

Patience or Lethargy?: U.S. Policy toward North Korea under the Obama Administration

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Abstract

Since the Obama administration adopted a “strategic patience” policy toward North Korea, no noticeable progress has been made in U.S.–North Korean relations. By closely examining the policy goals and strategies of the Obama administration, this paper seeks to uncover what is missing from U.S. policy toward North Korea. This paper argues that the success of the Obama administration in achieving the denuclearization of North Korea is dependent on an appropriate understanding of Pyongyang’s security concerns and a careful analysis of North Korean nuclear policy. It suggests that President Obama should radically change his North Korea policy. More specifically, he should abandon the current strategic patience policy and instead adopt a “constructive engagement” policy in order to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea and the security of the East Asian region.

Keywords: North Korea, U.S. foreign policy, Obama administration, strategic patience, constructive engagement

Introduction

The denuclearization of North Korea (officially, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or DPRK) has been the most important policy objective in U.S.–North

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Korea relations since the end of the Cold War. But U.S. foreign policy in North Korea proved unsuccessful when Pyongyang conducted its first nuclear test in 2006. Both the William J. Clinton administration (1993–2000) and the George W. Bush administration (2001–2008) sought to prevent a nuclear North Korea by adopting a variety of policies toward the country, ranging from a possible use of military force to a negotiated settlement. Despite many years of hard work, however, their efforts failed.

President Obama has been seeking the denuclearization of North Korea since his inauguration in 2009. Nonproliferation of nuclear weapons and counterterrorism are top priorities in his foreign policy. Like his predecessors, Obama also believes that nuclear nonproliferation is critical not only for the security of the United States, but also for the peace of the international community. On April 5, 2009, he revealed his vision for a world without nuclear weapons in Prague, Czech Republic.¹ Approximately one year later, the Obama administration also announced a radical shift in U.S. nuclear weapons strategy in that the United States will not use its nuclear weapons to retaliate against attacks involving biological or chemical weapons or large-scale conventional forces.² On April 8, 2010, he also signed a historic nuclear arms control treaty with Russian president Dmitri A. Medvedev.³ He was even awarded the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize “for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples.”⁴

However, Obama has not been so successful with the North Korean nuclear issue. Since the Obama administration adopted a “strategic patience” policy, no progress has been made: neither the denuclearization process nor the Six-Party Talks have resumed. Pyongyang even conducted a second nuclear test during Obama’s term, and has not rejoined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The central goal of this paper is to explain why the Obama administration has not had any noticeable accomplishment in its policy on the North Korean nuclear issue. By closely examining the policy goals and strategies of the Obama administration over the past two and a half years, this paper seeks to uncover what is missing from U.S. policy toward North Korea. The starting point is to make sense of what Pyongyang really wants from Washington. Giving due consideration to Pyongyang’s objectives, President Obama faces a choice of three different strategies: coercive diplomacy, strategic patience (the status quo), and constructive engagement.

This paper argues that the success of the Obama administration in achieving the denuclearization of North Korea is dependent on an appropriate understanding of Pyongyang’s security concerns and a careful analysis of North Korean nuclear policy. It suggests that President Obama should radically change his North Korea policy. More specifically, he should abandon the strategic patience policy and instead adopt a “constructive engagement” policy in order to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea and the security of the East Asian region.

The North Korea Policy of the Obama Administration

President Barack Obama was expected to bring about dramatic change in not only U.S. domestic policy but also foreign policy. These expectations were incredi-

bly high, both because Obama symbolized change as the first African American president in American history and because he retained the political power to do so with the Democratic Party's control of both chambers of Congress. The inauguration of President Obama also generated expectations in Pyongyang that "the strained relationship between North Korea and the U.S. would improve under the new U.S. administration, for Obama had indicated during the 2008 presidential campaign his willingness to meet even with leaders of rogue nations, such as Kim Jong-Il of North Korea, if that was what it would take to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue."⁵

In practice, however, North Korea was not near the top of the Obama administration's foreign policy priorities. Upon taking office, President Obama focused primarily on the global economic crisis and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Against this background, U.S. relations with North Korea were of secondary importance. Moreover, although President Obama has emphasized his intention to depart from President George W. Bush's policy of unilateralism and shift toward multilateral cooperation, he has found that he does not have many options and that it is not easy to radically change U.S. policy on the North Korean nuclear issue.

During his presidential election campaign, Obama pledged his commitment to strengthening nuclear arms control by reducing the existing nuclear and missile arsenals of the major powers and enforcing the nuclear nonproliferation regime. In his inauguration speech, furthermore, he pledged to remove the threats of nuclear weapons from the world. Hillary Rodham Clinton, his new secretary of state, also stated, "Our goal is to end the North Korean nuclear program — both the plutonium reprocessing program and the highly enriched uranium program."⁶ Clinton, in her first press conference as U.S. Secretary of State, emphasized that "the Six-Party Talks were 'essential' to ending North Korea's nuclear weapons program and that North Korea's nuclear issue should be resolved quickly, through bilateral as well as the Six-Party Talks."⁷

While the new administration was busy dealing with other urgent issues such as the financial crisis and the Iraq War, however, Pyongyang was desperate to get the attention of the United States. The North Korean leadership did not want to be put on a back burner and became increasingly impatient. On February 3, 2009, Pyongyang put pressure on the new Obama administration by announcing that "now is the time for the U.S. to clarify its stand on dialogue or war."⁸ On April 5, 2009, Pyongyang launched a long-range ballistic missile with three main purposes. The first purpose was to send a message to Washington: "Don't forget about me!" Secondly, it wanted to raise the stakes in its negotiation with the Obama administration. North Korea wanted to be recognized as a nuclear power. Lastly, it had a domestic political purpose. A successful missile launch would serve to enhance the prestige and power of the Kim Jong Il regime.

The Obama administration, however, did not give in to Pyongyang's provocations. Obama stated, "If North Koreans do not meet their obligations, we should move quickly to re-impose sanctions that have been waived and consider new restrictions going forward."⁹ President Obama decided to "take a hard look" at U.S. policy

toward North Korea and to make it sure that there would be no rewards for Pyongyang's bad behavior.¹⁰

However, North Korea's defiance and provocation continued to escalate. On May 25, 2009, Pyongyang conducted a second nuclear test. President Obama immediately declared that "North Korea's programs pose a great threat to the peace and security of the world."¹¹ At a joint press conference with South Korean president Lee Myung-bak on June 16, President Obama also declared his intention to break the pattern of rewarding North Korea's threatening behavior. He said, "There's been a pattern in the past where North Korea behaves in a belligerent fashion, and if it waits long enough, is then rewarded with foodstuffs and fuel and concessionary loans and a whole range of benefits ... [he stated his intention to] make it clear to North Korea it will not find security or respect through threats or illegal weapons."¹² But North Korea adopted a defiant attitude against the United States by launching a number of missiles again on July 4, 2009.

Since then, there have been several confrontations between North Korea and South Korea. These culminated in the sinking of a South Korean ship by an alleged North Korean torpedo and an exchange of artillery fire over Yeonpyeong Island. When the South Korea navy ship *Cheonan* was sunk on March 26, 2010, President Obama strongly condemned the act of aggression by Pyongyang. In a meeting with South Korean president Lee Myung-bak, Secretary of State Clinton said that she came to Korea to show a "clear and unmistakable support for the South Korean government. She also continued to state the need for "strategic patience."¹³ But North Koreans denied responsibility for the incident and argued that it was just a fabrication by South Korea and the United States in a bid to maintain a hostile policy toward Pyongyang.¹⁴

President Obama continued to take a strong stance. On April 5, 2010, even when he announced that he would substantially limit the conditions for use of nuclear weapons, he said that he was carving out an exception for "outliers like Iran and North Korea."¹⁵ On June 15, 2010, President Obama sent Congress a "Notice from the President on the Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to North Korea" to request an extension of Executive Order 13466, which had been signed by President George W. Bush in 2008 to impose economic sanctions on North Korea. On June 26, Obama announced that he and President Lee agreed "to delay handing off wartime operational control of Korean forces on the Korean Peninsula from the U.S. to Korea until the second half of 2015."¹⁶ Korea was to have wartime operational control back in 2012. In July, the largest U.S.–South Korea joint military exercise in years was held in order to send North Korea a strong message. On August 30, the Obama administration expanded economic sanctions on North Korea.

Although the Obama administration considered the possibility of engaging North Korea, it waned with the results of the midterm elections in which Republicans dominated. A few weeks later, Pyongyang surprisingly showed visiting Siegfried S. Hecker vast uranium enrichment facilities. According to *The New York Times*,¹⁷ it was a signal that "the country is preparing to expand its nuclear arsenal or build a far more powerful type of atomic bomb." Against this background has been a call

for a thorough review and an honest assessment of U.S. policy toward North Korea.¹⁸ But it fell on deaf ears. Stephen W. Bosworth, Special Representative for North Korea Policy, stated that the U.S. policy is not a failure and that he does not believe in engagement just for the sake of engagement — or talking just for the sake of talking.¹⁹

On November 23, 2010, North Korea launched a massive artillery barrage on a South Korean island in response to South Korea's *Hoguk* (Protect Our Nation) military exercise. President Obama was “outraged” by Pyongyang’s provocative action and pledged to defend South Korea.²⁰ The U.S. military headquarters in Seoul also announced that the USS *George Washington* carrier group would join South Korean naval forces for joint military exercises. Under these circumstances, a Korea expert group issued a statement that “The current crisis ... underscores the imperative for diplomacy to transform the fragile armistice into a durable structure of peace based on the negotiation of a peace treaty, normalized relations, and the denuclearization of the peninsula.”²¹

However, Washington’s position on Pyongyang never changed in a meaningful way. On January 11, 2011, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said, during his trip to China, that North Korea’s nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile programs are becoming a direct threat to the United States.²² Furthermore, at a summit with Chinese president Hu Jintao, President Obama warned that “if China did not step up its pressure on North Korea, the United States would have to redeploy its forces in Asia to protect itself from a potential North Korean strike on American soil.”²³ From February 28 to March 10, the United States and South Korea held a joint military exercise called “the Key Resolve/Foal Eagle Exercise.” Pyongyang was enraged by this exercise, because it was reported that it would include “Oplan 5027,” a war plan to prepare for the event of Pyongyang’s regime change.

On April 1, 2011, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, introduced the North Korea Sanctions and Diplomatic Nonrecognition Act of 2011 in order to “continue restrictions against and prohibit diplomatic recognition of the Government of North Korea.”²⁴ In late April, when former U.S. president Jimmy Carter visited Pyongyang with U.S.–North Korean experts, his wishes to meet and talk with Kim Jong Il to break the tensions between North Korea and the United States were not realized. In May, the last hope for the South–North dialogue disappeared when Pyongyang disclosed a closed-door talk to prepare for a summit. Since the Obama administration demanded North Korea’s sincere participation in the South–North dialogue as a precondition for a bilateral negotiation between the United States and North Korea and a multilateral negotiation through the Six-Party Talks, this startling — and diplomatically disrespectful — revelation closed all possibilities for a reconciliation between the two countries, at least in the near future.

North Korean Policy toward the United States: What Do They Really Want?

For the Obama administration to achieve its most important policy goal in North Korea, the denuclearization of North Korea, an appropriate understanding of the

motivations and intentions of Pyongyang is essential.²⁵ In fact, the ambition of North Korea to develop and possess military nuclear capabilities has changed in response to internal and external circumstances. In the late 1980s, Pyongyang started its military nuclear program in earnest with the goal of acquiring nuclear weapons due mostly to its post-Cold War security concerns. During the 1990s, however, North Korea changed its policy and began to use the nuclear program as a “bargaining chip” to be traded for security assurances and economic aid. Since the Bush administration, Pyongyang has returned to its initial ambition of developing nuclear weapons in response to the reluctance of the United States to guarantee North Korea’s security.

The history of the North Korean nuclear program can be divided into three main phases: 1) primitive nuclear program development (from its inception in the late 1950s until the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s), 2) the initiation and abandonment of a military nuclear program (from the end of the Cold War to the late 1990s), and 3) its resumed military nuclear program (from the Bush administration to the present).

Primitive Nuclear Capability Development

In the 1950s, North Korea began to develop its nuclear capabilities with the assistance of the Soviet Union.²⁶ In the early 1960s, the North Korean government started construction of the Yongbyon nuclear research complex. In 1965, the Soviet Union delivered to North Korea a 0.1MW critical assembly and a 2MW research reactor under the terms of their 1959 nuclear cooperation agreement. North Korean scientists expanded the capacity of this reactor into an 8MW research reactor. North Korea joined the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1974 and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985. When Pyongyang signed the NPT, it appears that North Korean leaders did not fully understand the significance of the treaty.²⁷

More importantly, however, Pyongyang signed the NPT because it was under the Soviet nuclear umbrella just as Japan and South Korea were behind the American nuclear shield.²⁸ With the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, however, North Korea had to develop military self-reliance while the United States became the world’s only dominant power. Thus, a nuclear weapon would make sense to Pyongyang as a last resort if all else failed.²⁹

Initiation and Abandonment of a Military Nuclear Program

There were a variety of motivations for the North Korean military nuclear program after the end of the Cold War: military, economic, and political.

MILITARY MOTIVATIONS

Since the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, the foreign policy orientations of North Korea and the Soviet Union have diverged, and the Soviet Union reduced its military aid to North Korea. Pyongyang was also concerned about Soviet Union–South Korea rapprochement. The normalization of Russia–South Korean rela-

tions in 1991 and the normalization of Chinese–South Korean relations in 1992 increased Pyongyang’s concern about its military and security policies. When Moscow informed Pyongyang of its normalization with Seoul, the foreign minister of North Korea warned that “North Korea had no choice but to facilitate the development of necessary weapons, indicating a possible development of nuclear weapons.”³⁰

As a consequence of external factors in the late 1980s, North Korea reassessed its nuclear-free military strategy. For Pyongyang, it was a matter of the survival of the regime, and the development of nuclear weapons emerged as the most attractive option. First, a nuclear weapon could serve as the most powerful deterrent against external security threats. Second, the bomb could help to buttress the legitimacy of North Korean leadership. Third, a nuclear weapon could serve as a symbol of North Korean prestige. For these reasons, Pyongyang decided to launch a military nuclear program.³¹

ECONOMIC MOTIVATIONS

Since the end of the Cold War, the North Korean economy had been experiencing the deepest economic crisis in its history.³² The economic decline of the 1990s forced various changes in North Korea. The famine and accompanying economic decline loosened government control of the society, triggered a decentralization of authority, and prompted the authorities in Pyongyang to look into new ways of structuring the economy.³³ However, the large economic problem was the country’s military burden. In the early 1990s, North Korea was spending around 22 percent of its GNP on defense, yet in absolute terms, this was only half the amount spent by South Korea.³⁴ Pyongyang must have been convinced that it could reduce its military spending by saving money on conventional military armaments with the development of nuclear ones.

North Korea had also been suffering from serious energy shortage problems, due in large part to the policy changes of its major trading partners. Prior to 1990, North Korea could buy oil from China at a “friendly” price, which was approximately half of the world market price. But both Russia and China began to demand that North Korea pay for oil supplies in hard currency at world market prices. Thus, “North Korea’s inability to pay for larger oil and gas imports on new terms, aggravated by the decline in domestic and coal production, resulted in a significant energy deficit that hurt North Korean industrial and chemical production and those sectors of the economy that depended on transportation, such as fisheries and agriculture.”³⁵ Furthermore, since North Korea has abundant deposits of uranium, the development of nuclear energy might have appeared to be one way of solving its energy problem.³⁶

POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS

North Korean leaders had strong fears of the global trend away from socialism. Although Pyongyang thought that the impact of changes in Eastern Europe would be relatively small by comparison with their potential impact in China or the Soviet Union, there is no doubt that North Korean leaders were still worried about the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of Eastern Europe. In other

words, Pyongyang was afraid that these events could be repeated in North Korea. Under these circumstances, having a nuclear weapon might prove useful in the regime's survival. First, it would contribute toward gaining support from the North Korean military sector and hardliners. Second, it would make it easier to mobilize its people in the pretext of increasing external threats. Last, if successful, it would give North Korean leaders prestige and legitimacy.³⁷

The first nuclear crisis between North Korea and the United States was initiated in 1989, when the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reportedly obtained evidence proving North Korea's capability of developing nuclear weapons on its own. The crisis was escalated in 1993 by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)'s demand to carry out "special inspections" of undeclared sites in North Korea. In February 1993, when the IAEA referred the matter to its Board of Governors, which passed a resolution requesting North Korea to permit the "full and prompt implementation" of its safeguards agreement "without delay," Pyongyang immediately rejected the request and, two weeks later, announced that it would withdraw from the NPT.

In March 1994, when the United States sought to bring sanctions against North Korea through the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), tensions reached the boiling point. In May 1994, Pyongyang decided to pull the fuel rods from a reactor, and in June 1994, it also announced that it would withdraw from the IAEA. As both sides prepared for a possible war, former President Jimmy Carter visited Pyongyang and dramatically brokered a deal with Kim Il Sung that defused the immediate crisis.

On October 21, 1994, North Korea and the United States signed the Agreed Framework in Geneva, Switzerland. By signing the Agreed Framework, North Korea earned \$4.5 billion worth of potential economic assistance in return for freezing its nuclear program. The Agreed Framework also gave North Korea an opportunity to break out of its international isolation, to normalize diplomatic relations with the United States and other countries, and to join key international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and so forth. Furthermore, Pyongyang received the United States' guarantee that it would not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against Pyongyang as long as North Korea abided by the agreement. In conclusion, by signing the 1994 Agreed Framework, North Korea substantially relinquished its ambitions to get nuclear weapons.

Resumed Military Nuclear Program

From 1995 to 2000, however, divided government and partisan politics heavily constrained President Clinton in his dealings with North Korea. During this period, Congress wielded considerable power to limit Clinton's ability to negotiate with North Korea, to support the 1994 agreement, and to establish a new relationship with North Korea. Congress exercised its appropriations power by cutting the funding for the construction of two light-water reactors in North Korea and by delaying deliveries of fuel oil to North Korea. Although Congress did not always succeed in obstructing Clinton's leadership on the North Korean issue, Lee and Miles wrote, "it did manage to erect substantial roadblocks. By routinely hammering the adminis-

tration, Congress successfully prevented full implementation of the Agreed Framework. The resulting delays and hesitations helped to reinforce a lack of trust between the United States and North Korea.”³⁸

North Korea, in response, began to develop a uranium-enrichment (HEU) program in violation of the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework by enlisting the support of Pakistan nuclear scientist A. Q. Khan from 1998.³⁹ In 2002, when James Kelly confronted North Korean policy makers on the HEU question during his visit to Pyongyang, they did not challenge or deny Kelly’s contention. In 2010, after eight years of denial on the existence of an HEU program (from December 2002 to November 2010), Pyongyang shocked the world by disclosing to Dr. Siegfried Hecker its hitherto clandestine uranium enrichment facility in Yongbyon.⁴⁰ However, Pyongyang does not seem to have resumed its military nuclear program at a full scale during this period.

Pyongyang must have restarted the development of its nuclear weapons in earnest since the G. W. Bush administration. The Bush foreign policy team criticized the 1994 Agreed Framework as “a reward for bad behavior.” It also blamed Clinton’s administration for an appeasement policy during the 2000 presidential election campaign. After his inauguration, in his State of the Union speech, President Bush labeled the DPRK part of the “Axis of Evil.” The 2001 Nuclear Posture Review developed contingency plans for using nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. The 2002 National Security Strategy emphasized the possibility of preemptive military strikes against countries with weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

However, the crucial moment must have been the visit of James Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for Asia and the Pacific, to Pyongyang. After visiting Pyongyang in October 2002, Kelly announced that North Korea had admitted to running a secret nuclear program. Events began spiraling downward immediately. During the following month, the United States, Japan, and South Korea decided to suspend further oil shipments to North Korea. In December, Pyongyang declared the Agreed Framework dead and announced that it would restart operations of its frozen nuclear facilities. North Korea also declared its intention to expel IAEA inspectors. On January 10, 2003, Pyongyang announced its withdrawal from the NPT and stated that it was no longer bound by its IAEA safeguards agreement. On October 18, 2004, President Bush signed the North Korean Human Rights Act. In September 2005, the Bush administration accused North Korea of counterfeiting U.S. dollars and money laundering, and froze North Korean bank accounts at Banco Delta Asia. On February 10, 2005, North Korea declared that it possessed nuclear weapons. On October 9, 2006, North Korea conducted its first nuclear test.

Taking the indefinable trajectory of North Korean nuclear policy into consideration, it is evident that the policy has changed in response to its internal and external circumstances. During the Cold War, the North Korean nuclear program remained within the boundaries of civilian and peaceful use of nuclear capabilities. After the end of the Cold War, however, Pyongyang started its military nuclear program with the goal of acquiring nuclear capabilities due mostly to its post-Cold War security concerns. Confronted by the United States and the international commu-

nity, North Korea changed its policy and began to use the nuclear program as a “bargaining chip” to be traded for security assurances and economic aid. Since the Bush administration, however, Pyongyang has returned to its ambition of developing nuclear weapons in response to the hostile policy of the United States toward North Korea.

Three Policy Options of the Obama Administration toward North Korea

With regard to U.S. policy toward North Korea, President Obama has three plausible policy options: coercive diplomacy, strategic patience, and constructive engagement. A military option is out of the question. There are four reasons why the Obama administration cannot choose this military option. First, the United States does not know how many North Korean nuclear weapons exist or where they are located. Second, a surgical strike might cause a full-scale military conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Third, most neighboring countries, including South Korea, Russia, and China, oppose the military option. Last, Americans will not easily allow another military intervention during the Obama administration due to the legacy of the Bush doctrine.

Coercive Diplomacy

The first policy option that the Obama administration can embrace is coercive diplomacy or a containment policy, which President Bush chose as his North Korea policy for most his term. Many neoconservatives under the Bush administration also preferred this policy. Georgy Bulychev has noted that the idea of “the neoconservatives in 2002–2006 was that regime change was the solution to the WMD threat, and that no concessions were to be made to the North Korean regime, which was about to collapse anyway and should be assisted in that by sanctions, isolation and subversive activities.”⁴¹ Toward these goals, the Bush administration refused to negotiate with North Korea in earnest, declaring that it would “talk” but not “negotiate.” Vice President Dick Cheney stated, “We don’t negotiate with evil. We defeat it.”⁴² Based on this policy, President Bush demanded that North Korea follow the “CVID” principle, which is complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea’s entire nuclear energy and weapons program. This containment option, however, did not prevent a nuclear North Korea.

Underlying this policy option are two main beliefs. The first is that we should wait until North Korea makes a meaningful gesture and do nothing but enforce economic sanctions. However, containment policies have hardly worked in international history. Regarding North Korea, economic sanctions will not work without Chinese cooperation.⁴³ Even if they work, economic sanctions will inevitably get in the way of diplomatic progress. Furthermore, sanctions may be counterproductive by playing “an important role in generating domestic support for the Kim regime and maintaining socio-political cohesion.”⁴⁴ The second belief is that there is no sense in

negotiating with North Korea because history shows that agreements with Pyongyang always fail and the United States ends up betrayed. But the idea that negotiations with the North are useless contradicts the history of U.S.–North Korea relations. Pyongyang concluded a couple of important agreements with Washington including the 1994 Geneva Agreement and the 2005 Joint Statement.⁴⁵

More importantly, North Korea sees the United States as its most dangerous threat, regardless of the fact that the United States considers its forces in Korea to be for the security and peace of the Korean Peninsula and in the East Asian region.⁴⁶ The North Korean perception of threat originates from several factors. First of all, the United States and North Korea are still technically at war, because the 1953 armistice was never replaced with a peace treaty. Secondly, under the terms of the U.S.–South Korean alliance, the U.S. commander of the U.S.–South Korean Combined Forces Command still has operational control over South Korean forces during wartime. Lastly, the military presence of the United States in South Korea and Japan has exacerbated the threat perceived by North Korea. Additionally, after the end of the Cold War, the United States became the world's sole dominant power.

It is unreasonable to threaten North Korea, particularly if North Korea already feels threatened, because it will likely lead to more hostility toward the United States. Some critics have made the sarcastic remark that “Washington’s excuse for ignoring the nonaggression treaty proposal has to be the ultimate in irrationality. It said it would not negotiate under duress. So duress consists of being asked to be nonaggressive?”⁴⁷ According to Roland Bleiker, however, “Few policy-makers, security analysts and journalists ever make the effort to imagine how threats are perceived from the North Korean perspective, or consider how these perceptions are part of an interactive security dilemma in which the West, and U.S. foreign policy in particular, is implicated as deeply as the vilified regime in Pyongyang.”⁴⁸ All in all, it is evident that the attempts of North Korea to develop nuclear weapons have resulted from such threat perceptions and its security dilemma. Pyongyang “needed real nuclear deterrence.”⁴⁹ Under these circumstances, coercive diplomacy will only deteriorate the North Korean nuclear issue.

Strategic Patience

The Obama administration has pursued a policy of “strategic patience” toward Pyongyang that “essentially waits for North Korea to come back to the table while maintaining pressure through economic sanctions and arms interdictions” during its first two and a half years in office.⁵⁰ President Obama pledged to engage rogue states in dialogue during his presidential election campaign, but he has not followed through with Pyongyang since his inauguration. After North Korea’s second nuclear test and missile launches, he rather sought international sanctions both through the UN Security Council and by cooperation with regional allies such as South Korea and Japan. Obama even tried to gather support from China. Since then, the Obama administration has been reluctant to engage the Kim Jong Il regime. President Obama still persists in playing a waiting game. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton calls it “strategic patience.”⁵¹

President Obama has adopted this policy of strategic patience toward Pyongyang because the denuclearization of North Korea was not at the top of his foreign policy priorities when he took office. Since his inauguration, he has been busy dealing with the global economic recession and with the Iraq War and the Afghanistan War. There are more reasons, however, why the North Korea nuclear issue was put on a back burner during Obama's first two and a half years in office. First, Pyongyang's nuclear weapons still lack an effective delivery system such as intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). They are thus not yet direct and urgent threats to the United States. Second, Washington maintains shared views with Seoul and Tokyo, alliances in the East Asian region. This alliance system remains very stable and effective. Third, there are some indications that the Kim Jong Il regime is unstable and might collapse before long.⁵²

Based on this strategic patience policy, the Obama administration has waited for Pyongyang to return to the Six-Party Talks or to show serious interest in denuclearization. However, North Koreans have also waited for the United States to pay attention to them, take them seriously, and accept their conditions for talks. The Yeonpyeong incident on November 23, 2010, ended these waiting games. It has been proved that the strategy of waiting or "strategic patience" did not resolve the North Korean nuclear issue.⁵³

While the Obama administration was exercising strategic patience policy, Pyongyang continued to create "facts on the ground."⁵⁴ During this period, North Korea conducted a second nuclear test and test-fired missiles a couple of times. It also built a uranium enrichment plant and started to construct a new nuclear reactor. Despite the wishes of the Obama administration, strategic patience has reached a dead end.⁵⁵ Critics call Obama's strategic patience policy "doing nothing."⁵⁶

Although we admit that the current crisis on the Korean Peninsula has been created largely by North Korea's unwillingness to give up its nuclear weapons program, it is also true that Obama's policy toward North Korea has been "Japanized" in the sense that it "is a clear example of reactive diplomacy"⁵⁷ and that the U.S. "failed to take major independent foreign policy initiatives, despite the fact that the country had the power and national incentives to be 'proactive,'" in the words of Geun Lee.⁵⁸ However, the denuclearization of North Korea requires U.S. leadership. U.S. disengagement from talks with Pyongyang contributes to instability of the East Asian region. The strategic patience policy is no longer viable. It is just "a formula for continued deadlock and danger."⁵⁹ The Obama administration must break the passivity and take the diplomatic initiative to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem.⁶⁰

Constructive Engagement

The last policy option for the Obama administration is constructive engagement through diplomatic negotiations with North Korea. President Clinton chose this option in his presidency and President Bush also adopted this policy in 2007. In 2007, the Bush administration chose this option of engagement realizing that there was no other option left. As a matter of fact, this option has always been the only way to achieve a peaceful diplomatic solution to the North Korean nuclear issue.⁶¹

The Obama administration should also adopt this pragmatic approach to Pyongyang. The first two policies have failed to halt North Korean nuclear weapons development, let alone denuclearize North Korea. The United States has to sit down with North Korea to resolve the nuclear issue. This worked during both the Clinton and Bush administration. During those periods, Pyongyang employed a tit-for-tat strategy toward Washington.⁶² Whenever the United States cooperated, North Korea responded in kind. By contrast, whenever the United States did not cooperate, North Korea became recalcitrant. It is important for the Obama administration to make the first move.

President Obama should also take a new action-for-action approach to North Korea. At the same time, it is particularly important that the Obama administration takes the initiative to reduce North Korea's security concerns. This might include a peace treaty to conclude the Korean War and the normalization of relations between the two countries. These are far from revolutionary ideas. All of these ideas were indeed suggested on the condition that North Korea abandon its nuclear program first. Then again, the key is to be willing to make the first move.⁶³

This constructive engagement policy also has other benefits. First, North Korea can be denied formal recognition as a nuclear power as long as talks, whether bilateral or multilateral, are going on. Secondly, it could cap further nuclear weapons development, at least for a while. In short, a negotiated settlement can slow down Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program.⁶⁴ Victor Cha also argues, "If the choice is between dealing with a dictator with a runaway nuclear weapons program or one with a program capped and under international monitoring, the latter surely serves U.S. and Asian interests."⁶⁵

Conclusion: From Strategic Patience to Constructive Engagement

It may be premature to contend that Obama's policy toward Pyongyang has been a failure, both because North Korea is also in large part responsible for this aggravated situation and because the Obama administration has succeeded at least in preventing North Korea from attaining a full-fledged nuclear power status even if it has not succeeded in bringing about the denuclearization of North Korea. Furthermore, it is hard to make any sweeping or definitive assessment on the Obama Administration's North Korea policy at this point, since President Obama's tenure does not expire until January 2013.

Therefore, we can only make a preliminary assessment on the policy. For the Obama administration to achieve meaningful progress in its North Korea policy in the remainder of his term, however, it is vital to recognize Pyongyang's motivations and intentions for its nuclear weapons development. President Obama also needs to consider North Korea's security concerns, because, according to former president Jimmy Carter, "the unfortunate alternative is for North Koreans to take whatever actions they consider necessary to defend themselves from what they claim to fear

most: a military attack supported by the United States, along with efforts to change the political regime.”⁶⁶

This study suggests that President Obama abandon his strategic patience policy and instead adopt a constructive engagement policy in order to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea and the security of the East Asian region. Obama may have been forced to adopt the strategic patience policy partly because of the lack of sufficient resources. The Bush administration wasted too many resources on efforts such as unilateralism and use of military force to achieve its foreign policy goals that were seen as arrogant even by Asian allies and partners.⁶⁷ However, neither coercive diplomacy based on economic sanctions nor strategic patience to maintain the status quo can resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. The only realistic way to achieve U.S. foreign policy goals in the region is to engage North Korea seriously. Dialogue with North Korea is not a reward for bad behavior. Negotiations with Pyongyang can be frustrating, but there are no other options left for the Obama administration and finally, as Wit pointed out, “limited success is better than none at all.”⁶⁸

Notes

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6. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
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9. Hong Nak Kim, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–25.
10. David Lai, 2009. “Obama’s Policy Option on North Korea.” *China Security*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2009), p. 14.
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21. ASCK (Alliance of Scholars Concerned about Korea). "ASCK Steering Committee Statement on the Current Crisis in Korea." November 27, 2010, at <http://asck.org/positions.html>. (Search date: June 16, 2011).

22. John Pomfret. "Defense Secretary Gates Says North Korean Ballistic Missiles Pose 'Direct Threat' to U.S." *The Washington Post*, January 11, 2011.

23. Mark Landler and Martin Fackler. "U.S. Warning to China Sends Ripples to the Koreans." *The New York Times*, January 20, 2011.

24. North Korea Sanctions and Diplomatic Nonrecognition Act of 2011, at <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/C?c112:/temp/~c112S4BJTM>. (Search date: June 17, 2011).

25. According to Delury and Moon, "the primary analytical failure [in the study of North Korea's foreign policy] consists in a fundamental misreading of North Korea's intentions." John Delury and Chung-in Moon, "Analytical Failure and the North Korean Quagmire." *Policy Forum Online*, April 13, 2011.

26. In 1956, North Korea and the Soviet Union signed two agreements regarding cooperation in nuclear research projects. In 1959, North Korea signed an additional protocol with the Soviet Union on the peaceful use of nuclear energy. All of these agreements, however, limited cooperation between the two countries to the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Natalya Bazhanova, "North Korea's Decision to Develop an Independent Nuclear Program." In James C. Moltz and Alexandre Y. Mansourov, eds., *The North Korean Nuclear Program: Security, Strategy, and New Perspectives from Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

27. Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 254; Selig S. Harrison, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) p. 203; Gavan McCormack, *Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Nuclear Catastrophe* (New York: Nation Books, 2004), p. 153.

28. However, this does not necessarily mean that North Korea never had ambitions to develop military nuclear programs. Even during the Korean War, North Korea felt threatened by the United States' possible use of nuclear weapons. North Korea might have thought of a nuclear bomb as a deterrent against U.S. nuclear use and the U.S. nuclear umbrella. For a time, Pyongyang also feared an emerging South Korean nuclear weapons program as well. Not only would nuclear weapons have bolstered the regime's legitimacy, they might have also allowed Pyongyang to reduce its dependence on the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China. Michael J. Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb: A Case Study in Nonproliferation* (Houndmills and London: Macmillan Press, 1995), pp. 16–19.

29. Natalya Bazhanova, op. cit., pp. 127–28; John Feffer, *North Korea South Korea: U.S. Policy at a Time of Crisis* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), pp. 61–62.

30. Kyung-Ae Park, "North Korea's Defensive Power and U.S.–North Korea Relations." In Kyung-Ae Park and Dalchoong Kim, eds., *Korean Security Dynamics in Transition* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 90.

31. Natalya Bazhanova, op. cit., pp. 129–36.

32. North Korea's gross domestic product (GDP) began to fall: -3.0 percent in 1991, -7.6 percent in 1992, -5.4 percent in 1993, -1.7 percent in 1994, -2.0 percent in 1995, -2.1 percent in 1996, and -6.8 percent in 1997. In contrast, South Korea has recorded extraordinary economic growth rates in the Asia-Pacific region. The annual GDP growth rates in South Korea have been as follows: 9.1 percent in 1991, 5.1 percent in 1992, 5.8 percent in 1993, 8.4 percent in 1994, 8.2 percent in 1995, 7.5 percent in 1996, and 5.5 percent in 1997. Vladimir D. Andrianov, "Economic Aspects of the North Korean Nuclear Program." In James C. Moltz and Alexandre Y. Mansourov, eds., *The North Korean Nuclear Program: Security, Strategy, and New Perspectives from Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 41–42.

33. John Feffer, op. cit., p. 75.

34. Andrew Mack, "The Nuclear Crisis on the Korean Peninsula." *Asian Survey* 33, no. 4 (April 1993): 341.

35. Vladimir D. Andrianov, op. cit., p. 47.

36. Natural deposits of uranium in North Korea were estimated at 26 million tons of uranium ore containing more than 15,000 tons of uranium. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

37. Some even argue that North Korea's nuclear weapons "mostly work at the psychological

and political rather than the military level.” See Peter Hayes and Scott Bruce, “North Korean Nuclear Nationalism and the Threat of Nuclear War in Korea,” *Pacific Focus* 26, no. 1 (April 2011): 65–89.

38. Karin Lee and Adam Miles, “North Korea on Capitol Hill.” In John Feffer, ed., *The Future of US-Korean Relations: The Imbalance of Power* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 160.

39. North Korea seems to have started its HEU program in 1998. In 1998, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, evaluating Pyongyang’s nuclear programs up to the point in time, admitted that “judging from all indications, North Korea was living up to its part of the Agreed Framework.” Kyung-Ae Park, op. cit., p. 100.

40. However, some still argue that there is no major evidence that Pyongyang breached the 1994 Agreed Framework and returned to its early ambitions to develop nuclear weapons. See Selig S. Harrison, “Did North Korea Cheat?” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 1 (January/February 2005): 99–110.

41. Georgy Bulychev, “North Korea: Nuclear Menace or Paper Tiger?” *Japan Focus*, February 15, 2007.

42. Glenn Kessler, “Impact from the Shadows: Cheney Wields Power with Few Fingerprints.” *The Washington Post*, October 5, 2004.

43. Tong Kim, “Dichotomy of Obama’s North Korea Policy: Deterrence and Sanctions Will Not Solve the North Korean Question without Chinese Cooperation.” *Policy Forum Online*, August 5, 2010.

44. John Delury and Chung-in Moon, op. cit.

45. John W. Lewis and Robert Carlin, “Activating a North Korea Policy.” *Policy Forum Online*, February 25, 2010.

46. The accuracy and appropriateness of Pyongyang’s perceptions of the U.S. threat are a separate issue, but they are evidently important driving forces in the North Korea’s U.S. policy making. For detailed discussions on the role of perceptions, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

47. Gregory Clark, “Pyongyang Is the Real Victim,” *Japan Times*, January 10, 2003.

48. Roland Bleiker, “A Rogue Is a Rogue: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Korean Nuclear Crisis.” *International Affairs* 79, no. 4 (July 2003): 721.

49. David E. Sanger, *The Inheritance: The World Obama Confronts and the Challenges to American Power* (New York: Harmony Books, 2009), p. 342.

50. Emma Chanlett-Avery and Mi Ae Taylor. “North Korea: U.S. Relations, Nuclear Diplomacy, and Internal Situation.” Congressional Research Service, November 10, 2010. According to the U.S. Department of State, the basic tenet of U.S. policy toward North Korea is that “if they meet their international obligations, take affirmative steps to reduce tensions in the region, and take affirmative steps to denuclearize, we will respond accordingly. But they have to actually begin to undertake those steps before we would contemplate any action.” See U.S. Department of State, State Department Press Briefing, December 20, 2010.

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52. Tong Kim, “Requisites for North Korea’s Denuclearization.” *Policy Forum Online*, May 3, 2010.

53. Tong Kim, “Korean Peninsula at a New Juncture of War and Peace: Between Aggressive Deterrent and Escalating Risk of War.” *Policy Forum Online*, December 21, 2010.

54. James E. Goodby and Donald Gross, “Strategic Patience Has Become Strategic Passivity.” *Policy Forum Online*, December 22, 2010.

55. Joel Wit and Jenny Town. “Strategic Patience Is Strategic Blunder.” *Foreign Policy*, June 16, 2011, at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/06/16/strategic_patience_is_strategic_blunder. (Search date: June 17, 2011).

56. Some even argue that “strategic patience is a de jure neutral policy toward North Korea; it is a de facto policy of increasing North Korea’s isolation in all areas, and that includes rejecting substantive contacts with its representatives.” Alexander Vorontsov, “The Korean Peninsula: Results of the ‘Semi-Apocalyptic’ Year of 2010 and a Glance into the Future.” *New Eastern Outlook*, March 15, 2011, at <http://www.journal-neo.com/?q=node/5099>. (Search date: June 16, 2011).

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58. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

59. Robert G. Gard, “Negotiating with North Korea on Its Nuclear Program.” Center for

Arms Control and Non-Proliferation. April 28, 2011, at http://armscontrolcenter.org/policy/north_korea/articles/negotiating_with_north_korea_on_its_nuclear_program. (Search date: June 16, 2011).

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62. Leon V. Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

63. David Lai, op. cit., p. 17.

64. Hong Nak Kim, op. cit., p. 34.

65. Victor Cha, "What Do They Really Want?: Obama's North Korea Conundrum." *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2009): 129.

66. Jimmy Carter, "North Korea's Consistent Message to the U.S." *The Washington Post*, November 24, 2010.

67. Geun Lee, op. cit., p. 65.

68. Joel S. Wit, op. cit.

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