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.

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THE KOREAN PENINSULA remains one of the most protracted and volatile conflict zones in the world, with a 70-year history of inter-Korean military confrontation and four decades of the North Korean nuclear quagmire. Despite South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s appeal for dialogue and peace following his inauguration on May 10, 2017, he was greeted in the ensuing months with 15 rounds of ballistic-missile tests by North Korea, including a Hwasung-15 ICBM on Nov. 29, as well as a sixth nuclear test on Sept. 3. Equally worrisome was the threat by the administration of US President Donald Trump to use military options to compel Pyongyang to denuclearize. Preventive war, pre-emptive attacks and even a so-called “bloody nose” strategy were commonly invoked in discussions among policy-makers in the US. Moon’s peace initiative was launched to manage the horns of this dilemma.

THE THREE PRINCIPLES OF MOON’S PEACE INITIATIVE
Moon’s goal has been to achieve a nuclear weapons-free, peaceful and prosperous Korean Peninsula. He has adopted three principles to realize those goals.

1) The first principle is to seek a “peace first” policy by resolutely opposing any military actions, whether pre-emption and/or preventive war. This opposition is grounded in basic cost-benefit analysis. Once initiated, a conflict would be difficult if not impossible to contain, and the human and economic costs of war on the Korean Peninsula would be staggering. With Seoul’s huge civilian population living within artillery range and the largest economies in the world within missile range, South Korea, Asia and the world simply have too much to lose from a war with North Korea, which has very little to lose and is willing to fight to the death.

2) The second principle is adherence to a “no nukes” policy. Moon firmly believes that South Korea cannot peacefully coexist with a nuclear North Korea and that Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions should be stopped. He has declared that South Korea will not possess any nuclear arms of its own. This was a response to a growing number of calls by some people in South Korea to develop an indigenous nuclear-arms program to deal with Pyongyang’s nuclear threat. They advocate the independent acquisition of nuclear weapons by arguing that America’s nuclear umbrella, provided under the scheme of extended deterrence, is a broken umbrella. But the Moon government has been critical of these calls, because American commitment to extended deterrence and its nuclear umbrella is unquestionably firm. Worse is that as soon as South Korea declares its intention to pursue this course, it would face strong headwinds. Its national economy and nuclear power industry would face ruin, and it would risk the country’s traditional alliance with the United States. Moreover, a nuclear South Korea could be a tipping point that would trigger a nuclear domino effect in Northeast Asia.

3) The third principle adopted by the Moon government is of “no regime change” in North Korea. On several occasions, including in his speech in Berlin on July 6, 2017, Moon clearly said that he would seek neither regime change in North Korea nor reunification by absorption on South Korean terms. He believes that neither of these moves would be desirable because they would undermine mutual trust, while stiffening Pyongyang’s hostility. Moreover, they would not be feasible in the short run, because removing North Korea’s leadership is extremely difficult from a practical standpoint. The collapse of the Kim Jong Un regime also would not necessarily mean the end of North Korea as a sovereign state. The military or a military-party collective leadership could easily replace the Kim regime, and any new leadership would likely show the same behavior. A mass uprising could bring about an abrupt end to the regime, but at present this seems highly unlikely. Moreover, loss of control over North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction in the wake of political and social chaos is another reason why the Moon government is less receptive to leadership or regime change.

PEACE WITH FOUR ‘P’S
While adhering to these principles, Moon has advanced four strategies, consisting of peace-making, peace-keeping, peace-building and proactive diplomacy. The peace-making strategy aims at restoring dialogue and negotiation as a viable means of resolving the North Korean nuclear problem. Aware of inherent limits to dialogue and negotiation and the lessons of the failed Six-Party Talks as well as bilateral talks between North Korea and the US, Moon has proposed a two-track approach in which Pyongyang and Washington engage in bilateral dialogue to resolve the nuclear problem, while Seoul and Pyongyang resume talks on inter-Korean relations. Moon’s emphasis on dialogue and negotiation has yielded some positive outcomes, such as the Panmunjom summit on April 27, 2018, the US-North Korea summit in Singapore on June 12, 2018, and the Pyongyang Summit on Sept. 18-20, 2018.

Moon’s approach also seeks to enhance inter-
Korean confidence-building through military agreements on operational arms control. Article Two of the Panmunjom Declaration stipulates that South and North Korean leaders make joint efforts to alleviate acute military tensions and take practical measures to eliminate the danger of war on the Korean Peninsula. Alleviating military tensions and eliminating the danger of war is a highly significant challenge directly linked to the fate of the Korean people and a vital task in guaranteeing their peaceful and stable lives. The two leaders also agreed to completely cease all hostile acts against each other in every domain — land, air and sea. In this vein, the two sides agreed to transform the demilitarized zone into a peace zone in a genuine sense by ceasing, as of May 1, 2018, all hostile acts and eliminating their means, including broadcasting through loudspeakers and the distribution of leaflets, in the areas along the Military Demarcation Line. They also agreed to devise a practical scheme to turn the areas around the Northern Limit Line in the West Sea into a maritime peace zone in order to prevent accidental military clashes and guarantee safe fishing activities. Beginning on Nov. 1, 2018, most of these agreements have been implemented.

The transformation of the armistice agreement into a lasting and stable peace regime through the adoption of a declaration of the end of war and the achievement of a peace accord or treaty among concerned parties constitutes the final component of the peace-making strategy. Article Three of the Panmunjom Declaration states that “South and North Korea will actively co-operate to establish a permanent and solid peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Bringing an end to the current unnatural state of armistice and establishing a robust peace regime on the Korean Peninsula is a historical mission that must not be delayed any further.” The two leaders thus “reaffirmed the Non-Aggression Agreement that pre-

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**Policy Steps to Peace**

Moon Jae-in’s Policy on the Korean Peninsula as phrased by the South Korean Ministry of Unification:

It is a long-term and comprehensive policy led by Korea to realize ‘peace’ and ‘prosperity’ on the Korean Peninsula as well as Northeast Asia together with North Korea, regional neighbors, and the international society.

**‘Peace’ First**

Peace is the value that we should uphold with the highest priority, as well as the foundation for prosperity.

**Spirit of ‘Mutual Respect’**

We pursue a “Korean Peninsula of co-prosperity,” where South and North respect and co-operate with each other, by defining our stance as the “3-Nos” - no desire for the North’s collapse, no pursuit of unification by absorption, and no pursuit of unification through artificial means.

**‘Open’ Policy**

The policy will be completed through public participation and interaction to ensure that the policy can be fully understood by — and made by — the people.

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**Three Goals**

1. Resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and establishment of permanent peace
2. Development of sustainable inter-Korean relations
3. Realization of a new economic community on the Korean Peninsula

**Four Strategies**

1. Taking a step-by-step and comprehensive approach
2. Tackling the issues of inter-Korean relations and the North Korean nuclear threat simultaneously
3. Ensuring sustainability through institutionalization
4. Laying the foundation for peaceful unification through mutually beneficial co-operation

**Five Principles**

1. Korea-led initiative
2. Strong defense
3. Mutual respect
4. Interaction with the people
5. International co-operation
cludes the use of force in any form against each other,” and “agreed to carry out disarmament in a phased manner, as military tension is alleviated, and substantial progress is made in military confidence-building.”

The end-of-war declaration that Moon initially proposed has become controversial not only because it was seen as a hasty concession to Pyongyang, but also because Washington feared that it would precipitate a change in the status of the South Korea-US alliance as well as lead to the reduction or withdrawal of US forces from South Korea. But such worries seem groundless. The South Korean version of the proposed declaration is rather symbolic and political in nature. It is known to have four elements. First, political leaders take the “symbolic” step of formally declaring the end of the Korean War, which has lasted more than 70 years. The second element is a pronouncement on the elimination of hostile relations between North and South Korea and between North Korea and the US, which could entail some sort of non-aggression accord. The third would stipulate that the Armistice Agreement and the arrangements that stem from it — such as the Military Demarcation Line that separates the Koreas and the United Nations Command that seeks to deter North Korea from the South Korean side of the border — would temporarily remain in place until the parties negotiate a more comprehensive, legally binding peace treaty to replace the Armistice. The fourth component would link the completion of a peace treaty and normalization of diplomatic relations among the parties, along with a broader “peace regime on the Korean Peninsula” to the denuclearization of North Korea. The declaration aims at not only making a transition from the Armistice Agreement to some form of a peace treaty, but also fostering the process of North Korea’s denuclearization.

The strategy of peace-keeping is composed of sanctions and maximum pressure, as well as military deterrence and alliance. The Moon government has closely co-operated with the US and Japan in pushing for tougher sanctions resolutions at the United Nations Security Council and has fully complied with them. Seoul has also pledged to go along with unilateral sanctions by the US, including secondary boycotts. More importantly, the Moon government has decided to sustain sanction measures adopted by previous conservative governments, such as the May 24 measure that bans exchanges and co-operation with North Korea and the suspension of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the Mt. Kumgang tourist project.

The Moon government has also been pursuing a strategy of deterrence and missile defense. Deterrence aims at preventing North Korea from acting in a certain way by threatening to retaliate with credible military force. It is composed of two elements. One is conventional deterrence through a strengthening of South Korea-US combined forces and South Korea’s self-reliant defense posture. In order to enhance defense capabilities, the Moon government increased its defense budget by 8.6 percent in 2018 and 8.2 percent in 2019, respectively. The other is nuclear deterrence through close co-operation and co-ordination with the US on extended deterrence and the provision of America’s nuclear umbrella. Meanwhile, the Moon government strongly opposes the redeployment of American tactical nuclear weapons on South Korean soil, as well as the development and possession of independent nuclear weapons.

The strategy of peace-building has also been simultaneously pursued. The Moon government has proposed a “new economic map of the Korean Peninsula,” an initiative designed to foster the formation of an inter-Korean economic community, starting with railroad connections and energy networks. Such an economic community would facilitate the free flow of people, goods and services, resembling a state of de facto, if not de jure, unification. The arrival of such de facto unification would fundamentally reduce military tension, while enhancing a feeling of co-variance and mutual safety. When and if de facto unification leads to de jure unification, the structural causes of the Korean conflict can be eliminated, and stable and lasting peace can be realized. Thus, Moon has emphasized “the peaceful economy thesis” — Pyong-hwa Gyungje — in which “peace on the Korean Peninsula will serve as a new driving force for economic growth, which will not only impact both Koreas but also encompass Northeast Asia, ASEAN and Eurasia.”

Finally, Moon wants to use more proactive diplomacy in resolving the North Korean nuclear problem by facilitating not only inter-Korean and US-North Korean dialogue, but also seeking close consultation with Japan, China and Russia. In this regard, he proposed a new Korean Peninsula regime that refers to “the order of the coming century in which we will take on a leading role. Working together with the people and with North Korea as well, we will create a new order of peace and co-operation.” He further stated that “the new Korean Peninsula regime is a new community of peace and co-operation that will end confrontations and conflicts. We will establish a permanent peace regime without fail on the basis of our unwavering will, close ROK-US co-ordination, a settlement in North Korea-US talks and support from the international community.” Moon believes that “progress in inter-Korean relations will lead to the normalization of North Korea’s relations with the United States and Japan, later expanding into a new order of peace and security in Northeast Asia.”
LINKING PEACE-BUILDING TO DENUCLEARIZATION
Since the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in February 2018, Moon's strategy for peace has resulted in some positive outcomes, as evidenced by successive summit meetings. However, his peace initiative has been fundamentally under- mined by a lack of progress in denuclearizing North Korea. Despite Chairman Kim Jong Un's words and commitments, there has been not any concrete progress toward denuclearization. It will hardly be feasible to make progress in peace-building on the Korean Peninsula without corresponding measures toward denuclearization.

Expectations were high for the second US-North Korea summit, held in Hanoi on Feb. 27-28. But the news of “no deal” from Hanoi came as a shock to many South Koreans. The disappointment shook the public’s faith in summit diplomacy, and undermined Seoul’s efforts to foster parallel processes to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea, the building of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula and inter-Korean economic co-operation. The Moon government’s post-Hanoi strategy of encouraging a rhetoric and deeds, no matter how trivial they seem, risk bringing about catastrophic consequences. As a result, Moon is appealing for mutual restraint in words and deeds to make the resuscitation of negotiations possible.

The Moon government is also urging prudence and realism. North Korea is not a surrender- nation, and it is highly unlikely to accept Trump’s big deal. The logic of “all or nothing” prevails, then the ability to exit from the current stalemate seems inconceivable. The North Korean proposal does not seem realistic either. The US will not exchange only the dismantling of Yongbyon nuclear facilities and suspension of nuclear and missile activities for the lifting of major portions of the UN economic sanctions. Pyongyang should offer more than that (for example, the dismantling of Yongbyon plus a commitment to dismantle additional uranium enrichment facilities), while expecting less (for example, inter-Korean economic exchanges and co-operation instead of relief from a large portion of the UN sanctions).

In this regard, the South Korean government’s proposal for “a comprehensive agreement on all for all, its incremen- tal implementation based on mutually accept- able roadmap and timetable” seems to be a more sensible compromise that could overcome the current zero-sum deadlock.

CONCLUSION
The Moon government’s peace initiative is an ambitious project to create a nuclear weapons-free, peaceful and prosperous Korean Peninsula by dismantling the old Cold War structure that still haunts both Koreas. It is timely and well taken. But its record has so far been mixed. Although it played a crucial role in resolving the acute crisis on the Peninsula in 2017 through summit diplomacy, the goal of achieving denuclearization and peace still seems far off and elusive. A spring of peace has not yet arrived. The Hanoi setback has further reinforced this rather pessimistic outlook.

Indeed, Moon’s peace initiative isn’t without constraints and limits. Daunting challenges await:
- Contradictions within the initiative seem problematic. In encountering North Korea’s military provocations, the Moon government has emphasized the importance of peace-keeping through the enhancement of military deterrence and the South Korea-US alliance, which directly contradicts the mandate of peace-making and peace-building.
- Peace-building is the ultimate goal of the Moon government’s peace initiative. It would become plausible when and if unification, de facto or de jure, becomes a reality. Practically speaking, de jure unification that presupposes one nation, one state, one system and one government seems highly unlikely, because it would only be plausible under one of the following two scenarios: unification by absorption (on South Korean terms) or unification by communization (on North Korean terms). Currently, neither scenario is likely. However, de facto unification, which ensures the free flow of people, goods and services across the military demarcation line through the institutionalization of inter-Korean co-operation and integration is plausible if the two Koreas can engage in economic exchanges and co-operation and eventually build an economic community. But international sanctions under UN Security Council Resolutions fundamentally delimit such inter-Korean economic exchanges and co-operation, and therefore block efforts toward peace-building.

Peace-building seems highly unlikely without substantial sanctions relief, which is tied to the denuclearization of North Korea.
- Internal and external environments do not seem favorable to Moon’s peace initiative. Whereas domestic conservative opposition has been growing, Pyongyang has not always co-operated with Seoul’s efforts to achieve denuclearization and peace. External factors have also been volatile. Trump’s unpredictable policies, which have been dictated by an odd interplay among his hyperbolic personality, nasty Washington politics and hegemonic rivalry with China, have also become a major source of anxiety in Seoul.

These challenges notwithstanding, the peace initiative remains the right choice simply because there are no other alternatives. Whereas sanctions and maximum pressure have had a limited effect in compelling changes in North Korea’s behavior, military action is unthinkable to South Koreans. Instead, a negotiated settlement of the North Korean nuclear issue as well as peace-making and peace-building are the mandate of our time, based on common sense and historical consciousness.