

Washington's 40-year North Korea Policy: Success or Failure?

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Washington's 40-year offensive policy of North Korean regime change has gone nowhere.

Bill Clinton created a chance of peace with North Korea in 1994 and he blew it.

George W. Bush accepted the 2005 agreement for peace, then, he threw it away.

Donald Trump had the golden chance for peace at 2018 Hanoi Summit, but he lost the chance.

Barack Obama has made North Korea a Nuclear State.

Joe Biden, 46th president of the U.S. has quasi impossible mission of saving America from the murderous corona-virus, the torn economy and, above all, the deeply divided society. The virus will go away and the economy will be eventually recovered. But, the task of unifying the society is something else. The divide of the American society is essentially due to poor management of the 150-year old racial relations and disorderly neo-liberal economic growth and there is no guarantee that the Biden will be able to unify the country. One thing sure is that Biden should give priority to the solution of internal racial problem instead of trying to change regimes of other countries including North Korea.

Biden will eventually have to do something about North Korean problems. It is hoped that he will not spend eight years of "strategic patience" which was the North Korean policy of his former boss, Barack Obama. I presume that Biden's perception of North Korean problems is based on the views of American media, think tanks, academia and politicians. Their perception of North Korean issues is based on the 70-year old mistrust and hatred toward North Korea. What these views are saying is that the failure of Washington's North Korea policy is attributable to the dishonesty and unreliability of North Korea. Unfortunately, as long as Biden relies on these views, his North Korea policy will fail just like his predecessors' policies have failed.

In this paper, I am presenting alternative view which is, I believe, more objective and more useful for the solution of North Koreans problems. I may add that my view is shared by most of the liberal minded North Korean affaires experts in South Korea including former Ministers of Unification of Korea.

Image on the right: President Donald J. Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, walk together to their one-on-one bilateral meeting, Tuesday, June 12, 2018, at the Capella Hotel in Singapore. (Official White House Photo by Stephanie Chaisez)



In this paper, I am asking two questions. What has been the nature of Washington's North Korea policy for last 40 years? Was it a failure or a success?

The primary objective of Washington's North Korea policy has been the: regime change and the denuclearization of North Korea. One may add that China containment policy and the sales of military equipment were its objective as well, although they were not officially recognized objectives.

Policy of Regime Change has failed

The change of North Korean regime has been the core of Washington's North Korea policy. This policy is based on West's negative perception – even demonization – of North Korean regime of Juchéism. In the eyes of the media, think tanks and politicians of the West, Juchéism is a dangerous ideology which, if spread, can pollute the Western value of democracy.

Washington's strategy of regime change is built up on two tactics: total war or/and internal revolt. The total war was planned several times since as early as 1950. The U.S. had an idea of attacking North Korea with nuclear weapon during the Korean War (1950-1953). In 1992, Bill Clinton was going to bomb North Korea. In 1968, after the capture by Pyongyang of the USS Pueblo, a spy ship, Washington was going to attack North Korea. In 2017, Trump was ready to invade North Korea

But, none of these plans was carried out because of the huge human casualties. According to John Bolton, one of the most ardent supporter of the war mentioned that within 30 minute of the war, several millions of citizens of Seoul city will be sacrificed, apart from the deaths of American troops and their families.

The alternative option taken by Washington along with the conservative forces in South Korea was to provoke internal revolts, topple the Juché government and establish a democratic regime.

To provoke the internal revolt against the North Korean government, the U.S. and its allies have used several tactics.

First, the tactic used was the creation of fear so that the people would blame the government for its failure of assuring citizens' security. This has been done for decades by U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises. According to the people who have lived in North Korea, these military exercises were so extensive, so violent and so intense that that the North Koreans people became utterly frightened and even terrorized. This tactic was a

failure. The North Koreans have endured without complaining against the government. On the contrary, they rather blamed the U.S. and its allies.

Second, the U.S. and its allies have been relying on anti-Juché propaganda through radio, TV, seminars with North Korean refugees and even the air-born propaganda balloons. The propaganda was designed to show the superiority of democracy of South Korea over Juchéism of North Korea. This approach has failed primarily, because North Koreans had contempt for the South Korean regime for its corruption, its being vassal regime of Washington and its being pro-Japan. North Koreans knew that South Korea was richer than North Korea, but they seemed to think that the North Korean government looked after the ordinary citizens far better than the conservative South Korean counterparts.

Third, Washington and the conservative South Korean government have been trying to isolate Pyongyang from the international community through diplomatic pressure and economic aid, but this tactic has not produced the expected results. North Korea has diplomatic relations with 164 countries, although the number of embassies abroad is much smaller.

Fourth, Washington has been imposing on North Korea endless sanctions against the North. Washington and the conservative government of South Korea thought that these sanctions would lead to the massive complaints against the government, but this has not happened in North Korea for the simple reason that the people had been used to it on the one hand and, on the other, North Korea enforced self sufficiency and increasingly used the underground trade with China and other neighbouring countries to get daily necessities and even oil.

Despite all these harsh tactics deployed by the U.S. and its allies, the citizens of North Korea have not revolted and the Juchéism has survived.

This can be explained by two additional factors. On the one hand, Juchéism has evolved from militarism (Sun-gun) to double priority of military force and economic development (Byun-jin) and now, to economic development. In other words, Juchéism has been evolving from the military-oriented system to people's welfare-oriented system.

On the other hand, we must know the cultural impact of the leader-people relation embodied in the Juchéism. The ideology of Juché is highly inspired by Confucianism in which the people regard the head of state as father and obey. In the West, one wonders how the Kim's family has been able to maintain the power for 70 years. Given the harsh living conditions, the North Koreans could have risen up and try to topple the government. But this has not happened, because the government-people relation is not necessarily one of ruler-ruled coercive relations but rather one of ruler's paternalistic care-people's gratitude. However, as the North Korean society becomes more open and globalized, such Confucian relations will have to go through changes. And, the regime will become more open and more globally acceptable regime.

Policy of Denuclearization has gone no where

Politicians and bureaucrats in Washington have been trying to convince the world that Washington's North Korea policy of denuclearization is the best assurance of peace on the Korean peninsula. In fact, the U.S. had good opportunities to achieve the objective of denuclearization. But, unfortunately, Washington blew all these opportunities.

The first opportunity was the Framework Agreement of October 21, 1994 by virtue of which North Korea would stop all nuclear program in return of the construction of two civil use light water nuclear reactors and provision of oil. But this was cancelled because of the non-implementation of the Agreement by Washington and Seoul. One of the reasons of the non-implementation of the Agreement was the death of Kim Il-sung in July 1994. Washington hoped that Kim-il-sung's death would provoke popular revolt and topple the government.

But there was no popular revolt and the regime was still there. This meant that Washington and Seoul had to implement the Agreement. But, neither South Korea nor the U.S. wanted the implementation of the Agreement. So, Washington and Seoul were looking for events which could justify the non-implementation of the Agreement, Well, North Korea provided an event.

On August 31, 1998, Kim Jong-il, successor of Kim Il-sung made a test of Missile Taepodong-1 to show the dissatisfaction with the non-implementation of the Agreement. This gave Washington the justification for scraping the Agreement. And, in 2002, the Agreement just disappeared into thin air, when George W. Bush declared that North Korea was a part of " Axis of Evil".

The second was the 2005-Agreement which was produced as a result of the 6-Party Talks. George W. Bush blew the chance of denuclearization. North Korea was quite disappointed with Washington's hesitation to implement the 1944-Agreement and, in December of 2002, Pyongyang announced that it would reactivate the Yongbyon nuclear facilities. This obviously alarmed the Bush government and in 2003, the 6-party Talk began under the presidency of China. The member countries included the two Koreas, Japan, Russia and the U.S.

On August 9, 2003, the first meeting of the 6-Party Talk took place. The talk was difficult because of Pyongyang's uranium enriching program which North Korea denied, while The U.S. suspected. In order to put pressure on Pyongyang, the U.S. froze 25 million USD deposited by North Korea in a bank (Banco Delta Asia) in Macao.

Nevertheless, on September 19, 2005, a joint statement was announced. In this Statement, North Korea pledged to abandon nuclear program and respect the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) Safe Guards rules as well as its return to NPT (Non-proliferation Treaty) in exchange of non-aggression of the U.S. However, there was no positive sign of realization of the Statement. Then, in order to speed up the process and to show its potential nuclear capacity, Pyongyang undertook the first nuclear test on October 9, 2006.

The 6-Party Talk continued until 2007. In 2007 the group announced the Action Plan of the 2005 Statement. In this plan North Korea would go further by promising no export of nuclear products, while the U.S. would provide 900,000 tons of oil. Moreover, North Korea will be removed from the list of terrorism sponsor countries.

Then February 2008, the anti-Pyongyang conservative party of Lee Byong-bak took over the power in South Korea and the 6-PartyTalk mechanism disappeared. Nevertheless, Washington could, if it wanted, implement the 2005 Joint Statement despite the Lee Myong-bak's anti- North Korea policy.

Barack Obama who succeeded George W. Bush could continue the 6-Party talk, but he failed. He could try to improve the bilateral relations, but he did not. Rather, he spent 8-year

of “Strategic Patience”, which has led to 3 nuclear tests out of 6 nuclear tests ever undertaken by Pyongyang and 83 missile tests representing 57% of all missile tests undertaken by North Korea. In this way Obama made North Korea a de facto Nuclear State and a missile super power.

The third was Trump’s engagement policy designed to bring peace to the Korean peninsula. But, he had to deal with North Korea which was deeply disappointed by the 8-year “strategic patience”. When Donald Trump took over the power on January 20, 2017, Pyongyang was in a difficult situation because of Obama’s North Korea policy of doing nothing. But it had a high hope for Trump’s more positive policy of peace dialogue and engagement. But, nothing happened. To show its disappointment, North Korea tested on July 4, 2017 the ICBM, Hwasung-14 with a range of 8,500 KM and undertook test of hydrogen bomb on September 3, 2017. Trump reacted violently and threatened Pyongyang with “fury and fire”.

Here, we can see that Americans felt insecure. And, Trump felt the need for engagement with Kim Jong-un. But, having no experience in managing international crisis, Trump relied on Moon Jae-in, president of South Korea, for the engagement and the Singapore Summit took place on June 12, 2018 leading to joint statement on some basic guiding principles of the bilateral engagement. But the real test took place in Hanoi on February 27-28, 2019, which was sabotaged by hardliners in Washington. It was just too bad. Remember this. Kim Jong-un went to Hanoi by train taking three days travel to Hanoi. He did this to show his sincerity of solving the nuclear crisis. It was a golden opportunity to find the solution. But Trump blew it.

Image below: U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster during September briefing on North Korea. (White House)



What emerges from these episodes is the pattern of Washington’s North Korean denuclearization policy. The pattern may be summarized:

American nuclear threat→North Korean deterrent reactions (missile tests or nuclear tests)→fear in the U.S.→Washington-Pyongyang Peace Agreement→restoration of calm in the U.S.→Cancellation of the agreement

Let us apply this pattern to what happened to the 1994 Framework Agreement.

- Prior to the 1994 Framework Agreement, North Korea was threatened by possible nuclear attack by the U.S. The Soviet Union’s collapse in 1989 meant for Pyongyang the end of Soviet protection against American nuclear attack and North Korea felt the need for nuclear development for defensive purpose.

- In 1992, Pyongyang withdrew from NPT, which alarmed Washington. Bill Clinton planned military intervention-most likely nuclear attack.
- Owing to the Jimmy Carter's mediation, Washington and Pyongyang signed the 1994 Agreement.
- Calm was restored in the U.S.
- The U.S. and its allies looked for an excuse for cancelling the Agreement. In 1998, North Korea launched missile to complain the delay of the Agreement implementation.
- And, in 2002, George W. Bush made North Korea as a part of the "Axis of Evil". In this way, the 1994 Agreement has gone with the political wind.

Now let us look at the end of 2005 Joint Statement.

- Having lost the chance of peace through the 1994 Agreement, North Korea needed to put pressure on the U.S. Pyongyang said that it could reactivate the Yongbyon nuclear facilities.
- Being alarmed, Washington persuaded China, in 2003, to organize the 6-Party Talk.
- On September 19, 2005, the 6-Party Talk signed the Joint Statement in which North Korea would stop all nuclear programmes in return of non aggression of the U.S.
- North Korea being fed up with the non-fulfillment of the joint Statement, undertook the first nuclear test on October 9, 2006
- In 2007, the 6-Party-Talk tried to continue its dialogue and the Action Plan was announced.
- Calm was restored in the U.S.
- George W. Bush put North Korea back on the list of terrorism-sponsor country. The 2005-Agreement disappeared with no trace.

Now, let us see the episode of the 2019 Hanoi Summit

- For 8 years (2009-2017), Barack Obama relied on "Strategic Patience" to solve the North Korean nuclear crisis. But he did nothing to undertake dialogue with Pyongyang
- North Korea was hoping that Donald Trump would open the door for bilateral peace dialogue in vain.
- Being disappointed, North Korea launched in July 2017 the ICBM Hwasung-14 which can reach Alaska. And on September 3, Kim Jong-un tested hydrogen bomb. So, Americans felt insecure.
- Trump was alarmed
- Through productive mediation of Moon Jae-in, Donald Trump met Kim Jong-un three times. The Hanoi Summit has given the golden chance for the solution of the North Korean nuclear crisis. But Trump let the chance to fly away.

When we see the 40-year experience of the American North Korea policy, we are made to wonders if Washington really desires denuclearization. If Washington really wanted denuclearization, it has had three occasions for denuclearization, but it has let them to go away. Why? Does Washington really want denuclearization of North Korea? But, what it has shown so far make us doubt its sincerity for denuclearization.

What has happened makes us to believe that Washington does not really want North Korean denuclearization. What has taken place makes us to think that Washington prefers a nuclear North Korea and resulting tension which justifies the presence of U.S. military in South Korea for the China containment policy and which assures the lucrative market of American military equipment in Korea and Japan.

To sum up, the general evaluation of Washington's 40-year North Korea policy is very negative. It has failed in changing Juchéism. The denuclearization policy has gone nowhere. The regime Juchéism is still there intact. The number of nuclear bombs may be increasing.

If there is anything which the U.S. has accomplished, it is the expansion of market of American military equipment and the enhancement of China containment. It is hoped that Biden will come up with North Korea policy that aims at real denuclearization, the lasting peace in Korea and in the region.

It is hoped that Biden will not repeat what his predecessor have done. His policy should be based on mutual trust and respect and find solution through dialogue and negotiation.

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