

## FPC Briefing: High Stakes Gambit- Regional Positions on the North Korea Nuclear Crisis

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As North Korea ratchets up its rhetoric of a nuclear attack on the United States, the Korean Peninsula is living up to its reputation as an increasingly volatile and potential flashpoint for conflict. Evermore confrontational and increasingly isolated internationally, the Hermit Kingdom in recent weeks has accentuated its standing as a highly unknown and unpredictable entity in international affairs. Moreover, the communist country is situated at the centre of a region that contains three of the world's largest economies (the US, China and Japan), four established nuclear powers (the US, China, Russia and North Korea) and two countries with the technological ability to gain nuclear capabilities within months if they so wish (Japan and South Korea).



Although Pyongyang's capacity to successfully carry out a nuclear attack on the US mainland appears improbable (due to both the technical prowess and range of its missiles, as well as US interceptor technology and placement), the threat of such an undertaking is quickly deepening tension, insecurity and fear across the Asia-Pacific. Critically, the current situation defies traditional axioms that the "strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept"<sup>2</sup>, as North Korea continues to flout international pressures. This briefing analyses in turn the positions of the major regional powers – the US, Japan, China and Russia – on the crisis.

### The United States: External Regional Balancer

With over 28,000 troops based around Seoul and sixty kilometres from the North Korean border, as well as large troop numbers in neighbouring Japan, the Korean peninsula remains as one of the few places on earth where the US could become nearly instantly involved in a major conflict. The US perceives North Korea to be opposed to major elements of the existing international order, epitomising many of the dangers that the US wishes to eliminate through its foreign policy. These elements include exporting ballistic missiles, possessing chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, Pyongyang's (historical) sponsorship of terrorism, and non-support of the 1967 Nuclear Non-

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.iglesianicristowebsite.com/Pages/5a-global-expansion.html>

<sup>2</sup> Thuryclides quoted in Kim, S.S. & Lee, T.H. "Chinese-North Korean Relations: Managing Asymmetrical Independence" in Kim, S.S. & Lee, T.H. (eds.) *North Korea and Northeast Asia* (Rowman & Littlefield, Oxford, 2002), p.131.

Proliferation Treaty (NPT) – which it signed in 1985, subsequently did not comply with and then publically withdrew from in 2003. For these reasons, in US strategic mindsets, North Korea is a rogue state that is successfully ‘thwarting American policy’<sup>3</sup>.

While recent attention has focused upon possible provocations against US bases in Guam, a much more immediate concern is a North Korean attack against South Korea (with whom it is technically still at war) and Japan (the subject of unresolved animus dating from the Second World War). A nuclear strike against these countries carries the highest risk of escalation, as the US is bound by clauses in long-standing security agreements to protect both South Korea and Japan if they are attacked<sup>4</sup>. In the case of the former, the US would lead South Korean forces. The US has traditionally used these security alliances to manage / contain the situation in conjunction with humanitarian considerations (nominally large aid donations) and sanctions. Importantly, North Korea was the largest recipient of US aid in Asia in the 2000s – aid which has been periodically stopped / restarted in response to North Korean restarting / stopping its nuclear activities. North Korea usually demands fuel or food in return for any concessions, a policy that Pyongyang has historically used to effectively ‘substitute the US for the economic and security role previous(ly) played by the Soviet Union and China’<sup>5</sup>.

While direct US engagement is seen as a central means with which to increase its international legitimacy, analysts note how ‘both the US and North Korea have done a great deal to fuel each other’s fears’<sup>6</sup>. North Korea regards itself as being under nuclear siege since the Korean War of 1950-53, when General MacArthur wanted to use nuclear missiles to solve the conflict. Recent history has also seen American nuclear weapons placed on the peninsula, with a South Korea wanting to produce them. Far from remaining at a status quo, the US has at times escalated the situation – such as the Bush doctrine of pre-emption, the rhetoric of the “Axis of Evil” and Washington hawks openly talking of regime change. Indeed, each time the US has used such antagonistic policies to pressure Pyongyang ‘the latter became more recalcitrant’<sup>7</sup>, as shown by recent US-South Korean military exercises that deployed nuclear-capable B2 stealth bombers across the Peninsula. Such US actions have enhanced a longstanding North Korean view that “the nuclear deterrent is necessary for our self-defence ... we will continue to enhance it until the US abandons its hostile policy towards us”<sup>8</sup>.

American alliances and relations in the region are potentially threatened by this stance, particularly regarding US wishes concerning unification. In particular, if unification were to come about, it would become difficult for the US to maintain a military presence in South Korea if the North Korean threat evaporated, which could then have implications for the US troop presence in Japan. A nuclear North Korea therefore undermines US regional security architectures upon which post-Second World War Northeast Asia has been built, and which have allowed the region’s economic and political success over the last 60 years. North Korea remains as the singular country that has not benefited from this boom. Furthermore, the historical vagueness of US policy ‘invites miscalculation by Asian adversaries and allies’<sup>9</sup>, in their policy formulations and during any crisis. In addition, if North Korea is allowed to continue its nuclear brinkmanship, it may well have implications outside the region; encouraging state legitimisation through the acquisition of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and undermining US non-proliferation efforts. In relation to aid to North Korea; ‘maintaining this kind of largesse to an unreconstructed, vituperative, Stalinist dynasty is politically unsustainable in the donor

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<sup>3</sup> Dujarric, R. "North Korea: Risks and Rewards of Engagement", *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54, No.2, 2001 p.728.

<sup>4</sup> Ogden, C. "Analysis - World Should Be Worried About the Possible Results of this Sabre-Rattling", *The Scotsman*, 5 April 2013, p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Manning, R.A. "United States–North Korean Relations: from Welfare to Warfare?" in Kim, S.S., Lee, T.H. (eds.) (2002) p.62.

<sup>6</sup> Bleiker, R. "A Rogue is a Rogue is a Rogue: US Foreign Policy and Korean Nuclear Crisis", *International Affairs*, Vol.79, No.4, 2003 p. 728.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p.723.

<sup>8</sup> So Chol, North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman quoted in Watts, J. "North Korea Urges EU to Keep Bush at Bay", *The Guardian*, Saturday 29 November 2003, p. 20

<sup>9</sup> Betts, R.K. "Wealth, Power and Instability: East Asia and the United States After the Cold War", *International Security*, Vol.18, No.3, 1993/4, p.37.

countries<sup>10</sup>, which could have electoral repercussions in the US and elsewhere if the current (and any future) crisis is left unresolved.

### **Japan: Historically Troubled Actor**

Of the powers detailed here, Japan has the least advanced relations with North Korea, which 'remains the main black spot on Japan's record of upgrading its ties'<sup>11</sup> with the region. The two countries are yet to normalise relations and have many historical obstacles to overcome before they can do so - primarily the Japanese occupation of the peninsula from 1910 to 1945, which personifies the 'deep-seated cultural and historical antipathy between all Koreans and the Japanese'<sup>12</sup>. There is also the issue of war reparations (as yet undetermined and unpaid) and historical responsibility for precipitating the war that split the peninsula. Against this backdrop, other issues can be added; the November 2009 Taepodong-II missile test across Japan by North Korea (one of many such episodic incidents); incursions by North Korean ships into Japanese waters; the irresolution of abduction issues (of Japanese nationals by North Korean agents between 1978 and 1983); and a lack of any economic connections. In Japan, the periodic institution of rewriting history textbooks and visits by leading politicians to the ultra-nationalist Yasakuni war shrine in Tokyo exacerbate such historical animosities, and reduce Japanese popular sentiment towards reconciliation.

For these reasons, and given Article IX of the Japanese Constitution that advocates a pacifist stance and legally delimits Japan's military rearmament, Japan continues to contribute indirectly in any region solution - usually via aid through existing US policy. Since the first North Korean nuclear test in 2003, Tokyo has prioritised strengthening its bilateral security relations with the US rather than developing multilateral solutions or bilateral Japan-North Korea ties. US led engagement legitimises this policy and the fact that the US is obliged to protect Japan in case of attack underpins the security arrangements between the two countries, whereby 'a major crisis on the peninsula ... represents one of the touchstone contingencies underlying US-Japan alliance relations'<sup>13</sup>. Great importance is also placed upon Japan-South Korea ties, recognising their military links and their economic bonds as mutually important import and export markets. Typical of this stance, during a nuclear crisis in the 1990s, 'Japan, in accordance with Seoul's desires, suspended normalisation talks with Pyongyang and set resolution of the nuclear issue as a precondition of further dialogue'<sup>14</sup>, which strengthened relations between the two sides.

The impact of reunification also raises concerns for Tokyo; most particularly a potential economic downturn for itself and the region as a whole, absorbing potential influxes of Korean refugees in the event of a conflict, and the evacuation of Japanese nationals. If any WMD were retained on the peninsula, 'Japan also worries about the long term implications of a reunited Korea that is anti-Japan'<sup>15</sup>. On the issue of reconstruction costs, while the US, potentially China, and Japan have the capital to pay, if the latter paid such an endeavour could be construed as economic colonialisation and as a threat to other regional powers. Other Japanese concerns centre on the asymmetrical threat North Korea poses; namely that the Japanese mainland and all major cities can almost certainly be hit by a North Korean missile attack. The assertion that Japan would be one of the first targets in case of armed conflict between the US and North Korea, additionally represents a major stumbling block in Japan-US relations. In turn, with any US withdrawal from the region, Japan would be confronted with a choice between continued pacifism or remilitarisation - a decision which could be heightened

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<sup>10</sup> Noland, M. *Avoiding the Apocalypse: the Future of the Two Koreas* (Institute for International Economics, Washington DC, 2000) p.13.

<sup>11</sup> Hook, G.D., Gibson, J., Hughes, C.W., Dobson, H. (eds.) *Japan's International Relations; Politics, Economics and Security* (Routledge, London, 2001) p.191.

<sup>12</sup> Oberdorfer, D. "North Korea's Historic Shift: From Self-Reliance to Engagement", *North Korea's Engagement - Perspectives, Outlooks and Implications* (National Intelligence Council), 25 November 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Pollack, J.D., Lee, C.M. *Preparing for Korean Unification: Scenarios and Implications* (RAND, Washington, 1999) p.14.

<sup>14</sup> Cha, V.D. *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States - Korea - Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999) p.211.

<sup>15</sup> Oberdorfer, D. (2003).

if Korean-US relations diminish and also by continued Chinese economic expansion. Inimical to this would be Japan's regional self-perception and her immediate past history, particularly with China (whom she occupied from 1931 to 1945) concerning the domination and leadership of the region.

### **China: Rising Regional Powerhouse**

With direct ideological and geographical links to North Korea, China clearly has the greatest capability to shape a positive outcome on the Korean Peninsula, and her mounting geo-political and geo-economic clout increasingly positions her as part of a regional solution. Given the current political and economic status of the region, and the presence of the US, China also has the greatest gains to make through controlling the situation on the peninsula. With an alliance formally codified in 1961, after China had protected the North in the 1950-53 Korean War, their relationship has been characteristically described as being as "close as lips and teeth" (*chunchi*). While China's status as North Korea's only remaining Cold War ally may be waning – especially after an ideological split in the 1980s as China liberalised her economy – China remains the closest of all the regional powers to North Korea and is its largest trading partner. Given the regional involvement of the US and historical animus towards Japan, 'in Chinese strategic thinking, the Korean peninsula is singled out as the "core problem" ... of Northeast Asia'<sup>16</sup>. China is also a significant aid donor (especially at times of famine) to North Korea.

Overall, China desires a stable, non-aggressive North Korea that will not unsettle her regional strategic calculations. Whilst maintaining humanitarian aid to the North, Beijing has had strong relations with the South since the normalisation of relations in 1992. This policy reflects China's doctrines of 'non-use of force, pragmatism and dialogue'<sup>17</sup>, and the creation of a stable periphery through which to heighten the economic expansion, so critical to her domestic development and international rise as a great power. For many, acting as a broker in negotiations on the peninsula, as illustrated by its hosting of the Six Party Talks from August 2003, is seen as a means by which to cultivate an image of being a responsible force in global politics, as China tries to raise her political kudos in the region.

Beijing's overall aim continues to be the prevention of the 'dominance of Korea by any external power ... and preventing the formation of any anti-China coalition'<sup>18</sup> in the region, as she wishes to see a Korea fundamentally independent of American influence. This stance underpins Beijing's prolonged aid and donations to North Korea in order to prevent any destabilisation, as any internal North Korean meltdown could also precipitate regional instability and conflict. Notably the Six Party Talks have not met since 2009 (when Pyongyang withdrew from the process), and Beijing is becoming increasingly impatient with North Korean belligerence in this regard. With reference to its smaller neighbour, in early April 2013, new Chinese President Xi Jinping remarked "no one should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for selfish gains"<sup>19</sup>.

Equally, China wishes 'to avert the crystallisation of conditions under which Pyongyang could calculate that lashing out ... is a rational course of action'<sup>20</sup> and which could precipitate a military escalation with the US, Japan and/or South Korea. Beijing is also attempting to counteract the North's ideological entrenchment towards Marxist-Leninist principles, particularly economically as she tries to guide North Korea towards reform – a policy that is resulting in, at best, timid steps by Pyongyang towards liberalisation. This policy stems not only from a fear that North Korea's 'political

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<sup>16</sup> Kim, S.S., Lee, T.H. "Chinese-North Korean Relations: Managing Asymmetrical Independence" in Kim, S.S., Lee, T.H. (eds.) (2002) p.111.

<sup>17</sup> Odgaard, L. "The Role of South Korea in the US-DPRK Nuclear Standoff", presented at the *Conference on Regional Governance: Greater China*, University of Durham, 24-25 October 2003. (Unpublished) p.17.

<sup>18</sup> Kim, S.S. "The Making of China's Korea Policy in the Era of Reform" in Lampton, D.M. (ed.) *The Making Of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001) p.373.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Hatton, Celia 'Is China Ready to Abandon North Korea?', *BBC News Online*, April 9, 2013. Accessible at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-22062589>

<sup>20</sup> Kim, S.S. "China and North Korea in a Changing World", *Asia Special Report*, No.115, September 2003, p.16.

and economic collapse would result in a geopolitical earthquake<sup>21</sup>, but also because the more the North can reform, the more amenable it would be to a peaceful, non-aligned unification with the South. How the North and South unify could also have implications on the status of Taiwan, leading to positive portents for Beijing to reintegrate peacefully reintegrate Taiwan back into the Chinese mainland (and which would reverse what China regards as another negative legacy dating from Japan's occupation of the Chinese mainland at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century).

Other concerns that exist for China revolve around preventing any flow of North Korean refugees into southern China (which would hugely increase in any conflict), and to avoid heightening demographic pressures and ethno nationalism (such as among ethnic Chinese Koreans) that could internally destabilise China. In addition, China wishes to deter a situation whereby North Korea's nuclear weapons programme provokes US military intervention in the peninsula or the nuclearisation of South Korea and Japan. Naturally, it is difficult for China to convince North Korea to abandon its capabilities in light of its own well-established nuclear weapons programme (Beijing first tested in 1964) – an observation that equally applies to the US and Russia.

### **Russia: Significant Dormant Force**

For Moscow, its relations with Pyongyang have much deteriorated since the end of the Cold War, when it was one of North Korea's major trading partners, especially in terms of military and fuel assistance. The demise of the Soviet Union exacerbated North Korea's position further as previous economic links were severed and engendered a new Russia 'no longer willing or able to subsidise Pyongyang's failing economy, (which made) economic co-operation ... difficult to achieve'<sup>22</sup>. The relationship was however resuscitated, as shown by Kim Jong Il's July 2001 train journey from Pyongyang to Moscow and the "immediate contact" clause in the 2000 Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Co-operation concerning any attacks on North Korea. The limits to these relationship were initially shown however by Moscow's support of United Nations Security Resolution 1695 condemning Pyongyang's nuclear tests in 2006. Such criticism, and support of sanctions (including their implementation), has continued in recent years as Russian impatience and infuriation as North Korea's periodic escalations have threatened to destabilise the Peninsula. Significantly, Moscow cancelled 90% of North Korea's \$11 billion historic debt to Russia in September 2012 as an act of good will to the incoming new leader Kim Jong-Un.

In turn, Russia's increased involvement via the Six Party Talks, was seen as a way to find a peaceful regional solution that could lead to an independent Korea, which would counter the US troop presence and influence in the region – itself a Russian concern. Russia further supports a multilateral solution to the Korean problem because it would provide greater opportunities in the future for better regional relations. Also Russia would gain a huge economic boost from a successful, peaceful unification, as direct links to the peninsula would be opened up, removing a previous reliance on train routes via Dalian. This would further open up the Korean, and consequently, Japanese markets to the resource-rich Siberian gas fields. The opening up of the peninsula would also improve transportation links between Korea and Russia, facilitating economic dynamism. Unification could also alleviate current concerns over North Korean guest workers in the Russian Far East and their links to drug, people, money and nuclear smuggling. Even without unification, if North Korea's economy were to ever strengthen and globalise along the lines of China's melange of capitalism with her communist existence, Pyongyang's demand for Russian energy could also rise sharply, which could help North Korean pay back remaining debts to Moscow.

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<sup>21</sup> Jien, C. "Limits of the 'Lips and Teeth' Alliance: An Historical Review of Chinese-North Korean Relations", *Asia Special Report*, No.115, September 2003 p.9.

<sup>22</sup> Kim, S.S., Lee, T.H. "Chinese-North Korean Relations: Managing Asymmetrical Independence" in Kim, S.S., Lee, T.H. (eds.) (2002) p.158.

It is important to remember Russia's international residual strength that comes from her territory, her science and technological expertise, abundant natural resources, permanent membership of the UN Security Council and above all her 'status as the only nuclear power that can effectively destroy the United States'<sup>23</sup>. Concerning multilateral regimes, Russia has not held back in her criticism and recently stated that Pyongyang's attempts to 'violate decisions of the United Nations Security Council are categorically unacceptable'<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, whilst Russia may appear outside of directly influencing the peninsula at this time, its security and political links to the North and the potential economic windfall it could gain from reunification do not make it an insignificant force concerning the future of the Korean Peninsula. Importantly, Moscow echoes US concerns over North Korea's nuclear proliferation and the challenges that this inherently poses to international control regimes.

### **Conclusions: The Limits of Deterrence**

It is a 'combination of a high level of capability, abiding animus, proximity, and the absence of any multilateral security regime that explains the international community's response to North Korea'<sup>25</sup> as each of the regional powers manoeuvre their foreign policy machinations around each other. Above all, stability, either through an abiding status quo or peaceful unification, is what each of the regional powers want as a 'collapsing North Korea with inordinate asymmetrical ... military capabilities has extraordinary refractory ramifications for great-power politics in North-East Asia'<sup>26</sup> and beyond. How and if this can be done is unclear, with any coalescence around a particular strategy complicated through a range of historical and strategic divergences.

Significantly, as an unresolved conflict dating from the earliest years of the Cold War, all the major powers outlined here have a hand in the current crisis. These influences range from Japan occupying the Korean Peninsula until the end of the Second World War; to the US, China and Russia precipitating and participating in the Korean War that spilt the Peninsula; to Soviet help in the 1950s towards North Korea's nuclear energy research and China's sharing of nuclear weapons blueprints with Pakistan that eventually made their way to Pyongyang (via AQ Khan), eventually aiding her first nuclear test in 2003. Additionally, the Korean Armistice Agreement of July 27 1953 intended to end the Korean War was signed by UN forces (led by the US), China and North Korea but not South Korea – an eventuality which has led to there being no final peace settlement on the Peninsula issue.

Currently, with North Korea being led by the heavily inexperienced thirty-something Kim Jong-Un, who is at best pandering to internal military voices, the possibility for disastrous miscalculation intensifies. Against this background, the repercussions of any attempted nuclear attack range from the moderate – a failure to hit any US target, to the extreme – a successful nuclear strike on either the US, South Korea or Japan, in all likelihood leading to US military action. Whether conflict is averted or not, the current crisis underscores just how effective the international community can really be when dealing with a pugnacious nuclear-armed country. As the crisis shows, there is a clear limit to coercive power and historical impact of food and material aid, sanctions, multilateral efforts, western rhetoric or a combination of these measures<sup>27</sup>. This shortcoming has serious negative portents for policy concerning Iran – another country attempting to follow Pyongyang's acquisition of nuclear weapons.

The present situation displays the limits of deterrence when dealing with a nuclear-equipped adversary who is simply unconcerned with garnering greater international criticism. Despite the vast material gulf between Pyongyang and each of the major powers outlined in this briefing - and the

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<sup>23</sup> Kim, S.S. "North Korea and Northeast Asia in World Politics" in Kim, S.S., Lee, T.H. (eds.) (2002) p.11.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Grammaticas, David "Korea Crisis: UN's Ban Wams of "Serious Implications", *BBC News Online*, April 4 2013. Accessible at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-22035531>

<sup>25</sup> Kim, S.S. "The Making of China's Korea Policy in the Era of Reform" in Lampton, D.M. (ed.) (2001) p.372.

<sup>26</sup> Kim, S.S. "North Korea and Northeast Asia in World Politics" in Kim, S.S., Lee, T.H. (eds.) (2002) p.5.

<sup>27</sup> Ogden, C. "Analysis - World Should Be Worried About the Possible Results of this Sabre-Rattling", *The Scotsman*, April 5 2013, p.7.

former's status as a failed and rogue state - the power of asymmetric capabilities has been proven by this crisis. As such, North Korean leaders know that the international community is restricted in its responses and that possessing nuclear capabilities (and threatening an ability to deliver them to either the US or her regional allies) essentially protects their country from any existential threat or invasion. Thus, when facing the threat of WMD from a determined, belligerent and isolated state, no degree of military or economic capabilities can help to assuage the situation. Given that the security strategies of the major powers are resolutely based upon the maximisation of such capabilities, international stakes – including British – remain higher than ever. It will therefore require some radical international rethinking, and leadership, to precipitate a positive outcome concerning North Korea's present and future trajectory – with implications for the international community and global stability for years to come.

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