

NORTH KOREA: IN SEARCH OF A PEACEFUL SOLUTION

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Immediate concerns

In the beginning of every year, tensions increase on the Korean peninsula. This is the time for the annual US–South Korean military exercises, which the North sees as preparations for attack. It is also the time for celebration of Kim family birthdays and the Day of the Army, usually marked with some kind of military bravado – missile or satellite launches, a nuclear test, a major military exercise or at least a military parade.

This year has been particularly worrisome. The North Korean testing programme, which intensified one and a half years ago and aims at intercontinental capability, has shown significant progress. US build-up in the region was more comprehensive than before: five military exercises were held; a US carrier group accompanied by Japanese naval units moved toward the Korean peninsula; and the THAAD missile defence system was hastily deployed to South Korea to precede the election of a new president known to be opposed to it. Particularly unnerving was the Trump–Kim combination. Trump is inexperienced and unpredictable, by design and perhaps by personality; and, for lack of better information, grave concerns have been raised about Kim’s stability and rationality. No transparency and high tension breeds worst-case assumptions.

Risk is probability-times outcome. The probability of armed conflict may be low, after all. Nobody wants it. The stakes have been raised, however, and North Korea shows no sign of backing down. It is also worth recalling that in 1994, the USA and North Korea came close to war. Should that happen, the consequences would be catastrophic, and so the risk remains significant.

North Korean objectives

For North Korea, security is at the heart of the problem, and nuclear deterrence has become the favoured means of achieving it. Kim Jong Un inherited the nuclear priority from his father Kim Jong Il, but has taken it to new heights. In 2013, the Constitution was amended to declare the DPRK a nuclear weapon state, and nuclear activities have become a prominent feature of the North Korean media picture and national identity. At the same time, the young Kim has promised to raise the well-being of the population. His thinking appears similar to that of the big powers during the Cold War: it is cheaper to make nuclear weapons than to maintain a conventional military balance against a much stronger South Korea – the North Korean version of a “bigger bang for the buck”. By substituting

nuclear firepower for conventional force – 700 000 active frontline personnel and 4.5 million in reserve, a formidable drain on resources – Kim may hope to free resources for civilian use, and thus make these objectives compatible.

The *byungjin* strategy of nuclear deterrence and improved standards of living is the road-map “under the prevailing situation”. That phrase probably implies that Pyongyang may change the strategy if the United States and South Korea move away from what North Korea calls “their hostile policy”.

Therefore, nuclear deterrence may not be carved in stone – but today it will take more to push it back than ten years ago. A functional equivalent to an operational nuclear force will have to be found – a strong bargaining card in Kim’s hands. The fate of the security assurances given to the Ukraine under the Budapest agreement underscores the problem.

Another reading of the North’s objective is more aggressive. After the partition, North and South Korea have shared the goal of unification, but each wanted to be the surviving government. With the Soviet Union gone and no hope of support from Russia, and with China recognizing South Korea and looking in all other directions than North Korea, Pyongyang had nothing to sustain that ambition. Kim Il Sung therefore sought reconciliation with his arch-enemies the United States, Japan and South Korea. However, he did not stop his embryonic, covert nuclear programme, and was caught red-handed by the IAEA in 1993.

There is not much evidence to shed light on the North’s reunification ambitions in the years that followed. Squeezed as the country is, economically and politically, one would think that security for the regime would be an ambition high enough. However, reunification under DPRK leadership may have drawn renewed attention and interest as its nuclear weapon capability grew, this time in the form of decoupling of South Korea from the United States. Similar to de Gaulle’s credo – “the United States does not sacrifice Chicago for Paris” – a capability to strike the American continent might undermine the US security guarantee for the South. In the 1980s, Soviet SS-20s were viewed in the same perspective – as an effort to decouple Western Europe from the United States. Translated to the Korean peninsula, the United States would not sacrifice San Francisco for Seoul. The narrative may appear far-fetched – there is no comparison between the capabilities of the Soviet Union and North Korea – but it cannot be ruled out.

Options

North Korea is of imminent security concern not only for East Asia, but for the world. So, for that matter, is the United States under Donald Trump. How can the tensions be alleviated and the problem solved? What are the options?

Sanctions

Sanctions do not work. The same crime and punishment cycle has been repeated over and over again. North Korea tests, the world condemns, the UN Security Council convenes,, more sanctions are proposed, China negotiates with the United States to dilute them, the United States discusses military counter-measures with its Asian allies –and North Korea continues its nuclear and missile programmes.

The lesson from Iran tells the same story. Radically different from isolated North Korea, Iran used to be well connected with the outside world, but sanctions could not stop the nuclear programme. When UN sanctions were first imposed in 2006, Iran had installed just a few hundred centrifuges. By the time Hassan Rouhani was elected president in 2013, there were 19 000.

The point is this: sanctions can function as intended only when accompanied by negotiations. When the US settled for talks, and credible expectations of sanctions relief took hold, Iran, in response, offered concessions of its own to make an agreement possible. Then –and only then – did sanctions work as they were meant to. Pressure with negotiations succeeded where pure pressure had failed. And North Korea is no different.

In the case of Iran, the USA and the EU ramped up sanctions from 2010 on, in what became a prelude to negotiations. In the case of North Korea, there is not much more to cut as long as China maintains its policy of engagement. China allows public debate on North Korea and views differ, but Xi is wedded to stability, especially now, prior to the Party Congress this autumn, and will continue to keep the DPRK afloat. During the first quarter of this year China's imports from North Korea increased by 18 per cent and its exports by a staggering 55 per cent. Still, while there is no sign that China will let its irritating neighbour down, calls for more sanctions continue –more to mark opposition to continued testing than out of any belief in their instrumentality.

Cyber warfare

Around 2010, the IAEA noticed that many Iranian centrifuges collapsed, and commentators believed that Iran did not master the technology. The explanation was quite different: it was a US cyberattack, Stuxnet, that made many centrifuges spin out of control.

Three years ago, Obama reportedly accelerated a secret campaign of cyber-warfare strikes at North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes. The covert programme is known as "left of launch", as cyberattacks begin before missiles reach the launching pad or as they blast off. Such attacks may

delay the targeted programmes until operators find out what is happening, but they do not solve any problems.

War

Siegfried Hecker, former head of the Los Alamos weapons lab, believes that North Korea has made nuclear warheads – perhaps 20-25 of them - small and light enough to be mounted on missiles which can reach targets anywhere in South Korea and Japan. A successful missile test three weeks ago demonstrated a missile range of at least 4000 km, putting Guam within range. The primary objective of the test was to move closer to intercontinental ballistic missile capability. Solid fuel enables them to launch their missiles on short notice and from hidden positions, making missile defence more difficult.

In 1994, when a batch of irradiated fuel was about to be unloaded from the reactor in Yongbyon, the USA thought it could bomb the reprocessing facility with little risk of radioactive fallout. Today, bombing the programme makes little sense. It is not known where the weapons are located and where the covert production facilities might be, and road-mobile and submarine-launched missiles cannot be located reliably. All told, the consequences of any military intervention are unacceptably high, certainly in the view of the South Korean government and probably also in that of the United States – despite the proclamation that “all options are on the table”.

The military option would be considered seriously only if North Korea should initiate military action. An attack on South Korea cannot be ruled out in a decoupling scenario, if and when the continental United States has come within reach of its missiles –but it seems far-fetched. Premeditated attack on the USA is not on the cards, for the regime is not suicidal. The real danger is that in a period of high tension, events may spin out of control.

Negotiations

The 2005 statement of principles, agreed at the six-power talks in Beijing, was in many respects a repeat of the 1994 Framework Agreement that defused that year’s crisis. The statement ruled out weapons as well as fuel-cycle facilities. The parties undertook to respect each other’s sovereignty and to normalize relations, promoting economic cooperation in the fields of energy, trade and investment. Further, they agreed to negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula, replacing the armistice agreement with a peace treaty and regional security arrangements. The scope of the undertaking was all-encompassing, and the parties agreed to implement their consensus in a phased manner, in line with the principle of “commitment for commitment, action for action”. These principles remain valid. The current search for peaceful solutions may build on this platform.

The United States wants North Korea to take steps to denuclearize first. Secretary Tillerson has said the North Koreans must eliminate their arsenal or at least constrain it significantly: then, the USA might sit down for talks. North Korea, in response, wants to negotiate a peace treaty before denuclearizing. Neither position is negotiable. Such posturing over the sequence is a sure sign of deadlock.

However, out of the public gaze, and on condition that negotiations would be conducted along the parallel and reciprocal lines advocated by China, North Korea might nevertheless offer some initial concessions, like a halt in testing and fissile material production, similar to the suspension it agreed to at the onset of negotiations in 1994. For the USA, it is psychologically demanding to have to negotiate on a par with a pariah state; domestically, it is hard to defend because the dominant narrative maintains that diplomacy has failed and North Korea alone is to blame. In effect, diplomacy has slowed down the programme and on one occasion (2007-2008) even deactivated it. Furthermore, on more than one occasion the United States also failed to live up to its commitments, not only North Korea. If and when negotiations resume, both side must do better in this respect.

A related idea, aired by Hans Blix, holds that a commitment not to test nuclear weapons might be combined with US and Chinese commitments to the same, promoting universal acceptance of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). In that way, North Korean acceptance would be easier to obtain, and a long-sought, top-priority arms control objective might be achieved. With the P-5 on board, pressure would mount on the remaining hold-outs – India, Pakistan, Israel, Iran and Egypt – to ratify as well. The idea is attractive and worth promoting, but at odds with prevailing priorities in Washington.

History has shown that the most promising periods in US–North Korea and North–South relations have occurred when Seoul and Washington acted in concert to sustain dialogue and engagement with Pyongyang. By contrast, the most intense crises occurred when Pyongyang concluded that Seoul was impeding Washington’s efforts to engage. And Seoul could make little progress with Pyongyang when Washington was not engaging.

To get new negotiations off to a promising start, it is therefore essential to forge a coordinated engagement between the Trump administration and that of newly elected President Moon in South Korea. Moon is not wedded to sunshine policy, but is leaning in that direction – whereas Trump is confrontational and unpredictable. So coordination is no simple task. North Korea, on the other hand, has always wanted to be on speaking terms with the United States. To get attention, provocative actions have therefore been timed to coincide with special days in the US calendar, like Columbus Day, Memorial Day or when the president makes his State of the Union speech.

In all likelihood, probes that may open the doors to negotiations are already underway between the US, South Korea, China and North Korea. Russia and Japan are included, somehow, for the six-power format is a logical one: these are the powers most directly affected by the Korean conflict. However, quite different from the six powers that negotiated with Iran, which remained well-coordinated throughout, the Asian powers have distinctly diverging interests. For China, North Korea is a piece of a much larger puzzle of pushing the United States away from its immediate neighbourhood and adjacent waters. US missile defence is an important element here. Japan has hang-ups over the abductions issue, and Prime Minister Abe has been using the North Korean threat to promote his own domestic agenda.

Little attention has been paid to Russia, and for good reason: relations with North Korea have been at a minimum. Recently, however, Moscow has positioned itself to play a role in the conflict. The railway to North Korea has been renovated; Russian coal is sent via Rason harbour in the northeast to Asian clients and may also include North Korean coal; a ferry connection to Vladivostok has just been opened; food aid has been provided; and the Korean news agency has named Russia *the* most friendly country. Russia is therefore in a position to undermine Chinese sanctions and play spoiler if it so wishes—or it can play bad cop-good cop with China. Together, these six powers represent a mosaic of interests that make any negotiation a complex undertaking.

The objective must be to achieve North Korean re-entry into the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon-state in return for sanctions relief, economic assistance, normalization and a peace regime providing security assurances for North Korea. Security assurances on paper, in traditional fashion, will hardly suffice. Regional security arrangements may be needed as well. One such arrangement was envisaged in the six-power statement of principles, which committed the parties to “explore ways and means for promoting security cooperation in Northeast Asia”. Another could be a legally binding nuclear-weapon-free zone treaty committing South Korea, Japan and North Korea to abstain from manufacture and testing nuclear weapons, and not to allow nuclear weapons to be stored on their territory. There may be other possibilities. Nobody knows what the North Koreans may agree to: the only way to find out is to negotiate.

In view of the bargaining cards that North Korea has acquired through eight years of uninterrupted arms build-up, finding a functional equivalent to nuclear deterrence is the most demanding single task facing the negotiators. If we are correct in assuming that security for the regime is the main objective for Pyongyang, it should not be beyond human ingenuity to find a solution. But if the North is fixated on the decoupling idea, it may come to naught.

Regime collapse and reunification

The French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) noted that a full-fledged dictatorship is a form of government that can be maintained for a great many years. And indeed, the North Korean version has lasted for seventy. De Tocqueville also noted that semi-dictatorships are difficult to manage. When the rulers begin to open up, they may soon find themselves on a slippery slope leading to collapse. In the age of globalization, there is no life insurance for outmoded dictatorships – so the problem may disappear this way, the weapons along with the regime.

The same scenario may also play out in a less dramatic and more constructive way. At some stage in the transition process from dictatorship to something else, national sentiments may reassert themselves and move to the top of the agenda. They may remain latent for generations, but as soon as the opportunity arises they may spring to life, and demand their right. German reunification was disregarded and deemed illusory until it suddenly happened.

In East Asia, nobody wants reunification the way it happened in Germany. Of course, a better-organized process would be preferable. China holds the key, and it will not trust other countries in the same way as Gorbachev did after German reunification, only to see NATO moving east. For China, the preconditions for reunification are no US soldiers and no nuclear weapons on the peninsula.

These possible outcomes belong to an uncertain future. The current problem is imminent and calls for negotiations, as soon as possible – for, without negotiations and agreements, it is bound to grow and fester. The alternatives are war or acquiescence to another *de facto* nuclear weapon state. Neither prospect is attractive.

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Sverre Lodgaard

