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Dealing with North Korea and its Nuclear Threat

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The ROK ' s Policy

My government firmly believes that the only viable way to resolve the nuclear issue through diplomacy is for North Korea to make a strategic decision to give up its nuclear weapons. It is indeed a tall order, but ultimately there is no other way. So our efforts must be focused on creating an environment in which North Korea has no other option but to make a fundamental change.

Based on a firm principle of no tolerance of nuclear weapons, Korea is pursuing a policy of stronger pressure and more robust diplomacy in close cooperation with the international community.

First of all, Korea maintains strong deterrence based on its alliance with the US so that we can prevent provocations and maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. To cope with North Korea's WMD threat, Korea and the US adopted a tailored deterrence strategy at the recent SCM.

In response to North Korea's third nuclear test, the UN Security Council adopted the fourth sanctions resolution on North Korea and the international community including China is implementing the sanctions more effectively. These sanctions ratcheted up pressure on North Korea and perhaps played a part in North Korea's switch to a dialogue mode this May.

China may be the only country capable of influencing North Korea's strategic thinking in a meaningful way. Korea and the US place emphasis on fostering strategic collaboration stressing coinciding strategic interests in denuclearization. Recently, China seems to put more emphasis on

denuclearization in its Korean Peninsula policy. For example, China made public a long list of export control items listing over 900 WMD-related dual use items. This is worthy of note as China officially reaffirmed that it would exercise its full responsibilities as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Korea believes that strengthened strategic cooperation among Korea, the US and China can play a central role not only in building sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula but also embarking on the road to a peaceful reunification.

Korea is working closely with Japan and Russia as both countries firmly oppose North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Korea is also making efforts to work more closely with ASEAN, EU and many other members of the international community.

All in all, North Korea finds itself in an increasingly isolated position because of its nuclear weapons program. Our aim is to a situation where the cost of pursuing nuclear ambitions is becoming unsustainable. We must a situation where North Korea has no choice but to admit that nuclear weapons are after all no strategic asset but strategic liability that prevents North Korea from pursuing economic development and closer ties with China and other countries.

Korea keeps the door open to dialogue. But Korea believes that dialogue must be conducive to progress in denuclearization and North Korea must not be allowed to increase its nuclear threat while the talks are under way.

North Korea says these days that it calls for the resumption of talks without any preconditions. But, given North Korea's dismal track record, should we resume dialogue without robust preparations, it would prove a recipe for failure and can inflict a mortal damage on the Six Party Talks.

More specifically, we must first make sure that the goal of the talks is denuclearization.

Second, robust steps need to be taken to prevent North Korea from abusing the time for dialogue as a window of opportunity to strengthen its nuclear weapons capability.

Third, once talks are resumed, accelerated negotiations must be conducted to secure agreement for a complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement.

Outlook for Negotiations and Policy Options

If we look back at the history of nuclear negotiations with North Korea, every agreement including the Agreed Framework in 1994 and September 19 Joint Statement of 2005 only progressed so far

to the stage of freeze, but never made it beyond the point of “the moment of truth“, that is complete declaration and verification.

North Korea was eager to prolong both the negotiation and implementation process using salami tactics and brinkmanship, while always evading to take irreversible steps.

That has to change. The only effective way is to fundamentally change the way North Korea calculates.

For this to happen, the international community needs to exert more pressure strong enough to force North Korea’s strategic calculations.

Second, we have to make it clear that once North Korea chooses to come on the desirable path, it will be able to enjoy full opportunities to engage economically with the international community. In close cooperation with the international community, the five parties have to come up with a convincing substantive strategic message for North Korea.

Third, once negotiations resume, we have to avoid repeating familiar patterns. It is crucial that North Korea’s seriousness for denuclearization is established at the early stages of the process. We must demand bold steps from North Korea. Patience wears thin because of the accumulated frustration. If negotiations yield no outcome, the momentum for talks will be lost fairly quickly.

Last, based on a strong sense of ownership, Korea must play a central role in the whole process.

Concluding Remarks

The strategic landscape in Northeast Asia is currently shifting in a significant way. In its midst, the North Korean nuclear issue has reached a serious stage and calls for collective efforts and wisdom if we are to find a solution.

20 years of experience where successes were few and far between and failures abound naturally have made pessimists out of many of us. My presentation today may not help lift our spirits either.

One consolation is that North Korea’s strategic position has not improved with its increasingly stronger nuclear weapons capability.

Nuclear weapons made North Korea pay a huge opportunity cost in economic development, posing a long-term threat to the regime survival. As it has become isolated, North Korea’s dependence on China rose to a high level.

In conclusion, in spite of everything, Korea cannot afford to remain frustrated, sarcastic or just complaining. For Korea has no option to walk away. So with my team, I will continue to spend hours trying to find a way to put more pressure and effect change on North Korea, identify openings and opportunities, and refine and sharpen our messages.

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