



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Assessing the North Korean Crisis

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 574, August 30, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: When mischief transfigures into menace, and plausible deniability gets in the way of the immediate concerted action necessary to punish state criminality in a decisive and conclusive manner, strategic patience becomes inversely proportional to strategic purpose. The North Korean crisis is a testament to the lamentable current state of a dysfunctional international system in need of a monitored ethical code, of decency and candor, of sincerity, humanity, wisdom and justice, at every echelon. It is time for diplomats and state leaders to heed the urgency.

The DPRK is neither a “democracy” nor a “republic,” and it is surely not a “people’s” democratic republic. It is a closed tyrannical system, the Stalinist fruit of a ceasefire that froze the 1950-53 Korean conflict.

To date no amount of cajoling, bribing, warning, or punishing has succeeded in deterring the DPRK from pursuing its military nuclearization, though the country would stand to benefit if it did abandon that pursuit.

A glance at the [geographic disposition of its nuclear wherewithal](#) prompts suspicions as to whether the DPRK is riding this suicidal rollercoaster on its own or in coordination with China. The DPRK is politically, economically, socially, and otherwise dependent on China, and its sovereignty is insufficient to convince that its defiance stems entirely from its own audacity.

North Korea’s aggressiveness is that of a surrogate; a third-striker; a bogeyman to China’s historical nemesis, Japan. Pyongyang does not appear bent on annihilating the Republic of Korea, despite hostile rhetoric and countless artillery pieces and tunnels along the length of the demilitarized zone.

The DPRK’s map of its nuclear facilities shows systematic, sustained planning beyond the acumen and lifespan of the young tyrant in charge. They seem to

be the result of years of collaboration with a mightier power pursuing its own strategic advantages.

The DPRK's insolence is an affront to all its neighbors except China. It is a criminal threat to international peace and a discredit to humanity.

Because of the locus of many of the DPRK's critical installations, conclusive punitive deletion would be consequential, as it would risk collateral damage to China proper. The awareness that inaction (perceived paralysis, prolonged hesitation, sheepish resignation) would be read as capitulation by the likes of Iran and Pakistan, by future imitators, and by ill-wishers hiding in the aisles, exacerbates the dilemma. Success through military liquidation is iffy: China's Mutual Aid & Cooperation Friendship Treaty with the DPRK in 1979 was extended in 1981 and in 2001, and remains valid until 2021. In it, Beijing pledges to provide all military and other assistance Pyongyang should require when under enemy attack.

This solidarity dates from the early 1950s, when Stalinist northern Korea invaded southern Korea with Maoist China's advance knowledge. The northward repulsion of north Korean forces above the 38th parallel by the US-led UN coalition triggered China's intervention, resulting in the loss of a quarter million north Korean and one hundred thousand Chinese soldiers' lives. This shared high cost remains indelibly chiseled in the institutional memory of both countries, in tribute to the revolutionary thrust and ideological struggle they continued to share against all things American.

During the Cold War, and after the mutation of the USSR into Russia, the DPRK remained a useful tool of vicarious diplomatic pressure in the mellowing triangular relations among China, Russia, and the US. Beijing and Moscow continued to overlook Pyongyang's often inconvenient, sometimes reckless behavior for as long as the price did not exceed the cost.

North Korea's aggressive display of nuclear might and bellicose rhetoric, apart from causing concern in the West, is leading its sponsors to weigh the costs for their other interests, and the worth for their global strategy of its threat to world stability. Repercussions of Pyongyang's menace are reaching levels unaffordable by an ascending major power like China, which seeks international recognition as a new superpower.

Yet the DPRK realizes full well that at least until 2021, it can behave as if it were an integral part of China. It is that cocky belief that may ultimately push the cost too far for Pyongyang's sponsors, leading to its abandonment. The US and the West should play their part in their drawing this conclusion.

Xi Jinping's July meeting with Putin in Moscow produced a joint statement of their unshakable mutual insistence on a "non-military solution" for the North Korean crisis. Their remark in passing that "the current international system is moving towards multi-polarization" may signal an inclination to maintain Pyongyang's spoiler role in their future triangular power equations with Washington. This tends to reinforce suspicions over the role to incumb on Russia (therefore Iran) and China (therefore the DPRK) in the surreptitious gnawing at the merits and qualifications of the US as the globe's only superpower.

Some attribute Beijing's call for "a diplomatic solution" as the only way out to the shudder created at the thought of a sudden collapse of the DPRK, and the unleashing of a flood of North Koreans into China – with all the "unpredictable destabilizing consequences" that such an influx would likely occasion. This theory is absurd. Turkey, home to 80 million people, has absorbed more than 3 million Syrian refugees (about 4% of its population). The ratio of 25 million North Koreans to 1.3 billion Chinese (2%) pales by comparison. A better reason must reside elsewhere.

If the DPRK faced extinction, by implosion or by explosion, the ensuing reunification would likely be on capitalist terms. China would be compelled to share a long border with a mighty new neighbor, whose frontiers would be patrolled exclusively by a US ally that would be not only a democratic capitalist powerhouse but a sizeable frenemy. No nuclearized buffer zone anymore; no dirty third hand for bad cop/good cop scenarios. This prospect may be reason enough for China to want to keep the Korean peninsula divided forever.

Yet should not the reunification of the Koreas under any circumstances encourage denuclearization in East Asia and foster repatriation of US troops from Korea and Japan, as soon as all regional stakeholders (China, Russia, Japan, a reunified Korea – and the US) agree to let East Asia enter the 21st century? Would that alone not usher in a century of peace, cooperation, and prosperity for all?

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