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The North Korean Nuclear Crisis: Lessons for the Iranian Case?

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North Korea is well known for its repeated provocations of South Korea and the United States in the context of efforts over the past decade to negotiate a deal in the Six-Party framework that would result in North Korean nuclear disarmament. North Korea's provocations, including missile tests and nuclear advances such as three nuclear tests since 2006, have a regional and international dimension. According to the established pattern, North Korea makes blatant brinkmanship moves in order to summon the US to the negotiating table and press for better terms – namely, to secure more economic assistance. This has been the linchpin of every deal it has made so far in the nuclear realm.

The last time North Korea negotiated in the framework of the Six-Party talks was in December 2008. In 2009, North Korea declared the Six-Party talks over, and conducted its second nuclear test. In 2010, it took provocative action against South Korea – sinking the corvette *Cheonan*, an act that killed 46 sailors, and conducting an artillery attack on the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong (a region subject to dispute between the two Koreas), killing two South Korean marines and two civilians. In late 2010 North Korea also revealed a uranium enrichment facility at Yongbyon.

Over the course of 2011, Pyongyang once again expressed willingness to explore a return to nuclear negotiations, and in the summer held brief bilateral talks with the US. Before any agreement was reached, however, North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il died and was succeeded by his son Kim Jong-Un. A surprise development in February 2012 fostered short lived hope that the new leader had adopted a positive approach: the US and North Korea announced – through simultaneous unilateral declarations – that they had reached an understanding in the nuclear realm. North Korea announced its willingness to suspend uranium enrichment and place a moratorium on nuclear and long range missile tests, and the US pledged 240,000 tons of food aid. But the deal never materialized – instead the new leader decided to launch a satellite in mid-April 2012 (which failed), and since that time has demonstrated increased defiance, with a successful missile test later that year and a nuclear test in February 2013.

The past few weeks have witnessed a sharp escalation in North Korean nuclear and conventional threats directed primarily against South Korea and the United States, but also against Japan. For the first time, North Korea issued an explicit threat of a nuclear attack to the United States. The frequency, intensity, and content of these threats – unfolding in rapid succession – are unprecedented in the near-decade of negotiations with North Korea in the nuclear realm.

What is North Korea trying to achieve? The immediate backdrop to the escalation were the sanctions following North Korea's third nuclear test in February, and the annual US-South Korean joint military exercise that North Korea protests every year. Neither of these developments, however, was unexpected, and neither explains the dramatic rise in intensity of the North Korean threats. Moreover, the threats themselves are basically toothless: evidence is lacking that North Korea has the capability to miniaturize a nuclear warhead and place it atop a long range missile, which renders the nuclear threat to the US dubious. For its part, a significant conventional attack would surely elicit a strong military response that North Korea could probably not sustain. With the Six-Party talks suspended, the new escalation also did not initially seem to adhere to the familiar pattern that North Korea had established in the past; however, a new US-South Korean offer of negotiations – on condition that North Korea is serious about denuclearization – could signal that this is indeed what North Korea was once again seeking.

While North Korea's motivation is unclear, Pyongyang succeeded in capturing the world's attention through its belligerent nuclear rhetoric. Specters of pending nuclear war raised by the media ignored the fact that North Korea's current capabilities cannot support its threats. Thus the bluster is ultimately likely to fizzle out, and at most find expression in the test-fire of a long range missile.

At the same time, however, North Korea is indeed advancing its nuclear and missile programs, and if no deal is reached in the nuclear realm, it will eventually succeed in developing a warhead that it can place on a long range missile, and thus become a full-fledged nuclear state that can pose a threat to the US backed up by capabilities. This crisis has demonstrated how North Korea – a state not averse to issuing nuclear threats – will be able to place the region on immediate hair-trigger alert.

What does this crisis imply for the Iranian nuclear crisis? North Korea's crisis-making behavior actually provides little insight into Iran's possible next move, because Iran has developed its own particular style of dealing with the international community. While no less determined and defiant than North Korea, Iran is guided by the principle of *crisis-avoidance*, and it has tapped this strategy to considerable effect. The regional context of each proliferator is also quite different: North Korea has used the nuclear issue as a bargaining chip for economic assistance from the US and its regional neighbors. Oil-rich

Iran is not in need of such assistance, and is using its nuclear program rather as a means to strengthen its regional position and hegemonic ambitions. Significantly, South Koreans remained relatively calm in the face of the barrage of North Korean threats, but this would not be expected in the face of similar threats from Iran, especially for Saudi Arabia and Israel. North Korea – although nuclear – is a weak state surrounded by much stronger neighbors that seem to regard their aggressive neighbor almost like a provocative child that must be treated firmly but not spurned. By contrast, Iran is a strong state in a region where it is regarded by some as a rival for regional influence, and by others as a formidable and dangerous adversary.

Predictably, the international approaches to the proliferators have been influenced by the leading states' perceptions of the proliferators and their regional contexts. The US has long avoided a forceful approach toward North Korea because Pyongyang can cause massive destruction to Seoul with conventional missiles, while China has protected North Korea due to its fears of implosion and ensuing adverse consequences for China. Amid continued efforts to press North Korea to negotiate a deal, the states confronting Pyongyang are in effect following a policy of containment, and the recent crisis could be construed as demonstrating that even in the face of blatant nuclear threats containment is working. However, the different strategic realities in the Middle East should caution against simplistic comparisons. If Iran issued threats similar to those of North Korea, they would be regarded very differently due to different regional conditions. Moreover, Iran could advance its interests without posing such blatant threats; as a nuclear state it would be able to exploit its immunity to counterattack in order to incrementally advance aggressive regional hegemonic goals. In this scenario, classic nuclear deterrence will be rendered irrelevant.

Thus the fact that North Korea and Iran both present a nuclear proliferation challenge does not neutralize the many differences between the two cases. Developments regarding one determined proliferator do not necessarily have immediate implications for the other. Each case should be considered on its own terms, including: the nature and motivation of the proliferator, its strategy and tactics when facing regional and global powers, and the calculations of the specific group of states that confront it, as a function of the regional conditions that prevail in each case.