



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 121/2014 dated 27 June 2014

North Korea: Key to a China Nightmare?

By Huiyun Feng

Synopsis

North Korea may not be a nightmare for China. Instead, it will provide an opportunity for China and the United States to work together in preventing a possible nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. China should take a strong initiative to restart the Six Party Talks.

Commentary

A COMMENTATOR in the *Wall Street Journal*, Andrew Browne, has predicted that a fourth North Korean nuclear test will lead to China's nightmare, in that it will escalate China-Japan tensions by precipitating a new nuclear arms race in East Asia. This is not likely to materialise.

The North Korean domestic political scene is getting more opaque with the young leader Kim Jong-Un trying to consolidate power through extreme measures such as executing even his own uncle. Domestic instability and regime insecurity will drive the leadership to take risks in the international scene.

Will China fear a nuclear arms race in East Asia?

During his power consolidation Kim Jong-Un's legitimacy may be challenged by different factions, domestically from the military, political establishment, and even his own family clan, as well as by international actors such as the United States and South Korea. Therefore, Kim Jong-Un might use nuclear tests to boost his domestic standing and legitimacy, like his father and grandfather have done.

On the other hand, North Korea would not like to be left alone. Possible natural disasters and poor economic situations will only contribute to this scenario. Since the early 1990s, North Korea watchers have been predicting the collapse of the North Korean economy, had it not been for the aid and help from China. It only becomes more depressing and dangerous when winter comes. That is why China's economic aid is vital for North Korea's regime security.

Will China fear a nuclear arms race in East Asia? The answer is "probably not". Firstly, even if South Korea has nuclear power, given the proximity to the North, it will still face a security dilemma of Mutual Assured Destruction. Therefore, the most dangerous thing for South Korea is not a nuclear North, but a paranoid and irrational leader in the North.

While some politicians in Japan may want to go nuclear the Japanese government will have to face their anti-nuclear public. As Japan is the only country that suffered two nuclear bomb attacks, the lesson from history will be a fresh reminder for the leadership and the Japanese people. Given its democratic nature, even if there might be risk-taking leaders in the domestic political scene, public opinion will be a strong brake on irrational nationalism and patriotism.

More importantly, the US will not want to see a nuclear Japan or South Korea. On the one hand, as the American public still remembers Pearl Harbour, a nuclear-armed Japan will still be alarming in the US. On the other hand, the strategic rationale behind the US military presence in East Asia is to provide a security umbrella to its allies.

US-China cooperation over North Korea?

If both South Korea and Japan decide to build up their own nuclear deterrents for fear of North Korean nuclear attacks, then the American public will call for "Uncle Sam" to return home because of the shrinking military budget as well as unfinished wars elsewhere.

Therefore, North Korea's nuclear gamble will not change the strategic balance of power in East Asia, which is still shaped by the larger interaction between the US and China.

The US- China relationship is going through a difficult time. Obama's recent visit to Asia reconfirmed the US rebalancing in Asia. In the eyes of Chinese leaders, the US was behind the recent diplomatic flare-ups between China and its neighbours in both the East China Sea and South China Sea.

Furthermore, in late May the US Justice Department issued indictments against five Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers for hacking into American companies in a bid for competitive advantage for Chinese companies. This public humiliation deteriorated US-China relations further.

Although it is still not clear why the Obama administration challenged China on the cyber-security issue, one consequence is to push China to the opposing side, probably with Russia, which has been giving the US a tough time in Ukraine. In order to avoid a new Cold War, the US needs to find a way to reconsolidate its relationship with China. North Korea may provide such an opportunity.

China should take initiative

North Korea's provocations by either a nuclear test or a skirmish with the South will further strain the already fragile security environment in Northeast Asia. It is clear that no country can rein in North Korea alone, including China, which may have some limited influence over its leadership.

It is also clear that both China and the US share a common interest in maintaining peace in the region. Therefore, it is time for China and the US to work together to prevent a new nuclear crisis in the Korean Peninsula.

China should take a strong initiative to restart the Six Party Talks that have been stalled since 2009 when the North withdrew and later when the North sank the South Korean naval ship Cheonan and shelled Yeonpyeong Island. Although the Six Party Talks may not be able to prevent North Korea's nuclear gamble and provocations, it will at least provide an opportunity for all major powers to re-focus on their common interest in the region.

It would be an illusion to believe that North Korea will collapse or give up its nuclear weapons overnight. Therefore, the real danger in the Korean Peninsula is not to know what North Korea wants, but to pretend that North Korea wants nothing since it will further push North Korea to go to extremes.

Another possible positive side effect is to help repair the damaged bilateral relations between China and the US. There will be no need for either China or the US to worry about North Korea's new provocations so long as they can work together for the sake of regional security.

The writer is Associate Professor of Political Science at Utah State University and currently a visiting senior fellow with the China Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.