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Jeju Forum Talking Points

• Why the change in NK's policy direction?

It's a combination of external pressure, internal developments, and the fact that NK has now completed development of nuclear forces capable of hitting the United States. It probably feels it can now deal with the US on an equal footing as a nuclear weapons state. It may also feel reluctant to press ahead too much more out of concern that doing so could prompt the US to take out its fledgling nuclear capability with a preventive strike.

One of the major problems with much analysis is that many so-called experts take what I would call an "essentialist" view. To them, NK is the land that time forgot. Nothing ever changes. But it's clear that nuclear weapons are a big change and it's also clear that KJU has a very different personality, life experience, and leadership style than his father and grandfather. His upbringing in Switzerland has to be a major factor. How is it possible for a young man not to be impressed by that experience? The world's most advanced economy and the only European country that Hitler didn't dare to invade.

NK's security policy has also evolved over the years. It's moved from military-first, to a dual-track or "byongjin" strategy, and is now transitioning again to an economy first policy. So to answer the question, I think Pyongyang's shift in policy direction is strategic, not tactical.

We also need to remember that it's not all about NK either. The possibility of Kim's adopting a new security policy opened up because governments were in place in Washington and Seoul with which he could deal.

• Is NK's foreign policy direction reversible?

Yes—NK's policy direction could change. For example, it's hard to imagine that the current mood of dialogue and relaxation could survive a sudden leadership change in any of the three countries. Apart from that, the prospects look pretty good for policy to continue on the same path. Poll numbers show Trump's NK policy is popular. President Moon just had a huge victory in local elections. Kim Jong Un is enjoying a massive image makeover. But we need to remember stuff happens—and current trends could be knocked off track if something unexpected hit us from the side. For example, what would happen if the Republicans lost the US mid-term elections and Trump faced an impeachment motion? What would happen if US-China relations sharply deteriorated over trade issues? Could there be a move by hardliners in NK against KJU?

This is why it's important to harden present trends by building momentum and making more progress.

- **Could unrelenting media criticism make Trump's NK policy unsustainable?**

Theoretically it could, but I think there are growing signs of support for Trump's NK policy. Kim Jong Un must know that he needs to reciprocate for Trump's outreach. As he does, support for Trump's policy should grow.

Despite the administration rhetoric, it's just not going to be possible to delay sanctions relief indefinitely. From a technical perspective, that's ridiculous. Dr. Sig Hecker has estimated that denuclearization may take more than a decade to finish. Does anyone seriously think that NK, businessmen, or others states in the region will wait that long for some reciprocation? While we on the topic of denuclearization, people also need to realize that the process will involve some reprocessing to reduce the volume of highly radioactive material and get it in a form that it be safely shipped out of country.

- **Military exercises—a tool of the military-industrial complex?**

It's pretty clear that, assuming that NK continues to play ball, the joint military exercises as we've known them are going to have to go away. Military analysts have long known that the exercises have grown too gargantuan, reached over-the-top proportions, and become counterproductive—particularly by intimidating NK with strategic systems. If continued at the current level, these exercises would make NK's shift to an economy-first policy more difficult. The introduction of nuclear-capable systems has just been plain stupid, given what we're trying to accomplish. The same goes for inclusion of stealth systems that could be used for a first strike. This only forces NK to redouble efforts to build up its military.

It's long been recognized that the exercises had become excessive and needed to be wound down. I made this argument a year ago in a Nikkei Asian Review. Retired US Army Colonel Bill McKinney more recently made a similar point in 38th North.

I don't think it's the US military-industrial complex that's responsible. Rather, it's been the wrong-headed ideas of many so-called US experts and policy-makers. Most of them attribute all the tensions in Korea to the innate evil of the NK regime. They fail to recognize the action-reaction dimension of the problem—for example, that the Eisenhower administration created the nuclear problem in Korea by threatening to use nuclear weapons to wind up the Korean War and deploying 950 weapons tactical nuclear weapons there in the 1950s. (There's a good article in Wikipedia that provides details.)

We removed all these weapons during the administration of papa Bush, but meanwhile the NKs had already embarked on their own nuclear buildup.

I think what President Trump is trying to do is trying to work this action-reaction dynamic in the other direction—towards denuclearization and peace-building. We should all wish the three leaders—Trump, Kim, and Moon—well and hope that they can succeed.