



THE KOREAN PENINSULA IN FLAMES?

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Niklas Swanström reflects on the present escalation of conflict on the Korean Peninsula and examines possible dialogue options to reduce the current tensions.

The Korean Peninsula has been under great pressure the last few months and tensions have escalated much faster than anticipated. Tensions will not necessarily end here. There will potentially be more activity from North Korea as well as from South Korea and the US that will threaten stability. The North Korean missile and nuclear tests created uproar in the international community to an extent that even China was forced to strengthen the sanctions against its neighbor, at least on paper. North Korea was angered by the strengthened sanctions regime and has in turn threatened to punish the international community, namely the US and South Korea. The propaganda war has been very strong, particularly from North Korea and has threatened to bring the fragile peace to an end. This has now culminated with real actions of strength with US B-52 aircraft carrying out flights over the Peninsula in joint exercises with Seoul and mobilizations on both sides.

This process comes at a time when North Korea has obvious economic problems and potentially a difficult food situation, which appears to have even affected the North Korean military. Moreover, it has been claimed that the political situation within North Korea has shown signs of instability. There have even been rumors of assassination attempts directed towards Kim Jong Un. Meanwhile, South Korea has elected a new president and must pass through a period of transitional weakness that will remain until the president has completed the government appointments and effectively taken over the administration, a period that has given the North a window for operations.

Under the prevailing circumstances, North Korea is likely to continue the escalation of words and potentially even with smaller military operations, especially in reaction to the US–South Korea joint military exercises and the recently signed mutual defense agreement that North Korea has criticized. If the rumors of political weakness of the North Korean government were in any way true, it would be difficult for Kim Jong Un not to act strongly against the strengthened sanctions, as the government cannot be perceived as being weak against foreign “aggression.” North Korean leaders, and especially the military,

feel sincerely that this is a breach of North Korea’s sovereignty and it is a continuation of the “West’s” double standard. If Kim Jong Un could steer away from an escalation of this precarious situation it would be an indication of the strength of the rule of Kim Jong Un as well as a show of willingness to engage constructively.

Implications

Much of the tension that we see today is expected but the tone and the potential for escalation is higher than it has been for a long time, even if a war still seems unlikely, it is not impossible. North Korea has never been so isolated before and China’s more assertive position against North Korea is hailed in the US. It is evident that Beijing is dissatisfied with the negative developments on the Korean Peninsula and in North Korea in particular, as it threatens regional stability and China’s potential to act as a facilitator. However, it is extremely unlikely that China would take any measures that would threaten the stability of North Korea, especially if the economic situation in North Korea is problematic. The US on the other hand, seems to be more assertive against Pyongyang and in Washington voices have been raised for a more active policy that could lead to regime change. South Korea is still more reserved and President Park Geun-hye has taken the wise decision to take a more “wait-and-see” position even if she came out strongly after the recent developments and clearly states her dissatisfaction with the situation. Yet it remains clear that she is greatly troubled by the developments and if the situation continues she will act with much more force than what the North Koreans might expect. If the situation escalates it would be difficult for the US and South Korea not to react in kind towards perceived aggression and if a military escalation develops it is likely and necessary, from the public view, that the response will be both directed towards the units involved but also against communication centers and other military infrastructure. Despite the legality of such proportional response it would undoubtedly be an escalation of the conflict. The upcoming tightening of



sanctions and tougher attitudes from the West and other international actors, such as restrictions on aid and political contacts, will further upset the situation but from an external perspective there is not much else to do if to show dissatisfaction with the ongoing escalation.

It will be difficult for any dialogue format to continue if the tension escalates, or for that matter any informal channel to keep contacts open. Politically it would be suicide to engage an aggressor, regardless of which side of the conflict you are on. For President Park Geun-hye this would effectively kill any prospect to open up the dialogue with North Korea, something that she had hoped to do. The question remains how much patience does she (or any other actor) have before she terms the North Koreans to be impossible to work with? The nuclear test already made it difficult but it is still potentially manageable, as the interest for dialogue is high on the South Korea side, albeit not necessarily as strong on the US side, but more tension would not play positively for dialogue. It has been argued that the North Koreans will try to force President Park into negotiations but this would backfire and it is well understood in Pyongyang that it would not suit the bilateral relations to continue the escalation.

There has been a lot of discussion regarding the reasoning behind the missile launch and the nuclear test. It is difficult to understand the reasons behind the timing of the test and escalation of tension on the Korean Peninsula as being anything other than predominantly a result of internal factors in North Korea, even if the international factors are present to some extent. Both the launch and the test were obviously determined long before the increased sanctions and the South Korean presidential election. The reality is that the reasons behind North Korea's actions remains unclear, but it would be a significant signal if further tension could be averted. However, the crucial question remains: who could lead such an initiative?

Recommendations

If the situation could be contained to words only it would be a significant success for Kim Jong Un personally, and the interna-

tional community should also recognize it as such but this will not be enough to enter into serious negotiations. If North Korea refrains from further escalation it would need to be acknowledged that this is an important milestone. However, this does not mean that the international community legally accepts North Korea as a nuclear state, even if it is possible to argue that most have already done so de facto. If de-escalation is possible it is important to return to talks as soon as possible and North Korea has to be ready to, at least, include the nuclear options on the table and to seriously look over what the future of the Korean Peninsula should look like. If the escalation continues, the outside world will continue its tough policy towards North Korea which would lead to a much more unstable Korean Peninsula but there is very little willingness to compromise with North Korea at this time.

Due to the lack of trust between the different parties it is also crucial to return to a tit-for-tat policy where all actors seriously begin to react to the steps taken by the other, no matter how small those steps may be. It is an almost unanimous perception that the ball is in the North Korean corner at the time and it would be necessary for Pyongyang to put something serious on the table to discuss. Arguably there has been little interest from either side in conducting constructive dialogue in the conflict the last three to four years. The new leaderships in most of the states involved could impact positively. The beginning of these transitions to new leadership has been rather negative, due largely to the weak starting positions. But now, all have to step up to the challenges.

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