The New Korean Cold War and the Possibility of Thaw

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The North Korean launch of an object –whether missile or satellite – in early April, 2009 was promptly denounced by the United Nations Security Council (see Gavan McCormack, "Security Council Condemnation of North Korean "UFO" Deepens Korean Crisis (http://japanfocus.org/-Gavan-McCormack/3121)."

Since then, the diplomatic atmosphere has steadily worsened. On 29 April, a spokesman for the North Korean Foreign Ministry issued a statement demanding that "the UNSC should promptly make an apology for having infringed the sovereignty of the DPRK and withdraw all its unreasonable and discriminative 'resolutions' and decisions adopted against the DPRK." Otherwise, the DPRK would take "additional self-defensive measures … including nuclear tests and test-firings of intercontinental ballistic missiles," and would build a light water reactor to ensure self-production of nuclear fuel.

The rhetoric of North Korea's denunciation of South Korea has also escalated. According to Rodong sinmun on 4 May, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's statement of intention to join the Proliferation Security Initiative was "a public declaration of military confrontation against us and of war provocation to invade the North … basic common sense dictates that it will lead to military clashes between the two sides and escalate to a full-blown war."

North Korea's high expectations of the Obama administration also appear also to have crashed. On 4 May, a Foreign Ministry spokesman in Pyongyang declared there was "absolutely no difference" between the Obama and the previous George W. Bush administration.

In this bleak and apparently deteriorating atmosphere, well-known Russian Korea expert, Georgy Toloraya, visited North Korea. He believes that the situation is not at all hopeless, and that the deep freeze can be thawed. Here he offers his analysis and prescription for a way out of the morass. GMcC

In Pyongyang in late April 2009 this author got the impression – through both official and unofficial contacts - that DPRK decision-makers were in their hearts quite satisfied with the controversy about their country in the wake of the April "satellite launch". North Korea had as a result once again become the focus of world politics. They seemed to have grown tired of the multilateral diplomatic process and frustrated with its "uselessness", feeling that such a process would hardly help them attain their final goal, regime survival. They said repeatedly that Pyongyang had come to the

conclusion that only WMD deterrent could guarantee their safety.

Kim Jong Il with scientists and technicians of the Satellite/Missile program

No harsh words were spared for South Korean "traitors" and the fact that Seoul is just 50 km from the DMZ was stressed to underline the advantageous position the North enjoys in military terms. My interlocutors criticized one Russian researcher who stated that North Korea was weak and would certainly be defeated in a conflict. They argued that an all-out war would destroy both Koreas and much of the adjacent territories, so there would be no winners, while in any limited local conflict near the border North Korea would certainly be victorious.

North Korea has threatened to conduct another nuclear test and to continue improving its missile capabilities. In the coming months this threatened nuclear test is almost certain to become a major global challenge. The leading players in the Korean game will have to determine their positions and suggest strategies to avoid such an unwelcome development.

It is a challenging task. The current situation in and around Korea is reminiscent of the early 1990s, when the peninsula was on the brink of military conflict. At that time the cause was the international community's pressure on Pyongyang to contain its attempts to acquire nuclear weapons. This time the tension is more the result of intentional actions taken by North Korea in accordance with its own strategic rationale. North Korean behavior is the consequence of dissatisfaction with the policies and the actions (or lack of them) of its adversaries. It cannot be explained simply in terms of the "unpredictability" of the Pyongyang regime or its "blackmail". What might be the motives of North Korean authorities and how should the concerned parties act in the light of these new developments?

Just two years ago the improvement in the Korean situation seemed, if not irreversible, at least long-term. The progress of the Six Party Talks and deepening North-South cooperation were grounds for guarded optimism. The modalities of a "package deal" - eventual denuclearization in exchange for security guarantees and economic aid – had become the underlying presupposition of the agreements reached in 2005 and 2007 at the Six Party Talks. Of course, serious experts did not believe there was any prospect in the short term of a complete and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea, but at least further nuclear development was arrested and the long and painful process of working out a compromise between the US and the DPRK on a *modus vivendi* seemed to be underway. Much as had been done during the final period of the Bush administration to bring about a change in the dialogue with North Korea, the likelihood of a future Democratic approach seemed to many to offer an even brighter prospect. The Democratic presidential candidates demonstrated (in varying degree) a readiness for dialogue with DPRK. When important agreements were reached in October 2007 at the North-South summit – it appeared that the two Koreas were finally on the way to significantly reduce hostilities and move toward peaceful coexistence.

However, the negative changes that instead followed were swift and profound. North Korea reverted again to playing its own game – in the hope of eventually getting what it wants.

The deterioration started with the advent of a conservative government in Seoul. Many experts, including myself, underestimated the degree of animosity and distrust the Grand National Party (Hannaradang)'s "old guard" would provoke in Pyongyang even before the predictable victory of Lee Myong Bak in the presidential elections of December 2007. North Koreans seemed to believe that the "engagement" rhetoric of the South Korean ruling class had a "false bottom" – that its real desire was to use engagement to undermine the Pyongyang regime and cause it to collapse. (As a matter of fact, such a view is not completely at odds with what I have heard from some quarters in Seoul.) Northerners became worried lest further cooperation with Seoul amount to letting in a Trojan horse. Prevention of such a development is much more important to them than the possible economic benefits that some South Koreans naively believe play a role in the political calculations of the Pyongyang elite. The elite has what it needs. Improvement of the economic situation for the general population is not a matter of life and death, but political stability is.

The usefulness of the Six Party Talks seems to North Koreans to have been exhausted. Further down the road they would have to discuss – and probably be pressed for concessions on something really tangible, such as their reprocessed fissile materials and actual nuclear weapons. That, most likely, formed no part of their calculations, at least at the early stage of searching for a strategic compromise with the West. Understandably, North Koreans became frustrated as their tangible gains from the multiparty process were marginal. They did not come much closer to getting substantial security guarantees, and even the largely symbolic (and easily reversible) "delisting" of the DPRK as a terrorist state caused much controversy in the US and elsewhere, and led to demands for new concessions from it in return. North Koreans saw that as a breach of trust. Modest economic assistance was indeed promised when the accord was sealed, but only Russia carried out its obligations (200 thousand tons of heavy oil), while other countries either totally abstained (Japan) or dragged their feet. The DPRK felt that its concessions were not fully recognized and valued. "Hawks" in Pyongyang might also have suspected that concessions were perceived in the West as a sign of weakness and testimony to their pressing need to normalize relations. No one was impressed, at least to the extent that North Koreans had probably expected, with the actual opening of its nuclear program and even the disabling of some objects, though such things were unimaginable just a few years ago.

North Korea had gone much further than in Clinton's time, but received much less in return. It had gained neither promises of normalization nor even any glimpse of the hoped for light water reactors (LWRs), though these had been part of the 1994 deal. Small wonder that the voices in Pyongyang saying that engagement policies were ineffective became louder. The crucial factor probably was the reported illness of Kim Jong Il, which came as a shock to the elite. Without Kim Jong Il's guidance, they were too scared to continue the elaborate "chess game" with the West. "Opening" seemed to present a real and immediate danger.

To increase the vigilance and boost the flagging spirits of the population an external enemy was needed. So the country followed the familiar pattern of closing up and tightening the screws as demanded by the military and ideologues. At the same time, from a pragmatic point of view world attention – and the attention of the new US administration above all - was easily attracted by raising tensions, which also served to raise the stakes for a future diplomatic

contest.

This strategy probably took shape in late 2008, after the initial shock brought about by Kim Jong Il's health problem wore off. The malevolent speculations in the West and South Korea about Kim Jong Il's possible demise and the DPRK collapse that might follow really irritated the North Korean leadership. Emotions are not unimportant in politics. Seeing the degree of personal animosity of so much of the outside world, North Korea's leaders felt morally right to resist compromise or concession. They concluded that only sheer force, not mere words, could assure their survival.

The early signs included very harsh statements and rhetoric on the part of North Korea's Foreign Ministry and its military spokespersons. Relations with South Korea were almost totally suspended. The criticism of Lee Myung Bak reached unprecedented heights. However the world did not take that seriously, seemingly following instead a path of "benign neglect". Perhaps that was unsurprising given the Obama administration's preoccupation with financial crisis, Iraq, Afghanistan and other pressing problems. North Korea was obviously not a priority and Pyongyang could not realistically expect any major concessions allowing them to display the vitality of "Songun" (military first) policies or to bring closer their goal of becoming a "strong and prosperous nation by 2012".

The missile launch, widely publicized for nearly two months, became a perfect opportunity. North Koreans may have taken secret satisfaction from the fact that Western governments (especially Japan's) swallowed the bait and gave the missile launch much more attention and publicity than it deserved. Dozens of missiles and rockets are launched regularly round the globe and only Japanese paranoia about this being an "enemy" rocket helped the impoverished country's once-a-decade launch of an outdated missile become the focus of global concern. Iran's successful satellite launch in February, despite its potentially much graver consequences, went almost unnoticed.

North Korea got the attention it longed for and the pretext it needed to "tighten the screws", while also demonstrating that it did not actually need allies. It does not hide its displeasure at Chinese and Russian "betrayal" by their support for the UN Security Council president's statement. Following the launch, Pyongyang can leave out of its decision-making process not only Japan and South Korea, but all the other parties. The US will sooner or later have to resume bilateral dialogue with Pyongyang. Otherwise new provocations would follow.

What next? It looks as though the international community will have to wait until earnest dialogue between the US and the DPRK starts. Pyongyang has resorted to criticism of the Obama administration, probably in order to "tame" the relative novices in Washington and to raise the stakes for future concessions. Procrastination also helps North Korea raise the stakes (reprocessing fuel rods, conducting a nuclear test or missile test, or possibly by border clashes with South Korea). Much as all others dislike it, the status of North Korea as a nuclear power has become reality and that reality has to be taken into account for possible arrangements with international non-proliferation regimes in expectation of a Korean peninsula denuclearization which should still be left on the agenda.

It may sound somewhat cynical, but the US administration now has a unique chance to work out a totally new approach to Korean problem. First, a paradigm of US-DPRK coexistence has to be worked out based on the assumption that the Pyongyang regime is here to stay and should be recognized. A tacit understanding on the future of the DPRK and an easing of pressure on the country should be effected. (Paradoxically, such easing of tensions

could open the way to peaceful evolution of the regime, first by economic marketization and later by a resulting softening of the regime). This new approach should be seriously presented to North Korea by a communication at the highest level, without the demand for immediate "tit for tat". Only after doing that could new arrangements for security on the Korean peninsula be discussed, with demilitarization and denuclearization remaining a vital but distant goal.

Although the role of the US is central to bringing about change, that of other players is also important. China and Russia would support such an approach with little reservation and they will help promote dialogue since normalization in Korea corresponds with their strategic goals both in the region and in their relations vis-à-vis the United States. Japan has to change its unconstructive approach and at least take a wait-and-see attitude, without attempting to disrupt the dialogue or to promote its own egoistic interests. South Korea could play a vital role by supporting US efforts, rather than pushing its own agenda without concern for wider goals, and it should refrain from hostile actions against the DPRK whatever irritations it might face. The multilateral coordination mechanism (even without North Korean participation, as 5+1) should be kept intact, and Pyongyang should not be allowed to play on the contradictions between its partners in the talks. In the end the deal on the newly established "rules of the game" should get the approval and guarantees of implementation from all the players. A high-level political declaration and a set of bilateral legally binding treaties between each of the participants could be the form of a final basic arrangement launching new security architecture in Northeast Asia.

This might not seem an opportune time to think about such things, but North Koreans need to grasp the strategic concept of their partners and to see clearly where the road could take them.

Author, Pyongyang, April 2009

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