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Misunderstanding North Korea

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SUMMARY As North Korea gets closer to deploying working nuclear missiles, it is more important than ever to dispense with four common misunderstandings. First, characterizations of the regime as irrational are wrong. Fundamentally weak and deeply insecure, North Korea tries to compensate by cultivating an image of eagerness to go to war in the hope of intimidating its adversaries. Second, paranoid about subversion, Pyongyang is extremely unlikely to exchange its nuclear weapons for greater trade opportunities with democratic countries. Third, the option of using military action to prevent North Korea from getting nuclear missiles is not “on the table.” Finally, depending on China to solve the problem is fruitless because the Chinese fear a collapse of the regime more than they fear a nuclear-armed North Korea. Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington should focus on mitigating the dangers of living with deliverable North Korean bombs.

Introduction

Over 30 years into the North Korea nuclear crisis, Pyongyang now seems on the verge of getting a deliverable bomb. Its adversaries failed to dissuade the North Koreans from researching nuclear weapons, acquiring weapons-grade nuclear material, abrogating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, building working bombs, conducting several test explosions, and developing missiles that could serve as delivery vehicles. Discussion of the issue is accordingly increasing. This discussion frequently repeats four misconceptions connected to the crisis: that the North Korean government is crazy, that the regime might bargain away its nuclear weapons, that “all options are on the table,” and that China can solve the problem. Dispelling these misconceptions clarifies the situation and the task facing policymakers as Pyongyang closes in on deploying nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

Compared to the single-mindedness with which Pyongyang has pursued regime security, it is US foreign policy in Asia that appears ‘erratic’

The Pyongyang Regime Is Not Crazy

Thanks to constant reinforcement by news and entertainment media and by US government officials (Donald Trump, for example, has repeatedly called Kim Jong-un a “madman”¹), the average American thinks he or she knows two things about North Korea: (1) that it is hostile toward the United States; and (2) that its government is irrational. The phrase “North Korea crazy” returns over 3 million results in a Google search. Similar searches with the words “unpredictable,” “irrational,” and “erratic” substituted for “crazy” each yield about half a million results.

Pyongyang, however, is neither crazy nor unpredictable. Strictly speaking, “irrationality” means making decisions that are not anchored in reason

or reality—acting, for example, on an unusual delusion or on a temporary but later-regretted wave of emotion. A more technical definition of irrationality is the failure to behave in accordance with a hierarchy of consistently ranked values—in other words, deciding today to sacrifice goal X in order to achieve competing goal Y but tomorrow doing the reverse. None of these descriptions fits the government in Pyongyang, which has, for decades, consistently and ruthlessly implemented policies that prioritize the goal of maintaining regime security (even at the expense, arguably, of state security—or what Americans usually call “national security”).

To be sure, the regime’s values do not reflect those of liberal democratic societies. To stay in power, the DPRK’s top leaders have no problem engaging in many types of behavior outsiders consider odious, including committing politically motivated executions and imprisonment on a large scale, violating numerous international laws, and sponsoring misogynist and racist propaganda. But while these acts represent a code of values outsiders might consider atrocious, they are not irrational given the regime’s objectives. Moreover, compared to the single-mindedness with which Pyongyang has pursued regime security, it is US foreign policy in Asia that appears “erratic.”

The Kim regime is fundamentally weak and deeply insecure. It is clearly losing its political struggle to the death with bitter rival Seoul, which controls twice the population of North Korea and an economy 30 times larger. Pyongyang deeply fears “absorption” by the South. It also fears attack from the United States. While Americans might think the North Koreans are paranoid, they should understand that North Koreans suffered terribly

during the Korean War under carpet-bombing by US aircraft, which dropped more tons of ordnance on North Korea than US planes used in the entire Pacific Theater during World War II. When they started running out of undestroyed urban areas to bomb, US air forces struck dikes and dams to cause flooding that would ruin the North Korean rice crop.² Washington has also frequently threatened to strike North Korea with nuclear weapons.

To compensate for its lack of military capabilities relative to its adversaries, Pyongyang has, for decades, employed a strategy of bravado: signaling that it is willing to take extreme risks and is not afraid to go to war against the militarily superior forces of the US-ROK alliance. The DPRK's nuclear-weapons and missile programs are another form of compensation for weakness.

The Regime Will Not Bargain Away Its Nuclear Weapons

Since disavowing the 2005 Joint Statement that conditionally committed North Korea to de-nuclearization, Pyongyang and its representatives have repeatedly said the country will never give up its nuclear weapons. In 2012 the regime revised its constitution to refer to North Korea as a nuclear-weapons state. Few decisions are irrevocable for a one-man dictatorship but it would not be easy for Kim Jong-un to order such a dramatic policy reversal as voluntary de-nuclearization without it appearing to be an act of weakness.

More importantly, a nuclear-weapons capability addresses the regime's two primary security concerns. Internally, North Korea's entry into the exclusive nuclear-weapons club counts as a rare success for a government that has failed for decades to deliver

on promises of prosperity for the North Korean population outside of the privileged inhabitants of the capital city. Having nuclear weapons is a source of national pride and provides the regime with an infusion of domestic legitimacy. With regard to external security, a nuclear-weapons capability helps to offset North Korea's military weakness relative to the US-ROK alliance. In addition to deterring attack from its adversaries, Pyongyang likely also hopes that joining the exclusive nuclear club would give the regime much greater leverage in pursuing longer-term goals such as getting US forces off the Peninsula, ending the US-ROK alliance, and eventually achieving reunification on North Korean terms.

Governments generally want prosperity as much as they want security. Citizens of democracies assume national leaders must take care of their people to remain in power, since in democratic systems leaders blamed for poor economic performance get voted out of office. Even in authoritarian states, national leaders usually cannot survive for long if they prove incapable of meeting the populace's expectations of prosperity. Outside governments opposed to the DPRK's nuclear ambitions have approached the problem as if the Pyongyang regime wants prosperity as much as it wants security. Thus Chinese officials have tried to persuade Pyongyang to follow the post-Mao Chinese model by marketizing the economy while maintaining a one-party dictatorship, and Seoul and Washington have promised North Korea increased economic aid and cooperation as a reward for de-nuclearization.

This has not worked, however, for two reasons. First, the Kim regime values security much more than prosperity. Second, the state is so much more powerful than society in North Korea

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that the regime can survive its consistent failure to deliver prosperity to most of the country.

Liberalizing the economy and opening the country wider to international trade would undoubtedly stimulate productivity and raise living standards but the regime apparently fears this path would lead to challenges to the government's monopoly over political power by empowering society and by allowing in dangerous ideas. In 2009, for example, the government announced a currency "reform" that required all citizens to immediately exchange their North Korean won for new banknotes. The amount of new currency an individual could draw was limited to a maximum of about US\$260, regardless of the amount of old currency turned in.³ The apparent purpose of the move was to wipe out the savings accumulated by a nascent middle class through unauthorized black-market trading. The regime demonstrated it preferred a weak society to a wealthy society.

The regime does seem to worry about keeping the 2.5 million residents of Pyongyang happy; accordingly, they enjoy a comfortable lifestyle relative to the other 90 percent of North Koreans. Those outside Pyongyang rely heavily on foraging and illegal informal markets to survive—but they lack the ability to overthrow the government. Even if North Korea's economic bounty is meager, if there is enough to keep the military leadership and residents of Pyongyang content, the regime can remain in power.

Therefore, the idea of trading their nuclear weapons for a promised economic payoff that they view ambivalently is unappealing to Kim and his inner circle. Nor are signals of hostility from the United States and South Korea enough to frighten Pyongyang into giving up its nuclear-weapons and

missile programs. Pyongyang welcomes a permanent atmosphere of tension between itself and its adversaries as a boost to the regime's domestic legitimacy. The notion of endless hostility toward the DPRK from the powerful United States, an ever-present theme of domestic propaganda, provides an excuse for North Korea's economic hardships and seemingly affirms the strength and heroism of a government that continually succeeds in holding the Americans at bay.

There Is No Military Option

As the crisis heated up in 2017, high-ranking US officials began publicly making vague threats of a strike against North Korea by the US armed forces. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson pointedly said, "All options are on the table."⁴ Nikki Haley, US ambassador to the United Nations, warned, "The US is prepared to use the full range of our capabilities to defend ourselves and our allies. One of our capabilities lies with our considerable military forces."⁵ Trump stated, "We will confront [the threat from North Korea] very strongly. . . . I have some pretty severe things that we're thinking about."⁶ The seemingly noncommittal nature of these warnings may reflect a desire by Washington to preserve plausible deniability. If so, this is an indirect acknowledgment of the reality that military action to prevent the DPRK from attaining a nuclear ICBM capability is not feasible.

Such action could take one of three forms. The first possible approach is a symbolic military strike intended to intimidate the North Korean leaders into halting their development of nuclear ICBMs. The goal would not be to destroy the DPRK's physical capacity to build such weapons but rather to signal that the US-ROK alliance

will destroy North Korean lives and property if Pyongyang continues its present course.

The second possible approach is a surgical strike from the air (most likely employing cruise missiles) on key North Korea nuclear-weapons and missile infrastructure. Destroying this infrastructure would probably, at least temporarily, derail the regime's plans for future nuclear and missile tests. Such tests provide the data and experience North Korean technicians will require to craft a launch vehicle capable of delivering a working nuclear bomb as far as North America.

The third possible approach would be for the United States and South Korea to initiate a total war against North Korea with the objective of removing the Kim regime and unifying the Peninsula under the Seoul government. This would include a massive northward ground invasion with the expectation of maximum resistance by the full weight of the DPRK armed forces.

Each of these approaches is prohibitively risky and more likely to worsen than to alleviate the crisis. The first two approaches are premised on the assumption that Pyongyang would recognize the attack as limited—i.e., not part of a general all-out attempt by the alliance to conquer North Korea. The DPRK leadership, however, could easily leap to the conclusion that an air attack is preliminary to an impending invasion. Indeed, an attack on North Korea's missile and nuclear-weapons facilities would be a logical first phase of a general war plan, giving the highest priority to eliminating the possibility of nuclear retaliation by the North while the element of surprise was still available. Any attack on the North—even a small-scale symbolic strike on a target such as a missile launch pad—might prompt Pyongyang to immediately implement a massive

retaliatory attack based on the “use it or lose it” fear that the destruction of key DPRK military assets might be imminent. This hair-trigger DPRK response might include the artillery and rocket launchers arrayed against Seoul. Greater Seoul is home to 25 million people, half of South Korea's population.

Furthermore, the payoff for taking these huge risks is disproportionately small, as these attacks probably would not be effective. Much of the DPRK's nuclear and missile arsenals are stored in hidden facilities unknown to US and ROK targeters. The setback caused by strikes against known infrastructure would be temporary. The most likely North Korean response to either a symbolic attack or a broader effort to destroy the nuclear and missile programs would be a stronger determination to complete these programs. Pyongyang hopes that deploying nuclear ICBMs will deter future attacks.

Going to war with North Korea offers the chance to eliminate the missile and nuclear programs with finality and certitude. Any serious military action against North Korea, however, carries a high likelihood that the DPRK would play its only valuable card, which is the capability to rain destruction on Seoul. Thus the price of ending the DPRK nuclear threat could be several million South Korean dead or injured plus additional thousands of American casualties.

Opting for a preventive total war would be a perverse choice given that avoiding a terrible, costly conflict is the reason the international community is trying to get North Korea to de-nuclearize.

China Will Not Solve the Problem

China is North Korea's main trading partner and the supplier of most of the DPRK's food and fuel. Consequently, US politicians from both major parties

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have often alleged that China has such overwhelming leverage over North Korea that the Chinese could solve the nuclear crisis at will. President Donald Trump, in particular, said as a presidential candidate in 2016, “China can solve that problem with one meeting or one phone call.”⁷ Beijing has insisted it has less influence over Pyongyang than Americans believe, that North Korea has often defied Chinese pressure, and that the responsibility for defusing the crisis rests with Washington. Chinese President Xi Jinping seems to have made that pitch to Trump effectively during their summit meeting in April 2017. “After listening for 10 minutes, I realized it’s not so easy” for China to compel policy changes in North Korea, Trump later said.⁸ Trump added in a June 20, 2017, tweet that “I know China tried . . . to help with North Korea” but “it has not worked out.”⁹ Yet Trump seemed, on July 3, 2017, to return to the hope that China would solve the problem, tweeting, “Perhaps China will put a heavy move on North Korea and end this nonsense once and for all.”¹⁰

Both the Chinese government and Chinese society are angry with Pyongyang’s intransigence. The North Koreans have refused to follow China’s advice, consistently caused trouble for China by raising tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and embarrassed Beijing by going ahead with nuclear tests the Chinese publicly opposed. Xi has yet to meet Kim Jong-un, a profound and calculated slight. (Xi has met repeatedly with South Korean presidents during Kim’s reign.)

China, however, has compelling reasons not to end the “nonsense.” There is little question Beijing wants North Korea to de-nuclearize. The difference between the Chinese and American agendas, however, is their priorities. Unlike Washington, China’s top priority is avoiding a collapse of the Kim government.

From China’s standpoint, regime collapse would open up several highly adverse possibilities. A take-over of northern Korea by Seoul would create a stronger, united Korea that has irredentist designs on part of what is now PRC territory. This would also place a US ally and a host of US military bases on the Chinese border. A DPRK collapse could also create a flow of large numbers of ethnic Koreans into China. Taking care of these refugees would be an economic burden for China and their migration could increase the Koreanization of areas on China’s side of the border. The Chinese also worry about what might happen to North Korea’s nuclear weapons and material in the chaos of a power vacuum.

Thus China opposes placing Pyongyang under pressure strong enough that it might indirectly topple the regime. In the several meetings of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to approve punitive sanctions against North Korea, China has consistently tried to reduce the severity of the measures proposed by the United States, its fellow permanent member on the UNSC. Beijing also asserts the right to carve out “humanitarian” exceptions to the anti-North Korean sanctions.

It is highly unlikely that anything less than strong pressure would have a chance of persuading Pyongyang to voluntarily de-nuclearize. It is not clear that even a policy of extreme coercion, such as cutting off supplies of energy to North Korea, would force Pyongyang to relent. Yet China, the only country capable of doing so, will not impose intolerable economic pressure on Pyongyang unless circumstances dramatically change. Beijing will not stand in the way of the Kim government getting its nuclear ICBMs.

Beijing clearly wishes Americans would stop placing the onus on China. In July 2017, PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang

pulled out the “ulterior motives” card, an especially strong condemnation Chinese commentators usually employ with alleged US attempts to weaken China or overthrow the Chinese Communist Party government. “Recently,” he said, “certain people . . . have been exaggerating and giving prominence to the so-called ‘China responsibility theory.’ I think this either shows lack of a full, correct knowledge of the issue, or there are ulterior motives for it, trying to shift responsibility.”¹¹

Conclusions

These observations do not suggest a ready solution to the problem of North Korea deploying working nuclear ICBMs. Indeed, understanding the importance of nuclear weapons to the Kim regime and the improbability of China exercising decisive constructive influence makes a solution appear even more distant than commonly recognized. US policy is essentially stuck waiting for an impossibility: that Pyongyang, now close to gaining its long-pursued objective, will decide to abandon it to grasp the economic blandishments offered by its adversaries.

The issue creates an acute problem for the US-ROK relationship. An American public and Congress unaccustomed to being vulnerable to an attack from nuclear missiles controlled by a leader they widely consider irrational, highly aggressive, and extremely hostile toward the United States will pressure the US executive for effective action to eliminate this threat. Inevitably, Washington will visit and re-visit the idea of preventive military

action. This is perhaps the only course of action that could promise to provide the instant security that Americans demand. South Koreans, however, would bear almost all of the risk of the potentially terrible consequences of North Korean retaliation.

On the other hand, acknowledging that the Kim government is both rational and highly defensive should make it easier to live with the North Koreans possessing long-range nuclear missiles, an outcome that seems likely in the near future.

Presumably Kim’s government understands that firing a nuclear missile at a South Korean, Japanese, or American city would result in the prompt physical destruction of the regime and the incorporation of the DPRK into the Seoul-led Republic of Korea. Reminding Pyongyang of this fact, along with improving anti-missile defense systems, should be part of Washington’s response to Pyongyang gaining this capability. There is no reason to believe the Kim regime is suicidal, so we should not fear a “bolt from the blue” nuclear attack by North Korea. Neither Washington nor Seoul is interested in the kind of hyper-aggressive policy, such as an unprovoked invasion of the North by ROK or US ground forces, that might cause Pyongyang to decide to use nuclear weapons. Serious and troubling possibilities exist for an accidental nuclear launch or a miscalculated limited attack leading to uncontrolled escalation toward unlimited war. But the idea that the “madman” intends to nuke the US homeland when he has the means is a canard, Pyongyang’s own propaganda notwithstanding.

There is no reason to believe the Kim regime is suicidal, so we should not fear a ‘bolt from the blue’ nuclear attack by North Korea

Notes

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