For decades, both North Korea and the United States have in their own way thwarted efforts to resolve the threat of a nuclearized North Korea. Both have cheated on, or failed to fulfill, past agreements to bring a halt to Pyongyang’s nuclear program.

Under Kim Jong Un, North Korea has achieved a level of nuclear and missile development that has finally caught the eye of Washington and the American public. Is peace still possible?

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After North Korea’s apparent hydrogen bomb test in early September, the world now must decide how to cope with the reality that Pyongyang rules a nuclear-weapons state.

For Seoul, the calculus is perilous as it is wedged between the ‘scaring’ it gets from Pyongyang, its ‘bashing’ over security issues from Beijing and the worry that Trump’s US may decide that ‘bypassing’ its commitment to South Korea is a possibility.

The answer, writes Taewoo Kim, is for US nuclear weapons to return to the peninsula, and for Seoul and Japan to finally acquire their own nuclear weapons with US blessing — a prescription that he believes also accords with long-term US geostrategic interests.

NORTH KOREA once again publicly defied the world with its sixth nuclear test at 12:29pm local time on September 3. The blast yield was so powerful that the tremors were felt not just in Seoul but as far as Changchun in China. Three hours later, Pyongyang claimed that its test of an ICBM-ready hydrogen bomb was a complete success. The Korea Meteorological Administration estimated that the detonation caused a magnitude 5.7 earthquake, while the United States Geological Survey and the China Earthquake Administration rated it at magnitude 6.3. South Korean experts, based on various estimates, concluded that the nuclear test was between 200 kilotons and one megaton; they found virtually no reason to doubt North Korea’s claim that it was a hydrogen bomb.

Since 2006, North Korea has conducted six nuclear tests. In 2016 alone, it had 24 missile launches. As of the end of August this year, the regime has conducted 14 missile launches, including two ICBM-class Hwasong-14 missiles. At this point, the international community has little choice but to “recognize,” whether formally or not, that Pyongyang is the world’s ninth nuclear-weapons state, with advanced nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles.

What the world must decide now is whether or not to “accept” North Korea’s nuclear-weapons state status. North Korea has relentlessly pursued that status under the grand strategy of changing the nuclear game for its own purposes. If the international community fails to find a silver bullet to stop the nuclear-armed fanatics in Pyongyang, its nuclear and missile capabilities will continue to pose a comprehensive and persistent security threat not only to the Korean Peninsula but to Northeast Asia and the entire world. Consequently, Seoul will continue to suffer from its own nightmares brought on by Pyongyang’s “Korea-scaring,” Beijing’s “Korea-bashing” and the possibility of Washington’s “Korea-bypassing.”

THE SECURITY IMPACTS

From a longer-term perspective, North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear-weapons state status would seem to lead to a saturation point that could cause the demise of the regime through either internal implosion or outside explosion. For the time being, however, Pyongyang’s game of chicken against the world is bringing the regime significant success as it succeeds in shaking the security landscape of the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia and the world.

At the global level, North Korea’s nuclear game is disrupting the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) regime and incapacitating the UN Security Council. If Pyongyang is accepted as the fourth member of the de facto nuclear club outside the NPT — following Israel, India and Pakistan — the universality and validity of the NPT as an international norm will be severely damaged. As long as Beijing and Moscow continue their deceptive act of participating in the Security Council’s sanctions against Pyongyang while vetoing potentially crippling sanctions with real bite and helping the survival of the regime, the UN’s authority and binding power will continue to weaken. On that note, any future addition to the nine Security Council resolutions adopted since 2006 will not be able to put an end to Pyongyang’s nuclear game.

For Northeast Asia, the nuclear North Korea exacerbates the new Cold War confrontation and impacts on Washington’s alliance policy. For Beijing, nuclear weapons in the hands of an increasingly defiant Pyongyang is a diplomatic tightrope. It undermines China’s leadership while also being a strategic asset that helps Beijing and Russia keep Washington and its allies in check. China, giving more weight to the latter, has chosen to connive in North Korea’s nuclear endgame. As a result, whenever Pyongyang shoots missiles or conducts nuclear tests, the new Cold War confrontations become more vehement, but continue to leave room for Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs to continue. Meanwhile, Beijing strengthens its illogical and unilateral “Korea-bashing” over the deployment of the US Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system. This is how the Beijing-Moscow strategic collaboration has protected Pyongyang’s nuclear adventurism.

Most importantly, North Korea’s brinkmanship against the US has had a strong decoupling effect, driving a wedge between the US and Seoul. A case in point is the verbal war between Washington and Pyongyang that took place shortly after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2371 on August 5. As North Korea showed off its submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM) and ICBMs and threatened the continental US and its military bases in Guam, US citizens began asking their government: “Should our cities and military bases be at risk from Pyongyang’s nuclear attacks to help South Korea?” Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger went so far as to advise Washington to use the withdrawal of US forces from South Korea as a bargaining chip for negotiations with Beijing, which was followed by President Donald Trump threatening a “withdrawal” from the US-South Korea Free Trade Agreement. Both ideas made people in South Korea shiver at the thought of Washington’s “Korea-bypassing” while feeding Pyongyang’s hope of one day achieving its goal of sep-
The Kim Question: The US and Its Allies Face Up to a Nuclear North Korea

The moon's calculated craziness is powerful enough to stifle the American media and people, thus affecting Washington's alliance policy.

On the Korean Peninsula, Pyongyang's weapons of mass destruction offer a formidable asymmetric leverage against Seoul. North Korea's nuclear weapons dwarf South Korea's qualitative superiority in conventional forces, and the inter-Korean military balance has already collapsed. In addition, Pyongyang's “Korea-scaring” game has long divided society, people, media and politics in South Korea, and triggered considerable changes in its political culture. Against this backdrop, the classic truths of peace and war no longer ring true to South Koreans: “if you want peace, prepare for war.” “Peace forced upon the loser would mean humiliation” and “Weakness invites aggression.” If South Korea fails to create new political dynamics that can achieve national unity and overcome this defeatism, South Koreans may have to worry about the demise of their free, democratic country before they talk about collapse of the North Korean regime.

THE MOON ADMINISTRATION’S UNVERIFIED SECURITY EXPERIMENTS

South Korean experts who agonize over their country becoming the greatest victim of North Korea's nuclear threat demand that the government employ a three-track strategy: military deterrence, sanctions and dialogue. They do not want Seoul marginalized by Pyongyang's nuclear gambit. While not opposing the government's attempt to open up a dialogue, they strongly demand “dialogue on the basis of military deterrence.” They urge the government to strengthen the Washington-Seoul alliance and reinforce combined deterrence capabilities. To prevent further marginalization of South Korea on the battlefield of nuclear diplomacy, they want more leverage combined with stronger independent deterrence capabilities.

In this way, they believe, South Korea can grapple with Korea-scaring, Korea-bashing and possible Korea-bypassing. In this vein, it was encouraging to see President Moon Jae-in emphasize deterrence by ordering military exercises as an armed protest against North Korea's ICBM test in August and nuclear test in September.

However, the Moon administration has made some odd-sounding suggestions, seemingly rooted in excessive optimism. Right after his inauguration in May, the new president vowed to phase out the country's dependence on atomic energy and move towards a reactor-free era. During his visit to Washington in June, he mentioned an early transfer of wartime operational control of allied forces, or OPCON, to Seoul. In July, while making a speech in Berlin, he hinted at the pursuit of a peace treaty on the Korean Peninsula in exchange for North Korea's denuclearization. In his National Liberation Day speech on August 15, the president touched on a halt to Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions by saying, “The resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue must start from a nuclear freeze.” Some pundits in Seoul are confused, because issues such as a peace treaty and OPCON transfer are what the Pyongyang regime has tenaciously pursued for decades as a way to divide the US from the Korean Peninsula. Anyway, if the government decides to put what President Moon suggests into practice, these will be unverified security experiments that could put South Korea in an uncertain and precarious position.

Of course, North Korea's leaders are not reckless enough to wage a war against the US. Pyongyang's brinkmanship reflects calculated craziness. That is, North Korea is playing a “rationally irrational” game that is meticulously calculated to win maximum military and diplomatic concessions; it believes it knows how and why it must stop at the edge of the abyss.

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The OPCON transfer may help satisfy Seoul's progressive activists who have argued that operational control of wartime forces is a matter of national pride and sovereignty. The foremost criteria on this long-running issue, however, should be whether a change in OPCON will affect the prevention of North Korea's all-out war provocation, US military intervention in the case of war and eventual victory. A peace treaty to formally end the Korean War is also directly linked to the nation's destiny. Many South Korean young people may easily get enthusiastic about the idea of changing the current armistice regime to build a permanent peace. But they often disregard the fact that in return North Korea will demand an end to the South Korea-US alliance and withdrawal of US forces. In fact, South Korea's security institutions could potentially be dismantled. History tells us that peace treaties between predators and prey are never sustained, as has been seen in many cases: the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression Pact, and the 1973 Paris Peace Accords on Vietnam. Last but not least, a big deal over a North Korean nuclear freeze may relieve Washington's stress over Pyongyang, but it might also reduce US concern for South Korea's security and entrench the military asymmetry on the Korean Peninsula. This would just allow North Korea to continue its Korea-scaring and distort inter-Korean relations in its favor.

TIME FOR NEW THINKING ON ALLIANCE CO-OPERATION

For the time being, Pyongyang, enjoying China and Russia's ambivalence, will see no reason to quit its addiction to nuclear weapons. What is equally unlikely, considering the current new Cold War confrontational dynamics, is that...
China will cease protecting North Korea and stop its preposterous Korea-bashing over THAAD. For the international community, this means that continued anger, sanctions and condemnation will not quell Pyongyang's die-hard nuclear intentions. Really, now is the time for the US and South Korea to prepare a roadmap for future alliance co-operation under a different approach.

For South Korea, it is urgent to get over Pyongyang's Korea-scaring, Beijing's Korea-bashing and forestall Washington's Korea-bypassing. Now is not the time to talk about unverified security experiments. Seoul needs to realize that an early OPCON transfer, a peace treaty, a nuclear freeze deal and so on may excite some South Koreans, but they could dilute the US-South Korea alliance, help solidify North Korea's posture, strengthen Beijing's hand and set Washington on a course to give up on Korea. At least for the time being, therefore, South Korea should concentrate on stepping up alliance co-operation to keep Pyongyang's WMDs from turning into a fully-fledged game changer. Five months after the Acheson line was declared in January 1950, Pyongyang provoked the Korean War. South Koreans should not forget that.

The US, with more capability than any other state to stop North Korea's dangerous nuclear game, needs to think about a new alliance policy framework based on geo-strategy rather than counter-proliferation policies. For such a fresh restart, Washington has to pay attention to the fact that the “northern triangle” states — China, Russia and North Korea — are all nuclear-armed and that Beijing sees North Korea as an essential strategic buffer and accepts Pyongyang's nuclear forces as a geostrategic asset valuable for keeping the US off guard. In contrast, US policy has stayed in the counter-proliferation framework, seeking alliance co-operation to combat the expansionist rise of China while not allowing allies to go nuclear. Extended deterrence, including the so-called nuclear umbrella, has been the lynchpin to both assure the security of allies and dissuade their nuclear ambitions. But this approach is now quickly losing ground as the nuclear collusion of socialist countries goes so far as to let North Korea's nuclear-tipped missiles threaten US territories. This approach, if allowed to go on, will drastically change the strategic contour in this region in favor of the northern triangle, putting South Korea into an even more miserable plight.

This is why I argue that Washington needs a new policy framework that includes eventual nuclearization of such democratic Asian states as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, all of whom are now bullied by China's outward push. A modus vivendi before this nuclearization debate would be the redeployment of US air-to-ground tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea and Japan. Definitely, the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons and the formation of a “balance of resolution” on the peninsula would be much safer than military action that could escalate into a tragic war. This would doubtless improve the geostrategic reality in this region and be a comprehensive military, political and psychological way for South Korea to eliminate its unilateral vulnerability, cure the Korea-scaring and Korea-bashing problems and avert Korea-bypassing.

The simple beginning of a debate on the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons will in itself constitute a strong diplomatic warning that the strategic landscape of Northeast Asia can be altered if China sticks to a policy of collusion with the nuclear pariah. This could be the real game-changer.

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