

North Korea's Nuclear Program: Its Rationale, Intentions and [Military-First Politics](#)

Kim Keun-sik

Kim Keun-sik (Kim, Geun-sik) is an assistant professor in the School of Political Science and Communications, Kyungnam University. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Seoul National University. His publications include “The Change in North Korea’s Party-Government-Military Relationship in the Kim Jong Il Era: The Implications of the Change of the ‘Great Leader’ (*suryeong*) System.” Email: kimosung@kyungnam.ac.kr.

Abstract

North Korea’s official rationale for its nuclear program has been, during the first nuclear crisis, to boost the nuclear energy industry for peaceful purposes, and during the second one, to secure a nuclear deterrent against the United States for security. In the first crisis, it held consistently to the claim of peaceful use of nuclear energy and demanded the construction of light water reactors—with which the development of nuclear weapons is almost impossible—a demand which was addressed in the Geneva Agreement Framework. In the second crisis, however, it is taking a different position that possession of nuclear weapons is essential to secure a deterrent against the United States’ hostile policy.

In this context, it is necessary to conduct a close review of North Korea’s real intentions beyond its official stance, what it really wants to get with its nuclear program. One speculation is that it is trying to increase its negotiating power vis-à-vis the United States with its nuclear program, in which case it might abandon the program if the conditions are met. Another is that if its nuclear program fails to put effective pressure on the United States and to induce concessions, North Korea might try to produce nuclear weapons to use as a military deterrent against the United States and South Korea and to portray the image of a strong nuclear-armed country domestically. From this standpoint, it seeks to have nuclear weapons to maintain its system, not for negotiation, and therefore will stick to its nuclear program and will not scrap it under any condition.

One thing that we need to consider as regards North Korea’s intentions for its nuclear development is the so-called “[military-first politics](#),” which has been emphasized recently. According to this policy, which represents the governing principle of the Kim Jong Il regime as distinct from the era of Kim Il Sung, North Korea feels that it must strengthen the military and defense industry to counteract the United States’ hostile policy against it. This policy is of particular concern because North Korea may link it with the need to develop nuclear weapons. In conclusion, North Korea’s real intentions are important in deciding whether to possess nuclear weapons or abandon its nuclear program, but the decision will depend a lot on how the United States responds.

Keywords: peaceful nuclear use, nuclear deterrent force, the nuclear card for negotiation, possession of nuclear weapons for system maintenance, military-first politics

Is North Korea Going to Possess Nuclear Weapons?

The second nuclear crisis of North Korea, which began in 2002, is still going on. Compared with the first nuclear crisis ten years ago, the current one has a more complex structure. The Bush administration has a much more rigid stance toward North Korea than the Clinton administration, which is one complicating factor. On the other side of the table, the Kim Jong Il regime's aggressive attitude makes the situation even more complicated, as North Korea has argued strongly for a nuclear deterrent against the United States and even declared its possession of nuclear weapons.

Watching North Korea, confronting with the United States over the development of nuclear weapons, one may be sometimes amazed at the former's diplomatic negotiation skills and at other times feel how reckless it is for disregarding international norms. What is North Korea's position on the nuclear issue? It is difficult to tell if it is waging a formidable battle against the United States, not once but twice, to maintain a principle that it cannot abandon, or it is just confronting the United States as it has been pushed to the end of a cliff and has nothing to lose.

North Korea made official its possession of nuclear arms on a statement issued on February 10 this year, and its foreign minister proposed on March 31 to hold Northeast Asia nuclear arms reduction talks on the premise of its possession of nuclear arms. These actions, which intensified tension in the international community, made some people believe that North Korea's real intention in the nuclear issue is to make its possession of nuclear arms accepted as a fact. However, when Chairman Kim Jong Il met South Korea's Unification Minister Chung Dong-young on June 17, 2005, he reconfirmed that President Kim Il Sung's dying wish was to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. Also, by signing the September 19 joint statement reached at the fourth round of the six-party talks which resumed after much difficulty, North Korea officially agreed to take actual steps to denuclearize the peninsula, including abandonment of its nuclear program. This would mean discarding its nuclear weapons and nuclear program once and for all in return for normalization of its relations with the United States and security guarantees. Showing a strong will to possess nuclear arms and at the same time displaying its willingness to negotiate and the possibility of abandoning nuclear weapons, makes one wonder what North Korea is really after.

In fact, solving the North Korea nuclear issue is critical for peace and stability in Northeast Asia and the world as well as on the Korean peninsula itself, so it is needless to say that the problem should be resolved in a peaceful manner. For this, it is necessary to make a thorough and precise analysis of North Korea's real position and intentions relating to the nuclear issue. In order to analyze the second nuclear crisis objectively and find an accurate solution, we need to heed North Korea's rationale and position on nuclear development. This requires an examination of how, based on its own logic, Pyongyang justifies its nuclear development, and why it claims nuclear weapons are essential in many official announcements to the outside world. However, simply analyzing official claims alone is not enough for developing a solution to the problem. This requires an analysis of North Korea's real intentions hidden behind its official logic and position. South Korea can better deal with the North by understanding the apparent logic and real intentions of its nuclear development. One thing that we should not fail to address while examining Pyongyang's official stance and real intentions is the relationship between nuclear development and [military-first politics](#), which is a big

political discourse in the era of Kim Jong Il and has recently been undergoing systematization. This is because North Korea's military-first politics is not just rhetoric but denotes a certain tendency of the regime in dealing with the nuclear issue.

This paper attempts to analyze closely North Korea's official position and real intentions as regards nuclear development and to review their relationship with [military-first politics](#), in order to evaluate whether Pyongyang might be able to abandon nuclear development and if so, under what conditions.

North Korea's Logic

During the first and second nuclear crises, North Korea adopted contradicting rationales for its nuclear development: the need to develop the nuclear energy industry through peaceful use (that is, to have nuclear power plants for energy), vs. the need to have nuclear weapons as a deterrent against the United States for self-defense. During the first crisis between 1993 and 1994, it held consistently to the claim for peaceful nuclear use and induced an agreement from the United States to provide light water reactors, with which the development of nuclear weapons is difficult, to replace its graphite-moderated reactors. But in the current second crisis, it proclaims that it has no choice but to have nuclear arms as a deterrent against the United States in order to confront the U.S. hostile policy.

Nuclear Energy Industry: Peaceful Use

From the beginning, North Korea responded to the suspicion and wariness of the international community on its nuclear development with the argument that it was for peaceful purposes to obtain energy from nuclear power plants. During the first nuclear crisis which began in 1993, its official rationale was peaceful use of nuclear energy. Regarding international suspicions that it was reprocessing spent fuel rods from its 5MW reactor in Yeongbyeon and extracting weapons-grade plutonium, it claimed that it was a legitimate nuclear activity for peaceful use of nuclear energy. It employed the logic that if the world was concerned about the possibility of North Korea developing nuclear arms, the international community, including the United States, could replace the plant with one with light water reactors, with which extraction of plutonium is highly unlikely.¹

After having many rounds of push and pull with the United States, a war of nerves with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and emotional confrontations with South Korea, North Korea secured an agreement from the United States to build two light water reactors in return for freezing and dismantling all its nuclear activities. The Agreed Framework signed in Geneva reflected what North Korea claimed consistently to want from the beginning; i.e., the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.² Actually, clauses on a peaceful nuclear use are found in every agreement North Korea made with

메모 [TS1]: You might want to check on this. I'm pretty sure that the North Koreans tried to deny that they were reprocessing at first, and indeed try to disguise the reprocessing facility. I also do not know of any peaceful use of plutonium reprocessing that they could claim to be doing.

¹ See Yi S. (1994) for the view that, on the assumption of peaceful nuclear use regarding North Korea's official position, the root cause of the first North Korean nuclear crisis was pressure from the United States and the IAEA on North Korea rather than suspicions on its development of nuclear weapons.

² It is written explicitly in the Basic Framework signed in Geneva by North Korea and the United States in October 1994 that "If necessary, the United States and the DPRK will make a bilateral agreement on cooperation in the area of peaceful use of nuclear energy."

South Korea, the United States, and the international community, including the 1991 Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (the Joint Declaration), the Agreed Framework made in Geneva in 1994 and the Treaty on Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to which North Korea acceded in 1985.

North Korea's consistent rationale for its entitlement to peaceful nuclear use as is confirmed in the repeated statements of 3 "No"s by Kim Il Sung, that it has no need, no intention and no ability to produce nuclear weapons.

Regarding our radio-chemical research center, which some people say is a reprocessing facility, it is an essential element for the development of nuclear energy industry for peaceful purposes and has nothing to do with the development of nuclear weapons. We have said repeatedly that we have no need, no intention and no ability to make nuclear weapons. . . . Western countries link our peaceful nuclear activities with the development of nuclear weapons, which is totally groundless, and make a big deal out of it, which is intended only to create more suspicion on us.³

North Korea's claim for peaceful nuclear use was demonstrated dramatically when Kang Seok-ju demanded the construction of light water reactors as a solution to the crisis while negotiations between North Korea and the United States were underway. In the second-round high-level talks in September 1993, Kang avowed that North Korea had conducted a peaceful nuclear development program to resolve the energy shortage problem by using raw uranium excavated in North Korea and graphite-moderated reactors such as were commonly used in other countries.⁴ He officially announced that if the international community would provide light water reactors to meet its need for energy, North Korea would be willing to revise its nuclear energy development program altogether by replacing its reactors with light water facilities. The United States showed a positive response to the proposal and the result of the negotiation was inserted in the press release presented by the two parties.⁵ A package deal of the same content was presented to U.S. Congressman Ackerman during his visit to North Korea in October 1993.⁶

However, suspicions still remain over North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and extraction of plutonium. It is true that North Korea was at a loss when suspicion on its extraction of plutonium arose owing to the IAEA's improved testing techniques after North Korea had provided its initial declaration of nuclear activities.⁷ Instead of admitting its development of nuclear weapons, however, it regarded the IAEA's demand for special inspection as a violation of sovereignty and threatened withdrawal from the NPT. Then the focus of North Korea's nuclear issue immediately shifted from suspicion on its plutonium extraction to provision of light water nuclear

³ Kim Il Sung (1995, 30-31).

⁴ Oberdorfer (2002, 428-429).

⁵ The press release distributed at the time had the following on this point: "Both sides recognize that it is desirable for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to replace the existing graphite-moderated reactors and related nuclear facilities with light water reactors. The United States of America, as part of the final resolution of the nuclear issue and on the assumption that problems relating to the light water reactors can be solved, supports the introduction of light water reactors and expresses its willingness to explore ways for this with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea."

⁶ Sigal (1999, 110).

⁷ Oberdorfer (2002, 403-404).

plants in order to make it stay in the NPT and comply with IAEA inspections. North Korea took the position that since the United States suspected North Korea's development of nuclear weapons when it only sought peaceful use of nuclear energy, it would accept to inspections and abandoning graphite-moderated reactors if offered less dangerous light water reactors. Put in danger, it escaped suspicion on its nuclear development and gained what it wanted by sticking to the claim of peaceful nuclear use. North Korea removed spent fuel rods when the nuclear crisis peaked in 1994, which was also an example of brinkmanship diplomacy, by basing its claim on peaceful nuclear use and at the same time, heightening the danger of possible nuclear material extraction. North Korea's position in the first nuclear crisis was to insist on using nuclear reactors for energy and if the United States had suspicions, show its willingness to freeze them or accept inspection in exchange for provision of light water reactors and alternative energy. In summary, while claiming to operate nuclear reactors for peaceful purposes consistently from the beginning to the end, it defined the pressure from the United States and the IAEA as a hostile act to isolate and demolish it and employed the rationale that it had no choice but to counter force with force.⁸

While the first nuclear crisis revolved mainly around peaceful nuclear use, North Korea is taking a step further in the second crisis, arguing for a need to secure a nuclear deterrent for self-defense, but it is still not going to give up its right to peaceful nuclear use. It is a well-known fact that the fourth round of the six-party talks held from late July to early August this year failed to reach an agreement, although North Korea and the United States managed to find a common ground in their positions by coming to the table with a flexible attitude and having serious bilateral contacts over the issue of North Korea's peaceful use of nuclear energy and light water reactors. On August 4, the day with the highest tension during the talks, North Korea's vice foreign minister Kim Gye-gwan met with reporters and stressed that North Korea's assertion that denuclearization means peaceful use of nuclear energy and that every country in the world is entitled to a peaceful nuclear activity. He asked why North Korea should be denied that right when it is neither a defeated country nor a criminal.⁹ In the second-phase of the fourth round talks held after a recess, Hyeon Hak-bong, spokesman for North Korean delegates, demanded provision of light water reactors to guarantee peaceful nuclear use in practice.¹⁰ The fact that North Korea demanded to insert phrases on an explicit acceptance of its peaceful nuclear use and provision of light water reactors in the September 19 Agreement while yielding to abandonment of its nuclear program shows that its official stance in the first and second crises is to consistently hold on to the claim of peaceful nuclear use.

Nuclear Deterrent Force: For Defense against the United States

Unlike its consistent claim on peaceful nuclear use in the first nuclear crisis, North Korea

⁸ Announcing a virtual state of war in 1993, Commander-in-Chief Kim Jong Il sent a letter to the People's Army, which said that "The imperialist United States conducted a nuclear war exercise called Team Spirit to make preemptive attacks on the northern part of the Republic on the excuse of suspicion about our nuclear development and incited some classes in the Secretariat of the IAEA and some Member Countries to force a special inspection on military facilities of the Republic, causing extreme tension in our country" (*Joseon jungang yeon-gam* 1994, 51).

⁹ *Yonhap News*, August 5, 2005.

¹⁰ *Yonhap News*, September 15 and September 16, 2005.

is employing a different rationale in the ongoing second crisis that it is critical to possess nuclear weapons for self-defense and secure a deterrent against United States' attacks.

During the first nuclear crisis, North Korea had very intense standoffs with the United States by confronting its hostile policy, determined not to budge an inch and even to risk war if necessary, even while demanding to guarantee its peaceful nuclear use and pulling it through. In confrontation with the United States, it announced its position that it would not yield to an unjust force and react squarely to the United States' hard-line policy and instigation of war. In every emergency situation, it made its position clear that it would respond to dialogue with dialogue and war with war.¹¹ Its official stance was that it would be a great miscalculation if the United States was to attempt to solve the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula by mounting international pressure such as isolation and sanctions, and that if it took such a coercive measure, North Korea would take an even stronger measure for defense.¹² But even then, it had not made its possession of nuclear weapons officially known.

In the second nuclear crisis, however, North Korea evaluated that the Bush administration's hostile policy has gotten stronger in degree. The Bush administration openly displayed its hostility against North Korea by calling it an axis of evil in 2002, deciding on the ultimate use of nuclear weapons against North Korea in the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), and calling for preemptive attacks by confirming the so-called Bush doctrine. In those circumstances, U.S. Special Envoy James Kelly's visit to North Korea in October 2002 resulted in a tense standoff between the two countries, making the Geneva Agreement no longer function as a safety valve for the security of the peninsula. After this, confrontation between the two kept getting worse. North Korea claimed it had to take proper measures for self-defense as a sovereign state and came to announce its possession of nuclear weapons as a deterrent against the United States, which would otherwise take aggression action to dismantle the regime.

Of course, it did not announce its possession of nuclear weapons when the second nuclear crisis began. After Kelly's visit in October 2002, which led to the second crisis, the United States raised the issue of North Korea's uranium enrichment program, which North Korea asserted was a groundless fabrication and stepped up the level of its reaction in accordance with the United States' actions. First, when the United States stopped providing heavy oil, North Korea announced on December 12, 2002 it was reactivating its nuclear program and resuming the operation of nuclear facilities. In response to the IAEA's resolution on North Korea, it declared its withdrawal from the NPT on January 10, 2003. Even then, however, it said that it "has no intention to produce nuclear weapons and (its) nuclear activities at this stage will be confined only to peaceful purposes such as the production of electricity."¹³

Despite North Korea's demands, the United States did not change its hard-line policy against it and in the first round of the six-party talks showed little room for negotiation, demanding that North Korea abandon its nuclear program. Further, it raised such issues as North Korea's missiles, human rights, counterfeiting, and involvement in terrorism. Then, North Korea began to make different claims, departing from its prior

¹¹ Pyongyang Broadcasting Station, November 5, 1993.

¹² Interview with Heo Jong, deputy ambassador of the Representatives of the DPRK to the United Nations, *Hangyoreh sinmun*, March 19, 1993.

¹³ Statement of the DPRK Government on its withdrawal from the NPT, *Korean Central News Agency*, January 10, 2003.

stance. It officially declared its will to possess nuclear weapons, instead of simply extracting nuclear material, by stating on October 2, 2003 that it had completed reprocessing spent fuel rods and would change the direction of nuclear use to that of strengthening its deterrent capacity. Later, in response to the aggravated nuclear crisis, North Korea took the position that it must have a nuclear deterrent for defense against the United States' hostile North Korean policy, instead of its previous claim for peaceful nuclear use, and stated that when an appropriate time comes, its increased nuclear deterrent force would be proven.¹⁴ At last, on February 10, 2005, North Korea officially declared its possession of nuclear weapons in a statement issued by the spokesman of the Foreign Affairs Ministry,¹⁵ and on this premise it claimed that now that it has become a full-fledged nuclear weapons state, the six-party talks should be disarmament talks where the participating countries negotiate the issue on an equal footing.¹⁶ Compared to the first nuclear crisis in which its official position was for peaceful use of nuclear energy, in the second crisis it has switched to the need of possessing nuclear weapons in order to defend itself against the U.S. preemptive aggression and counter Washington's hostile policy.

Now, let us trace back how North Korea came to take the official position of claiming the need to possess nuclear weapons to have a nuclear deterrent in the second nuclear crisis, using their own words. "In October 2002, the DPRK made itself very clear to the special envoy of the U.S. President that the DPRK was entitled to possess not only nuclear weapons but any type of weapon more powerful than that so as to defend its sovereignty and right to existence from the ever-growing nuclear threat by the U.S."¹⁷

However, the United States continued to put pressure on the DPRK, instead of trying to resolve the crisis by withdrawing its hard-line policy. "Now that the U.S. does not want to coexist peacefully with the DPRK at all and seeks to disarm it completely, the Foreign Ministry of the DPRK, upon the government's authorization, declared to the world that the DPRK would not feel any need to have such talks nor show any interest and expectation for them any longer and would have no other option but to keep and increase its nuclear deterrent force as a just self-defensive means to repel the U.S. preemptive nuclear attacks and ensure peace and stability in the Korean peninsula and the region."¹⁸ Now "it is as clear as noonday that the U.S. is set to seize the DPRK by force, through high-handed actions and by military means, it would be the biggest mistake for the U.S. to calculate that the DPRK would sit idle and disarm itself, taken in by Washington's trick. When an appropriate time comes, the DPRK's increased nuclear deterrent force will be proved in practice."¹⁹ Negotiations between North Korea and the United States made no progress in the second and third rounds of the six-party talks held in 2004, and since the Bush administration began its second term in 2005 it designated North Korea an outpost of tyranny and continued [its] hard-line North Korean policy by calling for an end to tyranny. Then North Korea officially announced its possession of nuclear weapons by

¹⁴ *Korean Central News Agency*, October 16 and October 18, 2003.

¹⁵ Statement by the Spokesman of the Foreign Ministry, *Korean Central News Agency*, February 10, 2005.

¹⁶ Statement by the Spokesman of the Foreign Ministry, *Korean Central News Agency*, March 31, 2005.

¹⁷ Spokesman of the DPRK Foreign Ministry, "Conclusion of non-aggression treaty between the DPRK and the U.S. is called for as a reasonable and practical measure to resolve the nuclear issue," *Korean Central News Agency*, October 25, 2002.

¹⁸ "Supreme People's Assembly approves measures taken by Foreign Ministry as regards nuclear issue," *Korean Central News Agency*, September 3, 2003.

¹⁹ Spokesman of the DPRK Foreign Ministry, "When an appropriate time comes, our increased nuclear deterrent force will be proved in practice," *Korean Central News Agency*, October 18, 2003.

stating, “We had already taken the resolute action of pulling out of the NPT and have manufactured nukes for self-defense to cope with the Bush administration’s evermore undisguised policy to isolate and stifle the DPRK. Its nuclear weapons will remain a nuclear deterrent for self-defense under any circumstances.”²⁰

Ultimately, North Korea’s official position in the current second nuclear crisis is that a nuclear deterrent force is critical for self-defense, as it is confronted with the United States’ nuclear threat and hostile policy. According to North Korea, the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula originated from the United States’ hard-line policy and therefore, if the United States withdraws such a policy, it will discard its nuclear program,²¹ but if not, it has no choice but to have nuclear weapons to secure a deterrent. Based on this logic, since 2002 its official position has proceeded from completion of reprocessing and extraction of nuclear materials, to shifting the use of nuclear energy to strengthen its deterrent force, to publicly revealing the actual stuff, and finally the announcement that it possesses nuclear weapons.

North Korea’s Real Intentions

What are North Korea’s real intentions beyond its official rationale with regard to the nuclear issue? Some analysts argue that it is using the nuclear card to enhance its negotiating power vis-à-vis the United States in order to improve its relations with the United States and obtain economic aid from it. According to this standpoint, it might give up the nuclear card if its stated conditions are met. But others say that it is not seeking negotiation but rather to actually possess nuclear weapons. From this perspective, by having nuclear arms, it can secure military deterrence against the United States and South Korea and present the image of a nuclear-armed strong country to its own people. So there is a possibility that North Korea will seek to actually own nuclear arms to maintain its system, rather than as bargaining chips.

The Nuclear Card for Negotiation with the United States

The assertion that it is possible to resolve the nuclear issue in a peaceful manner is based on the analysis that North Korea’s real intentions are to negotiate with the United States, and that it will ultimately abandon its nuclear program, and so the nuclear program is a card for negotiations. According to this perspective, North Korea used this card for negotiation in the first nuclear crisis and pledged it would abandon the nuclear program in exchange for the provision of light water reactors and the removal of economic sanctions. North Korea will sell off its program again in the second crisis if the price is good enough.²²

Whether North Korea’s possession of nuclear weapons is suspected or actual,

²⁰ Spokesman of the DPRK Foreign Ministry, declare that the DPRK will not participate in the 6-party talks indefinitely and possesses nuclear weapons, *Korean Central News Agency*, February 10, 2005.

²¹ North Korea presented the following criteria to judge that the United States has given up its hostile policy toward it: to ensure non-aggression, to establish diplomatic relations, and to stop interfering with its economic cooperation with other countries, *Korean Central News Agency*, August 13, 2003.

²² In fact, according to the Korean delegation attending the third round of the 6-party talks in June 2004, North Korea said that it could sell the program if the price is right.

anything that can be a threat to the United States useful as a bargaining chip. If North Korea indeed created the nuclear crisis to use it as a card for negotiation to normalize diplomatic relations and to get Washington's attention so it would come to the table with a serious attitude, the first nuclear crisis was quite successful.²³ North Korea turned its nuclear development into an issue, brought the United States to the negotiation table, and gained concessions through "brinkmanship."²⁴ But in the second crisis that is underway, it is too early to tell whether Pyongyang's tactic is successful or not. Despite the powerful threat of North Korea possessing nuclear arms, it is not yet clear whether the Bush administration intends to make concessions. No one knows yet if playing the nuclear card for negotiation will work again this time.

For the nuclear issue to work as a bargaining chip--that is, to draw attention and extract concessions from the United States, some conditions need to be met. First of all, the use of the nuclear card should not result in any military action or deployment of military force by the United States. Since the nuclear weapons program is intended for negotiation to get concessions, it would be a disaster if the United States does not come to the table and instead attacks North Korea. Therefore, in order to use the nuclear card for negotiation in the first and second crises, North Korea must believe that U.S. military action against it is almost impossible. In fact, South Korea's opposition to war to avoid the damage that it would cause and opposition from China and Russia to check U.S. hegemony in Northeast Asia creates an international political structure which makes U.S. military action most unlikely. As a matter of fact, when the United States was on the brink of taking military action against North Korea in May 1994 during the first nuclear crisis, President Clinton decided against it after receiving a report that a war on the peninsula would result in expected casualties of 52,000 U.S. soldiers and 490,000 South Korean soldiers within the first three months.²⁵

In addition, for the nuclear program to work as a bargaining chip, North Korea must constantly increase the level of crisis until the United States decides to yield. The greatest pressure North Korea put on the Clinton administration in the first crisis was the threat of its withdrawal from the NPT and reprocessing of spent fuel rods. With only a year left until the talks on NPT extension slated for 1995, it would have been a fiasco if the United States failed to maintain the nuclear nonproliferation system. The United States had to prevent North Korea from withdrawing from the NPT and reprocessing spent fuel rods outside the control of the international nonproliferation regime. It was in this context that negotiation between the two countries took place dramatically following Jimmy Carter's visit to North Korea in June 1994.

The Bush administration included North Korea in the axis of evil and frequently mentioned the need for preemptive military attacks against nuclear proliferators. So, for North Korea to draw attention from the United States, it had to operate the nuclear program even more actively. It also calculated that even if the strategy failed, they would still have a deterrent force against U.S. attacks.²⁶ Unlike the first nuclear crisis, however, this time the Bush administration did not appear anxious even when North Korea completed reprocessing and declared it had secured a nuclear deterrent. Finally, North Korea crossed the line and announced its possession of nuclear weapons in 2005. If the

²³ Oberdorfer (2002, 425).

²⁴ For a detailed description on North Korea's on-the-edge negotiation tactics, see Snyder (1999, 65-85).

²⁵ Oberdorfer (2002, 463-464).

²⁶ O'Hanlon and Mochizuki (2004, 136).

메모 [TS2]: Not really. They talked about the need for preemptive strikes in general to protect the US against nuclear proliferation, and the inclusion of North Korea in the axis of evil implied that NK could be a target for such preemption. But the US government has never directly threatened pre-emptive strikes against NK (some allies of the administration have, but those are not official Bush administration threats).

United States does not respond to the nuclear card intended for negotiation, North Korea may have to step it up to an even more dangerous level; for example, conduct nuclear experiments, sell nuclear arms, or launch missiles. If the nuclear card is intended for negotiation, North Korea must continue to aggravate the situation until the United States responds.

What North Korea wants to gain by using the dangerous nuclear card is a friendly external environment to enable system maintenance in the post-Cold War era; in other words, Washington's withdrawal of its hard-line North Korean policy, and more specifically, normalization of relations with the United States. This originates from North Korea's dire need to have a deal with the United States directly in order to maintain its system in the changed international environment after the collapse of the socialist bloc. Since the end of the Cold War, North Korea has viewed the United States as the most important country to deal with for achieving its comprehensive national interests. In its view, it has no choice but to pursue national interests such as security, status and economic development through direct negotiations with the United States.²⁷

The collapse of socialism, which started in the late 1980s, invalidated North Korea's existing foreign policy. The socialist countries could no longer guarantee its survival. On the one hand the socialist bloc was disintegrated, while on the other hand it became quite clear entering the 1990s that competition between North and South Korea had ended in a landslide victory for the South. Now North Korea's foreign policy had to change for regime survival and system maintenance, which could only be obtained by striking a deal with the United States.

Having to wage a painful struggle against the United States with the survival of its system seriously threatened after the collapse of the socialist bloc, North Korea tried to guarantee system survival through a "nuclear deal" between 1992 and 1994. After much difficulty, this resulted in the Geneva Framework between the two in October 1994, which secured North Korea's regime survival in the altered international environment. To protect the highest national interest—i.e., system survival—in a situation of critical urgency, North Korea initiated direct dialogue with the United States by using the nuclear issue, one representing the Cold War era, and through intense Cold War-style confrontations, it reached an agreement that set a goal fitting for the post-Cold War era.²⁸ Watching the sunset of the Cold War order, North Korea, by making a nuclear deal with the United States, reached a post-Cold War agreement promising improvement of relations between the two, thereby securing a primary condition for regime survival.

In 2002, tension built up again between the two as North Korea admitted enriching uranium, but it used the nuclear card this time again to bring the United States to the negotiation table, and revealed a strong hope for improvement of bilateral relations in exchange for its abandonment of nuclear development. According to this view, North Korea has used the nuclear issue as a negotiation card to bring the United States to dialogue and get a concession from it during both the first and second nuclear crises.

Possession of Nuclear Force for System Maintenance

Another perspective is that North Korea will not give up its nuclear program because it

²⁷ Seo (2004, 122).

²⁸ For the tense nuclear diplomacy between North Korea and the United States at the time, see John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (1998); Sigal (1999); and Oberdorfer (2002).

cannot for system maintenance, and tries to make it known as a fact that it possesses nuclear weapons. According to this view, it would be more rational for North Korea to judge that, in order to maintain the system, it must possess nuclear weapons, instead of gaining security guarantees and acceptance of its sovereignty from the United States by abandoning the nuclear program.

First of all, if nuclear-armed, North Korea will have a more favorable position in military power relations with South Korea, which is in an asymmetric, unbalanced state at present. Possession of nuclear weapons will reduce the imbalance of military power between the two Koreas to a certain degree. Note that it was in the mid 1980s when the gap between the two Koreas became very visible that the North began focusing on nuclear development.

In addition, with nuclear arms, it can give its people confidence and pride by portraying the image of a powerful and prosperous country. Building a powerful and prosperous country has been the ultimate national goal since Kim Jong Il inherited power. In the midst of ever-worsening economic hardship and international isolation, possession of nuclear arms, which brings the United States as well as Japan into the target zone, will create momentum to build the people's political confidence and trust in their leader and the party.²⁹

The foremost reason that North Korea tries to develop nuclear arms is to counteract the United States' hostile North Korean policy by securing a nuclear deterrent. The "negotiationists" argue that North Korea uses the nuclear card to prevent the United States' preemptive attacks and attempts to isolate and destroy it, and to obtain security guarantees and normalization of relations in exchange for abandoning the nuclear program. But the hardliners assert that the most effective method to deter the United States' attacks on North Korea is to actually have nuclear weapons. If it is nuclear-armed, the United States cannot attack it easily for fear of retaliation. Therefore, according to this view, for system maintenance and security guarantees, North Korea must own nuclear weapons and make this known as a fact internationally, not just use them as bargaining chips.

The assertion that North Korea's real intention is to produce nuclear weapons has been taken further so that some civil organizations in the South and pro-North Korea people living abroad make such extreme claims as that North Korea's possession of nuclear arms will destroy the United States' hard-line policy and protect the peninsula from a nuclear war, and furthermore that it is the only way to make the United States submit to North Korea and achieve an independent, peaceful national reunification. According to them, North Korea has a retaliation power to set the Japanese archipelagos in flames within several minutes and the mainland United States in twenty minutes, and the North is making the United States shudder for fear by actually owning nuclear weapons. They say with full confidence that there were doubts on North Korea's ability to attack the mainland United States in the first nuclear crisis, but not anymore.³⁰

Many Russian researchers analyze that North Korea turned its nuclear reactor technology, which began in the second half of the 1980s, into an effort to develop nuclear weapons because they were faced with an unfavorable security context after the collapse

²⁹ In fact, those who visited North Korea in 2003 and 2005 after the second nuclear crisis say that people they met in Pyongyang believed that the country possesses nuclear weapons and said with confidence that now they could fight a war against the United States.

³⁰ See Kim M. (2005).

of the socialist bloc. They believe that North Korea found possession of nuclear weapons so appealing as it commands the respect of the world and offers effective negotiation opportunities in a hostile international environment.³¹ It also tries to develop nuclear weapons to recover from an obvious defeat in economic competition with Seoul and to restore national pride. At the same time, North Korea wants to exchange its nuclear development program for as high a price as possible if it obtains important political and economic concessions from the United States.³² The Russians note that North Korea built nuclear reactors for economic purposes initially and then later sought to develop nuclear weapons in the changed politico-military context, and uses the nuclear threat against the United States for negotiation.

The perception that North Korea will ultimately have nuclear weapons is generally accepted even in the conservative camp in South Korea. Many believe that a peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue through dialogue has been doubtful from the very beginning, primarily because North Korea has approached negotiations with the sole intention to ultimately possess nuclear weapons. Because it will never give up nuclear weapons under any conditions, the nuclear issue of North Korea will not be solved through negotiation and dialogue, but by the replacement of the Kim Jong Il regime or a fundamental change of the North Korean system, which are probably the only solutions.

Advocates of this view analyze that North Korea began constructing clandestine nuclear facilities in Yeongbyeon in the late 1980s to develop nuclear weapons in order to solve the energy shortage and unstable security situation simultaneously, and that it already decided in 2002 to opt to strengthen security and regime survival through possession of nuclear arms, not through negotiation.³³ The North Korean nuclear issue arose not because it violated international law, but because it believes that it must have nuclear bombs for its own destiny and because such a belief seriously threatens international security. This is why the conservatives believe that it is wrong to think that the nuclear issue can be resolved by North Korea's acceptance of nuclear inspections and return to the NPT regime.³⁴ The political leaders of North Korea think that possession of nuclear weapons is the only alternative to defend with their own force their socialist regime, *juche* thought and the political system based on it, in the midst of a harsh international order.³⁵ According to them, it is an undeniable fact that North Korea's real intention as to the nuclear issue is to have nuclear weapons in actuality, not just to use them as bargaining chips.

Military-First Politics and the Nuclear Program

One thing that we should not fail to address in relation to North Korea's nuclear development is the discourse on what is called the "military-first politics." The *Military-first politics*, which is a principle that distinguishes the Kim Jong Il regime from the Kim Il Sung regime, has become comprehensive and systematized recently and has been upgraded to the level of an ideology and a "label fitting the era." This warrants a

³¹ Moltz and Mansourov (2000, 151).

³² Moltz and Mansourov (2000, 81-82).

³³ See Yi Y. (2004).

³⁴ Yi C. (1995, 7).

³⁵ Yi C. (1995, 178).

close examination of how the current political discourse in North Korea, which emphasizes the basic principle of “putting the military first and basing everything on it” and strengthening the defense industry, is related to its nuclear development.

In the transition to the Kim Jong Il regime after Kim Il Sung’s death, the North Korean military emerged as the main pillar to lead the party and the nation at a critical time, not just something that represents the physical force of the party. This is the result of North Korea’s unique political management approach to overcoming crises by promoting the military when the regime was in great danger. In other words, the unique political management called [military-first politics](#) has increased the role of the military to a great deal.

[Military-first politics](#) is the governing principle of the North Korean regime adopted in the situation of grave political circumstances. It is a form of politics that “puts the military before everything else” and “proceeds with revolution based on the military.” Its ideology is based on the notion that “the military is the party, the nation and the people” and the “gun ideology that even the gun has an ideology.”³⁶ [Military-first politics](#), which is Kim Jong Il’s primary political management method, has taken the place of the “almighty sword that leads the revolution to victory.”³⁷

[Military-first politics](#) has special implications for the nuclear issue, because its background is related with Washington’s hard-line policy toward North Korea and focuses on the growth of the defense industry as the foremost economic direction of the era.

Regarding the historical conditions for the emergence of [military-first politics](#), North Korea asserts that the attempts of the imperialist reactionary forces represented by the United States to isolate and destroy it have reached an extreme level.³⁸ The basis of [military-first politics](#) is the conception that “because the United States and its allies try to destroy North Korea with force, the only thing it can do to protect the nation and the people is to acquire powerful military forces.”³⁹ In its view, it cannot overcome crisis or avoid danger without advancing the military and relying on it. The only way to win in the grave situation is to concentrate every force on the military, strengthen the people’s army and base everything on it.

According to its own explanation, [military-first politics](#) is the best strategy North Korea can employ to counter plans to launch war against it, and so functions as a deterrent against war with the United States. North Korea stresses that the powerful offensive power of [military-first politics](#), which the United States is afraid of, is the force of a military-based powerful nation that the whole world recognizes.⁴⁰ That is, [military-first politics](#) is a powerful military offensive force which makes the United States’ nuclear power useless and henceforth serves as a deterrent of war. The U.S. threats of a nuclear war, the nuclear umbrella, the missile defense system, and the deployment of U.S. soldiers in Korea become useless when they are confronted with the military deterrent force of [military-first politics](#).⁴¹ We should pay attention to the logic of [military-first](#)

³⁶ Kim C. (2000).

³⁷ “Military-first politics of our party will always succeed and never fail,” Editorials in *Nodong sinmun* (Labor News), and *Geulloja* (Workers), the issue of June 16, 1999.

³⁸ Kim B. (2004, 3).

³⁹ Kim B. (2004, 5).

⁴⁰ Kim I. (2003, 243).

⁴¹ Kim I. (2003, 254-255).

politics that North Korea should have a sufficient military deterrent to block the U.S. threat of war against it, because in the present condition it is highly likely that the regime's military-first principle can be easily linked to the necessity of nuclear development.

Also, **military-first politics** gives first priority to military affairs among matters of state and tries to build socialism by making the People's Army the core force. Here, "giving the first priority to military affairs among matters of state" means to situate them as the foremost and most important affairs and to strengthen national defense forces by all means.⁴²

The defense industry produces all physical means necessary for war, so its primary focus is to manufacture weapons and equipment to defeat enemies armed with modern weapons and protect the country from imperialist attempts against it. In **the military-first era**, economic construction is directed at the defense industry first, and only then are light manufacturing and farming emphasized.⁴³ This is because the military comes first, the defense industry is first on the priority list, and the development of the defense industry is a life-or-death issue in that era. This reflects the present reality of North Korea that it can survive without sugar, but not without bullets.⁴⁴ As examined here, for the inherent demands of **military-first politics**, the direction of economic growth is defined first as the development of the defense industry, which generates concerns in the context of the current nuclear issue.

Military-first politics, which is the governing principle of the Kim Jong Il era and the dominant political discourse in North Korean society, is based, in terms of its logic, on the premise of confrontation with the United States, and justifies securing a military deterrent to nullify U.S. hostile policy. Furthermore, priority on the development of the defense industry is asserted openly. All these imply that North Korea cannot give up its nuclear program easily.

The ideology of **military-first politics** has a logical structure that as long as it functions as a regime principle of North Korea, the intent for nuclear development will increase. Insofar as the attempts of foreign countries, including the United States, to isolate and destroy North Korea exist, **military-first politics** that puts the military up front and depends on it must continue. This will increase the status and role of the military as the last fortress to protect socialism and presents strengthening the defense industry, the military's material basis, as a priority agenda. According to this logic, nuclear development is too easy a temptation to be disregarded easily.

Conclusion: Can North Korea give up its nuclear program?

Can North Korea give up its nuclear program? Its official position in the first and second nuclear crises has been that, based on peaceful nuclear use, it can have a nuclear deterrent for self-defense if the U.S. hostile policy against North Korea continues. As long as the United States keeps threatening North Korea and attempts to destroy it, the nuclear issue will not be resolved. In this context, as a solution, North Korea demands the United States

⁴² Kim B. (2004, 12).

⁴³ Kim B. (2005, 15).

⁴⁴ Yun (2004, 245).

make a concession equivalent to North Korea giving up nuclear development; i.e., discard its hostile North Korean policy.

According to this logic, North Korea does not need to own nuclear weapons if the United States does what North Korea wants it to do. North Korea's intention is not to actually produce nuclear weapons but to use the nuclear card for negotiation, i.e., bring the United States to the negotiation table and gain what it wants. If the United States yields, North Korea can give up its nuclear card. If it does not, North Korea has to proceed to possess nuclear weapons as per its official stance. If the nuclear card fails to put effective pressure on the United States to make a concession, the possibility cannot be completely ruled out that North Korea will have to seek nuclear weapons even if it wanted from the beginning to use the nuclear program for negotiation and had the intention to give them up ultimately. Taking this into account, it might work to its advantage in reality if North Korea does not stick to either one possession of nuclear weapons or negotiation but instead straddles both possibilities. To do this, it must continue its nuclear program despite vehement opposition. If it is nuclear-armed, that would be good, and even if it gives up the weapons due to opposition, it will fetch a higher price for doing so.⁴⁵

Therefore, it is more likely that North Korea will need to choose between abandonment of the nuclear program and possession of nuclear weapons, depending on the United States' response. If the Bush administration, unlike the Clinton administration, holds on to the principle that it will not compensate for evil acts and is not going to accept North Korea's demands until it gives up the nuclear program, North Korea will have to give it up for nothing or make even more forceful threats such as nuclear experiments or transfer of nuclear weapons in order to make the United States listen. This will lead to an extreme crisis and a catastrophe on the Korean peninsula.

However, if the Bush administration continues to ignore North Korea's demands, it will intensify the nuclear crisis and increase the expansion of mass-destruction weapons, which will invite severe criticism at home and abroad. So, there is a possibility that the crisis can be resolved by exchanging North Korea's abandonment of the nuclear program for security guarantees and normalization of relations with the United States. If this should happen, North Korea will have used the nuclear card for negotiation very cleverly and discarding the nuclear program in response to the action taken by the United States. This will contribute tremendously to peace and stability on the peninsula. And this is why we hope for a peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue even though it is a long, arduous process.

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⁴⁵ Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci (2004, 460-461).

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