



NORTH KOREA: NUKES, NATIONALISM & NEGOTIATIONS

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As South Korea this month takes up the rotating presidency of the United Nations Security Council, concerns over North Korea's nuclear program grow. Pyongyang's recent rocket tests, its anticipated third nuclear test, as well as reactions across the region, mean new approaches are needed. New approaches in engagement with Pyongyang are essential and should be immediate to prevent nationalist sentiments from escalating the issue to unmanageable heights for neighboring governments.

North Korea has faced serious domestic challenges in its economy since the 1990s. It is today believed that North Korea cannot feed its people if foreign aid decreases further. However, the regime has ignored the food crisis that has led to serious starvation in the country while, at the same time, channeling much effort and funds into the development of nuclear weapons.

The recently approved UN sanctions condemned North Korea for its December rocket launch. In response, Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), North Korea's state-run media, said that the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, mentioned the possibility of a third nuclear test soon and stated that future tests would target the U.S. North Korea seems to have already completed preparations for a nuclear test. Many predict that highly-enriched uranium (HEU) could be used in what will be Pyongyang's third nuclear test.

An obvious question follows, how will Kim Jong Un deal with the issues of the current economic crisis vis-a-vis its nuclear program? This becomes increasingly important as it is unlikely that any economic aid will be provided if North Korea goes ahead with the proposed test, instead the international community will likely impose additional sanctions against North Korea.

In terms of regime survival, it can be argued that Kim Jong Un would be interested in improving people's living conditions and reconciliation with its external "enemies" – the U.S. and South Korea – if this would help consolidate public loyalty to the new leader. The regime appears to believe that a successful nuclear test could be more useful for regime survival than pursuing foreign aid for economic

development. An attempted nuclear test, particularly following the December's successful satellite launch, could strengthen Kim Jong Un's leadership credentials and ease people's dissatisfaction with the current economic difficulties. Propaganda will present a successful nuclear test as a symbol of Kim Jong Un's strong nation. In this sense, fomenting external tensions will improve internal solidarity.

An Arms Race in Northeast Asia?

The December launch of a North Korean rocket has triggered a space race between the two rivals on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's successful launch of the Unha-3 rocket, which placed a satellite into orbit, demonstrated its ability to indigenously build and launch a satellite. After Seoul's two failed launches last year, it revealed that North Korea is more technologically advanced in the field than South Korea. Under this pressure, South Korea finally launched the Naro-3 rocket on 30 January after twice failing to put a satellite into space. Still, South Korean national pride was damaged as the rocket was partly made in Russia, while the Unha-3 rocket was predominantly made in North Korea. Some experts estimate that South Korea is almost a decade behind North Korea in rocket technology. As a result of growing concern, South Korea announced last week that it would build an indigenous rocket by 2018 and eventually send a probe to the moon. However, there is an obvious concern that the competition between the two Koreas will be intense and could provide the capability to propel a ballistic missile with a dangerous payload.

In addition, Japan last July passed the new aerospace



legislation that appears to move toward Japan's re-militarization with the opening up of military uses of space. Japan has increased funding to develop military space technology, in particular missile detection systems. North Korea's recent rocket launches and hinted nuclear test also serve as a good motivation for Japan to increase its rocket technology. This desire was outlined on 27 January when Japan launched into orbit two intelligence satellites.

In much the same vein, many South Koreans believe that there is little chance to stop North Korea's nuclear program. Even if the new South Korean government pursues dialogue with North Korea, public pressure for a tougher stance against Pyongyang is mounting. Some conservative politicians in Seoul could push for pursuing its nuclear program. Japan may also consider a similar option to counter the North Korean nuclear threat. The growing unease coupled with nationalist elements has the potential to trigger a nuclear arms race among countries in Northeast Asia, including Taiwan – China's biggest concern.

China's Ability to Negotiate

Many believe in China's leverage over North Korea since Beijing provides 80-90 percent of North Korea's food and oil imports. The international community seems to have high expectations about China's ability to block North Korea's third nuclear test and freeze its nuclear weapons program. China has demonstrated greater impatience with Pyongyang when it signed the UN Resolution 2087, which outlines sanctions against North Korea for its December rocket launch. Furthermore, China is likely to decrease its aid to North Korea if Pyongyang goes ahead with its third nuclear test. The *Global Times*, a Chinese newspaper owned by the Communist Party, said "if North Korea engages in further nuclear tests, China will not hesitate to reduce its assistance to North Korea."

Nevertheless, hopes for Beijing's intervention in the issue might be too high as China's primary interest in the dispute is for regional stability and Beijing will inevitably control the degree to which its sanctions and assistance will take in order to avoid North Korea's collapse. This priority is unlikely to change during Xi Jinping's leadership as the collapse of the Kim Jong Un's regime might lead to unrest in China as well, in particular on shared border areas.

In this sense, Chinese pressure has its limits and the game

of provocation and punishment between North Korea and the international community will likely continue in its normal cycle. In the meantime, the technological improvements of North Korea's missile and nuclear programs will advance further. Eventually, some believe within five years, North Korea's long-range missile technology, which is believed to be able to deliver a nuclear payload, will be able to reach mainland U.S., as far as New York or Washington D.C.

While the ability of China to prevent North Korea's nuclear development cannot be depended on, the international community should recognize and encourage China's efforts in pushing Pyongyang to reform and open its economy to the outside world. Chinese pressure for an opening has increased powerfully in the last few years and Xi Jinping is likely to continue to intensify such efforts with the new leadership in North Korea. In the long-term, Beijing's role will be critical in facilitating international efforts to "teach" Pyongyang to follow international norms, and eventually remove the political bottlenecks preventing North Korea from taking a bolder approach toward economic opening and reform.

Playing the long game

Despite new sanctions, North Korea is unlikely to give up its nuclear program, as nuclear weapons are an ace up the sleeve for Kim Jong Un's leadership in order to overcome domestic instability and to maximize its ability to extract foreign aid. The regime believes that a successful third nuclear test will better its hand at the negotiating table as it plays for more generous financial aid from its "enemies," namely the U.S., South Korea and Japan.

This sense is rooted in the North Korean hostile views toward the outside world and is rooted in Juche ideology. North Koreans believe that the current isolation and economic difficulties are caused by the U.S. and its allies' hard-line policies toward North Korea. Furthermore, their perception is further reinforced by North Korea's long history of war, occupation, and invasion by China, Japan, and the U.S. military. As is outlined in numerous papers by North Korean guest researchers at this Institute, compensation is owed for past wrongs and aggression toward Pyongyang persists on its borders, both by the U.S. presence and South Korea. This feeling of historical victimhood has made the North Korean regime and its people obsessed with deriv-



ing recompense from others for the suffering of the North Korean people. Nevertheless, this perceived victimization sometimes pushes North Korea to indulge in radical ideas and dangerous acts, such as the development of nuclear weapons.

As a long-term goal, changing North Korean perceptions is crucial and should be based on trust-building measures. The process that began with the 1975 Helsinki Accords as a European experience could serve as a source of trust-building, including the establishment of people-to-people contact based on principles, norms and rules of behavior, for guiding North Korea to join the international community.

The European peace process took decades to establish trust between the two sides through a long-term engagement that was of the utmost help in gradually changing people and regimes in Eastern Europe during those years. Key assumptions for partial economic rapprochement and education programs were the gradual opening of people's minds and of economies to Western Europe, launching a number of cooperative activities between Western and Eastern Europe.

In this context, one of the most important lessons from the European experience is that long-term educational engagement to help North Korea understand the aspects of entering into the international community, and reasons for the need to respect international rules and norms.

In the cooperation strategy, it is important to provide North Korea with the necessary capacity to build a viable and self-sufficient economy, rather than sending material aid. In this sense, the future South Korean economic engagement should entail the need to strengthen the capacity of key human resources, in particular as regards their ability to define a path of economic development. Improvement of the capacity of human resources in the social sectors, such as in the areas of agricultural, energy and medical, and training and educating people in North Korea, can bring

an opening up of North Korea's economy and society that could lead to a fundamental change in North Korea in the future. Therefore, it is believed that long-term trust-building policies with educational engagement could change North Korea in the future, from the people to the regime. In the short-term, the future is more perilous and less certain, and cool heads should reign.

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