

## Beyond Optimism and Skepticism about North Korean Denuclearization: A Case for Conditional Engagement\*

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*South Korean President Moon took a bold initiative to establish peace on the Korean peninsula while denuclearizing North Korea. Though negotiations with North Korea are on the move, controversy about how to deal with North Korea never ends. Optimists argue that Kim Jong Un has made up his mind to give up nuclear weapons and concentrate on economic development. They argue that, though slow and conditionally, North Korea is reciprocating to the US and South Korean demands. Thus, optimists take a position of 'trust and engage.' On the other hand, skeptics argue that North Korean goals have never changed and that Kim Jong Un will never give up nuclear weapons. What they are trying to do is delay, deceive, and buy time for nuclear enforcement. Skeptics take a position of 'coerce and verify.' This paper takes a position that we had better test Kim seriously and push to the limit until his ultimate decision can be discerned. Engagement is a viable option than other alternatives like dovish engagement, strategic patience, coercive sanctions, or war. However, there is a proper way to engage North Korea, what the author calls 'conditional engagement.' 'Engage and verify' should be a principle of conditional engagement. Tough and strict conditionalities should be attached to engagement. If you follow this position, negotiating with North Korea should be tougher and more principled.*

**Keywords:** North Korea, Denuclearization, Moon Jae In, Kim Jong Un, Conditional Engagement

### 1. MOON JAE-IN'S PEACE INITIATIVE AS NEW ADVENTURE

Denuclearization of North Korea has been a decades-long challenge in international society. Several attempts have preceded current efforts, but none of them proved to be fully successful. North Korea continued to develop and advance its nuclear and missile program despite international efforts for engagement, sanctions, neglect, and isolation. After its 4th nuclear test in January 2016, North Korea surprised many specialists in the field, because it developed high-end nuclear and missile technology so quickly. In 2017, North Korea came to place American homeland within its range of ballistic missiles. North Korea emerged as a non-negligible source of threat, even to the United States. President Obama told the newly elected President Trump that North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs would be Trump administration's greatest national security challenge.<sup>1</sup> State Secretary Pompeo himself made it clear that chief among the outlaw regimes are North Korea and Iran.<sup>2</sup> The dilemma for the United States is that utilizing a military option is not

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\* The author would like to thank those intellectuals who gave helpful comments to an earlier draft of this paper: Victor Cha, Scott Snyder, Alexander Vershbow, Joel Wit, Taisuke Mibae, and Robert Manning. This paper was written when the author was a visiting senior fellow at the Atlantic Council with generous support from the Korea Foundation.

<sup>1</sup> Pompeo (2018), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

an easy choice at all. Most of all, catastrophic civilian casualties are expected to occur on the Korean peninsula. Such an option would put the lives of 230,000 American citizens in South Korea at risk, not to mention the millions of South Korean and Japanese.<sup>3</sup> China, which shares long borders with North Korea, also would not stay distant. Mastro suggests that any conflict involving large-scale US military operations will trigger significant Chinese military intervention,<sup>4</sup> which may put entire Northeast Asia into a path for turmoil.

North Korea's nuclear and missile program is without doubt a daunting security challenge to South Korea and its allies. North Korea's nuclear capability to reach the US homeland raises questions about Washington's commitment to upholding effective extended deterrence for South Korea. Whether the United States will protect Seoul at the expense of Los Angeles or New York emerged as a debatable question. The South Korean public began showing strong sympathy to the idea of its own nuclearization.<sup>5</sup> In addition, South Korea faced an unprecedented dilemma that the United States might actually use a military option to break down North Korean nuclear facilities as long as North Korea continues to threaten the United States with its nuclear arsenals. At the 72<sup>nd</sup> UN general assembly meeting, President Trump said, "If the United States is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea. Rocket Man is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime."<sup>6</sup> US officials discussed the option of using limited strike against North Korea, if not a full-scale war. How to avoid another war on the Korean peninsula became the life and death question not only for North Korea but also for South Korea.

Since 2016, UN began imposing tougher sanctions on North Korea. Even China, supposedly North Korea's ally, jumped on the sanction regime and virtually began implementing sanction measures against North Korea without disguise. These punitive sanction measures were combined with President Trump's threat of using military actions to get rid of North Korean nuclear program. Sanctions combined with military threats contributed to the change of North Korean leader's mind. On January 1st, 2018, Kim Jong Un made a peace offensive to the outside world, saying that he wants to see Pyeongchang Winter Olympics as a successful event of the Korean people and willing to improve inter-Korean relationship.<sup>7</sup>

Changes in Kim Jong Un's attitude did not come out of nowhere. In the Berlin declaration, delivered in June 2017, South Korean President Moon made it clear that his government would seek neither the collapse of North Korean regime nor artificial unification by absorption. Instead he suggested that inter-Korean dialogue should be resumed to promote the idea of North Korea participating in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, reunion of separate families, and halting antagonistic behaviors along the DMZ.<sup>8</sup> Especially the Moon government began seriously consulting North Korea's key decision makers through informal

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<sup>3</sup> Cha and Katz suggest that ultimately, Trump cannot solve the problem of a nuclear North Korea with a preventive military strike. Cha and Katz (2018), p. 97-98.

<sup>4</sup> Mastro (2018), p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> In an opinion poll conducted by Munhwa Ilbo, 62.8% supported the idea of South Korea going nuclear. Munhwa Ilbo. Dongha Kim (2017)

<sup>6</sup> Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 19, 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly/> (Search date: November 7, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Kim Jong Un's New Year speech on January 1, 2018. *Donga.com*, January 1, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Moon's New Berlin declaration on July 6, 2017. *Chosun Ilbo*, July 6, 2017.

and undisclosed intelligence channels since the latter half of 2017, while preparing for the Olympic games. After a preliminary special envoy exchange, the Moon-Kim summit meeting was held on April 27, 2018, at Panmunjeom. And then Moon played the role of mediator between Trump and Kim, leading to the Singapore summit on June 12, 2018.

President Moon's peace initiative stands on critical reflections and appraisals of failed attempts of the past to denuclearize North Korea. It stands on a few modifications in the ways to handle the North Korea question.

First, because North Korea had already developed high-end nuclear capability, timing and sequence significantly mattered. The Moon administration did not hesitate to frontload the nuclear and missile issue before addressing functional, socio-economic cooperation. Without untying the nuclear knot, inter-Korean relations cannot move forward because of internal and external pressures. This approach is different from the sunshine policy, or dovish engagement policy which were pursued by the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations. At that time, progressive leaders in South Korea advocated the idea of giving asymmetrical and preemptive assistance to North Korea with unfounded expectations that North Korea would reciprocate positively to South Korea's good-willed gestures.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the anticipations that North Korea would eventually give up nuclear weapons, North Korea elevated its nuclear capability rather than dropping the weapons system. The Moon administration, instead, alluded that if nuclear and ballistic missile issues are not solved first, economic assistance cannot be implemented.

Second, the Moon administration took the stance that North Korean question should be solved in a comprehensive way than addressing the issue of nuclear provocations only.<sup>10</sup> Political security issues had to be handled in combination with economic, social and cultural cooperation. A kind of grand bargain should be there,<sup>11</sup> where the US, South Korea and other countries give positive incentives to North Korea in exchange for giving up its nuclear program. Massive assistance and development plan for North Korea should be in order if and when North Korea is willing to give up its nuclear program. This approach is different from the preposition that North Korea should unilaterally surrender to the concerted pressures from the outside. In addition to big sticks, big carrots should be ready.

Third, for expediency and need for speedy decision making, the Moon administration preferred solution finding through a top-down process. Summit diplomacy has been utilized to advance negotiations with the North. Advisors and staffs played a supportive role for summit diplomacy. This is based on the reflection that extended negotiations with North Korea at working level bureaucrats can hardly produce tangible results in a short period of time. All too often, negotiating teams are divided on many issues, sometimes trivial and futile, and many times end up extending the process to the maximum until the other parties are exhausted. Most of all, the working level bureaucrats could hardly be expected to make ultimate resolutions. Many of them were afraid of bearing responsibilities on behalf of political leaders. That is why the Moon government adopted a top-down approach instead of a bottom-up process.

The fourth change might be that of bringing the US in from the beginning of the process.

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<sup>9</sup> As for theoretical foundations and positive effects of sunshine policy, refer to Moon (2012).

<sup>10</sup> Young-kwan Yoon, a former South Korean foreign minister, emphasized this point at a keynote speech at the Seoul-Tokyo Forum on June 15th, 2018, in Tokyo, Japan.

<sup>11</sup> The idea of grand bargain with North Korea was suggested by O'Hanlon and Mochizuki. O'Hanlon and Mochizuki (2013)

Though inter-Korean talks play an igniting and ice-breaking role, denuclearization issue can hardly be settled down without American involvement. South Korea welcomed the idea of playing the role of a mediator or a facilitator of negotiation between the US and North Korea. This is based on the reflection that inter-Korean reconciliation measures had been often blocked or opposed by the US, especially when new US presidents assumed the position. Furthermore, if the US sets a low priority on the issue or complacently delegate the responsibility of solving the problem to China, all have to wait in line for unknown future. On top of that, bringing the US into the negotiating process can be an effective way to avoid a war-prone situation on the Korean peninsula until the negotiation faces the moment of truth.

Moon's bet on top-down processing is actually in progress. Prime movers of resolving the North Korean issue are the three political leaders – Moon Jae-in, Trump, and Kim Jong Un. Without unprecedented and unlikely combination of leadership quality of the three keymen, dealing with North Korea from a new angle would have been a non-starter. Above all, three leaders are seeking negotiated solution. Korean peninsula watchers are relieved to find that an imminent war has been avoided at least. Denuclearization is a long way to go, but three leaders' rhetoric show their commitment to the goal of complete denuclearization.<sup>12</sup> From time to time they use different phrases like CVID (complete verifiable irreversible dismantlement), FFVD (final fully verifiable denuclearization), or others, but complete denuclearization is the minimum common denominator. Also, despite Trump's repeated request for preemptive denuclearization, a package deal is tacitly taken for granted. Denuclearization is discussed on the table with other agendas like diplomatic normalization, peace settlement, improving inter-Korean relations, and economic aids. Countries involved are accepting the notion that complete denuclearization requires process of a series of negotiations and phased implementation.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. UNENDING CONTROVERSIES ABOUT DEALING WITH NORTH KOREA

North Korean denuclearization game is subtly on the move. Road to denuclearization is bumpy, but it moves forward with sporadic breaks. Unlike President Trump's speech at UN in 2017, Trump said, on the same venue in 2018, that "We have engaged with North Korea to replace the specter of conflict with a bold and new push for peace."<sup>14</sup> Moon and Kim have had two summit meetings: April 27, and September 18-20. Trump has met Kim in Singapore in June 2018. Pompeo has visited Pyongyang four times.

However, opinions are deeply divided as to the prospects for complete denuclearization of

<sup>12</sup> In complete denuclearization, two terms – verifiable and irreversible – have been omitted. Whether this is a strategic choice should be decided later.

<sup>13</sup> In a sense, this approach attests to the case that three countries accepted Chinese advices for simultaneous promotion of double-track. Seong-hyun Lee at the Sejong Institute argued, "The reason for Chinese silence after the Pyongyang summit is that the process of denuclearization is moving along the line that Chinese has suggested." His lecture at the Korea Economy Institute in Washington DC on October 18th, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Remarks by President Trump to the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York on September 25, 2018. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-73rd-session-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-ny/> (Search date: November 7, 2018)

North Korea. In general, optimism is more prevalent in South Korea, especially among those who are directly involved in talks with North Korea, while skepticism is deeply rooted in Washington DC, especially among those who had been involved in negotiations with North Korea in the past.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.1 Optimists

Those who are optimistic about the denuclearization deal share some common conjectures.

First, optimists argue that Kim Jong Un made a strategic decision to give up nuclear weapon program and shifted national strategy toward concentrating on economic development. North Korea is not what it used to be. A close adviser to President Moon, Chung-in Moon advocates the notion that Kim Jong Un clearly made up his mind to abdicate the nuclear weapon system and that he would concentrate in enhancing North Koreans' living standards. He said, "Kim cannot survive if he fails to win the hearts and minds of his own people. If he fails to make his people happy, the safety of the North Korean system cannot be guaranteed. How can nuclear weapon guarantee that?"<sup>16</sup> Delury goes further to suggest that Kim Jong Un's real goal is economic development.<sup>17</sup> Critiques point out that Kim Jong Un's will to give up the weapon system has been indirectly delivered through South Korean high ranking officials rather than Kim himself, through his own voice. Optimists make rebuttal that what they have heard from Kim Jong Un is an unequivocal statement to denuclearize. They imply that Kim Jong Un himself said on September 19, 2018, that he would make Korean peninsula a land of peace without nuclear weapons.<sup>18</sup> President Moon also confirmed this promise when he gave a public speech in front of 150,000 North Korean audience. Also the fact that both Panmunjeom and Pyongyang declarations were printed *Rodong Shimbun*, verbatim, without modifying a single sentence attests to the case that Kim made the resolution and publicized it.<sup>19</sup>

Second, optimists suggest, friendly diplomatic gestures are reliable means to elicit positive and cooperative reciprocal action from North Korea. For them, trust-building between South and North Korea is critically important to make things move along. Improvement of inter-Korean relations contributes positively to complete denuclearization process. Accepting North Korea as an equal, legitimate and reliable partner is the starting point. Reducing military tensions and avoiding unexpected military conflicts are inarguably necessary. Inter-Korean reconciliation is regarded as a prime engine of building trust as well as a solid foundation for eliciting cooperation from North Korea.<sup>20</sup> In other words, showing a good will and well-intentioned gestures toward North Korea composes a critical element to step forward. On the contrary, optimists are reluctant to impose heavy sanctions or

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<sup>15</sup> After reviewing a number of analysts, a CRS report comments, "Many analysts believe that the North Korean regime, regardless of inducements, will not voluntarily give up its nuclear weapon capability." Nikitin, Chanlett-Avery, Manyin (2017), p.12.

<sup>16</sup> Hyung-Jin Kim (2018)

<sup>17</sup> Delury (2017b)

<sup>18</sup> Moon (2018), p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Joon-hyung Kim (2018)

<sup>20</sup> It is not surprising at all that the department of unification front stands at the center of inter-Korean talks.

pressures on North Korea, though they also accept that sanctions can hardly be lifted without significant moves on the part of North Korea. Chung-in Moon suggested an idea that the US plays a bad cop, while South Korea plays a good cop.<sup>21</sup> Tacit division of labor between the US and South Korea is not bad for optimists.

Third, optimists argue that North Korea is reciprocating to the US and South Korean claims, though slowly and conditionally. North Korea preemptively destroyed nuclear test site in Punggye-ri, even before Singapore summit between Trump and Kim. After the Singapore meeting, North Korea handed over the remains of missing American soldiers during the Korean War. Within the Pyongyang declaration, Kim promised that the missile test site, Dongchang-ri, would be completely disintegrated and foreign observers can be invited to the site if needed. In addition, even though they attached a condition of 'US's corresponding measures,' Kim promised that Yeongbyon nuclear facility can be permanently destroyed under the international inspection. As long as the US provides corresponding measures, North Korea would be willing to give up its nuclear program. For optimists, a key to the solution is easing the US's hostile and antagonistic policy toward North Korea.

Fourth, optimists argue that there are limited avenues for North Korea to escape or find a convenient leeway. Sanctions and military reactions are readily available barriers to roll back. If North Korea does not keep the promise of completely denuclearizing the country, they have to expect harsher sanctions from the international community. Even military actions initiated by frustrated Trump can be expected. However, critiques point out that North Korea does not care about negative penalties as they have lived with such hardship for a long period of time and that North Korea knows that taking a military option is not a viable option even for Trump.

In sum, what optimists argue is the strategy of *trust and engage*. Without engagement, North Korea would not move. As there are plenty of signs that North Korea has changed, optimists suggest that we had better go ahead with trust-building measures in order to produce positive tangible outcomes.

## 2.2 Skeptics

Unlike optimists, skeptics interpret the phenomenon from a different angle.

First of all, skeptics argue that North Korea has never changed. Above all, their strategic goals remain unchanged. North Korea wants to secure their strategic leverage over South Korea by developing asymmetrical weapon system, including nuclear, bio-chemical weapons, special task forces, ICBMs, and etc. In the name of eliminating antagonistic policy toward North Korea, North Korean authorities would continue to renounce the US treaty with South Korea and call for withdrawal of all US troops from the peninsula.<sup>22</sup> According to Stanton, Lee, and Klingner, "Pyongyang does not want peace. By drawing the U.S. into a peace process, the North hopes to blunt criticism of its crimes against humanity, legitimizing its regime, get South Korea to lower its defenses, induce U.S. forces to withdraw from South Korea."<sup>23</sup> Though they talk about peace and reconciliation, those are all rhetoric without any proven record of actions.

Second, skeptics are in basic agreement that Kim Jong Un will never give up hard-

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<sup>21</sup> *Yonhap News*, May 11, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Jervis and Rapp-Hopper (2018), p. 107.

<sup>23</sup> Stanton, Lee, and Klingner (2017), p. 74.

won nuclear weapon system. It is the survival kit for the Kim regime. Kim Jong Un said in New Year's speech in 2018 that they have grasped a treasure sword for defending peace.<sup>24</sup> North Korea even codified in their constitution that North Korea is a nuclear weapon state. Andrei Lankov suggests, "North Korean leaders are determined to stick to their nuclear development, and see nuclear weapons as the major guarantee of their security. There is no form of pressure that can convince them to budge on this, no promise that will seduce them into compliance. They believe that without nuclear weapons, they are as good as dead."<sup>25</sup> Dan Sneider points out, "The credibility of claims of North Korea's readiness to give up its nuclear arsenal in Washington is zero."<sup>26</sup> Bruce Bennet argues that Kim Jong Un's real objective is to delay US actions against him until he can build a coercive nuclear weapon force with dozens of ICBMs to directly threaten the US.<sup>27</sup> It might be the case that, at best, what Kim thinks is to make North Korea a responsible nuclear weapon state without testing, using, and proliferating overseas.

Third, engaging North Korea will eventually give unilateral advantages to North Korea, because North Korean demands would be unreasonable and hard to accept on the part of the US and South Korea. After the Singapore summit, North Korea continued to argue that an end of war declaration is an indispensable proof that the US renounces an aggressive policy toward North Korea. Chosun Central News argued on October 2, 2018, "An end of war declaration is not the item we can exchange with denuclearization. If US does not want it, we don't, either."<sup>28</sup> Eventually North Korea shifted its demands to lifting sanctions. Furthermore, a news report revealed that, at the UN general assembly, a North Korean diplomat argued that the UN Command is 'monster-like organization' and should be dismantled in early possible date.<sup>29</sup> Hyung-chul Tae, president of Kim IIsung University, even said, "Denuclearization on the Korean peninsula does not mean unilateral give-up of nuclear weapons on our part. We would like to the elimination of American nuclear threat on the Korean peninsula, on the one hand, as well as elimination of American concerns about North Korean nuclear program."<sup>30</sup> It is pretty much evident that North Korea is at least shifting its position and requesting different things depending on the stages of negotiation. In a word, North Korea is hardly a reliable negotiation partner.

Fourth, skeptics point out that North Korea is not reciprocating in a reliable and consistent manner. What we may witness will not be efforts to denuclearize the country but a typical North Korean tactic of delaying, deceiving, and time-earning strategies to justify the existing weapon system as well as upgrade future nuclear capabilities. They will continue to delegitimize US's requests.<sup>31</sup> The claim that Kim Jong Un is willing to dismantle Punggye-ri, Dongchang-ri facilities is a typical example. They want to lead the negotiation on their own

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<sup>24</sup> Kim Jong Un's New Year speech on January 1, 2018. *Donga.com*, January 1, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Klug (2018).

<sup>26</sup> Sneider (2018).

<sup>27</sup> Bennet (2018)

<sup>28</sup> *Joongang Ilbo*, October 3, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> *Channel A*, October 19, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> *Joongang Ilbo*, October 1, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Scott Harold raises interesting points. In the US-led negotiations, only two alternatives exist: Yes or No, Is or Isn't. But communist countries like China and North Korea often adopt political tactic and propaganda campaign to delegitimize the other party first and push for their agendas little by little. Interview with Scott Harold at the RAND Corporation on October 17, 2018.

terms and get maximum returns at a beginning stage in return for handing over useless cards for them.

In a nutshell, skeptics take the position that engaging North Korea is a futile and useless attempt. *Coerce and thoroughly verify* North Korean claims and promises is the norm, they argue.<sup>32</sup>

### 2.3 Conditional Engagement

Both optimists and skeptics take an extremely rigid position regarding North Korea's denuclearization. They act as if they know what will happen in the future. Many of their claims are based on ideological belief or repetition of stereo-typed biases. Instead, this paper takes a position that can be summed up into the following sentence: "You never know until you give it a try". Rather than giving up hope or falling into despair before the final moment of truth, it is better to test the wills of Kim Jong Un and push him to the limit.<sup>33</sup> Also this paper takes the position that opportunities should be seized in an unmistakable manner, carelessly giving up preemptively.

Against the backdrop of optimism and skepticism, this paper develops an argument on the following notions.

First, North Korea has changed, but not fundamentally. There are signs that North Korean leader undertakes a risky gambling in the international negotiation platform. He openly declared his will to completely denuclearize. His words, though not materialized yet, have been exposed to the public, in and out of the country. However, it goes without saying that Kim as a supreme leader of the country can reverse the course at any time if outside rewards do not match his level of expectation. Kim may be gambling to get maximum benefits while giving minimum sacrifice on the part of North Korea. Immediate concerns for Kim may be lifting sanctions that strangle his regime. But he knows that lifting sanctions need some actions of roll-back on his side. Depending on what is given from South Korea and the US, North Korea may elastically change its position.

Second, North Korea may give up nuclear weapon program, but not entirely. What North Korea pursues may be a responsible nuclear weapon state recognized by international society, as in the case of Pakistan. Evans Revere warns that the whole process of negotiation might end up with accepting North Korea as a virtual de facto nuclear weapon state, though we may not accept the de jure status.<sup>34</sup> However, because of mounting pressures and sanctions from the international community, North Korea may face a reluctant choice for them to go further. They may not voluntarily give up its nuclear program, but unless it heads toward near-to-complete and verifiable denuclearization, sanction regime will not be eased, either. We have reasons to push Kim Jong Un to the limit.

Third, engaging North Korea is desirable, but unconditional progress of inter-Korean reconciliation is not a panacea for trust-building with North Korea. When we approach North

<sup>32</sup> Sohn and Kim called skeptics approach as 'verify then trust.' Sohn and Kim (2018).

<sup>33</sup> There are divided opinions about the prospect for North Korea's complete denuclearization. Still at a meeting at the Atlantic Council on May 3, 2018, specialists agreed upon the stance that it is worthwhile to give it a try. A similar conclusion was drawn at the Korea Foundation for Advance Studies (KFAS) roundtable on North Korean denuclearization on August 28, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Evan Revere's remark at the Seoul-Washington Forum at Council on Foreign Relations on October 16, 2018.



Korea, well-coordinated and synchronized policy measures should be ready in order to elicit substantial compromises from North Korea. Coercive sanctions do not naturally bring about tangible outcomes. Nor does dialogue with trust unconditionally produce desired outcomes. Dialogue and sanctions should be flexibly combined. Dialogue with North Korea should go on with big stick in our hands.

Fourth, North Korea does seem to be reciprocating, but on their own terms. North Korea does not blindly accept the requests defined from outside. They follow their own timeline, matching their responses to their expected actions. That is why they rely on salami tactics, time-taking negotiations, and try to avoid unexpected penalties. A commentator in South Korea termed this way as “self-defined denuclearization.”<sup>35</sup> North Korea is rationally calculating rather than blindly accepting demands set by others or stupidly presenting self-justified claims only. Therefore, we should be ready to give and take on the basis of principled platforms.

Simply put, this paper argues the following: Engage North Korea but always verify North Korean actions, not words. What should be verified should be their actions, not just words, promises, and gestures. *Engage and verify or engage as long as you can verify* is the principle of conditional engagement.

How does conditional engagement differ from other alternatives? First, it takes the position that North Korea is not fully trustworthy, though we have to treat it as a legitimate negotiating partner. North Korean leader should not be regarded simply as being stupid, bad, or deceptive. He is a rationally calculating actor. However, considering that North Korea’s track record so far has been mostly deceptive, their words and actions should be checked and verified. Second, as North Korean leader declared that he would give up nuclear weapons, we had better engage North Korea in pursuit of negotiated solution. We do not have to doubt their argument from the start. But, at the same time, we should not naively trust what they say. Engagement is for testing Kim Jong Un seriously and discerning whether he is sincerely acting toward a declared goal of denuclearization. Third, engagement is not simply allowing and accepting whatever North Korea wants to do. We have to attach strict conditions and principles when we engage North Korea. Fourth, engagement does not necessarily exclude coercion or sanctions. Sanctions should be maintained until North Korean is verifiably denuclearized. Depending on North Korea’s actions, we can flexibly weaken or strengthen sanctions on North Korea. Sanctions can be lifted if North Korea sincerely reciprocates our principled requests. Following table graphically summarizes these points.

	Trust and Wait	Doubt and Verify
Engage	<i>Trust and Engage</i> Dovish Engagement	<i>Engage and Verify</i> Conditional Engagement
Coerce	<i>Coerce and Wait</i> Strategic Patience	<i>Coerce and Verify</i> Comprehensive Coercion

<sup>35</sup> Kaksoo Shin, *Joongang Ilbo*, October 23, 2018.

### 3. ONGOING NUCLEAR DEAL SEEN FROM THE PRISM OF CONDITIONAL ENGAGEMENT

From the perspective of conditional engagement, how can we address the ongoing denuclearization negotiations with North Korea?

President Moon's initiative to engage North Korea for the purpose of establishing peace on the Korean peninsula as well as denuclearizing North Korea should be highly evaluated. Through three summit meetings between Moon and Kim, two in Panmunjeom and one in Pyongyang, a momentum for negotiated solution has been generated. Inter-Korean summit has been instrumental in setting up an unprecedented dialogue between Trump and Kim in Singapore in June, 2018. Inter-Korean talks also made a significant breakthrough in reducing tensions between South and North Korea, including military conflicts, as well as envisioning a blueprint for enhanced economic cooperation between the two countries.

However, to actually realize the goal of denuclearizing North Korea, there are more to be desired that have been left unaddressed. Denuclearization of North Korea is very slowly on the move. North Korean actions for denuclearization have not been noticeably presented. In particular, after the Pyongyang summit in September, 2018, the US-DPRK talks are stalled while engines are up for inter-Korean collaboration. With regard to the progress of denuclearization, there are unclear points that need to be clarified in a timely manner.

First of all, it remains unclear whether all the parties concerned have reached a consensus about the conceptual definition of complete denuclearization. There is a general consensus about the term, but it remains ambiguous whether North Korea fully accepts the submission of the full list of nuclear program facilities and whether it will allow full verification on those facilities. It is needless to say that report and verification are the integral and indispensable element of denuclearization.<sup>36</sup> A North Korean leader is reported to have said, "Under the situation that North Korea and US lack trust, submitting the full list of nuclear material, arsenals, and delivery system is equivalent to submitting military target lists to the United States."<sup>37</sup> But denuclearization without verification is nothing but a disguised peace. It should be clearly defined regardless of whether two missing words, verifiable and irreversible, from the concept of CVID are intentionally dropped or tactically forgone. As verification constitutes the core of denuclearization process, this is highly likely to create a rift between North Korea and US.

Also left unsettled is the scope of complete denuclearization. In order to completely denuclearize the country, dismantling not only nuclear materials, nuclear production and test facilities, nuclear arsenals already produced, but also nuclear production knowledge networks should be included. At the moment, only nuclear production and test facilities are on the negotiating table. North Korea tends to think that Punggye-ri, Dongchang-ri, and Yeongbyon are within the reasonable scope of starting the process of denuclearization. They demand that the US display corresponding measures to move ahead. South Korean government seems to be positive about this move. South Korean Foreign Minister Kang tossed the idea that report of the full list of North Korean nuclear program can be prepared after exchanging Yeongbyon with an end of war declaration.<sup>38</sup> She argues that US-North Korea deals have always faced

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<sup>36</sup> Choi, Shin, and Kim (2018).

<sup>37</sup> *DongA Ilbo*, November 5, 2018; and *Media Pen*. November 6, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> John Hudson (2018).

insurmountable challenges after the report and at the stage of verifying the designated sites.<sup>39</sup> It is not unusual for the distrusted parties to move step by step after confirming the other parties' intention and actions. However, this process entails a danger of being entrapped in a salami tactic that North Korea often adopted. That is why the US urges North Korea to submit to substantially meaningful steps on the negotiation table. US Vice President Pence said, "I think it will be absolutely imperative in this next summit that we come away with a plan for identifying all of the weapons in question, identifying all the development sites, allowing for inspections of the sites and the plan for dismantling nuclear weapons."<sup>40</sup> Even if the list falls short of the full list at the moment, he encouraged North Korea to submit a verifiable plan.

Disagreements about the sequence of denuclearization still exist. The US constantly and consistently argues that sanctions cannot be lifted until substantial denuclearization measures are completed. On the other hand, North Korea claims that they can take next step denuclearization measures only after lifting sanctions against them first. In the beginning of the talk, a frontloading formula, or preemptively getting rid of significant proportion of nuclear arsenals and materials, had been discussed. However, the idea evaporated or at least was weakened. Instead, the possibility of partially lifting sanctions has been loaded on the table. There is no doubt that North Korea is seriously interested in lifting sanctions against them. Sanctions, which are based on unanimous decisions among the UN members, cannot be easily lifted unless North Korea takes substantial and meaningful measures for dismantling its nuclear program. Dismantling almost two useless facilities - Pungye-ri and Dongchang-ri facilities – may not be enough.<sup>41</sup> Yeongbyon facility contains important strategic implications, but it is just a part of the entire nuclear production facilities. Dismantling Yeongbyon may be a good start, but one can hardly lift significant proportion of sanctions because one facility has been dismantled verifiably. What North Korea wants may be a partial lifting of sanctions in order to push forward inter-Korean economic cooperation agreed at Panmunjeom and Pyongyang declarations. For North Korea, getting economic assistance from South Korea may be a major breakthrough in enhancing the lives of North Korean people. However, South Korean government is well aware that it cannot run too fast. South Korean Unification Minister Cho Myung-kyun said at an international forum on November 15, 2018, "Substantial progress of inter-Korean cooperation will be possible only after UN sanctions are lifted."<sup>42</sup>

With regard to US's corresponding measures, there are no agreed-upon guidelines about what to give to North Korea and what to receive from North Korea. Positions are not anchored but shifting. An end of war declaration is often discussed. North Korea requested it as a reliable sign of ending hostility toward North Korea. President Moon also resonated by arguing that an end of war declaration is just a politically symbolic declaration, which does

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<sup>39</sup> Hudson (2018).

<sup>40</sup> Pence interview with NBC news on November 5, 2018. [https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/full-interview-vice-president-mike-pence-from-pyeongchang-1158023747679?v=raila&search date: November 17, 2018](https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/full-interview-vice-president-mike-pence-from-pyeongchang-1158023747679?v=raila&search%20date%3A2018-11-17)).

<sup>41</sup> Evans Revere called two facilities as dying, if not dead, horses. You do not have to buy them twice. Evans Revere's remark at the Seoul Washington Forum organized by Council on Foreign Relations on October 16, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> *Yonhap News*. November 15, 2018.

not necessarily affect the status of UN Command let alone the US forces in general.<sup>43</sup> He says that Kim Jong Un has also committed to this formula. Chung-in Moon explained the South Korean government position by suggesting, “First, an end of war declaration is a political declaration of ending the irregular state of war which has been sustained since 1953. Second, if an end of war is declared, antagonistic relations among relevant parties, US, South and North Korea, should be dissolved. Third, in order to make up for the interim period until the peace treaty is concluded after an end of war declaration, armistice system can be sustained. South Korean government takes a position that current demarcation line, UN Command, and Neutral Oversight Committee should be maintained. Fourth, after declaring an end of war, denuclearization and peace settlement talks should be pushed simultaneously.”<sup>44</sup> However, experienced negotiators with North Korea argue that North Korean negotiation behavior is different from other countries. North Korea usually does not highly regard the spirits they have shared during the negotiating process.<sup>45</sup> Instead, North Korea has a tendency to locate advantageous clauses within the accord and push the others back. We have to reasonably assume that North Korea, if an end to the Korean war is declared, has a high chance of pushing us to a corner by claiming that at least the UN Command should be dissolved to substantiate the end of the war. Depending on the formula and contents of it, an end of war declaration can lead to an unexpected negative outcome for South Korea and the US. If an end of war is declared, there is a possibility that North Korea begin campaigning for the dismantlement of the UN Command, because it existed for the purpose of managing the armistice.

Linkage between inter-Korean collaboration and the US-DPRK dialogue still remains murky. South Korean Unification Minister Cho Myung-kyun claims that smooth progress of inter-Korean collaboration can be the facilitator for the US-DPRK dialogue.<sup>46</sup> South Korea pursues partial sanction lifting in order to push forward few key inter-Korean cooperative projects. During his week-long visits to European countries, President Moon publicly discussed the possibility of lifting sanction on North Korea.<sup>47</sup> For him, it seems as if peace on the Korean peninsula weighs more than denuclearization.<sup>48</sup> South Korean Unification Ministry are preparing for several projects like linking railways, reopening Kaesung and Kumgangasan projects, forest vaccination projects, and others even though they are not implementing those big projects yet. Inter-Korean military accord has also been signed to assuage tensions and avoid unnecessary military conflicts along the militarized border. South Korean government is certainly consulting these issues with the UN command, which

<sup>43</sup> Full script of Moon Jae-in’s interview with BBC introduced at *Munhwa Ilbo* on October 12, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Moon (2018).

<sup>45</sup> Comments by Tae-yong Cho, former foreign minister as well as Chun-sik Kim, former unification minister at an informal meeting in Seoul on August 9, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Hangyoreh on November 16, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> *Yonhap News*, October 21, 2018. Though Moon attached a condition to lift sanction as ‘if North Korea takes meaningful and irreversible actions,’ it is clear that South Korean government is positive about lifting sanctions.

<sup>48</sup> President Moon said clearly that his priority lies in peace at Fox News interview. “Full Script of Interview with Fox New,” *Kyunghyang Daily*. September 26, 2018. *Chosun Ilbo* posted a critical column on October 22, 2018, suggesting that Korean diplomacy is off the right track of solving North Korean nuclear problem by losing the sense of direction because of being trapped in inter-Korean relations.

supervise all the activities related to the armistice.<sup>49</sup> However, from October 2018, rift between the US and South Korea began to emerge. While South Korean government officials think that certain sanctions can be lifted to facilitate inter-Korean cooperation, the US maintains a strong position that sanctions on North Korea can never be lifted without North Korea's meaningful actions for denuclearization. Korea watchers in Washington DC raised the suspicion that South Korea is running too fast to proceed with cooperative projects with North Korea without fully consulting the US.<sup>50</sup> At one moment, Trump said that South Korea cannot go ahead with sanction lifting without American approval.<sup>51</sup> This remark reflects a concern on the part of the US that South Korea may push forward inter-Korean cooperation projects regardless of international sanctions against North Korea.

The other issue that has not been clarified among negotiation partners may be a timeline for realizing the goal of denuclearization. In the beginning of the talk, completing denuclearization at earliest moment has been discussed. Moon and Kim seemed to have agreed upon the basic timeline to complete denuclearization, which is roughly by January 2021, the endpoint of Trump's first presidential term. However, Trump suddenly changed his position and tweeted, "I don't want to get into the time game. I don't have to rush it. If it takes two years, three years or five months."<sup>52</sup> Pompeo accepted and followed this position. It may be the case that hastily concluding the negotiation entails the danger of handling denuclearization problem in a clumsy way. It also has a positive effect of putting North Korean denuclearization game in a buyer's market, not in a seller's market. North Korea may not be able to sell the tailored items according to a timetable they have set. However, at the same time, it entails a risk that Trump inadvertently accepts the North Korean tactic of intentionally delaying promises and manipulating compromises.

#### 4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The case for conditional engagement comes as a viable alternative to other strategic options like war, strategic patience, coercive sanctions, and dovish engagement.<sup>53</sup>

Like President Trump's rhetoric of 'fire and fury against a little rocket man,' one may feel tempting to destroy a rogue regime like North Korea and completely reset the country from the scratch. However, it is all too clear that war, preventive or preemptive, is very costly. Considering countless number of casualties on the peninsula as well as material and financial costs we have to pay, war is not the most reliable means to denuclearize North Korea. Relying on war also entails a strong chance of inviting deep intervention of China into major military conflict on the peninsula.

Strategic patience is not a viable option, either. Strategic patience brought about stronger

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<sup>49</sup> Moon (2018).

<sup>50</sup> Scott Snyder and Bruce Klinger warned the possibility of increasing rift between the US and South Korea. *Yonhap News*. October 28, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> *Yonhap News*. October 11, 2018.

<sup>52</sup> *New York Times*, September 26, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> In this sense, I share John Delury's point. He points out, "None of the alternatives to a deal-doing nothing (waiting for North Korea to collapse), doing too little (relying on China to impose sanctions), or doing too much (starting a second Korean war)-holds any promise for success." Still he remains overly optimistic about the deal. Delury (2017), p. 51.

nuclear capability of North Korea by neglecting the duty to control the situation. Strategic patience ended up with non-strategic patience or strategic neglect. As Delury suggests, Obama never showed interest in dealing with North Korea seriously because of his belief that the regime could not outlive Kim Jong Il's death, and then the wishful notion that Beijing could solve the problem for him.<sup>54</sup> Patience served the interests of North Korea over South Korean or American interests.

Pressuring North Korea through heavy and tough sanction measures may be instrumental in inducing changes of mindsets among the North Korean leaders. It makes North Korea painful and hard to sustain a normal life,<sup>55</sup> but sanctions do not necessarily or automatically bring about collapse of the North Korean regime or unilateral surrender from a North Korean leader. Nonetheless, pressures and sanctions play an effective role in inducing North Korea to come to the negotiation table. North Korea may not give up nuclear weapons because of sanctions, but sanctions can be a very good pressuring tactics to deal with North Korea.<sup>56</sup> Pressure had better be utilized as a means for inducing dialogue. Dialogue and sanctions had better go side-by-side.

Dovish engagement can hardly become a viable alternative, either. North Korea did not take off its coat though South Korea continued to shed warmth on North Korea. Unilateral engagement by South Korea with a hopeful thinking that North Korea would eventually reciprocate turned out to be futile. Under this scenario, threshold of change that leads to a decision to meaningfully denuclearize is determined by the recipient side, not the givers. Without attaching strong conditionality of engagement, it results only in buying time for North Korea as well as condoning continued nuclear development to the last moment.

Engaging North Korea is a meaningful adventure. Victor Cha aptly discussed the utility of engagement long ago. According to Cha, "Engagement is a form of preventive defense – that is, actions taken by the U.S. and its allies to prevent the emergence of potentially dangerous and conflictual situation." He also argued, "Engagement would not only provide insight on the degree of change in DPRK intentions, but would also lay the groundwork for punishment if the regime fails to fulfill its obligations."<sup>57</sup> But strict conditionality should be attached to engagement. Engagement with conditionality, or conditional engagement, awards flexibility as well as adaptability in negotiating with North Korea. Negotiation should proceed upon the basis of bargain and exchange, which presupposes reciprocity. We are supposed to seriously test Kim Jong Un's will to denuclearize and push him to the corner until we can discern his ultimate intentions. On the other hand, this also means that we should be ready and willing to reciprocate if North Korea is willing to give up its nuclear weapons program. A principle of dialogue and pressure is the answer, not dialogue without coercion or coercion without dialogue.

What we need is a proper way to engage North Korea. When we engage North Korea, attaching strict conditionalities may enhance the possibility of leading to complete

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<sup>54</sup> Delury (2017), p. 48.

<sup>55</sup> Byung Yeon Kim makes a point that sanctions significantly affect North Korean economy. Byung Yeon Kim (2018).

<sup>56</sup> Cha and Katz suggest the right way to coerce North Korea. According to them, "A comprehensive coercive strategy for denuclearizing diplomacy would build on the strengths of the maximum-pressure campaign while more fully leveraging the support and resources of regional allies and partners. Cha and Katz (2018), p. 92.

<sup>57</sup> Victor Cha (2002), p. 44.

denuclearization.

First, when we engage North Korea, complete denuclearization, whether you call it CVID or FFID, should remain as an unshakable and non-negotiable goal.<sup>58</sup> Peace without completely solving North Korean nuclear problem is nothing but a pseudo-peace.<sup>59</sup> Security specialists in Seoul and Washington are worried about a slim possibility that negotiations with North Korea would stop in the middle, achieving only a halfway done. Trump may declare summit diplomacy a success at a point when North Korea ceases its nuclear and missile tests, gives up ICBM capability that can reach the American homeland, and abides to not proliferate nuclear arsenals to other countries.<sup>60</sup> This inadvertent negotiation would award North Korea with a legitimate rationale to be acknowledged as de facto, responsible, nuclear weapon state like Pakistan.<sup>61</sup> Partial denuclearization does not mitigate security threat from North Korea at all. As Jervis and Rapp-Hopper point out, “Both South Korea and Japan should be concerned that Washington appears preoccupied with weapons aimed at it and relatively unconcerned about the weapons aimed at them. Understandably, they might worry that Trump’s ‘America First’ stance means a weaker nuclear umbrella.”<sup>62</sup> To assuage these concerns, the ultimate goal should remain complete denuclearization without compromise.

Second, exchange based on asymmetric reciprocity, whereupon dovish engagement policy stood, should be avoided. The concept of asymmetric reciprocity supposes that South Korea has the upper hand and more to give to induce cooperation from North Korea. It also presupposes that we have time to wait until the effect of engaging North Korea would be materialized. The idea that side payments would embroil trust and would in turn give incentives to give up nuclear weapon system has been already time-tested and proven as failure. Nuclear possession gives asymmetric advantages to North Korea over South Korea. At least North Korea is on par with South Korea. Thus exchange on an equal footing should be a principle when it comes to military and security issue. Furthermore, denuclearizing North Korea is an imminent issue that does not allow us to wait for North Korea to move until the latter is fully convinced. This does not necessarily imply that we should not give anything in return. Economic package or humanitarian assistance can be expanded in proportion to the width and depth of North Korean denuclearization.

Third, ‘snapback’ clause can be applied when negotiating with North Korea. Rather than sticking to a single position, we had better set multiple range of actions wherein we can move forward or backward, depending on the actions and non-actions of North Korea. If North Korea advances forward to dismantle its nuclear program, we can award them with meaningful incentives. Reversely, if North Korea steps back or delays its actions for denuclearization, we should step back. Not only utilizing incentives to North Korea in a flexible manner, lifting or imposing sanctions against North Korea should be adjusted depending on the modality of North Korean actions. If North Korea is verifiably moving forward, we should be willing to lift sanctions in a proportional manner. On the other hand,

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<sup>58</sup> Pompeo described the final, fully verified denuclearization as follows. Final means that there will be no possibility that North Korea will ever restart its weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs. Fully verified means that there will be stronger verification standard than were required under the JCPOA. Mike Pompeo, “Confronting Iran,” *Foreign Affairs* (2018), p. 63.

<sup>59</sup> Chun-sik Kim (2018).

<sup>60</sup> Dukmin Yun (2018).

<sup>61</sup> Alaggapa (2017).

<sup>62</sup> Jervis and Rapp-Hopper (2018), p. 113.

we do not have to blindly accept North Korean request for sanction lifting without tangible and verifiable actions.

Fourth, the principle of exchanging equivalent values should be preserved. Scope or parameter of exchange should be properly tailored. An end of war declaration should not be preemptively signed. Though Moon and Kim seemed to have a shared understanding that an end of war declaration can be a symbolic political statement that does not affect the status of UN command or USFK,<sup>63</sup> there remains a possibility that premature declaration of an end of war might invite unnecessary and unintended consequences of galvanizing the public in South Korea as well as inviting delegitimizing campaign from North Korea and China. If an end of war is symbolically declared, one can make it as a symbolic gesture of good will on both parties without legally binding elements. It may end up with a political declaration that both parties do not have enduring will to antagonize the other or that both parties promise not to militarily attack the other party, which practically amounts to a non-aggression pact. Even in that case, a condition should be attached in a written form, where it certifies that the declaration does not affect the status of UN Command or that of USFK. The US troops in South Korea or ROK-US alliance should not be prematurely put on the table.<sup>64</sup> The US-ROK alliance is founded on a bilateral treaty between the two countries, which was a strategic decision on both parties. The USFK has been established much earlier than the North Korean nuclear development program. Even without North Korean nuclear threat, the US troops in South Korea serve as a deterrence power against any possible North Korean threat, including conventional or other asymmetrical weapon system that North Korea possesses.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the US forces in South Korea play a pivotal role in balancing out other great powers in East Asia and the Pacific. Even after complete denuclearization of North Korea, the US troops and ROK-US alliance should remain as a balancer in the region.<sup>66</sup>

Fifth, clear timeline for negotiation and a shared roadmap should be prepared. Particularly when we negotiate with a less reliable partner, conditions related to until when and what should be traded must be clearly outlined. If timeline is not properly set, North Korea will tactfully take advantage of this as a leverage against the US and South Korea, because North Korea is very good at utilizing salami tactics. As tacitly agreed between Moon and Kim, denuclearizing process had better be completed by January 2021 when the first presidential term for Trump draws to an end. Expediting the process within that time limit may increase efficacy of negotiation on both sides. In addition to the timeline, roadmap about what to give and what to receive in return should be clearly demarcated. Relying on luck or a good will of the other party is neither desirable nor practical. Actions and expected reactions should be relatively and clearly delineated. In order to do that, close consultation and coordination between the US and South Korea is immensely important before we talk to North Korea. The absence of overall shared roadmap can lead to an unexpected and unnecessary rift between the US and South Korea. The US and South Korea should develop a shared and well-defined

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<sup>63</sup> President Moon himself confirmed this point in his interview with Fox News on September 25, 2018. "Full Script of Interview with Fox New," *Kyunghyang Daily*. September 26, 2018.

<sup>64</sup> This is not simply a fabricated tale. Joseph Dunford told at a forum that the US would have to start making changes to its military posture on the Korean peninsula over time if talks with North Korea advance. Ali and Stewart (2018).

<sup>65</sup> Ralph Cossa resonates this point when he suggests, "Even without nuclear weapons, North Korea poses a formidable threat to the South which the US alliance helps to deter. Cossa (2018)

<sup>66</sup> Sunghan Kim (2018).



strategy of our own based on realistic assessment about what can be done.

Sixth, in terms of conditional reciprocation, we can think of soft compensation before we get into hard compensation. Low-cost, easy-to-implement measures to breed trust can precede before sanction lifting or massive economic aid. Humanitarian aid within the parameter of UN sanction resolutions can be expanded. Personal exchanges, like inviting North Korean elite bureaucrats or students to American universities, can be promoted.<sup>67</sup> Exploratory commission for conducting research on the investment and marketing possibilities in North Korea can be dispatched. The UN member countries can explore the possibility of inviting North Korea to a few key international institutions like IMF, World Bank or WTO.<sup>68</sup> Or even establishing a US liaison office in Pyongyang can be duly considered for the purpose of promoting daily communication and information gathering.

Last but not the least, most important conditionality that should be attached to engagement is thorough verification. Verbal commitment or promises are not enough to move ahead, though they may be signs of good will on both parties. Hopeful thinking or subjective judgement are barriers to progress rather than a foundation for sustainable trust-building. 'Self-defined or self-fulfilled' verification should also be avoided. Instead, actions toward denuclearization should be carefully and thoroughly verified step-by-step prescribed by strictly-defined international procedures and standard.

The cry for conditional engagement outlined here implies that negotiating with North Korea should be tougher and more principled.

**Article Received: 11-14-2018 Revised: 12-1-2018 Accepted: 12-1-2018**

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<sup>67</sup> Former South Korean Foreign Minister Young-kwan Yoon also points out the importance of preemptive trust-building measures. Yoon (2018).

<sup>68</sup> Robert Manning at Atlantic Council emphasizes the value of inviting North Korea to international organizations. Manning's comment on my presentation of the first draft of this paper at Atlantic Council on October 23, 2018.

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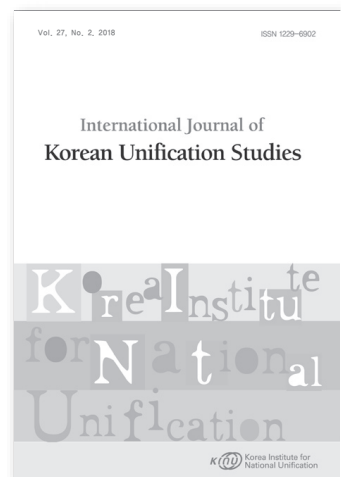
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