Northeast Asia is rife with potential conflict, given US-China great power rivalry, ongoing differences over interpretations of history between Korea and Japan and between China and Japan, simmering maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, and worries that tensions could escalate between Taiwan and the Mainland under the US presidency of Donald J. Trump.

The articles in this cover package of Global Asia argue that now is the time for players in the region to embrace “strategic diplomacy.”
Enough Failure: Use Strategic Diplomacy to Denuclearize North Korea

By Bong-Geun Jun

STRATEGIC DIPLOMACY is diplomacy that fulfills desired goals by using available means in the most effective way. All diplomacy could be conceived as strategic diplomacy, because states engage in diplomacy to pursue certain goals. However, we usually stop short of calling all diplomacy “strategic.” How then do we distinguish between diplomacy that is strategic and diplomacy that is not? In this article, I consider how a more consciously strategic form of diplomacy — that is, diplomacy undertaken with accentuated strategic rationale and long-term objectives — can be forged in South Korea’s denuclearization diplomacy toward North Korea.

In this project, strategic diplomacy is defined as “the process by which state and non-state actors socially construct and frame their view of the world; set their agendas; and communicate, contest and negotiate diverging core interests and goals.” From a strategic diplomacy perspective, the regional security context is also understood as a “complex system.” In light of this definition, we need to have three core elements to achieve successful strategic diplomacy.

First, there are political or policy goals that reflect the values and interests of the concerned political entity. If these goals are reasonable (as in common sense) and align with those of a larger entity such as the international community, they are more likely to be purposeful and sustainable.

Second, the political entity needs to decide on the most effective and efficient means and approaches to achieve these goals. In doing so, it must consider not only its own capabilities, but also the level of support or resistance from its strategic partners and adversaries. Overestimation or underestimation of either oneself or others is sure to take a high toll. Third, emphasizing the “systems” approach highlights that there are feedback and interactive processes among both the political ways, means and ends, and between players. These are the dynamic elements of strategic diplomacy that require constant adjustment and alignment.

Traditional studies of national politics differentiate between political policy and military strategy. Thus, the task of setting goals and directions in national security policy is seen to belong to the realm of kings or politicians, whereas strategy is regarded as the primarily military ways of fulfilling and implementing those goals and is seen as belonging to the realm of generals. However, the strategic diplomacy perspective argues that strategic thinking needs to permeate both the setting of goals and the means of fulfilling them. Mistaken strategic directions by political leaders will ultimately lead their countries into defeat or misery, no matter how well policies are executed by generals and bureaucrats. Strategic thinking is necessary in setting goals and adjusting them in fast-changing environments, and in response to interactions with counterparts or enemies.

How can we measure the past performance of South Korea’s denuclearization diplomacy toward North Korea? South Korea, the United States and the international community have been engaged in denuclearization diplomacy toward Pyongyang for over a quarter of a century — since the late 1980s — but we have not only failed to denuclearize North Korea, we now face an almost nuclear-armed North Korea. This means that our denuclearization diplomacy failed. The concept of strategic diplomacy would be helpful in understanding and explaining the causes of this failure in a systematic way. Such a conceptual analysis and framework will also provide us with valuable lessons that can help us plan a more effective denuclearization diplomacy as well as avoid similar mistakes. Using the concept and analytical tool of strategic diplomacy, I attempt in this article to explain the failure of past denuclearization diplomacy, draw lessons and provide strategic prescriptions for the future.

THE PRESENT STATE OF THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR PROBLEM

The fourth and fifth nuclear tests by North Korea on Jan. 6 and Sept. 9, 2016, respectively, served notice on South Korea and the entire international community that North Korea’s nuclear weapons program had advanced to the next level. In addition to expanding and accelerating its programs, North Korea institutionalized its nuclear weapons policies and nuclear status. It even issued nuclear doctrines for the use of nuclear weapons, as if it were already a recognized nuclear-weapons state.

North Korea’s official nuclear doctrine and policies began appearing with the “Law on Consolidating the Position of Nuclear Weapons State for Self-Defense,” adopted by the Supreme People’s Assembly on April 1, 2013. In early 2016, responding to joint military exercises by South Korea and the US, as well as economic sanctions under United Nations Security Council Resolution 2270, North Korea made repeated threats of pre-emptive nuclear strikes against the two states and adopted a nuclear doctrine of massive retaliation in general.

What can we make of Pyongyang’s declared nuclear doctrines? First, since North Korea’s foremost nuclear doctrine against South Korea is a pre-emptive nuclear strike, South Korea should
be prepared militarily to prevent, deter and defend itself from possible pre-emptive strikes by the North. Such preparations would require a stronger US security commitment to the South, strengthened US extended deterrence under the nuclear umbrella, the presence of US strategic assets on South Korean soil and nearby, layered missile defense systems and strong and credible retaliatory forces, among others.

Second, the North Korean nuclear doctrine of assured massive retaliation does not yet correspond to its nuclear capabilities and posture. If North Korea is really able to retaliate with a second strike after absorbing a first strike, it must have a sufficient inventory of nuclear weapons (over 100 warheads at least), physical protection of its nuclear arsenal, and multiple launch systems (silos, mobile, submarine launched ballistic missiles, etc.). However, North Korea has not fully developed nor is it in possession of such capabilities as yet. North Korea, with only tens of nuclear weapons currently, may think that it is extremely vulnerable to a first strike, which could wipe out all of its nuclear capabilities. Therefore, in order to acquire an assured retaliatory and second-strike capability as soon as possible, North Korea is expected to accelerate and expand its nuclear weapons program at any cost.

Against this backdrop, South Korea and the US, in co-operation with China and the international community, are determined to sanction and pressure North Korea to change its nuclear armament policy and strategic calculations. In doing so, first, we must remind ourselves of the fact that until now, we have failed to prevent North Korea from going nuclear. Our quarter-century of denuclearization diplomacy has failed. Second, the current policy environment in general is worse than ever, as North Korea has accumulated more nuclear material and, possibly, a sizable nuclear arsenal. The Kim Jong Un regime seems more adventurous and aggressive than that of his father.

As we renew and confirm our commitment to the denuclearization of North Korea, we should pay attention to the following trends.

First, certain cyclical patterns have been seen in the nuclear negotiation process with North Korea. It begins with some kind of nuclear crisis triggered by North Korea — past examples include its declaration that it was withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); the arbitrary removal of spent fuels from the 5MW graphite-moderated reactor in the absence of IAEA inspectors; nuclear tests; long-range missile tests, and so on. These crises are then followed by nuclear negotiations and agreements. Not long after, all these nuclear agreements are utterly violated and abandoned by North Korea.

Over the last 25 years, we have witnessed about seven such “vicious cycles” of nuclear crisis, nuclear agreements, and collapse. As a result, the relationship between North Korea and the US and between the two Koreas have been further aggravated, accumulating greater distrust and antagonism, and the chances of peaceful resolution through dialogue have become even bleaker. If we ever have the opportunity to conclude another nuclear agreement with North Korea, we must come up with extraordinary measures to prevent any recurrence of such a vicious cycle.

As North Korea repeatedly violated nuclear agreements, the Barack Obama administration made it clear that it “would not buy the same horse twice or three times.” This position is widely known as “strategic patience,” waiting until the North changes its position and behavior while pressuring and sanctioning it at the same time. However, this approach has not proved productive either, as North Korea continues to expand and advance its nuclear weapons program while enduring pressure and sanctions.

Second, the amount of North Korea’s nuclear material has been increasing continuously. What is even more dangerous is that this amount tends to double about every 10 years, with North Korea’s nuclear enrichment facilities operating and being expanded unchecked. In the early 1990s, North Korea had approximately 10 to 12 kilograms of plutonium. Now, the amount of nuclear material in North Korea, including plutonium and highly-enriched uranium, is estimated to have increased by up to four to five times the original amount. As North Korea continues to build additional clandestine enrichment facilities, its capacity to produce nuclear material will also continue to increase.

Third, the costs of pressuring and/or persuading North Korea to denuclearize will continue to increase as its nuclear arsenal expands. As the country’s stockpile of nuclear materials and bombs increases, its demands for political, economic and diplomatic compensation from South Korea and the US will certainly increase as well. The Kim Jong Un regime seems determined to develop and deploy its nuclear weapons, with the dual goal of legitimizing its fragile regime and becoming a recognized nuclear weapons state.

These trends foreshadow the difficulties and obstacles that we will face in our future efforts toward the denuclearization of North Korea.

WHAT WENT WRONG AND WHY?
Viewed from the perspective of strategic diplomacy, the following points can explain the failure of denuclearization diplomacy.

First, we failed to fully understand our opponent. Through the 1990s and the early 2000s, we repeatedly underestimated the durability of the Kim family regime and its communist system. Previous South Korean governments and North Korea watchers repeatedly predicted an imminent collapse of North Korea within years, if not months.

We also underestimated North Korea’s will and capability to develop nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. Surprisingly, North Korea’s antiquated communist, family-inherited, one-man system of rule managed to survive through severe economic and food crises in the post-Cold War era. It also managed to advance its nuclear weapons program despite economic sanctions and hardship.

Second, we failed to establish, co-ordinate, incorporate, prioritize and sustain policy goals toward North Korea such as unification, denuclearization, peace-settlement, reconciliation, military tension reduction, economic co-operation and the protection of human rights. With the change of governments and administrations in Seoul and Washington, policy lines have swung...
back and forth between sunshine, dialogue, neglect, strategic patience and regime change.

Even though policy and strategy co-ordination among Seoul, Washington and Beijing is a prerequisite for the success of our denuclearization diplomacy, that co-ordination remains elusive. Even within South Korea, the so-called South-South conflict between conservatives and progressives over unification and security matters still exists.

Third, we failed to deal with North Korea based on a well-designed strategic plan. We also failed to remain focused on the nuclear issue for an extended period of time. Our diplomacy tended to be reactive, temporary and passive rather than proactive, focused and persistent.

In the 1990s and 2000s, nuclear negotiations and agreements were mostly made only after North Korea’s nuclear provocations, and only to avoid imminent nuclear crises. Once the crises had dissipated after the conclusion of nuclear deals, domestic and international support for such deals also weakened.

Fourth, we failed to mobilize effective pressure and sanctions, combined with attractive and visible incentives, to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear program. “Paper tiger” or “pie-in-the-sky” measures were not painful enough for the Kim regime to give up nuclear weapons — the panacea to its security, systemic, regime and economic crises. We thought that North Korea could easily be pressured to give up its nuclear program. Though we firmly believed that we were buying time (that is, until North Korea collapsed), in reality, it turned out that North Korea had bought time to consolidate domestic power and to advance its nuclear program. All this happened because our denuclearization diplomacy was not strategic. We did not know North Korea well. Our North Korean policy objectives were neither realistic nor consistent. We lacked the sufficient means and effective ways to impose our policy goals and will on North Korea. We failed to adjust our policy goals and strategies, even after our assumptions about the durability of the North Korean regime, the pace of its nuclear development and the degree of China’s participation in sanctions turned out to be wrong.

APPLYING STRATEGIC DIPLOMACY TO DENUCLEARIZATION DIPLOMACY

First, we have to incorporate and prioritize competing North Korea policy goals in a systematic and manageable way. In my view, assuming that North Korea already possesses and has deployed nuclear weapons, we need to give deterrence and defense from a North Korean nuclear attack the highest priority. The denuclearization objective comes next. The unification, reconciliation, and economic co-operation objectives should be given a low priority for now.

Prioritizing the goal of unification may produce two unexpected side effects. First, since Pyongyang considers unification efforts as an attempt to absorb the North Korean regime into the South, it will double down on its nuclear program in order to deter our offensive unification. Second, some South Koreans might choose to adopt the approach of so-called strategic patience, hoping North Korea will collapse in the near future and that unification will solve the nuclear problem once and for all.

It is irrational to predicate our policy toward North Korea on an assumption of its imminent collapse, since no one can possibly predict when it will collapse. Indeed, irrespective of our wishes for a collapse, no one can possibly forecast whether or not that will happen. Even if it eventually collapses like many former communist and authoritarian regimes have, we cannot predict when it will happen. New variables such as the rise of China and the US-China strategic competition in East Asia further complicate affairs on the Korean Peninsula. China has publicly announced that it is pursuing not only North Korea’s denuclearization but also its stability. Of course, we need a well-designed contingency plan to prepare for the collapse of North Korea. However, this should be considered scenario planning, not the main basis for policy toward the North.

Second, our strategy of denuclearization diplomacy should take into account both interaction with and resistance from North Korea. Otherwise, our denuclearization diplomacy will end as an unilateral action and fall short of changing North Korea’s strategic calculation. In this regard, we should take into account North Korea’s capacity to resist diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions.

North Korea’s capacity for resistance and resilience is unusually high. Unlike most former communist and dictatorial states, its system and regime survived the post-Cold War crisis intact. What renders North Korea an extremely resistant, tough and stubborn opponent to deal with are its unique Soo-ryoung (one-man rule), Ju-che (self-reliant ideology) and Communist system combined with terror politics and self-imposed isolation.

Third, considering such a high level of resistance from North Korea, we need a good strategy for creating, combining and applying various effective diplomatic, military, political and economic means to attain the maximum influence. In order to force North Korea to change its strategic calculation, pressure and sanctions should be strong and painful. On the other hand, incentives also need to be attractive and irresistible.

We used to pressure North Korea to change its strategy and behavior by warning that “if you denuclearize, you will be rewarded economically and diplomatically. However, if you choose nuclear armament, you will be punished
with strengthened sanctions and pressure.” But North Korea never opted out of denuclearization because its own strategic calculation tells it that “if we suspend or give up our nuclear program, we will become another Iraq, Libya or Ukraine. If we keep nuclear weapons, we could deter US military aggression and South Korea’s attempt at unification by absorption. Economic suffering due to sanctions is no match for the survival of the Kim family dynasty and the communist regime.”

We should note that the Kim regime makes use of security crises to quell domestic complaints and to purge party and military leaders. North Korea has been suffering from chronic and pervasive economic and food crises for decades. Kim Jong Un also lacks political legitimacy, unlike his grandfather and father. Therefore, the current Kim regime has become a “crisis state,” deliberately causing and using crises to consolidate its regime. This means that North Korea is not very susceptible to foreign pressure and sanctions. To a degree, foreign pressure and sanctions help the Kim regime strengthen its power. Our dilemma thus becomes how to make the North Korean leadership feel pain and pressure and to change its behavior.

Lastly, but more importantly, we need a comprehensive strategic roadmap that will help us align and co-ordinate multi-dimensional, multi-staged denuclearization efforts among various stakeholders. For the last 25 years, we attempted to apply various denuclearization models to the Korean Peninsula, all of which turned out to be unsuccessful. Therefore, we may have to develop a Korean Peninsula-specific denuclearization model that suits the unique and complex situation on the Peninsula. The new “Korean Peninsula-type” model would be a combination of various historical denuclearization models: the ABACC model, in which Argentina and Brazil agreed on the creation of a mutual inspection regime as both of them gave up their nuclear programs; the Ukraine model, in which Ukraine agreed to denuclearize in exchange for economic and security assurances; the Libya model, which required arbitration and a political deal; the South African model, which presumed changes in the security environment and governmental system; and the Iranian model, illustrated by effective sanctions, high-level political communications, and the European Union’s approach of dialogue and trust-building.

The new Korean model should be based on the 9.19 Six-Party Joint Statement of 2005, with reinforced details on sanctions and a reward system, a division of roles among major states, an implementation schedule and a strategy to guarantee its implementation. More specifically, a new denuclearization model should include the following key components: improvement in inter-Korean relations; the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula; a Northeast Asia security co-operation regime; normalization of US-North Korea and Japan-North Korea relations; and economic and energy assistance to North Korea. These elements are also the key components of the 9.19 Six-Party Joint Statement. If all these areas progress in parallel, they will positively complement each other and create synergistic effects.

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