



Keeping North Korea at the Negotiation Table

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North Korea's fourth nuclear test in January 2016 and its fifth in September of the same year proved that its nuclear weapons capability has reached the final stages. It also demonstrated the regime's ability to strike the mainland United States through a series of ballistic missile launches. This prompted the international community, especially the United States, to take practical action on the North Korean nuclear issue and throw strategic patience aside.

The United States and the international community have imposed strong and practical economic sanctions against North Korea beyond formal sanctions. It has banned all overseas worker projects and exports of coal and other mineral resources to China, which were the main sources of income for the North Korean economy and the military. It also banned all exports of strategic materials, oil, and chemicals to North Korea. Above all, China and Russia judged that North Korea was ignoring their warnings against upgrading its nuclear capabilities. Thus, China and Russia joined the US and the international community's economic blockade against North Korea, and economic sanctions against the North began to take effect.

The situation on the Korean Peninsula has escalated into a state of war as North Korea protested against these strong sanctions. In particular, President Trump's unilateral foreign policy and unpredictable leadership have raised concerns that military operations against North Korea may be possible. This has forced the Korean government and civil society into a state of tension exceeding any that have come before it.

In May 2017, the Moon Jae-in administration, which aims to build trust with North Korea, was inaugurated. Moon's administration began its charm offensive by initiating sports diplomacy,

inviting North Korea to attend the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics held in February. Moon quickly followed this with an invitation to the dialogue table to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. Following North Korea's decision to participate in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, the Korean Peninsula was more peaceful than ever. The first inter-Korean summit was held in May 2018, and progress seemed tenable until the second round of US-North Korea talks broke down in February 2019. Hopes abounded that the half-century-long dispute and confrontation between the two Koreas might be resolved. At the same time, the Trump administration was soaked in "selfish expectations" that it would be able to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue where former US presidents had failed.

During the same period, North Korea conveyed the results of the series of inter-Korean summits and the first-ever US-North Korea summit to its people through propaganda media. The North Korean government called on its people to remain patient for just a bit longer, sending the message that it would be able to end its confrontation with the international community and focus on economic development. North Koreans endured the pain of economic hardship caused by tighter internal controls and the US economic blockade in the hopes that US-North Korea negotiations meant that the young leader Kim Jong Un would catch the two rabbits of regime security and economic development that Kim Jong Il had failed to achieve.

Indeed, the US sanctions imposed on North Korea after the fourth and fifth nuclear tests in 2016 were enough to inflict pain not only on the Kim Jong Un regime but also on the North Korean people. The ban on exports of oil, chemical, and fertilizer products to energy-poor North Korea has dealt a direct blow to its economy, especially agricultural production. Oil and fertilizer aid, which had been provided by China, an ally regardless of sanctions, was suspended. The US has taken a so-called "smart sanction" approach by sanctioning agencies and people involved in nuclear development, saying it minimizes the humanitarian damage that could be caused by economic sanctions, but it has not in fact been "smart" at all.

In the midst of this, the South Korean government and NGOs were unable to provide virtually any aid, even with sanctions exceptions granted by the US and UN. This seems to be due to the US calculation that any aid will weaken US leverage in the process of denuclearization negotiations. North Korea's current economic hardship is believed to be the worst since the early 2000s, when 300,000 died of starvation.

In July 2020, North Korea finally began to criticize the US and South Korea. The regime's criticism centered on how the US, South Korea, and the international community rewarded North Korea, which participated in the denuclearization negotiations in a serious and unprecedented

manner to pursue peace on the Korean Peninsula starting with its attendance at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. The failure to come up with a proper compensation mechanism for North Korea, which actually participated in the negotiations, has impacted the situation in a number of ways. As discussed above, the unprecedented strong US sanctions against North Korea during the negotiations have left North Koreans more impoverished, greatly dampening Kim Jong Un's grip. Kim Jong Un's foreign policy of pursuing a conciliatory policy of dialogue and negotiations ended in failure, and Kim Jong Un will have no choice but to support the hardliners in denuclearization negotiations and foreign policy going forward.

What created this situation? Did North Korea make too many demands at the US-North Korea talks in Hanoi in February 2019? Were the demands of the US reasonable? What did South Korea do? It may be difficult to find a clear answer, but if we look back on the past three years since the first inter-Korean summit in 2018, it is not difficult to understand the North's choices or the background of Kim Yo-jong's criticism of the United States and South Korea issued in July of this year.

First, the US has treated North Korea as though the regime is a teenager who should be disciplined, not as an equal with which the US must negotiate. The US began negotiations with the North determined not to offer any indications of potential compensation or signs of a conciliatory attitude until the teenager named North Korea reflected on its actions and promised to shape up. The outcome of this approach was foregone. The US would not make any concessions or offer kindness until North Korea first reflected on its attitude and asked for forgiveness, promising that it would never do wrong again. However, a successful negotiation is a process in which the participants in the negotiations recognize each other as partners on equal footing. Both sides can then reach an agreement while upholding mutual respect by making equivalent concessions to find a consensus. This further requires a clear mutual understanding of the needs of the other side. However, the US instead saw North Korea as a rogue boy, not a negotiating partner, and no conciliatory gestures such as compensation were ever considered as the US sought to change the North's attitude.

Second, let's assume that throughout the last three years of US-North Korea denuclearization negotiations, the US has maintained its perception that it is in a superior position rather than a partner in an equal dialogue. Viewed through this lens, the US approach to these negotiations has been one of a father seeking to discipline and correct the attitude of a rogue teenager. Even if this were the case, it takes a harmonious use of both carrots and sticks for a father with the upper hand in terms of power or authority to discipline a child. Children should not be

given too much love or overly harsh discipline. For teenagers who have already demonstrated a bad attitude, hardline measures such as sticks will only worsen the situation. You have to expand your mind, and soft, warm gestures are the only way to open the heart of a wounded child. North Korea has been the loner of the international community for the past 30 years since the end of the Cold War, a rogue teenager who does not hesitate to act out to attract attention. Hunger and the past three years of denuclearization negotiations have been tougher than ever due to the US whip of economic sanctions. North Korea came to the negotiation table willing to discuss making changes. But when North Korea said they would turn over a new leaf, how could the US take their word for it? The US instead countered by asking the regime to show their willingness to change by taking action first, insisting on a total surrender and behavior change. Wasn't this demand too harsh for a child who just emerged from a dark tunnel? The father should have shown warm behavior first. In other words, the US should have provided North Korea, which was seriously involved in denuclearization negotiations, with a compensation mechanism.

Third, suppose North Korea is a misbehaving child and the United States is the father who wants to correct their behavior. In this analogy, let us assume that South Korea is the mother. What role did the mother play in the father's discipline of his son? What should South Korea's role be? From South Korea's perspective, the father is blunt and strict because he has a mission to protect his family from the harsh world. Such a father is more likely to use a whip than to engage in warm actions or speak gently to discipline his child. The mother should be an active partner who advises such a father that warm words and actions are a more effective means of discipline than a whip. It is easy to guess what role South Korea should have played as the mother when the US as the father favored taking up the whip over warm words and actions in disciplining his son, North Korea. However, South Korea did not do its part properly. Such a mother is bound to be resentful of North Korea's distorted position as a child.

The last three years of denuclearization negotiations are about to collapse. COVID-19 has prompted North Korea to refrain from making the extreme choice of leaving the negotiating table entirely. However, even if the denuclearization negotiations between the US and North Korea resume, absent fundamental changes in Washington's attitude toward Pyongyang, the chances of success appear low. South Korea should also take a more active role. South Korea should hold on to North Korea, which wants to leave the negotiating table, and persuade the US to provide a corresponding compensation mechanism by sitting at the negotiating table. ■

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