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North Korea: Is It Really a Serious Threat?

By Nah Liang Tuang

Synopsis

North Korea is expected to test another long range rocket and nuclear device in 2013. Should such grandstanding raise alarm about its capabilities? Rather than knee jerk punishment would a measured approach be more productive?

Commentary

SOUTH KOREA'S defence minister has claimed that Pyongyang is getting ready to test a third nuclear device and launch another long range rocket, as satellite images reveal that North Korea has been testing long-range rocket engines.

However, even if Pyongyang does carry out both tests in 2013, how much of a threat will North Korea pose to its neighbours? Will the rocket launch make a qualitative change to the capability of the North Korean People's Army (KPA)?

Less than meets the eye?

Though it boasts a numerical superiority over the Republic of Korea (ROK), with one million troops and 5,000 tanks compared to the South's 520,000 troops and 2,300 tanks, the three branches of the KPA have stagnated technologically and deteriorated in relative capability to the ROK's military. For example the most numerous South Korean tank, the K1 series, is based on the technology of the 1980s and 90s, while the backbone of the KPA are Soviet era tanks built on obsolescent technology of the 1950s to 70s.

The collapse of the Soviet Union cut off the flow of subsidised and modern military equipment to North Korea. Based on the military doctrine that dictates a three to one numerical superiority for a successful offence, the KPA is neither qualitatively nor quantitatively strong enough to prevail over the South Korean Army.

Similarly, the North Korean navy is clearly outmatched by the ROK navy which has far superior warships than the KPA's naval force (21 frigates and destroyers versus three frigates). In the air, while the Korean People's Army Air Force (KPAF) has the numerical edge over the Republic of Korea Air Force (ROKAF), with 678 combat aircraft to ROKAF's fleet of 467, it does not have the qualitative superiority over the South.

The oldest ROKAF warplanes date from the late 1960s and early 1970s and form about 51% of South Korea's

air power while the Soviet and Chinese-made workhorses of the KPAF were developed in the 1950s/60s and comprise 78% of North Korea's air power. Thus, the KPAF is unable to marshal a three to one numerical superiority over the ROKAF, is antiquated and is also said to suffer from fuel shortages. Consequently, apart from the ability to level Seoul using artillery, the North Korean military does not pose a serious threat. Additionally, even the threat against Seoul becomes improbable because bombarding it would mean a renewed Korean War which Pyongyang cannot win and would quite likely avoid.

Pyongyang's squib nukes

If North Korea's conventional capabilities are insufficient to garner the respect it desires, then what about its WMD arsenal, especially its nuclear weapons? Using the Indian and South African examples of the explosive yield possible from unsophisticated nuclear warheads, the Indian nuclear detonation in 1974 produced a yield of eight kilotonnes while the first South African nuclear device had a yield of five to nine kilotonnes. In contrast, the North Korean nuclear tests produced relatively weak nuclear blasts of one kilotonne or less and 2.4 kilotonnes in 2006 and 2009 respectively.

Therefore, the evidence suggests that North Korea's nuclear warhead designs are either inefficient or faulty. Hence, Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal appears to consist of atomic squibs and even if its estimated warhead inventory has increased from six to eight to six to 18 warheads, the inaccuracy of its current missiles as warhead delivery vehicles renders the nuclear arsenal ineffectual against military targets and only useful against cities.

Since North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un would want to avoid being branded a monster for slaughtering civilians, Pyongyang's nuclear armoury is effectively unusable and is only a national pride trophy.

A more productive approach

With nuclear arms as Pyongyang's last source of pride and negotiative power, the United States, South Korea and even Japan should avoid cornering Pyongyang to make it more desperate. For example, in response to South Korean and US criticism together with condemnation from the UN Security Council (UNSC) for North Korea's suspected test of a Taepodong-2 missile in April 2009, Pyongyang responded with a second nuclear test in May. Similarly, when the long range rocket launch in April 2012 was condemned by the US, Pyongyang responded by declaring that it would not be bound by a 29 February agreement to stop missile and nuclear tests in return for food aid.

While it is uncertain whether Kim will launch another rocket in 2013, it costs nothing for the Western powers, the US and South Korea to exercise restraint in condemning Pyongyang. This is because the previous two rockets in April and 2009 were ostensibly satellite-launching vehicles with miniscule payloads of 100 kilos, insufficient for nuclear warheads. In so far as the next rocket will have a similar payload, it is hardly a threat. And if the rocket fails, rubbing salt into Pyongyang's wounded pride would be unnecessary.

More a wounded animal than predator

Instead, North Korea could be advised that the international community disapproves of ballistic missile aggrandisement; while no further sanctions will be imposed for the time being, a third nuclear test will not be tolerated, with punitive measures to be implemented by the UNSC. Concurrently, China should be engaged as North Korea's last remaining ally, to remind Pyongyang that North Korea is still unable to feed itself and even if harvests have improved, they still face food shortages which must be met via imports or aid.

Additionally, its economy is still struggling and requires more assistance than China alone can provide. Hence, restraint by North Korea's adversaries should be highlighted and Beijing should advise Pyongyang that nuclear forbearance will yield more aid than brinkmanship.

As the KPA is outmatched and outdated, North Korea has resorted to nuclear equalisers. However, if its adversaries support punitive measures to enforce North Korean nuclear disarmament, it should be pointed out that North Korea is more like a wounded animal, lashing out to survive, than a predator seeking conquest.

Therefore, if Pyongyang is shown some flexibility even as it attempts a nationalist pride bolstering rocket launch, it might be persuaded not to detonate its third nuclear device and resume disarmament negotiations.

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