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Behind North Korea's Olive Branch: An Alternative View

By Graham Ong-Webb

Synopsis

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un's conciliatory gestures towards South Korea are a welcome move. But they should not belie the high possibility that it will continue ballistic missile and warhead testing in 2018.

Commentary

IN A televised New Year speech, North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un delivered a two-prong message of trepidation and hope. He warned the United States of the "reality" of North Korea's nuclear deterrent. He also called for peace on the Korean peninsula, adding that his representatives should start talks with their South Korean counterparts "as soon as possible". The purpose would be to discuss sending a delegation to the 2018 Winter Olympics, to be hosted in South Korea next month.

In less than a day, South Korean President Moon Jae-in welcomed Kim Jong- Un's offer of what is being perceived as an olive branch. In calling for swift measures to help North Korea (DPRK) participate in discussions, the South Korean Government has already suggested that high-level talks be held on 9 January 2018, in the border village of Panmunjom in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

Geopolitical Game?

Yet, there is no innocence in geopolitics. In heeding Machiavellian caution, the Korean peninsula crisis is yet another geopolitical game where we must treat every move as deliberate and calibrated on the part of its players.

We must also follow the most tangible trail in this saga—the science and technology of a nuclear-armed ICBM development programme. Factoring this into the larger

scheme leads us to conclude the following: Kim Jong-Un is not only buying time for the next ballistic missile or warhead test, but is attempting to shape a more amenable context for North Korea to come away from testing without triggering pre-emptive strikes from the US.

To achieve this, Kim Jong-Un is using his olive branch to draw a line in the sand, dividing South Korea and the US. The end-state is that Seoul can be expected to have become more dovish while Washington remains unchangingly hawkish. He needs to win over the Moon administration in order to have them dampen the prospects for American pre-emption. Any bellicosity from the US, even in rhetorical terms, frames the Americans as the aggressor, giving North Korea the impetus to resume testing.

Follow the Science

To begin with, we must not lose sight of North Korea's next objective in producing viable nuclear-armed ICBMs. There is a two-step goal: The first is to technically succeed at testing a nuclear warhead design that can survive the demands of atmospheric re-entry after the space phase of intercontinental flight. The second is to avoid pre-emption during the final window of vulnerability while it manufactures a few warheads based on the winning design.

The stark reality regarding North Korea's nuclear-armed ICBMs is that there is no demonstrable indication—based on what we have seen in previous tests—that this class of nuclear warheads can survive atmospheric re-entry from much higher altitudes. In contrast, North Korea's nuclear-armed short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) and intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBMs), used to threaten US military bases in South Korea, Japan, and Guam, have likely met the lower-altitude demands of re-entry for these other classes of warheads. This explains why North Korea is now focusing on the testing of its ICBMs.

North's Nuclear Deterrent Complete?

Despite previously lauding that his country's strategic nuclear deterrent is "complete", Kim Jong-Un knows—as the American nuclear planners know—that until North Korea's nuclear warheads are truly survivable, the credibility of its nuclear threat against the US homeland remains an open question. It must therefore be answered through actual testing.

However, missile and warhead testing do not occur in the vacuum of a laboratory but in a geopolitical environment. Missile launches and warhead explosions are inescapably detected by radars and seismographs. Testing comes with diplomatic, strategic, and economic costs. The most significant strategic cost is the risk of pre-emptive military strikes by the US, which some observers opine is increasing by the day.

With all the testing that has gone on in 2017, the DPRK knows whatever little cache it had has run dry, especially after the last ICBM test on 29 November 2017. In drawing the last straw, Kim Jong-Un knows that any further testing at this lowest point in the crisis certainly risks American military pre-emption.

Therefore, the decision point to execute a warhead re-entry test is a matter of context and timing. Time may also matter more than we think because the level of international tolerance will always be relatively low, and the DPRK understands that the ideal outcome is to get a singular re-entry test right.

One can only imagine a flurry of computer-simulated warhead testing within North Korea's engineering labs. However, there is no running away from an actual test and right now North Korea is shaping a context on its terms.

Unpacking the Psychology

Psychology is clearly a key tool in shaping an amenable context. What Kim Jong-Un has done through his conciliatory gestures towards South Korea is to lift the mood considerably, both within South Korea and internationally, from its lowest levels to a newfound high. Indeed, one could say that the effect has been almost euphoric after what has been a difficult past year in this crisis.

Picturing a barometer graph, what Kim Jong-Un may have effectively done is to plot a point that is much higher than we are now at in the current state of tensions.

If he follows this psychological rationale through to its conclusion, then it is quite unlikely that Kim Jong-Un will renege on his proposals to South Korea. Doing so will make any subsequent rhetoric on his part completely unbelievable.

In the end, having gone this far in its nuclear weapons development, North Korea must rationally see its programme to its conclusion in order to credibly threaten the US homeland and therefore achieve mutual nuclear deterrence between both countries at the strategic level. The art here is about how to intelligently set the stage for North Korea to attain this capability without risking war itself.

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