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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Inside Kim Jong Un’s Assertive Mind
By Haksoo Paik

The pressure that the world has focused on the surge in North Korea’s nuclear development has proven ineffective in the face of Kim Jong Un’s determination to succeed at his grim task. Where even his father opted for sporadic negotiations and agreements, the current leader is unwavering.

What factors make Kim Jong Un so aggressive? Haksoo Paik writes that understanding the mindset, self-centeredness and achievements of the young leader is a vital starting point for finding a path toward a solution to the current crisis.

IN JULY 2017, North Korea test-fired intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) twice, and in September it conducted a test of an “ICBM-mountable hydrogen bomb.” It called both tests successful. Kim Jong Un said that the explosion of a hydrogen bomb was “a great victory for the Korean people” and that “the final victory of the Juche Revolution is certain.”

It appears that “maximum pressure and engagement,” the Trump Administration’s policy toward North Korea, has not been effective enough to weaken Kim Jong Un’s nuclear and ballistic-missile ambitions. Those who do not agree with that observation may argue that truly serious pressure on North Korea began only in 2016, with the help of China, and that pressure will be closer to maximum great victory for the Korean people” and that “the observation may argue that truly serious pressure on North Korea began only in 2016, with the help of China, and that pressure will be closer to maximum

Kim Jong Un’s achievements
December 2017 will mark the sixth anniversary of Kim Jong Un’s assumption of “supreme leadership” in North Korea. His achievements have far surpassed expectations when he inherited power from his father in December 2011. At the time of his coronation, he was seen as young and inexperienced, and the most popular scenario in the Western, South Korean and Japanese media was that the supreme leader system would likely collapse and be followed by a collective leadership.

However, these predictions were off the mark. Kim Jong Un decisively consolidated his power, and is now in full control by all indications. His consolidation of power was most dramatically demonstrated by his calculated removal and execution of his uncle and mentor, Jang Song-taek, to pre-empt future challenges to his power.

He significantly encouraged home production and expanded markets by introducing various reforms, most notably in agriculture, industry and the service sector. North Korea now has more of a semi-market system that makes markets more important than ideology in the everyday lives of North Koreans. According to the most recent statistics published by the Bank of Korea, North Korea’s GDP growth rate in 2016 was 3.9 percent, the highest in 17 years. More importantly, the state has increased its tax revenues and strengthened its extractive capabilities. This partly answers the question of where the money comes from for Kim Jong Un’s large-scale construction projects such as the new Pyongyang Airport terminal (2015), “Future Scientists’ Street” (2015), “Dawn Street” (2016) and others.

In the military-security arena, Kim decisively strengthened nuclear and ballistic-missile capabilities by conducting four nuclear tests, including the most recent test of an ICBM-mountable thermonuclear bomb, and numerous ballistic-missile test firings, including intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and ICBMs.

Finally, “change” is the key word that could best describe what is happening in North Korean society. Kim has pursued North Korean-style internationalization as expressed in the slogan, “Keep your feet firmly on the ground of your motherland and keep your eyes on the world!” His regime emphasizes catching up with “world trends” and “world standards.”

These achievements must have given North Koreans hope that their young leader will deliver better lives and futures, despite economic hardship and widespread corruption. In addition, Kim appears to be winning a war of nerves with the US and establishing an image as a fearless fighter in the minds of North Koreans. Kim Jong Un’s popularity is reportedly higher than that of his late father Kim Jong Il.

Kim Jong Un: Forged in Privilege
The other sources of Kim Jong Un’s motives are seen in his background and interests. He grew up as a key member of North Korea’s dynastic Kim family, the grandson of Kim Il Sung, the son of Kim Jong Il and the heir to the throne. In short, Kim’s identity is that of a supreme leader or king. He is known to have grown up with few checks on his needs and wants. In other words, without any feeling of insufficiency or inferiority, which helped him develop his egocentric personality and self-centered understanding of the world. It appears that his sense of self-esteem does not allow any confrontation, criticism or opposition from others. Any person or country that challenges or opposes him, faces retaliation and punishment without fail. The US is no exception in this regard. If his prestige is damaged, the way he tries to restore his self-respect is tremendously aggressive and violent, as we have witnessed up to now.

Besides his family background, the political culture and system in North Korea provided Kim with a specific environment for forming his identity. North Korea’s system is characterized by a mixture of North Korean socialism, Juche ideology, or independence, the Kim-dominated “supreme leader system,” and military-first politics with a layer of North Korean-style Confucianism.

It is intriguing to think about what influence his experience of living and studying for four years in Switzerland as a teenager has had on his identity and the course of North Korea in the future. He is known to have spent his time like any teenage boy in school: playing basketball and watching the NBA on TV, idolizing basketball stars such as Michael Jordan; playing computer games; watching action movies, adoring stars like Jackie Chan; listening to music performed by Western singers such as Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston; learning Western culture, including democracy. All these experiences will presumably remain a latent identity until a window of opportunity is opened, for instance, as the nuclear and ballistic-missile issues are resolved one way or another.
Kim Jong Un’s interests were basically formed by his identities. His identity as the supreme leader of North Korea played a major role in shaping his interests: to protect, expand and exercise his power in the way the supreme leader was supposed to do, on the one hand; and to strengthen North Korea’s national security, military strength and economy, on the other.

These identities and interests apparently motivated him to be vigilant and often merciless in his efforts. He monopolized power, and pre-empted any future opposition in the domestic arena. He strengthened his nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities to counter threats coming from the US, South Korea and Japan. It is noteworthy that Kim Jong Un is taking advantage of the leadership vacuum in the US on Korean affairs. By all indications, Kim appears to have decided to perfect the technology needed for “nuclear-tipped ICBMs” at the earliest possible time.

**Kim’s Modus Operandi in Expressing his Motives**

Kim Jong Un’s modus operandi in exercising his motives lies in the slogan “concentrated fire, continuous fire and targeted fire.” Kim himself has emphasized the importance of this in ideological work, and this ideological warfare was faithfully reflected in countering US and UN Security Council threats in the military-security realm.

The North Korean party and state officials often carry headlines quoting and reflecting this idea of “concentrated fire, continuous fire and targeted fire.” And when North Korea announced a “complete success” of its ICBM-mountable hydrogen bomb test on September 3, Korean Central Television used a pop song entitled “Peace Exists on Our Guns and Spears” as the background music; part of the lyrics say, “We will never, ever beg for peace no matter how valuable it is.”

Kim Jong Un has conducted four nuclear tests and 82 test-firings of various kinds of ballistic missiles in less than six years as leader, whereas Kim Jong Il conducted two nuclear tests and 16 ballistic-missile tests during his 16-year rule. Kim Jong Un has also diverged from his father in his response to sanctions. During Kim Jong Il’s tenure, North Korea’s nuclear or missile tests were punished by UN Security Council resolutions, which were followed by a period of confrontation and eventually by dialogue and negotiations that frequently produced “agreements.” The agreements were not kept faithfully, though, and North Korea’s provocations resumed, again to be followed by a resolution and another period of confrontation as the pattern repeated itself.

In the Kim Jong Un era, however, when North Korean provocations prompt a Security Council resolution, Kim has countered with another provocation, which is again punished by a resolution, only to be followed by another provocation. This pattern is characterized by the absence of dialogue, negotiation and even hollow agreements. In the past, these agreements were practically “control mechanisms” to try to check North Korea’s nuclear behavior. The current lack of dialogue, negotiation and agreement means Kim Jong Un has a virtual free hand in his pursuit of technological advances and the perfection of his nuclear arsenal with no control mechanism wielded by the international community.

**What Must Be Done?**

Kim Jong Un’s motives and assertiveness in recent nuclear and ballistic-missile provocations raise a series of questions. Will his seeming confidence continue to prompt him to speed up nuclear weapons and ballistic-missile developments? Regardless of the answer, what should be our policy options to bring his motives under control? More concretely, how should we persuade him to change his modus operandi of “concentrated fire, continuous fire and targeted fire,” which constitutes an immediate threat to the outside world? The self-contradictory nature of the Trump Administration’s “maximum pressure and engagement” policy is evidenced by the conflicting words and behavior of senior US officials, including Trump. They mention the need to resolve the North Korean problem by diplomatic means, and then insist that “maximum pressure” will prompt Kim Jong Un to enter into a dialogue. This intermittent offer of “dialogue” is offset by Trump’s promises of “fire and fury” because Pyongyang is “begging for war,” and so on.

Questions arise about what precisely is US policy toward North Korea: what constitutes “maximum pressure,” and who will decide when to unleash it? The US stance implies that there is no place for negotiation in the “maximum pressure and engagement” policy. Diplomacy is only possible when the US, South Korea, Japan and the UN Security Council recognize and accept North Korea as a fully qualified partner in finding solutions to the current crisis, including North Korea’s nuclear threat, deployment of the THAAD anti-missile system in South Korea, conflicts along the 38th parallel and the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the West Sea, and, more broadly, issues of war and peace in Korea.

If we continue to ignore Kim Jong Un’s motives and his confidence in confronting the US and the UN and fail to account for his achievements in politics, the economy, the military-security arena and society in North Korea, we may overestimate our ability to punish North Korea. Excessive dependence on pressure and sanctions will ultimately undermine our capacity to deal with North Korea in a more problem-solving fashion, leaving us victim to the devil of our own creation. Past experience tells us that sanctions-only policies will have a limited effect on resolving North Korea’s nuclear and missile issues, let alone the broader Korean problem itself.

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