

North Korea's Role and Its Impact on Indo-Pacific Regional Security

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Abstract

Since the “ice breaking journey” in early 2018 when the two Koreas participated in the Winter Olympics together and conducted a series of bilateral summits following the games, the nuclear challenge centered on North Korea seemed to be at a new turning point. Nonetheless, after about a year of pushing the “smile diplomacy,” and as long as Pyongyang has no intention of abandoning or revising its nuclear and missile development programs, any dialogue with North Korea will only be used by that country to buy time to boost its military capability. Furthermore, due to limited progress on denuclearization, the trade war between the US and China, the Covid-19 pandemic, and with North Korea launching missiles again, the situation has become more complicated, and it seems hard to have any positive expectations for the near future. In this paper, I will analyze the role of North Korea in recent developments in regional security and how Pyongyang thinks about its survival strategy according to national and family interests, before discussing the potential future developments on the Korean Peninsula.

Keywords: North Korea, Nuclear Policy, Korean Peninsula, Indo-Pacific, Regional Security

I. North Korea's Survival Strategy

1. Short-Term: Diplomatic Track Change

North Korea is a destitute underdeveloped country with a population of 25 million and an estimated GDP of \$17.4 billion in 2018, according to UN data. With the UN Security Council adopting increasingly stringent and prolonged economic sanctions, North Korea's real comprehensive power is obviously disproportional to its influence

on global discourse. Meanwhile, as the cost for nuclear testing and missile firing is extremely high, for a country that has sat on the edge of chronic economic crisis since the 1990s, the price is unbearable. Although in recent years Pyongyang has made efforts to establish a balance between nuclear policy and economic development by emphasizing the so called “Byongjin Policy”(double-track) of jointly pushing forward economic development and nuclear armament, the situation remains tough and challenging. From an alternative perspective, the reason that a small economic state such as North Korea can successfully maneuver among the big powers mainly rests on the reality that the latter cannot achieve a consensus to solve this issue. In other words, although the peninsula crisis may seem to revolve around North Korea’s nuclear weapon intention, perhaps the real reason is continued tensions among the great powers, especially between US and China. Furthermore, in a complicated multipolar post-Cold War environment, East Asia is where so many major powers congregate, which makes their relations the most critical factor for regional stability.¹ As a “strategic bridge” in the region, the Korean Peninsula thus serves as a thermometer for great power tensions.

Similar to other small and middle states, in the face of great powers, North Korea is also confined to the choices of balancing or “bandwagoning.” In contrast with the general preference for bandwagoning, Pyongyang seems to prefer balancing, or resistance against, great powers through the strengthening of capabilities or establishing a counterbalancing united front with other states. Besides the military, it is clear that North Korea has struggled in improving its comprehensive capability. Further noting diplomatic isolation (China is not actually a real ally), in terms of balancing, Pyongyang does not seek to gain power subjectively, but seeks to grab hold of opportunities objectively. Therefore, while it seems rational for Pyongyang to exploit the regional structural gap among powers or a temporary gap that opens up during regime change in states, it is even more rational for Pyongyang to reduce the use of risky brinkmanship and seek survival through the structural “windows” that emerge when power shifts. In recent years, including China’s reluctance to strictly enforce UN sanctions, US President Donald Trump’s prioritization of economic interests over diplomatic and security interests, and the historical opportunity introduced by the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, many developments have provided North Korea with the

1. 蔡東杰,〈朝鮮半島危機之區域戰略意涵〉,《全球政治評論》,No. 42, April 2013, pp. 23-38.

opportunity to change its foreign policy, abandoning the traditional trouble maker image and establishing a more favorable peace-builder image. While negotiations for denuclearization stagnated in 2019 and led North Korea to return to trouble maker status, future developments remain to be observed.



Figure 1. North and South Korea Representatives Met in 2018 Winter Olympics

Source: “North, South Korea begin talks as Winter Olympics helps break the ice,” *The Hindu*, January 9, 2018, <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/north-south-korea-begin-talks-as-winter-olympics-help-break-ice/article22401840.ece>>.

2. Mid-Term: Upgrading Economic Development

As mentioned above, while the brinkmanship strategy of nuclear test and missile launching may seem irrational and a high-cost for economic development, its goal remains the pursuit of sovereignty and survival.² Despite the possession of more than a paltry level of natural resources and infrastructure, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 still had a major economic impact on North Korea from 1994 to 1998.³ Severe

2. Jong-Seok Park, “Is It Possible to Denuclearize North Korea?” *World Environment and Island Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4, December 2016, pp. 227-238.

3. Bradley Babson, “The North Korea Economic System: Challenges and Issues,” *International Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Spring 2016, pp. 149-175.

hunger forced Pyongyang to demand its people to carry out the so called “arduous march,”⁴ while strong economic pressure generated a potential regime crisis. The demise of Kim Il-sung in 1994 encouraged the succeeding Kim Jong-il to transform nuclear weapons from a tool to guarantee survival to a tool to ask for aid by deterrence.⁵ Nonetheless, Washington and Beijing’s promotion of the Six Party Talks effectively closed the gap of great power tensions and forced Kim Jong-il to sit down and accept Western-style reform. Since 2004, Kim began to pay frequent visits to China (in 2010 especially, Kim visited China twice in three months); bilateral trade increased from \$3.7 billion in 1999 to \$56 billion in 2011 while trade dependence shot up from 25% to 70%. From Pyongyang’s official announcement in 2010 that “efforts are made to revive the domestic economy from 1960s level to 1970s level within the span of three years,” it is easy to speculate the severity of the serious economic challenge.



Figure 2. Border Economic Cooperation between China and North Korea in Dandong

Source: Photograph by Tung-chieh Tsai.

North Korea’s economic dependence on China comes from the touted special relationship that originated in the Korean War. While there may be rational reasons

4. William J. Moon, “The Origins of the Great North Korean Famine: Its Dynamics and Normative Implications,” *North Korean Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1, May 2009, pp. 105-122.

5. From 1956 to 1959, North Korea accepted Soviet technical assistance and began nuclear testing. Although North Korea reluctantly entered the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1985, it declined to accept the obligation of open inspection. After the outbreak of famine in 1994, Kim Il-sung

that supports the maintenance of such relationship, challenges abound as well. For example, in order to decrease its political and economic dependence on China, North Korea sought to “shut off China and engage the US” (reduce contact with China while establishing direct channels for dialogue with the US), which effectively stagnated North Korea-China relations from 2014 to 2017. On the other hand, Pyongyang seeks to promote limited economic reforms autonomously and to reduce cooperation with China.⁶ The Kim Jong-un regime allegedly adopted a series of new market-oriented policies, including the *Law on Economic Development Zones* in 2013 and the *May 30 Measures* in 2015. For example, the Socialist System of Responsible Business Operation and Field Responsibility System forms a cooperative farm production unit system (*bunjo*) and allows farmers to register their households as “work teams” and keep a larger portion of their harvest. Meanwhile, managers of state enterprises are allowed to purchase items on a free market, make deals with other enterprises or even private businesses, and own the right to fire and hire workers.⁷ In 2016, at the Workers’ Party Congress, Kim Jong-un announced the first five year plan since the 1980s, aimed at reviving North Korea’s struggling economy and increasing the pace of reform before 2020. Nonetheless, the strengthening of economic sanctions in 2017 encouraged Pyongyang to make further efforts toward transformation.⁸ However, the sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic since early 2020 has had a huge economic impact.

3. Long-Term: Regime Consolidation

For North Korea, perhaps one of its most crucial goals or just the core interest is to maintain its unique status as the only patrimonial socialist regime in the world.

sought assistance through nuclear threats and reached the Framework Agreement with the US in 1995. The Framework Agreement became North Korea’s biggest source of assistance from 1996 to 1999.

6. For example, the execution of Jang Song-thaek in December 2013 was highly symbolic. A corresponding result was the purging of many officials who dealt with investment relations with China. Mathieu Duchatel, “Tactical Pause in China’s Economic Engagement in North Korea,” *China Brief*, Vol. 14, No. 9, May 2014, p. 7.

7. Andrei Lankov, “North Korea Dabbles in Reform,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2015, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/22/opinion/north-korea-dabbles-in-reform.html>>.

8. Jungah Lee, “Sanctions Push North Korea’s Economy into Reverse,” *Bloomberg*, July 20, 2018, <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-07-20/sanctions-have-pushed-north-korea-s-economy-into-reverse>>.

Whether the ideology under concern is *Juche* (self-reliance) proposed by regime founder Kim Il-sung in the 1960s, the *Songun* (military first) policy promoted by Kim Jong-il since the 1990s, or the *Byongjin* (double-track) approach emphasized by Kim Jong-un, in addition to the pursuit for autonomy, an important aim is to maintain and secure the legitimacy of the sacred “Paektu blood line” (royal Kim family). In general, some observers believe that Kim Jong-un relies on four long-term strategies to consolidate his power: intense political pressure, tight social control, liberalization of the grass root economy, and unwavering determination to develop nuclear weapons. As for “Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il-ism,” the ideology not only serves as the main guiding ideal for the Kim Jong-un regime, its goal is also to demonstrate legitimacy that succeeded from generations past. It is worth noting that in order to suppress other male family members from vying for succession, the Kim family sacrificed unity, which in turn threatens stability of its rule. Recently, not only did Kim Jong-un’s aunt, Kim Kyong-hui, reappear on the political scene, Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un’s sister, was also deliberately given more opportunities to appear in public.



Figure 3. North Korea leader Kim Jong-un and his sister Kim Yo-jong

Source: “Kim Jong Un-Keeps Quiet as North Korea Turns Up Heat,” *VOA*, June 18, 2020, <<https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/kim-jong-un-keeps-quiet-north-korea-turns-heat>>.

Regardless, the goals mentioned will face two major challenges. First, it is doubtful whether the international community will recognize transitions in North Korea. Second,

it is also uncertain whether domestic economic development can provide stable support. Correspondingly, Kim Jong-un's adopted strategic adjustments in recent times expose the leader's wish to strike two birds with one stone. However, the sustainability of the policy depends on the opportunities present in international relations. If the tide turns or stagnation follows, the future of the Kim regime remains uncertain.

II. Pyongyang's Response in the Shadow of Covid-19

1. Challenge to the Status Quo

After the ice breaking winter games in February 2018, inter-Korea relations reached a climax at the Pyongyang Summit in that September. According to the September 19 Military Agreement signed by the defense ministers from North and South Korea respectively, Pyongyang and Seoul agreed to completely demilitarize the Joint Security Area (JSA) by October, halt all hostilities by November of the same year, and evacuate all guards and facilities from the demilitarized zone (DMZ). However, following the irresolution of the Hanoi Summit between the US and North Korea in February 2019, inter-Korea interactions not only stagnated after the Panmunjom meeting in June, but a new wave of tension has also began to re-emerge at the beginning of the new year.



Figure 4. The Joint Liaison Office in Kaesong Industrial Complex

Source: Joshua Berlinger, Jake Kwon, & Yoonjung Seo, "North Korea blows up liaison office in Kaesong used for talks with South," *CNN*, June 16, 2020, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/16/asia/north-korea-explosion-intl-hnk/index.html>>.

On June 4, 2020, after Kim Yo-jong, the First Vice Director of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) heavily criticized both a leaflet drop across the border conducted by groups of North Korean defectors, along with the South Korean government, which has given tacit approval to such acts, Pyongyang unilaterally severed the inter-Korean hotline on June 9, demolished the Joint Liaison Office in the Kaesong Industrial Complex on June 16, and deployed a small number of troops to outposts near the border in the DMZ. Meanwhile in the western border, Pyongyang allegedly readied its canons on the coast and targeted Yeonpyeong Island. It is worth noting that on the twentieth anniversary of the June 15 2000 North-South Summit this year, the term "work against the enemy" was used again. The term was seemingly abandoned after 2000 when inter-Korea relations warmed. On the other hand, since 2010, Pyongyang severed bilateral communication lines on three occasions: after the proposal of sanctions after the Cheonan incident of 2010, the inauguration of the Park Geun-hye government and North Korea's third nuclear test in 2013, and the termination of the Kaesong Industrial Complex by Seoul in 2016. The severing of communication in 2020 is only the fourth time Pyongyang has done so. While the ostensible reason may be disapproval against defectors, it was in fact the first time for North Korea to take the initiative in severing communication with South Korea.

2. Deepening Economic Crisis

It is obvious that North Korea is currently making efforts toward altering the *status quo* since 2018. Specifically, while inter-Korea relations were greatly relaxed for a short time after 2018 and the Moon Jae-in government continued to uphold a cordial posture toward the North despite declining relations in 2019, North Korea's "planned provocations" recently may not be a response to changes in the external environment.



Figure 5. On the Street of Sinuiju, a Border City of North Korea Facing Dandong across the Yalu River

Source: Photograph by Tung-chieh Tsai.

The general belief is that the economy continues to be the biggest challenge for Pyongyang. It is worth noting that sanctions against North Korea were elevated in response to the increased frequency of missile tests by North Korea. Even when signs of relief on the Korean Peninsula emerged in 2018, not only did the US uphold sanctions against North Korea, but under pressure of an extended trade war, China was also forced to comply. As 90% of North Korea's external trade goes to China, transit trade carried out by joint investment enterprises suffered considerably. The UN ban on labor export by North Korea toward the end of 2019 effectively cut off a source of foreign currency for Pyongyang. At the beginning of 2020, lockdown measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic created further pressures for the border trade that North Korea depends heavily on, mainly between Sinuiju and Dandong. Noting depletion of foreign reserves and shortages in daily staples, a pending economic crisis is not hard to imagine. As such, Pyongyang decided to take a high risk gamble, a policy tactic that it has often resorted to in the past.

3. Domestic Political Considerations

In April 2020, extended absence from the public gave rise to heated discussions on Kim Jong-un's personal health. Although Kim's reappearance cleared away some speculations, the fact is that the number of public appearances has remains relatively low. In contrast, Kim Yo-jong seems to have walked to the center stage and taken up the role of a hawkish leader. The North Korean media calls Kim Yo-jong "party central," which clearly exposes the increased political status of the younger Kim. As Kim Yo-jong has gained an increased voice in domestic politics, on June 24, Kim Jong-un decided to halt the military actions against South Korea as a two-sided approach. In general, many observers believe that some kind of joint governance by Kim Jong-un and Kim Yo-jong may be the new normal in North Korea. Such development calls to mind Kim Kyong-hui's emergence as Minister of Light Industry of the Worker's Party in 1987 and the supporting role she played after Kim Jong-il acquired power in 1997. In my opinion, while personal health may be a factor in Kim Jong-un's decision to elevate Kim Yo-jong's political status after nine years in power, his main consideration may still be the continuation and consolidation of the influence of the clan.

III. The Peninsula Issue under US-China Co-operation

1. US-North Korea Relations in the Trump Period

In the span of one year, US President Donald Trump met with Kim Jong-un three times—June 2018 in Singapore, February 2019 in Hanoi, and June 2019 in Panmunjom—and promised Pyongyang security in exchange for the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Nonetheless, progress on negotiations remains limited and stagnation ensued. It is worth observing that in order to pressure Trump to hasten the pace in realizing negotiated promises at Panmunjom, after agreeing to recommence talks with the US on September 9, 2019, North Korea suddenly fired unknown missiles toward the Sea of Japan twice on September 10, and test fired the Pukguksong-3 (PGK-3) submarine launched ballistic missiles on October 2. Launching PGK-3 missiles was the most provocative action by Pyongyang since recommencing dialogue with the US in 2018. In the aforementioned context, in October 2019, the US and North Korea underwent another official meeting in Stockholm. Although envoy of the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kim Myong-gil, thought that the negotiations had broken down, the US side thought otherwise and announced that

both parties carried out a smooth meeting. Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un continued to issue threats toward the White House, noting that the final deadline for negotiations was the end of 2019. Kim also decided to pursue active and offensive measures to strengthen national security, and warned Trump to look forward to a special Christmas present since the latter was now facing heavy pressure in president campaign. While the threats did not materialize, negotiations continued to stall. North Korea fired a total of 13 mid- and short-ranged ballistic missiles in the first six months of 2020 and escalated tensions on the Korean Peninsula in June—the intention to accumulate bargaining power was clear.



Figure 6. Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump Meet on the Military Demarcation Line

Source: Jon Herskovitz, “Kim Jong Un Bolsters Nuclear Threat to U.S. as Trump Talks Stall,” *Bloomberg*, November 27, 2019, <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-11-26/kim-jong-un-advances-nuclear-threat-to-u-s-as-trump-talks-stall>>.

In fact, when Pyongyang decided to turn toward brinkmanship once more in June, perhaps US provocation was critical. According to a fifty page indictment statement released by the US Department of Justice on May 28, 28 North Korean and five Chinese nationals were accused of money laundering for Pyongyang through a

network of more than 250 shell companies. The underground network spans China, Russia, Austria, Thailand, Kuwait and Libya, with illegal money entering the national Joseon Trade Bank and funding projects on the development of weapons of mass destruction. It is clear that in the context of stalled negotiations, Pyongyang decided to re-embrace missile diplomacy and Washington chose to expand sanctions diplomacy.

While the main reason for the breakdown of negotiations seems to be Washington's proposal for "permanent verifiable irreversible dismantlement" (PVID) and an emphasis on dismantlement before reimbursement at the first Trump-Kim Summit in June 2018. Such demands were unacceptable for North Korea. The fact is that since the failure of the Six Party Talks in 2009, the Peninsula crisis serves as a source of legitimacy for the US to return to Asia. In addition, an outgrowth from the two summit meetings between Trump and Kim in 2019 is the exploitation of events for domestic politics. For Trump, the summit shifted attention away from political challenges within the US, while for Kim, the meeting supported the propaganda that North Korea sits as an equal to the world's superpower. It is worth noting that President Trump once viewed the summit as a diplomatic accomplishment. As Trump is currently under the pressure of re-election, Pyongyang's threat to influence the US election in exchange for the US lifting of economic sanctions seems rational. However, as a hegemonic power under pressure, Washington's tough response toward Pyongyang should not be surprising as well.

2. Economic Dependence and China-North Korea Relations

From 2006 to 2017, North Korea carried out six nuclear tests and achieved the goal of weaponizing its nuclear arsenal. In the context of the breakdown of the Six Party Talks in 2009 and increased pressure from economic sanctions in 2016-17, despite North Korea's trade dependence on China increasing from 17% in 2001 to 45% in 2010 and finally making an immense leap to 92% in 2017, bilateral relations did not move forward until the thawing of inter-Korean relations after the Pyeongchang Olympics in 2018. In the ten months from March 2018 to January 2019, Kim Jong-un visited China four times, making him the most frequent visitor to China among all North Korean leaders. Even more important is the timing. For example, after visiting Beijing in March 2018, Kim met with Moon Jae-in in April and signed the Panmunjom Declaration. After meeting with Xi Jinping again in May in Dalian, Kim

boarded a designated plane provided by China and flew to Singapore to meet with President Trump. One week after the Singapore Summit, Kim flew to Beijing for another meeting with Xi Jinping. Finally, one month before meeting with Trump again in Hanoi, Kim called yet again on Beijing. On the other hand, in June 2019, Xi Jinping became the highest ranking CCP leader to visit Pyongyang in 14 years.

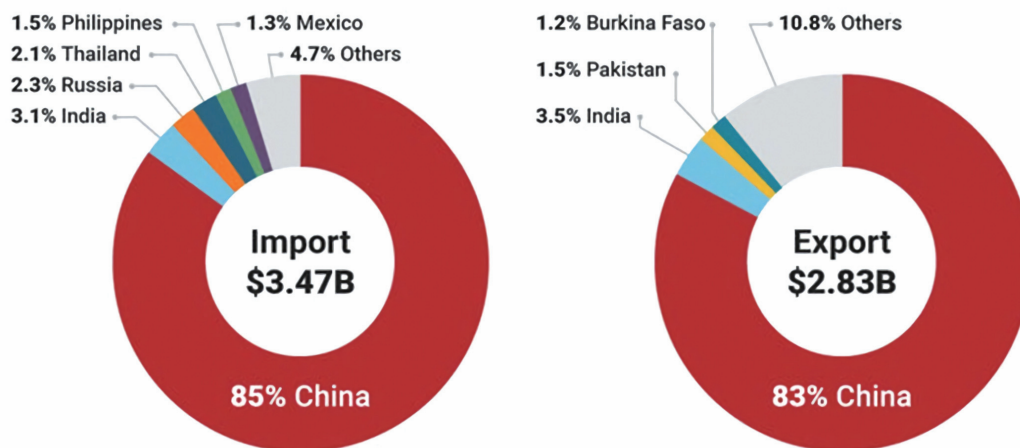


Figure 7. China-North Korea Bilateral Trade in 2015

Source: Elena Holodny, “North Korea’s biggest trading partner is China — and it’s not even close,” September 20, 2017, *BusinessInsider*, <<https://www.businessinsider.com/north-korea-and-china-trade-2017-9>>.

As Beijing is unwilling to bear the spillover effects of a collapse of the North Korean economy, even at the height of international sanctions against North Korea in 2016-17, observers believe in general that China continues to be the main economic support for North Korea despite its concurrent stand on UN decisions. Besides food assistance and cross-border trade, according to a UN report released in April 2020, in 2019, North Korea acquired a profit of at least \$22 million, originating from secret exchanges on the high seas. Indirect assistance from China offers a potential explanation. However, it is worth noting that North Korea does not want to deepen its dependence on the Chinese economy, which drove Pyongyang to make active efforts toward mending relations with the US. The unexpected trade war between the US and China, and that spilled over into international relations in 2019, not only complicated developments on the Korean Peninsula but also urged China to re-evaluate its Peninsula

policy. Compared with the original stance of welcoming slow and marginal progress on the Korean Peninsula, the sudden shift toward stagnation and tension seems to be incompatible with the interests of China. While a provocative North Korea may be a new challenge for China, coupled with the economic implications of the pandemic, uncertainties of the US election, distress in Hong Kong and natural disasters within the country, Beijing can only adopt a stance of strategic patience, or “more vigilance and pondering.”

After the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in China in early 2020, North Korea became the first country in the world to terminate bilateral exchange of personnel with China. In addition to closing the border with China and Russia, and banning the transportation of personnel and goods across the border, Pyongyang terminated outbound travel and stopped inbound tourism, which essentially turned the country into a state of total lockdown. In the face of these policies, Beijing cooperated while keeping a close watch on the potential outbreak of a refugee crisis due to economic difficulties in North Korea. When Kim Jong-un “vanished” in April 2020, in response to possible political upheaval in North Korea, China implemented border control in Jilin and Liaoning and rumors abounded then that there were signs of PLA movement along the border. Since the elevation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula in June, besides the proclamation that “North and South Korea are one nation and the Korean Peninsula should maintain peace and stability,” Beijing has yet to make further statements or take further actions. Noting the key role that China has played on the Peninsula over the years, it remains to be observed how Beijing would react in the future.

IV. Future Prospects of the Peninsula Issue

1. More Competition than Cooperation in US-China Relations

Since the 1940s, developments on the Korean Peninsula are closely connected with US-China relations.⁹ In fact, since the end of the Korean War, except for a short period of time in 2003-2007 when the US and China tried to promote the Six Party Talks together, the lack of consensus is normal for the Peninsula issue. It is worth

9. Scott A. Snyder, “Instability in North Korea and Its Impact on US-China Relations,” in Paul B. Stares, et al., eds., *Managing Instability in China’s Periphery* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2011), pp. 11-24.

noting that while the maintenance of stability on the Korean Peninsula is part of the consensus between the US and China, the question of leadership continues to set the two powers apart. As such, the US hopes to continue to act as a mediator between the two Koreas while China seems equally as capable. From the US pivot to Asia to the Indo-Pacific Strategy, China is clearly the target of US strategic isolation. In numerous US strategic reports in recent years, the descriptions of the China threat seems more direct and emphasized. Correspondingly, uncertainties concerning North Korea reflect instability of the regional environment.

2. Extreme Pressure vs. Extreme Provocation

For decades, the North Korean regime engaged in brinkmanship and provocation. Once tensions are high—having achieved an advantageous position and attracted attention from the international community—North Korea would tone down its provocations and accept negotiations to temporarily relieve the situation.¹⁰ However, faced with the UN Security Council gradually stepping up the pressure of economic sanctions from 2013 to 2017, North Korea was forced to seek a breakthrough in 2018. With the Kim Jong-un's five year economic plan coming to an end in 2020, stalled negotiations, a lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and extended economic sanctions by the US due to election concerns, it may force Pyongyang to continue to adopt brinkmanship and elevate regional tensions. Pyongyang's actions in the near future deserve close attention.

3. Possible Scenarios for the Peninsula Issue

After a short turn toward a “peace offensive” in 2018-19, North Korea seems to show signs of returning to brinkmanship and deterrence in 2020. As progress toward denuclearization of the Peninsula is currently stalled, the Covid-19 pandemic has halted all international exchange and stunted economic development, and the upcoming US presidential election renders Washington's response to Pyongyang ineffective, in the near future, small scale tensions may still arise on the Korean Peninsula. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that despite Pyongyang's increased confrontation with Seoul in June

10. Ashley A.C. Hess, “Why Does North Korea Engage in Provocations?” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, Vol. 5, Issue 1, April 2018, pp. 57-83.

2020, a peaceful Moon Jae-in government that still believes in the Sunshine Policy is a key to stabilizing relations on the Peninsula. China and its unwillingness to see a North Korea collapse giving rise to waves of refugees is another key factor. The two factors help to maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula. The key variable in the near future is whether Washington will continue to adopt the Indo-Pacific Strategy and think about the next stage of negotiations after the conclusion of the election.