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A Treasured Sword of Justice?¹

Explaining the Key Reasons behind North Korea's Nuclear Development and US Policy Implications

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Abstract: Since the end of the Korean War (1950-1953), North Korea has tenaciously sought to develop nuclear capabilities despite harsh external pressure and sanctions, and thus it poses a serious threat to the international community. What has motivated North Korea to persistently develop nuclear weapons? Under what conditions has North Korea been able to obtain them? How should the US resolve the North Korean nuclear problem? In responding to these questions, this article first articulates the key external and internal reasons behind North Korea's nuclear development, including US military threats, distrust toward the Soviet Union (later Russia) and China, lessons on regime survival deriving from the cases of Iraq, Libya, and Ukraine, weak conventional forces, and unstable domestic conditions. The article then looks into how systemic elements, such as a weak Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) system and the US-China rivalry have indirectly helped the economically fragile nation to manufacture nuclear weapons. The article concludes by delineating several policy implications for North Korea's denuclearization.

Keywords: *North Korea, Nuclear Development, Denuclearization, Regime Survival, NPT, Diplomatic Negotiations*

Introduction

Since the end of the Korean War (1950-1953), the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter DPRK or North Korea) has tenaciously sought to develop nuclear capabilities despite harsh external pressure and sanctions, and thus it poses a serious threat to the international community. What has motivated North Korea, one of the poorest countries in the world, to persistently develop nuclear weapons? Under what conditions has North Korea been able to achieve nuclear development? What policy implications does such analysis of the nation's nuclear development provide for a currently controversial issue – the denuclearization of North Korea?

In answering these questions, this article creates a new analytical framework that integrates individual, domestic, and systemic-level factors in explaining key reasons behind North Korea's nuclear development. A main argument is that both external and internal elements – the US military threat, North Korea's distrust toward the Soviet Union (later Russia) and China, lessons on regime survival stemming from the cases of Iraq, Libya, and Ukraine, weak conventional forces, and unstable domestic conditions – have increased top North Korean leaders' aspirations to develop nuclear weapons for the purpose of regime security and survival. In addition, systemic components, such as a weak Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) system and the US-China rivalry have indirectly helped the economically fragile nation to accomplish nuclear development.

Moreover, this article makes a key assertion that the Kim Jong-un regime will not completely give up its nuclear capabilities unless it feels fully secure. Hence, in the current US-DPRK diplomatic negotiations, it is necessary for the US to offer some security guarantee measures to the Kim regime in order to make progress toward the nation's denuclearization.

The US also should make every effort to denuclearize North Korea as much as possible through effective diplomatic negotiations. However, it would be unfeasible to achieve final, fully verified denuclearization (FFVD) or complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization (CVID) due to the high possibility of North Korea's deceptive declarations of nuclear programs and the extreme difficulty in finding agreement on a full verification process. Thus, the goal of US foreign policy toward North Korea should be to make it unnecessary for the nation to retain nuclear capabilities through diplomatic measures.

Analytical Framework

In the existing literature, many scholars and pundits largely share a consensus that regime security and survival have been a most significant motive for North Korea's nuclear development.² On top of their insights, this article seeks to provide a comprehensive explanation of the key reasons behind the nation's persistent pursuit of a nuclear arsenal. In other words, this article presents a new analytical framework that integrates individual, domestic, and systemic factors to promote an understanding of the origins of the North Korean nuclear problem and its possible resolution.

A primary element that has enabled DPRK's nuclear development is its top leaders' incessant aspirations for nuclear weapons as an instrument for regime survival, as illustrated in Figure 1. Because North Korea is a totalitarian dictatorial state in which top leaders have almost absolute power, their strong will has been indispensable to the achievement of DPRK's nuclear ambitions. As detailed in subsequent sections, North

Korea's founding leader Kim Il-sung (1948-1994), his son Kim Jong-il (1994-2011), and his grandson Kim Jong-un (2011-present) have all aspired to acquire nuclear weapons in order to consolidate their regimes' security and survival.

Figure 1. An analytical framework that explains North Korea's nuclear development



The North Korean leaders' motives for nuclear development have been sparked and strengthened by both external and internal factors. The former is US military threats since the Korean War, DPRK leaders' long-standing distrust toward its patrons – the Soviet Union (later Russia) and China, and learning from the cases of Iraq, Libya, and the Ukraine that discarding nuclear cards would easily lead to external military intervention and regime collapse or insecurity. The latter is the weakening of DPRK's conventional military forces caused by economic stagnation and unstable domestic conditions sparked by economic crises and leadership transitions. Moreover, the two systemic components – the weak NPT system and the intensifying US-China rivalry since 2008 – have indirectly helped North Korea attain its nuclear capabilities. The following sections address all of these elements in detail.

Key External Contributors to Top Leaders' Nuclear Ambitions

There are three direct external factors that have prompted the three North Korean supreme leaders to pursue nuclear development. Arguably, most significant is the consistent military threat from the DPRK's archenemy, the United States. During the Korean War (1950-1953), the Kim Il-sung regime faced a serious threat when US General Douglas MacArthur considered using nuclear weapons to end the war early. MacArthur's plan, however, did not materialize due to the objection of US President Harry Truman, who was deeply concerned about the unnecessary extension of the war.³

On top of this threat, US President Dwight Eisenhower began to deploy numerous tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea in the 1950s. Their number peaked in 1967 at approximately 950 warheads.⁴ In response, North Korea repeatedly asked its patron, the Soviet Union, to provide a nuclear reactor. In January 1956, Kim Il-sung expressed an interest in having North Korean scientists work in nuclear research. Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Gromyko recorded in April 1958 that “North Korea was eager to start a nuclear program, though they insisted it was for peaceful purposes.”⁶ As a result, in 1965, the Soviet Union helped to establish an experimental nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, and the DPRK regime sought to produce plutonium to develop nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union never wanted its client nation DPRK to contain the technology to produce nuclear weapons because Moscow distrusted the DPRK’s leaders. Soviet leaders perceived that North Korea would threaten its communist allies with nuclear weapons and even use the weaponry against South Korea and its allies. These acts could be extremely detrimental to Soviet interests, so the Soviet Union continually ignored or refused North Korean requests, thereby postponing its provision of a nuclear power plant to North Korea. Until all American nuclear weapons were withdrawn from the Republic of Korea (hereafter ROK or South Korea) in 1991, the South Korean-based nuclear arsenal was an enduring and existential threat to the North Korean regime.

Even after the 1991 complete withdrawal of American nuclear weapons from South Korea, the US provided the ROK with extended nuclear deterrence or a nuclear umbrella, which means that the US could retaliate against North Korea with nuclear weapons if the North invades the South. Responding to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the George W. Bush administration even endorsed a strategy of “preemptive strikes” against immediate and future threats to American security. The 2002 US Nuclear Posture Review included North Korea in the list of six states as potential targets for US nuclear weapons.⁷

US-ROK joint military drills were also a serious threat to North Korea. Based on the 1953 ROK-US Mutual Defense Treaty, the two nations began to conduct a series of joint military exercises on a regular basis. Particularly, the so-called “Team Spirit,” which started in 1976 with an emphasis on force flow and force-on-force operations, became a big concern for DPRK leaders on account of its massive scale.⁸ Uniting several smaller exercises into one large one, Team Spirit grew over time from an initial participation of 107,000 US and South Korean soldiers to over 200,000 in the late 1980s.⁹ Moreover, once military tensions had escalated on the Korean Peninsula, the US government often sent strategic military assets to South Korea, including “B-52 bombers, stealth warplanes, nuclear-powered submarines, and aircraft carriers.”¹⁰ In response to these US military threats, the North Korean government has persistently requested the conclusion of a nonaggression pact, a peace treaty, and even diplomatic normalization with the US as a guaranteeing measure for its regime security. Therefore, the American military threat is

an important factor that has continually stimulated North Korean leaders to pursue the development of nuclear weapons for their regime's survival and security.

The second external component is the mistrust between the DPRK and its patrons, the Soviet Union (later Russia) and China. The lack of mutual trust between the communist comrades was another catalyst that directed North Korea toward nuclear development. Top North Korean leaders attempted to gain maximum benefits from the Soviet Union and China while playing both nations against each other.¹¹ However, their trust level toward their two patrons was not very high, and such distrust dates back to the 1950s. The DPRK's founding leader, Kim Il-sung, was extremely sensitive to the intervention of the Soviet Union and China into his nation's internal matters in the 1950s. The Soviet Union had provided North Korea with strong political, economic, and military support, but Kim Il-sung strove to break away from this dominant Soviet influence throughout the 1950s. In addition, Chinese military forces, which had intervened in the Korean War, did not return to their nation until 1956, thus posing a direct threat to Kim's power consolidation and North Korea's independence. In this context, Kim sought to create the *juche* ideology (self-reliance) to promote his nation's autonomy, though the ideology was also aimed at justifying his totalitarian rule. Kim's wariness toward the Soviet Union and China peaked at the so-called "August Incident of 1956." With the support from Moscow and Beijing, the Soviet-Korean faction (a group of high-level North Korean officials who stayed in the Soviet Union during the World War II period) and the Yan'an-Korean faction (those who had strong ties with the Chinese communist leaders during the period) conducted a military coup against Kim Il-sung in June and July 1956, while he was on a trip to the Soviet Union and other communist nations in East Europe. This coup, however, failed, and Kim thoroughly purged all Soviet and Yan'an faction leaders, thus consolidating his totalitarian dictatorship.

Moreover, Kim Il-sung, who had been closely following Joseph Stalin's policy directions, disliked new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's destalinization and conciliatory policies toward the West. In the wake of Stalin's death in 1953, Khrushchev came to power in 1956 and harshly criticized Stalin for his intolerance, brutality, and abuse of power at a closed session of the Soviet Communist Party convention. This act was a serious threat to Kim, as he was pursuing the "Stalinization of North Korea" and its cult of personality.¹² Kim was also deeply disappointed with the Soviet Union after Moscow backed down during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Another event that reduced the trust level was China's Cultural Revolution that started in 1966. A huge number of violent Red Guards, mobilized by Chinese leader Mao Zedong, denounced Kim as a revisionist. In response, the North Korean media accused China of representing leftist opportunism, dogmatism, and great-nation chauvinism. Between 1966 and 1969, North Korea and China stopped all economic and cultural agreements and top-level

visits, and China even closed its border with North Korea in 1968.¹³ In addition, the sharp confrontation between the Soviet Union and China, which had started in the late 1950s and continued up to the late 1980s, was another source of North Korea's suspicion of its patrons. The level of distrust between North Korea and its patrons reached its apex after South Korea normalized diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1990 and China in 1992 because North Korea regarded the two patrons' new-found ties with South Korea as acts of betrayal. Since DPRK leaders had felt insecure in their patrons' support, this revitalized lack of confidence was another reason behind the nation's nuclear development. The DPRK tried to make up for its weak allied relationships with Moscow and Beijing by developing nuclear weapons secretly and aggressively.

Third, a series of international events – the 2003 Iraqi war, the 2011 Libyan civil war, and the 2014 Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula – provided DPRK leaders with an important lesson for regime survival: destroying a nation's nuclear potential could easily lead to external military interventions, thereby posing a serious threat to regime security.¹⁴ Starting in the mid-1970s, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein had actively pursued nuclear development, but he failed to produce nuclear weapons due to Israel's bombing of its nuclear facilities in 1981, the US-led coalition bombing during the first Gulf War (1990-1991), and consequential thorough international monitoring and inspections. Hussein thus sought to deter adversaries by falsely aggrandizing Iraq's overall weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities, since Iraq was unable to maintain the nuclear program at its full potential.¹⁵ This situation ended with Hussein's death when the US waged war against Iraq in 2003.

Another dictator in Libya, Muammar Quaddafi, met a similar fate. In the early 2000s, the Quaddafi regime suffered from serious domestic troubles, including economic distress, urban riots, two military coup attempts, and an Islamic insurgency. He had also lost the ability to develop an operational nuclear capability because of the lack of technology and required parts for a uranium enrichment plant. Under these circumstances, Quaddafi desperately needed economic quid pro quos offered by the United States in order to stay in power. He voluntarily stopped his nation's nuclear programs in 2003 in response to US persuasion and pressure. As a result, when the Arab Spring triggered the Libyan civil war in 2011, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was able to easily intervene, and Quaddafi was killed by Libyan rebel forces.¹⁶ When witnessing the airstrikes of the US and its allies in Libya in 2011, North Korea's foreign minister actually stated that the denuclearization of the North African nation had been “an invasion tactic to disarm the country.”¹⁷

Ukraine, which became an independent nation in 1991, had approximately 1,900 Soviet strategic nuclear warheads, 2,650-4,200 tactical nuclear weapons, and 176 Inter-

Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) stationed on its former Soviet territory.¹⁸ By 1996, the nation had transferred all Soviet-era strategic warheads to Russia. In the early 2000s, Ukraine had also dismantled the ICBMs and strategic bombers with the support from the US-funded Cooperative Threat Reduction Program and had even transferred its highly enriched uranium to Russia by 2012. It is needless to say that all these acts made it easier for Russia to annex Crimea from the Ukraine in 2014. Hence, after witnessing all these cases, North Korean leaders may have confirmed the importance of maintaining nuclear capabilities for its regime's survival and security.

Key Internal Contributors to Top Leaders' Nuclear Ambitions

In addition to the above-mentioned external factors, it is necessary to figure out primary internal factors that steered North Korean leaders to develop nuclear weapons. The first was the significant weakening of the nation's conventional military forces, which happened due mainly to persistent economic downturns, particularly an economic crisis after the demise of the Cold War. In the 1950s, the Kim Il-sung regime was able to quickly reconstruct its Korean War-devastated economy through massive mobilization of labor forces and foreign aid from the Soviet bloc. This swift post-war recovery, however, did not culminate in long-term economic development. Rather, the North Korean economy started deteriorating in the mid-1960s and plunged into a long period of economic stagnation. Among the central causes were major defects of the Soviet-style command economy – the lack of incentives for workers to toil productively, economic autarky based on the *juche* ideology, too much allocation of limited resources to the heavy industrial and military sectors, and wasteful spending on large-scale, expensive construction projects. On the other hand, South Korea achieved miraculous economic growth because of its state-directed development strategy, export-driven economy, focus on creating educated workforce, and monetary support from the US and Japan¹⁹. As a result, the DPRK's GDP per capita only increased from \$384 in 1970 to \$811 in 1989, while the ROK's grew from \$286 to \$5,724 during the same period of time.²⁰

Furthermore, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the East European communist nations in the early 1990s posed a fatal blow to the already declining North Korean economy. During the Cold War period, Pyongyang had received approximately \$2.2 billion in aid and credits from Moscow. As the DPRK's largest trade partner, Moscow accounted for more than a half of Pyongyang's trade. Moscow also provided Pyongyang with cheap, below-market-priced oil and weaponry. As a consequence of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, North Korea could no longer depend on the Soviet Union and other key trading partners in East Europe, including Hungary and Poland. Natural disasters, such as severe droughts and floods, further worsened the DPRK's economy. Therefore, North

Korea's average economic growth rate was a negative 4.2 percent during the 1990-1998 period. The nation's GDP per capita considerably dropped, from \$811 in 1989 to \$456 in 1998. Under these circumstances, North Korea became unable to compete with South Korea in terms of conventional military capabilities. Due to its continually stagnant economy, the North has not been able to invest much in innovating its conventional forces, including artillery, tanks, jet fighters, warships, and submarines. Hence, it was strategically rational for DPRK military leaders to offset the asymmetric conventional military advantage of the South by developing nuclear weapons.

Related to the above argument, unstable conditions within North Korea, primarily caused by economic crises and/or leadership transitions, have also been an important catalyst for the nation's nuclear development. North Korea was arguably in a most unstable political condition during the periods of 1989-1994 and 2008-2013. The former period witnessed the end of the Cold War and the death of the DPRK's founding leader, Kim Il-sung. As noted already, the collapse of the Soviet Union and other East European communist countries provided a huge economic and diplomatic challenge to the survival of the North Korean regime. This period ended with a harsh economic crisis in the mid-1990s. Due to this economic crisis, approximately 600,000-1,000,000 North Koreans (3 to 5 percent of the nation's population) starved to death between 1995 and 1998. This was an unprecedented famine in world history for a previously industrialized nation like North Korea.²¹ The North Korean regime's grip over the general public significantly weakened as the nation's ration system almost collapsed. In addition, Pyongyang was deeply isolated from the international community, especially after Moscow and Beijing normalized diplomatic relationships with Seoul despite Pyongyang's strong opposition. The death in July 1994 of Kim Il-sung, whose strong charisma attracted wide-ranging public support, created additional instability for the North Korean regime. Thus, it was not a coincidence that the DPRK made great efforts to develop nuclear weapons in the late 1980s and the early 1990s when its regime survival was in question.²²

The DPRK regime faced more uncertainty in the wake of Kim Jong-il's stroke in August 2008 and subsequent death in December 2011. It appears that this domestic instability strengthened North Korean leaders' aspirations for accelerating nuclear development because its nuclear capability was regarded as a guarantor of regime survival.²³ The new young leader, Kim Jong-un, born in 1984, needed to consolidate his weak power base and sustain the economically moribund nation. Unlike his father, Kim Jong-un had little prior work experience in the nation's party, military, and government before taking power. It was urgently necessary for Kim Jong-un to demonstrate military and economic achievements in order to promote himself and establish political legitimacy. A former South Korean Vice Unification Minister argued, "Kim Jong-un focused on investing a huge portion of North Korea's limited resources in nuclear/missile development as an

instrument for consolidating his authority. This nuclear-focused policy was also aimed at weakening the power of high-ranking military officers who had had substantial influence under the Kim Jong-il.²⁴ After Kim Jong-un took power in April 2012, the DPRK declared North Korea to be a nuclear state in its constitution. In March 2013, the new regime declared the so-called *byungjin* Line, which meant a simultaneous pursuit of nuclear program and economic development.²⁵ Consequently, Kim Jong-un conducted four nuclear tests and 89 test firings of various kinds of ballistic missiles between 2012 and 2017, while his father had accomplished only two nuclear tests and 16 ballistic missile tests during his entire rule from 1994-2011.²⁶

Indirect External Contributors to DPRK's Nuclear Development

As analyzed above, both external and internal factors – US military threats, distrustful Moscow and Beijing, learning effect, weak conventional military forces, and unstable internal conditions – have jointly led top DPRK leaders to develop nuclear weapons for their regime's survival and security. In addition to these direct catalysts, it is necessary to examine systemic elements that have indirectly helped North Korea's nuclear development. To promote a comprehensive understanding, this section addresses two complementary systemic factors – the weak NPT system and the intensifying US-China rivalry.

In March 1970, the NPT came into effect after a grand bargain between non-nuclear-weapon states and the five nations possessing nuclear weapons. The former promised not to acquire nuclear weapons, while the latter promised to disarm gradually their nuclear arsenals and to share nuclear technology for peaceful uses. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has become the enforcer of the treaty's terms. The NPT has played a crucial role in preventing many countries from turning into nuclear powers, as demonstrated in the cases of South Africa and former Soviet republics such as Kazakhstan, the Ukraine, and Belarus.²⁷

Despite its positive role, however, the NPT system contains several fundamental weaknesses that North Korea has been able to exploit. Above all, although it signed the NPT in December 1985, due mainly to Soviet persuasion, North Korea continued to produce plutonium from a nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. According to the NPT, all signatory nations must conclude a comprehensive safeguard agreement (CSA) with the IAEA within eighteen months of signature. The DPRK, however, delayed its signing of the CSA until April 1992 without penalty, as the IAEA had little capacity to enforce the nation to sign the CSA earlier. During this delay, North Korea evaded the IAEA's close inspection of nuclear facilities and obtained adequate plutonium to develop several nuclear weapons.

North Korea also exploited another weakness of the NPT, whose Article 10 allows each member state to withdraw from the treaty on three months' notice if the nation declares that extraordinary events related to the NPT jeopardize its supreme interests. Taking advantage of this clause, the DPRK threatened to quit the treaty several times in 1992-1993 in response to international pressure to give up its nuclear ambitions. This threat worked effectively because the US was seriously concerned about the weakening of the overall NPT system that could result from a North Korean withdrawal. Thus, North Korean threats to quit the NPT helped the nation delay the IAEA's required inspection of suspicious nuclear facilities. After its secret uranium-enrichment program was revealed by US Assistant Secretary of State, James Kelly, who had visited Pyongyang in October 2002, North Korea actually withdrew from the NPT in January 2003. The nation subsequently evicted IAEA inspectors and restarted a nuclear reactor that had been frozen under the 1994 Agreed Framework with the United States.²⁸ In response to these provocative acts, the IAEA declared that the DPRK had violated obligations under its CSA, requesting the UN Security Council's involvement. However, it was not possible for the UN Security Council to take any immediate action toward North Korea, because China and Russia opposed the council's intervention.²⁹ Now outside of the NPT, North Korea conducted six nuclear tests after October 2006. The UN Security Council adopted a number of economic sanctions on North Korea, but these measures were not effective, due to only lukewarm support by key trading partners, China and Russia.

On top of this weak NPT system, the growing US-Chinese rivalry since 2008 has provided the North Korean regime with ample room to maneuver for nuclear development. The two superpowers basically agree with the denuclearization of North Korea. Supporting the NPT system, the US and China have the same interests in the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, Washington is concerned about North Korea's nuclear adventurism in terms of national security for itself and its key Asian allies, South Korea and Japan. Beijing also worries about a negative impact of the DPRK's nuclear ambitions on regional instability, which could damage the continual economic growth essential to internal stability and the ruling legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. Despite these converging interests, however, their strategic priorities in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue diverge notably. Washington sets a priority on the denuclearization of North Korea, while Beijing places greater emphasis on preventing the North Korean regime's collapse. Thus, Washington has sought to maximize international pressure to stop DPRK's nuclear ambitions. On the other hand, China has been reluctant to push the North Korean regime to discontinue its nuclear program because pressure could cause sudden regime collapse. This scenario is a nightmare to China, which shares a long and porous border (about 887 miles) with the DPRK. Governmental collapse could trigger a massive refugee crisis, disastrous pandemics, and subsequent political and economic instability within the border area.

Given this policy priority gap, the two giants' rivalry notably increased during the post-2008 period due mainly to China's more assertive actions.³⁰ Among them are diplomatic bullying, expansive territorial claims in the South and East China Seas, increased patrolling in disputed waters, and the arrests of fishermen from Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. This assertiveness arose after the 2008 financial crisis, during which the American economy was seriously damaged compared to the Chinese economy. At the time, Chinese leaders were filled with pride and nationalism as a consequence of the successful hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.³¹ To check and balance the rise of China, US President Barack Obama declared the so-called "US pivot to Asia" (later scaled down to "US rebalance to Asia") in December 2011 and strengthened its diplomatic and military ties with Asian allies, such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia. The US also promoted partnerships with China's neighbors, such as India, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Singapore. China opposed this American approach, criticizing it as an encirclement or containment strategy.

In this context, it was difficult for Washington and Beijing to closely cooperate with each other to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. North Korea took advantage to advance its nuclear capability, as it would have been difficult for North Korea to accelerate nuclear development if the two giants had closely cooperated over their shared interest to denuclearize North Korea. In other words, Pyongyang, which has been heavily dependent on Beijing in terms of commercial trade and the provision of energy resources, could not have persistently pursued its nuclear capability if Beijing had fully adopted and implemented intense UN Security Council's sanctions. The intensification of the two giants' rivalry made it harder to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. The UN Security Council adopted a series of sanctions on North Korea as a result of its nuclear tests and long-range missile launches, but such measures were ineffective, because China often tried to tone down the intensity of the sanctions and showed lax commitment to implementing them.

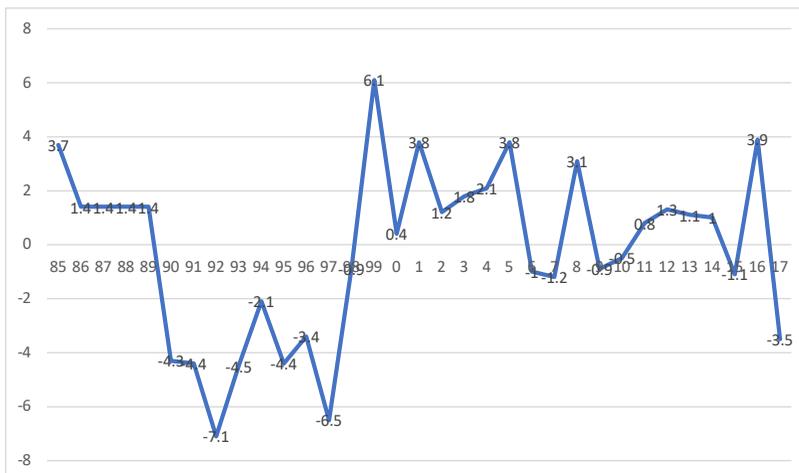
Costs/Benefits of Nuclear Development and Implications for Denuclearization

While exploring the key reasons behind North Korea's nuclear development, this article has thus far shown how external and internal factors have jointly fueled top DPRK leaders' aspirations for nuclear weapons as a primary instrument for regime survival. The article also addressed some indirect contributions to DPRK's nuclear adventurism by several systemic elements. Given this analysis, it would be useful to assess the costs and benefits that North Korea has taken on as a result of its persistent pursuit of nuclear weapons and to explore the main implications of North Korea's potential denuclearization.

First of all, North Korea has paid an enormous economic cost for the development of nuclear weapons. The nation has suffered from UN Security Council economic sanctions since October 2006, when the nation conducted its first nuclear test. Since then, five more nuclear tests and three long-range missile launches have elevated the intensity of the sanctions. On top of such UN measures, the US, South Korea, Japan, and the European Union have also imposed their own unilateral sanctions on the North Korean regime. Although sanctions have not been a fatal blow to the North Korean economy because of China's lackluster involvement in the sanction regime, North Korea has been unable to rejuvenate its moribund economy, as demonstrated in Figure 2. Particularly, the DPRK's economic growth rate plummeted from 3.9 percent in 2016 to negative 3.5 percent in 2017, and this shift was arguably caused by sharply strengthened UN sanctions. Foreign investors have had few incentives to send their resources to such an unstable nation. The DPRK has designated a number of special economic, development, and tourist zones, but they have largely failed to attract a huge amount of foreign direct investment due to the political and economic unpredictability and instability deriving from the nuclear problem.

Furthermore, its nuclear adventurism has continued to prevent North Korea from joining international organizations, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, because the US, the most influential country in these organizations, has blocked the DPRK's entry. Thus, the DPRK has been unable to receive concessional loans, which could have considerably helped its economic recovery and growth, as witnessed in other communist nations like China and Vietnam.

Figure 2: North Korea's Real GDP Growth Rate, 1985-2017 (unit: percent)



Source: The United Nations. Available at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/Index>

Related to these economic costs, diplomatic isolation is another significant cost that North Korea has endured thanks to its nuclear adventurism. Even before starting nuclear standoffs with the international community in the early 1990s, North Korea suffered diplomatic isolation due to the 1983 terrorist act in Burma, the 1987 bombing of a Korean passenger airplane, and the collapse of Soviet bloc countries after the end of the Cold War.³² However, the nation's nuclear ambitions deepened its isolation from the international community. The first (1992-1994) and second nuclear crisis (2002-2003) on the Korean Peninsula largely hindered North Korea's broader diplomatic recognition in the world community during the post-Cold War period. Particularly, the nation's diplomatic isolation increased after December 2008, when the Six-Party Talks, initiated in 2003 among the US, China, Japan, Russia, North and South Korea, ended due to sharp disagreements between North Korea and other parties over how to verify nuclear programs and materials that the DPRK had declared. The world community, led by the UN Security Council, increasingly isolated the Hermit Kingdom through a series of resolutions and sanctions as the nation continued to pursue nuclear and long-range missile capabilities.

On the other hand, a primary benefit provided by North Korea's operational nuclear capability is to deter external military intervention and thus to maintain regime security/survival. The hostage situation created since the populated city Seoul is within range of the DPRK's artilleries/rockets has worked as a useful deterrent for pre-emptive US-ROK military acts. However, Pyongyang's de facto nuclear power status has notably increased the deterrence power, as external intervention could culminate into far more catastrophic outcomes involving nuclear war. For instance, in 2017, US President Trump adopted a strategy of "maximum pressure" and warned Pyongyang of the possibility of US preemptive strikes. But Trump later acknowledged that such military acts could bring about millions of human casualties and massive destruction of industrial facilities, so that it would be implausible for the US to take up the option.

On top of such deterrence, the nuclear achievements have played a pivotal role in promoting national pride among the public. This has contributed to the increase of both internal unity and top leader Kim Jong-un's ruling legitimacy. It is also clear that such nuclear and long-range missile capabilities have provided Pyongyang with an effective bargaining chip with which to engage powers such as the US and China. Without such capabilities, it would have been difficult for Kim Jong-un to have the historic 2018 summits with Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Therefore, despite considerable economic and diplomatic costs, North Korea's nuclear capabilities have significantly helped to secure Kim's regime and allow it to deal on an equal footing with great powers such as the US.

These considerations offer several important implications for North Korea's

denuclearization. First, unless its regime security is fully guaranteed, the Kim Jong-un regime is unlikely to accept the final, fully verified denuclearization (FFVD) of North Korea that the US government has demanded. In other words, the Kim regime might slowly follow the denuclearization process if the US proportionally provided security guarantees, including sanctions relief, a declaration to end the Korean War, the conclusion of a peace treaty, and US-DPRK diplomatic normalization.

A noteworthy point is, however, that no country can fully guarantee the Kim regime's security/survival, although the above-mentioned measures could assist in that goal. For instance, the US government would probably make little effort to protect the Kim regime, which has been accused of being a longstanding dictatorship that has committed grim human rights violations and provocative military adventurism, if the regime's survival was endangered by a public revolt or a military coup. It might be thus implausible that the Kim regime could feel completely secure regardless of American reassurance measures. For this reason, the regime may desire to maintain its nuclear capabilities. Therefore, in a phased denuclearization process, North Korea would not declare all of its nuclear weapons, materials, and facilities, despite America's security guarantee measures. It would not be very difficult for North Korea to hide them in a number of underground tunnels in mountainous terrains. Furthermore, the DPRK would refuse to accept complete verification measures, including the IAEA inspectors' request to visit all suspicious, undeclared nuclear sites.

In relation to this implication, second, the ongoing US-DPRK diplomatic negotiations could become stalemated if the US continued to cling to its demand for FFVD, or CVID. There are many obstacles in moving forward in terms of a phased denuclearization process, such as the declaration, verification, and dismantlement stages, in exchange for proportional compensation measures. Two primary impediments to the denuclearization process are the difficulty of reaching an optimal compromise in negotiations over how to verify the declared nuclear substances and the alteration of ruling governments in the US and South Korea. The Six-Party Talks (2003-2008) produced a series of detailed agreements on the denuclearization of North Korea, but the diplomatic initiative ended as the US and North Korea failed to find compromise over the verification process. The former pushed for the sampling test that would show how much nuclear material North Korea had produced and inspectors' unlimited access to suspicious nuclear sites. The latter preferred documental reviews, interviews with nuclear workers, and access only to declared nuclear facilities. Also uncertain are whether or not President Trump is reelected in 2020 and the progressive, pro-diplomacy party continues to hold power in South Korea. As witnessed before, the inauguration of US President George W. Bush in January 2001 dramatically shifted the US-DPRK relations from an atmosphere of reconciliation and rapprochement to an adversarial relationship, because Bush disliked

his predecessor Bill Clinton's engagement policy toward North Korea. The transition from a progressive to conservative government in South Korea in 2008 also made it difficult for the Barack Obama administration to engage North Korea.³³

Despite all of these potential challenges, the diplomatic approach is better than other alternatives, particularly military options. Either US preemptive strikes or bloody nose strikes would lead to North Korean military retaliation, thereby sparking an all-out war potentially involving nuclear and biochemical weapons. As a consequence, millions of human casualties and the massive destruction of industrial facilities could ensue. As seen over the last two decades, economic sanctions have not been effective either in denuclearizing North Korea as long as China's priority lies in DPRK's regime survival. Rather, North Korea has continued to enhance its nuclear capabilities amid the sanction regime.

In this regard, the diplomatic approach is an only viable option. But it will take a long time to achieve the denuclearization, even partial and incomplete, of North Korea through US-DPRK diplomatic negotiations.³⁴ The US should make great efforts to denuclearize North Korea as much as possible through effective diplomatic negotiations. However, it would be unfeasible to achieve FFVD or CVID due to the high possibility of North Korea's deceptive declarations and the extreme difficulty to find agreement on a full verification process. America's strict stand for thorough verification, such as IAEA inspectors' access to all suspicious nuclear sites, could end the whole diplomatic approach, as shown in the case of the Six-Party Talks from 2003 to 2008. Hence, despite the achievement of incomplete or partial denuclearization in practice, the US should continually pursue a diplomatic solution, reach an official denuclearization agreement with North Korea, and implement the official agreement without disruption. All these processes could lead the DPRK to an officially denuclearized state, although the nation might actually hide some nuclear programs in secret places.

This diplomatic approach at least has two advantages, though it is an extremely challenging task. The first is to halt the advance of North Korea's nuclear/missile capabilities. The second advantage is to possibly lead the nation to complete denuclearization in the long run. As the North Korean government has emphasized, its next goal is economic development. The above-mentioned security guarantees, and especially US-DPRK diplomatic normalization, would significantly help North Korea grow its moribund economy. Such measures would enable the DPRK to have normal trade relationships with many affluent nations, including the US, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union. In addition to the inflow of foreign direct investment, North Korea could receive large concessional loans for economic development from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. As this development progresses, keeping nuclear weapons, materials, and facilities would be a big liability, because the revelation of its secret nuclear activities could

seriously damage its credibility and end most economic assistance. This situation would be extremely detrimental to the North Korean regime stability. Therefore, the goal of US foreign policy toward the DPRK should be to make it unnecessary for the nation to retain nuclear capabilities through effective diplomatic measures.

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