



## North Korea: Recent Developments and Concerns

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### Introduction

Following the December 2011 death of North Korea's second generation dictator, Kim Jong-Il, the world has watched closely as his son has been heralded as the next leader. This leadership shift has been accompanied by a significant increase in uncertainty surrounding who is really in charge and how North Korean leadership will exercise power. It appears as Kim Jong-un consolidates power, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea), with a population of roughly 23 million, continues to be a major threat to regional and international security. Negotiations to achieve denuclearization have failed thus far, while continued efforts to

reinvigorate the Six Party Talks have been led by the United States. Recent developments regarding the attempted rocket launch point to a more belligerent posture, as the international community is preparing for another possible nuclear test. Moreover, the role of China in influencing North Korea's intentions and actions are also evolving. The DPRK has clearly violated bi-lateral and international agreements with respect to its nuclear program and continues to engage in weapons proliferation activities. Even though their current nuclear capabilities do not pose an imminent threat, North Korea continues to learn from their failures and may eventually produce a long-range missile with a nuclear capability. The international community must focus its efforts on containing the DPRK's nuclear program and continue to engage in efforts to achieve full denuclearization. For now, it appears that the regime is committed to advancing its nuclear weapons program to deter perceived hostile nations, mainly South Korea and the United States.

## **New Leadership**

Since the death of Kim Jong-il, the North Korean power structure has shifted to an arrangement based on collective military rule from one characterized by a strongman dictatorship. The military, however, has officially pledged allegiance to the heir of the Kim Dynasty, Kim Jong-un. This new arrangement suggests that North Korea will be governed by an oligarchic structure for the first time since the state's inception in 1948. This group style leadership has significant implications with respect to the consolidation of power, as analysts reference Kim Jong-un's uncle Jang Song-thaek and Ri-Yong-ho, the military's most senior general, as the key decision makers in this new regime. The relatively calm power transition further illustrates the importance the military attributes to regime survival. Kim Jong-Un is regarded as an inexperienced and unknown leader in his late twenties. Some observers note that his uncanny resemblance to his grandfather and North Korea's founder Kim il-Sung is his greatest attribute, perpetuating the country's powerful cult of personality. He made a surprising, first address to the nation following the recent failed rocket launch, consolidating his image as the leader of the country and espousing that North Korea will continue to invest heavily in the military. Not to be underestimated, it is believed that his father only spoke publicly on a few occasions over 17 years in power.

## **Recent Provocations**

Even though both Koreas have not engaged in full blown military conflict since the armistice in 1953, both countries remain officially in a state of war that has witnessed a relative escalation in hostilities during recent years. The torpedo attack of the Cheonan submarine in South Korean waters killed 46 sailors, the highest death toll of any incident since the Korean War. Furthermore, the attack on Yeonpyeong Island represented the first time the North artillery shelled South Korean sovereign territory since the end of the Korean War. In response to the attack, South Korea enhanced their rules of engagement that would likely entail robust military

retaliation to a future attack.<sup>1</sup> These 2010 incidents were unprecedented in scope, constituting extremely serious provocations that have the potential for a severe escalation.

From the U.S. perspective, these incidents reinforced the need for Pyongyang's investment in constructive dialogue that could benefit all sides and deter future attacks. Engaging in discussions has enhanced some understanding of an extremely closed and tightly controlled power structure. The talks have also improved perceptions concerning the North's motivations that could help the United States and the international community better anticipate its intentions. A legitimate mode of communication has the potential for a better understanding of an unpredictable adversary and can be utilized to project credible warnings to deter belligerent behaviour. Unfortunately, history has shown that provocations and capricious use of threats are a calculated part of North Korean negotiation tactics intended to alter the nature of the bargaining process.

## **Nuclear Negotiations**

Years of bilateral and multilateral discussions, including the Six Party Talks, have resulted in a series of breakdowns and pullouts. This has left Seoul and the West with a sense that North Korea is committed to maintaining its nuclear weapons programs at the expense of an impoverished population in dire need for food and other assistance. Many observers believe that the North exploits these opportunities for discussions to receive economic aid for their participation, with little intent of removing their nuclear threat. In October 2011, following a long period of suspended talks, the United States decided to resume discussions with North Korea in Geneva. After the encounter, there appeared to be constructive progress in discussions; however, both sides parted without securing a future date for more bilateral or multilateral talks. In January 2012, the North claimed that it was interested in negotiations over an agreement to suspend its uranium enrichment program. The Six Party Talks have thus far failed to inhibit Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions; however negotiations have resulted in the shutdown of the 5-MWe plutonium production reactor, as North Korea continues to strive to enhance uranium enrichment capabilities and persists in missile and nuclear exports. If North Korea had been left unchecked they would likely be in possession of an arsenal of one hundred or more bombs, according to some experts.<sup>2</sup> The DPRK does, however, have the capability to restart work at the 5-MWe reactor and produce enough plutonium for one nuclear bomb annually. The fact that it has not embarked on this path has lead some analysts to believe that either North Korea may perceive that their minimal nuclear arsenal is a sufficient deterrent or that it is not willing to incur the costs of further international sanctions.

On February 29, 2012, the U.S. and North Korea announced their intentions of re-engaging in concrete discussions regarding the nuclear stalemate which has endured since Pyongyang quit the Six Party Talks in late 2008, resumed nuclear development, and publicly expressed their pursuit of uranium enrichment capacity. Following recent discussions in Beijing, the U.S. agreed to continue providing food assistance in return for North Korea's pledge to suspend its nuclear

weapons program. This deal would result in a transfer of \$200 million in food aid to the impoverished North in return for assurances that the regime will halt nuclear testing, long-range missile launches, and the uranium enrichment program.

Some view these agreements as positive developments that enhance cooperation and dialogue; however, other critics debate the merits of such understandings that involve exchanging tangible assistance for a promise that has been subject to renegeing in past instances. Furthermore, it is likely that the regime would utilize the vast majority of this aid to feed their military, as opposed to the starving masses, in order to ensure the survival of the regime, rendering such arrangements counter-productive. As Henry Kissinger notes: “the issue for diplomacy has become whether the goal should be to manage North Korea’s nuclear arsenal or to eliminate it.”<sup>3</sup> Few analysts believe that North Korea has any intention of relinquishing its nuclear program. However, constructive dialogue is necessary to clearly convey how denuclearization can help North Korea evade further isolation, improve its deteriorating economy, and ultimately avoid regime collapse.

### **Failed Rocket Launch, Impending Nuclear Test?**

On April 13, 2012, North Korea failed to launch a rocket into orbit, in what was perceived to be an attempted long-range missile test. In response to the incident, the United Nations Security Council has expanded sanctions on elements and additional entities related to North Korea’s missile and nuclear programs. Furthermore, the United States has cancelled the proposed food aid deal described above, as North Korea clearly violated the agreement. A similar U.N. censure occurred after the failed satellite launch in April 2009, causing North Korea to withdraw from nuclear disarmament talks and conduct its second nuclear test.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, observers are concerned that a comparable cycle of condemnation and tests will ensue. Observers were surprised and are unclear as to why North Korea would publicly admit their failure in the latest missile launch, insinuating a minor break in historical patterns. In any case, the fact that both previous nuclear tests (first in 2006, again in 2009) succeeded two attempted missile launches cannot be over looked and the international community must be prepared for this outcome.

There is speculation that North Korea may try to detonate its first uranium-based nuclear device, which would illustrate its program’s advancement from its previous program dependent entirely on plutonium to regain credibility after the failed rocket launch. According to South Korean intelligence officials, satellite images reveal that North Korea has been digging a new tunnel near the site of the two previous nuclear tests, indicating that possible preparations for a third nuclear test are underway.<sup>5</sup> However, minimal progress at the site has been reported since, indicating that the nuclear device is not ready or that the regime is weary of risking further international sanctions. It is clear that the DPRK believes that these nuclear tests, even if only partially successful, produce significant political leverage in future negotiations derived from the fear that these weapons will pose a grave danger eventually.<sup>6</sup>

## **Missile/Nuclear Capabilities**

In January 2011, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned that North Korea will be able to hit the U.S. with an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) within 5 years, noting that the country “is becoming a direct threat to the United States.”<sup>7</sup> South Korea and Japan lie within North Korea’s Nodong missile range, putting millions of lives at risk if they were ever successful in equipping these missiles with nuclear capabilities. However, all of North Korea’s long-range rocket launches (four since 1998) have resulted in failures, causing many experts to believe that the North lacks the resources and technical expertise to develop an ICBM of its own.<sup>8</sup>

Even though North Korea continues to profess that they possess the capabilities to defeat the United States, most observers attribute these statements as mere rhetoric. Some experts estimate that North Korea possesses enough plutonium to produce approximately four to eight “simple” bombs; however, the country likely lacks the capacity to mount a nuclear bomb on a missile.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in November 2010, the North achieved a milestone with the revelation of a facility constructed secretly to enrich uranium and a South Korean expert now says that the North has enough highly enriched uranium to produce three to six nuclear bombs.<sup>10</sup> Considering that past long-range rocket tests have resulted in failure, North Korea appears to be years away from developing an intercontinental ballistic missile equipped with a nuclear capability. The international community, however, is concerned that the DPRK is learning from their past failures and will eventually attain the ability to strike North America and other targets around the world.

## **China’s Role and Influence**

As North Korea’s most vital ally and largest trading partner China possesses an immense amount of influence over DPRK. It has helped sustain the regime as Pyongyang remains economically dependent on China, which represents approximately 90 percent of its energy imports and is its main source for food and weapons.<sup>11</sup> The Congressional Research Service also reports that Chinese food aid is channeled directly to the military, which further illustrates Chinese commitment to ensuring the survival of the North Korean regime. Consequentially, China has opposed harsh international economic sanctions throughout the years. However, the nuclear tests of 2006 and 2009 forced China to re-evaluate its relationship with North Korea, initiating episodes of pressure and incentives to force North Korea to reverse its nuclear course.

Sustaining the regime ensures that a communist ally is situated on China’s northeastern border, providing a buffer zone between South Korea and the 29,000 U.S. troops stationed there. As a result, China is able to reallocate its military presence to focus on issues related to Taiwanese independence and other concerns. Beijing perceives that the alliance serves as a significant counter to American dominance in the region and an increasingly powerful Japanese military.

Military experts believe that China is the likely supplier of the 16-wheel truck used by North Korea to reveal a new long-range missile during the recent celebrations commemorating the centennial of Kim Il Sung's birth. Even though experts believe that the long-range missiles displayed were fakes, the truck seen during the parade increases North Korea's capabilities. This carrier is believed to be capable of launching missiles and allows North Korea to transport long-range missiles around the country, making it more difficult for outsiders to destroy. China, however, repeatedly assures the international community that it is complying with the U.N. Security Council resolution banning nations from supplying arms and related materials to North Korea. As the country's only significant ally, there is significant and legitimate suspicion concerning China's role and intentions in continuing its support for North Korea.

Many analysts observe that China would cease its support and allow for the North Korean regime to collapse only if it perceived that a unified democratic Korea would be more advantageous and favourable toward Beijing. However, preventing an influx of North Korean refugees into China in the event of war dictates Chinese policy of ensuring stability and helping sustain the regime. Beijing believes that peace and stability can be achieved on the Korean Peninsula if the DPRK embarks on a similar economic and political reform along the Chinese model undertaken thirty years ago. Economic sanctions against the DPRK are ineffective without China's support. The unparalleled political and economic leverage over Pyongyang places China in a unique position to influence the regime's plans and actions. However, some experts believe that China does not have as much influence over the regime as the United States and the West perceive. North Korea's continued belligerence in the face of Chinese opposition suggests that either Chinese influence is eroding or the regime believes these recent provocations are worth the risks of deteriorating relations with its patron. There are also some recent reports showing that reformers in the Chinese high leadership are also weary of their unpredictable ally.

## **Weapons Proliferation**

Pyongyang has also continued to engage in the export of missile and nuclear technologies for many years. It has sold re-engineered short-range Soviet missiles mainly to Pakistan, Iran, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Burma (Myanmar); however its long-range missile program has not resulted in significant progress. North Korea has evolved from a country dependent on imports of missile technology to a major supplier of missiles, and the means to construct them, to rogue states. Furthermore, North Korea has reportedly exported uranium hexafluoride, the precursor to highly enriched uranium, to Libya, before dictator Muammar Qaddafi ended the program in 2003. Many observers also believe that the DPRK has cooperated with Pakistan and Burma (Myanmar) on nuclear issues.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, overwhelming evidence points to Pyongyang constructing a plutonium-producing reactor in Syria that was subsequently destroyed by Israel in an air strike in September 2007. The United States accused the North Koreans of helping the Syrian's with a nuclear program that "was not intended for peaceful purposes."<sup>13</sup> This case represented

significant North Korean efforts to engage in nuclear proliferation to other rogue regimes, undermining regional and international stability.

## **The Iranian Connection**

Nuclear cooperation with Iran is currently the greatest concern in this regard as North Korea assists Iran with reactor, plutonium and weapons technologies, where as technological information related to centrifuges and missiles are mutually exchanged.<sup>14</sup> The Iranian connection is exemplified by credible reports showing that 12 Iranian officials from the Shahid Hemmat Industrial Group (SHID) were in North Korea observing the missile launch and receiving test data.<sup>15</sup> This illustrates the magnitude of the relationship between the two states who actively exchange information related to ballistic missile technology. It is important to note that Iran's missile program is based on North Korean missile engines. For example, the Shahab-3 ballistic missile developed by the SHID is considered to be modeled from North Korea's mid-range Nodong missile. Even though the Iranians may not have gained any significant knowledge from the latest failed test, Pyongyang's successful defiance of the West is a source of inspiration for Tehran to emulate in order to elude the international community throughout their own quest to achieve nuclear capabilities.

Tehran's nuclear program is highly dependent on uranium enrichment and it has received significant technical assistance and expert advice from North Korea. As a result, Iranian scientists are also expected to witness the anticipated nuclear test. Some analysts and defence officials believe that the DPRK has actually tested a nuclear device on behalf of the Iranians.<sup>16</sup> This would entail a significant development in nuclear relations between the countries. In return, Iran also provides aid to the impoverished country in order to help ensure the survival of the regime. In light of the U.S. cancelling plans to send food aid, Iran announced that the Islamic Republic has sent 85 tons worth of humanitarian aid, including vital food staples to North Korea.<sup>17</sup> This exemplifies the close ties between the nations as they continue to support each other's endeavors. Both states view their nuclear programs as central to deterring foreign intervention and ensuring the survival of their respective regimes. Nuclear cooperation with the Islamic Republic is arguably the most significant problem facing the international community in their efforts to curb nuclear proliferation.

## **Conclusion**

North Korea continues to constitute a grave threat to international peace and stability. It appears that DPRK cannot be forced to surrender its nuclear program. Bi-lateral and multi-lateral negotiations have not led to successful denuclearization and North Korea has proven that it is capable of exploiting these forums for discussion to receive much needed assistance. Unless North Korea instigates a conflict, military strikes on key facilities are highly unlikely. It is clear China will not support economic sanctions that have the power to bring down the regime in Pyongyang, rendering this option ineffective without full international compliance. The recent

release of kidnapped Chinese fisherman for ransom further illustrates the tensions growing between DPRK and its benefactor. North Korea can only be persuaded to relinquish its nuclear weapons only if the benefits in doing so outweigh the costs of maintaining the program. North Korea's international isolation from the global economy, centrally planned economic system, and disproportionate investment in its military has led to a state of extreme poverty and widespread starvation. The unavoidable opening up of North Korean society through pirated cell phones and increased internet usage has immense ramifications for the future of the country. In the long run, Kim Jong-un will have to address these core issues and realize that the survival of the regime depends on improving the standard of living for the population. The costs of maintaining the capabilities to produce a handful of nuclear bombs are enormous and continue to rise. The United States, South Korea and other key international countries must focus on how to improve regional security and encourage North Korea's transition to a more open society and freer economy.

## Endnotes:

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