Recently, US president Barack Obama visited South Korea and Japan as a part of a four-nation Asia tour. Certainly it is unrealistic to expect the issues facing the Korean peninsula to be resolved after a single summit between the US-Japan and US-ROK. Nevertheless, President Obama’s visit to Seoul and Tokyo this month ended somewhat in disappointment, with no substantial results. No real observable advancements were made on the top agenda items -- the North Korean nuclear issue and improvement of jarred ROK-Japan relations -- other than Japan and US agreement on its own security issues and South Korea and US agreeing on pressuring North Korea for the resolution of nuclear issue.

The North Korean nuclear issue continues to escalate. Currently there are no other measures being taken but to demand North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions. North Korea has threatened to conduct a fourth nuclear test and has been bellicosely playing the nuclear card to resume the stalled Six-Party Talks without conditions. Under the current circumstances, the discernible outcome of President Obama’s Asia tour reached between the three countries is a mere warning based on principles for nuclear abandonment and enforcement of sanctions in case of additional nuclear testing. No parties presented progression in their positions to resolve the current nuclear challenge through dialogue. North Korea continues to demand a return to dialogue. The US, South Korea and Japan obdurately refuse. This has only added fuel for North Korean nuclear capabilities and arsenals to grow in strength.

The key factor in the deteriorated relationship between South Korea and Japan is the historical revisionism of Japan’s Shinzo Abe administration and this visit has only reaffirmed this challenge, not resolve it. Prime Minister Abe openly spoke at the US-Japan joint press conference justifying Yasukuni Shrine visits and President Obama confirmed that the disputed island of Senkaku (known as “Diaoyu” in Chinese) fell under the US-Japanese Security Treaty and supported Japan’s assertion of the right to collective self-defense, adding power to Abe’s push for an expanded military role and right-wing politics. It is not surprising that China is expressing concerns over the joint statement released by the United States and Japan. President Obama must face the criticism that these actions have further fueled future conflict and confrontation in the Northeast Asian region instead of peace and cooperation.

President Obama's Asia trip’s failed attempt to improve relations and resolve the North Korean nuclear issue has everything to do with the US “return to Asia” policy or “rebalancing” strategy.

Once the negotiation is restarted through the resumption of the Six-Party Talks, the current political atmosphere in Northeast Asia will shift to a mood of dialogue rather than confrontation. After members of the Six-Party Talks gather for multilateral and bilateral talks and begin to make some progress, one can expect a new door of dialogue to open. In this case, the United States will have difficulty in pressing China and enforce its rebalancing strategy. For the US, it is more favorable to enforce its rebalancing strategy in the structured environment of security crisis with confrontation and conflict in Northeast Asia and escalation of the North Korean nuclear threat.

As North Korea's nuclear capabilities and military provocations gain strength through nuclear
tests and missile launches, the US also gains the legitimacy of strengthening its military intervention in Northeast Asia. In the past, when Six-Party Talks were in works, the United States had less involvement militarily in the Korean peninsula. Conversely, the United States involvement in the Korean peninsula was vindicated during the period of North Korea's nuclear provocations and the suspension of multilateral talks. During the period of North Korea's provocations involving the sinking of the ROKS Cheonan navy corvette and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, the US nuclear-powered carrier USS George Washington was swiftly dispatched to the West (Yellow) Sea. The crisis in spring of 2013 also allowed the United States to place strategic nuclear bombers, stealth aircraft, and a nuclear aircraft carrier, of which the aircraft could fly over the Korean peninsula. This created favorable conditions for the Obama administration to execute its return to Asia strategy and rebalancing strategy to keep China in check. Consequently, as the Obama administration maintains the rebalancing strategy as the top tactic for East Asia, its strategic interests to resolve the North Korean nuclear dilemma through dialogue is weakened.

The Obama administration faces "automatic budget cuts" for the next 10 years and must cut $500 billion in defense spending. In addition, for the US to maintain its superpower status, it is imperative to promote military cooperation with Japan. Thus, it is natural that Japan is the largest supporter of the US missile defense (MD) system. This is a tactically calculated move, as the United States is attempting to make up for its defense cuts through supporting Japan's military expansion. In an exchange to fill its defense budget gap by strengthening the US-Japan alliance, the United States is turning a blind eye to Japan’s far-right movement and historical revisionism. This is a part of the same context of US stalwartly defending Japan in the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute which provides strong momentum to Japan’s hard right and military expansion.

For the US government, it may be inevitable to watch the growing far-right movement in Japan with the heightening of the North Korean nuclear threats as the US seeks to promote its “return to Asia” and “rebalancing” strategies while at the same time increase military cooperation with Japan. As the US blatantly took the side of Japan in the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute and gave ex post facto approval on the collective self-defense, it demonstrates the US-Japan alliance is a critical component of Washington’s East Asia strategy. Due to this fact, the US responded with support for Japan's shift to the right. As a result, confrontations between China and Japan intensified and relations between South Korea and Japan were exacerbated. While the confrontation between China and Japan is not a huge concern for the United States, the jarred ROK-Japan relations is creating an uncomfortable situation for Washington. For the Obama administration to complete the “return to Asia” and “rebalancing” strategies, it is critical to expand the US-ROK-Japan military cooperation to the level of mutual integration. This is related to the US’s continuous demand for South Korea’s participation in the US missile defense system and encouragement to seek resolutions to various issues including the sex slave issue and promote future-oriented relations between Japan and South Korea.

What South Korea needs the most in the 21st century is to make the transition from a confrontational structure of the neo-Cold War period to peaceful cooperative relations of the post-Cold War period. It is unacceptable to allow Japan to continue to shift to the right and promote historical revisionism or just sit and watch the conflicting power struggle between Japan and China. More broadly, it is more beneficial for South Korea if the Sino-US relations advance from confrontational to cooperative relations. Furthermore, US-ROK alliance and ROK-Sino strategic cooperative partnership must be promoted simultaneously. It is critical for South Korea to stand firm and not fall victim to the Obama administration's rebalancing strategy that creates confrontation.

More than ever, South Korea must head the effort to promote peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia. Rather than idly standing by, South Korea should persuade the United States to resume the Six-Party Talks to resolve the nuclear issue. The resumption of the Six-Party Talks is meaningful as it signifies the transition from deteriorated relations to a new phase of dialogue. Once talks are restarted to begin nuclear negotiations, it will create an atmosphere of dialogue and cooperation instead of confrontation in Northeast Asia. A spirit of cooperation in the region can be generated in the long term by redressing the flawed choices made by the Japanese government.
The real progress in the North Korean nuclear issue can be expected only when trust is continuously maintained between North and South Korea and an active role is possible. For the Park Geun-hye administration’s Trust-Building Process on the Korean Peninsula to fully operate, it must be based on trusting North Korea. Rather than criticizing North Korea for its failure to accept our offers, we need to take a more realistic and pragmatic approach. A new approach becomes necessary to proceed toward an inter-Korean dialogue which takes into account both South Korea’s Dresden initiative (that focus on economic cooperation and social and cultural exchanges) and North Korea’s National Defense Commission’s January 16th proposal (that deals with political and military issues). South Korea must take the ownership and initiative to resolve the nuclear issue, North-South relations, and promote peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia.