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A NUCLEAR NORTH KOREA – ASSESSING THE FALLOUT

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IN FEBRUARY 2005, North Korea announced to the world that it had successfully developed a deployable nuclear weapon. The international reaction ranged from outright shock to guarded concern. It seemed that Northeast Asia had taken a giant step closer to its nightmare scenario: this would open the floodgates for nuclear proliferation in the region - first South Korea, then Japan. China would then enhance its nuclear arsenal, both in quality and in numbers. These concerns of the international community reflect three broader issues and problems that are not always immediately obvious. The scenario highlighted above is simply the third.

Failure of IAEA?

The first concern revolves around the impact of the North Korean declaration on the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Pyongyang's move might signal the failure of the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) inspection and monitoring regimes, and encourage a host of other countries with nuclear ambitions. Greater nuclear proliferation would ensue, leading to further destabilising arms races around the world. However, there is already widespread concern that the IAEA's nuclear non-proliferation mechanisms are not working, given the existing cases of IAEA failures, of which North Korea is simply the latest. Libya may have unilaterally abandoned its WMD ambitions, but this ought not to be seen as an IAEA success story. This is not to say that we should abandon the IAEA and its monitoring regimes, because they are the best non-proliferation regime we currently have. Unless and until a better system can be devised, we have to make do with what we have got.

Nuclear terrorism

The second concern is the possibility of North Korea selling nuclear weapons to terrorist organisations. In the 1970s and 1980s, North Korea had a number of relationships with several terrorist organisations, under the coordination of its current leader Kim Jong Il. North Korea has precious few sources of foreign exchange – thus far ballistic missiles seems to be the only North Korean product that can find a foreign market. This argument is flawed, however. Pyongyang's past relationships with terrorist organisations were all with organisations that sought to overturn existing state regimes and governments, and had consequently generally limited their activities within the boundaries of the particular state. This North Korean policy was an attempt to enhance its international political legitimacy and concurrently degrade Seoul's international legitimacy, by building its portfolio of international relationships that would recognise it as the sole legitimate political authority in the Korean peninsula. As yet, there seems to be no evidence, clear or otherwise, of links

between Pyongyang and the terrorist bogeymen of today – al Qaeda globally, and Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia. But this could change overnight.

Reviewing assumptions about Pyongyang

However, the fact is that the region is still nowhere near any of these scenarios. In fact, thus far none of the anticipated negative repercussions of a nuclear-capable North Korea have yet materialised. Yet concerns remain high; perhaps we should begin to re-examine our fundamental assumptions about this issue – that North Korea is a dangerous rogue regime, that its military arsenal undermines Japanese and South Korean security, and that the only state that can have any influence over North Korea is China.

The last assumption is the easiest to deal with. The United States has often insisted that China has to exert more of its influence to get North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons programme. But if this episode highlights one thing, it is that China has no influence over North Korea whatsoever. Pyongyang's declaration could not have come at a worse time for Beijing – the various delicate negotiations Beijing has been having with the United States and with Europe. Chinese officials have often in the past privately complained about the intransigence of their North Korean counterparts. In any case, a more careful study of North Korean relations with Moscow and Beijing during the Cold War points to one conclusion – that it was Pyongyang that had influence over Moscow and Beijing, not vice versa.

The second assumption is equally flawed. One concern is that North Korea might acquire the ability to marry a nuclear warhead to a ballistic missile – which, incidentally, is no small technological feat. Assuming that Pyongyang can clear this technological hurdle, however, this then places Japan at great potential danger of a North Korean nuclear strike. This would then encourage the Japanese to abandon their nuclear taboos and begin their own nuclear weapons programme, and there can be no doubt that Japan could very quickly build up a massive nuclear arsenal. A re-militarised and nuclear Japan would touch on the regional raw nerves that allegedly still persist concerning Japan's World War Two record. Recent developments in the Japan-United States relationship, however, assuage these fears. It seems that this relationship has been enhanced rather than undermined by this episode. Japan thus has little incentive to develop an indigenous nuclear weapons programme. If anything, fears over North Korea's ballistic missile systems have led the Japanese to move more into the area of ballistic missile defences.

South Korea threatened?

Another concern is the threat that North Korea can pose to South Korea. Perhaps up to 20 years ago, South Korea might have had much to fear from the North Korean military. It does not today. The North Korean military has received a very small number of fairly modern combat systems over the last decade, but the overwhelming majority of its combat systems are thoroughly antiquated. In comparison, the South Korean military is modern, well-trained and well-equipped. It is likely that even in the absence of US Forces in Korea should a shooting war break out, South Korea will still experience a great deal of damage, but the eventual outcome – Seoul prevailing over Pyongyang – cannot be doubted. The fear, of course, is that an otherwise decisive conventional defeat would then tempt Pyongyang to utilise its nuclear option. But that requires Pyongyang to recognise some value coming out of a nuclear-devastated South Korea.

The problem lies in the first assumption. Pyongyang has a well-deserved reputation for erratic, if not downright bizarre and dangerous, strategic behaviour. A nuclear North Korea invites any number of plausible nightmare scenarios. Rationally, North Korea gains absolutely nothing from a nuclear-devastated South, but as the counter-argument goes, Pyongyang does not always act rationally. The potential flaw of this argument, however, is that it presupposes an irrational North Korea. There is in reality a pattern of rationality that underpins Pyongyang's strategic behaviour, and it is certainly manifest in this issue. Pyongyang's strategic behaviour is motivated purely by its sense of insecurity vis-à-vis the United States. The nuclear weapons programme has been, quite simply, an attempt to bolster its own security. The now famous remark attributed to an Indian general in the aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom – that the signal lesson of the Iraq war is that states without nuclear weapons should not provoke a conflict against the United States – probably gives Pyongyang some degree of comfort. From this perspective, therefore, North Korea requires two main things – American guarantees of Pyongyang's security, and foreign economic aid. Its nuclear weapons programme is thus an instrument of blackmail. The primary objective is to gain security guarantees from the United States and foreign economic aid. The means by which this objective can be realised is by leveraging on its past reputation for irrational behaviour. If the international community really worries about a nuclear-capable and irrational North Korea, then it has to meet Pyongyang's demands, not vice versa.

Policy Implications

What, then, are the policy implications? It is possible that the greatest mistake being made right now in response to this episode is for policy-makers to constantly wring their hands in despair and demonstrate great concern and worry over a nuclear-capable North Korea. This plays into Pyongyang's hands – it only serves to reinforce their perceptions that they are right in pursuing this nuclear option. They possibly reason that it is only a matter of time before the international community caves into their demands. So, rather than discouraging North Korean intransigence, such public displays of angst only encourages Pyongyang to hold out longer for the anticipated payout.

Perhaps, a more viable course of action is to take North Korean rhetoric about its security concerns at face value. In other words, accept that Pyongyang feels threatened by the military power of the United States, however rightly or wrongly. Washington should therefore acquiesce to North Korean demands for a security guarantee. Let North Korea keep its nuclear arsenal, in other words, with one absolutely essential caveat – Pyongyang must never sell its nuclear weapons to terrorist organisations. Intelligence resources should then be devoted to monitoring all traffic in and out of North Korea. The moment there is even the whiff of evidence of an attempted WMD trade between any terrorist organisation and Pyongyang, this will surely invite the terrible retribution that United States military power - acting on behalf of the IAEA and the United Nations - will bring upon North Korea

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