

North Korea's Nuclear Perceptions and Deterrence

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Nuclear weapons have always had a habit of inviting games of perception. Will the state in possession of a nuclear option make use of it? Obviously, there is always precedent that any state with an option will, at some point, make do with it. The importance here is one of perception.

The DPRK has tended to be in the business of mastering perceptions over reality for much of its existence. In many ways, it has had to. In the face of a dominant United States, a retreating Russia, and a China that has proven to be more qualified about its support, Pyongyang has become more boisterous and terrier-like in its pronouncements.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a firm reminder that a state that under-valued its claims to have terrible weapons of mass murder might become unfortunate candidates for regime change. Pyongyang learned a lesson Saddam Hussein did not: exaggerate, embellish and if not outright lie about having the means to create a ring of fire from Tokyo to Alaska. Never mind that it might physically impossible to execute it.

Much of the North Korean nuclear program has been a case of speculation – again, an issue of mastering perception. Have previous tests been successful? Is much of it just colourful talk? Its first test did not cut the mustard, necessitating a second one which yielded between 2 and 7 kilotons. (To place this in perspective, the Hiroshima atomic blast was 15 kilotons.). Subsequent tests have been better, though not by much.

On January 5, 2016, reports came out of a seismic event close to Punggye-ri, a North Korean test site. What followed were customary triumphal announcements that the regime had been successful in testing a hydrogen weapon, made to spectators standing in the Kim Il Sung Square in the capital. (The vintage stretches back to post-test announcements in 2006, 2009, and 2013.)

“There took place,” according to the Korean Central news Agency, “a world startling event to be specifically recorded in national history... The DPRK proudly joined the advanced ranks of nuclear weapons possessing the H-Bomb.”[1] Experts were quick to dismiss the claim about this self-admission to the ranks. At most, the test might have been be a “boosted-fission” weapon with a fusion additive.

The important point here remains trickery and unsettling counterparts, a mentality derived from what Scott Snyder calls the “guerrilla partisan experience” sharpened by Japanese occupation.

“The guerrilla partisan experience, through which leaders feel unconstrained by norms that might limit options of full-fledged members of the international

community, has had direct application to and influence on North Korean preferences for crisis diplomacy and brinkmanship to gain the attention and respect of negotiating counterparts.”[2]

In 1985, it even went so far as to become a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), an arrangement it proceeded to avoid with disdain. When needed, it has sought to cultivate powers to receive enriched uranium hardware in exchange for other weapons expertise.

North Korea relies on the sort of troubled mentality nourished by such figures as US President Bill Clinton’s former defence chief William Perry. Just a few hours prior to Pyongyang’s weapon’s test, he claimed that, “The probability of a nuclear calamity is higher today, I believe, that it was during the cold war.” Perry also fears “substantial miscalculation” and false alarms.[3] Such rich soil to till!

The strategy stemming from the North Korean leadership is a combination of irritating gnat and dangerous flea. China can be played off against the Japan-South Korean and US front. Moscow can also be potentially embroiled at stages, though it has proven less enthusiastic about Pyongyang’s antics in recent years.

These are not watertight considerations – the continuing attractiveness of seeing Beijing as a vital and determining factor behind reining in Kim Jong-un is fanciful at best. The North Korean regime was alarmed once China took the road of economic modernisation in the 1980s. There would be no Deng economic plan north of the 38th parallel. Increasingly, the sides do not see eye to eye, with Beijing regarding the DPRK as greater nuisance than ally.

North Korea has become the hermit state par excellence, cruel to its populace but determined to sustain its weakened form in the face of hostile powers. It is a case study against sanctions, which have at most only served to injure its own population rather than undermine the state’s ambitions.

Such measures will no doubt be sought again in the UN Security Council. Again, they will have little effect on the weapons program. If anything, they simply supply the regime with its raison d’être of further accelerating weapons programs in the face of an existential threat.

Despite all that, such publications as *The Economist* insist that Pyongyang is getting away with too much. “Financial sanctions can be made to bite deeper by more closely monitoring banking transactions. And the Vienna convention should not give cover to envoys engaged in criminality.”[4] Subsidies from China, it argues, could also be squeezed; the money life line cut off with greater determination.

In the meantime, each test, however advanced or rudimentary, provides data the DPRK’s scientists and engineers will be able to use to enhance both fission efficiency and the means of delivering a device. It is precisely that sort of capacity that the regime will keep up its sleeve, if for no other reason it wishes everyone to believe it has one.

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Notes

[1] <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2016/01/08/why-even-a-failed-test-makes-north-koreas-nuclear-arsenal-scarier/>

[2] <http://nautilus.org/publications/books/dprkbb/uspolicy/dprk-briefing-book-north-korean-nuclear-brinkmanship-testing-the-nuclear-nonproliferation-regime/#2>

[3] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/07/nuclear-weapons-risk-greater-than-in-cold-war-says-ex-pentagon-chief>

[4] <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21685451-after-pyongyangs-fourth-nuclear-test-china-must-change-its-tune-towards-its-outrageous>

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