

# Interpreting North Korea's Military Strategy<sup>1</sup>

*Hideshi Takesada*<sup>2</sup>

## **Introduction**

The year 2010 marked the passage of 60 years since the outbreak of the Korean War. Nonetheless, the relationship between North and South Korea and the international environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula appear to be much the same today as they were in the 1950s. This is because the peninsula remains divided by a militarized border and the militaries of the North and South continue to face each other across this border. North Korea shows no desire to accept North-South coexistence. And while the international community hopes to see North Korea abandon its nuclear weapons development program, China—which continues to provide economic assistance to North Korea—does not always present a clear stance regarding inspections of the North's nuclear development. The year 2010 saw two incidents that heightened military tensions between the North and South, which were followed by a Workers' Party of Korea Conference in September that resulted in revision of WPK rules, a structural reorganization, and a shift toward a WPK-centered leadership system. Although North Korea continued to take a hard military stance following the conference, its New Year's Joint Editorial of January 2011 proposed dialogue with South Korea and led to the beginning of North-South talks. Although North Korea's behavior remains perplexing, this paper will attempt to explain this behavior by linking it to North Korea's military strategy.

## **The Korean War and North Korea's Possession of Nuclear Weapons**

In 1948, two countries were born on the Korean Peninsula: The Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Two years later, on June 25, 1950, the Korean People's Army crossed the military demarcation line between

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revision and amendment of a paper presented at the "International Symposium on Security Affairs 2010" that was hosted by the National Institute for Defense Studies on December 2, 2010. The entirety of its content reflects the views and interpretations of the author and in no way represents the views of the Ministry of Defense or the National Institute for Defense Studies.

<sup>2</sup> Former Executive Director for Research & International Affairs.

the two countries and drove south, beginning a war toward reunification of the peninsula. Kim Il-sung had judged that, after the US forces' withdrawal from Korea, it would be possible for his forces to militarily unify the peninsula without a full-scale conflict with the United States. North Korea's action to start the war was supported by the then Soviet Union and China. Immediately after fighting broke out, US-led United Nations forces intervened, thereby beginning a full-blown war. When the UN forces pushed northward through the Korean Peninsula and approached the border between North Korea and China, the People's Volunteer Army crossed the Yalu River and entered North Korea. The time was October 1950. Confronted with China's entry into the war, US President Henry S. Truman made reference to the use of nuclear weapons on November 30. North Korea admits that Truman's suggestion regarding American use of nuclear weapons had a profound impact on it and was the impetus behind Pyongyang's decision to acquire nuclear weapons. This admission is contained in a DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs memorandum of April 2010 that provides a historical background and justification of North Korea's need to possess nuclear weapons<sup>3</sup>.

Following the signing of the Korean War Armistice Agreement in July 1953, US forces became stationed on the Korean Peninsula against the backdrop of the brewing Cold War, and continuing confrontation between the US-South Korea and China-North Korea-Soviet alliances took hold from the 1960s. South Korea reinforced its alliance with the US by sending forces to Vietnam. At the same time, relations between Japan and South Korea became normalized, and South Korea began a policy of accepting Japanese capital. On the other hand, North Korea implemented a planned economy and in fact maintained economic superiority vis-à-vis South Korea until the end of the 1960s. However, as Pyongyang watched the US-South Korea alliance strengthen, Japan-South Korea relations normalize, and South Koreans enjoy growing domestic stability, it began taking a hard-line military policy toward Seoul. In 1966, a North Korean torpedo boat attacked a South Korean fishing boat, and in 1967 a North-South clash occurred at the Demilitarized Zone. And in January 1968, the Blue House Raid was staged, marking a strategic

---

<sup>3</sup> A memorandum titled "The Korean Peninsula and Nuclear Issue" that was issued by the DPRK Foreign Ministry on April 21, 2010, gives a historical background behind North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons. *Korean News*, Korean-language electronic version (<http://www.kcna.co.jp/today-rodong/rodong.htm>); accessed on January 24, 2011. It explains that suggestions concerning use of nuclear weapons by President Truman and other high-ranking US government officials caused North Korean citizens to flee to the South in fear. It further notes the impact that the US's statements concerning nuclear weapons had on the Korean War.

shift whereby North Korean soldiers who had infiltrated into South Korea attempted to assassinate the South Korean president. However, in the end, these incidents amounted to nothing more than localized clashes, with none leading to full-scale war on the Korean Peninsula. As a matter of fact, as Sino-American relations thawed and movement toward a Vietnam War peace agreement gathered steam, North and South Korea began approaching each other. In July 1972, a North-South Joint Communiqué was announced in which both sides agreed on seven points pertaining to peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula rose once again in April of 1975, when the North Vietnamese Army entered Saigon and the South Vietnamese government collapsed. Immediately afterward, Kim Il-sung visited China, where he requested Beijing's support in unifying the peninsula. However, this visit similarly did not lead to renewed hostilities, and the armistice was maintained.

As the socialist regimes of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe began to waver under the weight of their stagnant economies at the end of the 1980s, expectations for South Korean-led reunification of the Korean Peninsula grew in South Korea<sup>4</sup>. During this time, South Korea's international standing was rising and economy growing following its successful hosting of the Seoul Olympics in 1988. And Seoul's continuing modernization of its armed forces resulted in a growing gap in North-South military capability. Coinciding with these developments was the reunification of a similarly divided country—namely, East and West Germany—which influenced the domestic debate on unification in South Korea.

Nonetheless, North Korea did not collapse, and there was no change in circumstances on the Korean Peninsula: three military alliances remained in effect (US-South Korea, China-North Korea, and USSR-North Korea) and the militaries of the North and South continued to face each other across the DMZ. Around the time that the socialist economies of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were

---

<sup>4</sup> At this time, active debate on reunification of the Korean Peninsula was taking place in South Korea. For example, South Korean President Roh Tae-woo (in office from 1988 to 1992) stressed the importance of preparing for reunification. His speeches having reunification themes are recorded in *Minshu-shugi to Toi no Jidai: No Te-u no Enzetsu-shu* (a time of democracy and equality: a collection of speeches by Roh Tae-woo) (Kakinohakai, 1990). Moreover, the National Unification Board (established in 1969) was renamed the Ministry of Unification and its director-general was elevated in status to deputy prime minister on December 27, 1990, in order to promote South Korea's unification policy under government leadership. This represented a reorganization in preparation for unification of the Korean Peninsula. For further discussion of this time period, please see Hideshi Takesada, "Korean Security and Unification in the Détente Era," *The Korea Journal of Defense Analysis*, pp.179-189 (The Korea Institute for Defense Analysis, Summer 1990).

meeting their demise, suspicions began to emerge that North Korea was developing nuclear weapons. The international community demanded that North Korea submit to inspections of suspected nuclear weapons development-related facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). North Korea responded by declaring its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on March 12, 1993. As its reason for withdrawal, North Korea announced that “the DPRK faced a direct threat from the United States, itself a nuclear power, and thus the DPRK was withdrawing from the NPT to maintain its autonomy and ensure its national security.”<sup>5</sup> Prior to this announcement, it was only suspected that North Korea was developing nuclear weapons; however, in the wake of the North’s explanation that it was “withdrawing to ensure its national security,” it became clear in March of 1993 that North Korea intended to possess nuclear weapons for the military objective of “maintaining national security.” In other words, it was leaving the NPT because it was considering possessing nuclear weapons. Thus, from the earliest stage of US-North Korea talks, North Korea had determined that it required nuclear weapons in order to protect itself from the nuclear weapons of the United States.

Talks began between the United States and North Korea for the purpose of persuading North Korea to allow strict inspections. These talks led to the US-DPRK Agreed Framework in October 1994. At this point, the international community embraced expectations that North Korea would dismantle its graphite-moderated reactor, accept international assistance toward improving its energy sector, and embark on the road toward economic reconstruction. The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) was launched, and a program was started whereby the United States would provide 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil annually and international organizations would construct light-water reactors in North Korea in exchange for Pyongyang’s freezing its graphite-moderated reactor. However, the KEDO program did not proceed smoothly. During construction of the light-water reactors, Pyongyang protested against the reactors’ being referred to as “South Korean models.” And disagreements between North Korea and KEDO concerning the wages paid to North Korean laborers emerged, delaying construction of the reactors.

---

<sup>5</sup> See the memorandum mentioned above. It states that North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to protect “our nation’s sovereignty and our state’s security,” given the US’s demand that North Korea undergo special inspections due to the threat of its nuclear weapons.

Despite such problems, North-South dialogue was moving forward. In June of 2000, President Kim Dae-jung and National Defense Commission (NDC) Chairman Kim Jong-Il held an Inter-Korean Summit, where leaders of both sides discussed reconciliation and reaffirmed the importance of developing mutual trust as mentioned in the South-North Basic Agreement of 1991. At the second Inter-Korean Summit held in August of 2007, South Korea pledged large-scale assistance to the North. It appeared that the North-South reconciliation process was proceeding smoothly.

However, entering 2000, suspicions emerged on the Korean Peninsula that North Korea was building uranium enrichment facilities. In October 2002, during a visit to North Korea by US special presidential envoy James Kelly, Pyongyang clearly stated that it had a program to produce enriched uranium. In August 2003, Six-Party Talks by Japan, the US, China, Russia, South Korea, and North Korea commenced to clear up suspicions regarding Pyongyang's uranium enrichment activities. Then, on February 10, 2005, the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially declared North Korea's nuclear capability, saying that the country had "manufactured nuclear weapons for self-defense purposes in order to counter the United States' hostile policy toward the DPRK."<sup>6</sup> With this declaration, the international community's effort to persuade Pyongyang to dismantle all of its nuclear weapons development programs and existing nuclear weapons faced an extremely difficult challenge, as North Korea was no longer hiding its nuclear ambitions. The Six-Party Talks now continued to address a North Korea that had clearly stated its goal of becoming a nuclear power. Then, on September 19, 2005, the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks adopted its first ever Joint Statement. In the statement, all of the participating parties agreed that North Korea would abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs, return to the NPT, and accept IAEA inspections<sup>7</sup>.

Immediately after the Joint Statement's adoption, however, the US government—which had been investigating possible money laundering by the North Korean leadership in connection with suspected development of weapons of mass destruction—identified Banco Delta Asia, a Macao-based bank, as a

---

<sup>6</sup> The entire text was posted on *Korean News*, Korean-language electronic version, on February 11, 2005 (<http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-k.htm>); accessed on January 24, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> For the entire text, see the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (<http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/n-korea/6kaigo/ks-050919html>); accessed on January 24, 2011.

financial institution associated with North Korean money laundering. In the wake of this action, the Joint Statement's implementation became deadlocked, and no progress was made toward achieving the items agreed upon by the Six-Party Talks. Entering 2006, North Korea launched ballistic missiles on July 5 and conducted its first nuclear test on October 9. Thus, North Korea had done more than simply declare itself a nuclear power; it had also raised the possibility that it was working to make nuclear weapons deliverable via ballistic missiles. The international community continued its effort to persuade Pyongyang to stop its nuclear weapons development. On February 13, 2007, this effort resulted in the adoption of a joint document clearly stating that North Korea would accept initial phase actions agreed upon by the Six-Party Talks. This was followed on October 3 by an agreement concerning "Second-Phase Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement."

What can be gathered from international community-North Korea exchanges as well as North Korean documents explaining its nuclear development is that Pyongyang has, from the very beginning, strived to develop nuclear weapons. After suspicions concerning the country's nuclear weapons program first came light, Pyongyang explained that the program was for power generation. When it could no longer avoid strict inspections of its nuclear facilities, it withdrew from the NPT. Then, after declaring itself a nuclear power, it conducted nuclear tests. Subsequently, it has been shifting its focus toward gaining international recognition of its status of a nuclear power, while also justifying the reasons for its possession of nuclear weapons.

So then, what is North Korea's ultimate aim? Because it has stated that the motivation behind its nuclear weapons development is the threat posed by the US's nuclear weapons, it will likely continue insisting on its right to possess a nuclear deterrent so long as nuclear weapons exist in the world. Let us take a look at a specific report from North Korea. According to the aforementioned DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs memorandum, "the mission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's nuclear weapons is to inhibit and repulse any aggression or attack against the nation and people until the time when denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the world is achieved." Here, "nation and people" refer to the Korean Peninsula—including both North Korea and South Korea—and not just the northern half. Because it contains the phrase "repulse aggression against the people," it can be construed that the weapons are to "repulse aggression against the entire Korean Peninsula, which is home to the same people, regardless of whether they live in the

North or South.” Another mission given for the North’s nuclear weapons is to “do away with the US’s military support of South Korea.” Pyongyang has used this as the basis for its demand for “inspection of US nuclear weapons existing in South Korea.” Mention of “US nuclear weapons in South Korea” implies that North Korean nuclear weapons are to stop American military intervention on the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, from the statement that North Korea will possess nuclear weapons “until the time when denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the world is achieved,” it can be interpreted that the North will not give up its nuclear weapons so long as the nuclear threat from the United States exists. In addition, North Korea insists that replacing the Armistice Agreement with a peace accord is a precondition for avoiding nuclear war<sup>8</sup>. Thus, it can be seen that North Korea’s nuclear weapons are linked to Pyongyang’s desire to eliminate the US’s military commitment to South Korea, exist as a means of preventing American military intervention, and are closely tied to Pyongyang’s policy of setting conditions for the signing of a peace accord. North Korea’s nuclear weapons are an important pillar in the country’s historical and long-held policy of autonomous reunification—in other words, North Korean-led reunification. And this helps explain why North Korea calls them “decisive weapons” and “ultimate weapons.”

## Nuclear Strategy

It has become clear that North Korea’s nuclear ambitions are based on Pyongyang’s long-held reunification policy. So then, in military terms, how does Pyongyang envision using its nuclear weapons, which it claims to possess to “inhibit and repulse any aggression or attack against the nation and people”? Let us consider statements that are other than the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs memorandum of April 2010.

On April 24, 2010, North Korea’s General Ri Yong-ho, Chief of General Staff of the KPA, made the following statement at a commemorative gathering held on the day prior to the Korean People’s Army’s 78th birthday: “If they invade so much as 0.001 millimeter of the Democratic Republic of North Korea’s sacred sky, earth or sea, we will mobilize every means, including the nuclear deterrents, and blow

<sup>8</sup> Korean Central News Agency report of February 3, 2010. *Choson Sinbo*, Japanese-language electronic version, February 10, 2010 (<http://www.lkorea-np.co.jp/sinboj>); accessed on January 24, 2011.

away the invading citadel until not a trace remains.”<sup>9</sup> This statement signifies that, if attacked, North Korea would resist with nuclear weapons even if the enemy were to invade using only conventional forces, and suggests that Pyongyang would use its nuclear weapons on a first-strike basis. “Blow away the invading citadel” means that North Korea would use WMDs to destroy major cities and military bases. The statement does not suggest that Pyongyang would “use nuclear weapons to ensure North Korea’s security,” but rather that it would “accomplish the historic mission of reunifying the fatherland.” Thus, above all else, North Korea’s use of nuclear weapons would be for the goal of reunification. Accordingly, North Korea considers its possession of nuclear weapons to be part of its national reunification strategy.

Beginning around 2009, members of the international community addressed concerns surrounding NDC Chairman Kim Jong-il’s health by discussing preparations for possible developments in North Korea. Responding to reports that the South Korean government had prepared an action plan for dealing with a rapid change in the North Korean situation, the NDC stated on January 15, 2010, that it would initiate a “retaliatory sacred war based on its nuclear deterrence” against South Korea. This marked the first time the North had ever used the term “sacred war.”<sup>10</sup> Then, on July 24, North Korea labeled joint US-South Korea military exercises an “attempt to strangle the DPRK militarily” and said that it would “initiate a retaliatory sacred war based on its nuclear deterrence at a time of its choosing.” Once again, it used the term “sacred war.”<sup>11</sup>

On December 23, 2010, Kim Yong-chun, Minister of the People’s Armed Forces, made the following statement at a central report meeting: “The DPRK’s revolutionary forces are fully prepared to initiate a sacred war using our nuclear deterrent. We will launch a forceful physical attack if any part of the DPRK’s air, land, or sea is invaded.” According to North Korea’s interpretation, the phrase “air, land, or sea” refers to the entire Korean Peninsula, and “forceful physical attack”

<sup>9</sup> *Choson Sinbo*, Japanese-language electronic version, May 6, 2010 (<http://www.lkorea-np.co.jp/sinboj>); accessed on January 24, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> The entire text of the NDC statement on “responding with a sacred war of revenge against the contingency governing plan” was posted on *Korean News*, Korean-language electronic version, on January 15, 2010 (<http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-k.htm>); accessed on January 24, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> The entire text of the NDC statement on “sacred war based on nuclear deterrent” was posted on *Korean News*, Korean-language electronic version, on July 24, 2010 (<http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-k.htm>); accessed on January 24, 2011.

suggests the use of weapons of mass destruction<sup>12</sup>. From this interpretation, North Korea is using the term “sacred war” even when it is referring to US-South Korean military exercises taking place within South Korea.

In general, “sacred war” refers to war that is fought for a just cause. On the Korean Peninsula, the “just cause” is rectification of the divided Korea and reunification of the Korean people. North Korea uses “sacred war” in the sense that “if a war is to eliminate the national division, then its becoming a nuclear war is justified.” From this, it is clear that North Korea believes that “if the DPRK is to fight the United States in a war to reunify the Korean Peninsula, then checking US intervention by suggesting the use of nuclear weapons is justified.”

This stance does not conflict with North Korea's desire for a peace accord. If, by possessing nuclear weapons, North Korea can achieve a state of deterred US intervention, then it must ensure that this state is lasting. Institutionalizing this state will require normalization of US-North Korea relations. Such normalization will necessitate the signing of a peace accord, and the conclusion of a US-North Korea non-aggression pact will be essential toward this end. In 2010, North Korea took a step in preparation for normalized US-North Korea relations by appointing Kang Sok-ju, former First Vice Foreign Minister (in charge of diplomacy with the US), as Vice Premier.

North Korea has sought to achieve a more equal relationship with the United States and then begin a process toward reunifying the Korean Peninsula solely through North and South involvement. It sees “autonomous, peaceful unification” as “achieving reunification without American interference or war.” And it realized that possession of nuclear weapons capable of serving as a deterrent in actual war is a means for instigating this process. Thus, North Korea has clearly stated that it will maintain its nuclear deterrent and refused to dispose of its existing nuclear weapons. In 2010, North Korea admitted to US experts that it has an experimental light-water reactor development program. It also allowed these experts to view centrifuges it claimed to have built with domestic technology and disclosed that it is engaged in uranium enrichment. Thus, it is clear that North Korea is continuing

---

<sup>12</sup> *Chosun Online*, Japanese-language electronic version, December 24, 2010 (<http://www.chosunonline.com/news/>); accessed on January 24, 2011.

a full-scale effort to develop WMDs<sup>13</sup>. Based on these developments, as well as on Pyongyang's view of nuclear devices as decisive weapons toward achieving the ultimate goal it has held since the nation's birth in 1948, it seems reasonable to conclude that North Korea's chief aim is to continue its nuclear development and manufacture nuclear weapons that serve as a deterrent against the United States—even if it must do so under inspections, sanctions, and nuclear test detection schemes. Here, “North Korean deterrent against the United States” does not mean “nuclear weapons capable of countering American nuclear might.” Rather, Pyongyang sees nuclear weapons as a means for producing a scenario in which the United States, knowing that North Korea possesses nuclear weapons, will decide to “leave reunification to the Koreans, as US military intervention on the Korean Peninsula of Northeast Asia would present a security threat to American home territory.”

In line with the discussion above, it is possible to compile several North Korean policies concerning nuclear weapons from official DPRK announcements. Specifically, 1) North Korea's nuclear ambitions were sparked when the United States alluded to use of nuclear weapons during the Korean War. 2) North Korea possesses nuclear weapons for the security and reunification of the entire Korean Peninsula—i.e., the Korean nation and its people; thus, nuclear capability is based on Pyongyang's reunification strategy. 3) North Korea will not abandon its nuclear weapons so long as the autonomy and security of the entire Korean Peninsula remains in question. In other words, it will not give up its nuclear weapons until the United States abandons its nuclear deterrence-based strategy, and it will continue to produce as many nuclear weapons as it feels are necessary. 4) North Korea possesses nuclear weapons to deter US military intervention in the Korean Peninsula problem, and thus its nuclear capability does not conflict with its desire to conclude a US-North Korea peace accord. And 5), North Korea is prepared to use nuclear weapons in a first-strike manner to counter an invasion of the Korean Peninsula.

It is apparent that these five principles form the foundation of North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Indeed, Pyongyang's nuclear development program forms part of its reunification policy. In fact, North Korea has hinted in official reports that

---

<sup>13</sup> This matter is discussed in a report issued by Professor Hecker of Stanford University and other experts after they visited North Korea. The report describes the experts' astonishment at finding new centrifuges. Siegfried S. Hecker, “Redefining Denuclearization on North Korea,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 20, 2010.

it will have difficulty accepting assurances of security for the northern half of the Korean Peninsula in exchange for a pledge to abandon its nuclear program in North-South dialogues and the Six-Party Talks.

## Preparation for both War and Peace

In recent years, North Korea has also been seeking superiority over South Korea in terms of conventional forces as well. On April 5, 2009, the North launched a Taepodong 2 ballistic missile, and on May 25 it conducted a nuclear test. At the same time, North Korea intensified its claim that the North Limit Line (NLL) drawn in the Yellow Sea to the west of the Korean Peninsula is invalid. On May 27, 2009, Pyongyang announced that it “will not be bound to the Armistice Agreement any longer.<sup>14</sup>” Amid rising tensions, North and South naval vessels clashed in the Yellow Sea on November 10. Since 2009, North Korea has been expanding training of its conventional forces, and with this North-South naval confrontation, it has further ratcheted up military pressure on the South. On December 21, Pyongyang declared it would establish a “peacetime firing zone for (North Korean) coastal and island artillery corps” around the maritime demarcation line in the Yellow Sea to the west of the Korean Peninsula, and began repeating reports that it does not recognize the NLL. Subsequently, in January 2010, it conducted joint ground, naval, and air training that envisioned a scenario of actual conflict with South Korea but without US involvement<sup>15</sup>.

On March 26, a South Korean patrol vessel was attacked and sunk by a North Korean submarine that fired a heavy-weight torpedo. Given that implementing such an attack in shallow waters requires sophisticated operational skills, North Korea proved that it can demonstrate naval superiority under certain conditions. Then, on November 23, North Korea shelled Yeonpyeong Island; this attack was limited to a South Korean island that is outside the US Navy's responsibility to defend and

<sup>14</sup> *Chosun Online*, electronic version, May 28, 2009 (<http://www.chosunonline.com/news>); accessed on February 1, 2011. The NLL was established by UN forces on August 30, 1953. North Korea accepted the NLL's establishment without contest because it had lost its naval vessels and shore-to-ship missiles.

<sup>15</sup> North Korea's naval activity became more vigorous following a North-South naval clash on November 10, 2009. *Chosun Online*, Japanese-language electronic version, April 24, 2010 (<http://www.chosunonline.com/news>); accessed on February 6, 2011. In January 2010, North Korea disclosed scenes of a tank division engaged in military training in preparation for an attack on a South Korean city. *JoongAng Ilbo*, Japanese-language electronic version, January 7, 2010 (<http://www.japanese.joins.com/>); accessed on February 4, 2011.

involved means that inflicted pinpoint damage. The shelling reminded the South Korean public that, despite its military obsolescence, North Korea still had the ability to harm the South with its artillery. However, both the sinking of the patrol vessel and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island were limited and sporadic attacks against South Korea, and they were alike in that they involved means unlikely to spark conflict with the United States.

The attacks against South Korea in 2010 were executed in parallel with reports out of Pyongyang that it would maintain its nuclear deterrent. This suggests that North Korea is simultaneously strengthening its nuclear and conventional capabilities. Moreover, the North's hard-line military stance coincided with changes to North Korean leadership. In September of 2010, a Workers Party of Korea Conference was held. Here, Kim Jong-un, the third and youngest son of North Korea's leader, NDC Chairman Kim Jong-il, assumed the post of Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the WPK. On October 10, after the conference resulted in a reorganization of the WPK, Vice-Chairman Kim Jong-un stood (with the rank of general) on the VIP platform with his father at a Korean People's Army review held to celebrate the WPK's 65th anniversary. At the review, which was held to coincide with the launch of the new WPK structure, Nodong and Musudan ballistic missiles were displayed to the foreign media, including those from the United States and Japan. The appearance of these missiles formed a significant part of the KPA review, a point supported by the fact that Pyongyang allowed foreign media to make live reports on some parts of the missiles' display. The public display of reportedly North Korean-built ballistic missiles together with the appearance of Kim Jong-il's son, Kim Jong-un, suggests that North Korea's WMDs are somehow linked to the appearance of Kim Jong-il's successor.

North Korea has also been active on the diplomatic front. A DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs memorandum dated April 21, 2010, justified North Korea's nuclear deterrence against the United States and also called on the US to sign a peace accord for the Korean Peninsula. It explained that normalization of US-North Korea relations would be a necessary step toward alleviating tensions<sup>16</sup>. Then, in August—following the sinking of the South Korean patrol vessel in March—a visit to North Korea by Wu Dawei, Chinese representative to the Six-Party Talks,

---

<sup>16</sup> The memorandum of April 21 explains the validity of North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons and the need to conclude a peace accord. *Korean News*, Korean-language electronic version, April 21, 2010 (<http://www.kcna.co.jp/today-rodong/rodong.htm>); accessed on January 24, 2011.

resulted in Pyongyang's agreement to resume the Six-Party Talks<sup>17</sup>. Entering 2011, the New Year's Joint Editorial of January mentioned the necessity of North-South exchange. This was followed by a North Korean call for multi-level North-South exchanges on January 5 and, later, a proposal for talks by working-level military officers of both sides. Accordingly, Pyongyang began making serious efforts toward restarting North-South exchanges from the beginning of 2011. However, it remains to be seen whether discussions concerning the North Korea problem will progress smoothly.

This paper has pointed out that North Korea's continued pursuit of nuclear weapons is tied to its reunification policy. Pyongyang's military logic toward reunification—which supersedes its international relations in Northeast Asia, and particularly North-South relations, China-North Korea relations, and US-North Korea relations—can be found here. So then, what factors lie behind North Korea's maintaining a reunification-oriented military strategy in which it engages in dialogue with Seoul but remains capable of reunifying the Korean Peninsula with surprise attack tactics, as it also seeks to avoid a full-scale war with the US by possessing nuclear weapons?

First, there is the problem of how North Korea views South Korean society. On January 21, 2011, North Korea's *Democratic Korea* reported that “the people of Korea should join hands and not proceed on a path to confrontation by conspiring with external forces.” To achieve a breakthrough in military tensions, it proposed that Seoul should engage in mutual and multi-level dialogue with Pyongyang, rather than reinforce its military cooperation with the United States. *Democratic Korea* further stated that North-South exchanges are more important than the US-South Korea alliance<sup>18</sup>. The New Year's Joint Editorial of January 2011 indicated Pyongyang was shifting toward a more dialogue-oriented posture in the wake of its provocations on the Korean Peninsula in 2010, and the editorial was followed by a proposal for North-South dialogue at various levels, including between national assemblies and working-level military officers. However, the *Democratic Korea* article provides a more fleshed-out view. It suggests that, within its South Korea policy, Pyongyang is calculating that “even amid increasing tensions, North Korea

<sup>17</sup> *News From Korean Central News Agency of DPRK*, August 20, 2010 (<http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-k.htm>); accessed on January 24, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Presented in *Choson Sinbo*, Japanese-language electronic version, January 26, 2011 (<http://www.1korea-np.co.jp/sinboj>); accessed February 4, 2011.

can foster a climate in which South Koreans will come to realize the importance of North-South dialogue.” Following North-South military clashes, more and more articles reporting on South Koreans’ criticisms of their government have been appearing in the WPK’s official news organ and other sources in North Korea. Thus, it is apparent that North Korea is paying attention to the fact that increasing numbers of South Koreans support dialogue even amid inter-Korea tensions. On May 20, 2010, the international Joint Civilian-Military Investigation Group released its mid-term report on the sinking of the South Korean patrol vessel. In the report, the group determined that the sinking was caused by a North Korean heavy-weight torpedo. Immediately after the report’s release, South Korea held nationwide local elections that resulted in a victory for the opposition party. This result was partly attributable to the fact that many voters supported the opposition party’s criticism that “North Korea was instigating military provocations because Seoul was pressing Pyongyang too hard.” North Korea most likely knows that its military provocations will not lead South Korea to take a retaliatory course.

Second, there is the issue of China’s stance. Since 2009, China has had issue with North Korea’s hard-line military stance, including its testing of missiles and nuclear weapons and limited military attacks against South Korea. However, at such times, China has opposed sanctions on North Korea and placed emphasis on preventing recurrence of war. Following the sinking of the South Korean patrol vessel in March 2010, China opposed sanctions against North Korea that were being discussed in the UN Security Council; instead, its view was that lines of communication should be kept open to avoid a flare-up of hostilities. In response, North Korea made clear its intention to return to the Six-Party Talks, which Beijing wished to see restarted. A North Korean mission to China agreed to a restart of the Six-Party Talks in or around mid-October 2010<sup>19</sup>. Since the spring of 2010, China and North Korea have shared the same posture regarding the Six-Party Talks; indeed, immediately following the North’s attack on Yeonpyeong Island on November 23, China’s special representative to the Six-Party Talks proposed the holding of a meeting to lay the groundwork for the talks at a news conference in Beijing. China and North Korea agree that restarting the Six-Party Talks is more important than holding meetings to discuss the reasons for inter-Korean military tensions. This stance by China is likely the basis for Pyongyang’s view that Beijing

---

<sup>19</sup> *Choson Sinbo*, Japanese-language electronic version, October 20, 2010 (<http://www.1korea-np.co.jp/sinboj>); accessed on January 24, 2011.

will not implement policies that isolate North Korea in response to its nuclear weapons development and military actions.

Third, there is North Korea's view that its nuclear weapons development and building of a powerful military are undertakings that extend beyond single generations. On October 9, 2010, Yang Hyong-sop, Vice-President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, made the following statement at a political gathering for the WPK's 65th anniversary: "The immortal guidance given by the Great Leader and Revered General in building the Party must continue to shine over the generations."<sup>20</sup> This statement was made at a WPK event occurring after Kim Jong-un's appointment as Vice-Chairman of the WPK's Central Military Commission. "Guidance in building the Party" includes the development of weapons of mass destruction, which is an important program of the NDC, the body that oversees the military of the WPK: the KPA. In other words, North Korea is saying that, even if its leaders change, there are internal reasons that compel the new leader to continue nuclear weapons tests, construction of light-water reactors, uranium enrichment, and improvement of missile capabilities that had been directed by his predecessors. Consequently, the completion of projects that Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il did not complete will likely be a condition for ensuring their successor's legitimacy.

And fourth is North Korea's recent pursuit of technical innovation through international exchanges. Reports following the sinking of the South Korean patrol vessel in March 2010 made it clear that North Korea had exported submarines to Iran<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, active military exchanges took place between Beijing and Pyongyang during 2010, which marked the 60th anniversary of the People's Volunteer Army entry into the Korean War. On the heels of a WPK Conference held following two visits to China by General Secretary Kim Jong-il, a Chinese Communist Party mission (led by Secretary Zhou Yongkang) visited Pyongyang on October 10 for talks with Kim Jong-il. These talks led to the signing of an agreement for economic and technical cooperation. After the agreement was formalized, General Zhou Yongkang observed a KPA military review from the VIP platform. Soon after, on October 23, a Chinese military mission that included General Guo Boxiong, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, visited

<sup>20</sup> *Korean News*, Korean-language electronic version, October 10, 2010 (<http://www.kena.co.jp/index-k.htm>); accessed on January 24, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, June 10, 2010.

North Korea.

As for North Korea's relationship with Myanmar, diplomatic relations between the two countries, which had been severed since the 1980s, began showing signs of improvement when Myanmar made some regime changes. It has become clear that Pyongyang had pledged military assistance to Myanmar since even before the two sides' establishment of diplomatic ties<sup>22</sup>.

In the past, North Korea has built cooperative relationships in not only economic but also military fields with such countries as Myanmar, Iran, Yemen, Syria, Pakistan, China, and Russia. The technologies North Korea needs to produce WMDs likely include alloys for missile manufacture, solid fuel technologies, three-stage rocket separation technologies, and guidance technologies. The degree to which these technologies are available in the international community is often unclear. If it is considered that Pyongyang has actively pursued technical cooperation with various countries, then is it not reasonable to conclude that North Korea sees more conditions favoring continuance of WMD development rather than its abandonment in the face of technical bottlenecks?

As was described above, North Korea realized the "role of nuclear weapons" on the Korean Peninsula in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War, and its nuclear ambitions were later kindled when the Cold War structure began to change. As the Cold War drew to an end, North Korea felt pressure to raise its stake in its own national defense, and this led to its development of nuclear weapons from the early 1990s. Since then, it has become apparent that Pyongyang is continuing its WMD program while cementing a nuclear weapons-oriented military strategy and taking of advantage of various circumstances that surround it.

At the same time, North Korea's hard-line stance against South Korea in the area of conventional forces is likely based on the following assumption: "North Korea will soon complete its nuclear deterrent, and when it fully develops its intercontinental ballistic missiles, it will be able to stop US military intervention on the Korean Peninsula. At the time that this calculation becomes valid, North Korea will either negotiate with South Korea or go to war with it." Thus, Pyongyang is preparing for both war and peace with an eye to reunification. It is maintaining a strategy of "avoiding full-scale war with the US, continuing exchanges with Seoul, and ultimately, when US forces are no longer stationed in the South, casting

<sup>22</sup> Aung Lynn Htut, "The Burma-North Korea Axis," *International Herald Tribune*, June 18, 2010 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/19/>); accessed on February 4, 2011.

aside international interference and reunifying the peninsula under Pyongyang's leadership, even with the obsolete KPA." And it is precisely because of this strategy that Pyongyang is pressing for normalization of US-North Korea relations while simultaneously setting the US military's withdrawal from South Korea as the cornerstone of its policy.

Certainly, there are many uncertainties in play here. Will reunification be realized through North-South talks? Or will reunification will come as a result of armed clash between the two Koreas. The answer will depend on how South Korean forces respond, how the US-South Korea alliance functions, and how the US's efforts to contain the situation succeed. However, if, in North Korea's estimation, this scenario will make it possible to reunify the peninsula under Pyongyang's leadership, then in all likelihood it is the only scenario that the North is considering.

North Korea's strategy of reunifying the peninsula while avoiding conflict with the US and international interference follows the same line as the "autonomous, peaceful unification" espoused by Kim Il-sung and represents a goal pursued by Pyongyang since the country's birth in 1948. Accordingly, whenever Pyongyang explains the significance of its nuclear ambitions, it invariably harks back to its experience during the Korean War. The recent military tensions on the Korean Peninsula tell us that military clashes can happen on the peninsula at any time. They also tell us that there has been no change in the basic structure of North Korea's Korean Peninsula strategy over the past 60 years.

North Korea knows that if it attacks South Korean patrol vessels or shells South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island, its actions will result in a stronger US-South Korea alliance and strengthened US-South Korea-Japan ties. It also certainly knows that its reputation in the international community will suffer and that economic sanctions against it will not be relaxed. Regardless, Pyongyang has continued executing limited military attacks against South Korea. This is because its WMD program and actions by its conventional forces have high priority in Pyongyang's policy of not only obtaining diplomatic bargaining chips but also achieving the higher cause of reunification—in other words, Pyongyang pursues such behavior because it is in line with its military logic.

North Korea's prime concern is "regime survival." It believes that there will be no reunification if the regime collapses. However, it is important to consider that an element of Pyongyang's desire for "regime survival" is "reunification by liberating

the southern half of the Korean Peninsula.” North Korea—which is continuing its nuclear program while pursuing its traditional policy of autonomous, peaceful unification—is developing nuclear weapons as part of a long-term and historically based strategy that looks beyond “bargaining chips.”

## **Conclusion**

North Korea maintains a military strategy that is centered on nuclear weapons, and it is using this strategy as the basis for its diplomacy with the US and China, North-South dialogue, and military buildup. Since April 2009, it has conducted a series of actions that fit into this picture, among them missile tests, nuclear tests, the attack on a South Korean patrol vessel, the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, and disclosure of a plan to construct a light-water reactor. All of these actions were interrelated and tied to internal circumstances in North Korea.

North Korea’s leadership believes that a scenario in which Pyongyang “achieves reunification by preventing US intervention through possession of nuclear weapons” is possible, and therefore we are unlikely to see any change in Pyongyang’s policy. Pyongyang will not abandon its nuclear weapons so long as it sets “autonomous, peaceful unification” as its goal, and consequently it will almost certainly attempt to develop and possess WMDs through various means even under its next leader. This goal will also doubtless spur Pyongyang to import WMD technology from abroad.

Since its birth as a nation, North Korea has maintained a consistent strategy regardless of changes in its external environment, including fluctuations in the US military’s involvement on the Korean Peninsula, China and Russia’s relationships with the two Koreas, and Seoul’s North Korea policy. Behind this consistency is a reunification-oriented military strategy that is centered on nuclear weapons. Looking forward, it will be important to carefully observe North Korea’s military movements, diplomatic policy, and domestic developments, while bearing in mind its strategy that is a product of its post-foundation experiences. (February 5, 2011)