

Coercive Diplomacy for Political Objective: North Korea Threatened the Moon Jae-in Administration of South Korea*

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Abstract

Coercion, or coercive diplomacy, is the strategy of persuading an opponent to move in a desired direction by threatening to inflict pain. This strategy is used in interstate relations, where effective threats are not always those directed at national interests such as territory or the lives of the population. This is because coercion does not achieve its objectives through military conflict. Instead, its direct target is the civilian leadership—the actors in domestic politics. For civilian leaders with political power who are targeted by coercion, the fear of losing their political advantage over domestic competitors may be a more decisive factor in conceding to the coercer's demands than national interests. Indeed, North Korea was able to successfully use coercive diplomacy against South Korea precisely because the Moon Jae-in administration's advantage over its domestic competitors depended on stable relations with North Korea. North Korea then took the opportunity offered by coercive diplomacy to prove its superiority to liberal democracy by denouncing South Korea's continued "flunkeyism" (*sadaejui*) toward the United States. The survival strategy of the North Korean regime is what incentivizes it to continue engaging in coercive diplomacy.

Introduction¹

Coercion (or compellence) is the use of military force not to destroy a target's forces, but to persuade the target to move in a desired direction by threatening to inflict pain of some kind. Alexander George and others, for example, have defined the concept of coercive diplomacy as foreign policy

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¹ This paper's account of North Korea to explain the Moon Jae-in administration's stance toward the U.S.-South Korea working group and its political response to tensions at the Northern Limit Line overlaps with the discussion of South Korea in Watanabe Takeshi, "Mun Jein Seiken no Ikōki Seigi ni yoru Kankoku Kokubō no Seijika [The Politicization of South Korea's National Defense by the Transitional Justice of the Moon Jae-in Administration]," in *Taikokukan Kyōsō no Jidai' no Chōsenhantō to Chitsujo no Yukue* [The Korean Peninsula and the Future of the Peninsular Order in an 'Era of Great Power Competition'] (The Japan Institute of International Affairs, 2021), pp. 138–141. This paper captures those points from the perspective of the North Korean side. The sequence of events mentioned in this paper was also used to write Chapter 3 of the *East Asian Strategic Review 2021*, edited by the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS, 2021).

that employs such actions to force an adversary to behave as desired.² The concept of coercive diplomacy can contribute to our understanding of important aspects of North Korea's actions.

Since coercion is not premised on military conflict, its direct target is not the military, but the civilian leadership.³ The more critical the object the coercer threatens to destroy is to the civilian leadership of the target country, the greater the likelihood that the target country will give in to coercion. And because civilian leaders are subject to domestic political competition, coercion tends to be more successful if the coercer holds as hostage the political worth that the civilian leaders have over their domestic competitors. Although discussions on coercion generally focus on the national interests at stake, political worth is of interest to specific forces within a state and does not necessarily coincide with national interests such as territory or the lives of the population.

One instance that illustrates the characteristics typical of coercion was the tensions caused by North Korea in 2020. As this paper will show, what North Korea did to the Moon Jae-in administration was to threaten to destroy the stability of inter-Korean relations, a political asset that helped the administration maintain its advantage over domestic conservatives. Using this threat, North Korea tried to stop the Moon Jae-in administration from coordinating closely with the United States through a working group on its policy toward the North. This falls under the category of coercive diplomacy, in which threats are used to induce changes in ongoing developments.⁴

First, in early June 2020, North Korea stated that there had been South Korean violations of the Panmunjeom Declaration (April 27, 2018) and that it had the option of abrogating the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjeom Declaration in the Military Domain (signed on September 19, 2018) if the violations were not corrected.⁵ We can read from President Moon Jae-in's speech at the end of the month that he viewed the stability of inter-Korean military relations from the perspective of domestic politics. In this speech, he stated that the armistice of the Korean War must be turned into the formal end of the war to unify ideologies within South Korea.⁶

Before tensions erupted, a little more than six months after the military agreement was signed, President Moon Jae-in had claimed that "ideological stigma" in South Korea was created by pro-Japanese collaborators (those who the president's camp sees as having later formed a conservative faction) to suppress independence activists (from whom progressive forces in the president's camp claim to have inherited the spirit of the independence movement), and that military confrontation with North Korea must be resolved in order to eliminate this hostility.⁷ In other words, in President Moon Jae-in's view, conservatives had the upper hand because they were using

² Paul Gordon Lauren, Gordon Craig, and Alexander George, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Challenges of Our Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4th ed., pp. 200–201; *Force and Statecraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 6th ed., pp. 217–219.

³ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 22.

⁴ Alexander George, "Coercive Diplomacy: Definition and Characteristics," Alexander George and William E. Simons eds., *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1994) 2nd ed., p.7; Lauren, Craig, and George, *Force and Statecraft*, 4th ed., p. 200.

⁵ KCNA, June 4, 2020.

⁶ Blue House, "6.25 chongjeng je 70 chunhyong kinyomsa [Korean War 70th Anniversary Commemoration Address]," June 25, 2020.

⁷ Office of the President of the Republic of Korea, Moon Jae-in Daetongryong Yeonseol Munjip: Ulinun Hamkke Jalsalaya Hamnida [Speeches of President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea: We Must Live Well Together] Volume 2, Part 2 (Office of the President, 2019), pp. 256–263.

military confrontation between the North and South to create “ideological” opposition, and ending the war could deprive them of that advantage. By threatening the Moon Jae-in administration with abrogation of the military agreement, North Korea was essentially threatening to destroy the stability of inter-Korean relations, the route for the administration to gain an advantage in domestic politics. In response, the Moon Jae-in administration reduced coordination through the U.S.-South Korea working group in accordance with North Korea’s demands.

What North Korea was threatening to destroy through coercive diplomacy in this instance was not, as realism would predict, national interests unrelated to domestic politics. North Korea was using its military power against the political interests of the Moon Jae-in administration, a specific force within South Korea, rather than against the interests of South Korea as a whole.

Here, North Korea acted more as an internal entity intervening in political competition than as a force external to the target country. Underlying this is the fact that North and South Korea have not abandoned their common identity as one nation. North Korea’s criticism of the working group took the form of demands for South Korea to correct its “flunkeyism” (*sadaejuui*, a pejorative Korean term which refers to a subservient attitude toward great powers), and these demands were linked to actions that would make the military, the Korean People’s Army (KPA), reconfirm that North Korea, not South Korea, represented the *juche* (self-reliance) of the nation. Through coercive diplomacy, North Korea emphasized the issue of autonomy, which differed from South Korea’s economic success, and demonstrated its superiority in the rivalry between regimes by compelling South Korea to rectify its subservience to the United States. Coercive diplomacy helps North Korea to maintain political control over the military, preventing it from choosing a liberal democratic system. In this case, the necessity of regime survival incentivizes North Korea to continue engaging in coercive diplomacy.

1. Coercion Achieves Results

In June 2020, North Korea said it would have the General Staff of the KPA review plans for military action against South Korea, but later that month it announced that it would suspend the military action plans against the South. Some may see this as the end of a tense situation. However, for coercion to achieve its objectives through the threat of destruction rather than through the destruction of a target by military action, the destructive act must be suspended. Suspending a destructive act amounts to a continuation of the threat.

Thomas Schelling described the concept of compellence as making an adversary take a desired action through the fear of danger, rather than by brute force. He distinguished it from conventional military action in which the objective is to defeat an adversary’s armed forces. As long as the adversary fears potential destruction, the threatened destructive act is suspended, and because the threat remains, it exerts power to move the adversary.⁸

If we view North Korea’s withholding of military action in terms of this concept of coercion, then we will see that North Korea has only reached one phase in accomplishing its plan. North Korea threatened the Moon Jae-in administration, saying that the option of escalation was on hold, and pressured the administration to act according to its demands. Before escalating the situation further, North Korea stopped for a moment to see what its adversary would do. This is one method

⁸ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, pp. 2–3.

of effective coercion, as mentioned by George and others.⁹ This course of action places the target country in a constant state of anxiety that the threat of destruction may be carried out, and forces the target's policymakers to consider their response to the coercer's demands.

George also discussed other issues that may affect whether coercion succeeds or fails, such as what motivates a target country to reject coercion. For a target country, a demand to stop what it is doing is easier to accept than a demand to give up what it has already accomplished.¹⁰ Ultimately, George defined coercive diplomacy as "defensive" coercion, that is, efforts to persuade the target to stop an action in progress, as opposed to "offensive" coercion, wherein blackmail strategies are employed to persuade the target to give up what it has already accomplished.¹¹ This classification underscores differences in the likelihood of coercion's success, according to George's view.

As will be discussed below, North Korea's actions were aimed at stopping South Korea's ongoing talks with the United States, namely, the U.S.-South Korea working group. Therefore, according to George's definition, it constitutes defensive coercion and coercive diplomacy, not blackmail. An attempt at offensive coercion by North Korea to eliminate already-established components of the U.S.-South Korea alliance, such as a total withdrawal of U.S. forces in South Korea, on the other hand, would be difficult for any South Korean regime to accept in the near future. The working group that North Korea demanded to be abolished was jointly organized by U.S. and South Korean chief representatives on North Korean affairs following the 2018 inter-Korean summit. It included the South Korean Ministry of Unification and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was South Korea's attempt to coordinate with the United States regarding future policy on North Korea. The fact that North Korea did not demand South Korea to eliminate established elements of the U.S.-South Korea alliance was likely a necessary condition for coercion to be successful.

However, the discussion in this paper will not rely entirely on George's definition of coercive diplomacy. This is because the fact that North Korea's demand was defensive, as George puts it, is unlikely to have been the decisive reason that the coercion was effective. The argument for distinguishing coercive diplomacy from blackmail only makes sense if the fact that the coercion is defensive is critical to its success. And even in explanations involving George himself, there are instances where he states that coercive diplomacy can be both offensive and defensive.¹² Thus, the definition that coercive diplomacy must be defensive is not fixed, but rather depends largely on the purpose of the discussion and on the case being discussed.

Ultimately, the decisive reason that the Moon Jae-in administration gave in to coercion was that North Korea had threatened to destroy inter-Korean relations, which had become an asset to the administration in domestic politics. While the outcome of coercive diplomacy is generally

⁹ Alexander George, "Theory and Practice," George and Simons eds., *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), 2nd ed., p. 18; Lauren, Craig, and George, *Force and Statecraft*, 4th ed., p. 202.

¹⁰ Alexander George, "The Development of Doctrine and Strategy," Alexander George, David Hall, and William Simons, *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy: Laos, Cuba, Vietnam*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), pp. 22–23.

¹¹ George, "Coercive Diplomacy: Definition and Characteristics," p. 7.

¹² Lauren, Craig, and George, *Force and Statecraft*, 4th ed., p. 200.

thought to be contingent on the certainty that military force may be used,¹³ in this instance, North Korea did not base its threat on the use of military force. This being the case, its direct target was not the military, but the civilian leaders who were key players in political competition. The outcome of the threat would in fact be determined through the political process within the target country to see which force stood to benefit from responding to the demand.¹⁴

What was at work in North Korea's coercive diplomacy with the Moon Jae-in administration was not the capacity for the direct destruction of people and the nation emphasized by Schelling.¹⁵ Rather than such interests of the nation as a whole, i.e., the national interest, North Korea used the threat to take away the interests of a particular domestic force, the Moon Jae-in administration, to great effect.

First, North Korea stated that South Korea had violated the Panmunjeom Declaration (April 27, 2018), which prohibits the "hostile acts" of "broadcasting through loudspeakers and distribution of leaflets," and threatened that if the violations were not corrected, it had the option of abrogating the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjeom Declaration in the Military Domain (September 19, 2018).¹⁶ North Korea's demands eventually shifted to correcting the "flunkeyism" (a subservient attitude toward great powers) demonstrated by South Korea in continuing to coordinate with the United States on its policy toward the North and sustain ROK-U.S. combined exercises.¹⁷ This move strongly suggests that preventing the spread of anti-North leaflets was not in itself North Korea's main objective. North Korea was attempting to get South Korea to dial back the actions it was taking as an ally of the United States.

From several years back, North Korea had been focusing on taking issue with "broadcasting through loudspeakers and distribution of leaflets" during negotiations with South Korea and using it as a starting point to create conditions conducive to coercive diplomacy. As will be explained below, the wording of the Panmunjeom Declaration regarding the distribution of leaflets can be used as a basis for asserting the existence of an exchange relationship in which South Korea must comply with demands if it wants North Korea to abstain from military action. North Korea's plan to assert that this exchange relationship exists dates back to at least 2015. This wording in the Panmunjeom Declaration is very similar to what North Korea wanted, but South Korea rejected, in the Joint Press Statement by the South and North issued in August 2015 to resolve the tensions between the North and South that had arisen along the Military Demarcation Line (MDL).

The joint press statement with South Korea issued by North Korea at the end of the crisis along the MDL stated that when South Korea stopped "all loudspeaker propaganda broadcasts," North Korea would "lift the semi-war state at that time" (August 25, 2015). This meant that North Korea would stop provoking a military crisis in exchange for the suspension of "loudspeaker propaganda broadcasts" by South Korea. However, the phrase "at that time," which creates such

¹³ Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) pp. 45–46; Robert Art and Kelly Greenhill, "Coercion: An Analytical Overview," Kelly Greenhill and Peter Krause eds., *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 4.

¹⁴ Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, *The Dynamics of Coercion: American Foreign Policy and the Limits of Military Might*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 48–49.

¹⁵ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 22.

¹⁶ KCNA, June 4, 2020.

¹⁷ KCNA, June 17, 2020.

an exchange relationship, was not included in the joint press statement released by the South Korean side.¹⁸ If North Korea's intention was to link military action with the political objective of making South Korea behave as desired, the South Korean side, then under the Park Geun-hye administration, did not accept it.

In contrast, the 2018 Panmunjeom Declaration contains wording that North Korea can use to argue that the provocation of military tension can only be avoided if South Korea abides by the prohibition against "broadcasting through loudspeakers distribution of leaflets." This is because the Declaration explicitly identifies loudspeaker broadcasting and leaflet distribution as acts that are the "source of military tension and conflict" (according to Article 2.1 of the Panmunjeom Declaration, it is the obligation of both sides to cease the broadcasting through loudspeakers and distribution of leaflets in order to eliminate the source of military tension and conflict).¹⁹ In fact, two years after the inter-Korean summit, North Korea issued a threat that it was considering destructive acts against South Korea as punishment for violating "the articles of the Panmunjeom Declaration and the agreement in the military field in which both sides agreed to ban all hostile acts, including leaflet-scattering" (June 4, 2020).

In this statement, North Korea indicated that if the "hostile acts" were not corrected, it had the option to shut down the inter-Korean joint liaison office (established in September 2018) or to abrogate the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjeom Declaration in the Military Domain, and thus attempted to make South Korea, which wanted to avoid such consequences, accede to its demands.²⁰ Soon after, North Korea emphasized its intention to take military action, saying it would have its military's general staff consider the action (June 13),²¹ and followed this up by bombing the inter-Korean joint liaison office (June 16).²²

While the dramatic images of destruction may have lent credibility to the threat, the act itself did not actually contribute to a military victory over South Korea. Rather, it was a demonstration that North Korea was withholding the option of inflicting pain on policymakers behind the military. The use of such force is typically seen as a means of ensuring the effectiveness of coercive diplomacy.²³ And indeed, when North Korean chairman Kim Jong-un announced (on June 23) that he would "suspend plans for military action against the South,"²⁴ South Korean's Moon Jae-in administration began to discuss downgrading cooperation in the U.S.-South Korea alliance.

The on-hold status of the military action plan also maximized the threat's effectiveness. First of all, the on-hold decision was made at a "preliminary meeting" for the Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK).²⁵ This unusual Central Military Commission "preliminary meeting" informed the target country that a plenary session may be held to decide on military action, underscoring the pending nature of said option. In addition, the on-

¹⁸ Blue House, "Nambug Gowi Danggugja Jeobchog Gongdong Bodomun [Joint Press Release from the Inter-Korean High-Level Meeting]," August 25, 2015; *Rodong Sinmun*, August 25, 2015.

¹⁹ National Institute for Defense Studies (ed.), *East Asian Strategic Review 2019* (National Institute for Defense Studies, 2019) pp. 93–95.

²⁰ KCNA, June 4, 2020.

²¹ KCNA, June 13, 2020.

²² KCNA, June 17, 2020.

²³ George, "The Development of Doctrine and Strategy," p. 18.

²⁴ KCNA, June 24, 2020.

²⁵ KCNA, June 24, 2020.

hold announcement was made just before the 70th Anniversary of the Korean War on June 25. North Korea suspended military action at a time when South Korea was more likely to state its position regarding its alliance with the United States, i.e., its “flunkeyism.” In his speech on this anniversary, President Moon Jae-in remarked that “while our people suffered the pains of the War, there were some countries that actually benefited from heightened demand during that war.”²⁶ Such a statement indicates none other than a negative attitude toward Japan’s function as a rear base supporting U.S. and South Korean military operations. Put another way, the statement holds relevance to the criticism of South Korean “flunkeyism,” that is, dependence on the U.S.-South Korea alliance.

Less than a week later, a senior official in the Moon Jae-in administration expressed the desire to reduce the functions of the U.S.-South Korea working group in response to criticism from North Korea that the South was subjecting the Korean nation to flunkeyism.²⁷ Moon Chung-in, special security advisor of President Moon Jae-in, criticized the United States for stalling inter-Korean cooperation on “issues that are not subject to sanctions” through the working group.²⁸ Around the same time, Lee In-young, the former parliamentary leader of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea, who was nominated Minister of Unification by President Moon Jae-in, also strongly suggested that South Korea intended to separate from the working group agenda those areas in which it could make its own decisions, i.e., narrow the scope of cooperation with the United States regarding its policy on the North.²⁹

Immediately after taking office, Minister of Unification Lee In-young invited over the U.S. ambassador to South Korea and noted that there were “positive and negative assessments of the working group.” After conveying South Korea’s “negative assessments” of coordination with the United States, Minister Lee In-young stated that the working group must “readjust and rearrange” its functions so that it could play a “role in promoting the development of inter-Korean relations and the consolidation of peace.”³⁰ Logically, this means that the minister of unification directly told the U.S. ambassador that “the development of inter-Korean relations and the consolidation of peace” would not succeed if South Korea and the United States continued to work in tandem as they had in the past. In fact, the minister of unification made clear to the U.S. ambassador on this occasion that South Korea would proceed to do “what it could do on its own” that need not be discussed with the United States separately from the working group.³¹

2. Effects of Holding Political Interests Hostage

In President Moon Jae-in’s speech on the anniversary of the Korean War, which, as noted above,

²⁶ Blue House, “Korean War 70th Anniversary Commemoration Address,” June 25, 2020.

²⁷ *Rodong Sinmun*, June 17, 2020.

²⁸ *Yonhap News*, July 1, 2020.

²⁹ *Dong-a Ilbo*, July 7, 2020; *Chosun Ilbo*, July 7, 2020; Office of the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, “Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee (Provisional Minutes),” 280th National Assembly (Provisional Session), July 23, 2020, p. 15.

³⁰ Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea, ““Tongilbujanggwan Hanmiuokinggurupur Geobuhaeda” nun Gosun Sasili Animnida: Munhwa Ilbo 8.19 ja Bodoe Daehan Seolmyeong [It Is Not True That the ‘Minister of Unification Rejected the U.S.-South Korea Working Group’: Statement Regarding a Munhwa Ilbo Article Dated August 19],” August 19, 2020.

³¹ Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea, “이인영 통일부 장관, 해리 해리스 주한 미국대사 접견 [Minister of Unification Lee In-young Meets with U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris],” August 18, 2020.

was an opportunity for him to express his reaction to Kim Jong-un's threat, i.e., suspending military action, he also stated that South Korea's GDP was more than 50 times that of North Korea and that "the two Koreas' competition over political and economic systems already ended a long time ago."³² North Korea, however, had been acting as though it saw South Korea as a competitor that it must bring to its knees (i.e., move by coercion). By demonstrating that it had the option to provoke a crisis that South Korea's political leaders would evade, North Korea managed to strengthen the argument within the South Korean government for greater autonomy from the United States. The trend based on this history shows that instead of South Korea, it was North Korea, which is supposed to have an economy that is only one-fiftieth that of the South, that has been moving its opponent in its desired direction.

North Korea is able to move South Korea, an economic powerhouse, because it has been employing its military power with the objective of provoking political motives within the South, rather than engaging in physical confrontation through all-out military conflict.

Its target, South Korea's Moon Jae-in administration, has also insisted on correcting the injustices created under the leadership of "pro-Japanese" conservatives, which are reflected in the way South Korea has strongly relied on the U.S.-South Korea alliance to confront North Korea. The fact that North Korea demanded South Korea to correct its "flunkeyism," which was easily accepted by the Moon Jae-in administration, strongly suggests that North Korea had an accurate idea of its adversary, i.e., it understood what motivated the other country's leaders, which has been identified as a success factor in coercive diplomacy.³³

Issues surrounding military confidence-building at sea are thought to have greatly helped North Korea understand the Moon Jae-in administration's political motives in inter-Korean relations. In his speech on March 1, 2019 (the 100th anniversary of the independence movement against Japanese colonial rule), the year before North Korea engaged in coercive diplomacy, President Moon Jae-in continued to raise the longstanding issue of "wiping out the vestiges of pro-Japanese collaborators," reinforcing the historical understanding that "pro-Japanese" conservatives had suppressed "independence activists" whom they considered to be on the side of North Korea, which led to "ideological" hostility. The president then linked "ideological" hostility to his policy toward the North by referring to it as "the 38th parallel drawn through our minds," and emphasized the significance of establishing a joint fishing zone in the waters around the Northern Limit Line (NLL).³⁴ For this to happen, the South Korean military would have to change its posture of not demarcating a joint fishing zone for fear of relativizing the NLL,³⁵ which it considers to be a maritime boundary.³⁶

President Moon Jae-in's speech on March 1 reveals that he saw dialing back the military's resistance on the NLL issue as going hand-in-hand with eliminating the "pro-Japanese" conservative "ideology" of confrontation with North Korea. Following this logic, the agreement to ease tensions

³² Blue House, "Korean War 70th Anniversary Commemoration Address," June 25, 2020.

³³ Alexander George and William Simons, "Findings and Conclusions," George and Simons eds., *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1994) 2nd ed., pp. 288–291.

³⁴ Office of the President of the Republic of Korea, Speeches of President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea: We Must Live Well Together, Volume 2, Part 2 (Office of the President, 2019), pp. 256–263.

³⁵ National Institute for Defense Studies (ed.), *East Asian Strategic Review 2019*, pp. 93–94.

³⁶ Office of the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, *Minutes of the Plenary Session of the National Assembly*, October 1, 2018, pp. 58–59.

at the NLL was a political asset to President Moon Jae-in that gave him an edge over conservatives in domestic politics. A little more than a year later, on June 4, 2020, the agreement that North Korea threatened to abrogate because of “hostile acts” was precisely this military agreement to ease tensions by establishing a joint fishing zone and peaceful waters around the NLL.

President Moon Jae-in’s reaction to Kim Jong-un’s subsequent June 23 show of suspending the option of military action was also an attempt to protect his domestic political assets. In his speech on June 25, President Moon Jae-in brought up “putting an end to the War” (i.e., the end of the Korean War armistice), which the North could consider a factor facilitating the withdrawal of U.S. forces, and gave the same reason as in his “wiping out the vestiges of pro-Japanese collaborators” speech on March 1 of the previous year: the goal of unifying “ideologies” within South Korea.³⁷ Conversely, this means that if the Moon Jae-in administration did not make progress in ending the war and easing tensions with North Korea, it could lose the opportunity to unify “ideologies” and undermine the conservatives’ advantage.

President Moon Jae-in once claimed that a declaration to end the war would not affect the status of the United Nations Command and U.S. forces stationed in South Korea,³⁸ and thus the counterargument could be made that the president did not see ending the war as a response to North Korea’s demand for South Korea to correct its dependence on the United States. However, on the same day as the president’s speech, a research institute of North Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a report stating that the continued existence of the United Nations Command (whose commander is a U.S. Army general who concurrently serves as the commander of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command and the United States Forces Korea) was the reason that the armistice agreement could not be converted into a peace agreement in the past.³⁹ In North Korea’s view, the process from declaring the end of the war to reaching a peace agreement includes a significant weakening of the U.S. military presence in South Korea. And as noted above, in this speech, President Moon Jae-in also criticized Japan for being one of “some countries that actually benefited from heightened demand” during the Korean War as well as a munitions base for the U.S. military.

North Korea is consistent in its actions of holding South Korean domestic political assets hostage over the NLL issue as well. In his West Sea Defense Day address honoring the victims of the conflict with North Korea over the NLL, President Moon Jae-in stressed the achievement that “not a single armed conflict has occurred along the Northern Limit Line” since the signing of the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjeom Declaration in the Military Domain (March 27, 2020).⁴⁰ By the time the president made these remarks, however, North Korea had already expressed its intent to provoke a crisis involving armed conflict at the NLL. On November

³⁷ Blue House, “Korean War 70th Anniversary Commemoration Address,” June 25, 2020.

³⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, “Migug Fox News Supesyorripotu wa Intobyu [U.S. Fox News Special Interview],” September 28, 2018.

³⁹ Institute for Disarmament and Peace, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, “Migug Daechosun Jeogdaesi Jeongchaeg Cheolhoe nun Chosunbando e Pyonghwa Anjongnur Wihan Pilsulbulgagyeole Seongyeoljogeon [Withdrawal of U.S. Hostile Policy towards DPRK – Indispensable Prerequisite for Peace and Stability on Korean Peninsula],” June 25, 2020.

⁴⁰ Office of the President of the Republic of Korea, Moon Jae-in Daetongryong Yeonseol Munjip: Widaehan Kookmingwa Hamkke, Sagyerur Sondohanun Daehanminguke Kirur Yorgesumnida [Speeches of President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea: Together with Our Great People, We Will Open the Way for the Republic of Korea to Lead the World], Volume 3, Part 2 (Office of the President, 2020), p. 323.

23, 2019, under the inspection of Chairman Kim Jong-un, North Korea conducted coastal artillery firing into the Yellow Sea near the NLL (officially reported by the North on November 25),⁴¹ then had its vessel sail southward, crossing the NLL.⁴² The following day, November 28, it fired two Short-Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs) toward the Sea of Japan.⁴³ While even the South Korean military considered the coastal artillery fire to be a violation of the military agreement,⁴⁴ President Moon Jae-in, in contrast, emphasized that the developments in the waters around the NLL, including those at that time, demonstrated that an armed conflict had been avoided as a result of the agreement.

North Korea held as hostage the Moon Jae-in administration's emphasis on avoiding armed conflict. This behavior continued in the September 2020 incident. According to an announcement by the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff, on September 21, North Korea discovered a crew member of the South Korean Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries in the North's waters around the NLL, and conducted "an act of brutality by shooting at him and burning his body."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, two days after the incident, President Moon Jae-in reiterated in a speech to the UN General Assembly that South Korea was committed to declaring an end to the war with North Korea and opening the door to a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula (an international regime on the Korean Peninsula based on a peace agreement).⁴⁶ In fact, it was not until September 24, after President Moon Jae-in had delivered his speech at the UN, that the South Korean presidential office (Blue House) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff disclosed the incident and condemned North Korea. The Moon Jae-in administration explained that the reason for the delay in disclosure was that the incident occurred in waters that were near-impossible to witness from the South Korean side, so it took time to obtain reliable information.⁴⁷

President Moon Jae-in's reiteration of "declaring an end to the war" shortly after the incident was preceded by an exchange of letters between the leaders of North and South Korea that had taken place approximately two weeks earlier (on September 12, Chairman Kim Jong-un had replied to President Moon Jae-in's September 8 letter).⁴⁸ This means that the Moon Jae-in administration had been indicating to North Korea that it was increasingly motivated to ease tensions between North and South Korea, even after the incident. As will be discussed below, North Korea adopted a policy of exploiting these motives in its response to the Moon Jae-in administration, and as a result, the Blue House once again forced its military to back away from a confrontation with North Korea.

First, North Korea did not directly release the document that the United Front Department of

⁴¹ *Rodong Sinmun*, November 25, 2019; *Kookbang Ilbo*, November 27, 2019.

⁴² *Kookbang Ilbo*, November 28, 2019; *Kookbang Ilbo*, November 29, 2019.

⁴³ *Kookbang Ilbo*, November 29, 2019; Ministry of Defense, "2019 Nen no Kitachōsen ni yoru Hassha [North Korea's Launches in 2019]," December 3, 2019.

⁴⁴ *Kookbang Ilbo*, November 27, 2019.

⁴⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Republic of Korea, "Eoeobjidouwon Siljong Gwanlyeon Ibjang Balpyo [Announcement of Our Position on the Disappearance of Fisheries Instructor]," September 24, 2020.

⁴⁶ Blue House, "Je 75 cha Yuen Chonghoe Gijo Yeonseol [Keynote Address at the 75th Session of the UN General Assembly]," September 23, 2020.

⁴⁷ Blue House, "Kang Min-seok Daebyeon-in Seomyeon Beuliping [Written Briefing by Presidential Spokesperson Kang Min-seok]," September 28, 2020.

⁴⁸ Blue House, "Nambug Jeongsang Chinseo Gwanlyeon Suh Hoon Guggaanbosiljang Beuliping [Briefing by Director of National Security Office Suh Hoon on the Letters between the Leaders of North and South Korea]," September 25, 2020.

the Central Committee of the WPK had sent to the Blue House on September 25. The document, which accuses the South Korean military of one-sidedly describing the incident as “barbaric” without having any “evidence” and “without asking for [an] account of the crackdown process,” was read aloud by the Blue House.⁴⁹ After reading the criticism of the South Korean military by North Korea, its supposed adversary, the Moon Jae-in administration began distancing itself from the facts ascertained by the South Korean military and moving closer to the North Korean position.

Just the previous day, on the 24th, the Blue House had publicly stated that it “strongly condemns” the “shooting and killing our citizen and burning his body” as a violation of “international law and humanitarianism” and that “those responsible must be severely punished.”⁵⁰ This condemnation would have been impossible if the Blue House did not trust the information from the South Korean military, which had called it “an act of brutality.” However, after reading the accusations against its own military on behalf of North Korea, the Blue House explained on the 28th that it had proposed a “joint investigation” of the incident to North Korea because it would be “difficult” for South Korea to “determine the facts.”⁵¹ The Blue House would never take this position unless it assumed that the South Korean military’s grasp of the facts, which accused the North of “an act of brutality,” was mistaken, and that North Korea may have been correct.

The document from the United Front Department of the WPK Central Committee, which the Blue House read aloud on behalf of North Korea, also conveyed Chairman Kim Jong-un’s position that he felt “very sorry” for disappointing President Moon Jae-in and fellow countrymen in the South with the “awful incident.” The North Korean document, in wording that could be interpreted as an apology, hinted that it was offering the Moon Jae-in administration an opportunity to ease tensions and blamed only the South Korean military. The document was structured to demand that the South Korean military back down from its position on the NLL with the easing of tensions as an incentive.

The lure of this opportunity was accompanied by the threat that relations could be destroyed if South Korea did not comply with the demand. According to the letter to the Blue House from North Korea, the incident must not destroy the “relations of trust and respect” between North and South Korea. On the day that this document was read aloud, North Korea’s state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that South Korean vessels searching for the crew member who was shot dead had “intruded” into “our territorial water,” despite the “security measures” taken by the North to ensure that “relations of trust and respect” would not be harmed. This, the KCNA added, foreshadowed the outbreak of a new “awful incident.”⁵²

North Korea had threatened through news reports that it would trigger a new “incident” unless the South Korean military changed its actions regarding the NLL as a boundary, while simultaneously communicating that it would give the Moon Jae-in administration the “relations of trust and respect” it desires if it complied with the North’s demands. Shortly thereafter, Chairman Kim Jong-un gave a speech at the 75th anniversary of the foundation of the WPK on October 10,

⁴⁹ Blue House, “Bugcheug Tongjimun gwanlyeon Suh Hoon Guggaanbosiljang Beuliping [Briefing by Director of National Security Office Suh Hoon Regarding the Notice from North Korea],” September 25, 2020.

⁵⁰ Blue House, “Uli Eoeobjidowon Samang Gwanlyeon NSC Sang-im-wi Seongmyeong [Statement from the NSC Standing Committee on the Death of Our Fisheries Instructor],” September 25, 2020.

⁵¹ Blue House, “Written Briefing by Presidential Spokesperson Kang Min-seok,” September 28, 2020.

⁵² KCNA, September 25, 2020.

during which he expressed “hope [that] the day would come when the North and South take each other’s hand again.”⁵³ This is consistent with the North’s abovementioned strategy toward the South, which utilizes a combination of threats and incentives.

After the anniversary celebration, where the North displayed a new intercontinental ballistic missile and new SRBMs targeted at South Korean territory, the Moon Jae-in administration’s National Security Council stated that it would “take note” of North Korea’s proposal to “restore inter-Korean relations.” South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense also commented on Kim Jong-un’s speech, “taking note” of the North’s position that military force “will never be abused or used as a means for preemptive strike.”⁵⁴ However, Chairman Kim Jong-un’s statement was remarkably vague on the possibility of a preemptive strike. After stating his position that military force would not be used preemptively, he went on to say that if any force were to infringe upon the security of the state, he “will enlist all our most powerful offensive strength in advance to punish them.” The Ministry of National Defense’s behavior in releasing an assessment that drew the public’s attention only to the part of the statement that could be read as denying the possibility of a preemptive strike is also consistent with the administration’s strong motivation to improve inter-Korean relations. While responding to the Moon Jae-in administration’s political motives for improving relations, North Korea was also engaging in coercive diplomacy by threatening to hold the opportunity for improved relations hostage.

3. Military Power for Political Objectives: Incentives to Continue Coercive Diplomacy

North Korea’s coercive diplomacy was an attempt to threaten the interests of the Moon Jae-in administration as a political force in the South to move the administration to act. Assuming that this is the case, North Korea’s coercive diplomacy is driven by political goals rather than by the national interest as understood by realism, which is irrelevant to domestic politics. It also represents a political struggle that is unfolding between two regimes belonging to the same nation.

It is generally agreed that the competition between the two regimes on the Korean Peninsula ended with South Korea’s economic victory. This view was also expressed in the above-mentioned speech by President Moon Jae-in. However, this viewpoint sees the economy as the sole point of contention in the political contest to determine which regime is the legitimate representative of the nation, and is based on the specific case of the collapse of European socialism. In fact, North Korea has been asserting a completely different point of contention from the economy in coercive diplomacy targeted at members of the same people. It is important to note that North Korea’s criticism of the U.S.-South Korea working group took the form of accusing South Korea of flunkeyism. Correcting flunkeyism, i.e., achieving national autonomy, is a point of contention between the regimes that differs from the economy. North Korea was mobilizing its military in tandem with coercive diplomacy for the political objective of demonstrating its superiority in this area.

North Korea began to make similar accusations during a series of SRBM launches in March 2020, prior to its June 2020 threat to the Moon Jae-in administration to correct its flunkeyism. On March 3, the day after the first launch, Kim Yo-jong, first vice department director of the WPK

⁵³ *Rodong Sinmun*, October 10, 2020.

⁵⁴ *Kookbang Ilbo*, October 12, 2020.

Central Committee, stated that South Korea “has considered the alliance with the U.S. dearer than its own fellow countrymen,” and accused South Korea of not conducting ROK-U.S. joint exercises that month only out of consideration for COVID-19.⁵⁵

The expression “alliance with the U.S. dearer than its own fellow countrymen” disseminates the notion that South Korea’s legitimacy as a representative of the Korean nation is negated by its alliance with the United States. At the same time, it creates a political contrast that gives the impression that South Korea is betraying its agenda of national autonomy, while North Korea is pursuing it seriously. Engaging in such discourse would not be essential if the focus was only on North Korea’s conflict with ROK-U.S. combined forces, i.e., nonpolitical issues. The rejection of the South Korean regime for supposedly having betrayed national autonomy also goes hand-in-hand with political manipulation by North Korea to make its military believe that Kim Jong-un’s regime is the only legitimate option for the nation.

Indeed, the role of the KPA in the SRBM launches and subsequent coercive diplomacy against South Korea under “flunkeyism” is reminiscent of a method of control in which members of a professional organization are continuously mobilized for the political objective of fighting an unjust competitor, which is unrelated to the specialty of the organization. Although members engaged in a professional area do not start out affiliated with a particular political force, the continuous imposition of short-term political campaign objectives turns the professional group into a wing of that political force. It has been pointed out that Soviet revolutionary forces once made extensive use of this phenomenon as a tactic of political infiltration into organizations (building organizational weapons).⁵⁶ The series of SRBM launches was accompanied by political slogans that were necessary for such a plan.

First, the SRBM launch on March 2 was framed as defending “the socialist homeland,” designating non-socialist regimes as the adversary. In addition, the “honor to the long-range artillery sub-units of Kim Jong-un” was praised during the launch.⁵⁷ This reference to honor indicates that rather than defending the nation as a whole, the duty to serve Chairman Kim Jong-un constitutes the organization’s *raison d’être*, making even his opponents within socialism adversaries against whom the military units must fight.

In addition, during the launch on the 9th, Kim Jong-un made the People’s Army equate the national defense agenda of strengthening the immediate counterattack capability of the SRBM unit with the implementation of the “line of building the Juche-oriented revolutionary armed forces.”⁵⁸ This linked the attainment of the military’s professional goal of acquiring competence to the pursuit of the current regime’s political objective of *juche* (autonomy from the great powers, as opposed to flunkeyism). Since the late President Kim Il-sung (Kim Jong-un’s grandfather), the North Korean regime has rejected any forces that could serve as alternative leadership as being contrary to the *juche* of the nation.⁵⁹ Following the method of asserting political control over an

⁵⁵ KCNA, March 3, 2020.

⁵⁶ Philip Selznick, *The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik, Strategy and Tactics*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1952), p. 19.

⁵⁷ *Rodong Sinmun*, March 3, 2020.

⁵⁸ KCNA, March 10, 2020.

⁵⁹ Suzuki Masayuki, *Kitachōsen: Shakaishugi to Dentō no Kyōmei* [North Korea: Resonance of Socialism and Tradition] (University of Tokyo Press, 1992), pp. 59–62, 81, 96–100, 113–117.

organization described above, the political struggle of these specific forces had to be merged with the pursuit of professional objectives,⁶⁰ and North Korea was doing just that.

Finally, the SRBM launch on March 21 was conducted in the presence of Chairman Kim Jong-un in order to demonstrate to military leaders the precision-strike capability of the weapons to be delivered to the People's Army. The next day, the *Rodong Sinmun*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the WPK, published a photo of Kim Jong-un and other senior officials celebrating the successful launch and reported that the KPA commanding officers were deeply moved when they recalled the devotion and efforts made by Kim Jong-un for the development of "our-style powerful" weapons and the pride at the "Juche-oriented national defence science" and "self-supporting defence industry of our state."⁶¹

In order to affiliate a professional organization with a particular leader, one must not only set a neutral goal such as that of national autonomy, which almost no would disagree with, but must also instill the perception that the struggle toward that goal can only proceed under the *guidance* of this particular leader. Of the SRBM launches on March 2, 9, 21, and 29, the launches on the 2nd and 9th took the form of having Kim Jong-un "guiding" at the front, rather than inspecting the military as a third party. Even when Kim Jong-un attended the launch on the 21st, it was emphasized that he was at the center of the activities, leaving no doubt as to who the military was following in order to achieve results. The People's Army, which has been reminded by these SRBM launches that joining Kim Jong-un's struggle means defending national autonomy, would soon confront South Korea, a traitor who holds "the alliance with the U.S. dearer than its own fellow countrymen," in coercive diplomacy. This sequence of events is also strongly consistent with Soviet political infiltration tactics,⁶² in which the leader's opponents are decried as unjust groups that have defied noble goals, while the leader who has "unmasked" this truth is recognized as a hero by members of professional organizations (in this case, military personnel).

The use of coercive diplomacy in tandem with internal political control was also a replay of moves seen prior to the 2018 inter-Korean summit. North Korea's coercive diplomacy moves around the inauguration of the Moon Jae-in administration (May 2017) were all accompanied by attempts to exert political control over the military.

One attempt at coercive diplomacy at that time was the training of the Hwasong artillery units of the KPA Strategic Force. The KCNA reported that in the event of an attack on their territory, North Korean officers and soldiers were prepared to "fully annihilate the bases of aggression and provocation" with the nuclear warhead-equipped "Hwasong artillery." This part was not so much a statement of North Korea's determination to combat the armies of hostile nations as a threat to the civilian population—a threat that they would inflict pain on a densely populated city.⁶³

The KPA Strategic Force also announced on August 8 that it was examining plans for making "an enveloping fire at the areas around Guam." It stated that it was targeting "major military bases" on Guam, and thus appears to be intended as a counterforce strike to destroy the military capabilities of U.S. forces, but it also mentions the threat of "send[ing] a serious warning signal

⁶⁰ Selznick, *The Organizational Weapon*, p. 29.

⁶¹ *Rodong Sinmun*, March 22, 2020.

⁶² Selznick, *The Organizational Weapon*, p. 59.

⁶³ KCNA, March 7, 2017.

to the U.S.”⁶⁴ The fact that the Strategic Force deliberately announced their plans in advance and gave the other party time to respond demonstrates exactly the type of behavior seen in coercive diplomacy that George pointed out.⁶⁵ A few days later, Kim Jong-un visited the KPA Strategic Force, received a report on the implementation plan, and stated that he would “watch a little more” the conduct of the United States.⁶⁶

Reports of both of these acts of coercion in which Kim Jong-un was directly involved mentioned his statement that the “monolithic leadership system” and the “command and management system of the Supreme Commander” must be firmly established.⁶⁷ This term can be said to be a concept that places “monolithic leadership,” meaning the exclusion of alternative leadership within a liberal democratic or socialist system, in the context of military command and control.

Under Kim Jong-un’s guidance at the Dropping and Target-striking Contest of KPA Special Operation Forces and the combat flight contest among commanding officers of the KPA Air and Anti-Air Force held during the same period, the slogan was “Safeguard the Party Central Committee headed by the great Comrade Kim Jong Un at the cost of our lives.”⁶⁸ This slogan, which has been repeated since immediately after the succession, equates the duty of national defense with protecting Kim Jong-un.⁶⁹ North Korea, seeking to bring the liberal democratic United States and South Korea to their knees through nuclear and missile threats, was also working to complement political control over the military, creating a military that would only protect the regime with Kim Jong-un as its sole leader and eliminate U.S.-style systems.

Conclusion

In June 2020, when North Korean leader Kim Jong-un suspend the option of taking “military action” and destroying the results of the Panmunjeom Declaration (announced at the 2018 inter-Korean summit), the Moon Jae-in administration made moves toward autonomy and distanced itself from the United States, as per North Korea’s demands. North Korea demonstrated its power by blowing up the inter-Korean joint liaison office and based its demands on the political motives of its target, President Moon Jae-in.

This fits with the requirements to ensure the effectiveness of coercive diplomacy that George has pointed out,⁷⁰ except that it was North Korea’s holding hostage of the domestic political interests of a targeted civilian power that was the decisive factor in achieving its objectives. For the Moon Jae-in administration, the Panmunjeom Declaration and the military agreement to implement it were political assets that eliminated the “ideology” of the “pro-Japanese” conservative opposition in South Korea. North Korea effectively deployed coercive diplomacy by taking these assets hostage.

⁶⁴ KCNA, August 9, 2017.

⁶⁵ George, “Theory and Practice,” p. 18.

⁶⁶ *Rodong Sinmun*, August 15, 2017.

⁶⁷ KCNA, August 9, 2017; *Rodong Sinmun*, August 15, 2017.

⁶⁸ Photo published on page 2 of the *Rodong Sinmun*, April 13, 2017; *Rodong Sinmun*, June 5, 2017.

⁶⁹ There is some overlap with the discussion of coercive diplomacy and parallel attempts to gain political control over the military in 2017 in the National Institute for Defense Studies (ed.), *East Asian Strategic Review 2018* (National Institute for Defense Studies, 2018), Chapter 3.

⁷⁰ George, “Theory and Practice,” p. 18; George and Simons, “Findings and Conclusions,” pp. 288–291.

North Korea may see the use of coercive diplomacy against forces in the South as political action that complements its monolithic leadership system, following in the vein of inter-regime competition during the Cold War. Using coercive diplomacy to establish national autonomy against the major powers as a point of contention is a rational strategy to ensure the survival of North Korea, which has no opportunities to demonstrate its superiority over alternate regimes in economic terms.

Lastly, this paper will conclude by explaining that on July 27, 2021, a little more than a year after the destruction of the inter-Korean joint liaison office by North Korea, both the Moon Jae-in administration and North Korea announced that they would restore South-North communication lines. Restoration of the communication lines was the result of an exchange of letters between South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, just as it had been the previous year when North Korea forced the Moon Jae-in administration to largely accept its position on the incident in the waters around the NLL.⁷¹ During the exchange of letters that began in April, the Moon Jae-in administration announced that it had agreed with the United States to “terminate” the U.S.-South Korea working group.⁷²

South Korea had indicated to the North Korean side its willingness to correct its flunkeyism as requested. This was likely a one-sided announcement by the Moon Jae-in administration without sufficient agreement from the U.S. side. The U.S. Department of State had responded to a question asking for confirmation that there was agreement to “terminate” the working group by saying that it would continue this engagement, and did not explicitly state whether the working group would be terminated or continue to exist.⁷³

The Moon Jae-in administration made clear its willingness to accede to North Korea’s demands while differentiating its position from that of the United States. North Korea likely observed this and agreed to restore the South-North communication lines. However, even in this case, North Korea remains in a position to reserve the option of destabilizing inter-Korean relations again in the future. Kim Yo-jong, vice department director of North Korea’s Central Committee of the WPK, issued a statement on the restoration of the South-North communication lines in which she dismissed hopes within South Korea that this would lead to a North-South summit as groundless speculation, and warned that continuing to conduct joint military exercises between South Korea and the United States would becloud the future of inter-Korean relations.⁷⁴ Thus, North Korea continued to hold inter-Korean relations hostage, demanding that the Moon Jae-in administration further correct its flunkeyism.

⁷¹ Office of the President of the Republic of Korea, “Nambug gan Tongsin-yeonlagseon Bog-won Gwanlyeon Park Suhyun Gugminsotongsuseog Beuliping [Briefing by Senior Secretary to President for Public Communication Park Soo-hyun on the Restoration of the Inter-Korean Communication Lines],” July 27, 2021; *KCNA*, July 27, 2021.

⁷² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, “Daebyeon-in Jeonglyebeuliping [Spokesperson’s Regular Press Briefing],” June 22, 2021.

⁷³ U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing,” June 22, 2021.

⁷⁴ *KCNA*, August 1, 2021.

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