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Nuclear Blackmail: Will North Korea Ever End its Nuclear Program?

by Sico van der Meer

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Introduction

North Korea is without any doubt one of the most mysterious countries in the world. The country is so closed that hardly anything is known about the situation inside. Only the stories of the few refugees from the country give some idea about the real life in North Korea. The political views and goals of the regime in Pyongyang are subject of intense speculation. Although in western media sometimes a somewhat lunatic, Cold War style regime is pictured^[1]—mainly due to the often indeed hilarious propaganda from Pyongyang—the regime is in fact very capable of playing the game of international politics.

Few countries with the same economic stature would ever be able to act this strong toward the world's most powerful states, let alone that they would gain as much from diplomatic negotiations like the Six Party Talks. What is the background of this North Korean strength? What are the aims of the regime in Pyongyang with its nuclear program, and what could these aims mean for the near future? Did North Korea really end its nuclear activities?

Insecurity and the Myth of Self-Reliance

To understand the background of the North Korean nuclear policy to at least some extent, it is necessary to look into the ideology of the regime that has shaped the (political) culture in North Korea since the establishment of the state in the 1940s. The essence of the so-called Juche ideology is often summarized as “self-determination” or “self-reliance.”^[2] After a long history of suppression by the neighboring states China and Japan, North Korea's main goal is complete independence in all respects. All policy of the North Korean regime is based upon this ideology, but two policy areas are especially important to understand North Korea's behavior with regard to its nuclear program: foreign policy and economy.

First of all, the foreign policy of North Korea can be described by the terms “fear” and “distrust”—some would even use the word “paranoid.” The strong belief in Juche ideology is that other states will never accept a completely independent North Korea; every (regional) power will always try to influence and to make use of the North Korean people, just the way it happened in the past. After the Chinese and Japanese rulers, now the United States is considered the main threat: after arriving on the Korean peninsula during the Second World War, the Americans never left and made half of the Korean nation (read: South Korea) a “vassal state” where troops and weapons are stationed to conquer the independent North as soon as they see a possibility. These ideas are the source of North Korea's aim to become a military superpower; military strength is considered necessary to guarantee self-determination. Next to its large conventional forces—

North Korea has the largest army in the world when one considers the military as a percentage of the population—acquiring weapons of mass destruction has always received a lot of attention. North Korea possesses large amounts of chemical and biological weapons, and the nuclear program is just another step in “self-defense,” as North Korea calls it. Nuclear weapons are seen as necessary to deter all (possible) enemies that are nuclear powers themselves.[3]

In the field of economic policy, the self-reliance of the Juche ideology is also important. A remarkable fact is that economic self-reliance is almost impossible in North Korea, as was already acknowledged in the first years of the North Korean state: “To be sure, North Korea is by no means self-sufficient and its maintenance of even a semi-modern economy depends upon its ability to import a great many types of goods... It is apparent that if the North Korean economy is obliged to conform to strict conditions of self-help, the standard of living in the area will be at very low level for a long time to come.”[4] This prediction in 1950 proved right. The agricultural circumstances in North Korea are quite unfavorable, while the country does not possess much raw materials either. That the North Korean economy survived for some sixty years already was only possible because economic self-reliance was not taken too seriously. During the Cold War, the North Korean regime proved very skilled in playing the communist rivals China and the Soviet Union off against each other, receiving extensive economic support from both. When the Cold War ended, however, the assistance from the Soviet Union also ended, resulting in a major (and still ongoing) economic crisis in North Korea. Famine became a recurring catastrophe for its population; estimates of famine victims during the past fifteen years vary between some hundreds of thousands to several million. Although North Korea still receives economic support from China, and to a lesser extent from Russia and South Korea, the country has a structural lack of almost anything, especially food and energy. Rather than pursuing economic reforms, the North Korean regime seems to prefer to rely on foreign aid, the same way the regime survived during the last six decades. This “aid-seeking policy” is an important part of the explanation of North Korea’s nuclear program and the way the regime deals with the international negotiations on this subject. Viewed economically, the nuclear program has a blackmail function to extract aid from other states. Pyongyang wants to be paid for every step it takes, even for coming to the negotiation table at all.[5]

Aims and Strategies

Roughly said, the aims of the North Korean nuclear program can be summarized as follows. Above all, nuclear weapons offer security. Nuclear deterrence towards supposed enemies is the most important goal. Next to that, there is the economic goal of using the nuclear program as an instrument for blackmailing to extract foreign aid. In exchange for North Korean concessions on this program, a lot of concessions from the other side of the negotiating table are being claimed. A third aim that should be mentioned, although it is partly overlapping with the first two aims, is that North Korea wants to be taken seriously, to be dealt with like a state that matters. This is one of the reasons why North Korea always urges the United States to engage in unilateral talks; the world’s biggest superpower has to recognize that North Korea is an equal partner.

These non-security aims make the North Korean case particularly special when compared to other states with nuclear weapons programs. Normally, these states try to develop their nuclear weapons in secret to prevent any external interference. The North Korean regime, on the contrary, openly acknowledges its endeavors to become a nuclear weapons state—some observers characterize the North Korean behavior as “atomic exhibitionism.”[6] By showing how dangerous North Korea is, the regime expects to extract more concessions from the international community.

In the meantime, the North Korean leadership takes into account that military intervention is not very likely. There is no unity among its opponents. The United States seems to be the only state eventually willing to intervene militarily, but they will not do that without the consent of their most important partners in the region, South Korea and Japan. Those states are afraid of North Korean violence to their own territories and will refuse any support for military action—especially as the

South Korean capital, Seoul, is very close to the border and might be destroyed in the first hours of a war because North Korea considers the South as a vassal state of the United States. China and Russia, in turn, are not at all in favor of U.S. involvement in their area of influence—which North Korea is at least to some extent. An even more important reason to oppose military action, shared by all parties involved, is the fear of the chaos that will arise when the regime in Pyongyang collapses. Because of a lack of political opposition in North Korea, a collapsing regime will not be easily replaced by new leaders in the short term, so anarchy and chaos will spread through the country—and beyond its borders. The neighboring states China, Russia and South Korea fear large flows of hungry refugees, as well as the spread of weapons (including weapons of mass destruction).[7] Chaos and instability in North Korea may influence the whole region in a negative sense and the costs of stabilization and development of the ruined country will be enormous.[8] North Korea not only recognizes these international fears, but also makes use of them, playing the “instability card” at the negotiation table to attract more concessions from its counterparts.[9]

Next to the strategy of playing the instability card, the North Korean regime uses the strategy of constantly slowing down all negotiation processes. Every possible detail is used to delay the negotiation processes as a whole. One example of many is the Banco Delta Asia affair. When in 2005 the North Korean accounts at this bank in Macau were declared “infected” by the United States and consequently frozen, North Korea refused to negotiate any further about anything as long as this relatively small problem was not resolved.[10] That time is on the North Korean side seems to be the idea in Pyongyang. As long as negotiations are possible, military action against the regime is highly unlikely, while at the same time the nuclear program may continue, at least to some extent. And as long as negotiations are dragging along, aid requirements due to floods and other disasters—that sometimes seem to be exaggerated to extract more support—will be taken more seriously by the international community. After all, nobody wants to see the regime in Pyongyang collapsing because of popular unrest as long as there could be nuclear devices available in the chaos that will arise, so food and energy supplies will surely follow upon these kind of aid requests.

North Korea at the Six Party Talks

The international negotiations on the North Korean nuclear program take place at the Six Party Talks, in which North Korea, the United States, China, Russia, South Korea and Japan are present at the negotiation table. Even the very existence of the Six Party Talks as a negotiation framework is already a success for North Korea. From the North Korean point of view, there are no friends and there is only one important enemy: the United States. Negotiating within international organizations like the United Nations is not favorable for Pyongyang, because North Korea will be completely outnumbered by non-friendly parties at the negotiation table (even the seemingly pro-Pyongyang states China and Russia are distrusted in Pyongyang; the idea is that their assistance is mainly meant to make North Korea their vassal state). Preferably, North Korea would negotiate directly with the United States, without any other parties involved. The United States, however, formally refused to talk bilaterally so far. Shifting the negotiations from the United Nations to the Six Party Talks is an important improvement for North Korea. Instead of being one of 192 parties, North Korea became one of six parties involved. From the North Korean perspective, being one of the Six Parties is a recognition that it is equal to the negotiating partners, and thus one of the great (regional) powers. It should be noted that initially Russia was not supposed to be involved in the talks. North Korea insisted on Russian participation to balance the pro-U.S. and contra-U.S. countries better (considering Japan and South Korea supporting Washington, and China and Russia supporting Pyongyang).

As explained above, the North Korean strategy at the Six Party Talks can be described as follows: making the negotiations as slow as possible, not only by causing problems about as many details as possible, but also by making the negotiations as complicated as possible. This is why Pyongyang does not want to negotiate about the nuclear program as an isolated subject, but also

wants to include other themes, like relations with South Korea and the US, energy deals, and so on. The Japanese insistence on including the abduction case in the negotiations, in this sense favors the North Korean strategy, making the negotiations even more diffuse. By making the negotiation process as complicated as possible, it is easier to sabotage parts of it. The other parties would more easily end the negotiations when North Korea would not fulfill the *only* point of agreement than when North Korea could say, “we did not manage to fulfill this promise, but we are doing a good job on the other ones.”

Although the North Korean negotiation strategy at the Six Party Talks is sometimes simply earmarked as rude and unwilling by western media, it is important to acknowledge that the sometimes indeed rude and seemingly unwilling behavior is not meant to completely end the negotiations. On the contrary, North Korea has nothing to gain by ending the international negotiations. The non-cooperative behavior that North Korean diplomats often show at the Six Party Talks is only meant to slow down the negotiations, not to let them fail completely. From the North Korean perspective, the negotiations should preferably go on forever. By the strategy of slowing down the negotiations as much as possible, the regime in Pyongyang is winning time and maneuverability—the risk of military action against the regime is limited as long as negotiations are ongoing, while in the meantime incidental economic support can be acquired.

Prospects for the Near Future

Considering the North Korean aims with its nuclear weapons program, one may question the willingness of Pyongyang to fulfill all promises it made within the 13 February 2007 Action Plan. From the viewpoint of the North Korean regime, it seems to have the most profit of continuing the negotiation process as long as possible, rather than to end it in whatever way, be it by solving the issue of its nuclear program or by breaking away from the negotiations at all.^[11] Although the agreement of February 2007 led to an atmosphere of optimism in the international community, especially after handing over the required documents about the nuclear activities in June 2008, one should remember that previous agreements, especially the 1994 Agreed Framework and the 2005 Joint Statement, failed after some time, due to so-called “differing interpretations” or even obvious cheating from the North Korean side. It is difficult to predict how the North Korean behavior towards the agreement will develop this time. The closing of five nuclear sites in July 2007 seems very promising in this respect, as well as the assumed openness about its nuclear activities that North Korea recently gave by handing over an impressive amount of documents—whether the information is correct and complete has yet to be verified.

Some observers, however, can simply not believe that the North Korean regime would ever completely surrender its nuclear weapons program, because it is Pyongyang’s only real leverage with the international community.^[12] They may have a point there. But in spite of the image of the North Korean regime in the western press, Pyongyang is not irrational at all, but very capable in playing the game of international diplomacy. When the North Korean leadership made the calculation that dismantling the nuclear program is the most profitable action at this moment, it may be serious. The outcome of these kinds of North Korean calculations are unfortunately not known outside a select group of people in Pyongyang. The North Korean strategy with regard to its nuclear program will therefore remain somewhat mysterious, now and in the near future. One lesson, however, may be learned from the past: don’t trust the North Korean regime too easily. The leaders in Pyongyang are masterminds in international politics.

About the Author

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