



Understanding the North Korea background and ways towards conflict de-escalation

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1. Introduction

The likelihood of an all-out war in the Korean Peninsula and even in the region is dramatically increasing in the last weeks.

North Korea (DPRK, Democratic People's Republic of Korea) nuclear program dates back to the early sixties, with the construction of DPRK first nuclear reactor in the Yongbyon site, with the help of Soviet Union [1], which however refused to support any military-oriented collaboration, as later China did too. In 1979, DPRK continued on its own the development of nuclear power, with further research and construction, also in the fuel cycle plants category. North Korea independently began to build in Yongbyon a second research reactor, an uranium ore processing plant and a fuel rod fabrication plant. The development of nuclear weapon capabilities in DPRK can be dated to the mid-eighties [2]. The ratification of the Non Proliferation Treaty in 1985 seemed to guarantee a chance for International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to avoid proliferation in that country. However, after the safeguards agreement in 1992, IAEA could verify the first lacks of compliance

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to the NPT. After a decade of negotiations, DPRK announced its withdrawal from the NPT [3], while in 2005 admitted to have nuclear weapons, but was open to the possibility of closing its nuclear program.

The six-party talks (US, Russia, China, Japan, DPRK, South Korea) ran from 2002 until 2009: while obtaining some important results (i.e. DPRK agreed to close its main nuclear reactor in 2007 and US declared DPRK off the list of states supporting terror [4] in 2008), they were abandoned when DPRK, after a first nuclear test on October 2006 (which was believed to be either a failure or a fake [5]), announced it had successfully conducted its second nuclear test in 2009 [6]. In the same year, DPRK failed satellite launch attempt was one of the causes of the end of the six-party talks, with the beginning of the development of ballistic missile development by DPRK. After North Korea successfully tested a long-range ballistic missile in 2012, United States halted any humanitarian food support to DPRK [7], and the situation in the area rapidly grew to the present crisis.

Until september 2017, DPRK has conducted 6 nuclear weapons tests, the last one believed to be a hydrogen thermonuclear powered device of relevant yield (around 100 kTon) [8]. The latest news report that DPRK launched its most powerful ICBM (Inter Continental Ballistic Missile) in November 2017 [9], while the United States put again North Korea in the list of States sponsoring terrorism [10].

2. Understanding the present situation

The underlying problem of all Western analysis on this issue is the intrinsic inability of the US and its allies to understand the cultural and historical background of North Korea, which is a paradigm by itself.

The usual journalistic labelling in terms of, let's say, clash between the world of freedom and the "hermetic kingdom", seen as the quintessence of the autocratic regimes, does not help to solve the situation [10]. Even the current President Trump's administration, like the previous ones, has had an oscillating attitude between the call for peaceful solutions [12,13] and the explicit threatening of nuclear war [14], while carrying out military drills in South Korea as a proof of strength [15].

Some analysts made a geopolitical analogy of the current Korean Peninsula crisis with the 1962 Cuban missile crisis [16], but this is not correct: the Castro's Cuba of 1962 was under the Former

Soviet Union influence, while North Korea is not a proxy region of the growing conflict between the US and China plus Russia.

The funding elements of the culture and history of North Korea are in its “Juche idea” [17], that means maintaining an independent and creative approach in finding national and regional political solutions. It is remarked in many analyses that China should play a more proactive and assertive role against Pyongyang, but China has limited power over North Korea, as Pyongyang has clearly signaled in the recent past months conducting missile tests on dates of major global events for Beijing.

Another pillar of the funding elements of North Korea is the so-called “Songun Chongch’i” ideology [18] or “military-first politics”, adopted by North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, the father of Kim Jong-un, the current leader, as a guideline for domestic governance and foreign policy.

As a consequence of this policy, in the realm of the national security, it is estimated that the nation has spent about 23% of its GDP in the period 2004-2014 in acquiring an operational nuclear weapon and ballistic missile offensive capability. It is utterly utopian that Kim Jong-un could get rid of this capability, even under crippling future economic sanctions [18]. A famous Pakistan leader said they would be willing to eat grass rather than give up their nuclear deterrent against India, and similarly Kim Jong-un would be willing to follow such approach.

According to the State Department's World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 2016 report [18], the North's military expenditures averaged about US\$3.5 billion a year. In absolute terms, however, South Korea's annual expenditures (\$30 billion) are around one order of magnitude higher than the DPRK's.

3. Lessons learned from previous crises

After the un-ended 1953 Korean War, the 38th parallel in the Korean Peninsula has a similar “sacred value” to the Line of Control (LoC) of the Asiatic subcontinent. The “Six-Party Talks” powers should regard the 38th parallel as the LoC.

In the absence of a very unlikely unification of the two Koreas, the 38th parallel should be left untouched in any possible future scenarios and contingencies.

Up to now, a common mantra of all the past three US Administrations has been to avoid any direct talk with the supreme leader of North Korea.

The total absence, at least publicly known, of any Confidence Security Building Measure, such as Direct (“Hot Line”) Communications Systems or the use of a Third Party Country to pass messages between the North Korea Government and the US Administration is even more

problematic. However, some kind of communication channels do exist [13], but at an informal level, with the US administration itself declaring those channels as not useful [14].

Instead, for instance, at the beginning of the diplomatic process which has framed the Iranian nuclear deal [19], it is now very well-known that Oman played an essential role between the Obama Administration and the Iranian Government of the ayatollahs.

4. A brief review of possible solutions

If we take a comprehensive look at the crisis in Korea, we can, first, affirm that persuading a nuclear-armed State to abandon or cap its nuclear arsenal depends on a proper framework for disarmament in terms of incentives and disincentives.

It is difficult to think that Pyongyang will give up its nuclear deterrent without offering to North Korea a comprehensive package of security and economic incentives. This pathway was attempted during the six-party talks, which, as we pointed out, took place between 2002 and 2009 [3]. At the beginning of the recent worsening of the crisis, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said it might take more than additional sanctions to resolve the crisis, foreseeing that a United Nations' Security Council agreement may prove difficult. Russia suggested instead looking for ways that would allow resuming the six-party talks [20].

North Korea is today a “de-facto” nuclear weapon and ballistic missile capable State [21]. The common narrative is that the North Korea nukes and missiles are a defensive strategy to repel the potential or perceived risk of an US invasion. In support of this thesis, there are the cases of the invasion of Iraq of Saddam Hussein and Libya of Colonel Gaddafi, despite the fact that both dictators had given up their WMD. However, in the case of North Korea, the recent race to build-up nuclear tipped missiles [9] could have another interpretation, namely to gain the upper hand in the possible future nuclear negotiations within the Six Party Talks or other format.

The options for the US run from tailored talks with North Korea endorsing a “freeze-for-freeze” formula, which the US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson seems to be promoting [13], to military ones that envisage a preemptive strike against the North Korea missile silos or even an invasion of ground forces (the usual idea of “boots-on-the-ground”) [14]. The US president says Tillerson is “wasting his time” on talks with North Korea, but the military options could be catastrophic, since even limited strikes would almost certainly start an escalating cycle of attacks and counter-attacks. Its unconceivable life cost has been estimated in hundreds of thousands casualties just in the first hours of the conflict, summing up to several millions at the end of a nuclear however limited conflict [22].

5. A proposal for a diplomatic solution

The authors believe, however, that there could be a more articulated and regionally focused diplomatic solution. It starts from the resume of the six-party talks, but with a different framework and organization of the diplomatic denuclearization process.

First of all, the 6 Party Talks powers could declare some “Peace Treaty Mechanism”, to be negotiated in the context of a 6 Party format. This could be launched in parallel with the diplomatic denuclearization process both aimed, in a short time window, to freeze the launching of ICBM by Pyongyang and the military drilling by the US and South Korea.

In this scenario, the settlement of sub-strategic US nuclear weapons in South Korea and in the Pacific region surrounding North Korea would be totally banned, and the US should grant to China and Russia to preserve the 38th parallel as a LoC for the Korean Peninsula.

These two processes would progress with the same pace, so that, ideally, at the achievement of a peace mechanism in the region, the capped nuclear weapons, as well as a certain category of ballistic missiles (the ICBM, IRBM or nuclear-tipped cruise missiles), would be decommissioned and destroyed, following a South Africa - like model [23]. An irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula might be assured by a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone together with the ballistic missiles deliveries.

This is not a short-term process. However, in our opinion, it must have a limited and well-defined duration with a clear and verifiable timetable.

During the process, further additional security mechanisms would be needed, such as:

- 1) Involving a “facilitator country” to allow the direct sensitive communications between the North Korea and the US, which cannot be disclosed to the other 6 Party Talks members, for national security concerns. Actually this format should become a “6+1” Talk Format, with the “+1” being an European Country (for instance Norway or Finland);
- 2) Declaring “negative security assurances” among the 6 countries (South Korea, North Korea, Japan, China, Russia, US): the US should guarantee that it will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against North Korea, and *viceversa* North Korea will not use WMD against the allies of the US (South Korea and Japan);
- 3) Establishing a “Regional Verification and Monitoring (RVM)” mechanism, in addition to the IAEA safeguards system. This RVM mechanism could consist of a regional system of mutual nuclear safeguards. The same model as the successful “Brazilian-Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials (ABACC)” could be followed. ABACC purpose is verifying the peaceful use of nuclear energy in Argentine and Brazil [24].

Likewise, a RVM agency involving South and North Korea, formally leaving other nations just to guarantee its correct working, would contribute to a de-escalation of the conflict – now involving a vast number of states, with an unbalanced situation (one against the rest of the world) – to a regional dimension.

6. Conclusions

Since 2011, DPRK tested nearly one hundred ballistic missile tests of growing capability. Four of its six nuclear tests, the most powerful ones, were in the same period. The total number of nuclear weapons in the North Korea arsenal could range from 20 to 25 units, with yields between 15 and 25 kilotons.

Even if the goal of the North Korean regime seems to guarantee independence and avoid overturning by means of a nuclear deterrent effect, the recent developments seemed to go beyond this purpose, and they have been felt as provocative and destabilizing by the United States, South Korea, Japan and the other states. The repeated and increasing sanctions imposed by the United Nations on North Korea seem to be insufficient to halt further military developments from DPRK. In order to avoid any military solution, that would have unacceptable consequences, a proposal for a diplomatic solution has been drafted in this paper.

The 6+1 Party Talks, after the achievement of a Peace Treaty Mechanism in the Korean Peninsula that replaces the current Korean Armistice Agreement, could stabilize the pursued process of a complete and irreversible denuclearization of the region through the establishment of a Korean Peninsula – in perspective a North East Asia - Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, free of nuclear weapons and their ballistic missile vehicles.

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