While the oversize personalities of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump tend to dominate global attention on the continuing efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, the peace initiative of South Korean President Moon Jae-in — the man in the middle — is increasingly pivotal to how things evolve among all of the players in this complex diplomatic drama.
Making Friendship Count: The Evidence Backs South Korea’s Peace Diplomacy
By Timo Kivimäki

South Korea has embarked on a policy toward North Korea that emphasizes building confidence and friendship and limits powerful means of persuasion to economic sanctions. President Moon Jae-in is betting that creating a more harmonious atmosphere can help create the conditions for peace. The evidence from global and regional experience suggests he is doing the right thing, writes Timo Kivimäki, who says that aggressive military alternatives are counter-productive.

SOUTH KOREAN President Moon Jae-in’s strategy toward North Korea can be looked at from several vantage points. While aiming for peace, denuclearization and the eventual unification of the two Koreas, Moon uses three strategic tools — dialogue, friendship-building and sanctions — to achieve these goals.

As a result, dialogue with Pyongyang has taken center stage in Seoul’s strategy. While before 2018 there were only six inter-Korean dialogue meetings on political matters, in 2018 alone there were 17 such meetings.

Secondly, Moon’s diplomacy is stretching the boundaries of what we have seen before. Creating massive media events to document walking hand-in-hand with the previously demonized leader of North Korea goes beyond the traditional tactics of engagement, trust and confidence-building. Moon’s approach amounts to a strategy of friendship-building as a method of achieving peace. Friendly nations do not need weapons to be secure from each other. Moon is trying to create a situation where friendship, engagement, trust and confidence would make North Korean nuclear weapons irrelevant and, thus, useless, at least in terms of the inter-Korean relationship.

The third element that characterizes Moon’s approach is economic coercion. Even though the sanctions are not initiated by South Korea and even though some friendship-building is limited by them, participation in international economic coercion of North Korea is undoubtedly also part of Moon’s approach to peace.

The main alternatives to Moon’s strategy that have been presented in the political and scholarly literature are: 1) military action; 2) military deterrence; and, 3) reliance on economic sanctions.

This article will analyze the success of similar strategies in the past. By using both East Asian and global evidence and by adjusting this evidence to the conditions on the Korean Peninsula, we will see whether the current South Korean strategy toward North Korea is supported by research-based evidence.

WOULD A ‘BLOODY NOSE’ MILITARY STRATEGY WORK?
Moon’s security strategy rules out most military options that have been presented as an alternative to dialogue and friendship-building. In South Korea’s national security strategy, according to a summary by Chung-In Moon (see page 10), the government’s stand on military options is based on three principles:
• Peace first, ruling out pre-emptive war to defeat North Korea;
• Denuclearization of North Korea by peaceful means, ruling out using South Korean independent nuclear weapons as deterrence;
• No regime change, ruling out overthrowing the government in Pyongyang.

All the options that the three principles rule out have been discussed in the context of a vague, “bloody nose” strategy. The military option has been suggested as a way to tackle the threat of war, North Korean nuclear blackmail and violations of human rights. But the use of military means for these purposes has a poor track record. Over the last 20 years, there have been 19 Western interventions in 12 fragile states with the intention of disarming weapons of mass destruction, changing regimes or suppressing terrorism or criminal violence: Kosovo (1999), Sierra Leone (2000), Afghanistan (2001-), Pakistan (2004-), Iraq (2003-2011 & 2014-), Central African Republic (2006), Somalia (2007-), Yemen (2009-), Mauritania (2010), Libya (2011 & 2015-), Mali (2013-2017) and Syria (2014-).

The effectiveness of these operations is not convincing. Military operations that have tried to tackle humanitarian problems caused by wars, dictators, WMDs or terrorists have increased rather than decreased the threats to security. Based on an assessment of the 19 military involvements by the US, the UK and France during the past two decades, it appears that fatalities after intervention rise by an average of 720 percent during the first year of intervention. In all but one of these 19 cases, the level of violence was in decline or very low a year before the intervention.

Furthermore, the threat of coercive regime change clearly encourages dictators to defend themselves using weapons of mass destruction. North Korea’s foreign minister gives a very clear hint about this in his paper to the ASEAN Regional Forum: “While the nuclear weapon states have never been under any military attack, non-nuclear states such as Grenada, Panama, Haiti, the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Somalia underwent regime change by military attack and interference from the US.”

East Asian evidence on military intervention is equally damning. East Asia used to be open to military intervention by external powers, and the Korean Peninsula is a great example of such openness. Altogether two-thirds of conflict fatalities in East Asia after the Second World War were produced in conflicts where external military intervention in a domestic dispute or conflict over governance escalated into war. Only a minimal fragment of the fatalities of these conflicts were produced before the internationalization of the domestic dispute.

After the 1970s, East Asian states no longer accepted external military intervention, especially against existing governments, regardless of how corrupt or undemocratic they might be. As a
result, 95 percent of the average annual conflict fatalities in the region disappeared. While military non-interference was expected to increase human rights violations because they could then be committed with impunity, the opposite happened. Dictators could no longer claim that the nation was threatened and could no longer secureitize political processes; consequently, autocratic violence was reduced. Thus, the military option is not a useful alternative to dialogue and friendship-building.

CAN MUTUAL MILITARY DETERRENCE GUARANTEE PEACE?

According to some scholars, notably David Kang, mutual nuclear deterrence between the US and North Korea could offer a foundation for stability. North Korea’s nuclear weapons do not pose an offensive military danger, but instead they are there to deter an attack from others. Obviously, the same is true for the nuclear weapons of the Western powers. Yet, leaving security to nuclear deterrence alone has its problems.

The world has at least once come close to a nuclear holocaust simply because of a Soviet false alarm of a US first strike. In September 1983, the world was saved by Stanislav Yevgrafovich Petrov, a lieutenant colonel of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, who simply guessed that a US first-strike alarm sent by the Soviet early warning system was false. The more courageous a bargainer is at getting close to the brink of war, the more she can extract concessions from others. In the Cuban missile crisis, the manipulation of perceptions of willingness to risk war, nuclear brinkmanship, created a situation in which only a flotilla commander and second-in-command of a submarine, Vasili Arkhipov, could rescue the world from a nuclear holocaust by refusing to authorize the use of nuclear torpedoes against the US Navy. North Korea could use similar nuclear brinkmanship against South Korea to exert political concessions. Thus, the logic of brinkmanship bargaining pushes protagonists closer to war while at the same time rewarding recklessness. Thus, even if nuclear deterrence may partly explain the current absence of military confrontation, it should not be the only guarantee of peace.

CAN ECONOMIC SANCTIONS PUSH PYONGYANG TO ABANDON NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

The track record of sanctions is well studied. There are data on each of the 203 sanctions used from the time of the First World War until 2005. On the basis of these data, it seems that in about one-third of the cases, sanctions produced positive change. This leaves the other two-thirds of the cases with practically no impact. Furthermore, sanctions can be quite costly in terms of human suffering — in some cases, comparable to weapons of mass destruction. Different types of sanctions have vastly different track records. If the political elite is internationalized, it is possible to target sanctions more sharply against the elite without harming the people. This would elevate the chances of success. Yet, targeting the elite is hard in a country such as North Korea, where the elite is isolated internationally. Thus, the overall likelihood of success of sanctions in North Korea could be even smaller than one-third, and yet the costs to North Koreans of such sanctions could still be significant. Trade sanctions that hit the people reinforce the siege narrative of dictators and improve regime durability.

When the target of sanctions sees the country or countries imposing them as an enemy, sanctions are viewed as a sign of hostility connected to the targeted behavior. As a result, they fail to push the target of sanctions in the desired direction. This problem affects the North Korean sanctions, because the political elite there clearly sees sanctions as Western hostility rather than something related to North Korea’s own behavior. Furthermore, if sanctions are seen, as is the case in Korea, in the context of a power struggle, sanctions almost always fail. During the Cold War, there was only one case of sanctions imposed on the Iron Curtain having even minimal success. In North Korea, the framing of power politics is quite clear, and if dialogue cannot reframe this, the chances of sanctions achieving change are slim.

Consequently, friendship-building is needed to support the effectiveness of sanctions. My calculations, based on the data of Hufbauer’s research team, show that sanctions that are delivered by countries that the target considers
friendly help bring about changes in a target’s behavior in two-thirds of cases.15 It can be concluded that sanctions are not likely to be a viable alternative to dialogue and friendship-building. Firstly, they are not likely to be very successful on their own. Secondly, success requires dialogue and friendship-building.

**DIALOGUE AND FRIENDSHIP-BUILDING WITH CONDITIONAL SANCTIONS**

The global record is overwhelming in favor of tying peace negotiations to efforts at building confidence, positive interactions, trust and friendship. The willingness to negotiate is clearly associated with an increase in the early resolution of conflicts.16 Furthermore, peace is more durable if it is achieved through negotiations.17 There is a need to raise questions that disturb good relations, even if these issues are troubling and divisive. The danger of a nuclear war is such an issue: it needs to be negotiated, even if such negotiations focus on divisive issues.

Yet, during the long peace of East Asia, the favored formula for ending conflict has not been based on peace negotiations. Mostly, East Asian conflicts have ended in inaction.18 Rather than dialogue on divisive issues, peace has been based on a formula that focuses on the things that unite East Asians.19 The friendship-building side of the South Korean government’s strategy derives from the traditional East Asian approach of focusing on issues that unite rather than focusing on differences. Fighting diseases, improving crisis stability and planning for mutually beneficial economic co-operation are typical East Asian tactics that are now being tried in Korea. It would, therefore, be possible to say that the current governmental strategy also draws on the lessons of the long peace in East Asia.

Thus, it seems that both global and East Asian evidence supports the South Korean policy that combines friendship-building and dialogue with economic conditionality. What is needed now, in addition to an evidence-based strategy toward North Korea, is a strategy that encourages the US and North Korea to compromise on their bilateral disputes.

Timo Kivimäki is Professor of International Relations at the University of Bath.