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WAYS OUT OF THE KOREAN CRISIS

A series of recent events has brought on a radically new and more dangerous military-political situation in and around the Korean peninsula. These include North Korea's fourth nuclear weapon test (January 6, 2016) and satellite launch (February 7, 2016), as well as draconian new sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council in Resolution 2270¹ and the ramping up of the annual US-South Korean military drills.

Many U.S. researchers rightly point out that there has been a "seismic shift" in Seoul's attitude to its northern neighbor. Any remaining elements of the engagement policy have now been completely defenestrated. The United States has been given the go-ahead to station its THAAD missile interceptors in South Korea, even though the move is bound to anger China.² Washington and Beijing, meanwhile, have also become much tougher on Pyongyang, resulting in unprecedented new restrictions imposed in UNSC Resolution 2270 and unilateral sanctions by the United States³, South Korea⁴, and other actors.

Resolution 2270 contains a range of measures, including sectoral sanctions, that can potentially deprive Pyongyang of most of its export earnings. That would be a heavy blow for the North Korean economy; in fact, this is the first package of measures that can undermine the country's very ability to survive in a hostile environment.

That latter fact has clearly enthused numerous Western proponents of the theory of North Korea's impending collapse and regime change. They are now busily discussing what should be done once the DRPK falls. Immediately after the adoption of Resolution 2270, Western analysts made cheerful predictions about the emergence of new horizons in the global "strategic strangulation campaign for North Korea", pointing at the need for a plan of action in case of Kim Jong-un's sudden demise.⁵ Their main recommendations include preserving and strengthening the military alliance between the United States and the

¹ [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2270\(2016\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2270(2016))

² Gordon Flake, "North Korea Groundhog Day is coming to an end",
<http://edition.cnn.com/2016/03/10/opinions/north-korea-response-flake/>

³ U.S. House of Representatives HR 757, the North Korea Sanctions Enforcement Act.
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/757>

⁴ Address by President Park Geun-hye to the National Assembly on State Affairs, February 16, 2016,
<http://media.daum.net/breakingnews/newsview?newsid=20160216111312562>,
<http://blogs.piie.com/nk/?p=14851>

⁵ David S. Maxwell, "A Strategic Strangulation Campaign for North Korea: Is the International Community Ready for What May Come Next?",
<http://www.fpri.org/article/2016/03/a-strategic-strangulation-campaign-for-north-korea-is-the-international-community-ready-for-what-may-come-next/>

future united Korea⁶, and ramping up American military presence in East Asia. They call for the deployment of a layered missile defense system in cooperation with America's Asian allies in order to bolster their confidence in the American nuclear umbrella and reduce their growing interest in acquiring a nuclear shield of their own.⁷

In our view, however, the logic based on unilateral steps to bring ever greater pressure to bear on the DPRK can only cause further escalation on the peninsula and in the wider region. Pyongyang has not become any more likely to capitulate than it was before the latest measures. We firmly believe that expectations of its impending collapse are wishful thinking. They ignore such basic facts as, for example, North Korea's moderate but steady economic growth since the turn of the century.

At the same time, we cannot rule out the hypothetical possibility of new pressures piled up on Pyongyang provoking a devastating retaliation. Crippling new sanctions against whole sectors of the DRPK economy, both military and civilian; growing military activity by the United States and its allies, with drill scenarios described as increasingly provocative even by some reputable US experts; and calls for Kim Jong-un's assassination could cause the North Korean leadership to lash out, with unpredictable consequences.

Some Russian analysts, meanwhile, are drawing parallels between North Korea's current situation and that of Japan in 1940 after America, Britain, China and the Netherlands (the ABCD line) imposed sanctions on Tokyo. Historians says that when the Japanese emperor met his military command to authorize the Pearl Harbor attack on December 7, 1941, the prevailing mood of the meeting was fairly realistic – and therefore, necessarily pessimistic about Tokyo's chances of defeating the United States. Nevertheless, the Japanese went for the military option because they felt they had no other choice amid the crippling economic blockade. It is no secret that Washington regarded its military embargo as a "lasso slung around Japan's neck". The Americans hoped they could keep the lid on Tokyo's militaristic zeal by either tightening or loosening that lasso. In the end, however, they miscalculated about the precise degree of tension on the lasso.

We are also worried about the growing belligerence in some political and military circles of South Korea. These circles seem not only ready but positively eager to unleash a devastating response to DPRK's "provocations", and to pay whatever price it takes to secure a speedy (and not necessarily peaceful) reunification of Korea. The precise methods being used to calculate the possible costs of such a reunification are another cause of concern. Our own experience as researchers leads us to believe that such forecasts and projections must never rule out even the most extreme and seemingly alarmist scenarios. One of these scenarios includes almost the entire Korean peninsula

⁶ David F. Helvey, "Principles for planning a US alliance with a unified Korea", PacNet # 27 - Mar. 14, 2016; Honolulu, Hawaii,

<https://csis.org/publication/pacnet-27-principles-planning-us-alliance-unified-korea>

⁷ Robert A. Manning, " North Korea and the Logic of a Nuclear Asia", March 3, 2016,

<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/north-korea-the-logic-nuclear-asia-15399>

ending up in ruins – or even a huge radioactive exclusion zone – in the event of a full-blown war triggered by an ill-judged use of force to achieve reunification.

The current approach to the North Korean problem is also detrimental to nuclear nonproliferation in the region as it gives rise to a vicious circle. In an effort to allay its allies' fears, stop them from trying to acquire a nuclear shield of their own, and demonstrate its steadfast determination to defend them, Washington is ramping up its military activity to "contain" the DPRK. For its part, Pyongyang perceives such activity as a growing security threat and responds by accelerating its nuclear missile program – inevitably leading to new test launches and detonations. Such steps by North Korea make the idea of acquiring nuclear weapons more attractive to South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan – thereby closing the vicious circle.

We are therefore relieved that amid the prevailing skepticism and negativity, there is still some rational and balanced reasoning by some reputable US experts who are calling for a negotiated solution of the Korean problem. Professor David Kang of the University of Southern California argues that "North Korea is not simply going to disappear... [It] will probably survive as long as it decides to survive... The United States will have to deal with the country the way it deals with China, Russia, or any other country with which the United States does not necessarily have the most amiable relationship but understands it has to live."⁸

Frank Jannuzi, President of the Mansfield Foundation, also believes that the long-term goal – peaceful unification of the Korean peninsula – requires engagement not isolation. In his opinion, the United States, Japan and South Korea must adopt an alternative approach that combines hard power and soft power in order to motivate Pyongyang to relinquish its nuclear ambitions.⁹

We believe that the decision by the United States and its allies to abandon any substantive talks with Pyongyang in recent years as part of President Obama's "strategic patience" policy – including their rejection of the "moratorium for moratorium" package deal proposed in January 2015 and reintroduced in January 2016 – has been one of the key causes of the latest crisis on the Korean peninsula. History shows that any progress, however limited, in containing and suspending North Korea's nuclear and missile programs has only ever been achieved through negotiation. The latest dramatic escalation urgently requires a return to negotiating mechanisms to resolve the Korean nuclear problem.

To reiterate, any hopes that North Korea will soon disappear from the political map of the world are wishful thinking. It is also important to recognize the important role that China continues to play. Some believe that Beijing has made a U-turn, that it now fully

⁸ "An Interview with David Kang", by Claire Chaeryung Lee, March 17, 2016
<http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=658>

⁹ "Frank Jannuzi Suggests Alternative Approach to North Korea in Tokyo Talk": Weekly Update from the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, March 17, 2016
<http://mansfieldfdn.org/events/coordinating-japan-u-s-and-rok-approaches-on-north-korea/>

subscribes to Washington's and Seoul's approach to the Korean problem, and that the Chinese will welcome the prospect of reunification on South Korea's own terms. These expectations are clearly exaggerated. Beijing is obviously very concerned by the progress made by North Korea's nuclear missile program. China may well choose to cooperate closely with the international community in order to freeze and reverse that program – witness, for example, China's role in drafting Resolution 2270. At the same time, North Korea's collapse is definitely not part of Beijing's plans. The Chinese have no intention of breaking up their economic ties with the DPRK, and they will provide whatever humanitarian and other assistance may be required to keep the country afloat.

Recommendations

1. For all its complexity, a negotiated solution of the North Korean nuclear problem remains the preferred option.

The immediate goal for any negotiations in the near future is the suspension of Pyongyang's nuclear activities. They were put on hold in the past as part of negotiated agreements, so the goal is entirely feasible. Although some researchers are skeptical about the practical significance of such a step, we believe that it would be an important milestone that opens up new vistas and forms a favorable climate for further progress on more decisive negotiated steps towards limiting Pyongyang's nuclear activities.

2. It would be important for the proposed negotiations to draw lessons from the successes and failures of previous diplomatic efforts. For example, according to many analysts as well as direct participants in the Six Party Talks, that effort was undermined by Japan's attempts to link denuclearization of the Korean peninsula with the essentially unrelated problem of abducted Japanese citizens. That problem should clearly be part of the bilateral agenda between Tokyo and Pyongyang, and many researches say that bringing that problem to the table was one of the reasons for the failure of the Six Party Talks.

We therefore believe that it would be counterproductive to link denuclearization with any other issues that are not related to the nuclear problem.

For example, many observers say the agenda of the talks should include the human rights situation in the DPRK. We strongly believe that this would significantly complicate the task of North Korea's nuclear disarmament, which is already exceptionally difficult as it is.

3. Previous talks have demonstrated the pitfalls of the approach that seeks to combine the ostensible goals with a hidden agenda. The history of dealings with North Korea and several other threshold states teaches us that these countries cooperate with the international community quite well on practical nuclear issues – until they begin to sense that the talks are being used by the other party as a cover for achieving a regime change.

4. The international community's reaction to the ongoing crisis on the Korean peninsula and to any possible escalations should be balanced and carefully calibrated. When

devising a response, it is important to aim for specific targets and take into account possible impact on the North Korean people. Any response should target the government, as opposed to ordinary citizens. It would be especially important to make sure that sanctions do not undermine and ultimately destroy the nascent class of North Korean entrepreneurs, or cripple beyond repair the gradual market-oriented economic reforms in the country.

5. As part of diplomatic contacts, it would be useful to put back on the table what we believe are entirely rational ideas contained in Pyongyang's proposals to Washington in January 2015. The proposed package deal included suspending or scaling back annual US-South Korean drills, and holding them farther away from North Korean borders. In return, Pyongyang declared itself willing to desist from any new missile or nuclear tests. That proposal, dubbed "moratorium for moratorium" by analysts, addresses specific military issues, and in our opinion can serve as a basis for constructive dialogue on a range of issues, including confidence-building measures on the Korean peninsula. Let us recall that there are historical precedents of large and regular military drills – such as Team Spirit - being temporarily suspended or scaled back. Such a move has always had a salutary effect on the political climate in and around the peninsula.