

## **Coercive Engagement toward North Korea** by Jinho Park

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The Korean Peninsula is again becoming a focus of international concern. Kim Jong Un has announced that North Korea is ready to conduct another nuclear test, one that targets the United States, making a provocation even more provocative. Over the past two decades, international efforts mainly led by the US and the UN Security Council have not stopped North Korea's nuclear ambitions, but have, at most, delayed the progress of North Korea's nuclear program. A third nuclear test is imminent, and we are doing our best to stop it. But the fundamental issue is getting North Korea to abandon its nuclear program, not just postpone a test.

We must review our strategy toward North Korea. North Korea's nuclear test will have a significant impact on shaping the strategic mindset of new leaders in Korea, China, and Japan, and should prompt a review of US policy as well.

In addition, North Korea's nuclear test might give Japan a good excuse to accelerate its military buildup as it has vowed to put sanctions on North Korea in response to the test. Japan's fast-growing military readiness is likely to escalate military tension over disputed islands with China. In the long term, the US military and diplomatic pivot to Asia would face much more uncertainty.

Up to now, we have focused on persuasive engagement to resolve North Korea's nuclear problem. But our negotiations with North Korea have not ended the vicious cycle of provocations, sanctions, and dialogues. All the while, North Korea has moved closer and closer to the final stage of nuclear weapon development, although it spent more time and money than expected.

As we contemplate a North Korean nuclear test, we have several tasks: first, prevent the test; second shift our diplomatic approach from 'persuasive engagement' to 'coercive engagement'; third, lock North Korea into our engagement efforts; and finally, discuss how to reward North Korea in return for abandoning its nuclear ambitions and returning to the international community. The UN Security Council (UNSC) should be at the center of these procedural efforts as long as North Korea does not withdraw from the UN. To play a timely and appropriate role, the UNSC should begin considering all available options including even the military option – while respecting its Charter – in applying coercive measures to resolve North Korean issues. It should be noted that the essential mission of the UNSC is not to dismantle North Korea's nuclear program but to ensure peace and security of the Korean Peninsula. In this respect, any

future Security Council resolution concerning North Korean provocations must discuss regional security beyond the Korean Peninsula and accordingly recommend an appropriate plan of action by regional UN member states.

While developing our coercive engagement strategy, one of the most important caveats is that it not be misperceived as a threat of punishment. To prevent such a strategic miscalculation, our coercive engagement must include well-coordinated collective efforts that are well-articulated and mature. Coercive engagement is not for threatening punishment, but for demonstrating our will and capability without any miscommunication to North Korea. Unlike persuasive engagement, North Korea is likely to face a situation – before making a provocation – under which its cost-benefit analysis should be based not on its strategic perspective but our statements and actions.

The success of coercive engagement depends on a common perception of threats posed by North Korea's nuclear development. But, concerned countries have their own perspectives on these threats, and have learned different lessons. Increasing our strategic cohesiveness requires a regional framework for addressing peace and security of Asia. Beyond providing a dialogue forum, this framework requires an action plan and code for binding participating countries. This initiative could contribute to mitigating a strategic gap among individual states, which is evident as they respond to North Korea's provocative activities and attempt to get it to abandon its nuclear program.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*