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## NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME AND CHINA'S STRATEGIC DILEMMA

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### JCSP 42

#### *Exercise Solo Flight*

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## North Korea's Nuclear Programme and China's Strategic Dilemma

### INTRODUCTION

When North Korea conducted 4<sup>th</sup> nuclear test on 6 January 2016, China was surprised and shocked because of following 2 reasons. First, North Korea conducted nuclear test in spite of China's opposition. Second, North Korea didn't notify nuclear test to China in advance. This unprecedented situation is showing current relationship between North Korea and China. Through the Korean War, two states became a blood alliance but now North Korea is becoming a threat to China's national interests. Especially, North Korea's nuclear programme is a huge threat to China because it could make regional instability of Northeast Asia. However, simultaneously, China can't convince North Korea to give up its pursuit of nuclear programme because North Korea is highly depending on nuclear programme to maintain its own regime stability. I argue that China is on the horns of '*strategic dilemma*' because North Korea's nuclear programme. That is to say, if China overlooks North Korea's nuclear programme, it would threaten China's national interests by increasing regional instability. On the contrary, if China convinces North Korea to give up its pursuit of nuclear programme, it would also threaten China's national interests by increasing North Korean regime's instability.

How can China deal with this strategic dilemma? I argue that China will behave to maximize its own national interests. So, this paper will prove that China is now in strategic dilemma due to North Korea's nuclear programme and subsequently, China will deal with it in order to maximize its national interests. First, this paper will examine the role of North Korea's nuclear programme as the most important means for its regime stability. Then, this paper will explain China's strategic dilemma that has been caused by North Korea's nuclear programme.

Finally, this paper will analyze China's strategic behaviour based on the perspective of national interests. The time period of this paper is after Kim Jong-un takes power in North Korea. And it will focus on the relationship between North Korea and China.

### **Why has North Korea adhered to Nuclear Programme?**

North Korea's nuclear programme is the most important means by which the regime can maintain its grip of power in the country. That is to say, the reason why Kim Jong-un can't relinquish a nuclear programme is that to do so would lead to a deterioration of the stability of the regime. How can nuclear programme support Kim Jong-un's regime survival? Nuclear programme has both domestic and international effectiveness for supporting regime survival.

First, nuclear programme has been the important means to consolidate domestic political and economic system. North Korea's leaders have used its own nuclear programme to enhance regime's legitimacy as the guarantor of a 'strong and prosperous country', fighting valiantly against the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Especially, for Kim Jong-un, it is becoming more important because of current regime instability. After Kim Jong-il, who was leader of North Korea, died in 2011, Kim Jong-un succeeded to his father's throne. Subsequently, instability of North Korea's regime worsened due to both domestic and international factors. When it comes to domestic factors, insufficient preparation for succession worsened regime's instability. Compared with his father, Kim Jong-un didn't have an enough experience for a succession because of a sudden death of his father.<sup>2</sup> Also the loyalty of the elder and the praetorian groups in North Korea, who were supporters for

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Habib, "North Korea's nuclear weapons programme and the maintenance of the Songun system," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 24 No.(1 March 2011): 60.

<sup>2</sup> Ciprian Ignat, "Kim Jong-un, a dangerous succession," *International Scientific Conference "Strategies XXI" 2*: Bucharest: "Carol I" National Defence University.(2014) : 66-67.

succession, was weak thus his authority was instable.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, internationally, with the collapse of the Communist bloc in the late 1980s and early 1990s, North Korea became more isolated.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, both a deterioration of the relationship with South Korea and international sanction due to North Korea's continued provocations in the 2000s also worsened regime's instability.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, to overcome this instability, Kim Jong-un is adhering to nuclear programme more than his father.

In addition to above political factors, the North Korean nuclear programme has also economic effectiveness for regime survival because, through a long negotiation, it brought many benefits over time to North Korea and most of the benefits are almost unconditional economic-aid from international society.<sup>6</sup> For example, Heavy fuel oil was provided to North Korea by the U.S. through the nuclear negotiation in 1990s.<sup>7</sup> And North Korea also gained the huge benefits from South Korea through the Kaesong Industrial Complex, which was built for the purpose of relaxing the tension on the Korean peninsula, since North Korea started to develop its nuclear programme. When North Korea conducted 4<sup>th</sup> nuclear test on 6 January 2016, South Korea promptly decided to close the Kaesong Industrial Complex as its own economic sanction. It means that the Kaesong Industrial Complex was an important source of North Korean regime's revenue.<sup>8</sup> Because North Korea's economy is still inefficient and weak, Kim Jong-un would use its nuclear programme to acquire the more benefits from international society.

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<sup>3</sup> Jae-cheon Lim, "North Korea's Hereditary Succession," *Asian Survey* 52.3 (May/Jun 2012): 564.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 553.

<sup>5</sup> Ignat, 66-67.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan D. Pollack, *No Exit: North Korea, nuclear weapons and international security* (New York: Routledge 2011), 114.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Putz, "Closing Kaesong: South Korea Withdraws from Joint Industrial Park," *The Diplomat*, last accessed 9 May 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/closing-kaesong-south-korea-withdraws-from-joint-industrial-park>.

Second, nuclear programme has been the important means to cope with US/ROK forces as a threat to its own regime. Although North Korea has strong conventional forces, North Korea can't exceed to US/ROK combined forces.<sup>9</sup> A nuclear capability/deterrent can compensate for such an inferior conventional military power in the face of a superior adversary because it provides a low-cost strategic equalizer, which Kim Jong-un needs in the face of US/ROK forces sitting south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.<sup>10</sup> Namely, if North Korea has a nuclear capability as an asymmetric power, conventional military power gap will be meaningless. North Korea can deter the U.S. nuclear threat and also have strategic superiority over South Korea, who doesn't have any nuclear capabilities except the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

Consequently, Kim Jong-un has tried to consolidate his power on domestic politics and economy and he has simultaneously tried to achieve strategic superiority over the military forces of the US/ROK alliance using the nuclear programme. Considering North Korea's instable situation after Kim Jong-un, an inexperienced and young leader, takes in power, he would more depend on its own nuclear programme.<sup>11</sup> It means that Kim Jong-un will not willingly relinquish its own nuclear programme. However, nuclear programme has led to deterioration in the relationship between the North Korea and China.<sup>12</sup> For China, North Korea's nuclear programme is an existential threat to its own national interests because China has sought regional stability in order to achieve its own goal/strategy, *Chinese Dream*.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, China hasn't made North Korea relinquish its nuclear programme because China has known that North Korean regime's stability is highly depending on its own nuclear programme. It means that both nuclear

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<sup>9</sup> The Heritage Foundation, "2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength, Threats: North Korea," last accessed 9 May 2016, <http://index.heritage.org/military/2015/chapter/threats/asia/north-korea>.

<sup>10</sup> Habib, 60.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory J. Moore, "How North Korea threatens China's interests: understanding Chinese 'duplicity' on the North Korean nuclear issue." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* Vol.8 (2008): 4-6.

<sup>13</sup> Bin He, "Xi Jinping's "China Dream," *China Scope* (March/April 2013): 6.

programme and relinquishment of it are all threat to China's national interests. As a result, North Korea's nuclear programme pushed China to do on the horns of the '*strategic dilemma*'<sup>14</sup>

### **China's Strategic Dilemma of North Korea's Nuclear Programme**

China's strategic dilemma of North Korea's nuclear programme means that if China overlooks North Korea's nuclear programme, it would threaten China's national interests by increasing regional instability. On the contrary, if China convinces North Korea to give up its pursuit of nuclear programme, it would also threaten China's national interests by increasing North Korean regime's instability. This is highly related to both China's national interests and impacts by North Korea's nuclear programme. Then, what are China's national interests? To understand China's national interests, China's Grand Strategy must be understood in advance.

In November 2012, a new leadership came to power in China which has been increasing its national power rapidly. Xi Jinping, the new Chinese leader, has a strong confidence on its national power and revealed China's Grand Strategy for the future.<sup>15</sup> The Grand Strategy, which is famous for '*Chinese Dream*,' shows/explains/outlines China's explicit ambition for its successful future.<sup>16</sup> China has been seeking '*Utopian World*' or '*Xiao Kang Society*' in Chinese, which means a moderately prosperous society in all respects until 2020.<sup>17</sup> China's vision out to 2050 is to overcome poverty, pollution, corruption and ethnic strife in order to become a fully developed nation.<sup>18</sup> This is a '*Chinese Dream*' which Xi Jinping wishes to come true. Based on

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<sup>14</sup> Moore, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Hyunyong, Ha, "Xi-Jinping's policy toward Northeast Asia : Changes and Implications" (Joint Command and Staff Programme Global Vortex Paper, Canadian Forces College, 2015), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Manoranjan Mohanty, "Xi Jinping and the 'Chinese Dream'," *Economic & Political Weekly* Vol. 48 Issue 38 (2013): 34.

<sup>17</sup> Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, "A 'Xiao kang' Society Means Not Merely Money," last accessed 9 May 2016, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/zgrq/t36665.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Robert Lawrence Kuhn, "Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream," *The New York Times*, last accessed 9 May 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/opinion/global/xi-jinpings-chinese-dream.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/opinion/global/xi-jinpings-chinese-dream.html?_r=0).

huge economic development and increases to its international influence, Xi Jinping has tried to aggressively drive many policies which are related to ‘*Chinese Dream*.’<sup>19</sup> Although some, mainly from Western point of view, has worried about China’s rise as a potential challenge to an international order<sup>20</sup>, China has been insisting that it will pursue a ‘*peaceful development*’ without a collision with an existing international order.<sup>21</sup> To achieve the ‘*Chinese Dream*’, regional stability has become China’s important national interests. Because China is rising but is not a Super Power yet and its national power does not exceed the U.S.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, for Xi Jinping, a stable environment is a manifest necessity to grow China’s national power.<sup>23</sup> The region of Northeast Asia is an important area to achieve this goal because this area is not only a potential unstable border area but also an acute front against the U.S. and its allies.<sup>24</sup> Then, how can North Korea’s nuclear programme mean to China’s national interests? That is to say, how can North Korea’s nuclear programme make China’s strategic dilemma?

North Korea’s nuclear programme is against China’s national interests because it could destabilize the regional security.<sup>25</sup> There are two significant reasons-arms race in Northeast Asia and provokes the U.S. intervention. First, North Korea’s nuclear programme might lead to nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia. If North Korea has a nuclear capability, South Korea and Japan will seek nuclear capability to deter North Korea’s threat or will actively will seek further military cooperation with the U.S. Second, North Korea’s nuclear capability could provoke a

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<sup>19</sup> Woosang Kim and Scott Gates, “Power transition theory and the rise of China,” *International Area Studies Review* Vol.18 (2015): 223.

<sup>20</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “China’s Unpeaceful Rise,” *Current History*, Vol.105 (April, 2006): 160.

<sup>21</sup> Barry Buzan, “China in International Society : Is ‘Peaceful Rise’ Possible?,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol.3 (2010): 34.

<sup>22</sup> Robert J. Art, “The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul,” *Political Science Quarterly* Fall (2010): 359.

<sup>23</sup> Moore, 2-3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.



military intervention from the U.S.<sup>26</sup> If North Korea continues to test a nuclear weapon, the U.S. or Japan could launch pre-emptive strikes against North Korea's nuclear facilities. It means that hostilities on Korean peninsula could outbreak due to North Korea's nuclear programme.<sup>27</sup> After all, all things which are caused by North Korea's nuclear programme would be threat to China's national interests.

On the other hand, a relinquishment of North Korea's nuclear programme would be a threat to China's national interests because it could destabilize North Korean regime's security. One would think that it would be in China's national interest to work with the US and other regional allies to convince North Korea to give up its pursuit of nuclear weapons, but China is having a difficulty in dissuading North Korea from its nuclear programme because it could make the instability of North Korea's regime. Namely, if North Korea relinquishes its nuclear programme by any external pressures, the regime's instability would skyrocket.<sup>28</sup> And if North Korea's regime were to collapses, there would be so many refugees in the border between North Korea and China.<sup>29</sup> There is a severe expectation that more than five hundred thousand of refugees will pass across the border between China and North Korea in case of regime collapse of North Korea.<sup>30</sup> It would make a huge confusion and negative effects on China's economic and societal development.<sup>31</sup> These could be huge threats to China's national interests. Therefore, China can not dissuade North Korea from its nuclear programme unilaterally.

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<sup>26</sup> Moore,13.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*,13.

<sup>28</sup> Habib,57-59.

<sup>29</sup> Moore,16.

<sup>30</sup> Paul B. Stares and Joel S. Wit, "Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea," *Council Special Report* No.42 (January 2009): 23.

<sup>31</sup> Hongnack Kim, "China-North Korea Relations after Kim Jong-Il," *International Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol.XVII, No.1(Spring 2013): 24.

Consequently, North Korea's nuclear programme has been making China's '*strategic dilemma*'. Then, what will be China's strategic choice to this '*strategic dilemma*'? It is very important because it will affect to the future of North Korea's nuclear programme which has been at a stalemate for a long time.

### **China's Strategic Choice : The Maximization of its National Interests**

When it comes to state's action in international events, this paper assumes that states would act rationally. As Allison and Zelikow argued, state's rationality refers to consistent, value-maximizing choice within specified constraints.<sup>32</sup> So, it is reasonable that China's strategic choice in strategic dilemma would be based on maximization of its national interests because maximization of national interests is consistent, value-maximizing choice.

China's strategic choice for dealing with North Korea's nuclear programme would be based on its own national interests because China has been trying to achieve its grand strategy, *Chinese Dream*. Namely, China will try to maximize its own national interests to cope with the strategic dilemma. China has wanted the regional stability on Korean peninsula. It is an explicit China's national interests in Northeast Asia. To achieve this goal, a stable North Korean regime without nuclear programme is required. However, North Korean regime without nuclear programme would be instable because Kim Jong-un is highly depending on nuclear programme to maintain its regime's stability. Therefore, China would try to support North Korean regime to avoid regime collapse by political and economic aid and simultaneously would try to persuade North Korea to follow China's the Open-Door policy.<sup>33</sup> Following China's the Open-Door policy

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<sup>32</sup> Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision : Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1999), 18.

<sup>33</sup> Mathieu Duchâtel and Philip Schell, *China's Policy on North Korea, Economic Engagement and Nuclear Disarmament*, (Solna: SIPRI, 2013), 17.

means that North Korean regime's stability is depending on not nuclear programme but getting out of international isolation through a relinquishment of its own nuclear programme.

After North Korea conducted 4<sup>th</sup> nuclear test on 6 January 2016, United Nations took sanction against North Korea through UNSC Resolution 2270.<sup>34</sup> It is a very strong and unprecedented nonmilitary sanction. If this sanction is executed well, North Korea's economy will be in huge difficulty. However, a key player is China. Although China cooperated with the U.S. on UNSC Resolution 2270, China as the largest trade partner with North Korea, has been still providing crude oil to North Korea.<sup>35</sup> In spite of strong international sanction against North Korea, Kim Jong-un is still adhering to its nuclear programme and even is likely to be preparing 5<sup>th</sup> nuclear test.<sup>36</sup> It means that China, who does not want North Korean regime collapse, still supports North Korean regime by an economic aid and international sanction would be ineffective due to China's support. As a result, China is cooperating with international society on sanction against North Korea but still support North Korea by economic aid to avoid North Korean regime's collapse and it will be negative effect on international sanction by the United Nations.

On the other hand, China would persuade North Korea to follow China's the Open-Door policy. China knows that North Korea's nuclear programme will deepen North Korea's international isolation. So China would try to let Kim Jong-un know that his regime will be well-maintained if he relinquishes its own nuclear programme and follows the China's Open-Door

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<sup>34</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2270, last accessed 4 May 2016, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2270\(2016\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2270(2016)).

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Shim, "U.S. to ask China to ban oil exports to North Korea, report says," UPI, last accessed 9 May 2016, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2016/01/22/US-to-ask-China-to-ban-oil-exports-to-North-Korea-report-says/8901453473437/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/01/22/US-to-ask-China-to-ban-oil-exports-to-North-Korea-report-says/8901453473437/)

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Shim, "North Korea preparations for 5th nuclear test complete, military says," UPI, last accessed 9 May 2016, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2016/04/22/North-Korea-preparations-for-5th-nuclear-test-complete-military-says/4741461342440/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/04/22/North-Korea-preparations-for-5th-nuclear-test-complete-military-says/4741461342440/)

policy. To do so, China will try to guarantee Kim Jong-un's regime at the expense of a relinquishment of nuclear programme by political and economic support. However, Kim Jong-un would hesitate to follow such the Open-Door policy due to distrust to China.<sup>37</sup> Rather, he would capitalize on Chinese geostrategic fears: a shared border with a unified peninsula under Seoul's control, tied to the alliance with the U.S.<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, China would support North Korea by economic aid to avoid regime collapse, simultaneously would persuade Kim Jong-un to follow China's Open-Door policy. It means that, for North Korea, a relinquishment of its own nuclear programme will be more beneficial to regime survival because it would facilitate getting out of international isolation. This would be the best option for China to cope with strategic dilemma because it is the best way to maximize China's national interests on North Korea's nuclear programme.

## CONCLUSION

On 8 May 2016, Kim Jong un emphasized that North Korea will be moving toward 'byongjin' a two-pronged approach aimed at enhancing nuclear might while improving living conditions at the Workers' Party of Korea congress in Pyongyang. He warned that North Korea will deploy nuclear weapons if the communist nation's enemies use them first.<sup>39</sup> This shows that North Korea's nuclear programme is the most important means by which the regime can maintain its grip of power in the country and North Korea will not forgive its nuclear programme

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<sup>37</sup> Theresa Lou, "Is China Finally Fed Up With Kim Jong-un's North Korea?," *The Diplomat*, last accessed 9 May 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/is-china-finally-fed-up-with-kim-jong-uns-north-korea/>

<sup>38</sup> Scott Synder, "China's Muddled Message On North Korea," last accessed 4 May 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/scottasnyder/2016/03/31/chinas-muddled-message-on-north-korea/#57240b3445f5>

<sup>39</sup> John Bacon and Steph Solis, "Kim Jong Un says North Korea won't use nukes first," *USATODAY*, last accessed 8 May 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/05/08/north-korea-wont-use-nukes-first-kim-jong-un/84107470/>.

in spite of international sanction. Furthermore, North Korea will be more depending on nuclear programme for its regime survival.

Such the North Korea's nuclear programme has been an explicit threat to China's national interests. If China overlooks North Korea's nuclear programme, it would threaten China's national interests by increasing regional instability. On the contrary, if China convinces North Korea to give up its pursuit of nuclear programme, it would also threaten China's national interests by increasing North Korean regime's instability. After all, North Korea's nuclear programme has made China's *strategic dilemma*.

China would cope with this *strategic dilemma* to maximize its national interests. And it is very important for us to expect the future of North Korea's nuclear programme because China has still strong influence on North Korea than any other states. For China, stable North Korea regime without nuclear programme is required for regional stability, which is China's national interests. To do so, China would support North Korean regime by economic aid to avoid regime collapse which could be caused by international sanction. Simultaneously, China would persuade Kim Jong-un to follow China's Open-Door policy to maintain his regime without nuclear programme.

As a result, China's strategic choice based on its national interests will make North Korea's nuclear problem more complicate because international sanction against North Korea would be ineffective due to China's economic support to North Korea and Kim Jong-un would hesitate to follow China's Open-Door policy due to distrust to China.

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