

“Reviving non-proliferation regime on the Korean Peninsula”

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The roots of the crisis. The world has become accustomed to the fact that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has a nuclear programme, that it has performed tests and rocked the boat in North-East Asia every once in a while.

This time it looks like DPRK's nuclear history has taken another dangerous turn. The latest nuclear test evidenced material progress made by North Korean weapon developers – unlike after the first two tests of 2006 and 2009, nobody has come to question the fact that the country actually exploded a nuclear explosive device.

The prospect of Pyongyang having a usable though limited nuclear strike capability is becoming virtually inevitable. If this is the case, the international community may have considerably less leverage over Pyongyang, while the latter will drastically increase its capabilities to blackmail other states or even unleash nuclear war.

North Korea's new leader Kim Jong-un has indicated his reluctance to change the country's economic strategy (i.e. by following the pattern of the People's Republic of China) and sticks to the tactics of nuclear blackmail in order to obtain economic aid from the China, the United States and South Korea. This strategy has perfectly proved its value, in terms of sustaining the regime. Indeed, each time heightened tensions were followed by promises to curtail the country's nuclear programme and practical measures to dismantle some of its elements. However, any such concession has invariably been withdrawn under the all-time pretext of coping with the US threat.

The recent campaign of Pyongyang is obviously domestically oriented, as the current DPRK's leadership is extremely reluctant to embark on market reform which they perceive as a threat to their power. This attitude is aggravated by the domestic situation – overwhelming cynicism coupled with strictest single-mindedness at the official level, enormous social stratification with the absolute majority of the population living in extreme poverty (including documented cases of cannibalism), widespread corruption at every level (to the point of being able to buy an opportunity to cross the border to China), growing black market where anything can be bought at a price that most citizens simply cannot afford.

The country's leadership dreads that this degradation has run too far, so that any attempt at liberalization might cause the regime to collapse. And to top it, there is the prosperous South Korea across the border – the recent years of contacts have influenced the attitude prevailing among the population of its northern counterpart. External tensions have become indispensable for the totalitarian and repressive regime to sustain domestic legitimacy and survive. This makes the situation substantially different from the conditions in China at the start of Deng Xiaoping's reform over three decades ago.

Alongside with the deplorable economic state, another rationale behind the nuclear test in February 2013, as well as the medium-range ballistic missile launch in December 2012, was raising the profile of Kim Jong-un, which was required due to his personality characteristics, as well as due to the fact that his rise to power had been poorly prepared in terms of both organization and publicity.

Nuclear and missile programmes. All experts shared the opinion that the DPRK will further enhance its nuclear capability. According to the experts' estimates, the country has 40 to 62 kg of weapon-grade plutonium in metal form. With the three nuclear tests factored in, 30 to 52 weapon-grade plutonium may have been used to produce nuclear warheads. Following this calculation, the DPRK as of today has 6 to 10 simple implosion-type nuclear weapons with plutonium core in the form of air gravity bombs that may be delivered by H-5 tactical bombers, Chinese-made copy of the old Soviet Il-28 aircraft. However, it is almost certain that the DPRK has no nuclear reentry vehicles for ballistic missiles that require smaller weight and size.

DPRK's facilities for plutonium production currently have limited operation capability following the dismantling activities of 2007-2008. Mastering uranium enrichment is still in a very early state. However, it may be expected that the coming years will see vigorous effort to create an infrastructure to increase plutonium production, as well as to expand the capacities for gas centrifuge uranium enrichment.

According to the approximate estimate by the end of 2012 the ground forces of the Korean People's Army had at its disposal three separate divisions of the medium range ballistic missiles Nodong-1 (range up to 1000 km., 9 launchers), one separate regiment of the operational tactical Scud type missiles (range up to 550 km., 28 launchers), three separate divisions of the KN-02 missile complex (range up to 120 km., 12 launchers) and six separate divisions of the "Luna-M" tactical missiles (range up to 65 km., 21 launchers).

The DPRK will most likely continue nuclear tests. The US needed 3 to 7 tests to include a specific nuclear warhead in the inventory. If uranium warheads will be the center of DPRK's future nuclear arsenal, the country will need a series of tests.

It appears that the nuclear test of 2013 has pushed the DPRK closer to the development of a compact nuclear device that can be used in a reentry vehicle of a ballistic missile. In April 2012 the DPRK amended its constitution to establish its status as a nuclear power which Pyongyang views as the main national security guarantee.

Some experts believe that these two acts by North Korea's new leader Kim Jong-Un have completely buried the feeble hopes of the international community for reaching an agreement on dismantling DPRK's nuclear weapons programme. North Korea regards building up its nuclear and missile potential as a fundamental prerequisite for maintaining the regime and ensuring the country's security against external pressure, and will therefore make vigorous efforts to develop this potential.

Resuming the six-party talks for the Korean peninsula, which had been discontinued in April 2009 has become pointless. Current realities call for new approaches to the issue.

The prospects for negotiations. The DPRK has no serious motivation to enter into talks, for it knows positively that neither the US nor South Korea (let alone other members of the United Nations Security Council, besides the US) will make a decision to resort to force.

Further, Pyongyang is not afraid of sanctions. Firstly, North Korea's external economic relations have been in any case significantly limited, so any new sanctions will hardly make a difference. Secondly, in North Korea there is no private sector and no middle class whose interests may be profoundly affected by sanctions and which could put pressure on the government. Thirdly, the government is totally indifferent to the living standards of the majority of the population as long as it does not revolt. Finally and most importantly, the available scope of sanctions will not be sufficient to seriously affect the material standing of the North Korean ruling establishment.

In addition, North Korea believes that there will be no end to the confrontation among Russia, the United States and China, and that it offers opportunities to maneuver and play on the differences among the three states. Pyongyang has taken advantage of China's position: if the aid is cut, the regime may collapse or respond with desperate military activities that may have unpredictable consequences for China and other states in the region. On the other hand, the mere existence of the North Korean regime with its nuclear weapons and its special relationship with China is an important bargaining chip for Beijing in its relations with the United States, Japan and South Korea.

However a sign of the gravity of the situation is the increased, as compared to the previous tests, severity of international response, in particular the reaction of China. The official Beijing expressed "dissatisfaction" (rather than "regret", "concern", etc.), which translates from the Chinese as "this may be the last straw". This is the first time China's experts on North Korea have started to insist that Beijing should take a tough stance, even if it caused deterioration in the country's relations with the DPRK. It is likely that China anticipates that its North Korean

bargaining chip may go down in value if it becomes evident that the PRC has no real influence over the DPRK.

Some experts believe that it is possible to persuade the DPRK to assume certain obligations under a minimum common denominator: to stop nuclear tests and halt the production of new explosive devices, ensure safety from the leakage of nuclear weapons-related materials and technology abroad. In return for such commitments the international community could agree on an aid programme to meet the demands of North Korean leadership.

However, other experts have found such proposals, particularly those related to the nuclear tests and production of warheads, to be obviously unfeasible, as Pyongyang would fail to comply. For the UN, this would mean going back to the old ill-proven policy of appeasing the North Korean regime. In addition, this would imply that the great powers would have to depart from the principled line because of the uncompromising North Korea, and to openly reconcile themselves to DPRK's past violation of the NPT regime and Security Council resolutions. As a consequence the DPRK will most probably soon respond with increased demands and intensified nuclear blackmail.

Strategic outlook. An opinion was expressed that the North Korean nuclear issue may only be resolved if the DPRK's regime gradually shifts towards market economy and greater transparency. However, the present regime will hardly agree to it. In addition, it is not clear whether a new regime will forego nuclear weapons. This cannot be guaranteed even if the DPRK and South Korea ever reunite, though if they do, nuclear weapons will be a less destabilizing factor (similarly to India).

It was mentioned that in any case, there needs to be a strategy to engage North Korea in the region's economy and international dialogue aimed at transforming the mindset of those DPRK social groups which are capable of changing, if only because of personal interest in hard currency and material comforts. With this aim in view, in the past a platform had been created, though it is not in use at the moment – a mechanism of six-party talks. These will hardly be soon resumed with North Korean participation. Today, Pyongyang stakes on bilateral ties with the US and South Korea. However, the six-party format includes the so-called Working Group 5 that addresses issues related to security in North-East Asia and is the only working group that may function even without DPRK's participation. This working group is chaired by Russia. In the foreseeable future the operation of the working group will become vitally important. An opinion was expressed that the Korean issue may be acceptably resolved only as part of strengthening the entire regional security system.

At this point two options for the communist regime change are available: through political collapse – if the country waives economic reform, or through gradual economic transformation.

Without economic reform the collapse of the political regime is virtually inevitable. The answer to the question as to the exact timing depends on how soon the antagonism between the rivalrous clans reaches its climax to trigger this course of events.

However, some experts believe that the ruling establishment is united in the self-preservation instinct and keeps the internal situation under control, ably upholding the status quo and manipulating the idea of an external threat. If this is the case, internal collapse is hardly a near-term perspective.

Korean reunification is not likely in the foreseeable future. The internal specific features of the regime and the nuclear factor aside, the reality is that this idea only meets the interests of Russia and, to a certain extent, South Korea. Indeed, in the *realpolitik* sense it is not in the interests of the other major players – China, the United States and Japan.

Since the great powers, South Korea or Japan are not ready to use military force, their practical line should focus on restraining and slowing down DPRK's nuclear and missile programme. In this regard, the deployment of missile defense by the US and its allies will be an effective contribution, alongside with deterrence based on offensive nuclear and conventional weapons. It would be essential to reach an agreement between the United States, China, Russia,

Japan and South Korea on the stabilizing parameters and the limits of such deterrence capabilities so that they do not strain the relations among these states.

This will also be an instrument for preventing Pyongyang from military adventures, in parallel to repeating attempts and projects aimed at engaging North Korea in economic and political relations in the region while waiting for internal processes to erode the totalitarian regime.

When the moment comes, the neighboring states must be prepared to take measures to prevent loss of control over nuclear weapons or access to them by international terrorist groups or other irresponsible regimes. In addition, regional structures should be created in advance to ensure conflict-free engagement of North Korea in the economic and security system of North-East Asia.