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North Korea - The Conundrum Gets Bigger

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Every time one thinks that the problems with North Korea have reached a new height, the world witnesses another surprise. Developments in nuclear weapons and missile technology are progressing much faster than previously thought. What is most surprising that in a world, where technological capacities of spying and intelligence have reached ever new heights, very little is known about developments within North Korea. Most of the assessments made are based on speculation or targeted disinformation often spread by the North Koreans themselves.

Few but important things are certain:

- North Korea is a case of its own. There is no other country with a similar political system. North Korea is a Confucian monarchy (currently in the third generation); it is an oligarchy composed of the high ranking officials and military officers; it is run by a Stalinist system of oppression; and, finally, there are strong traces of a cultish sect.
- The North Korean regime under the absolute command of Kim Jong-un is in full control. Even serious sanctions making life difficult and severe economic conditions cannot shake this absolute command.
- No external power, China included, can exert a decisive influence over North Korea. Pyongyang sees the possession of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles as the crucial asset to secure the survival of the regime.
- The Chinese leadership has two strategic goals on which no compromise is possible and which provide the North Koreans with a determined hold over Beijing: one, to avoid at any price a regime collapse and massive unrest in the North; two, to avoid at any price a re-unification of the two Koreas with a continued presence of the United States on the entire peninsula.
- Finally, there can be no doubt that war on the Korean Peninsula, even if no nuclear weapons are used, would have devastating consequences. Bear in mind that the metropolis of Seoul with some 25 million inhabitants is within easy reach of thousands of North Korean artillery guns. An outbreak of war would be an even bloodier repeat of the Korean War of 1950/53.

Without any doubt, the Korean Peninsula is the most dangerous crisis spot in Asia, in the world and at present there seems to be less of a chance for a peaceful solution than at any time since many decades.

The countries that were present at the six party talks that were aborted in 2009 were: China, North Korea, South Korea, the Russian Federation, the United States, and Japan. None of these countries is either capable or willing to put an end to the current impasse.

Japan and the Russian Federation do not have the military means nor the diplomatic clout to get North Korea to agree to meaningful talks.

South Korea has recently had a change in the presidency with the new occupant being of a more moderate, liberal disposition. However, previous initiatives such as the “sunshine policy” of Kim Dae Jung ended all in failure. If the top powers do not engage themselves, South Korea on its own has no capacity to determine the course of events.

This leaves the two big ones, the People’s Republic of China and the United States. The fact that there seems to be a rearrangement of the position of these two countries as top dog does not make it easier to get them fully engaged in the Korea issue. China sees Pyongyang as a useful irritant for the USA, as the US see it as a wound in the flank of China. Of course the launching of a missile with an atomic device on American territory would be a severe humiliation of the world’s still largest military power. However, the outbreak of a second Korean war would have devastating effects on the Chinese economy, most likely costing the country a large part of the economic clout it had acquired during the last two decades. One thing is most certain: the North Korea issue can and will be much more damaging to China than to the US.

We have, therefore, to deal with a traditional power gamble, which always has the element of “who blinks first” and is, therefore, a very dangerous situation to be in. We know that wars have been started even when it was against the fundamental interests of everyone. There is no guarantee that the Korean power gamble can get out of control and descend into a second Korean war even if nobody wanted it.

Pyongyang knows three facts: one, blackmail is the only tool at its disposal; two, the United States is quite happy about the conundrum that North Korea is for the People’s Republic; three, China is bluffing when it postures as the new Asian hegemon. North Korea constantly reminds the world of how limited China’s influence beyond its borders is.

A key question is, whether North Korea has an inclination towards self-destruction, whether it has a “kamikaze mentality”. Bearing in mind the little inside knowledge we have about North Korea, we might still be inclined to believe that the North Korean leadership has a strong interest in self-preservation. It is exactly the brinkmanship of Pyongyang towards Washington, Tokyo, Beijing and Seoul that leads us to the supposition that the North Korean leadership has a highly developed will for survival. Up till now the provocations, some issued in very harsh language, have never gone over the brink. Pyongyang seems to be fully aware of what it can do, even in terms of crossing many so-called “red lines”, without an outbreak of open war.

It is most certainly wrong to describe Kim Jong-un as a madman. We know little about him and we do not know the extent of competent advice he gets. All we know that until now he has plaid the very few trump cards he has, with great skill.

Then there is the eternal question about bringing the North Korean regime to its knees by using ever more stringent economic sanctions. The North Korean people has been living in miserable economic conditions since a long time. However, there are no signs that there could be any serious trouble with mass unrest. The people seem to be willing and able to continue to bear enormous economic hardship.

This underpins our key observation: Everything in North Korea is about the continuation of the Kim dynasty and the survival of the regime. If Pyongyang would at all be willing to consider discussions about its missile and atomic weapons program, this could only

happen if an iron-clad assurance were given by the United States of the respect for the unmitigated national sovereignty and national security of North Korea.

Finally, while looking at geopolitical and security issues one must never forget the historical dimensions. There is deep-seated hatred in North Korea (as also amongst a considerable part of the South Korean population) towards Japan. When Kim Jong-un launches ballistic missiles that violate Japanese airspace he can count on the full support of his people and the hidden approval of many South Koreans. But relations between Koreans and Chinese also have a long historical tradition. There is little love lost between the two neighbors. Should China intervene Kim Jong-un can count on the support of his entire people. On the other hand it is obvious that many nationalist Chinese are extremely angry about the repeated humiliation of their country and their leadership by the regime in Pyongyang.

This leaves indeed a very grim picture and bearing in mind the extreme paucity of factual information about what is actually happening in North Korea and about what drives the North Korean leadership we can do not more than listing a few of the possible scenarios:

- Scenario one (very likely): continuation of the current stand-off with a continuous increase in the North Korean provocations;
- Scenario two (highly unlikely but not to be excluded): outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula;
- Scenario three (highly unlikely but not improbable): recognition of Pyongyang by Washington and conclusion of a peace treaty;
- Scenario four (highly unlikely): intervention by Beijing to bring down the regime of Kim Jong-un;
- Scenario five (somewhat likely): resumption of the six party talks;
- Scenario six (highly unlikely): break down of the North Korean regime.

The major challenge for all parties concerned is now to avoid anything which might lead to an escalation of tensions and even to open conflict. This is a particularly difficult political challenge as the North will continue to provoke and will heighten tensions trying to lure the Americans and others into unreasonable reactions.

For the time being North East Asia remains a powder keg, which is particularly dangerous as there is no international or regional security architecture that can mitigate any potential crisis.

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