



CONTAINING CRISIS ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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North Korea's recent missile and nuclear tests have inflamed tensions on the Korean Peninsula with serious implications for regional and international security. While punitive pressure will be brought to bear on Pyongyang, there are significant question marks whether it will be persuaded to change course. In the meantime, cool heads are needed to control the escalation of crisis and ultimately find a way back to the negotiation table.

North Korea's missile test last week followed by its sixth nuclear test unambiguously underline that under Kim Jong Un, Pyongyang has accelerated its nuclear and missile programs and remains firmly wedded to such a course. In so doing, it has willfully disregarded international censure of its ambitions. The international community, foremost the United States, has been left struggling how to respond. Ruling out military strikes as a primary choice, the bolstering of sanctions, with an onus on China to do more, and military deterrence are likely to emerge as the preferred options. North Korea, however, is highly unlikely to be coerced away from its present trajectory. Nor is a diplomatic solution in prospect where Pyongyang has de facto rendered its denuclearization non-negotiable, and the international community has clearly stated it will not recognize North Korea as a de jure nuclear power. Instead, the danger lies in a continuing deterioration of the security situation with a growing potential for strategic miscalculation and risk that could escalate into both conventional and nuclear military responses. More than ever, as this brief argues, urgent confidence- and security-building measures are needed to avert crisis and control escalation.

North Korea's Growing Capability

North Korea's detonation of its sixth nuclear bomb on September 3 was its most powerful to date. The U.S. Geological Survey detected a magnitude explosion of 6.3, with the

tremor about 10 times more powerful than its previous nuclear test last September. North Korea claims to have successfully tested a hydrogen bomb. South Korean officials estimate that if such a bomb were dropped on Seoul, it could lead to two million casualties. While some experts express caution that it may in fact have been an advanced, but less powerful, atomic (fission) bomb, the recent test shows that if North Korea has not yet developed a hydrogen bomb it is getting very close.

The test comes on top of North Korea's firing of two intercontinental Hwasong-14 missiles in July. Fired at a deliberately steep angle, it is likely that major U.S. cities such as Los Angeles, Denver, and Chicago would have been in range if launched on a flatter trajectory. This was followed up by an intermediate-range Hwasong-12 missile fired over Japan on August 28, which landed in the western Pacific Ocean east of Hokkaido. While reportedly travelling only 2700km, it nonetheless gained a height of 550km, thus importantly showing its re-entry capacity.

The rapidity of North Korea's progress is impressive and disconcerting. What remains far from certain, however, is if North Korea has perfected the gains in missile and nuclear technologies to be able to mount a viable nuclear device on a missile that can successfully reach targets on the U.S. mainland. Though this would appear to be just a matter of time.

The recent tests should come as no surprise. Ever since the collapse of previous negotiated agreements, North Ko-



rea has redoubled its efforts to enhance its non-conventional military capabilities. Acquiring nuclear status was enshrined in the country's constitution in 2016 during the 7th Party Congress. Having concluded that its security cannot be guaranteed by external reassurances, the regime has steadfastly asserted that it has been left with no choice but to acquire nuclear status for its survival in the face of what it refers to as a U.S. "hostile policy." The nuclear test came on the back of the conclusion of annual joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises – a perennial source of friction with North Korea. Furthermore, developing the capacity to hit the United States with a nuclear-tipped ICBM not only fulfills its deterrence objectives, but also from its perspective maximizes its leverage with Washington – the goal being to conclude a peace treaty and remove U.S. forces from the peninsula.

The Dilemma of Response

With its tests in flagrant contravention of the Nonproliferation Treaty and UN Security Council resolutions, the international community is united in its resolve to refuse acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear state. But while strongly condemning the recent tests, the fact remains Pyongyang is marching ahead with its ambitions regardless. Having declared that the Obama era of so-called 'strategic patience' is at an end, the Trump administration has nevertheless so far failed to outline a clear policy to take its place. That "all options are on the table" indicates less a pragmatic approach than a scratching of heads of how to bring North Korea to heel over its tests.

Despite the dialed up rhetoric and war of words, the prospect of a preemptive American military strike on nuclear and missile facilities – while not fully ruled out – is prohibitively high given the casualties North Korea would likely be able to inflict on South Korea, Japan, and U.S. forces in East Asia. Indeed, Seoul has been at pains to obtain assurances from the Trump administration that it will not undertake any strike without its prior consent. At the other end of the spectrum, resumption of serious negotiations is improbable where there is no mood in Washington, or indeed Seoul or Tokyo, to be seen as rewarding North Korea's violations and where denuclearization is clearly not on Pyongyang's agenda. Moreover, the failure of past agreements looms large in recent memory with an absence of trust and goodwill on

both sides.

This leaves strengthened sanctions and deterrence as the most realistic responses, at least in the short term. A meeting of the UN Security Council the day after the nuclear test condemned the tests and affirmed the need to take appropriate measures. As such, there are growing calls for the textile sector, North Korean labor exports, and oil to be added to upcoming UN sanctions lists. Furthermore, under Trump, the U.S. has increasingly pushed to mandate secondary sanctions against any country, business, or individual that contributes to North Korea's economy. As China accounts for some 90 percent of North Korea's trade, it is seen in Washington as the key player capable of imposing critical leverage on Pyongyang, and is thus coming under increased pressure to more stringently implement sanctions.

Whether or not this would be enough to change Pyongyang's calculus is a moot point. Furthermore, China and Russia while strongly disapproving of North Korea's actions are unlikely to accede to the drastic steps of fully cutting off oil supplies, for example, that could destabilize the regime. In any case, Pyongyang has stockpiled reserves in the case of such an eventuality, and it would take many months before such sanctions would have an impact on the military or the missile and nuclear programs. Furthermore, if the U.S. should take steps such as secondary sanctions against Chinese banks and stateowned companies, this runs the risk of crossing a red-line with Beijing that could result in a Sino-U.S. trade conflict or China reconsidering its part in the sanctions regime.

The problem further lies therein that both powers see each other as mainly responsible for the problem. While the spotlight will fall on China to flex its trade and economic muscle with North Korea, it is clear that Beijing sees the buck lying with Washington to negotiate directly with North Korea and provide security assurances. Indeed, both China and Russia have argued for a dual suspension of nuclear and missile tests in return for cancelling joint U.S.-ROK military exercises – a proposal so far rejected by Washington and Seoul. Thus a lack of international consensus and coordination also provides a gap in which North Korea can continue to maneuver.

Sanctions aside, the other main countermeasure is to bolster military deterrence against North Korea. The day after the nuclear test, the South Korean navy engaged in live-fire drills in a show of strength. President Moon, in a



dramatic reversal of his previous position, has even called for accelerated deployment of units of the U.S. anti-missile defense system, THAAD – much to the displeasure of China. The United States has also granted South Korea permission to increase the weight of its warheads on missiles, thus demonstrating that it can strike North Korea with greater force. Debate has also been invigorated on the need to deploy U.S. strategic nuclear assets on the peninsula.

Need for Crisis Management

Strengthened sanctions and bolstering defense capabilities are commensurate responses to North Korea's actions, the latter where South Korea and Japan in particular feel increasingly threatened. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that in and of themselves they will dissuade Pyongyang to depart from its present course. On the contrary, tensions are only likely to worsen with a growing risk for military conflict exacerbated by the lack of dialogue between the actors and increased militarization of the region.

With the mil-to-mil hotline between the two Koreas having been cut since 2016, there is currently no military dialogue between South Korea, as well as the U.S. and Japan, with North Korea at any level. With no direct communication channels to exchange concerns and relay intentions at the operational level between commanders, even relatively small incidents in flashpoints like the DMZ and Northern Limit Line run the risk of dangerous escalation. Even more serious question marks remain over whether the U.S. could seek to shoot down subsequent missile tests by North Korea and what the repercussions of such would be.

Recognizing that “resolution” of the thorny issues of denuclearization and a peace treaty are impossible in the short term, the urgent task now is dialogue over the implementation of political and crisis management mechanisms that seek to increase predictability, transparency, and reduce misperceptions. The Neutral Nations' Supervisory Committee (NNSC), or another neutral actor, could potentially facilitate such a dialogue.

As such, items for discussion include, but are not limited to: the restoration of the military hotline between the two Koreas; notifications related to troop movements and exercises, especially military activities near the border to signal they are not an immediate preparation for attack; agreements on scaling down or relocating military exercises

away from sensitive areas; mutual commitments on non-aggression and on the non-first use of nuclear and strategic weapons; nuclear safety and non-proliferation; and dialogue over what could be a mutually acceptable exchange for the suspension of nuclear and missile tests. None of these will be easy to agree on and there are many uncertainties. They could, however, form the initial platform and entry point for subsequent negotiations over the longer-term processes of the denuclearization of Korea and establishing a sustainable peace mechanism.

Conclusion

The current febrile environment on the Korean Peninsula raises the risk of uncontrollable escalation and strategic miscalculation. It is clear that no silver-bullet solution is in sight and it is doubtful that pressure alone for North Korea's denuclearization will be heeded in Pyongyang. Rather it is likely to conduct further missile and nuclear tests in the weeks and months to come. For all the brinkmanship, however, a military conflict is in no side's interest, least of all for North Korea. Therefore the urgent task now is for all sides to control the situation to prevent it escalating further. Reducing military tensions is the only way to create a conducive environment in which space for later negotiations over each side's concerns can be created. This requires political will and bold diplomacy by Washington and Pyongyang to put stabilization of the current situation as a priority over other agendas. Worryingly, neither side has shown so far that they are in the mood for diplomacy. The growing stakes and seriousness of the situation, however, increasingly demand it.

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