

United States, China and the North Korean Nuclear Program

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Abstract: In a world that's more and more internationalist, interconnected, where the power of capitalism and internet has grown significantly over the past decade and so, the very existence of an isolated and totalitarian regime such as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea raises many questions about its future as state. A good number of opinions and speculations have been made public over prospects' of Pyongyang's regime and its transition towards another regime or collapse. It is important to follow these studies in order to better understand and anticipate as much as possible future actions and policies taken by a country that follows only its own internal rules while ignoring those general accepted by the international community. Therefore, the aim of the following study is to summarize and to point the most important aspects of what keeps North Korea in the spotlight and how two of the most important shapers of the international reality position themselves towards the nuclear program, whose development has strong implications for the entire world.

Keywords: North Korea; totalitarian regime; collapse; nuclear program; international community

Introduction

Even if history teaches us that the Cold War has ended in 1991, another one is taking place right now in Asia, where regional major powers have engaged in a strategic and economic competition. As long as the North Korean regime – a mixture of communism and national fascism – continues to exist, to arm itself and expressly develop its nuclear program regardless of the consequences, the cold war of Northeast Asia's history doesn't show signs of ending too soon (Kaplan, 2016).

Since the armistice of the Korean War in 1953, United States, one of the main actors of the old Cold War, has been fully engaged in the region supporting economically and military the Republic of Korea (South Korea), balancing therefore the Chinese influence in the Korean Peninsula. Closely positioned

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geographically and with interests in the same area, Russia and Japan often react to Pyongyang's actions, however their engagement's level on the dispute is low.

On the other hand, a modest position has been adopted by the United Nations too in response to North Korea's provocations. The Security Council has indeed adopted five major resolutions since 2006 that imposed and strengthened sanctions on Pyongyang for continuing to develop its nuclear weapons program and demanded it to refrain from ballistic missile tests.

It is commonly accepted on international level that North Korea's actions violate the UN resolutions and the international law, threatening as a result the regional and international peace and stability. Yet, the efforts to keep under control the North-Korean threat over the last decades and particularly after the accession to power in Pyongyang of Kim Jon-un in December 2011 have been unsuccessful in preventing his regime from advancing its programs, the last nuclear test standing as an indisputable proof of the country's intransigence.

Moreover, in addition to UN's efforts of achieving the goal of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, the Six-Party Talks project – United States, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea, North Korea (2003-2009) has proved to be a failure (Chang, 2016) and its causes rest on one hand on the pursuit of its own interests and priorities by each of the involved parties and on the other hand on its fears. What the project, alongside the UN sanctions, did succeed is solely an isolation of the North-Korean state.

1. North Korea's Ambitions

With an intensive military activity, the situation on the Korean Peninsula has become alarming within less than 5 years. Only this year, the 4th nuclear test was conducted on 6th January and other 9 attempts of North Korea launching short, mid or long-range missiles were registered, the last two being tested on 22nd June.

Feeling highly insecure as it lost the extensive Soviet and Chinese support that helped it recover after the Korean War (1950-1953) and so it fell further behind a far more prosperous South Korea, North Korea pursued nuclear weapons to compensate the new fragile internal condition and to improve the country's image inside and outside its borders.

However, this anxiety and weakness grew under Kim Jong-Un's regime, who announced his father's bequest of a nuclear program as a crowning achievement, changed the constitution in order to declare North Korea a nuclear state and declared nuclear and economic development as his top priorities (Snyder, 2016).

Although the Six-Party Talks mentioned before reached some key agreements, most of the problems with implementation persisted and, by consequence, the talks have been suspended throughout the Obama administration (Rinehart, Nikitin & Chanlett-Avery, 2016).

North Korea took advantage of the fact that diplomacy remained stalled and continued to develop its nuclear and missile programs in the absence of any agreement it considered binding so far. Last summer a North-Korean official asserted that the nuclear deterrent is *"not a plaything to be put on the negotiating table, as it is the essential means to protect its sovereignty and vital rights from the US nuclear threat and hostile policy which have lasted for more than half a century"* (Mullen, 2015).

Each time North Korea is calling for peace, as it contends that the talks should be held to *"defuse the military tension on the Korean Peninsula and build mutual trust between the South and North Korean military in order to break away from the disgraceful past and move on to a new beginning"* (Kim Tae-woo, 2016), the regime is in fact returning to the table only to buy time to carry on building and testing weapons technologies.

Its behavior can be explained by examining two aspects: first, any new missile/nuclear test is a proof that Pyongyang's regime is pursuing for international recognition for its country as nuclear power and at the same time it responds to any new set of sanctions adopted against it or to any joint military exercise between US and South Korea.

Second, it must not be forgotten that the more insecure a country is inside, the more aggressive is outside, seeking to ensure its long-term survival. Although some economic and agricultural reforms were announced in 2014 and a modest growth has been visible since, the country remains mainly impoverished. As one economist described the situation: *"the new normal of North Korean food security seems to be increasing choice for the privileged elite, chronic insecurity for a non-trivial share of the non-elite"* (Noland, 2016). There is also a critically low energy

supply and dilapidated infrastructure and a brutal leadership that can hardly make the Democratic People's Republic of Korea a stable and consolidated state.

2. The United States – North Korea Relations

The new American administration that came into office in 2009 promised to solve national security challenges by engaging in an unconditional dialogue with the leaders of regimes like North Korea. Pyongyang's regime has just conducted the same year its 2nd nuclear test, determining the approval by the UN Security Council of the Resolution 1874. The United States pleaded for this new set of sanctions, but soon abandoned the strategy and chose the policy of "strategic patience", patience that turned out to be "*a recipe for non-action*" (Green, 2016).

This is the international context that led North Korea to conduct its 3rd nuclear test on February 2013 and 2 long-range rocket tests. Moreover, North Korea's National Defense Commission admitted that its country will continue nuclear testing and long-range rocket launches, all of which are a part of an "upcoming all-out action" aimed at the United States, "*the sworn enemy of the Korean people*" (Griffiths, 2016).

Unlike Clinton and Bush administration for which the North-Korean nuclear issue represented a priority in its foreign policy (check the concept of "Axis of evil" addressed for the first time in 2002 by president George W. Bush and grouping together Iran, Iraq and North Korea), the Obama administration approached it more of an "*inconvenient exception to the proposition that dialogue could turn enemies into friends*" (Green, 2016).

The American policy toward North Korea pursued to put pressure on the regime while demanding Pyongyang to return to the Six-Party Talks. The main elements of this approach involve insisting that Pyongyang commits to steps toward denuclearization, closely coordinating with treaty allies Japan and South Korea, attempting to convince China to take a tougher line on North Korea and applying pressure on Pyongyang through arms interdictions and sanctions (Albert & Xu, 2016).

Contrary to some opinions, the economic sanctions on Pyongyang are much narrower than those put on Iran before the administration's nuclear deal with Tehran and an analysis conducted by Fletcher Security Review shows how

incomplete they really are (Stanton, 2015). And one of the reasons is that, until now, the American policy was conceived in order “*to bring the North to its senses, not to its knees*”, according to Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel (Chang, 2016). Also, over the last couple of years, United States built its approach based on the knowledge that North Korea's pace of nuclear and missile development was not rapid enough to enable Pyongyang to be able to directly strike the American territory.

In spite of that, the last months have brought a relative change of strategy at Washington. Recently, the US Treasury Department named North Korea as a “*primary money laundering concern*” (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2016). In the past, Pyongyang was also accused of “nuclear proliferation” and “human rights abuses”. The response came shortly after, but even though the North Korean state asserts that it is not afraid of these labels, the additional measures that will be adopted represent a real concern as banks and other financial institutions, both American and foreign, will not handle dollar transactions for Pyongyang's entities and fronts and probably will also shun dealings in other currencies for these customers (Chang, 2016).

The current U.S. policy toward North Korea continues to rely on diplomacy, being characterized by three aims: to maintain the strongest possible deterrent against Pyongyang, to sustain pressure on Pyongyang through sanctions, and to engage in diplomacy with Pyongyang (Philipp, 2016).

However, what is frustrating for the US attempts to isolate and pressure the regime is China's deepening economic engagement with North Korea. As this engagement continues, it is becoming increasingly difficult to sanction North Korea without impinging on Chinese commercial and economic interests (Konishi, 2011).

3. China's Close Ties to Pyongyang

When addressing North Korea's nuclear program and the foreign positions adopted with regards to Pyongyang's policies, there is an argument that arises often: “*Washington can do little without the cooperation of China*” (Stanton, 2015). The opinion can be justified if we take into consideration that China shares with North Korea one of its longest land border and it's its best and sometimes it's only ally, responsible for supporting Pyongyang with food and oil supplies. There is no doubt

that People's Republic of China has the deepest knowledge of the North Korean state (Kaplan, 2016).

Since the road to Pyongyang passes through Beijing, as United States tried several times, a solution for the tense situation in the Peninsula would be the negotiation with China in order to lift the sanctions level imposed to North Korea, so they can generate a real impact. The approach should concentrate on delivering a common plan of measures in sectors that matter for Kim Jong-Un (Stravidis, 2016).

China has long been willing to accept this type of approach, trying at the same time to avoid a clear path so it doesn't have future issues no matter what will happen to its North-Korean neighbor. Currently, Beijing is satisfied with the status-quo present in the Peninsula as it offers a buffer zone between its borders and the democratic Republic of Korea. Besides that, a turmoil that would break open as a consequence to a forced change of the regime would spread in its territory too.

An example of this "balanced policy" would be the statement of Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister following the military tests held by Pyongyang this February. He advised United States and North Korea to initiate negotiations in order to discuss and surpass their bilateral issues.

On the other hand, to show its support, taking advantage of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue in China's capital this year, President Xi Jinping pledged China would "completely and fully" enforce the UN's coercive measures. However, this wouldn't be the first time China complies with international sanctions on North Korea, without really interrupting the flow of materials and components for Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program, such as cylinders of uranium hexafluoride, or vacuum pumps, valves and computers (Chang, 2016).

This is one of the reasons South Korea continues to raise criticism over what they perceive as Beijing's prioritization of stability over denuclearization and dialogue over sanctions and pressure. At this point, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated on 5th February that "*we have a different definition of more serious measures*" (Snyder & Byun, 2016).

A possible way to convince the Beijing regime to truly and efficiently cooperate would be the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, proposed by Washington and accepted by Seoul. Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed his country's concern about the US's such a probable move as the system "*goes far beyond the defense need of the Korean Peninsula. It will reach deep into the hinterland of Asia, which*

will not only directly damage China's strategic security interests, but also do harm to the security interests of other countries in this region” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016).

5. Conclusions

While North Korean state remains unpredictable and opaque, security analysts continue to be concerned about its growing nuclear capability, as well as the potential for proliferation to other actors. Also, even though the primary focus of the international community rests on the nuclear weapons program, there are other contentious issues to be followed, such as Pyongyang's missile programs, the conventional military forces, the illicit activities and the human rights violations (Nikitin, Rinehart & Chanlett-Avery, 2016).

But the general agreement is that the first step to solve the North-Korean problem is the denuclearization. Some experts argue that tougher sanctions would help determine Pyongyang to give up its nuclear capabilities, others that China's intervention in either accepting the Korean unification or forcing a replacement of Kim Jong-un regime with a different leadership would be the key in the denuclearization process. Also, there are voices that hope to take advantage of North Korea's pursuit of provocations to undermine international and domestic support for the Kim regime and analysts who believe the continued dialogue with Pyongyang is an essential step in “probing North Korea's intentions” (Snyder, 2015). Ultimately, a combination of all these visions could turn out to be successful in solving the Nord-Korean affair.

However, there solutions would need a frame. Even if the United Nations provide a neutral space for cooperation, debate and resolutions' adoption, the functioning mechanism (coalition-led decisions) makes it difficult to take actions fast and efficiently as it demands unanimous consent. Another option would be the return to Six-party Talks, an alternative that may not turn out to be successful because of its core target – convincing North Korea to abandon its nuclear program. In exchange, the strategic triangle United States – Republic of Korea – China has become a prominent mechanism for managing regional crises in the short term and for shaping a future security structure in Northeast Asia over the long term (Konishi, 2011). An enhanced cooperation and coordination among these three nations could

lead to a more effective diplomatic approach to negotiating the denuclearization of North Korea.

Beside all, the optimal outcome remains, presumably, the reunification of the Korean Peninsula under a stable and democratic rule. The road to that result seems yet to imply a great number of risks: the potential for major strategic consequences (including competition for control of the North's nuclear arsenal), a massive humanitarian crisis, long-term strategic, economic and social repercussions. In the meantime, hardest sanctions should be imposed and also their strict implementation.

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