

North Korea: Regime Succession, Nuclear Brinkmanship and Regional Calculations

Monika Chansoria

The demise of the North Korean dictator, Kim Jong-il, in December 2011 placed the cloistered nation at the centre-stage of political activity, both domestically and across Northeast Asia. The deteriorating health and shrinking public appearances of Kim Jong-il had been a subject of intense debate and his death resulted in an unforeseen turn of events, wherein questions loomed large regarding the political future of the Kim dynasty, starting with Kim Bo-hyon. The North Korean political leadership has been strongly built around the Kim dynasty, wherein Kim Il-sung defined Pyongyang's political destiny ever since its inception in 1948. Although the ruling Korean Workers' Party, an all-powerful military and a section of the ruling elite, immediately sought to quash any potential power squabble by declaring Kim Jong-il's youngest son, Kim Jong-un as their next supreme leader, and supreme commander of the nation's influential military, the real test of regime survival has just about begun. Depicting loyalty to the new leader, a statement issued by the official state Chosun Central News Agency (KCNA), described Kim Jong-un as the "eternally immovable mental mainstay of the Korean people". In fact, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers' Party adopted a

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document pledging: “To carry forward and accomplish the cause of building a thriving socialist nation and revolutionary cause of *Juche* under the leadership of Kim Jong-un.”

The immediate objective of Kim Jong-un and his core team of advisers was to ensure a smooth and undisputed transition of power. Having thrived on an intense personality cult, Kim Jong-il had inherited the reins of power from his father Kim Il-sung, and ruled North Korea irrefutably for 17 years beginning

1994. Much in contrast, Kim Jong-il declared his third son, Kim Jong-un as his political successor only in 2009 and started grooming him for the final takeover. However, Kim Jong-il’s passing away catapulted Kim Jong-un into the ruling chair, without providing him enough time or exposure to consolidate control in the domestic corridors of power in Pyongyang.

The opacity of North Korea and its leadership is deeply entrenched in the Korean culture and Confucian principles, and remains hard to decipher. The canvas of North Korean politics has perennially been an enigma and continues largely unabated. The North Korean leadership has strived, and to a large extent, succeeded, in maintaining a firm grip over domestic political calculations and the trend is likely to continue even as new power configurations may well emerge in the coming future. With Kim Jong-un assuming the mantle of leadership, questions revolving around the pressing need for structural reforms in the socio-economic sphere are bound to arise.

While the rather inexperienced and raw Kim Jong-un has assumed the role of North Korea’s undisputed leader, it is speculated that he is being guided closely by key stakeholders of North Korean politics, namely Jang Song-taek, the husband of Kim Jong-il’s sister, Kim Kyong-hui. The couple

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is expected to play a decisive role in ensuring that Kim Jong-un carries forward the political legacy and strategy inherited from his father. Lack of policy-making transparency in this cagey Northeast Asian nation has pushed its people to the brink of collapse. Today, nearly 25 million North Koreans live on the edge amidst a desolate economy, suffering from prolonged malnutrition owing to a chronic shortage of food. The country is plunged into darkness after sunset due to an acute shortage of electricity.

The “China Factor”

By promptly endorsing the decision of Kim Jong-un’s succession, North Korea’s closest ally and benefactor, China, seems to be aiding Pyongyang at managing North Korea’s succession route. Recognising that regime survival would be critical for North Korea’s overall stability at this given point, China has displayed tacit support and approval for the new leadership through its state-controlled media. Declaring “Kim Jong-il immortal”, the front page of the state-owned *People’s Daily* underscored the significance of Beijing’s relationship with the opaque Northeast Asian nation. It needs to be brought to light that it was China’s backing that facilitated the survival of the Kim Jong-il regime in the backdrop of international economic sanctions. Today, Kim Jong-un too, is banking on implicit Chinese support, as he takes charge of North Korea. In the past, with the intent of viewing China as the source that would provide political and ideological sanctity to his regime, Kim Jong-il had visited China seven times, both officially and unofficially, since 2000. Significantly, the primary aim of his last few visits was to ensure a smooth passage for his son’s undisputed takeover of leadership.

China's ability to wield influence in Pyongyang is seeded in it being North Korea's largest provider of food aid that accounts for almost 50 percent. Besides, being the largest foreign direct investor in North Korea, China's economic assistance to North Korea is almost half of all Chinese foreign aid. Additionally, China also contributes almost 90 percent of Pyongyang's energy imports, including 80 percent of its conventional fuel. Based on these statistics, it would not

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be inappropriate to state that in the backdrop of international sanctions, North Korea could not have managed to remain afloat, if it were not for Chinese economic aid, military assistance and political backing. According to Chinese customs figures, Beijing is North Korea's largest trading partner with bilateral trade reaching \$3.5 billion in 2010, although leaning heavily in China's favour. However, it is important to mention here that a fair share of cross-border trade between North Korea and China goes unreported. This includes data relating to Chinese arms exports to North Korea which is not available in most trade estimates. In addition, the issue of North Korea's drug trafficking into northeast China, which has risen considerably in recent years, also concerns Beijing. In particular, China's Jilin province, and Dandong city in the Liaoning province, placed close to the North Korean-Chinese border have been identified as key transit points for the drug trade.

Despite these irritants, China can ill afford to witness a sudden collapse of the Kim regime in the present circumstances. Determined to both retain its influence on the Korean Peninsula and maintain leverage in Asia, the "North Korean card" constitutes an overarching policy goal for Beijing. The spectre of a collapsing North Korea will likely have a ripple effect not just throughout Northeast Asia, but beyond. From

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Beijing's perspective, such an event could prospectively lead to the possibility of a unified neighbour (Korea), with thousands of US troops and marines moving right next to the Chinese borders — a scenario that Beijing in all probability would be absolutely averse to.

Ensuring the survival of Kim Jong-un's regime will enable Beijing to wield political leverage against the US and guarantee the continuing presence of a responsive Communist ally on its northeastern border. Given the extent of North Korea's dependence on China, any sharp withdrawal

of economic/political support could impinge upon the overall stability in the Korean Peninsula. By providing assistance in multifarious forms to its regional allies, even if they may be classified as failed states, China seeks to pursue its own long-term political goals. Therefore, what initially set out as a relationship based on ideological affinity six decades ago, stares into a precarious future.

When it comes to dealing with North Korea's nuclear and missile brinkmanship in the context of regional stability, China seems to walking a tight rope. The reluctance displayed by China in severely reprimanding North Korea over its nuclear programme, stems from the fear of a potential collapse of the Kim regime. This will trigger serious economic and social consequences for China. With an estimated 300,000 North Koreans already residing illegally in China, any potential economic or politico-military crisis could witness an unmanageable influx of refugees fleeing across the shared 1,416-km-long border into China. This scenario could place increased pressure on China's own economy.

Renewed Nuclear and Missile Brinkmanship

In the past two decades, cloistered North Korea's nuclear defiance has continued unabated with the pattern of seemingly stringent international sanctions being unable to prevent Pyongyang from developing a full-fledged nuclear warhead along with its means of delivery. Nuclear diplomacy as well as attempts to deter both Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un have failed miserably. More troublesome is that North Korea's third and latest nuclear test, conducted on February 12, 2013, tends to suggest firstly, that North Korean nuclear ambitions may never be deterred after all; secondly, it further consolidates North Korea's nuclear weapons threshold; and, finally, it levies additional pressure on any potential military option, in case it is being considered as a tool of deterrence. Testifying the conduct of the test, the official Chosun Central News Agency accepted "... a third underground nuclear test in the northern underground nuclear test site..." A more disturbing and alarming facet of this test was the proclamation, "... in contrast with the past, we used a miniaturised and lightweight device for this test..."

It would also be interesting to gauge whether Kim Jong-un would be able to translate nuclear brinkmanship into a diplomatic breakthrough in terms of foreign policy with respect to the regional players and the United States. It needs to be recalled here that Kim Jong-il had successfully managed to flash the "nuclear card" and harvested substantially on it ever since the signing of the Agreed Framework in 1994. As the region observes unfolding of the internal political dynamics in Pyongyang, any stricter punitive measure might drift the North away from negotiations over completely dismantling its nuclear programme. Pyongyang's march towards complete disarmament and relinquishing its nuclear stockpile entails a very heavy price tag and any plausible solution with Kim Jong-un at the helm of affairs would fall into the category of a grand bargain.

The fact is that despite the international sanctions, North Korea's obstinate regime, under the rule of young Kim Jong-un, has managed to stride ahead technologically. The seismic force of this nuclear test has been far greater than

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that of Pyongyang's previous test in 2009. According to the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO), and as per the shape of its seismic signal, the North Korean blast, conducted at the test site in Punggye-ri, North Hamkyung province, measured 5.0 in seismic magnitude, thereby equalling an atomic blast of 6 kilotons. In comparison, Pyongyang's first test in 2006 was for less than 1 kiloton and the second one in 2009 was slated to have a power of approximately 2 kilotons, according to estimates by American intelligence.

Additionally, there is ample ambiguity about whether North Korea used plutonium or highly-enriched uranium to fuel the weapon. It has been suspected that the previous two tests in 2006 and 2009 were plutonium-based tests. However, there appears to be a reported switchover to highly-enriched uranium as Pyongyang desires to add up to its nuclear arsenal. It needs to be ascertained whether the latest North Korean test was fuelled by plutonium or uranium, more so since Pyongyang is said to have shut down its plutonium-producing reactor in 2007. It was only later in 2010 that the North's programme to enrich uranium was revealed. This holds special significance in the backdrop that North Korea is believed to have huge deposits of uranium. A pertinent question, therefore, would be to establish whether the North is working towards developing a miniaturised uranium warhead. To divine the type of nuclear explosive is quite difficult. The divination is based entirely on the detection of xenon isotopes in any gases escaping from the containment. Taking a cue from 2009, Pyongyang was reported to have plugged its underground testing tunnel so compactly that it left no room for radioactive gas to escape. Significantly, Japanese

planes detected a trace amount of xenon-133 during monitoring flights over Japan the day after North Korea carried out its nuclear test, according to the Japanese Science Ministry, quoted in a Channel News Asia report of February 21, 2013. Radioactive material amounting to 1.9 millibecquerels per cubic metre of air was detected from samples collected at an altitude of 300 metres off the coast of Aichi prefecture in central Japan. However, the ministry officials quoted by the Jiji news agency further clarified that they did not know whether the detected xenon was, in fact, connected to North Korea's underground test.

The North's declaration of attempts to miniaturise nuclear weapons can be seen as a follow-up to the successful test flight of its multi-stage Unha-3 rocket, launched on December 12, 2012. The rocket appeared to have travelled the entire distance of a projected course, putting an earth observation satellite into orbit, thus, making it North Korea's most successful amongst five attempts at testing long-range missile technology. According to the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD), which is a joint US-Canadian military organisation, the missile had "deployed an object that appeared to achieve orbit". With the latest nuclear test, the North Korean intent is to inch closer towards achieving the technological capability of deploying a weaponised missile capable of delivering a nuclear warhead targeting as far away as the continental United States.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's position as the supreme commander of the nation's influential military received a much-needed politico-military boost with the successful test flight of the Unha-3 rocket. Moreover, the South Korean Defence Ministry claimed that by virtue of launching this rocket, which took off and subsequently flew south over the Yellow Sea, East China Sea and the Philippines, North Korea had tested a ballistic missile that could fly more than 6,200 miles, with a warhead ranging 1,100 to 1,300 pounds. The ultimate target in this context appears to be the West Coast of continental United States. Following dissection of the debris of the North

Korean rocket, technicians in South Korea have found evidence which points towards the rocket's military purposes. That said, there is still no confirmation of whether the North had the "reentry" technology needed for the warhead of an intercontinental ballistic missile to survive the heat and vibration when it crashes through the atmosphere.

The rocket launch will likely threaten regional security equations, given that the launch is being viewed as a cover for further testing of long-range missile technology. Besides, the proliferation threat emanating from North Korea would become more grave given the interest of potential buyers of North Korean missiles. Recognising that regime survival would be critical for North Korea's overall stability at this given point, the rocket launch continues to carry forward North Korea's nuclear and missile brinkmanship in the context of regional stability. With freshly elected governments in Japan and South Korea, regional geo-politics following North Korea's rocket launch will only get cloudier in Northeast Asia.

Impact upon the Geo-Strategic Calculations in the Korean Peninsula

South Korea shall probably remain steadfast amid North Korean provocations, in the backdrop of a recent debate at the UN Conference on Disarmament, where North Korea threatened South Korea with "final destruction". The war of words continued from the other side as well when freshly-elected South Korean President, Park Geun-hye, warned that the North's pursuit of nuclear weapons would bring its government "self-destruction". Regional stability in the Korean Peninsula stands on a brink, especially with demands from within Park's governing Saenuri Party calling for South Korea to secure its own nuclear deterrent.

Perhaps the biggest foreign policy challenge for South Korea's new President, Park Geun-hye comes in the form of engaging North Korea peacefully, while simultaneously pressing it to abandon its nuclear pursuit and embark upon a trust-building process in the Korean Peninsula. Seoul

has sensed that North Korea's nuclear ambitions may never be deterred after all. Delivering her address at the Presidential inaugural ceremony, Park revisited familiar themes, including the state of the South Korean economy and, more critically, its relationship with North Korea. Park Geun-hye has indicated time and again that she is disposed to bringing an end to the period of deteriorating ties with the North under her predecessor and fellow conservative, Lee Myung-bak. It is hoped that in the wake of a somewhat yielding approach by North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, the prospect of South Korea adopting a softer stance towards the North remains a possibility. That notwithstanding, Park Guen-hye has stated in unequivocal terms that her government under no circumstances shall tolerate any military provocations from the North as she averred, "...provocations by the North will be met by stronger counter responses, the North's willingness to make the right choice and walk the path of change will be answered with more flexible engagement."

South Korea's relationship with the North can be described as tetchy amidst a hardline approach of Park's predecessor, Lee Myung-bak. With a series of provocations from the North, including testing long-range missile technology and, more recently, a nuclear device, the ruling Saenuri Party has appealed to its conservative power base through President Park, "... North Korea's recent nuclear test is a challenge to the survival and future of the Korean people... the biggest victim will be North Korea itself."

Internal divergences amongst neighbours on how to deal with a defiant North Korean regime loom large at a time when politico-strategic equations amongst Northeast Asian nations remain unsettled. These regional pressures, in turn, render the possibility of a unified response against the North more complicated. Within South Korea, Hwang Woo-yeo, Chairman of the ruling Saenuri Party and Moon Hee-sang, leader of the main opposition Democratic United Party's emergency committee, reaffirmed their position for a bipartisan approach towards responding to

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North Korea's third nuclear test.

Meanwhile, South Korean intelligence and experts have not disregarded the possibility of more ballistic missile test-launches by the North, and in this reference, South Korea appears to be bolstering its own military preparations for any eventuality by elevating its military readiness alert levels, according to the South Korean Ministry of National Defence. President Park's Administration is likely to strengthen cooperation and coordination with the international community to denuclearise North Korea, based on strong deterrence. As the American and South Korean forces undertook their annual Key Resolve and Foal Eagle joint military exercises, in which they undergo air, ground and naval

field training and practise war-games involving US troops stationed in South Korea and their Republic of Korea (ROK) counterparts, regional tensions could well be fuelled further.

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brinkmanship, the probability of any such reconciliation seems to be very low—at least in the near future.

US Sanctions Against North Korea

Ever since the signing of the Agreed Framework between the US and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1994, until it effectively broke down in 2003, Pyongyang's nuclear defiance has continued unabated with the pattern of seemingly stringent international sanctions being unable to prevent the North Korean regime from developing a full-fledged nuclear warhead along with its means of delivery. Sanctions, in fact, are a critical tenet of the larger bilateral equation between Washington and Pyongyang and there is a legislative basis for US economic sanctions against North Korea.

A facet that needs to be underscored is that contrary to most commonly expressed views, the United States does not maintain a comprehensive embargo against North Korea. The US government does not prohibit travel to North Korea, and, for that matter, does not deny trade in basic goods. However, trading activity between the two countries is minimal, mostly limited to food, medicines, and other humanitarian-related goods. According to the US Department of State Foreign Operations and Related Programmes Appropriations Act, North Korea is denied direct foreign aid and Economic Support Funds (ESF) for energy-related programmes, and direct loans, credits, insurance and guarantees of the Export-Import Bank.

When it comes to defining its trade status, North Korea does not possess any advantageous position and is denied luxury goods and trade financing. The US Department of Commerce has placed North Korea among the two most restricted country groups for exports, in that imports require a licence from the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, and using a North Korea-flagged vessel for any transaction, whatsoever, remains strictly prohibited. Moreover, foreign aid to North Korea is nominal, with most of it being limited to refugees

fleeing North Korea, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working towards promotion of democracy, human rights, and issues pertaining to governance. Besides, minimal aid is available in the form of emergency food aid and related to halting and consequent dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons programme infrastructure.

In so far as arms sales and transfer of arms are concerned, they remain fully denied as per US jurisdiction. Given that North Korean entities have been found to be in violation of US missile non-proliferation laws under Section 73 of the Arms Export Control Act and Section 11B of the Export Administration Act, imposition of sanctions becomes mandatory. The severity of the sanction depends on the type of material or technology that is said to have been transferred. When North Korea conducted its nuclear test in 2006, President George W Bush exercised his authority in order to cut off all foreign aid except humanitarian and food aid, deny sales or transfers of defence articles and defence services, deny foreign military financing, deny credit underwritten or provided by government coffers, withhold US support in the international financial institutions, deny export licences for dual-use items, and withhold Export-Import Bank support, as per a US Congressional Research Service report. Significantly, the Bush Administration also denied export licences for items on the US Munitions List (USML). Sanctions include a denial of contracts with agencies of the US government, denial of licences for items on the USML and, most of all, denial of all licences for importing into the United States for the foreign person or entity. Given that North Korea is a non-market economy, all activities related to the North Korean government were also sanctioned when entities in North Korea were found to have engaged in proliferation activities as per US law. The prohibitions on direct foreign aid to North Korea also make it ineligible for Millennium Challenge Account programmes.

Concluding Observations

Despite these stern and rigorous sanctions, nuclear diplomacy as well

as attempts to deter the North Korean dictators, both Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, have failed miserably. In stark contrast to the UN trade sanctions, it was assessed that disruptions to the financial flows associated with Banco Delta Asia (BDA), wherein accounts at BDA were associated with activities relating to missile proliferation, unrecorded gold sales and Kim Jong-il's political funding, have not gone unnoticed. In fact, during the six-party talks, North Korea expressed a strong desire to resolve the BDA issue. The nuclear strides by Pyongyang are a brutal riposte against Western sanctions. Tighter sanctions imposed by the West and economic sanctions forced by the UN have had barely any effect on North Korea's trade in luxury goods with its largest trade partner, China. For that matter, the Chinese take on sanctions against North Korea represents mere tokenism, given that its exports to North Korea have risen from \$ 300 million during the decade of the 1990s to over \$ 2 billion as of today. It needs to be noted that as long as China continues to be North Korea's primary patron and benefactor in every sense of the term, the sanctions shall not serve the desired purpose, however much North Korea gets threatened with dire retribution.

The quick progression of events in North Korea in the past year and a half beginning with Kim Jong-un's regime takeover, muscle flexing by North Korea in the nuclear and missile realm, fresh political developments in Japan and South Korea, now under the leadership of Shinzo Abe and Park Geun-hye, have all run alongside a crucial cross-roads. The trend of continued reticence by the North Korean leadership makes Pyongyang one of the world's most unintelligible and least open economies and this aspect, in all likelihood, will not change, at least in the near term. As of now, Kim Jong-un will cash in on the personality cult and political bequest as he leads North Korea into the 21st century. The debate centres around whether he would be able to fashion the future of Pyongyang based on the pillars of nationalism and an almost religious allegiance to the state, and its survival.