be classified as Kim's aides visited China and Vietnam ahead of the Singapore and Hanoi Summit to conduct a field inspection program related to the economic development model. In short, there is no doubt that the primary purpose of negotiations during this period was to lay the foundation for economic development by solving the issue of sanctions.

Before and after adopting the All-out Efforts Concentration Policy to Build a Socialist Economy at a plenary session of the Party's Central Committee in April 2018, North Korea carried out large-scale recreational facility construction projects in major tourist areas such as Wonsan Kalma and Samjiyon. In particular, in the case of the Wonsan Kalma Tourist Zone, Chairman Kim Jong Un personally took an inspection tour on May 25,¹² shortly after North Korea blew up its nuclear test facility in Punggye-ri ahead of the Singapore Summit. As noted, tourism is not subject to the sanctions on North Korea. At this time, Pyongyang seems to have been considering ways to: 1) Acquire at least a small amount of foreign currency to survive by at least attracting foreign tourists; 2) resume exports of significant items such as coal and iron ore to bring back its foreign currency supply to its pre-2016 levels; or 3) help state-owned factories or companies to receive foreign direct investment by completely lifting all the sanctions.

12 Peter Makowsky et al., "Examining Kim's Approach to Construction: Project Wonsan," *38 North*, October 16, 2020, accessed November 12, 2021, https://www.38north.org/2020/10/wonsan101620/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+38North+%2838+North%3A+Informed+Analysis+of+North+Korea%29https://www.38north.org/2020/10/wonsan101620/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+38North+%2838+North%3A+Informed+Analysis+of+North+Korea%29. Since the second half of 2019, when the prospect of negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea became slim, the construction speed of the Wonsan Kalma district has been significantly delayed, and it has not yet been completed. This can also be a further proof that the construction project of major tourist resorts was closely related to the improvement of economic conditions depending on the results of nuclear negotiations.

It is also necessary to examine the military's economic role, which was starkly noticeable during this period. All of the major construction projects, including Wonsan Kalma, had been carried out on a large scale by mobilizing the People's Army, and in May 2018, Kim Soo-gil, director of the General Political Bureau, accompanied Chairman Kim's field tour of Wonsan Kalma. This trend seems to have been formalized through an Enlarged Meeting of the Party Central Military Commission held on May 17, 2018, and it was reported on the front page of the *Rodong Sinmun*, that during the meeting, Chairman Kim said, "Let the People's Army take charge of both national defense and socialist economy construction."¹³ Taking a step further, Pyongyang, at that time, seemed to have been thinking of its own economic development model, in which foreign capital could be invested through the People's Army if sanctions were lifted. In other words, it is not a Vietnamese-style FDI in which each economic entity freely conducts joint ventures with the outside world, but a plan to use the People's Army as a main vehicle to control the official economy by receiving investment from other countries and distributing it to local companies and factories in special economic zones.¹⁴ This is similar to the so-called "gatekeeper model" that Cuba chose in order to maintain a socialist centralized economic model while seeking ways to attract external capital when it was suffering from difficulties due to the collapse of the socialist economy upon the end of the Cold War.¹⁵

It should be noted that North Korea took an approach that was quite different from the past, because for this time it focused on economic sanctions lift as a corresponding benefit for initial denuclearization measures. From the Inter-Korean Joint Declaration in September 2018 to the preparation period for the Hanoi Summit in February 2019, discussion

13 *Rodong Sinmun*, May 18. 2018.

14 Ildo Hwang, "Dual Structure of North Korea's Economic Development Discourse: Implications on Nuclear Negotiation," *Analysis of Major International Issues*, no. 6, Korea National Diplomatic Academy (2019): 14-15.

15 Hye Hyun Son. "New Cuban Government of Díaz-Canel: Implications and Challenges," *Analysis of Major International Issues*, no. 21, Korea National Diplomatic Academy (2018).

at the early stage of nuclear negotiation mainly centered on the topic of a permanent shutdown of the Yongbyon nuclear site. During the process, North Korea urged lifting sanctions as corresponding measures or compensational benefits in the political or security sector. The negotiation was embodied in the Hanoi meeting as a demand to lift four sanctions that had been adopted by the UN Security Council since 2016 in return for the dismantling of the Yongbyon facility.

This was quite a different move from those used by the North in the past. It usually focused on a set of security agenda items, including peace agreements, discussions of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea, and termination of U.S. strategic assets deployment to the region. Examples might include: 1) In January 2015, it proposed a tentative dual freeze for both nuclear tests and for ROK-US military drills; 2) Between October and December of the same year, the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a series of statements that suggested that the peace agreement and denuclearization pursued were a single package; and 3) in July 2016, a statement was issued in the name of a DPRK spokesman, calling for "denuclearization across the whole Korean Peninsula." This stance was reaffirmed at the Singapore Summit in June 2018 through an agreement that described the effort to establish the U.S.-North Korea relations for a peace regime.¹⁶

In this regard, the North's attitude toward focusing on sanctions at the

¹⁶ For this, an informal explanation can be provided with no different context from the official statement. Between 2017 and 2019, I attended seven 1.5-track conferences overseas in which the North Korean side also participated. Until the latter part of 2018, high-ranking officials from the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs mainly mentioned corresponding measures in the security sector, commonly referred to as "hostile policies," such as a withdrawal of U.S. troops or suspension of deploying strategic assets. Lifting sanctions was not discussed because the North's delegation created a hard-headed atmosphere in which it did not want to discuss lifting sanctions as a possible corresponding measure, saying, "DPRK can and will endure the sanction however long it would last." This attitude confirmed that North Korea perceived the sanctions as an issue that could degrade North Korea's reputation and weaken its negotiation leverage.

Hanoi Summit can be interpreted as follows: as the discussion developed from Singapore came to the point on detailed matters, it started to put much attention on sanction issues, in other words, rewards it can get in return for economic sector. To put it differently, it can be said that North Korea allowed a rapid shift in the focus of corresponding measures from security and political sectors to the economic sectors. It also reaffirmed that the regime's goal of negotiations at the time was to create an external environment favorable to its economic development, as proclaimed officially.

However, following the failure of the Hanoi Summit, North Korea has returned to security agenda, symbolized by the "withdrawal of the hostile policy." This regression was first mentioned during the press conference on March 15, 2019, right after the collapse of the Summit, in which Choe Son-hui, First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, mentioned the "possible suspension of negotiation." It was later continued by various North Korean statements mentioning mostly the ROK-US joint military drills. Pyongyang has never clearly summarized and explained what specific issues it refers to when it comes to "the hostile policy," but one thing is obvious: North Korea has returned to the frame it had before the Singapore Summit, focusing on the military situation around the Korean Peninsula.

In the end: 1) First, Pyongyang kept mentioning a comprehensive and fundamental agenda centered on security issues when the nuclear negotiations remained stalled; and 2) second, as the negotiation came close to achieving its tangible outcome, it changed its focus from the security sector to the economic sector represented by lifting sanctions. The North argues that it has shifted to a practical issue because the two countries did not narrow their fundamental issue gap. However, on the contrary, we can use the same logic as a proof that the North is also aware that the fundamental security issues is more unrealistic or unfeasible than lifting sanctions and other economic issues.

However, it is worth to shed a light upon the level of denuclearization measures that North Korea proposed in return for lifting sanctions.

According to the Joint Declaration in September 2018, North Korea agreed to permanent disposal of the Yongbyon nuclear facility in addition to the preemptive disposal of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site and the Dongchang-ri missile launch site. As noted, none of these facilities affect North Korea's already established nuclear and missile weapon system. Rather, these measures are to limit or slow down further development or capacity build-up in the future. Considering that the North showed reservations about giving up undisclosed uranium enrichment facilities outside of Yeongbyeon, which is expressed as "Yeongbyeon plus alpha," it is safe to say that for North Korea, such denuclearization measures were intended to slow down, rather than stop, its nuclear capability build-up. In short, at that time, North Korea had set a frame in which it was willing to slow down its capability development pace in return for sanctions relief.

Although the so-called "plus alpha" seems to have been discussed in a working-level talk at Stockholm for the time being,¹⁷ Pyongyang's attitude seemed that its maximum concession didn't include giving up its already established nuclear arsenals, and it did not think about abandoning the whole current nuclear capability. In other words, their ICBM capability had not secured the assured retaliation level against the U.S. mainland given its number and re-entry technology demonstrated in 2017, therefore, the North thought that a play card of temporizing the process only, at the level with (of) considerable ambiguity, could be acceptable for the U.S. side on the negotiation table. In this vein, North Korea must have anticipated that by giving out its test sites, implying its suspension on capability build-up, the U.S. might willingly alleviate or lift sanctions as a corresponding benefit.

As noted, the North's expectations were quite different from those of the Trump administration, which led to the collapse of the Hanoi

17 Jung-eun Lee and Wan-joon Yun, "Off to Stockholm, Kim Myong-gil from North Korea... New signals from the U.S.," *Dong-A Daily*, October 4, 2019, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://news.naver.com/main/read.naver?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=100&oid=020&aid=0003245072>.

negotiations. However, it can be said that North Korea's attempt to switch the corresponding action items shown in the process was an important example of what the North would demand when negotiations are really materializing. Alternatively, it is possible to hypothesize that the North also knows that the security-related issues such as the Korea-U.S. alliance and the USFK are unlikely to be realized, and they may repeatedly raise related issues just to show off its uncompromising attitude when negotiations are stalled.

V. 2019~2021: Full-fledged utilization of the U.S.–China strategic rivalry

The negotiation between the U.S. and North Korea faced a long impasse following the working-level negotiations at Stockholm in October 2019. The North, since then, has returned to a tough stance, taking up a new option that actively utilizes the so-called "New Cold War" discourse and making a boast of its close relationship with China. This approach can be summarized as an attempt to maximize their strategic value via using the U.S.-China rivalry context, since the summit diplomacy with the U.S. has not achieved significant results and the White House has shown a more reserved attitude. Additionally, they may have calculated that they could slow down the pace of economic deterioration by utilizing the rivalry structure between two great powers.

Of course, these playbooks have appeared since the first half of 2018, when the U.S. and North Korea started their leadership-led diplomacy. A case in point is that North Korea restored its relationship with China before the Singapore Summit. As explained earlier, North Korea's relationship with China experienced its worst period after the execution of Jang Sung-thaek in 2013 and China's participation in sanctions in 2016 and 2017. As it is well known, Chairman Kim visited Beijing just before the Singapore Summit to meet with President Xi Jinping, and throughout this, the two leaders emphasized their "strategic cooperation," which culminated in China providing a courtesy aircraft bound to Singapore for Chairman Kim.

The trend can be interpreted as an attempt by North Korea to increase the leverage of negotiations by having China at its back during the scheduled summit with the U.S. This was primarily meant to actively utilize President Trump's mindset, knowing that he recognized the U.S.-North Korea negotiations as a sub-variable of the U.S.-China conflict.¹⁸ Roughly speaking, North Korea has taken a double-hedging posture in negotiations with the U.S. and China, in which: 1) First, it tried to attract more active cooperation from China by demonstrating the possibility of striking a deal with the U.S.; and 2) second, it tried to obtain more concessions from the U.S. during the negotiations by reaffirming its long held friendship with China.

This was possible because North Korea understood that President Trump, at the time, had high expectations that he would be able to enjoy a competitive edge against China by pulling North Korea out of China's influence. In response to this, North Korea had sent a message that "there is no such thing as everlasting friends or everlasting foes."¹⁹ By setting up a situation in which both the U.S. and China would try to win over North Korea, it could show off the possible options, which in turn could provide a good chance to get an edge in its nuclear negotiation.

However, it can also be said that the double hedging during this period still set its center of gravity on the U.S. side. In other words, negotiations with the U.S. were the main concern, and the restoration of relations with China was a means to support this. However, while maintaining the double hedging attitude, North Korea started to gravitate back to China from the latter part of 2019. In other words, North Korea has been focusing on strengthening its close contacts and relationship with China, while

18 The substance of President Trump's perception at the time was reaffirmed in the memoirs of then National Security Advisor John Bolton. John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), ch. 4.

19 North Korea's state-run media reports revealed this stance most actively including an article titled "General Kim Jong Un, Writing a New History of Peace," *Rodong Sinmun*, February 13, 2019, published just ahead of the Hanoi Summit.

maintaining the slight possibility of negotiation with the U.S. in order to put pressure on China.

An example of this is the remarks made by Choi Ryong-hae, then First Vice Chairman of the State Affairs Commission, at the Non-Alliance Movement (NAM) Summit held in Azerbaijan in October 2019. His remarks can be summarized as follows: 1) Now is the time when invasive behavior and interference by a great imperialist power are rampant, similar to the early stage of the Cold War between the East and West; 2) the ghosts of a "New Cold War" are wandering around in various regions; and 3) therefore, countries that value justice should cooperate in the spirit of anti-imperialism and independence. This remark, in which he defines the current international situation as the "New Cold War," was formalized and distributed to residents of North Korea, as the full text was published in the *Rodong Sinmun*.²⁰

Interestingly, North Korean state media did not actively criticize the Trump administration during this period, while the *Rodong Sinmun* criticized the U.S. for its interference in China's human rights issues, and reported in detail the conflict between Russia and the NATO camp. For example, aggressive criticism towards the U.S. announced by North Korean Foreign Ministry officials before and after the working-level talks around the same time as Vice Chairman Choi's earlier remarks were rarely published in state media.

Pyongyang's behavioral pattern such as taking advantage of the

20 Hwang, "North Korea's Recent Perception on International Political Landscape": 11-12. This remark on the New Cold War is reaffirmed as follows through Chairman Kim Jong Un's policy speech at the 5th meeting of the Supreme People's Assembly (17th term) on September 29, 2021 (*Rodong Sinmun*, September 30, 2021): "Among the grim challenges and crises facing humanity, at the core lies the U.S. and its followers which are tumbling down the fundamentals of international peace and stability by abusing its power and coercing countries. The U.S has been dividing the world with its unfair and unilateral foreign policies, turning the international structure into 'the new cold war.' It has multiplied the complexity of the current international landscape."

deepening U.S.-China strategic competition to make the "New Cold War" and blocization a fait accompli, and defining oneself as a leading member of the socialist and non-alliance camps against the U.S., has gradually become entrenched with the prolonged deadlock in nuclear negotiations. In particular, during the Trump administration, the North repeatedly emphasized Trump and Kim's personal friendship, leaving the possibility of negotiations reserved, in order to maintain diversification of options. But from 2021, when the Biden administration's North Korea policy review was completed, criticism of the United States and the trend of strengthening relations between Pyongyang and Beijing became clearer in earnest. Although physical and human exchanges between North Korea and China were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, the two sides have shown off their highest level of friendship since the 1990s, in terms of the content and level of expression in diplomatic messages and state-run media.

From the perspective of nuclear negotiations, China, along with Russia, has recently been actively insisting on the partial relief of sanctions on North Korea as an agenda to be discussed on the UN Security Council. The main point is that it is necessary to ease sanctions related to the imports and exports of essential items. It has cited North Korea's preemptive measures such as the abolition of Punggye-ri and Dongchang-ri in 2018, arguing sanctions relief on essential items is necessary and can be made possible in the form of a snapback clause so that it can be repealed anytime. In addition, Beijing has repeatedly presented a frame for multilateralization of negotiations or resumption of six-party talks to include Russia as well as China in the picture. Such an argument is raised on the ground that the nuclear negotiations conducted under the U.S.-North Korea bilateral structure have not been successful, and officials from the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs also made some remarks acknowledging China's proposal at the multilateral 1.5-track conference held at the end of 2019.²¹

21 Hwang, "North Korea's Recent Perception on International Political Landscape": 15.

That is to say, in its "pendulum diplomacy," North Korea has swung to China. Such a move is deeply related to its recent determination to build nuclear war-fighting capabilities, which would be especially effective and viable in the region. This goal was clearly revealed by North Korea's modernization program on short-range missile forces and its declaration on tactical nuclear development from the 8th Party Congress of January 2021. Pyongyang, in particular, has recently strongly reaffirmed the need for "nuclear arms control negotiations," which may be related to the "New Cold War Blocization" stance examined so far.

In October 2021, the North raised the issue of "double standards" applied to the two Koreas regarding the building up of missile capabilities, arguing that it is equally justifiable for North Korea to modernize its short-range missile and reinforce the SLBM program. In addition, it actively uses the logical frame that was prevalent during the Cold War era, when the U.S. and the Soviet Union had nuclear arms control negotiations: 1) It uses terms such as "military balance" or "stability on the Korean Peninsula"; and 2) Chairman Kim remarked that "North Korea's main enemy is neither the U.S. nor South Korea. The war itself is the enemy."²² This move can be interpreted as an attempt to make nuclear armament a *fait accompli* by equating the current situation with the Cold War between the U.S. and Soviet Union and also by claiming that North Korea is a state party holding the right to participate in arms control negotiations. It is true that the logic itself of this context has been consistently maintained regardless of atmosphere surrounding the negotiations, but the recent discourse can be defined as a result of a more specific development of their "nuclear arms control negotiation" argument.

22 In this regard, North Korea's latest message includes "Chairman Kim Jong Un's speech at the National Defense Exhibition - Juche 110," *Rodong Sinmun*, October 11, 2021; "Remarks by Cho Chul-soo, head of international organization department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs," the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 3, 2021, accessed November 12, 2021, <http://www.mfa.gov.kp/view/article/13381>; and "Response from the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs," *Korea Central News Agency*, October 21, 2021.

Conceptually, Pyongyang's claim can be seen as an attempt to divide its capability into two separate packages: One is the punishment deterrence capability with its ICBM reaching the U.S. mainland demonstrated in 2017, and the other is the regional denial deterrence capability that it has developed since 2019.²³ Just as the negotiation of the two major Cold War camps was represented by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987, North Korea's logic seems to have developed in such a way as to imply that the U.S. should accept North Korea's partial or selective abandonment among its diversified nuclear arsenals.

This negotiation frame shows that North Korea has significantly raised the "price" compared to 2018, when it was willing to stop or slow down the pace of a "nuclear future" build-up of total arsenals in exchange for lifting the sanctions. In other words, in 2018, North Korea intended to keep its punishment deterrence capability against the U.S. mainland as opaque as possible in its denuclearization approach. However, the current attitude of Pyongyang is likely to develop in the direction of preferentially discussing the one of the two axes of its arsenals, whether for the U.S. or the region, while keeping the other intact and leaving it as a long-term

23 Refer to the following research for more information regarding relevant domestic/international analysis: Adam Mount, "Conventional Deterrence of North Korea," Federation of American Scientists, December 18, 2019, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://fas.org/pub-reports/conventional-deterrence-of-north-korea/>; Ildo Hwang, "Common Pattern of Nuclear Doctrine Evolutions and North Korea's Recent Concept of Nuclear Escalation," *National Strategy* 27, no. 3 (2021); Ildo Hwang, "North Korea's Nuclear Command and Control Estimate: Variables and Trends," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 33, no. 4 (2021); Jungsup Kim, "Recent Trend in Development of Tactical-Strategic Weapons and Implication on the Evolution of Nuclear Deterrence Doctrine in North Korea Since Hanoi Summit," *Sejong Policy Brief*, no. 6, Sejong Institute (2021); Senate Committee on Armed Services, "Statement of Charles A. Richard Commander United States Strategic Command before the Senate Committee on Armed Services 13 February 2020," United States Senate Committee on Armed Services, February 13, 2020, accessed November 12, 2021, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Richard_02-13-20.pdf; Shea Cotton, "Understanding North Korea's Missile Tests," Nuclear Threat Initiative, April 24, 2017, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/understanding-north-koreas-missile-tests/>.

agenda after confirming the implementation of initial corresponding measures.

Of course, even if Pyongyang formalizes this transition in frames, it will be difficult for the U.S. to accept it, in that it remains far from the fundamental goal: North Korea's denuclearization. Moreover, for the U.S., it is more unacceptable, in that such an approach would cause a conflict of interest between the United States and its allies in the region. Nevertheless, by repeatedly sending these messages, the North is likely to strive to achieve its goal of securing or maintaining nuclear forces with a certain level of military utility. In addition, North Korea seems to continue its efforts to interpret the deepening U.S.-China strategic rivalry as a new Cold War structure in order to receive tacit acknowledgement from either China or Russia of its regional denial deterrence capability build-up. And this can be a policy transition of the North to enter into the next chapter of its goal: completion of nuclear capability or recognition as a nuclear state even tacitly.

Currently, it is blocked by Covid-19 and the lockdown measures, but as soon as the situation improves, it is to be expected that North Korea will push to secure resources for its "muddling-through strategy" by resuming trade for essential items such as foods and fertilizer from China. As it is well known, these items are not subjected to UN Security Council sanctions. If the Self-reliant Economy campaign, which was formalized at the end of 2019, is combined with the external supply of these essential items, North Korea may calculate that it can minimize the economic difficulties caused by sanctions and secure the time for its full nuclear deterrent completion. If Pyongyang's deliberation proves to be successful, we can also say that its playbook in foreign policy, "maintaining strategic flexibility" that Chairman Kim consistently has pushed forward, will also be proven successful. This is the result of diplomatic strategies that have made maximum efforts to come up with multiple options and have striven to secure resources to leverage or slow down negotiations while constantly maneuvering between these options.

VI. Conclusion

One of the easiest errors to make when analyzing North Korea's foreign policy alone is misinterpreting the term "self-reliance (*Juche*).\" At first glance, it is easy to overlook this as simply a principle of maintaining a strong attitude toward hostile enemies, such as South Korea and the U.S. But the prevailing interpretation is that the initial establishment of this concept, which has been the core of the North Korean regime ideology, was significantly influenced by the August Faction Incident in 1956. In other words, the incident gave rise to the legitimate sense of the issue that any intervention by China or Soviet Union into North Korea's domestic politics should be criticized and blocked. This principle ultimately resulted in the slogan of "being self-reliant in terms of politics, economy, and military," as a systematic motto of the country.

Accordingly, North Korea has repeatedly shown a pattern of being fundamentally wary of situations in which it had to be unilaterally subordinate to a specific object or state. Subsequently, it chose to play pendulum diplomacy or tightrope diplomacy, actively utilizing the conflicts between China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.²⁴ This was a strategy to secure maximum political and economic benefits from both sides, even simultaneously, by either taking one side or hedging between the two countries depending on the situation and period of time.

The foreign policy shown by the Kim Jong Un regime for the past ten years, has not deviated significantly from this trajectory. Although the regime experienced great confusion in its early days, we can confirm that North Korea has always prioritized the maintenance of multiple options. It has set its primary strategic goals in an orderly fashion, but if difficulties arise in realizing them, it has not hesitated to adjust the goals themselves flexibly. In other words, the Kim Jong Un regime has made considerable

24 Soo Ho Lim, "Foreign Policy and Foreign Relation in Post Cold-War Era," in *Modern North Korea Studies*, ed. Dal-joong Chang (Seoul: Contemporary Critics, 2013), 107-109.

efforts to avoid being driven into a situation in which there is only one option. It has created domestic and international conditions and environments that can help maintain or exert such elasticity. Because of this, it has not been easy to play a game of diplomacy with North Korea under the premise that the country will eventually yield if others are able to drive it to a single unavoidable conclusion.

We cannot deny that the Kim Jong Un regime, by utilizing these options so actively, was able to achieve a significant success. North Korea first developed its lowest level of punishment deterrence capability against the U.S. mainland in 2016–2017, which was a remarkable achievement, especially compared to the rudimentary military utility of the nuclear force in the regime's early days. Since 2019, it has been stepping up its efforts to solidify its regional nuclear war-fighting capabilities while playing more ambiguous game when it comes to its strategic capabilities against the U.S. mainland. Looking just at the results so far, it can be said that North Korea has made a considerable accomplishment in achieving a significant portion of its original goals. Moreover, no one can confidently underestimate the likelihood of its realizing remaining goals in the future.

We need to deeply ponder the fact that North Korea tends to maintain various options to choose from and has made quite a few achievements thanks to such behavior patterns. This naturally leads to the conclusion that it can be difficult for us to achieve meaningful results by playing an all or nothing game with the country. This is all the more true in the current situation, in which Pyongyang's nuclear capability is crossing the threshold of maturation. In particular, considering the context of the U.S.-China relations, it is becoming even more difficult to devise out certain measures that could drive the North into a unilateral corner. Instead, the growing possibility is that Pyongyang will reiterate salami tactics and the negotiation frame of selective denuclearization, and this must be one of the most serious crisis factors related to the North Korean nuclear problem that we are witnessing now.

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