

A Study on the Motivating Factors for Nuclear Development in the Kim Jong-un Era (2011-2017)

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Abstract

Within five years of Kim Jong-un's rise to power, North Korea conducted four nuclear tests and launched the Hwasong-15, an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), in 2017, declaring the completion of its nuclear forces. During the period when Kim Jong-un completed nuclear forces to maintain the regime, foreign policy factors of the United States, China, Russia, and South Korea drove North Korea's accelerated nuclear development. The main motivating factors were the hostile policies and external threats as security factors. The completion of nuclear forces is also the result of the interplay of domestic political factors, normative factors, and hereditary factors. North Korea has been developing nuclear weapons and missiles for the survival of its regime. To achieve lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula, a new modus vivendi must be sought. It is necessary to set the ultimate goal of North Korea's complete denuclearization and engage in strategic thinking for a realistic and effective phased approach.

Keywords: *foreign policy factors, security factors, domestic political factors, normative factors, hereditary factors*

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2023, North Korea has defined South Korea as its "main enemy and hostile warring nation." South Korea, located in the geopolitical position of the Korean Peninsula, coexists with a nuclear-armed North Korea and finds itself in a situation akin to Damocles sitting under the sword of the existential threat of nuclear weapons[1]. North Korea declares that nuclear weapons are a means of "powerful war deterrence" and that it has risen to the ranks of a "strategic nation" with "strategic status" through its "nuclear treasured sword." This underscores the complex and difficult issue of bringing North Korea, armed with this "nuclear treasured sword," to the negotiating table on the premise of denuclearization. The purpose of this study is to identify the motivating factors behind Kim Jong-un's acceleration of nuclear development. Denuclearization of North Korea, which requires an arduous process, can only be addressed by accurately diagnosing the root causes of the problem. Therefore, it is important to conduct research to derive the motivating factors for Kim Jong-un's accelerated nuclear development through comprehensive analysis and logical inference. This will provide a

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starting point for exploring solutions and finding common ground for North Korea's denuclearization.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

There has been a tendency to overlook efforts to identify the reasons for North Korea's nuclear possession, as its nuclear program is perceived as the root of evil threatening peace on the Korean Peninsula and must be eliminated. Nevertheless, domestic and foreign researchers have attempted to identify the motivating factors. Ko Yu-hwan viewed North Korea's motivation for developing nuclear weapons from a historical-structural perspective, as a product of the complex interplay of factors such as the *suryong* (supreme leader) system, the division system, and the world system[2]. Bu Seung-chan and Park Kyung-jin suggested that North Korea's nuclear development is the result of efforts to ensure the survival and maintenance of the regime by applying Sagan's model of nuclear development motivation (security, domestic politics, and norm models)[3]. Yoo Sung-ok stated that changes in the internal and external environments, such as North Korea's internal situation, inter-Korean and North Korea-U.S. relations, and the international non-proliferation regime, provided the causes for nuclear development, including domestic political motives, military security motives, and economic motives[4]. Kim Bo-mi found the reason for North Korea's advancement of nuclear capabilities in domestic political factors such as the tense party-military relationship. Nuclear weapons serve to minimize external threats while simultaneously maximizing Kim Jong-un's domestic political interests and ensuring the stability of the regime[5]. Moon Jang-kwon argued that political motivations were the main determining factors behind North Korea's pursuit of nuclear policy in the post-Cold War era, and that nuclear possession is deeply related to national prestige and regime justification[6]. Scott D. Sagan proposed three models for why states develop nuclear weapons[7]. The "Security Model" is when nuclear weapons are developed to enhance national security against external threats. The "Domestic Politics Model" is when nuclear weapons are developed as a means to serve domestic regional and bureaucratic interests. The "Norm Model" suggests that states possess nuclear weapons because they can be seen as an important standard symbol demonstrating a nation's modernity or identity. Victor D. Cha presented a three-step model to explain the background and intentions behind North Korea's nuclear weapons development[8]. They serve as a shield to defend against attacks from hostile nations, including the United States. They are also a sword to achieve aggressive and revisionist goals. Finally, nuclear weapons are developed to serve as badges symbolizing the nation's modernity and power. Existing research has primarily focused on the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il eras, especially the first and second North Korean nuclear crises. Additionally, there are limitations in deriving and optimizing the motivating factors for accelerated nuclear development due to the restricted confirmation of policy reflections resulting from the dynamics of North Korea's internal politics and the focus on external approaches to analysis. Nevertheless, the analysis made it possible to derive common motivating factors, namely foreign policy factors, security factors, domestic political factors, normative factors, and hereditary factors.

3. Motivating Factors for Nuclear Development in the Kim Jong-un Era (2011-2017)

a. Foreign Policy Factors Driving the Completion of Nuclear Forces

Obama maintained an ambiguous stance through his "strategic patience" policy, based on the premise that negotiations and dialogue with North Korea were meaningless, and did not actively engage in resolving the crisis. Xi Jinping strongly criticized North Korea's nuclear tests and missile development while adhering to a dual policy that valued North Korea's stability[9]. Putin's New Eastern Policy, driven by his new equidistant foreign policy, struggled to achieve effectiveness due to the deteriorating North Korea-U.S. relations. The Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations linked the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue to the starting point of improving inter-Korean relations, resulting in extremely strained relations between the two

Koreas. The policies of the U.S., China, Russia, and South Korea toward North Korea failed to deter its nuclear development and instead drove its advancement.

b. Security Factors: Hostile Policies toward North Korea and External Threats

Kim Jong-un's abandonment of nuclear weapons could lead to a loss of legitimacy for the regime inherited from Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, weakening the durability of the system, making it a fundamental reason why he cannot give them up. North Korea is exposed to and vulnerable to external threats, and the persistence of isolation through international sanctions and pressure has led it to pursue nuclear development. In particular, although North Korea is in an alliance with China, doubts about the reliability of its patron state (China) have prompted it to secure the status of a nuclear power through nuclear tests and the advancement of nuclear delivery means. The establishment of the Strategic Forces, responsible for nuclear weapons and missiles under Kim Jong-un's direct command, demonstrates the authority and legitimacy to overcome unstable security factors.

c. Domestic Political Factors for Advancing Nuclear Capabilities

The widening gap in national power between South and North Korea has become a factor that compelled North Korea to develop nuclear weapons to offset the imbalance in conventional forces. North Korea adopted the "parallel development of economic construction and nuclear armed forces" line, recognizing that the completion of nuclear armed forces is a useful means to enhance war deterrence and defense capabilities militarily, cope with external threats, and simultaneously promote economic development and concentrate national capabilities on improving people's lives. This is being demonstrated through the practical achievements of modernizing weapon systems, such as the development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, through the science and technology-first policy.

d. Normative Factors for Establishing Identity and Enhancing Status

North Korea has propagated nuclear weapons as the "Juche nuclear treasured sword" and "almighty treasured sword" that maintain the suryong system (supreme leader). In North Korea, which has a strong totalitarian character, nuclear weapons are a symbol of political power and a decisive factor in power struggles. In 2012, at the 5th Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly, North Korea amended its Socialist Constitution, mentioning for the first time in the preamble that it is a "nuclear-armed state" in name and reality. Furthermore, in 2013, at the 7th Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly, it adopted the Supreme People's Assembly ordinance "On Further Consolidating the Status of a Self-defensive Nuclear Power" (hereinafter referred to as the "Nuclear-Armed State Ordinance"). In the same year, it codified nuclear possession in the preamble of the "Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Party's Monolithic Leadership System," the supreme and highest norms. Externally, North Korea firmly maintains the position that nuclear weapons can no longer be a political bargaining chip or an economic trade-off, and hopes to be recognized as a nuclear power.

e. Hereditary Factors for Securing Legitimacy

Kim Jong-un sought to secure the legitimacy of his power by inheriting to a certain extent the Juche ideology and Songun (military-first) policy of his predecessors. In this situation, nuclear weapons functioned as a means to establish Kim Jong-un's monolithic rule. Nuclear development creates endless external crises and serves as an important means to solidify internal unity and stability. Moreover, Kim Jong-un's inheritance and implementation of Kim Il-sung's ideology and Kim Jong-il's governing discourse is an important factor in securing the legitimacy of power succession. As a result, the completion of nuclear armed forces provided the

driving force for Kim Jong-un to emerge as an even greater leader than Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, who failed to achieve this. On the other hand, it became a factor in bringing about internal system solidarity and the consolidation of power. Ultimately, North Korea's nuclear development is a legacy of hereditary succession passed down from the previous generations to Kim Jong-un.

4. Preparation for North Korean nuclear threat and plan for denuclearization

For an effective response to the North Korean nuclear threat, the credibility of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) agreed upon by South Korea and the U.S. needs to be enhanced through the permanent deployment of U.S. extended deterrence strategic assets on the Korean Peninsula, the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons, and the development of NATO's nuclear sharing system. In particular, it is necessary to consider a "Conventional-Nuclear Integration" (CNI) system that allows South Korean fighter jets to carry and drop nuclear weapons. New "Korean Peninsula-style denuclearization solution models" should be developed, taking into account the Ukrainian-style mediation of security-economic exchange, the Libyan model of political big deals, and the South African model premised on changes in the security environment and regime change[10]. Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula requires preliminary work to build consensus within the framework of the Six-Party Talks. The participation of China and Russia can strengthen the binding force of the agreement and play a constructive role in checking the non-compliance of the agreement by North Korea or the U.S. unilaterally. While proceeding with denuclearization negotiations centered on North-South and North-U.S. relations, the Six-Party Talks or the Four-Party Talks should also be restored at an appropriate time. Considering North Korea's nuclear capabilities, a practical and phased approach through partial denuclearization is necessary. A strategic roadmap is required for short-term freezing of North Korea's nuclear program and long-term complete denuclearization. Furthermore, while aiming for a comprehensive and ultimate resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue, short-term measures should be prioritized to prevent the situation from deteriorating and build the minimum trust necessary for progress in denuclearization. If the principle of strategic and flexible reciprocity is applied to mutual demands, a phased agreement and implementation will be possible.

5. Conclusion

During the period when Kim Jong-un completed nuclear forces to maintain the regime, foreign policy factors such as Obama's "strategic patience" policy, Xi Jinping's "dual policy," Putin's ineffective "New Eastern Policy," and Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye's "hard-line policy toward North Korea" drove North Korea's accelerated nuclear development. The main motivating factors were doubts about the reliability of its patron state (China), hostile policies toward North Korea, and external threats as security factors. In addition, the completion of nuclear forces was driven by the interplay of domestic political factors such as the adoption of the "parallel development of economic construction and nuclear armed forces" line due to the widening gap in national power between North and South Korea; normative factors such as specifying "nuclear-armed state" in the Socialist Constitution and enacting ordinances, and adopting the "Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Party's Monolithic Leadership System"; and hereditary factors to establish a ruling foundation and secure legitimacy. North Korea considers itself a small great power possessing nuclear weapons. A return to small state status through arms reduction is realistically difficult[11]. Denuclearization of North Korea is an essential process for peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula. However, North Korea has developed nuclear weapons to maintain its regime while sacrificing its economy since the Korean War. If it does not gain benefits that can compensate for the dismantling of nuclear weapons, there is no possibility of abandonment. The

United States must reduce risks with North Korea, improve the security environment, and build mutual trust in a substantive, proactive, and realistic manner. A new modus vivendi should be sought to shift to peaceful coexistence with North Korea and offer conciliatory measures first to resume dialogue[12]. Facing the reality of a nuclear-armed North Korea, North Korea policy should also focus on forward-looking efforts and approaches for peaceful coexistence. To this end, efforts in multiple aspects, including maintaining deterrence while simultaneously pursuing political and diplomatic means, must be maximized. Strategic thinking for lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula is needed at this point.

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