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Living with a Nuclear North Korea

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SINCE 1990, when a French weather satellite first detected a strange-looking construction project in an obscure location called Yongbyon in North Korea, concerned scholars, strategic planners and policy-makers have been asking several questions – do the North Koreans want, or plan to acquire, or actually have, a nuclear weapons capability? And what impact will a nuclear North Korea have on the security stability of East Asia?

For a long time, there was debate and speculation in these circles over possible answers to these questions. One of the more frequently speculated answers portrayed a scenario of irrational nuclear attacks on China, Japan, South Korea or even the United States from North Korea. Another frequent speculation was a nuclear-capable North Korea employing nuclear blackmail against these countries. Yet another frequent speculation focused on the possible trade of nuclear weapons between North Korea and radical terrorist groups like Al Qaeda. None of these speculations seemed implausible; all of them seemed potentially horrifying. But there was one thing that made it all seem less terrible – these were speculations based on an as-yet unproven assumption that North Korea had nuclear ambitions and was on the verge of acquiring an indigenous nuclear weapons capability.

From Speculation to Reality

All that has changed now. To all intents and purposes, North Korea is now a genuinely nuclear-capable state, joining the ranks of the US, Russia, Britain, France, China, India and Pakistan. The questions that academic and strategic-policy communities now have to ask are, is a nuclear North Korea such a terrible thing, and if it is, can we do something about it?

To answer these questions, both policy-makers and scholars need to ask a series of questions that will help to ascertain the kind and level of threat that a nuclear-capable North Korea poses to the East Asian region.

The first question is: Who can we plausibly expect North Korea to attack using its nuclear weapons? We can plausibly rule out South Korea – if North Korea uses its nuclear weapon against the south to reunite the Korean peninsula, it will be inheriting a nuclear wasteland in the south, shorn of its otherwise highly prized industrial infrastructure. We can also plausibly rule out China, since the only possible friend North Korea currently has is China. Japan is a possible target for a North Korean nuclear attack, but the purposes for such an attack may be difficult to surmise. This leaves the US, but it remains to be seen as to whether or not North Korean missiles can reach any US territories – Hawaii and Alaska spring to mind as falling

within range of the medium-range Taepodong II missiles.

The second question is: Under what circumstances can we plausibly expect North Korea to use its nuclear weapons? A North Korean nuclear attack on the US is likely under certain conditions. One is an imminent military action by the US against North Korea, which North Korean strategic planners have been extremely worried about. North Korean strategic planners probably know that if the US were to employ military force against Pyongyang, there can be no doubt that the Kim Jong Il regime will collapse. The threat of nuclear attack against US territories may be one of the very few instruments Pyongyang has at its disposal to avert such a catastrophe. Another condition is imminent implosion within North Korea, as a result of long-standing economic stagnation. This is a sort of mutual destruction scenario – Pyongyang on the verge of collapse might decide to lash out against its long-standing enemies. The economic situation within North Korea is currently bad, but not quite as catastrophic as three years ago, when there was widespread famine within the country. Economic aid packages from China and South Korea have managed to avert any economic meltdown that might lead to the implosion of the country. The trick, it would appear, therefore, is to avoid either a US military attack or economic meltdown.

The third question is: What sort of reactions would such a North Korean nuclear attack likely generate? In the event North Korea launches a nuclear attack against any US territories, it is hard – indeed almost impossible – to imagine that the US will not exact a swift and terrible vengeance. The US may retaliate with nuclear attacks. Even if a US military response is non-nuclear, the full weight of US military power will almost definitely come to bear against North Korea. If North Korea attacks either South Korea or Japan, the US will still have to respond in a substantial manner; anything less than a substantial military response will undermine the credibility of US alliance relationships elsewhere in the world. Rather, the US military response against a North Korean nuclear attack against either South Korea or Japan will almost certainly be equally swift, decisive and devastating. In either case, there can be no doubt what the end result will be – the utter devastation of North Korea, the destruction of all its infrastructure, and the destruction of the Kim Jong Il regime. This is the last thing that Kim Jong Il wants.

The fourth question adopts a different tack. North Korea will not attack other countries with nuclear weapons, but its nuclearisation may encourage further proliferation of nuclear weapons, that is, a nuclear arms race in East Asia. Will either South Korea or Japan be tempted to become nuclear powers as well? Given the stockpiles of weapons-grade materials and high levels of technological sophistication in both countries, there can be little doubt that either of them can very quickly cross the nuclear threshold and rapidly outstrip whatever nuclear arsenal North Korea might plausibly be able to construct. We come back, in other words, to square one – North Korea being significantly weaker than its neighbours, both economically and militarily. Furthermore, despite India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea, the track record of nuclear non-proliferation has actually been good – countries like South Africa, Brazil, Libya and South Korea itself have all been persuaded to abandon once-held nuclear ambitions. Nuclear proliferation, in any case, is driven by more factors than just keeping up with the Joneses. In other words, when a country decides to cross the nuclear threshold, its decision is likely the result of a myriad of factors, and not due solely to what its neighbours or enemies have.

A nuclear North Korea a bad thing?

The conclusion seems to be that a nuclear North Korea may not be a good thing, but its impact on security and stability in the region may not be as terrible as some might envisage. If this is the case, should the international community want to do something about it? One thing is certain – North Korea has to be punished for breaching international agreements concerning nuclear non-proliferation. But we should also be clear that punishing North Korea will almost certainly not persuade Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear weapons programme. Nor will punishment dissuade other potential nuclear proliferators – Iran springs to mind – from proceeding with their own nuclear programmes. In other words, we may just have no choice but to learn to live with a nuclear North Korea.

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