

North Korea The Third Test

By Dr. John Bruni

The media hyperbole surrounding North Korea's third nuclear test is amazing were it not for the fact that we are actually talking about North Korea – the 'Hermit Kingdom'. Anyone would think that Kim Jong Un is about to give the order to march into Seoul, or to launch a salvo of missiles against Japan.



North Korea is a gangster-state, covered in the illusory garb of communist ideology. It is internationally isolated. Its economy is pure black-market. Apart from the senior leadership that has access to most Western and other conveniences, and a military which looks formidable were it not for the fact that it is armed with retrofitted and re-engineered 1950s-60s Soviet and Chinese military technology, much of what we purport to know about North Korea is fiction – a patch-work of guesses based on what has been told by North Korean refugees in China, defectors to South Korea, the occasional visiting Western journalist, some

electronic and other externally procured intelligence and a lot of academic speculation. From this melange of imperfect information, the Western media has painted North Korea as bent on exacting revenge on the US, South Korea and their regional allies, for its isolation.



This third nuclear test is another show of North Korean defiance toward the international community, to be sure. But this act is more about consolidating the young Kim's hold on power in Pyongyang, than about preparing his isolated and impoverished country for war. Firing off missiles, testing nuclear weapons and launching satellites, satisfies the hawks in Pyongyang who have built their careers on defying the West. It allows the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK) to be seen as supporting 'military belligerence' (considered by the North Korean military as projecting strength), which has been the cornerstone of the country's foreign policy since the end of the Korean War in 1953. It goes without saying that a North Korean attack against the South would elicit a total regime change in the North. Hypothetically

speaking, the American and South Korean militaries would not conduct a ‘limited operation’ to contain a major North Korean assault. The senior leadership in Pyongyang knows this. They also know the total war card can only be played once, and while this may (temporarily) ruin the South Korean and Japanese economies in a frenzy of high intensity violence, the North Korean state would be destroyed and its leadership wiped out.



So, what are we to make of the third nuclear test and the successful launching of a North Korean satellite last December? Does it show that North Korean domestic military technology is better than we think? That they are on the cusp of miniaturising a nuclear warhead and creating ballistic missiles with a striking distance to the west coast of the United States, or the north coast of Australia? No. The demonstrated technological prowess of North Korea comes at the cost of the welfare of the long-oppressed and impoverished North Korean people – hardly a sustainable base to create a proper war footing and a war-economy. They have just enough technological prowess to pull off a couple of international ‘scare’ every two-to-three years and this

should give us an indication of the limitations that Pyongyang is labouring under. So, what gives North Korea its power to hold the world transfixed? Its strategic location. Sitting between the economic giant of China and South Korea, the prospect of fighting another war on the Korean peninsula is inconceivable. The damage that any such war would cause to China and South Korea and their economies – catastrophic.

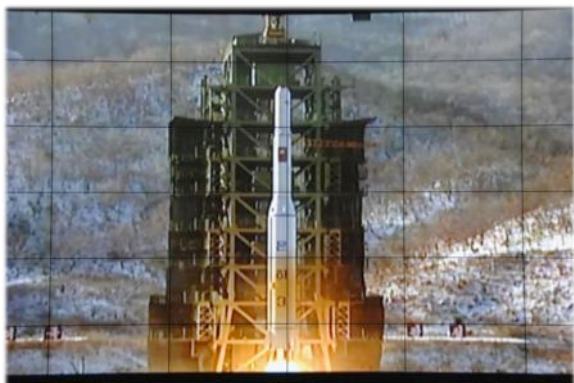
The idea of the North Korean regime collapsing is unthinkable. There would be destabilising, uncontrollable people movements from North Korea across its northern and southern borders. The political vacuum and chaos such a collapse would set off, would again ruin regional economic progress and potentially lead to escalating tensions as China, South Korea, Russia, the US and Japan all vie to influence events.

Political rhetoric aside, the status quo is easier to deal with. Maybe in time, a slow and controlled change of the existing order will see the emergence of something ‘better’. Only time and a lot of patience will determine the outcome.

The International Fallout

International condemnation regarding North Korea’s third nuclear test was unanimous. Even North Korea’s only international ally, China, criticised Pyongyang. This openly shows a rift develop between Pyongyang and Beijing, as reported by the media and international affairs commentariat. What the

media can't speculate on, is the darker side of international politics.



While China was quick to condemn the test, it was not about to suspend relations with Pyongyang. Indeed, if North Korea's stated claims that they have successfully miniaturised a nuclear warhead are true, one has to ask – could this technical feat be something that North Korean engineers achieved without external assistance? Obviously North Korea's nuclear weapons programme is a priority programme. It is designed to allow the North Korean political leadership to: a) look stronger than they actually are; b) satisfy the ambitions of hawkish elements of the military; c) intimidate its perceived enemies and d) have an important bargaining chip that it could *possibly* trade for critical economic concessions. Following the ascension of the young, untried Kim Jong Un to the leadership of North Korea upon the death of his father (Kim Jong Il, the Dear Leader), December 2011, Kim Jong Un had to quickly stamp his authority onto both the Worker's Party of Korea and the Korean People's Army. A resolute stance against old foes – the United States and South Korea –

was certainly the way this could be achieved and achieved quickly. It showed young Kim to be the legitimate successor to his mercurial father. But the darker side of politics is never far below the surface. China has a vested interest in a stable and friendly North Korea. Since the signing of the 1961 Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Co-operation Friendship Treaty, which essentially requires both countries to render mutual support to each other in times of war, the relationship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has solidified to the point where today some 80 percent of North Korean consumer goods are sourced from China, as well as up to 45 percent of North Korea's food imports. What does China get from this relationship? It gets to use North Korea as a strategic buffer against South Korea and the US. The US has some 28,000 troops stationed in South Korea and an extra 38,000 troops stationed in nearby Japan. With no network of formal regional allies to call upon, China considers North Korea a critical pawn, especially when America gives voice to China's growing economic and military power. The idea that China is labouring under this arrangement because of North Korea's 'unpredictability' is useful; it affords the Chinese politburo a degree of plausible deniability and a degree of separation.

Recent moves by the United States to contain the expansion of Chinese naval power in the Western Pacific through the so-called 'pivot', angered many in Beijing.

Constant American accusations of Chinese cyber-espionage and President Obama's threat to conduct pre-emptive cyber-strikes against the Chinese, leaves one wondering whether China tacitly approved North Korea's action to show America that good relations with China are indispensable if it wishes to solve the Korean 'dilemma'.

Though speculative, a great deal of Schadenfreude may have been had in Beijing and Moscow at American, South Korean and Japanese discomfort over the North Korean nuclear test. Both autocratic capitals have recently come under US pressure for their 'contrary' positions in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and the Western Pacific.

Addendum

At the time of writing, it has been reported that Pyongyang told Beijing of its intention to conduct another one or two nuclear tests later this year.

Images Accessed: 16/02/2013

DPRK anchorman:

<http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Guardian/Pix/audio/video/2013/2/12/1360661201564/North-Korean-TV-announcer-016.jpg>

Location of nuclear test:

<https://c479107.ssl.cf2.rackcdn.com/files/20197/width668/6x5zh7mr-1360715809.jpg>

Kim Jong Un with the Korean Army hierarchy:

<http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/dam/assets/130124090131-01-nk-0124-story-top.jpg>