



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

From Osirak to Yongbyon

by Dr. Alon Levkowitz

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 509, June 26, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: North Korea is moving forward with its development of an ICBM that can carry a nuclear warhead. Will Pyongyang test it, challenging Washington to strike its nuclear reactor in Yongbyon? If Washington does strike, will Pyongyang choose to react passively as Syria did in 2007, or will it respond by starting a war with South Korean and American forces in the region? Although both sides use militant rhetoric, neither will choose to challenge the other. They will instead upgrade their deterrence capabilities.

On June 7, 1981, the Israeli Air Force attacked and destroyed Osirak, the Iraqi nuclear reactor near Baghdad, Iraq. The attack was very successful and Iraq never retaliated. The message was heard loud and clear across the Middle East – Israel will not tolerate a nuclear threat to its national interests, not even from a country with which it does not share a border and from which the likelihood of an attack is relatively low.

Twenty-six years later, on September 6, 2007, the Israeli Air Force attacked the Syrian nuclear reactor in Deir ez-Zor, in northeast Syria. Unlike Iraq, Syria does share a border with Israel. Then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his advisors had to calculate the likelihood that Syria would perceive the attack as a *casus belli*. If it did, the strike on the reactor was tantamount to going to war with Syria.

Syria decided against starting a war with Israel; nor did it respond with a limited attack. The only state to condemn Israel for the strike was North Korea, which had assisted Syria in building the reactor.

Damascus decided it was in the Syrian interest to restrain itself from responding. What would be the North Korean response to a strike on the Yongbyon nuclear reactor? What trigger would convince President Donald Trump to attack Yongbyon?

In May 2017, David von Hippel and Peter Hayes published a report about the possible implications of an accident or an attack at the Yongbyon reactor.¹ Their report focused mainly on the implications of radiation exposure. One should bear in mind that unlike the Iraqi and Syrian reactors, which were destroyed during construction, Yongbyon is an active reactor. An attack on Yongbyon would not only have military implications, but would cause radiation exposure for about a 20 kilometer radius.

Washington considered attacking Yongbyon during the 1990s crisis. Seoul and Tokyo opposed any plan by Washington to conduct a "surgical attack" against the reactor or other strategic military sites, fearing it might escalate into a regional conflict that South Korea and Japan did not support.

Since 2006, North Korea has held five nuclear tests that led to UNSC and bilateral sanctions against it. Although the US and South Korean forces are under threat from North Korean military forces (mainly missiles and artillery), these tests did not convince Washington or Seoul to attack North Korea's nuclear sites. Will the sixth North Korean nuclear test change this equation?

No, it won't. Then why the change of tone in Washington and rising concerns in Seoul about a US attack on North Korea?

Pyongyang has built missile and nuclear capabilities, but has failed, according to intelligence sources, to acquire the technology to launch missiles with nuclear warheads. North Korea is getting closer to achieving this goal. Acquiring an ICBM with a nuclear warhead would allow North Korea to target the American west coast. This would change the nuclear equation between Washington and Pyongyang. The election of Donald Trump and his attempts to change Obama's diplomatic policy have led analysts in Washington to consider the possibility of an American conventional attack on Yongbyon and on North Korea's missile sites, if Pyongyang launches a conventional ICBM at the US.

Pyongyang is aware of the severe potential consequences of launching a nuclear ICBM at the US, which is why it will try to not challenge President Trump on this issue. It might test the ICBM by launching it to its shortest range, which would demonstrate its capabilities without threatening the US directly.

¹David von Hippel and Peter Hayes, "Potential impacts of accident at or the DPRK's Yongbyon nuclear reactors", NAPSNet Special Reports, May 22, 2017.

For its part, Washington understands that Pyongyang cannot be assumed to respond the passive way Syria did to a preemptive strike on Yongbyon and its strategic missile sites. Pyongyang might well see such an attack as a *casus belli* – but it does not want to launch a military response that could drag the region into a war North Korea might lose.

Washington is likely to choose to upgrade its deterrence versus Pyongyang through additional missile defense systems and by hinting that it might consider a surgical military strike on Yongbyon and other strategic sites if Pyongyang crosses the Rubicon. The likelihood of such a strike is relatively low, in view of concerns over the unintentional consequences of a regional war no one wants to start. It should remain low as long as Pyongyang does not cross the line.

Dr. Alon Levkowitz, a research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, is an expert on East Asian security, the Korean Peninsula, and Asian international organizations.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family