North Korea Inches Toward Negotiations on Its Nuclear Ambitions
By Tae-ho Kang

Efforts to thwart North Korea’s ambitions to develop a full-fledged nuclear weapons program — including the ability to deliver its existing nuclear devices on ballistic missiles — has eluded the United States, South Korea and other participants in the Six-Party talks.

Following the unraveling of a deal in 2012 that would have temporarily halted tests of nuclear weapons and missiles, there are signs that North Korea may be looking for a way out of the current impasse, writes Tae-ho Kang.

THE COLLAPSE of an agreement reached on Feb. 29, 2012, between the United States and North Korea to suspend Pyongyang’s tests of nuclear weapons and missiles — the so-called Leap Day Agreement, which was the first and only agreement with North Korea during US President Barack Obama’s first term — left US proponents of dialogue with North Korea on shaky ground. Shortly after the agreement was signed, Kim Jong Un proceeded to declare his country a nuclear state in its Constitution, twice launched satellites and conducted a third nuclear test. Naturally, opponents of negotiations with Pyongyang appeared vindicated in their argument that talks with North Korea are useless. That view became more prevalent inside the beltway in Washington. Still, war is not the solution either.

Former US Assistant Secretary of State Robert Gallucci, one of the main architects of the 1994 Agreed Framework signed by North Korea and the US in Geneva, put it aptly when he said that Washington’s policies toward North Korea, containment and engagement alike, had failed. This failing grade applies equally to the “strategic patience” approach adopted by Obama during his first term. Indeed, North Korea beefed up its nuclear capabilities more in those years than during any other period. Even so, the administration has yet to change policy approaches in its second term. On the eve of that second term, North Korea announced the prospect of “all-out Armageddon,” conducting a nuclear test and announcing a state of war on the Korean Peninsula. What North Korea policy there was in Washington evaporated, leaving only United Nations sanctions and the prospect of military reprisals. The North Korean nuclear issue became more serious than ever, and at the same time was completely forgotten. The conflicts over it contrast especially sharply with the preliminary nuclear agreement that the Obama administration reached with Iran last year, a major diplomatic achievement. Min-soon Song, a former South Korean Foreign Minister who served as senior representative to the Six-Party talks and was a major player in the signing of the “September 19 Statement” in 2005 during the fourth round of the talks, sounded a resigned note: “From a US domestic political perspective, the North Korean issue doesn’t seem to be one where [the Obama administration] senses any diplomatic investment value.”

SPRING 2013: ‘THE PLAYBOOK’ VERSUS ‘ALL-OUT ARMAGEDDON’
In the spring of 2013, exceptionally dark clouds of war were gathering over the Korean Peninsula. On February 12, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test. It followed this up on March 26 by declaring “Combat Readiness Posture No. 1.” A statement by the Korean People’s Army Supreme Command announced, “As of this moment, we are putting all field artillery forces into Combat Readiness Posture No. 1, including strategic rocket units and long-range artillery units.” Combat Readiness Posture No. 1 signals Supreme Commander Kim Jong Un’s final ratification of a plan for strategic rocket strikes on US bases on the American mainland and in Guam and Japan. And, indeed, batteries of the medium-range Musudan missile — with an estimated striking distance of 4,000km — were deployed to North Korea’s eastern coast and put on standby for launch. Choson Sinbo, the newspaper of the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon), reported this as North Korea’s “all-out Armageddon in response to the UN Security Council resolution that declared the satellite launch [of Dec. 12, 2012] to be illegal.”

The US, according to an April 3 report in The Wall Street Journal, responded according to its “playbook.” The playbook in question is a kind of tactical manual, drafted by the US Pacific Command in December 2012 in response to the North Korean military threat. Its aim is to respond to any threat from North Korea with shows of far superior force, intended to deter the North from additional provocations while also discouraging the South Korean government from any excessive military response.

This prompted war games with real weapons that began on March 11, the starting date of joint US-South Korean military exercises named Key Resolve. The US deployed a B-52 strategic bomber on the Korean Peninsula on March 19, then twice more that same month. On March 20, it included its strategic nuclear attack submarine USS Cheyenne in the exercises, all the while advertising the moves to show off its might. That same day, North Korea declared that it would take military action in response to any redeployment of the B-52, and activated its Combat Readiness Posture No. 1 for strategic rocket and long-range artillery units. On March 28, the US brought its more advanced B-2 strategic bomber in from the mainland. Still North Korea did not back down. The next day, Kim Jong Un called an urgent operational meeting on fire power strike duties for strategic missile units, ordering them to go on “standby to strike the US mainland.” North Korea publicized this meeting in its news media. The US shrugged it off, sending its top-of-the-line stealth F-22 Raptor from US Forces Japan into the skies over the Korean Peninsula on March 31.
A SHIFT TOWARD DIALOGUE

On April 12, North Korea showed signs that it would not activate a Musudan missile launch. Prior to that, Pyongyang had been recommending the withdrawal of diplomatic personnel from foreign missions and declaring plans to push the missile “launch” button. It was the first direct sign that one side was swerving away from a head-on collision. In the US, CNN quoted a US military source that day as saying North Korea had lowered its Musudan missiles from their upright position. (The first hope of a thaw, though, had come from the US. The Wall Street Journal had reported that the US was toning things down out of fear that its “playbook” strategy could backfire. On April 3, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel abruptly delayed a scheduled test launch of the new Minuteman 3 intercontinental ballistic missile, saying the US did not want to add fuel to a “complicated, combustible situation” on the Korean Peninsula. A South Korea-US Military Committee Meeting was also delayed, Hagel said, because of heightened tensions and to avoid any misperception or chance of manipulation by North Korea.)

When North Korea took its missiles off standby on April 12, that same day, US Secretary of State John Kerry met in Seoul with his South Korean counterpart. At a joint press conference afterward, he said that Washington wanted “dialogue” not to be undertaken.” Kerry went on to say that it was “up to Kim Jong Un what he decides to do,” and that the North Korean leader should show “responsible leadership.” Pyongyang’s answer came via China, where Political Bureau Chief Cho Ryong Hae paid a surprise visit on May 22 as Kim’s special envoy, making it clear that Pyongyang was moving away from its “all-out Armageddon” approach. During a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, he announced an approach that involved “dialogue with the Six-Party talks members.”

This would become more concrete with a June 6 proposal for talks with South Korean authorities and a June 16 proposal — in the form of an “important statement” from the National Defense Commission — for senior level talks with Washington. War had been once again averted. But the door to dialogue had merely been opened; no actual negotiations were under way. Last year, North Korea and the US merely traded verbal blows over the resumption of the Six-Party talks, despite China’s proactive efforts at mediating between them. Seoul and Pyongyang did engage in dialogue to address the shutdown of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, but the only result was to return the complex to its normal pre-closure status. Still, North Korea’s agreement to hold reunions between divided North and South Korean family members in February — despite the Key Resolve/Foal Eagle joint military exercises between the US and South Korea — showed how much things had changed from the year before. The two sides are not merely keeping dialogue going, either. A high-level channel is now being operated between the Blue House in Seoul (National Security Bureau first deputy director Kim Kyong-hyun) and the North Korean
Thaek may have had some impact. Jang’s execution may have been part of a change in the power structure of the Kim Jong Un regime, a changing of the generational guard.

The brutal means of this change are an indication of the Kim regime’s instability. If it can keep the repercussions to a minimum, the position of the regime — a system of unified leadership under Kim — will be cemented further. In particular, the elections this March for representatives to North Korea’s Supreme People’s Assembly may signal the emergence of a relatively younger cohort at the heart of institutional authority. If this happens, Pyongyang may accelerate its shift in policy focus, with economic development zones set up and economic management improvement measures instituted as part of a (relatively) greater emphasis on overseas co-operation and a market economy. Indeed, a Choson Sinbo report on Feb. 4, 2014 (“Resolution of the Supreme Leadership: An End to Division”) pointed to “the elimination of traitorous bands who had exploited the antagonists’ ‘strategic patience’ and ‘wait-and-see’ policies in an attempt to overturn the nation” as the background for Kim Jong Un’s shift on inter-Korean relations this year. Kim announced in his New Year’s address this year that “Korean solidarity in heart and mind has been strengthened a hundredfold by factional purges,” and the newspaper observed that “trust in the supreme leadership and stronger group solidarity has become security for developing and implementing the leader’s bold vision in policy.” The flip side to this, of course, is that Jang’s execution unsettled relations with the outside even more than before, and may have an especially negative impact on ties with Beijing.

North Korea has not talked about relations with Washington, but its declarations of a policy shift from last year have some hope for real negotiations with Seoul after Obama visits South Korea this April, once the Key Resolve exercises have ended. Still, no change is expected without progress on the nuclear issue.

**REJECTING OLD TACTICS**

During a US House of Representatives hearing in April 2013, Kerry said the US would not be using the same approaches as before on the North Korean nuclear issue. By this, he meant no more simply sitting down at the table to discuss economic aid and a peace regime, without any condition of denuclearization. At the same time, North Korea was also rejecting past methods. The approach to the nuclear issue that informed its National Defense Commission’s “important statement” of June 2013 proposing senior-level talks with Washington was a repudiation of the bargaining tactics that produced the Agreed Framework in 1994 and the 1995 Joint Statement from the Six-Party talks. An example can be found in an editorial printed in Rodong Sinmun, the WPK’s newspaper, on April 1, just after the country’s late March adoption of a “two-track approach” of simultaneously strengthening nuclear armaments and building the economy. “The age when the American empire threatened us with nuclear weapons and impeded the building of our economy is over,” it declared. The message was clear: now that North Korea had nuclear weapons, other countries had to acknowledge that fact, and any future dialogue and negotiations with the US were to take place on an “equal” footing within an arms reduction framework.

Another reason for Pyongyang’s rejection of past methods of bargaining about denuclearization, besides the fact that it now had nuclear capabilities, was that it no longer depended on energy support and the building of light-water reactors. Based on satellite images of the construction of an experimental light-water reactor (ELWR) at Yongbyon, US experts Nick Hansen and Jeffrey Lewis of 38 North, a website operated by the US-Korea Institute at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), concluded that North Korea would start experimental operation of a 100MW light-water reactor (with an electricity output of 25-30 MWe) as early as 2014, with commercial operation possible the following year. North Korea itself declared the reactor to be key to its two-track strategy: a Rodong Sinmun commentary on May 3, 2013 (“Our Party’s Two-Track Approach of Economic and Nuclear Weapon Construction Is a Permanent Course”) declared: “Based on our autonomous nuclear power industries, the par-
ty’s two-track approach will strengthen nuclear weaponry while also allowing us to solve our urgent electricity issues.”

In an interview with Yonhap News on Oct. 9, 2013, Joel Wit, a visiting scholar at SAIS, said that North Korea envisioned a “multi-stage” negotiation process leading up to denuclearization. Wit has one of the keenest understandings of Pyongyang’s position among US experts on North Korea, and he based his conclusion on the US and North Korea’s “1.5-track” dialogue in Berlin and London in late September and early October. According to Wit, North Korea’s position can be summed up roughly as follows: First, it is prepared to negotiate denuclearization. Second, it will not accept preconditions to dialogue. However, some form of “trust-building stage” for dialogue is possible. Third, the negotiation process is a multi-stage one that encompasses denuclearization, politics, the military and the economy. As with the 1994 Agreed Framework and the various agreements reached in the Six-Party talks, the process would go through several stages, with both sides taking actions as needed. The end point, obviously, would be dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear program. But Wit also said in another interview in 2013 that the stage of solving the nuclear issue through food or energy aid was over. North Korea, he added, is expecting a solution to its security issues, and the US should meet directly for serious discussions on what Pyongyang wants (a peace agreement) and what Washington wants (an end to its WMD and nuclear programs).

CHINA’S NEW APPROACH: REBALANCING THE PENINSULA
North Korea’s new approach, based on its status as a nuclear-armed state, drew a stern response from Washington, which declared that there would be no dialogue without the condition of denuclearization. Ultimately, it was more than even an unprecedented push from China could resolve. The Xi Jinping administration, which took office in 2013, has been more assertive than ever before on the North Korean nuclear issue, turning up diplomatic and economic pressure on Pyongyang and declaring its intention to follow UN sanctions. Li Chunfu, a senior researcher at the Sungkyun Institute of China Studies, aptly called it Beijing’s strategy of “rebalancing the Korean Peninsula.” Li noted, “This is a new approach, one that takes into account North Korean denuclearization and North Korea’s security fears — namely, relations with the US and South Korea.” The approach is based on two main determinations: the North Korean nuclear issue should not be used as part of a South Korea-US-Japan strategy to hem in China as part of Washington’s “pivot” to Asia; and the US and China need to cooperate on the issue as part of their “new type of great power relations.” Before meeting with Kerry in Washington on Sept. 19, 2013, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, “I am confident that we will be able to reach new, important agreement (with the US on how to re-launch the Six-Party talks).” He offered more specifics during a speech at the Brookings Institution, saying that Pyongyang was prepared to return to the 1995 Joint Statement of the Six-Party talks and its February 29 “Leap Day” deal with the US in 2012, in which it agreed to a temporary halt to uranium enrichment. In some sense, he was pressuring North Korea to change after it effectively passed a death sentence on the Six-Party talks and rejected the 1995 agreement. Indeed, at an international discussion held in Beijing on September 18 to honor the 10th anniversary of the Six-Party talks, North Korea’s First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan gave a speech emphasizing that a denuclearized Korean Peninsula was one of the “last wishes” of former leaders Kim II Sung and Kim Jong Il. Denuclearization was Pyongyang’s policy goal, he said, before going on to urge an immediate and unconditional reopening of the Six-Party talks and implementation of the 1995 Joint Statement. The only effect of this was Kerry’s statement on October 3 that the US was “prepared to sign a non-aggression agreement, providing North Korea decided to denuclearize and to engage in legitimate negotiations to achieve that end.” It did not lead to an actual resumption of dialogue. Chung-in Moon, a professor of political science and international studies at Yonsei University who attended the Beijing discussions (and who is also Editor-in-Chief of Global Asia), reported in

2006
North Korea says it won’t return to talks unless the US lifts sanctions imposed over alleged currency counterfeiting and other illegal activities. It test fires a long-range Taepodong-2 missile in July, then in October claims to have conducted its first nuclear test, drawing unanimous condemnation from the UN Security Council. Radioactive debris in air samples confirms the test.

2007
North Korea attends sixth round of Six-Party talks in February, and at the end promises to close and seal its Yongbyon nuclear reactor (pictured) in return for 50,000 tons of fuel oil and other aid shipments. After delays, it closes the reactor in July. A seventh round of Six-Party talks follows, and North Korea pledges to declare all of its nuclear programs and disable its nuclear weapons facilities by the year’s end.

2008
North Korea is accused of missing its deadline, but in May the US says it has handed over thousands of documents, especially relating to plutonium production. In June North Korea symbolically teleieves the destruction of its cooling tower at Yongbyon. An eighth round of Six-Party talks ensues, and in October the US removes North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. A ninth round of Six-Party talks in December breaks down as North Korea restricts inspectors’ access to nuclear sites and refuses to agree to a written declaration confirming its nuclear claims.

2009
In April, North Korea orders UN inspectors out and says it will not participate in any more Six-Party talks. In May it conducts a second underground test of a nuclear bomb, a move condemned in a UN Security Council resolution followed by fresh sanctions. In November, the North Korean state news agency says 8,000 spent fuel rods have been reprocessed, yielding enough enriched plutonium for potentially two nuclear bombs.

2010
Stanford University professor Siegfried Hecker, who was given unprecedented access to North Korean nuclear sites and documents, reports that it has a new nuclear enrichment facility with 2,000 centrifuges.
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Kerry said that the two sides had each presented their ideas for urging North Korea to denuclearize. He then said that the Chinese leadership made it very clear that if the North doesn’t comply [with existing pledges] and come to the table and be serious about talks and stop its program and live up to an agreed-upon set of standards with respect to the current activities that are threatening the people, that they are prepared to take additional steps in order to make sure that their policy is implemented.9 This suggested that Washington may be moving to unlock the gate maintaining that no dialogue would happen without denuclearization, while also presuming a role for China as a powerful “guarantor” of North Korean compliance to it.

A number of considerations seem to have factored into this change in approach. First, the US sensed a potential liability in the failure to make progress on the North Korean nuclear issue since September 2013, for all the proactive mediation efforts from China. By making dialogue conditional on denuclearization, it could lend some weight to Pyongyang’s argument for dialogue and negotiation. In contrast, the idea of having Washington concede and allow China to guarantee North Korean compliance with denuclearization offers the benefit of handing off that larger burden to Beijing. Obama himself, honored with a Nobel Prize for his calls for a nuclear-free world, is now gearing up for this year’s Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague in late March. He may find it difficult to talk about making progress toward a nuclear-free world without having something to show on North Korea. Finally, from the standpoint of the pivot to Asia, strategic patience on North Korea’s nuclear program is both too passive and too negative an approach. If Washington continues to insist on such tactics — promised on the idea of a larger role for China — there is a chance that it could lose more and more of its influence on the Korean Peninsula as China’s voice grows louder and US hegemony is eclipsed.

As it stands, there is a chance that Kerry’s visit to China, and its exchange of new ideas, could open up a new phase in negotiations on the nuclear issue. As its Red Cross meetings with Japan show, North Korea’s shift toward a bold and unilateral “peace offensive” this year is not restricted to its dealings with Seoul. The Six-Party talks have produced results in the past, with the 2005 Joint Statement agreement and the February 13 and October 3 Agreements of 2007 leading to the disablement of some nuclear facilities. Still, the road ahead is too long to provide any view on when North Korea might give up its nuclear program. The six years and more since the Six-Party talks broke down have shown all too many steps backward.

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a Joongang Ilbo column on Sept. 23, 2013 (“Getting NK核Negotiations Back on Track”), that representatives of South Korea and the US had demanded “plus alpha” as a precondition for rejoining the Six-Party talks, including International Atomic Energy Agency inspections on top of the February 29 Agreement. China intervened, but was unable to bridge the gap.

MOVEMENT FROM WASHINGTON
So far this year, Pyongyang and Washington look no closer to finding common ground. Daniel Russel, the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said on February 17, after an East Asian trip, that Washington’s goal in North Korea policy was denuclearization, not a resumption of dialogue. That same day, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin left on a trip to North Korea. When he came to South Korea on February 20, he said that Pyongyang still wanted an unconditional resumption of dialogue.

This time, however, signs of change are once again evident from Washington. After meeting with Wang and then Xi in Beijing on February 14, Kerry said that the two sides had each presented their ideas for urging North Korea to denuclearize. He then said that the Chinese leadership made it very clear that if the North doesn’t comply [with existing pledges] and come to the table and be serious about talks and stop its program and live up to an agreed-upon set of standards with respect to the current activities that are threatening the people, that they are prepared to take additional steps in order to make sure that their policy is implemented.9 This suggested that Washington may be moving to unlock the gate maintaining that no dialogue would happen without denuclearization, while also presuming a role for China as a powerful “guarantor” of North Korean compliance to it.

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2011
In October US and North Korean officials meet in Geneva in an attempt to restart the Six-Party talks that broke down in 2008. Just days before Kim Jong Il’s death in December, US and North Korean officials meet in Beijing to discuss possible food assistance to North Korea in exchange for the suspension of North Korea’s uranium enrichment program.

2012
North Korea indicates it is open to further talks on suspending its uranium enrichment program, and in February the US says North Korea has agreed to a moratorium on long-range missile launches and nuclear activity at Yongbyon. But in April, as Kim Jong Un formally takes over leadership, North Korea fires a long-range rocket, which it calls a satellite launch. The rocket disintegrates. In December it launches an Unha-3 long-range rocket (pictured) that it says successfully put a satellite into orbit. Fresh UN Security Council sanctions are imposed.

2013
North Korea says it plans to continue nuclear testing and long-range rocket launches, saying they are directed at the US. In February North Korea conducts its third underground nuclear test, said to be twice as big as the 2009 test. The UN Security Council approves further sanctions and military tensions in Korea are heightened. In April North Korea says it will restart all facilities at its main Yongbyon nuclear complex. In May it tests four short-range missiles over one weekend.

2014
On February 27 North Korea tests its new multiple-rocket launcher with range long enough to strike major American and South Korean military bases south of Seoul. It launches four short-range missiles off its eastern coast in what appears to be show of force while South Korea and the United States are conducting their annual joint military exercises. Several days later it fires two more missiles from a nearby location.