The threat from North Korea

S. Lami Prabhaj*, J. S. Kaiswai, Kajeev Sumar Randa
Department of Commerce, Osmania University PG College
Nalgonda, Andhra Pradesh, India
*E-mail address: lami.s@invertis.org

ABSTRACT
North Korea’s satellite launch last December and its detonation in February of a third nuclear device occurred in blatant defiance of multiple UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting such activities. Condemnation of these actions by the international community nonetheless precipitated a flurry of particularly strident North Korean threats against the United States and South Korea. These threats were actually hollow, but they provoked a billion-dollar strategic missile defense deployment decision and spawned calls by U.S. pundits and politicians for preventive attacks on North Korea. Although the intensity of the crisis is now waning, North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear and missile capabilities continues, and its political isolation from the international community deepens. It is high time to sort out the nature of the threat and reconsider what can be done about it.

Keywords: threat; North Korea

1. INTRODUCTION

The threats, turmoil, and media circus surrounding the Hollywood satire The Interview, in which bumbling American journalists assassinate North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, have put the country in the international spotlight again. Often forgotten amid all this comedy, though, is the very unfunny fact that North Korea’s nuclear weapons program has been
relentlessly expanding for a decade, and poses a real and deadly threat to the rest of Northeast Asia.

During my first visit to North Korea in January 2004, North Korean officials were eager to show my Stanford University colleagues and me the plutonium bomb fuel they produced following a diplomatic breakdown with the George W. Bush administration. Four years ago, during my seventh visit to the country and two years into the Obama administration, they surprised us with a tour through an ultra-modern centrifuge facility, demonstrating that they were capable of producing highly enriched uranium, the alternate route to the bomb.

During the Reagan administration in the 1980s, Pyongyang quietly laid the foundation for a nuclear weapon option by starting construction of indigenous plutonium production reactors and a reprocessing facility capable of extracting bomb-grade plutonium.

North Korea’s nuclear program first made international headlines during the George H.W. Bush administration, when satellite imagery of the reactors and reprocessing facility was aired. Pyongyang produced its first plutonium in the 5 megawatt-electric gas-graphite reactor and demonstrated the ability to extract plutonium by reprocessing the spent fuel. North Korea also likely explored uranium centrifuge technologies as a parallel route to the bomb at this time.

The Clinton administration faced the first serious North Korean nuclear crisis, but was able to negotiate a freeze of the North’s plutonium program with the Agreed Framework in 1994. During the second Clinton term, Pyongyang attempted its first long-range rocket launch, then followed it with a missile-testing moratorium. It also appeared to keep its weapon option open by clandestinely pursuing uranium centrifuge technologies. Pyongyang stepped up its missile and nuclear import-export business with Pakistan, Libya, Syria, and possibly Iran. Nevertheless, no more plutonium was produced and the two large reactors under construction deteriorated over the years beyond repair. Pyongyang retained a hedge by keeping the spent fuel in storage under international safeguards.
The George W. Bush administration confronted North Korea about its apparent clandestine centrifuge program and effectively killed the Agreed Framework, leading Pyongyang to restart its plutonium production reactor, reprocess plutonium from the stored spent fuel, and build a bomb.

Pyongyang conducted its first nuclear test in October 2006, a year after it signed a joint statement with the United States, China and others in which it committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs. Although the test was only partially successful, it marked a turning point in the North’s nuclear program.

The regime dropped all peaceful nuclear pretenses and declared itself a nuclear weapon state. It accelerated its uranium centrifuge program, while agreeing once again to freeze the plutonium production reactor.

It also covertly shipped uranium hexafluoride, the precursor to enriched uranium, to Libya. And in spite of being closely watched internationally, it built a plutonium production reactor for Syria, which Israel destroyed in September 2007. President George W. Bush left office with Pyongyang likely possessing five or so nuclear weapons.

The Obama administration was greeted by a long-range rocket test, followed by a second nuclear test in May 2009 - this one apparently successful. The centrifuge program matured sufficiently that in November 2010, North Korea declared it operational and revealed it to us during our visit.

It coincided with Pyongyang’s decision to build its own experimental light water reactor, which requires low-enriched uranium fuel. Concurrently, North Korea completed the new Sohae rocket launch site in the northwest to complement the older and smaller Tonghae site in the northeast.

Nuclear expansion continued apace through the leadership transition to Kim Jong-un upon the December 2011 death of his father, Kim Jong-il. One year later, North Korea successfully launched a satellite into orbit aboard the Unha-3 long-range rocket. It was followed by a third nuclear test in February 2013.
Alcance de los misiles

MISIL TAEPODONG-2

Altura: 32 m
Diámetro: 2.2 m

Fuente: AFP | FAS

North Korea Missile Ranges

Source: Heritage Foundation research.
Construction of the experimental reactor continued at a good pace. In addition, the fuel fabrication complex at the Yongbyon site expanded enormously, including doubling of the centrifuge hall we saw in 2010.

Construction at the Sohae rocket launch site has been equally massive and indications are that the engines of the rocket motor used in the KN-08 road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) were tested there recently.

Kim Jong-un also managed to have the new constitution declare North Korea a “nuclear-armed state.” The only good news is that nuclear exports to other states likely dried up, not for lack of trying on Pyongyang’s part, but rather for lack of customers - statehood has been virtually destroyed in Iraq, Libya and Syria, and Iran is pursuing nuclear negotiations.

So, with two years left in the Obama administration, Pyongyang likely has roughly 12 nuclear weapons with an annual manufacturing capacity of possibly four to six bombs. By the time the president leaves office, North Korea may conduct another nuclear test and have an arsenal of 20.
Five US administrations determined to prevent North Korea from becoming a nuclear weapon state through various combinations of diplomacy, threats, ultimatums, and sanctions all failed. The George W. Bush administration failed miserably and, to date, the Obama administration has done as badly.

Photo 1. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is shown on television overseeing a live fire military exercise on 2013. As the third generational head of a political dynasty started by North Korea’s founder, Kim Il Sung, the younger Kim is believed to have rapidly consolidated his control over the regime since the death of his father. But the policy direction he will set is not yet clear.

Why does an expanding North Korean nuclear program matter? The progression from developing the nuclear weapon option, to having a few bombs, to fielding a nuclear arsenal has made Pyongyang increasingly reliant on its nuclear weapons for regime survival and has dimmed the prospect of a denuclearized Korean peninsula.

More bombs and better bombs matter—these may instill Pyongyang’s leadership with a false sense of confidence and almost certainly expands what it may think are its tactical and strategic options.

The potential for miscalculations and accidents increases, and the consequences will be greater if it has more bombs and more sophisticated bombs with greater reach. In case of turmoil or a chaotic transition in the North, rendering the nuclear weapons and the enterprise safe and secure becomes more difficult. And, a financially desperate leadership may risk the sale of fissile materials or other nuclear assets, perhaps to non-state actors if the state market remains dormant.
Photo 2. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is shown on television overseeing a live fire military exercise on 2013. As the third generational head of a political dynasty started by North Korea’s founder, Kim Il Sung, the younger Kim is believed to have rapidly consolidated his control over the regime since the death of his father. But the policy direction he will set is not yet clear.

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Photo 4. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is shown on television overseeing a live fire military exercise.
The security threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear capacity, similar to the threat posed by its conventional forces and terrorist potential, is also problematic. North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons began in the early 1960s when it first asked its two sponsors, the Soviet Union and China, for such weapons. Determined to prevent nuclear proliferation and having experienced their own difficulties in dealing with North Korea, both the Soviets and Chinese rejected the request, saying they would guarantee North Korea’s security. Nevertheless, the Soviets provided North Korea with a small nuclear reactor in the early 1960s for civilian uses and insisted it be placed under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection to prevent diverting material to weapons development. In 1985, North Korea signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in exchange for continued Soviet nuclear assistance. However, North Korea surreptitiously continued to seek a nuclear weapons capacity and its increasing determination to achieve this objective has paralleled its ever growing isolation. Pyongyang’s international ostracism coincided with the beginning of its economic decline in the early 1970s and its virtual economic collapse following the fall of the USSR and China’s pursuit of its own economic and strategic interests since the early 1990s.

A non-nuclear North Korea would be relatively simple for the international community to ignore. Although the North Korean regime perceives the rest of the world as a threat to its survival, it can only break its isolation and secure the large scale economic aid it needs to improve the living standards of its people by engaging with the international community. This outlook could explain the regime’s determination to possess a nuclear capacity, which is not necessary if its sole aim is to isolate itself from (and be left alone by) the international community. Pyongyang’s international ostracism coincided with the beginning of its economic decline in the early 1970s and its virtual economic collapse following the fall of the USSR and China’s pursuit of its own economic and strategic interests since the early 1990s.

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the global community because the inevitable flow of information would threaten the regime’s survival by undermining its grip on the population, Pyongyang desperately needs foreign economic aid. Part of the rationale behind the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010, similar to its efforts to become a nuclear state, is that the regime wanted to bring North Korea’s economic plight to the attention of the international community and to force it to engage with Pyongyang diplomatically.

Contrary to the stereotypes frequently and broadly painted by the daily media, North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong-il, and the ruling elite, are not demented individuals determined to launch nuclear Armageddon. Rather, North Korea’s leadership is calculating and extremely ruthless, and fully cognizant of the precarious state of their country. Having enslaved its own people and isolated them from the rest of the world, this reactionary, Stalinist and nationalist regime has been unwilling and unable to adapt to an ever changing world, and now fears for its very survival. In addition during the 1990s, North Korea suffered a series of natural disasters, most notably the July 1995 flood, which largely destroyed its agricultural produce, further exacerbating the food shortages endured by its population. This compounded the dire economic situation brought about by decades of failed government policy. Thus, Pyongyang has neither the resources nor the will to embark on an expansionist foreign policy.

Another diplomatic route to possibly lessening the security threat posed by North Korea could be for the US to consider abandoning its insistence on negotiating with North Korea through the Six Party format, which has yet to produce tangible results. For example, in exchange for North Korean concessions regarding their nuclear program, the US could offer the regime the direct bi-lateral talks that Pyongyang claims it wants. This option risks alienating South Korea and Japan, arousing the suspicions of China and Russia, and gives North Korea the flexibility of driving a wedge between its powerful neighbours and the Americans. Thus, even if the US abandons the Six Party formula, for bi-lateral talks to be successful future negotiations between the North Koreans and the Americans would likely have to involve South Korea and China at some level, while Russia and Japan would need to be kept fully briefed on proceedings. Regardless of the actual method employed, any such successful diplomatic offensive would require the US, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan to act in unison because Pyongyang will exploit any divisions among these powers, thus potentially derailing the process.

Another way of dealing with the North Korean security threat is for the US, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan to work in unison to enforce a punitive solution. Largely because of its isolation and economic state, North Korea has been virtually immune to normal international diplomatic and economic pressures. However, the containment of North Korea through diplomatic isolation, economic sanctions, and naval blockade is plausible and, with these nations working together, could result in real pressure being placed on the regime. Withholding all forms of aid to North Korea, and suspending diplomatic contact with Pyongyang until it verifiably dismantles its nuclear program, are two measures that could be implemented. However, the failure of any of these nations to work together would make it impossible to successfully implement a policy of containment.

Another disadvantage to the international community adopting a policy of containment is that it risks triggering a monumental humanitarian disaster among the already destitute North Korean people, and any prospect of resolving the nuclear dilemma would evaporate because Pyongyang would never negotiate under such circumstances. China and South Korea, especially, would be unlikely to accept such an outcome, given that they would have to bear
most of the economic and humanitarian repercussions. Another great risk with adopting a policy of containment is that North Korea could collapse, and the resulting anarchy would have serious political and security, as well as humanitarian consequences for both the region and the wider world.

Any military attempt to deal with the North Korean nuclear threat would wreak such social and economic devastation in Northeast Asia that the international consequences of such action would reverberate for decades to come. Even so called ‘surgical strikes’ targeting suspected nuclear sites will likely solicit a North Korean response against South Korea and Japan, which will result in a full scale military conflict. Thus, while military action could destroy both North Korea and its nuclear program, the world would then have to deal with the consequences of massive social and economic devastation and dislocation. However, despite its aggressive language, the North Korean regime is fearful of provoking an armed conflict because, notwithstanding its formidable appearance, North Korea’s military power is dwarfed by the American, South Korean and Japanese military muscle arrayed against it.

The regime, which is primarily concerned with its own survival, is fully aware that any conflict with South Korea and Japan will also involve the US, and that such a scenario will result in the destruction of the North Korean state, no matter how much damage it manages to inflict on its neighbours. Even if North Korea succeeds in enhancing its nuclear capacity and is able to build and deploy a nuclear arsenal, it can never use these weapons without precipitating its own destruction. For North Korea, its potential nuclear (and conventional) threat is much more powerful than its actual threat can ever be. North Korea’s intransigence regarding its nuclear program may, in part, be based on a calculation that South Korea, Japan and, in particular, the US, will ultimately not resort to using military force to compel North Korea to yield because they do not want to provoke a potentially destructive conflict in North East Asia that would have global repercussions. North Korea is fully aware of its weakness vis-a-vis the US, South Korea and Japan, and it is therefore extremely unlikely that it will launch a full scale military strike against anyone. Similarly, any attempt by the international community to resolve the nuclear dilemma through military means, could result in such widespread destruction in North East Asia that it would have devastating long-term economic and social consequences worldwide.

2. CONCLUSIONS

Dealing with North Korea is surreal and dangerous. The first step in dealing with this most difficult of interlocutors is to objectively assess the nature of the threat it poses and the political-military balance existing in Northeast Asia. This assessment begins with a recognition that North Korea is a failed state under most criteria. It is nonetheless a centralized, martial society that has succeeded in controlling its population. Moreover, it has succeeded in acquiring rudimentary nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities and has proliferated some of these technologies to other states. Although it is unlikely at present to be able to credibly threaten nuclear-tipped ballistic missile attacks against its neighbors, it could eventually do so and may even pose a future nuclear missile threat to the United States. Curbing North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs and deterring their use and proliferation should be of the highest priority, meriting active diplomatic engagement with North Korea and its neighbors.

Accepting a nuclear North Korea may also open up the possibility of both South Korea and Japan going nuclear. Political elements in both countries pursuing this goal would use any
move by the international community to accept a nuclear North Korea, no matter what the safeguards, as a justification for launching their own nuclear programs. Internal opposition to such a move in both countries combined with external pressure from the US, China and Russia would most likely prevent such an outcome, but the potential for South Korea and Japan going nuclear cannot be dismissed outright. Although not a perfect solution, continued diplomatic engagement with North Korea, based on accepting the regime’s nuclear capacity under the conditions outlined above, may offer the best possibility of achieving sustainable stability on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia, while minimising the risk of a military confrontation.

The historical record strongly indicates there will be no rapid solution to the North Korean problem. An overall continuation of the status quo is the most plausible scenario regarding at least the immediate and medium term future on the Korean peninsula. Given the Korean peninsula is the one place on the globe where the interests of the US, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea converge, North Korea, with or without a nuclear capability, will remain a key strategic and security issue in international affairs for the foreseeable future. Each of the policy scenarios presented here are problematic and not very palatable because there are no good or easy options in dealing with North Korea. Unless the US, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan are willing to co-operate closely, and North Korea is prepared to make some concessions and fully honour any agreements it makes, it is unlikely that North Korea will be disarmed of its nuclear capacity. Instead, as the history of the Korean peninsula since its division in 1945 strongly indicates, North Korea is in all probability, likely to remain an interminable and intractable problem for the foreseeable future.

References


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The US and North Korea negotiated and signed the 1994 Agreed Framework in the wake of the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1993-94. Under the terms of the Agreed Framework, the US, South Korea and Japan agreed to supply energy and fuel aid to North Korea. In turn, Pyongyang agreed to freeze its nuclear program and to allow IAEA inspections of its nuclear facilities. Neither side fully abided by the terms of the agreement which ended in October 2002 when the North Koreans confirmed they had surreptitiously continued with their nuclear program and would no longer allow IAEA inspections. This precipitated the second North Korean nuclear crisis.