


Policy Forum 07-030: North Korea's Strategic Decisions After the February 13 Agreement

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By Jae-Jean Suh

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I. Introduction

Jae-Jean Suh, Senior Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification, writes, "it is highly unlikely that North Korea will refuse to integrate into the capitalist world system that other

socialist nations had selected and continue to persist with its acquisition of nuclear weapons, thereby further sustaining its Cold War isolation, but would rather make a strategic choice of abolishing its nuclear weapons."

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II. Article by Jae-Jean Suh

- "North Korea's Strategic Decisions After the February 13 Agreement"

By Jae-Jean Suh

There is a general consensus that the February 13 agreement at the six-party talks was a pivotal event in resolving the North Korean nuclear weapons issue and creating a breakthrough in establishing a peace regime on the Korean peninsula.

The biggest issue after the February 13 agreement is the reason why the US altered its position so dramatically. Since the inauguration of the Bush administration, it has designated North Korea as an axis of evil and has consistently refused bilateral negotiations with the North by insisting that the US can talk, but not negotiate with the North, that the US will never reward a bad behavior, and that the six-party talks and the BDA financial sanctions are separate matters. But all of a sudden, the US had hurriedly pursued dialogue with North Korea and reached the February 13 agreement, started bilateral talks to discuss normalizing diplomatic relations, and has launched five different working groups. There are still uncertainties concerning the orientation of US North Korean policies, but it is true that the February 13 agreement was possible because of the changes of US North Korean policies.

But no attention has been paid to how North Korea agreed to the February 13 agreement. The reason behind this seems to be the fact that North Korea had consistently requested dialogue with the US. After the three-party joint statements of Japan's Socialist Party and Liberal Democratic Party in 1990 and the subsequent negotiations concerning normalization of relationships with Japan, and the failure of the Agreed Framework between North and South Korea that was signed the following year, due to the nuclear issue raised by the US, North Korea had put all its stakes on normalization of relations with the US. This was because North Korea had realized that without good relations, it would be difficult to achieve normalization of relations with Japan as well. After the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, the history of North Korea may be described as the history of a desperate struggle to improve relations with the US.

But the remaining problem is whether North Korea will completely dismantle its nuclear weapons, which it had developed as a means to guarantee survival of its regime. The shutdown of the nuclear facilities, which North Korea has promised to complete within 60 days after the February 13 agreement, may be implemented, but there are doubts whether North Korea will carry out disablement measures of its nuclear facilities, which it had agreed to execute after 60 days after the agreement. And there are more pessimistic positions concerning the possibility of North Korea completely abolish its nuclear materials and weapons that have already been produced.

Behind these conceptions are deep-seated doubts about North Korea's intentions and suspicions that it will use the fact that the Bush administration is impatient because of domestic electoral schedule in 2008, and will close down its nuclear facilities but will not disable it, and wait until it can receive the benefits, such as one million tons of heavy oil, dissolution the BDA financial sanctions, dissolution of the sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council, and the relaxing of US

hostile policies toward North Korea.

There are many voices asserting that North Korea will never give up its nuclear weapons, which it has created despite the high cost and the many sanctions from the international community. In other words, it is unlikely that North Korea will give up its defensive measure of last resort.

Then what decision will North Korea ultimately make? North Korea's greatest leverage against the US is its nuclear weapons, so there is no doubt that it will utilize those weapons to the fullest. David Albright, President of the Institute for Science and International Security, and Joel Wit, the former Agreed Framework Coordinator at the US State Department, have clarified the strategy of North Korea's nuclear negotiations based on information they have gathered for five days starting from January 30 during their visit to the country. According to them, North Korea's nuclear abolishment will be implemented in two steps. The first step would follow the February 13 agreement. That is, in return for closing down and disabling their nuclear facilities, and reporting all nuclear facilities, nuclear programs, nuclear materials, and nuclear weapons, they will receive the benefits, such as one million tons of heavy oil, dissolution of the sanctions on the BDA accounts, dissolution of the terror-supporting nation list as a condition for establishing diplomatic relations between North Korea and the US, and halting the application of the Trade with Enemy Act. The second phase strategy involves eliminating nuclear weapons and materials, and in return, receiving aid for light water reactors, realizing normal relations between North Korea and the US, and establishing the peace regime.

Phase one will probably be implemented without trouble, but during phase two, providing light water reactors would be a great challenge. It is clear that the light water reactors are a matter of life and death in its negotiations for North Korea. But North Korea's ultimate goal is not just the reactors. The most important objective of the Kim Jong Il government is to maintain its regime. The internal and external circumstances are too dire for North Korea to make mistakes and disintegrate the negotiations by sacrificing the greater good while persisting on trivial matters. The negotiations process for the light water reactors would suffer from great difficulties, but there is a high possibility that it will reach a compromise during the six-party talks. North Korea may get a thermal power plant instead of a light water reactor, or receive commitments from the other five nations to build the reactor in exchange for the complete abolishment of its nuclear weapons. On this issue, the strategic decision of North Korea meets with the interests of the members of the six-party talks.

Acquiring nuclear weapons to maintain its regime may be helpful for North Korea, but it will be difficult to sustain because of severe opposition from the US, South Korea, and China. Most countries naturally wish to possess nuclear weapons, but because of the NPT regime or the opposition from neighboring countries, those wishes are difficult to achieve. Obtaining nuclear weapons requires the support of domestic strength. But that strength is what North Korea lacks. It is not like Pakistan which is rich in domestic resources. To complete its weapons, many more experiments are necessary, but it is uncertain whether North Korea is able to endure the increasing pressure from the international society.

But some say that North Korea may be able to withstand even the heavies of external pressure. Is North Korea really capable? Can one assume that since North Korea was able to survive for this long, it will be able to continue to hold out sanctions from the UN Security Council, and China for years? There is a possibility that North Korea would eventually crumble from within because of its efforts to obtain nuclear weapons. North Korea's nuclear armament will not be able to resolve concerns about its security. The weapons would provide an excuse for the US to sanction North Korea and carry out an attack. As long as North Korea has nuclear weapons, it would be difficult to improve relations with the US and Japan, resolve the economic sanctions, join international financial organizations, gain loans, and receive economic aid from South Korea. In other words, the long-term

consequences of nuclear armament are very detrimental to North Korea.

Ultimately, the most effective method for guaranteeing safety of its regime is normalizing relations with the US. Normal relations with the US entails the same with Japan, and also 10 billion dollars worth of compensation for colonization. North Korea may also escape from the political and economic containment imposed by the US. It is difficult to believe that North Korea will persist on its weapons through brinkmanship when the US is freely offering a chance for normal relations.

If North Korea gives up its nuclear ambitions, the biggest question would be how the regime would be integrated internally. The opinion that North Korea would not abandon its weapons unless this issue is properly addressed seems more plausible. There is an analysis that once normal relations with the US and Japan are realized and relations between the two Koreas improve, North Korea's external enemy would vanish which would be problematic for internal integration.

But there are many methods of social control that can be used for maintaining its regime, other than creating outside enemies. Currently, the ruling ideology that is utilized for propping up its regime is the military-first policy. The purpose of the military-first policy is to prevent a military coup d'etat by embracing the military establishment, and utilize it to keep up social order. In October 2002 during the second nuclear issue, it became the symbol of North Korea's anti-Americanism and has been useful in maintaining the regime. While North Korea was in conflict with the US because of nuclear issues, the military-first policy was viewed as nuclear politics or a part of the nuclear game. If the nuclear problem is resolved, then the policy's significance may dwindle somewhat, but it will still be viable as a symbol of internal politics.

If the nuclear standoff is resolved, there is a possibility that the idea of Powerful Nation may become a more effective ruling ideology than the military-first policy. With the inauguration of Kim Jong Il in 1998, the newly presented ruling ideology was building 'a strong and powerful nation.' Considering the fact that building 'a strong and powerful nation' was utilized as the core ruling ideology until the sudden emergence of the military-first policy during the second nuclear crisis in October 2002, it is highly feasible that the priority in ruling ideology would shift from the military-first policy to building 'a strong and powerful nation.' It is likely that North Korea would try to integrate its regime by focusing on economic revitalization and mobilizing the population for economic growth.

Taking all these points into consideration, it is highly possible that North Korea might conclude that giving up its nuclear weapons would be more beneficial in maintaining its regime, because maintaining normal relations with the US and Japan and building a peace regime on the Korean peninsula will be effective in reviving the economy.

If North Korea decides to postpone its schedule in giving up its weapons and squander this opportunity, then regaining US trust would be difficult, and the survival of the North Korean regime would be cast into doubt as isolation and sanctions deepen. This is because there is still uncertainty in US policy for the Korean peninsula. The change in US policy toward the Korean peninsula is more of a temporary strategic move in response to its diplomatic failure in the Middle East with the 2008 presidential elections coming closer. Also, there may be resistance from vested interests inside the US if its North Korean policy changes fundamentally, so North Korean policy may revert back to its original hard-line stance when the US finds an excuse to blame North Korea and eschew responsibility.

Ultimately, North Korea would not hesitate to improve relations with the US, which it has eagerly awaited for so long, and make to the decision to give up its nuclear program. The only negotiating hand that North Korea has is its nuclear weapons so it will use it as a leverage until the end, but will have no choice but to make a significant strategic choice. In the past 15 years, North Korea had

been fell into its own trap of nuclear issue, which had deepened its diplomatic and economic isolation. It is true that North Korea's attempts at developing nuclear weapons have been used to justify US policies of maintaining the status quo on the Korean peninsula, and its war against terror in the Middle East. After the September 19 Joint Statement in 2005 as the BDA financial sanctions rose to the surface and the situation reached a stalemate, a year and a half was wasted. North Korea was able to bring the US back to the negotiating table by a hair's breadth by pushing forward with its nuclear experiments, justifying its actions through its conflict with the US.

The strategic choice to improve relations with North Korea and the US is now late enough. Compared to the path taken by South Korea, which has grown into one of the world's top ten economic powers based on its 1953 alliance with the US and the three-way economic cooperation regime with the US and Japan after improving relations with Japan in 1965, North Korea has lost the chance to truly improve relations with the US and Japan, and so much more.

To sum up, it is highly unlikely that North Korea will refuse to integrate into the capitalist world system that other socialist nations had selected and continue to persist with its acquisition of nuclear weapons, thereby further sustaining its Cold War isolation, but would rather make a strategic choice of abolishing its nuclear weapons.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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