

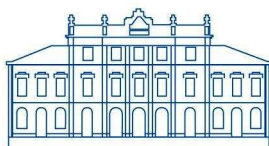
Looking into Mr. Kim Jong Un's nuclear crystal ball

Prepared by:

*Ms. Roberta Ballabio
Prof. Maurizio Martellini*

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Landau Network - Centro Volta
Como, Italy
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LOOKING INTO MR. KIM JONG UN'S CRYSTAL NUCLEAR BALL

Prepared by

Ms. Roberta Ballabio, Programme Officer, Landau Network – Centro Volta, Como, Italy

Prof. Maurizio Martellini, Secretary General, Landau Network – Centro Volta, Como, Italy

It is very difficult to make any strategic consideration from the recent escalations in the Korean peninsula. Any conclusion cannot simply be based on purely analytic matters only. According to many experts North Korea (NK) has managed a nuclear capability to produce fissile nuclear material (both enriched uranium and weapon grade plutonium), to detonate nuclear explosive devices, the last third one was in February 2013, and to cross a major technology ballistic missile threshold in December 2012 when it succeeded in putting a satellite into orbit.

All these elements denote clearly that NK, besides the legal framework of the Non Proliferation Treaty, under which it is still a non-nuclear weapon state (even if the NK withdrew from it in 2003), is a *de facto* 'nuclear weapon state', so the point is not to nullify this reality, but how to reverse this situation towards a full denuclearization, if any, of NK. In the past, South Africa developed nuclear weapon capabilities but there was no proof that the country actually managed nuclear tests, which are mandatory to develop operative nukes. The South African government decided in the 1990s to dismantle all its six nuclear weapons and joined the NPT in 1991 as a Non Nuclear State. In exchange of that, a full normalization of the country into the international community was granted and security assurances provided. Unfortunately, a South Africa model is very difficult to image for the NK, since, for instance, the North is still into "state of war" vis-a-vis the South and the US, and even the 1953 Armistice Agreement was nullified in February 2013 by NK.

However, any declared nuclear weapon posture is always a political message towards domestic and international constituencies, and this is the hard part to read. The recent bellicose rhetoric of Pyongyang could follow the same path, even if, for the first time, trying to read the NK nuclear leaves, it seems that Mr. Kim Jong Un is not dealing with the past "do-ut-des" nuclear brinkmanship. Instead, it seems that all the moves of the third leader of NK are focused to establish a nonnegotiable regional and international nuclear-focused security posture, without any other economic and political strings attached –and this attitude remind us the moves of the former Soviet Union in the 1950s. Furthermore, trying to gauge the future strategic directions of the current situation, which is very critical due to the absence of any kind of hotline between the two Koreas, it is very complex due to the different strategic agendas of the key powers playing in this region. Indeed the potential risk to escalate to a full-fledged war in the Korean Peninsula is concrete, if some, even small scale, conventional confrontations happen, for instance due to the non-authorized or accidental action of some local command post along the DMZ. The absence of any dialogue between the NK and the South Korea (SK), and between the NK and the US, even increase the possibility of the above catastrophic scenario, albeit the NK strategic forces and the NK nuclear deterrent are under strict control of the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army, Mr. Kim Jong Un.

Therefore, it is mandatory to contextualize the current NK stakes within the traditional NK narrative and the recent national/regional/international facts in order to play down this potential mess in the Korean Peninsula (KP). So allow the authors to suggest some interpretations:

- ✓ The Supreme Commander Mr. Kim Jong Un follows a traditional approach within the *Chuch'e* (or 'self-determination'), the core nationalist ideology, namely to establish for the domestic constituency his specific footprint, in a sort of ancestral trilogy. Mr. Kim Il Sung was the master of the reunification, Mr. Kim Jong Il was the creator of the Sŏn'gun 'military first' policy and the future historians could say if Mr. Kim Jong Un is the initiator of a new '*Nuclear Chuch'e*' or 'self-reliance nuclear policy' – i.e. a sort of 'nuclear first' policy to address the several existential threats that both the country and the regime face. If this turns out to be correct, then Mr. Kim Jong Un will be the leader that boasted the full nuclear weapon capability of the NK. One way to reverse this potential trend is to "think out of the box", namely to forget the nuclear dimensions of NK and to begin a serious regional and international discourse to address firstly the establishment of a permanent peace regime in the KP, and only after that to address the irreversible nuclear weapon disarmament of the country. To support this line of thought, there is a recent official statement of the Korean Central News Agency of DPRK (KCNA) of last April 1st, 2013, that, for our knowledge, is one of the first expressions of a preliminary NK nuclear posture: "1. the nuclear weapons are just means of defence [...] 2. for deterring and repelling the aggression and attack of the enemy against the DPRK [...] 5. the DPRK shall never use nukes against the non-nuclear states [...]". If this is the case, then NK must move from the actual (potential) idea of a counter-valued nuclear strategy (i.e. aimed to maximize the civilian casualties) to a (potential) minimal credible nuclear deterrence, like the one pursued by Pakistan or India in South Asia, by restarting the production of nuclear fissile materials. Indeed, NK has fully mastered both the uranium enrichment technologies and the plutonium separation ones to produce plutonium for its weapon program from the waste of its five megawatt graphite moderated reactor in the Yongbyon complex that was disabled in 2007. The dismantlement took place under an ultimately paralysed denuclearization deal with members of the so-called 'Six party Talks (6PT)', namely Russia, China, the US, SK, NK and Japan. Furthermore the country has also a relevant reserve of uranium ore, which amount approximately to 26 million tons. Therefore, if this is the envisaged strategic trend, only a comprehensive deal, addressing besides the nuclear dimensions also the security and economic issues, can reverse it. In this context, China , which is the only key ally of NK, is the one that can play a pivotal role to identify the essential benchmarks of this Grand Bargain and then to transfer them in the 6PT or in some sub-group of it. For the authors, the old Post-Cold War idea of Beijing to regard NK as the China 'strategic depth' against the pair US and SK, is not any more effective as before, even though such idea has not been discarded completely. Indeed, among other considerations, any progress by Pyongyang to achieve soon, if not achieved yet, operative nuclear mid-range ballistic missiles by improving its Musudang type, could induce the US to move *permanently* in the Pacific area its Aegis Ballistic Missile Defence (ABMD) system. As a consequence of this, the ABMD - a 'Sea-Based Midcourse' system designed to intercept ballistic missiles post boost phase and prior to re entry – might reduce the deterrence potential of the Chinese strategic forces, and hence it should be in the strategic interest of Beijing to persuade the NK ally to reverse its nuclear pace in the KP until a full denuclearization, since the attached political costs could trigger more regional instabilities and transform North East Asia in full-fledged nuclear-weapon armed region.
- ✓ Other than ballistic missiles, nuclear explosive devices and weapon usable materials, there is also another dimension to be taken into consideration. During the cold war the economic and security arenas were essentially decoupled baskets, today these two dimensions are strictly intertwined and multifaceted. In this context the past brinkmanship with NK has been always based on the dichotomy "nuclear-restrains-versus-international-aid". Now the economic situation in NK is more critical than ever. External aid has been drastically reduced in the last years, especially by SK and

the US as consequence of UN sanctions followed to North Korean provocations and is now essentially channeled only by China. Data speak about the overwhelmingly Chinese support to NK's economy: it provides around 90% of NK's energy, 80% of its consumer goods, 45% of its foodstuff. By 2011, the Chinese investment in North Korea could be quantified in more than 6 billion USD. At the same time, adverse climatic and environmental conditions hit the country (floods, droughts, famines), making conditions worse especially in some recent years. In this context, with these severe numbers, it is unlikely that traditional aid mechanisms could make the country stable. At the same time as a domino effect in this period of raising tensions, also South Korean economy is facing increasing difficulties, hit by the political and military uncertainty: stock index is exposed to market volatility, foreign investors' confidence is challenged both in short and long term: indeed short-range and small disruptions can open the path to economic instability in the long run. South Korea is trained to decades of periodic threats from NK, but prolonged confrontation will impact negatively on their globalized economy, more than in the isolated North.

In this frame, Mr. Kim Jong Un's message is the one of a country which wants respect and prestige at international level, and in particular to sit down at a negotiation table, maybe the next 6PT round, as another non NPT Nuclear Weapon State (NWS), besides the NPT NWSs present therein, namely the US, the China and Russia. Therefore, North Korea's strategy underpinning the recent serious crisis, is likely to strengthen its negotiation power within the 6PT, to achieve some returns. However, in order to achieve this stance, the North should prove to the world that it is able to manufacture an operative lightly and miniaturized nuclear explosive device so that to be set as an "emergency (unproved) nuke" on some of its ballistic missiles – and hence a fourth nuclear text (and not a "kinetic provocation") could be in the plans of Mr. Kim in a near future. This typical north Korean way to frame requests is prone to miscalculations and clearly conducive to an escalation that might end in a full-fledged war, but "nuclear showdown" as a powerful negotiation tool, is the only way the North can play in this time of transition to put itself on the stage. Indeed, effective and workable nukes by the North Korea can be considered as an insurance policy: for the North, the nuclear weapon could be more a "political weapon", rather than the assets of a classical deterrent due to the limited numbers of nukes, if Pyongyang achieves in short-time this stage.

As hinted above, in Mr. Kim Jong Un's era, the traditional brinkmanship cannot be used as in the past: the international scenario is changed, the geostrategic interests of the main regional players, i.e. China, Russia, South Korea, Japan and the US, have changed. A possible domestic calculation of Mr. Kim, could be to get a public opinion consensus within the country on the "*de facto* nuclear weapon state" nature of NK. Of course, the three NPT NWS playing in this region, will never recognize the NK as a new NPT NWS, since this scenario could open the way to a nuclearization of the Pacific, with South Korea and Japan becoming other "de facto NWS", and perhaps in a short-time.

Therefore, the most probable output of this crisis in the Pacific, will be, now that escalation is slowing down, the generalization of the so-called "strategic patience" of the US to the other nuclear weapon players in the region, namely Russia and China.

As consequence of these potential scenarios, a new negotiation mechanism or a re-focused and up-dated 6PT process, stalled since 2009, will be necessary.

Some food for thought can be provided by the following considerations:

- ✓ A possible soft strategy could be the establishment of military Confidential Building Measures (CBMs) similar to the ones established, and then interrupted, between India and Pakistan with the

Lahore Declaration of 1999. Of course this scenario requires time and continuous dialogue among all the key stakeholders, which is very difficult to envisage now.

- ✓ Reestablishing the hotlines between the general commanders in order to assure a maritime security zone of not interference and then discuss to reach an agreement on, at least, a cap on the nuclear fissile material production of the NK, and also in terms of the number and quality of its ballistic missiles. Of course, this scenario must be verifiable, and hence it demands a some mechanism of verification and monitoring.
- ✓ Another option could be represented by a third part acting as a facilitator between NK on one side and South Korea and the US on the other, within a sort of “three party prenegotiation format” aimed to prepare the subsequent official 6PT negotiations. This third part has to have legitimacy and power: this role could be played by China.

China showed some irritation over its ally's independence in geopolitical actions. The recent evolving context made Chinese position difficult and this can bring the hierarchy to rethink its strategic calculus towards NK, even though it cannot distance itself completely from North Korea considering its strategic interest over the KP and East Asia as a whole. The backing of the NK government is important to avoid the potential economic implosion of the country, that could result in a wave of refugees within Chinese borders; to keep a buffer zone between its provinces and South Korea, as well as the US armed forces stationed in the SK; the possibility to show geopolitical influence on the defiant NK. Too much compliance could, on the other side, undermine the consolidation of Chinese regional influence and international image of ‘global power’ and have also a negative impact on the estimated future China military costs, if Beijing needs to “equalize” the expected growing US military presence in the South Korea and in the Pacific for deterrence vis-à-vis the NK.

From another perspective the escalation guided by NK in the past months can also be a message to the Chinese ally: even in presence of huge aid and trade, NK is not willing to be absorbed and thus become the ‘fourth province’ of northeastern China as the economic penetration of Beijing in the NK is increasing.

It is evident that there are two clocks: the military/atomic one and the geopolitical/strategic one ticketing at different paces with the serious risk of possible escalations. These two clocks are more and more decoupled, but in the North East Asia environment there is a strategic player that can proactively engage Pyongyang and be engaged in a non-zero sum game, especially after the last weeks developments: China.

After the peak crises reached in last April, the ritual diplomacy is now at work even if among the usual NK skirmishes the international community is used to. These range from the launch of three short-range missiles North Korea fired from its east coast on May 18th (defined as regular military exercises), passing through the seizure on May 5th by North Korea of a Chinese fishing boat and its crewmen (then released) , to the visit paid to China by Vice-Marshal Choe Ryong-hae, a special envoy - a title Pyongyang rarely uses- of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on May 23th, in which there was a views exchange on the situation on the Korean Peninsula so as other issues of common interest and was mentioned NK's willingness to take ‘positive actions’ and to resolve issues “through multilateral dialogue and consultations like the 6PT”. Choe even passed on a letter from Kim Jong Un to a high rank Chinese official during the meeting, said it is the sincere wish of the DPRK “to create a peaceful external environment to develop its economy and improve people's livelihood”.

In the meanwhile on May 8th South Korea's President Park Geun-hye following the address to the joint session of US Congress, a rare honor given to a foreign head of state, said the South wants to build trust with its northern neighbour and proposed new talks.

These bilateral meetings, NK-China and SK-US, need to be framed in a larger diplomatic net: there is a scheduled summit between the Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Barack Obama on June 7-8, and President Park Geun-hye has already in agenda a visit to Beijing next month.

For sure the Korean peninsula situation will be one of the point of discussion.

The current situation could turn out to be something different from the previous diplomatic talks and negotiations: it can be seen as an effort of NK to return to a negotiation table, likely the 6PT, with a new status and a stronger position after the last nuclear test, as an attempt of Mr. Kim to establish a new "nuclear security order" in North East Asia under which his country should become an "equal player", fully integrated in the region and in the world.