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North Korea's Audaciousness Changes the Status-Quo in Northeast Asia

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According to Chinese astrology, the new year that began on February 8 is the Year of Fire Monkey, which symbolizes ambition, adventure, but also irritableness. North Korea, which has been excessively audacious and often looks resentful like a fire monkey, already surprised the world twice in the beginning of this year with its ambitious acts. The first was its 4th nuclear test conducted on January 6, and the second was its long-range rocket launch on February 6. Three key considerations are important in considering the implications for both the region and the international community.

First and foremost, it is clear that North Korea has been steadily improving its technologies. North Korea has made considerable technological progress over the past few decades in spite of the UN's best efforts. Regardless of whether or not the nuclear test in January was a hydrogen bomb as stated by the regime, or whether the rocket launched in February is actually a satellite for the peaceful use of space or a long-range missile in disguise, it is crystal clear that North Korea defied the United Nations Security Council resolutions that forbid North Korea from developing nuclear weapons or ballistic missile technologies. Essentially, Pyongyang does not think that it is particularly beholden to the UN where super powers including the United States, China, and Russia diplomatically compete.

Second, nuclear and missile technologies are no longer bargaining chips designed to exhibit Pyongyang's brinkmanship mainly to Washington. North Korea's nuclear and missile tests are often described as "provocations," thus conveying the implication that the action is intended to irritate the outside world. However, Pyongyang does not conduct these acts to keep its counterparts off balance or to get more attention from the international community. Rather, the two pillars of its strategy, i.e. development of nuclear and long-range missile technologies, have become the *raison d'être* of Pyongyang. The elites in Pyongyang truly believe that there is no other option for continuing their regime and proving the political legitimacy of their autocracy to their own people except via these two pillars.

Third, this year's unprecedented pattern of events is important to consider. In previous years, Pyongyang conducted its rocket test first, and then detonated nuclear devices. But this time, Pyongyang reversed the pattern with a nuclear test followed by a missile test. The international community was perplexed by how to respond to this new sequence because sanctions in response to missiles usually cannot be greater than sanctions in response to nuclear tests, which the international community was already working on. Pyongyang was successful not only in revealing its improvement of relevant technologies, but also in interrupting the ongoing process of negotiations on international sanctions against its provocations. As a result, it took much longer than the previous three times for the UN Security Council to adopt the unprecedentedly

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tough sanctions; it took just 5 days to adopt a sanctions resolution in 2006, 18 days in 2009, 23 days in 2013, and 56 days this time.

Another reason why it took for the US Security Council that long to reach consensus is there has been wide disagreement over what needs to be done to discourage Pyongyang from repeating such actions again. Sanctions are controversial especially among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The United States, together with its East Asian allies South Korea and Japan, wants “strong and comprehensive” sanctions against North Korea, whereas China has been reluctant to support sanctions up to a level that its domestic economy might be impacted and/or some serious economic crisis could occur in North Korea resulting in its instability or collapse. Therefore, it is noteworthy and encouraging that Washington and Beijing reached an agreement on a draft resolution that was unanimously adopted at the UN Security Council on March 2.

What factors contributed to changing Beijing’s mind? Firstly, Japan’s reactions this time was noticeably prompt and resolute. The two recent tests by North Korea provide a very good justification to Japan in its effort to further strengthen its defense and pursue normalization. Secondly, South Korea showed its strong rejection of North Korea’s actions as well. The South Korean government, which had already lost most of its economic leverage over North Korea because of the May 24 Measures enacted in 2010 as a response to the Cheonan Sinking Incident, declared that it would completely close the Kaesong Industrial Complex in spite of a furious backlash from the deeply invested entrepreneurs and from critical media. This means the South Korean government renounced its last vestige of economic leverage to show its determination for strengthening sanctions even though it would have domestic ramifications. In response North Korea expelled all South Korean staff from the complex and froze all assets. Additionally, Seoul announced that it will officially discuss with the United States the issue of deploying the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) anti-ballistic missile system to the US forces in Korea, an action that is not welcomed by Beijing. However, shortly before the historic agreement between Secretary of State John Kerry and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Washington on February 23 regarding sanctions, the United States postponed signing the agreement to deploy THAAD in South Korea, which was supposed to be signed that same day. Meanwhile, according to the recent public-opinion poll released by Korean Broadcasting System and Yonhap News, more than 67% of respondents answered that they support THAAD deployment in South Korea and more than 52% of them answered that South Korea also needs to have nuclear weapons. It is clear that South Koreans are frustrated with previous approaches, including Kim Dae-jung’s *Sunshine Policy*.

Washington has to keep closely cooperating with Seoul, Beijing, Tokyo, and even with Moscow to effectively implement the newly adopted sanctions in order to strike a fatal blow directly to Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs. Also, Washington has to think about a dual track policy, accompanied by some diplomatic action. For example, sending someone like Sung Kim, the U.S. Special Envoy for the Six-Party Talks, who can be symbolic and politically influential, would show Washington’s efforts to stabilize the current situation of escalating tensions in this region, and also to retrieve American citizens like Otto Frederick Warmbier, an American college student detained in North Korea who recently confessed his “hostile action”.

Strategic patience for this presidential election year might be exactly what Pyongyang wants in order to gain more time. Pyongyang has made persistent efforts to sharpen its sword, and it will keep doing so while Washington is distracted by the increasingly remarkable election season.

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