

Shifting Strategic & Diplomatic Relations with the Koreans

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NORTH KOREAN QUESTIONS IN 2008: TAKING STOCK

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I. Introduction

North Korean questions can be examined from both traditional and nontraditional security perspectives. North Korea's use of resources to maintain a large conventional military force continues to pose a traditional security threat to the Korean peninsula. Even beyond the Korean peninsula, the North's development of nuclear weapons, chemical and biological weapons, and ballistic missiles poses an enormous and extremely serious threat to the region and the world. In particular, North Korea's sale or transfer of sensitive materials to rogue states or nonstate actors and the regime's nuclear proliferation ambitions have become a serious security threat to the international community. There has also been concern about North Korea's active sponsorship of terrorism through the provision of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to terrorism-linked groups (Sharma 2008). Because many countries are determined to prevent the further proliferation of nuclear weapons, dealing with North Korea has become a top priority. Meanwhile, the severe famine conditions and energy shortages, worsening human rights violations, and North Korean refugee problems have presented the most difficult nontraditional security concerns for surrounding countries. Although the nuclear issue has been given the most attention by security experts and policymakers, it is clear that the North Korean problem involves a complicated mix of various traditional and nontraditional security issues.

Because of these complicated security concerns, proceeding with the process of denuclearization in exchange for economic incentives has been an extremely difficult and delicate foreign policy task for those countries involved in the six-party talks. The U.S. presidential victory of Barack Obama, who supports the six-party endeavors but also expressed willingness to hold direct talks with the North, has sparked cautious optimism for improved U.S.–North Korean relations, which could in turn provide momentum for expediting the six-party talks and the denuclearization process. Yet Obama's interest in direct talks with Pyongyang may prove to be a double-edged sword that could worsen inter-Korean relations and isolate other members of the six-party talks. Furthermore, it remains to be seen whether and how Obama will be able to maintain this reconciliatory posture toward Pyongyang if Pyongyang does not cooperate with the nuclear dismantlement process, particularly in the verification phase.

These difficulties and uncertainties have become even more complicated by the fact that the North Korean people now are on the brink of mass starvation and require immediate international aid (Kim K. 2008b). The North Korean regime seems to have little alternative but to depend on foreign aid to relieve internal

problems. At the same time this dependence could expose the regime to greater risks stemming from external pressures (Samuel S. Kim 2007). This might lead the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il, to engage in brinkmanship tactics in order to bring about more favorable conditions; however, this carries a heavy risk of backfiring on Kim's regime itself. As for the international community, distinguishing between the totalitarian political regime and the innocent populace is not easy. There have been many ethical debates as to whether international aid is actually an instrument of survival for the people or for the political regime.

Furthermore, as the health of Kim Jong-il reportedly deteriorates more rapidly, speculation about the problem of North Korea's political succession is rising to the surface. This has drawn international attention because, given the unique character of the *juche* system and Kim's political regime, the state of Kim's health could have an impact on regime survival or collapse. If North Korea suddenly collapses, the political, economic, humanitarian, and social consequences would be shockingly complicated and devastating, particularly for the countries involved, including South Korea. Moreover, if the United States and China engage in a large-scale power struggle to gain control of the Korean peninsula (reminiscent of the superpower rivalry in 1945 that divided the peninsula and later the Korean War that occurred in 1950–53) and South Korea is powerless to make its voice heard, then the fate of the peninsula might once again be at the mercy of outside powers. An enormous tragedy would befall the Korean peninsula if conflict were to break out between China and the United States, or possibly Russia. Even if the surrounding countries managed to carry out a contingency plan peacefully in the midst of a state collapse, they would not be able to avoid shouldering the tremendous costs for rebuilding the country and dealing with the refugee problem.

In this light, we need to more fully comprehend the connection between traditional high-politics issues and nontraditional low-politics issues. This is why it is necessary to approach the North Korean questions and to seek solutions using a comprehensive security paradigm. This paper will therefore use a comprehensive framework to analyze the North Korean nuclear issue, the dynamics and limitations of inter-Korean relations, humanitarian problems, and possible contingencies in case of regime collapse.

II. North Korean Nuclear Questions

The two Koreas remain technically at war inasmuch as no permanent peace treaty has been concluded since the cease-fire of 1954, which ended the Korean War. At the peninsular level, the most prominent traditional security threats are North

Korea's military threats, which include the development of a nuclear weapons program and the use of chemical and biological WMD. Although North Korea's conventional military power is for the most part outdated, it is powerful enough to cause significant lethal damage to South Korea in the case of a sudden nuclear attack. In terms of military force, the North Korean Army is the fourth largest in the world according to its manpower strength, with approximately 1.2 million soldiers and 70 percent or more of its military forces stationed at the front-line Demilitarized Zone (Scobell and Sanford 2007). In more recent years, North Korea has also used to its advantage the fact that South Korea is unable to possess WMD by embarking on a nuclear weapons development project. North Korea started to focus on the development of WMD beginning in the 1970s when South Korea's national power began to outstrip that of its northern counterpart.

Despite the buildup of military forces and the lingering danger of a traditional military attack, the North Korean nuclear problem is currently the most pressing problem and the largest threat to South Korean national security. Since the launch of the six-party talks in August 2003, the framework for multilateral negotiations has served as a platform for helping to dismantle the North's nuclear weapons program. However, the negotiation processes have encountered huge impediments to discovering, disabling, and dismantling North Korea's nuclear weapons and nuclear program. Even though there have been many tortuous obstacles that have threatened to derail the negotiation process, such as the Banco Delta Asia issue and the nuclear test, the six-party talks have proven to be instrumental in advancing the denuclearization of North Korea by providing economic and political incentives under the principle of action for action. A series of agreements such as the 2005 joint statement, the February 2007 agreement, and the October 2007 summit declaration have led to positive discussions on how to make progress in the second phase of the verification process (MOFA-PRC 2008).

There was hope that these breakthroughs could eventually lead to the third and final stage in the process or the complete abandonment of nuclear weapons. In positive developments this year, Christopher Hill, U.S. assistant secretary of state and the top U.S. negotiator to the six-party talks, met in Singapore in April with Kim Gye-gwan, North Korea's vice foreign minister. Following the meeting, on 27 June North Korea submitted a declaration of its nuclear materials and activities to U.S. officials and blew up a cooling tower located in Yongbyon the next day. This series of events generated optimistic prospects for the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue.

Many critics have argued, however, that the understanding in Singapore between Hill and Kim contains a number of loopholes that will make it more difficult to effectively monitor the complete and verifiable dismantlement of the North's nuclear program (Klingner 2008). It was also argued that at the time North Korea took advantage of President Bush's anxiety about producing tangible foreign achievements at the close of his presidency. The Bush administration's decision to provide a half million tons of food aid to hunger-stricken North Koreans without linking the aid to the progress of denuclearization enabled Pyongyang to maneuver more effectively between Seoul and Washington. But the Lee Myung-bak administration became bewildered by the U.S. decision to make such a move without first considering South Korea's strategic position toward North Korea, particularly when Pyongyang first declined a similar aid offer from the South (VOA 2008b). Japanese critics also argue that the six-party talks have merely become a series of bilateral talks between North Korea and the United States, with four spectators. In addition, some in Japan argued that Bush's plan to separate the thorny issue of Japanese abductees from the issue of North Korea's inclusion in the U.S. listing of state sponsors of terrorism significantly undermined U.S.-Japanese relations (Han 2008).

Despite the strong criticism of the negotiation process, there is still tremendous hope that the talks will bring about productive results and positive long-term change. At a recent meeting of the heads of the six-nation delegations in July, it was agreed that a verification package (visiting installations, reviewing documents, and interviewing North Korean technicians who were involved in the DPRK's nuclear program) would be set up within the six-party framework. A working-level nonproliferation group had already met to discuss specifically how to move the negotiations forward. Yet experts predicted that discussions regarding the degree of verification would be very difficult. After an unsuccessful meeting between Christopher Hill and Kim Gye-gwan in August, the tug-of-war over verification tactics between the United States and North Korea continued. Then, in spite of all the progress made, North Korea suddenly announced that it had suspended the disablement of its nuclear facilities in late August 2008 because the United States had not yet erased it from its list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Still, despite never-ending questions about the motives of Kim Jong-il, the North's announcement about the suspension was not necessarily characterized as evidence of the complete failure of the nuclear talks. This was due to the fact that the announcement was viewed primarily as another typical North Korean brinkmanship tactic used to pressure the United States and countries in the six-party talks (Harden 2008). Most likely this move was designed to

provoke a decrease in the six-party requests for rigorous verification, and also to pressure the United States into removing North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism (J. Kim 2008). North Korea had probably calculated that, with an unending, unpopular, and costly war in Iraq, a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, and the end of his presidential term approaching quickly, Bush would be caught in a weak domestic political situation and could not afford to return to his earlier hard-line stance. In this situation, North Korea appeared to use its brinkmanship tactics, along with Bush's weaker position, to bring about more favorable conditions for the regime.

Some suspect that North Korea is using recent tactics to stall until 2009 when a new U.S. government will take office.¹ The election of Barack Obama, who has emphasized dialogue, as the next U.S. president heralded an expectation of closer ties between Washington and Pyongyang. Yet Obama has emphasized the need for verifiable abandonment of the North Korean nuclear program, much in line with the “denuclearize North Korea” provision.² Consequently, considering the fact that the Obama administration is likely to take a stance similar to that of the Bush administration at best or hostile at worst, the Kim Jong-il regime's use of a delaying tactic would be rather puzzling.

On 11 October 2008, despite fierce controversies over delisting, the Bush administration announced it was removing the North from its list of state sponsors of terrorism after getting assurances that Pyongyang had agreed to a plan for inspection of its nuclear facilities and a reversal of actions the North had taken in recent weeks to resume its reactor. Pyongyang's latest actions make it clear that North Korea has been calculating precisely the costs and benefits of denuclearization as it moves toward the next step in the process.

Most recently North Korea's official news agency reported that verification under the agreement reached in October was limited to site visits by experts and that taking samples from the main nuclear complex was not part of the verification deal (Labott 2008). This contradicts a recent announcement by the United States about a breakthrough verification deal with North Korea (VOA 2008c).

1. See the analysis, “N. Korea Suspends Nuclear Disablement, Raising New Questions about Its Intentions,” in the 27 August 2008 *Hankyoreh*, www.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/306912.html.

2. The McCain and Obama statements are available on the Web site of the *Washington Post*, at http://voices.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2008/10/11/candidate_reaction_north_korea.html.

In the meantime, North Korea is not only considering the status of its nuclear program for security purposes; the North also desperately needs U.S. food and economic aid in order to relieve the worsening food and energy shortages. Continuing to lock horns with the South Korean Lee Myung-bak administration requires that Kim Jong-il maintain good relations with Washington under a policy of *togmi bongnam* [make direct contact with the United States and ignore or block the South]. North Korea seems to have weakened the resolve of the other five parties over verification issues rather than pushed for permanently ending the talks. Regardless of all the hard-to-interpret maneuvering by North Korea, both the United States and North Korea cannot find a good reason to abandon the six-party framework.

In spite of the hope that progress will be made through the six-party talks, it is uncertain whether the two-stage verification package will resolve the nuclear problem. Even after partial success, the mid- to long-term outlook on the complete abandonment of all North Korea's nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs is not bright. The storage and export of spent fuel, decontamination of facilities, verification of denuclearization, disassembly of the weapons, and removal of fissile material from North Korea is a process that will take many years to complete.

On top of all this, North Korea's real intentions and strategic calculations are a subject of constant debate. On the one hand, North Korea has continued to state that the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula was Kim Il-sung's *yuhun*, or dying wish, and North Korean officials have emphasized that the use of U.S. nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula and the spread of nuclear weapons in the surrounding region should not be allowed. On the other hand, Jack Pritchard, Korea Economic Institute president who visited Pyongyang last April, has commented that the North wants to be recognized as a nuclear power and has refused to disclose information on both its use of plutonium for weapons and the number of nuclear weapons it has (Kessler 2008). At the ASEAN Regional Forum in July 2008, North Korean delegates demanded that the country be treated as a nuclear weapons state and also demanded that the U.S. military facilities in South Korea be opened to nuclear weapons-free verification based on the action-for-action principle put forward at the CSCAP meeting in May 2008 (Hong 2008). In addition, according to Pritchard, Kim Gye-gwan said that North Korea would consider talking about abandoning nuclear weapons only after the full and final normalization of U.S.-North Korea relations (Kessler 2008).

It is not clear whether these contradictory remarks are negotiation tactics or part of North Korea's logic to help the country maintain possession of nuclear

weapons; however, the prospects for North Korea implementing the third and final abandonment stage are fairly gloomy. Furthermore, a problem that has not been sufficiently addressed is North Korea's uranium enrichment program, and the cooperation of North Korea and Syria on nuclear technology is also a serious pending issue that needs to be dealt with.

Yet, despite all this, it is certain that many of the tasks for achieving final verifiable resolution of the nuclear problem will be carried over into the Obama administration. Not only is there too much work to be done, but there is also too little time left for the Bush administration. To some degree, because North and South Korean relations have been strained recently, this factor has impeded the denuclearization process. Even with no other obstacles, it will take at least three to four years to dispose of nuclear weapons, using an action-for-action engagement approach with North Korea.

In summary, achieving final denuclearization is possible only if there is eventually a normalization of relations between the United States and North Korea. However, if discussions about human rights abuses, ballistic missile programs, biological and chemical weapons programs, and other illicit activities that have been taking place during the six-party talks are delayed by direct talks between Washington and Pyongyang, the road to denuclearization will also be very long and difficult. Given that Pyongyang has remained steadfast in pursuing a strategy of "incomplete declaration and reversible disablement" and since the DPRK has been successful with this strategy to date (Hong 2008), one can seriously question whether North Korea will completely abandon its nuclear weapons. Kim Jong-il's intent to possess nuclear weapons is not only aimed at obtaining security assurances and increasing the weapons' use as a bargaining tool, but possessing these weapons also serves domestic purposes such as regime survival. As a result of its serious economic crisis, food shortages, and energy shortages, North Korea must continue to be dependent on the international community for aid. If the external pressure from South Korea, the United States, and other countries increases, North Korea will be faced with the dilemma of whether or not to continue its nuclear weapons program.

As of this writing, it is still speculated that Kim Jong-il collapsed on 22 August and suffered a stroke (Chae and Ser 2008). If Kim is critically ill, it will greatly affect the future of the North Korean nuclear crisis. Because Kim is the only decision-making apparatus in the North Korean political system, it is unlikely that the country's ruling group will rush to make any decision in regard to the current nuclear standoff. Instead, members of the ruling group are likely to make very few responses, or passive responses, to the six-party negotiations process.

In this case, the future of the talks will remain uncertain. Some experts argue that Pyongyang could be tempted to employ hawkish threat tactics such as additional nuclear tests or long-range missile tests in order to tighten up domestic order and solidarity. Some also believe—although this is the least likely scenario—that Kim has intentionally stopped showing up to all official functions in order to attract the attention of the international community and that he has announced stern measures concerning these nuclear issues.³

Questions about Kim's health and North Korea's use of additional brinkmanship tactics will only make negotiations at the six-party talks more difficult. Unfortunately, it is highly possible that North Korea will continue to use the same type of brinkmanship strategies with the next U.S. administration if its ultimate strategy is to remain a nuclear weapons–possessing state. North Korea is fully utilizing the fact that the United States is and will be (at least for the foreseeable future) preoccupied and stuck with the complex problems of Iraq and Afghanistan. North Korea's ability to achieve this goal will depend on whether Kim Jong-il or the post-Kim leadership can overcome internal and external pressures and whether North Korea will be resilient enough to maintain regime security.

III. Inter-Korean Relations: Economic vs. Political

It was not until 21 November 1988, when a North Korean ship with 40 kilograms of North Korean clams arrived in the Pusan port, that an economic exchange between the two Koreas was first achieved after more than 40 years of strict noninteraction. In January 1989 these exchanges expanded to include imported paintings, wood products, and pottery sent from North Korea to South Korea. Although the initial trade of these artistic products was primarily symbolic, in the beginning of 1990s gold, zinc, iron started being imported from the North; and in the mid-1990s trade in textiles, agricultural products, and forest products began. Even though during the 1997 Asian financial crisis there was a substantial decline in trade, a prompt recovery was facilitated by the rapidly increasing inter-Korean exchanges that began after the historic summit in 2000 (Dong 2001).

Even in the face of the persistently tense military situation, inter-Korean trade continued to grow, and even the 1994 nuclear crisis and the 1998 Taepo-dong missile crisis were unable to dampen the effects of increased trade. The nuclear

3. See “Buk, Kim Jong-il kongang isangsul. 6ja hwoidam younhyang it Na?” [in Korean], Yonhap News, 9 September 2008, <http://media.daum.net/politics/dipdefen/view.html?cateid=1068&newsid=20080909230002780&p=yonhap>.

revelation that occurred in October 2002, rather than causing a decrease in trade, actually became the most significant factor affecting trade in 2003. Especially under the Sunshine Policy of the former South Korean president, Kim Dae-jung, all trade with the North was characterized as intra-Korean trade, from the support provided for the currently suspended Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization nuclear reactor projects to the Mt. Kumgang tourist project; humanitarian aid was also considered “non-transactional” trade (Lim 2006).

The Kim Dae-jung administration characterized inter-Korean economic cooperation as comprising both economic trade and aid, and it believed that an increase in interaction with North Korea would lead to reconciliation and peace on the Korean peninsula. This was a “functional project” that would affirmatively create peaceful and harmonious coexistence between North and South or pave the way for peaceful reunification (Samuel S. Kim and Winters 2004). As a result, South Korea became its northern counterpart’s largest trading partner after China and also became the country that provided the most hard currency to North Korea. The Sunshine Policy remained similar for the most part through the Peace and Prosperity Policy of the successive Roh Moo-hyun government. The total trade volume with North Korea reached a record high of \$1.79 billion in 2007 (MOU 2008).

Some argue that Seoul promoted inter-Korean trade itself and used trade as a guise for economic aid in order to alleviate North Korea’s economic afflictions and encourage its economic reform, which would ultimately lessen the South’s political, economic, or social burdens caused by the bankrupt North (Noland 2000). In addition, those espousing the North Korean engagement policy have argued that, although South Korea’s traditional reunification policy was based on high-level discussions between Seoul and Pyongyang, the Sunshine Policy encourages contact in the nongovernmental sector, and the growth of those contacts would eventually block North Korean aggression. It is in this vein that there has been a seemingly dialectic division, called *nam-nam galdung* [the South-South conflict] in South Korean society in regard to the perception and policy of inter-Korean relations. The progressives who call themselves the *pyunghwa seryok* [“peace force,” those promoting peace on the peninsula] continued to support an increase in trade and negotiations with North Korea despite the North’s bad behavior. They heavily criticized those demanding more cautious trade and provision of aid to Pyongyang as a *jeonjaeng seryok* [“war force,” those who are willing to risk a deterioration of relations with the North and could eventually provoke conflict leading to war].

In contrast with the previous Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, President Lee Myung-bak began his term by emphasizing inter-Korean reciprocity. The Lee administration believes that the fundamental basis of this inter-Korean policy is North Korea's complete abandonment of nuclear weapons. That is, Lee has highlighted the spirit of the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, Exchanges and Cooperation between North and South Korea (the so-called Basic Agreement) signed in 1991 and has sought to define inter-Korean relations by linking economic cooperation with the process of Pyongyang's nuclear dismantlement. In addition, the Lee government has raised a voice of concern with regard to the North Korean human rights problems. In March 2008 at the opening of the seventh session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, South Korean delegates urged North Korea to take the appropriate steps to address its human rights situation (Jung 2008), and for the first time in history at a summit last August both the United States and North Korea referred in a joint statement to the need to improve human rights.

North Korea has accused Lee Myung-bak of failing to implement the 15 June joint declaration and the 4 October declaration signed at inter-Korea summits in 2000 and 2007 by his liberal South Korean predecessors and Kim Jong-il. *Hankyoreh* reported on 2 April 2008 that Pyongyang also denounced Lee's emphasis on the 1991 Basic Agreement and Lee's Vision 3000 (Denuclearization and Openness Policy), which links the pace of South-North economic cooperation with the North's denuclearization process. Later in 2008, on 7 August, *Hankyoreh* reported that Pyongyang harshly blamed Lee's call for improved human rights in North Korea as interference in its internal affairs and criticized the distribution of propaganda leaflets in the North by South Korean civic groups, which further damaged inter-Korean relations.

While the confrontational political situation between North and South has gotten worse, the amount of trade between the two countries continued to increase up until June of 2008. This was because of the rise in production from the businesses at the Kaesong industrial complex and the increased export of processed materials from South Korean corporations to North Korea. According to the Ministry of Unification in South Korea, in 2008 from January to May the volume of inter-Korean trade increased 30 percent when compared with the same time period in 2007. The trade volume comprised business from the Kaesong complex (40 percent), regular trade (24 percent), exchange of processed materials (20 percent), business from the Mt. Kumgang tourism project (7 percent), and aid to North Korea (4 percent). This means that, even though talks between the two governments were suspended, the volume of economic cooperation at the nongovernmental level increased, and compared with 2007 the number of tourists visiting Mt. Kumgang increased by 60 percent until May 2008 (VOA 2008a).

Despite the ups and downs of the Mt. Kumgang tourism project, 2008 marked the project's 10-year anniversary, and it was determined that the business environment had reached a stable and mature stage. This has been due to the fact that ordinary citizens would not be heavily affected by the state of inter-Korean relations and other political trends (VOA 2008a). In the midst of this favorable trade environment, the shooting death of a South Korean tourist at Mt. Kumgang by North Korean soldiers in July 2008 sparked a great deal of new controversy. Still, it was largely said that Pyongyang would not cut off all trade with its southern counterpart because North Korea would lose approximately \$2 million per month in tourism costs owing to the suspension of tours to Mt. Kumgang. North Korea could not afford this since it has been unable to trade with European states owing to the U.S. listing of North Korea on the list of states that support terrorism. Accordingly, it was anticipated that Pyongyang would soon adopt a conciliatory stance on the shooting incident in order to prevent deterioration in trade. However, a defiant North Korea refused to conduct a joint investigation into the shooting incident and started to take on a more hard-line approach in the early part of September 2008. Pyongyang began to expel "unnecessary" South Korean tour staff members from Mt. Kumgang, which is a clear violation by the North of the North-South agreement. This could mean the tense state of affairs in inter-Korean relations could become even more drawn out and make the prospect of resuming visits to Mt. Kumgang rather difficult (Kim K. 2008a).

In the latest development in inter-Korean relations, two different factors working together have enabled Pyongyang to take a hard-line stance against Seoul. The first factor is the Bush administration's deal to remove North Korea from the U.S. terrorism blacklist in October, and the second is the presidential victory of Obama who is open to direct diplomatic talks with Pyongyang. The Times Online reported on 12 November 2008 that North Korea announced that it would "strictly restrict and cut off" all the overland border crossings, closing a liaison office for the North's Red Cross and a telephone hotline at the border village of Panmunjom.⁴ The ban could lead to the shutdown of the inter-Korean joint industrial complex of the North's border city of Kaesong. This closing down could bring about a major revenue loss and cut off a huge cash source for the North's workers, but it would also cause suffering for the 80 South Korean businesses operating in Kaesong.

As such, Pyongyang's aggressive moves toward Seoul could reflect a takeover of regime power by the hard-line military groups in place of an ailing Kim

4. "North Korea to Ban Border Crossings," www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article5135732.ece.

Jong-il or Pyongyang's attempts (whether or not under Kim's leadership) to press Seoul prior to making a big bargain with the Obama administration. Whatever the causes, there have been many sharp, contrasting viewpoints emerging in South Korea with regard to how to manage the deteriorating state of inter-Korean relations. Liberal experts have expressed criticism of Lee Myung-bak's "waiting strategy," stating that this position would only invite another North Korean threat, and have called on Lee to make changes to his North Korean policy. In contrast, those who believe in reciprocity call for North Korea's nuclear dismantlement before aid and direct talks. They have argued strongly that the past engagement policy brought about a "lost 10 years" that not only postponed reunification but also deprived the citizens of North Korea of the aid from the South, which actually went to the Kim Jong-il regime itself. They have asserted that the aid has not achieved the intended effect and has instead strengthened the regime in North Korea. Furthermore, they have called for readjustment of the fundamental basis of North Korean policy and the shedding of passive defensive policies contained in the Sunshine Policy. Conservatives argue that, if Lee softens his North Korean policy, Pyongyang will create opportunities to gain the upper hand with Seoul.⁵

As of this writing, it is too uncertain and volatile to predict what direction inter-Korean relations will take. At worst, a series of such aggressive moves made by North Korea could lead to a relapse into the chilled inter-Korean relations similar to the situation prior to 1971, before the two Koreas began a dialogue and established the Red Cross communication channels at Panmunjom. This might reflect the reality that, regardless of how much cooperation and reconciliation leads to more economic, cultural, social, and nonpolitical exchanges and even stimulates the development of low politics, such functional approaches often are not sufficient to resolve traditional security problems and political conflicts between the two Koreas. In addition, at times the high-politics issues push the low-politics matters to the back burner.

IV. North Korean Humanitarian Questions

The post-Cold war security paradigm also provides an opportunity to view the Korea questions from the perspective of "comprehensive security," including not only traditional military aspects but also economic and humanitarian dimensions. This is especially true in light of the persistent problems with famine and refugees in North Korea.

5. The *Korea Herald* on 14 November 2008 published an article, "N.K. Aims to Soften Seoul, Experts Say," that put forward these ideas.

The current North Korean humanitarian questions include internal problems such as a long-standing food crisis and gross human rights violations, and an external refugee dilemma. These problems have multifaceted causes involving a mixture of failed economic policies, political authoritarianism, and international coordination problems (Haggard and Noland 2007). First is the problem of governance in North Korea. Although unprecedented flooding and drought in the mid-1990s exacerbated food shortages, the decade-long North Korean famine has proximate economic causes and underlying political factors (Haggard and Noland 2005). The nature and operations of the reclusive, centralized socialist regime have been largely responsible for the failures and inability of ordinary North Korean citizens to receive enough food for survival. Decades of dictatorial rule with a powerful regime based on a personality cult has resulted in the military and political elites being given priority, and a consistently inefficient command economy has adversely affected people's ability to get access to food.

The government's tenuous attempts to resolve famine have done little to arrest or reverse the processes creating extreme hardship because Kim Jong-il will not allow any political, economic, and social change that will challenge his regime's security. In 1995, Kim made an unprecedented appeal for food to the international community when a serious natural disaster created a massive famine that resulted in the deaths of nearly one million people, if not more.⁶ The international community responded by sending large amounts of aid to the North. As the food situation became somewhat ameliorated during the 2004–06 period and as large amounts of aid continued to be sent directly from South Korea, Kim seemed to gain more confidence and leverage to demand that the World Food Program and other international agencies conduct less monitoring. He also ordered them to stop distributing emergency food aid by the end of 2005 and to shift their focus to "development assistance" by the following January (Achin 2005).

At this time, millions of North Korean people stand again on the brink of mass starvation, which could become more serious than the famine of the mid-1990s (WFP and FAO 2008). This reality was largely due to the impact of the mid-2007 floods on the North Korean harvest, the inefficient political and economic system, and the prices for staple goods that have skyrocketed since the country's 2002 economic reforms and marketization (WFP 2008). The reduced food aid from South Korea and the international community has also contributed to this problem. Still, Kim regularly denies that his country has suffered from famine.

6. Some argue that as many as two to three million people died from starvation, but these numbers are still under debate (Natsios 2001).

Although he has asserted that North Korea's economic afflictions have been the result of "hostile U.S. policies," he has made no attempt to understand what the causes of economic failure and famine exactly are and how to solve these problems. Amartya Sen (2007, xvi), a Nobel laureate in economics, has said that it is a pity that "[the] ruthless state, with its well-oiled machinery of authoritarian repression, is remarkably feeble in executing even the most elementary policies that could help the famine victims."

Second, the international community's response to the North's food crisis as a whole has lacked broader and more systematic international cohesion. Although the seriousness of the food shortage in the North has been (once again) known as one of the world's most serious humanitarian crises in the contemporary era, it has been difficult for the international community to move in to the North quickly with aid. Because almost all humanitarian donor countries have market economies and usually demand strict monitoring of aid distribution, it has taken a long time for the highly secretive and militaristic North, which is looked upon with suspicion by the West, to build a reputation for good reporting. The North Korean government's continuing insincerity toward outside aid has aggravated such suspicions since the first international aid arrived in late 1995. Although international pressure compelled the North to admit relief agencies to monitor food distribution, the North has not admitted foreign delegations into certain areas such as border regions and areas with sensitive military installations, as demonstrated in the cases of Médecins sans Frontières and Oxfam United Kingdom, both international humanitarian nongovernmental organizations. These organizations protested against the many restrictions on field workers in the North and pulled out in September 1998 and December 1999, respectively.⁷

Accountability has also been a big ethical question in food aid distribution for North Korea. The controversy is whether international aid to North Korea functions only to support a repressive, irresponsible regime while it prolongs the afflictions of the North Korean people. Some argue, "Food aid is fungible. No matter how scrupulously [monitored] the delivery of food aid [is], one cannot escape basic arithmetic: more food aid to feed civilians means more domestic production can go to keep the military well fed" (Manning and Przystup 1997). Others claim that international aid without proper monitoring could help the North Korean regime and people in the short run, but if the donations are not directed to those in desperate need or are steadily diverted to the military, the shutdown of the food program would be justified on humanitarian grounds because there are always other nations in need of relief aid (Natsios 2001). Still, it has been

7. Portions of this section are drawn from Lee S. (2003).

argued that, despite all the frustrations and difficulties of providing and monitoring humanitarian aid, it is impractical to withhold relief aid from North Korea and to wait for the Kim Jong-il regime to undertake reforms or eventually collapse. Cutting aid to the North gives no guarantees that the regime will collapse. More important, it can be readily assumed that without food aid additional resources will not be provided by Pyongyang to feed its people, resulting in the death and suffering of civilians (Savage and Nautilus Team 2002).

The exasperation with the aid situation in North Korea can also be understood in the context of donor fatigue—a phenomenon prevalent worldwide wherever international humanitarian action has been successful in lessening the life-threatening suffering of civilians in crises such as famine, forced displacement, and armed conflict. Generally, states remain passive toward the crises of other nations unless the crises threaten their own national interests and security. They are unwilling to take a lead in providing aid or preventing further deterioration of crises because such humanitarian actions cost money, energy, and time that could be better used for their own development.

Donor fatigue, or the lack of compassion and willingness, is not the only reason why donor nations are slow to respond to humanitarian emergencies or why millions of poor people still go hungry while there is an abundance of food in the world to feed them. Governments may be more reluctant to provide aid when there is little chance that the situation will improve or if the aid produces no tangible productive outcome. This is closely related to the idea of *realpolitik* exercised by each state. Government leaders have hardly ever sacrificed their own political gains for a humanitarian mandate. For instance, it is arguable that the delay in providing food aid to North Korea in 1995 can be attributed to the uncertainty about using aid as an effective bargaining chip for negotiations with North Korea. This could be seen as a typical chicken-and-egg argument, provoking the question of which should come first, food or diplomatic talks between North Korea and other countries. Some even asked whether the United States, South Korea, and Japan used this tactic (food aid as leverage) to bring North Korea to the negotiation table for the four-party talks. However, the use of this method was denied by all three countries. States often calculate the political ramifications of providing aid, and this can make it more difficult to coordinate plans for providing humanitarian relief. The lack of consensus on when, where, and how international aid should be provided to North Korea exacerbates the problem and the international community's ability to deal with the broader humanitarian issues.

Third, the South Korean engagement policy needs to be reevaluated from both strategic and humanitarian perspectives. Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy and Roh Moo-hyun's Peace and Prosperity Policy optimistically assumed that continuous goodwill would gradually encourage North Korea to participate in dialogue and reconciliation efforts. However, the North's attitude toward its southern counterpart fluctuates according to the state of the North's bilateral relations with the United States, regardless of the policies of the South Korean government. Any momentum that the peace process may have had on the Korean peninsula can be derailed immediately if relations between the United States and North Korea go awry. All North Korea wanted from "benevolent South Korea" appeared to be "economic sponsorship," which in the midst of tense relations, enabled the North to maintain a tough stance against the Bush administration. Two successive South Korean governments seemed to believe that aiding North Korea would improve inter-Korean relations and would increase their leverage in relations with North Korea and the rest of the world. However, in contrast with South Korea's strategic expectations, the South did not gain any leverage by pouring aid into the North, and it proved difficult, if not impossible, for South Korea to play a leading role in inter-Korean relations and multilateral initiatives. So, in the end, the intended strategic objectives were unsuccessful.

Engagement policy did not produce the intended humanitarian objectives either. South Korea has sent 2.4 million tons of rice and 200,000 tons of corn to North Korea since 2003 when the Roh Moo-hyun government was launched, but it failed to ensure the aid reached the hungry people (Lee J. 2008). It was reported that North Korea diverted rice supplied by South Korea for humanitarian purposes to the frontline units of the North Korean Army. The Roh Moo-hyun government reportedly ignored this information about the continuing misappropriations, but it did not voice any objections to the North. In March 2006, Seoul donated 5 billion *won* (\$5 million) worth of materials for the buildup of tourism facilities around Mt. Paektu, the highest mountain on the Korean peninsula, but the North did not allow South Korean officials to monitor the use of the donations (Lee J. 2008). The Lee Myung-bak government recognized the lack of monitoring and reviewed economic aid programs for the North in order to improve transparency in distributing aid. President Lee also cited the problem of unconditional reconciliation with the North over the past 10 years and offered food aid to Pyongyang contingent on the progress to be made in the North Korean nuclear dismantlement process and human rights issues. Kim Jong-il immediately rejected the offer and suspended practically all diplomatic channels.

Although the Sunshine Policy might have been good in principle, the outcome did not produce the intended strategic or humanitarian results. Even if in the

long run the engagement-policy approach might have been able to change the attitude of the Kim Jong-il regime, unfortunately the starving people of North Korea have not be able to hang on for that amount of time.

Fourth, North Koreans have been trying to escape from their stricken country, particularly to China, but the political barriers to emigration have made the process perilous and often futile. Even if they succeed in their escape, North Korean famine refugees in China or countries other than South Korea are now trapped by political, diplomatic, and legal restraints (Chang, Haggard, and Noland 2008). They are not officially categorized as refugees because one must meet the requirement of being forced to leave one's home state owing to political reasons before a decision can be made on whether an individual refugee can be granted refugee status, according to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (Margesson, Chanlett-Avery, and Bruno 2007). Unfortunately, North Korean defectors mainly in search of food are trapped by these legal constraints.

Furthermore, the fate of asylum seekers is determined by the receiving state. The Chinese government has without exception labeled all North Korean escapees as illegal aliens. Unless a dramatic incident happens to catch media headlines, escapees have been forcibly repatriated to the North. Therefore, those in China are subject to double sufferings of fugitive life and human rights violations such as human trafficking and labor exploitation by their Chinese hosts, yet they remain silent for fear of being arrested and repatriated. Those forcefully repatriated are subject to imprisonment and torture in what is known as a gulag. In particular, the female victims are forced into marriage or prostitution and refrain from speaking out against their sexual exploitation, not only because of the fear of repatriation but also because they wish to conceal their abuse owing to the high value placed on female virginity in East Asian culture (Kang and Rigoulot 2001). Over the course of several years, Chinese authorities have reportedly been increasing their surveillance and search activities and have imposed strong measures such as fines or expulsion against anyone who assists North Korean refugees. This crackdown was particularly strong during the preparations for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games to prevent the events from being used as a spotlight to highlight the situation of the refugees.

Meanwhile, the numbers of defectors who have come to South Korea since 1998 have been steadily increasing. Now approximately 14,000 North Korean defectors have entered South Korea. According to South Korea's Ministry of Unification in September 2008, in 2007, during only a one-year period, 2,544 defectors entered South Korea, and in the first half of 2008 1,744 had arrived, the

figure being a 42 percent increase compared with the same period in 2007. The adaptation of the refugees to the South Korean way of life is not easy, causing some social problems. In addition, the arrest of the North Korean female spy in August 2008 created suspicion about the possibility of other North Korean spies infiltrating South Korean society under the guise of being a refugee (Bae 2008).

V. North Korean Contingencies

There has been persistent outside speculation about the “second hereditary power transfer” of North Korean leadership, although Kim Jong-il, who inherited supreme power following the sudden death of his father, Kim Il-sung, in 1994, internally issued a ban in 2005 on any discussion concerning his successor. There have been no apparent successors designated to fill Kim Jong-il’s place, but Kim Jong-chol, the 27-year-old second son of Kim Jong-il, has been reported to be a strong candidate to be his father’s heir, particularly since he was selected in November 2007 as the deputy director of the Organization and Guidance Department, one of the top positions that was held by his father when his father became the successor of Kim Il-sung (Wiseman 2007). On 24 September 2008, the *Korea Times* reported on speculation that Jang Song-taek, Kim Jong-il’s brother-in-law, would take over the North Korean leadership. Yet, in the midst of a power struggle, no one can tell who among Kim Jong-il’s three sons or relatives will be nominated as his heir.

With the rising conjecture, such as an early article in *Chosun Ilbo* on 28 May 2007, about Kim Jong-il’s health, not only the dynastic succession but also the possibility of a successor emerging from the military or the communist party, Rodong Dang, has been the subject of speculation (Kim Sue-young 2008). Even the despotic regime of North Korea appears to be not completely free from criticism about the transmission of power through a third generation. Also, given the political and economic difficulties, Kim Jong-il may need to handpick a leader who is capable of commanding the military and other arenas and yet is still loyal to him. It is argued that, despite continuing political tension between North Korea and the United States, North Korea continues to seek better relations with the United States not only to create an environment favorable for economic recovery and international engagement but also to facilitate the way for the succession process (Lewis 2008). Still, no matter who will be the successor, it is expected that the next leader will not enjoy the same supreme power that the two predecessors enjoyed, and Pyongyang’s leadership in the post-Kim Jong-il era is likely to be characterized as “power sharing” or “power struggling” by core political and military elite groups.

While the North Korean power structure after Kim Jong-il has been a constant subject of debate among the international community, there has also been a rising concern about North Korean contingencies arising from a sudden collapse, either from the fall of the Kim Jong-il regime or North Korea itself. Two recently published books have warned against the sudden breakdown of the Kim Jong-il regime. One volume is by Mike Chinoy (2008), who visited North Korea 14 times while working as a CNN broadcast news reporter; the other is by Mike Kim (2008), an activist who has closely interviewed numerous North Korean defectors. Although the titles of these two books are about nuclear weapons and human rights, two subjects that would seem to conflict, both reach the conclusion that if the Kim Jong-il regime cannot adequately adapt to the standards of the international community, it is only a matter of when and in what form the Kim regime collapses.

Chinoy, quoting a North Korean official, explains the reason why Kim Jong-il continues to cling to nuclear weapons: “While Iraq’s past leader Saddam Hussein did not possess nuclear weapons and met a wretched end, North Korea possesses nuclear weapons and that is why Kim Jong-il’s regime is still strong.” Yet Chinoy still anticipates that the North Korean regime will likely crumble owing to its unstable political structure and moribund economy. He argues that the “post–Kim Jong-il North” has a high possibility of opening up and moving forward with reforms, achieving political recognition from the United States, and ultimately bringing about a positive change to North Korea, although there is still a possibility that the nuclear threat could continue to deepen the conflict between North Korea and the United States. The sudden death of Kim Jong-il would also generate internal division and confusion among the powerful North Korean elite (Chinoy 2008).

Meanwhile, Mike Kim’s book, which focuses on the afflictions of North Korean refugees surviving in the border regions of China and North Korea, also forecasts the fall of the Kim Jong-il regime. The author indicates that regime collapse will be caused by the large-scale refugee flow in combination with the changing mind-set of the younger generation throughout the country. Many North Koreans are realizing the “truth” through information that filters back from returned refugees. Therefore, the massive refugee problem, argues Mike Kim (2008), will be largely precipitated by the North Korean regime’s loss of power and control over its citizens.

These two books are among the many pieces of guesswork by academic, political, and civil society organizations that explore the possibility of a hard landing, wherein the North Korean regime implodes and chaos engulfs the

Korean peninsula, if not the whole region. In contrast, a soft-landing scenario, in which the Kims' regime gradually falls down with the pieces picked up by South Korea, has been long and widely favored, but renewed speculation about the North's sudden collapse is becoming more explicit because the country is on the brink of famine and economic bankruptcy.

The nation is also facing increasing international isolation (Halloran 2008). Not only have the North's diplomatic relations with the United States and South Korea been tense in the past few months, but even China and Russia, longtime allies, no longer share the same ideological values and objectives with North Korea. Owing to China's and Russia's anger over the nuclear test conducted in 2006, the North's relationship with these two countries has become strained. North Korea–Japan relations have been tense for a long time owing to the unresolved abduction issue, and Japan has continued to enforce sanctions against North Korea. Last, the no-show of Kim Jong-il in recent months for official occasions in North Korea, including the military parade to celebrate the country's 60th anniversary on 9 September 2008, has increased concerns about his health and contributed to uncertainty and conjecture about North Korea's domestic political situation.

Given the host of problems that North Korea currently faces, the collapse of the Kim Jong-il regime may not be just a theoretical possibility but could become a very real prospect. Although no one will even presume to know when and how it might happen, one thing is clear: the consequences of regime collapse will be astonishing. The most serious problems posed by the North's implosion are the emergence of a power vacuum on the peninsula, the potential for uncontrolled stockpiles of nuclear weapons to fall into the hands of rogue states or groups, and the surge of refugees who would certainly cause many difficulties for surrounding countries. Immediately after the occurrence, the United States, China, and possibly Russia could rush into North Korea to secure its nuclear facilities and lead the state-building process, leaving South Korea little option but to incorporate in the process of national reunification. Not only would these problems threaten the economic stability of surrounding countries, but they could also lead to a wide-scale humanitarian disaster.

The relationship between the United States and China in the event of the North's collapse will be important. If their relationship remains in a good shape or if they maintain at least a strategic partnership, a power game over a shattered North Korea or a reunited Korea could be manageable for the maintenance of peace and stability of the Korean peninsula and the region. If their relations and interests are in conflict, their big-power rivalry over Korea will be very dangerous, even

with the possibility of a military clash. This would affect the Korean peninsula and the entire East Asian region to an enormous extent.

Yet what is most troublesome is the fact that, despite all these serious plausibilities, we may not have even scratched the surface. Even more serious issues and risks may emerge in the future. It is thus vital to develop multilayered scenarios concerning all possible developments and, at the same time, meticulously prepare different contingency plans for responding to each scenario.

VI. Conclusion

Dealing with North Korea presents a host of complicated traditional and nontraditional security problems. North Korea's military forces still present a formidable threat to the Korean peninsula. Even beyond this, the nontraditional security threats presented by North Korea, in particular the development of nuclear weapons, are increasing in size and scope each year. The threat of North Korea's economic collapse and the resulting refugee or humanitarian problems that this would create for surrounding countries in Northeast Asia are extreme. This causes concern for the economic security of North Korea. Celebrating the state's 60th anniversary, Kim Young-il, the premier of the North Korean cabinet, stated, "Our most important task is to construct a strong socialist economy for the 21st century by concentrating our strength on making progress in economic industries and the people's way of life" (Kim Sue-young 2008). The North Korean economic system must change because in its current form ordinary North Korean people and the political regime simply cannot survive. In this vein, Kim Young-il's statement can be understood as welcoming but still concerned about the implementation of change because the North's economy might already be too devastated to recover.

In fact, market reform measures have been enacted by the North, but the problem is that the speed and extent of these changes have fallen far short. This is because Pyongyang is well aware of the necessity of reform but does not wish to enact any changes that would endanger the security of the regime. In particular, Kim Jong-il has appeared to prefer a growing dependence on external aid rather than conducting real economic reforms that might cause political and social turmoil from within. The future existence of the North Korean regime is largely dependent on relations with the United States (nuclear issues and regime guarantee), inter-Korean relations (reunification), and international engagement (economic reforms and market opening). Therefore, the question of whether the North will give up its command economy and introduce a market economy is in principle a matter of politics rather than one of economics.

The North Korean nuclear problem continues to be one of the most serious and pressing issues in the international community. Currently there are two different prospects concerning North Korean nuclear issues and relations between Pyongyang and Washington. The first is the development of normalized diplomatic relations between the United States and North Korea. In this scenario, negotiations regarding arms control and a peace treaty will be successfully concluded and the nuclear issue will be resolved peacefully. The second is the complete refusal by North Korea to dismantle its nuclear weapons program and a deterioration of relations with the United States. This scenario may produce an indefinite political stalemate that will cause even more suffering for poverty and hunger-stricken North Koreans. Either that, or the regime may experience a hard landing.

Whichever scenario becomes reality, South Korea should not be excluded from the discussions about the future of the Korean peninsula. For this reason, close U.S.–South Korean coordination is so crucial that President Lee Myung-bak needs to develop detailed and systematic plans of cooperation with the next U.S. president regarding the management of the various North Korean questions. In particular, the first six months after the election of President Barack Obama will be an extremely important transition period for both the United States and South Korea, during which they define the direction of their North Korean policy and related alliance matters. In the long run, it will be instrumental for both countries to build a comprehensive road map to enhance the quality and depth of the U.S.–Korea alliance to collectively cope with comprehensive global security threats.

Also, to deal with North Korea's unpredictable and precarious actions, which run counter to international norms, as well as to prepare for North Korean contingencies, South Korea needs to engage in scenario building and create a point-by-point response plan regarding the future of North Korea. This requires not only U.S.–South Korean coordination and trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea but also the expansion of cooperation among like-minded countries that share the values of a market economy and a liberal democratic system and universal values such as human rights. Such like-minded nations whose national capacity is similar to South Korea's could form a so-called middle-power club. Member activities could consist of a new multilateral process for dealing with global problems, including North Korean questions. It is thus worthwhile to consider what Christopher Hill said when he emphasized the importance of the role of "second circle" players like Canada, Australia, and the EU, which might be able to play a more active role in supporting the six-party talks by "revving up" humanitarian aid and economic contacts with the North (APFC 2008).

Finally, in addressing the existing humanitarian and human rights issues, the principle of responsibility to protect (R2P), which is one of the most important normative advances in post–Cold War global governance, can be applied to the situation in North Korea. R2P intends to focus more narrowly on the protection of civilians in times of conflict in order to escape the conceptual vagueness and difficulties of utilizing the term “human security.” This term espouses in its meaning both the “freedom from want” and the “freedom from fear” (ICISS 2001; Thakur 2008). Current global crises are largely characterized as “complex emergencies” in which a mixture of extreme poverty, famine, civil war, political unrest, and ruthless dictatorship forms a vicious cycle and makes vulnerable groups more exposed to life-threatening and impoverished situations. In this vein, we need to develop a more comprehensive meaning of the right to protect and adopt this principle as a fundamental norm in international society by thoroughly examining the interaction of fear and want. The North Korean situation fits well in the case of such complex emergencies. In these cases, the international community can address such needs as the North’s food and economic predicaments and human rights problems as well as traditional military threats, including nuclear issues and the reconstruction of a failed state in the event of its collapse.

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