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Why Should We Give Up Our Nuclear Weapons? Pyongyang's Perspective

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: For the past few weeks, discussion has been rife among analysts, policy makers, and the media about tension in the Korean Peninsula from the perspectives of Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, and even Beijing. But aside from the North Korean media, no one is asking what Pyongyang should do. What would serve its interests? What are the best policy alternatives for Kim Jong-un? In the wake of US president Donald Trump's declaration of a new North Korea policy, Pyongyang must analyze the pros and cons of a variety of policy options.

Often lost in the din of opinion about escalating tensions in the Korean Peninsula is the fact that Pyongyang has tangible interests at stake. For anyone attempting to make sense of the developing situation, it is helpful to attempt to view it from the North Korean perspective (to the extent that this is possible).

Kim Jong-un is facing many questions. Does testing conventional and nonconventional weapons serve his interests? Does it endanger the security of North Korea? What can be gained from the new rules of the game, as set by President Trump?

The military option: From Pyongyang's point of view, the US forces deployed in South Korea, Japan, and Guam are a constant security threat. Statements by US officials over the years (including in the past few weeks) recommending regime change in North Korea, or even a preemptive strike against it, are clear signs of potential threat to the regime. In response to such threats, Pyongyang has, over the course of many years, developed a deterrent force to prevent any attack by the US or its regional allies.

As far as Pyongyang is concerned, giving up its nuclear and missile capabilities would not serve its interests. On the contrary: it would endanger its security and its regime. The Libyan, Iranian, and even the Syrian case demonstrate the need for a nuclear deterrence capability. Without it, the state (i.e., the regime) is defenseless.

Missile tests: Why should Pyongyang continue to develop and test missiles? From a North Korean perspective, missile tests serve several goals. The first is to deter the US, South Korea, and Japan by demonstrating the regime's ability to launch missiles at regional targets. The second is a dual goal: first, to test whether or not Pyongyang can overcome technical problems; and second, to show North Korean missiles to potential buyers, mainly in the Middle East.

Nuclear tests: Pyongyang believes it needs to achieve nuclear capability as soon as possible. The ability to launch missiles armed with nuclear warheads would give it the ultimate deterrence against foreign threats. North Korea expects the US to use threats to try to prevent it from achieving this goal.

Brinksmanship: Over the years, Pyongyang has tried to gain economic and diplomatic benefits by employing a policy of brinksmanship. It uses this policy as a strategic lever to induce Washington and its allies to offer it financial assistance to defuse the Korean crisis.

The Six-Party-Talks (6PT) vs. bilateral negotiations: The 6PT allowed North Korea to negotiate with Japan, South Korea, China, Russia, and the US. Although it was a multilateral mechanism, it allowed Pyongyang to hold bilateral discussions with Washington, even when the latter preferred multilateral negotiations. The 6PT allowed Pyongyang to buy time to continue developing its nuclear and missile programs without being sanctioned by the UNSC.

Agreeing to restart the 6PT could be seen as a tactical concession by Pyongyang that would not require it to give anything up. If Washington expects a new 6PT round to include discussions on Pyongyang's relinquishing of its nuclear and missile weapons programs, as the White House has hinted, the latter will refuse to join the talks. North Korea will only join the 6PT to maximize its benefits as a nuclear state.

The Chinese factor: Pyongyang knows how important Beijing is to its interests – although in a few cases, including the present crisis, it has challenged the rules of the game with China. When the boundaries were breached, Beijing closed the pipeline, sending a message heard loud and clear in Pyongyang. North Korea knows, however, that China will not allow its stability to be threatened. The collapse of North Korea might, after all, bring the US to the Chinese border.

Although China has not supported North Korea's nuclear and missile tests over the years, it has acted as its guardian at the UNSC, preventing the Council from passing harsher sanctions against it. This is why Pyongyang has been able to breach Washington's rules without concern.

Pyongyang should nevertheless be aware that President Trump is raising the stakes in Asia, which might force Beijing to increase pressure on its problematic protégé. Pyongyang should take into account that Beijing might have to reevaluate its North Korean policy in order to prevent an escalation in the region under Trump's new administration.

The headlines over this most recent Korean Peninsula crisis raise the specter of WWII. Although Pyongyang's brinkmanship policy uses incendiary language, the regime does not want to start a world war. But we should pay attention. Some of the world's worst conflicts were unintended consequences.

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