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THE NORTH KOREAN PARADOX: Regime change anyone?

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The issue of Pyongyang's development of nuclear weapons has alarmed countries in East Asia and raised tension between the United States and North Korea, with the threat of war looming over the peninsula. Since President George W Bush pronounced North Korea to be part of an "axis of evil" with Iraq and Iran, Pyongyang has declared its intention to arm itself with nuclear weapons for its survival and called for a non-aggression pact with Washington. The US has pressed for multilateral talks involving first China and later Japan, South Korea and Russia as well. The first round of the six-way talks, held in Beijing in late August, has held out the prospect of a resolution that obviates a military attack on North Korea's nuclear facilities. This paper assesses the different perspectives of the various countries involved in the North Korean issue; whether they favour a regime change in Pyongyang; and the prospects of the six-way talks.

The Paradox

That North Korea is developing nuclear weapons is no longer in doubt. It already has a substantial amount of nuclear materials. It is also strengthening its conventional military capabilities and armed forces, which have more than one million personnel ready to go to war. It's an open secret that North Korean agents have been conducting underground operations in Tokyo and Seoul for decades and kidnapping Japanese nationals. They have built several tunnels under the demilitarised zone between the two Koreas and testing the Japanese coast guard by entering Japanese territorial waters periodically.

It is claimed that for all these reasons North Korea constitutes the most serious security problem in Northeast Asia. The reported starvation of large numbers of North Korean rural dwellers adds a humanitarian dimension to the crisis. The party solely responsible for all these problems, it is contended, is the regime in Pyongyang, headed by the dictator Kim Jong Il. It is argued that if the regime were to collapse and the dictator ousted most of the problems described above would be solved overnight.

However, paradoxically, governments involved in the North Korean issue seek to prolong the life of the Pyongyang regime, for various reasons. Despite the severity of the issues all the parties which have a substantial stake, including the US, Japan, South Korea and China, do not wish to see the collapse of the regime at present.

Causes of the Paradox

For the **United States** the North Korean issue is causing a policy dilemma. Hardline conservatives in Washington have been advocating an offensive policy towards Pyongyang for some time. They believe that sooner or later Pyongyang will acquire the capability to launch a direct nuclear attack against the US mainland. And in the global war on terror North Korea, as part of the axis of evil, is seen as a grave threat. However they are unable to put forward an offensive policy because of strategic constraints. The US armed forces are preoccupied with Iraq and this situation is unlikely to change in the near future. If an emergency situation arose in the Korean peninsula, additional US armed forces would have to be mobilized; however Washington is unable to do so today. The US' strategic doctrine used to seek a capability to fight two wars simultaneously in different parts of the world. Today it is thought that its forces are able to carry out only one and a half large-scale operations. Therefore hardliners have no choice but to support an engagement policy at present.

In addition, the current Republican administration will have to fight an election next year. The historical trend holds that any administration would hesitate to make a controversial or sensitive decision before an election. It should be noted that the approval rating of the Bush administration has dropped because of the prolonged problems in Iraq. Republicans do not want to have another Iraq during next year's election campaign. Therefore, although the US recognises the seriousness of the North Korean issue it would rather see the prolongation of the troublesome regime than confront it now.

For **Japan** the North Korean issue is extremely difficult to deal with. Tokyo rightly thinks that its four islands would be the first targets of Pyongyang's missiles, possibly carrying nuclear warheads. Japanese citizens are angry at Pyongyang's persistent refusal to allow the return of their abducted people. However a collapse of the Pyongyang regime would cause difficult problems for Japan. A huge inflow of Korean refugees will undermine the stability of Japan's domestic society, in which ethnic Koreans form a large proportion. The refugees' relationship with the ethnic Koreans who are associated with the North will be troublesome and those related to the South could be even more daunting.

Furthermore several high-ranking officials of the Japanese self-defence forces have intimated that few in the Japanese defence community wish to face a united Korea in a strategic sense. If the Pyongyang regime were to collapse and the northern half of Korea was suddenly merged with the south, the balance of power in Northeast Asia would change significantly and probably in a way unfavourable to Japan. Therefore, Japan's preference is for the maintenance of the Pyongyang regime and status quo.

South Korea does not want to see the collapse of the Pyongyang regime either. The unification of the peninsula is a long term goal for Seoul; however its policy makers recognise that the differences between the two halves are too large in economic, political and ideological terms, and the cost of absorbing a collapsed north suddenly would be intolerably high. Seoul's perception of the nuclear weapons threat is not as grave as that of Tokyo. This is because the South Koreans do not believe that their fellow Koreans in the north were likely to target their siblings in the south. Thus for Seoul a peaceful resolution of the dispute through dialogue is a reasonable option.

China's interests are no different from those of other regional countries. Beijing seeks

to maintain the Pyongyang regime because it fears that the latter's collapse would result in the influx of tens of thousands of North Korean refugees across the border, adding to the large number already in the border area. There is also a strategic reason for Beijing to want to maintain the status quo. If the Pyongyang regime were to collapse the northern part of the Korean peninsula would also come under the influence of the US. Beijing is not prepared to face Washington at its Korean border. Also there is a large population of ethnic Koreans in northeastern China who are unable to receive any outside support so long as the current regime in Pyongyang stays. However a united Korea could change this situation and these people, like other minorities in China, could become a source of domestic security concern for Beijing.

Six-way talks on Pyongyang's nuclear program

It is against this background of these regional countries seeking to prolong the life of North Korea that the first round of six-way talks on Pyongyang's nuclear program was held in Beijing. The six parties explored ways of resolving the crisis which erupted a year ago when Washington accused Pyongyang of pursuing a nuclear weapon program. For North Korea the crisis was a matter of survival; its worst scenario was to face a US attack similar to the one conducted on Iraq. Pyongyang therefore sought a non-aggression pact with Washington, and embarked on the negotiation with its nuclear program as a bargaining chip.

The result of the round disappointed many. No substantial agreement was reached and no communiqué issued. During the talks Pyongyang threatened that it might conduct a nuclear test. However when the round ended its delegate said another round was not necessary, because the US did not agree to a non-aggression pact. Such a pact was a tall order for Washington and its allies. Before the round the US allies, in particular Japan, had made clear to Washington that such a pact was not acceptable because the US forces in East Asia should not have their hands tied in dealing with any kinds of emergency situations.

Nevertheless Beijing announced that there would be another round of six-way talks, tentatively in November. Some observers doubt whether the thorny nuclear issue could be resolved through dialogue; indeed whether the next round would be held at all. However it is reasonable to expect that the six countries will meet again and explore the possibilities of a peaceful solution. It is unlikely that the US will agree to a formal non-aggression pact; however it might make a minimal concession to Pyongyang and offer it some kind of safety guarantee. It is reasonable to conclude that in view of the paradox that all the parties prefer to prolong the life of the most troublesome regime in the region a major confrontation on the Korean peninsula is not imminent.

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