

Prospects for a resolution to the North Korean nuclear crisis

The time for Europe to have greater ambition for its security and defence policy has come. North Korea's nuclear weapons development has been not only a threat to regional security in East Asia but also a challenge to global peace for many years. The United States and the international community seemed powerless to prevent the North Korean regime from developing the nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programs. The political situation deteriorated in July 2017 when North Korea conducted the first test of an intercontinental ballistic missile that appeared capable of striking the US mainland. Following a nuclear test in early September 2017, Pyongyang announced that its new intercontinental ballistic missiles could be equipped with a hydrogen warhead. North Korea's nuclear tests provoked an immediate response from the United States, Russian Federation and China. As a result, tensions continue to rise on Korean Peninsula. Despite the fact that both sides limit their actions to aggressive rhetoric and gestures, the risk of war in East Asia is greater than it has been for years.

The North Korean authorities perceives development of nuclear weapons as a guarantee that any outside power will not attempt to overthrow the regime in Pyongyang. Therefore, North Korea will remain determined to continue the nuclear program regardless of the costs of international isolation and economic sanctions

The origins of the North Korean nuclear programme can be traced back to the 1950s when the Soviet Union initiated training in nuclear technologies for Korean physicists and engineers. Given the fact that North Korea joined the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (or the Non-Proliferation Treaty, NPT) in 1985, there was a chance 'to civilise' Pyongyang's nuclear programme. Over the following years, it turned out that the North Korean government deceived the international community by pretending to be interested in cooperation whereas its only goal was to develop nuclear weapons. The multilateral agreements (NPT and the Six-Party Talks), economic sanctions imposed by the

United Nations and all US attempts to resolve North Korea nuclear and missile issues have proved unsuccessful. Despite the talks North Korea conducted several missile and nuclear tests (in 2006, 2009, 2013 and two tests in 2016) that made the compromise impossible. In 2012, following one year of negotiations with the Barack Obama administration, North Korea agreed to suspend its missile program in exchange for US food aid. A few weeks later, on 13 April, 2012 the Korean People's Army carried out another missile test, violating the deal with the United States.

There is no denying that the nuclear program is of great significance for the North Korean regime. The political power of the Kim dynasty is based on the armed forces and relatively well-paid officers, which is reflected in the Songun, 'the military first' policy of North Korea.

Pyongyang has an active military personnel of over 1,000,000 soldiers and spends roughly 20-25% of its GDP for the armed forces and military infrastructure. There is no denying that North Korea maintains its armed forces at the expense of the well-being of society. The regime continuously creates a sense of danger and threat to national security to justify sacrifices made by the North Korean society. Thus the nuclear weapons are used to build authority of Kim Jong-un who is perceived by the Koreans from the North as a leader capable of intimidating the greatest power in the world. As far as the foreign policy is concerned, the nuclear weapons and missiles act as a deterrent to any other states thinking of overthrowing the Kim Jong-un regime as in the case of Iraq or Libya.

North Korea's nuclear program: facts and figures

It is worth noting that the available information about the North Korean armed forces remains uncertain due to Pyongyang's internal and external isolation. The knowledge is based on official press releases of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, speculations, intelligence analyses and leaks from the North Korean government officials.

According to current estimates, North Korea has approximately 30-60 nuclear warheads. The U.S. intelligence claims that Pyongyang is capable of producing small nuclear warheads for ballistic missile delivery. The statement seems to be in line with declarations of the North Korean government which confirmed in early September 2017 that the DPRK can deploy a hydrogen bomb on ICBMs.

Nuclear tests

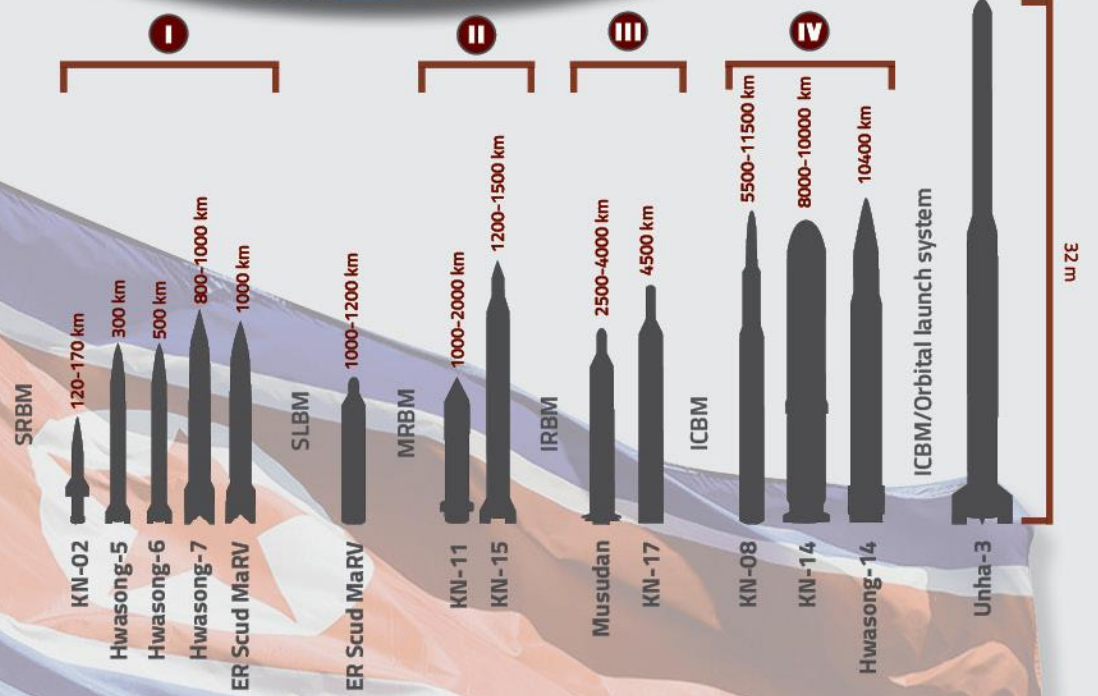
Data	Power
9 October 2006	0,5–2 KT
25 May 2009	2–6 KT (up to 20 KT according to other sources)
12 February 2013	6–14 KT
6 January 2016*	7–15 KT
9 September 2016	15–25 KT
3 September 2017*	80–120 KT

* According to the North Korean government, it was a test of a hydrogen bomb.

Over the last few years, North Korea has also accelerated its ballistic missile program. It is worth noting that Kim Jong-un has tested more missiles (84) than his father and grandfather combined (16 and 15 respectively). Undoubtedly, tests of North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missiles were perceived by the international community as the most alarming. On 4 July, 2017 the North Korean Armed Forces launched their first ICBM which achieved an altitude of 2800 km, landing 900 km away. The second test was carried out on 28 July, 2017.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the North Korean government developed technology based on the Soviet R-17 Scud missile. Probably, Pyongyang has developed various types of short, medium and long range missiles to date. It is likely that the North Korean regime is capable of striking the US mainland. The American administration will certainly attempt to resolve this issue and persuade Pyongyang to abandon the nuclear program. The United States can respond by launching a military operation; using diplomatic measures; seeking to overthrow North Korean leaders; or accepting the current state of affairs.

NORTH KOREA'S MISSILE AND NUCLEAR PROGRAMS



Nuclear Tests

- 09.10.2006 | Yield: 0,5-2 kt
- 25.05.2009 | Yield: 2-6 kt
- 12.02.2013 | Yield: 6-14 kt

*Alleged hydrogen bomb test

- 06.01.2016 | Yield: 7-15 kt*
- 09.09.2016 | Yield: 15-25 kt
- 03.09.2017 | Yield: 80-120 kt*

1. A military operation

From the military perspective, the United States (or a US-led coalition) is capable of defeating the North Korean Armed Forces despite Pyongyang's military strength. A military intervention would certainly put US allies at grave risk. Regardless of the scale of the operation, Pyongyang would conduct strikes against South Korea, possibly Japan and also the United States (particularly Guam, Hawaii as well as Alaska and the West Coast). Due to limited reconnaissance and intelligence capabilities it is highly unlikely that the United States would destroy all offensive systems of the North Korean armed forces even if the US armed forces used nuclear warheads to achieve this objective, which currently seems almost impossible. North Korea's mountains allow to hide military equipment which could be used by the regime to launch a counterattack, deploying missiles equipped with chemical and biological warheads, if Pyongyang's nuclear weapons were destroyed. Given that Seoul is located just 50 km from the 38th parallel north (the border between North and South Korea), the capital of South Korea with a total population of over 10 million people is within the range of Pyongyang's long range artillery and, therefore, is particularly exposed to North Korean strikes. It is worth noting that North Korea has been preparing for war for last 60 years. Consequently, it is impossible to rule out other military options of the North Korean regime such as operations involving special forces and sabotage. Taking into consideration the range of North Korea's missiles and large Japanese cities located within their range (including Tokyo), the conflict would likely lead to millions of civilian casualties.

The effectiveness of the first strike on North Korea conducted by the US-led coalition depends on the surprise factor. However, defeating the North Korean armed forces requires a large-scale military operation. It is highly unlikely that the North Korean government could overlook deployment and mobilisation of enemy's troops. Consequently, Pyongyang could attempt to carry out a preemptive strike, or, more likely, hide its nuclear arsenal and conduct an unpredictable counterattack. It is also worth noting that Russia and China would certainly react to North Korea's collapse (the latter one is bound with the North Korean regime by a treaty and its military clauses). Nevertheless, given 25 million North Korean people in need, Kim Jong-un's defeat poses a serious problem for the United States and international community. Taking into consideration all issues and conditions, North Korea's stabilisation would seem to be the most complex process after the World War II and certainly more time-consuming and expensive than comparable operations in Iraq or Afghanistan.

2. Diplomatic measures

The international community has tried repeatedly to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear program. However, all attempts to resolve this issue have been fruitless so far. All deals with the North Korean regime turned to be a temporary solution (including the 1994 US-North Korean Agreed Framework) due to the fact that Pyongyang selectively obeyed international agreements. On the other hand, the U.N. sanctions against North Korea were not effective enough to influence Pyongyang's policy (since the first nuclear test in 2006, the United Nations Security Council adopted 7 resolutions against the regime). Currently, it is also difficult to determine whether the last Resolution 2371, adopted unanimously by the United Nations Security Council on August 5, 2017, will prove to be effective, despite the fact that its provisions ought to severely affect North Korea's economic interests.

A lack of trust is the main issue as far as diplomatic talks are concerned. It is difficult to verify whether provisions of agreements are implemented whereas Pyongyang's intentions remain unclear. Therefore, any sanctions imposed by the international community will be ineffective without close international cooperation. Moreover, it is worth noting that the North Korean regime has also alternative ways, such as illegal trade and contacts with other dictators, to acquire necessary goods and resources. The People's Republic of China seems to be a key partner for the United States to put pressure on Pyongyang. Furthermore, China is actually the only state in the world that can imperil economic foundations of the North Korean regime.

3. A political change in North Korea

The fall of the North Korean regime is another way to change Pyongyang's policy. However, it cannot be achieved through externally initiated changes in the government. Given the current situation, a military intervention is not an option. On the other hand, the infiltration of the country is impossible due to Pyongyang's path of isolation; therefore, any political changes are possible only through revolution initiated by North Korean people. Despite the fact that Kim's regime seems unshakable, the actual state of affairs in North Korea's power circles remains a mystery. Therefore, it is impossible to rule out the existence of reformists within the government, who could lead to political changes such as those introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the People's Republic of China in the 1980s.

4. An acceptance

If the regime has determination to achieve full nuclear capabilities, an (informal) acceptance of Pyongyang's policy would be the only option for the international community. Despite negative effects of such an approach, this is still a better solution than, for example, US military operation against North Korea. Above all, this policy would be against the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. Moreover, it could encourage other states to develop nuclear weapons in the future. Arguably, this approach could lead to proliferation of nuclear weapons in East Asia (particularly in Japan and South Korea) and consequently deteriorate the situation in this region. The more the countries that possess nuclear weapons, the greater is the risk of nuclear conflict, particularly if the achievement of nuclear capabilities encouraged Kim Jong-un's regime to intensify its aggressive policy towards the southern neighbour. North Korea could also become an exporter of nuclear technologies and bombs for terrorist organisations. On the other hand, it is impossible to rule out a scenario in which nuclear weapons would be a guarantee of survival of the North Korean regime. Consequently, Pyongyang might become open to talks with the international community and attempt to improve its economy. These changes could help to lay foundations of nuclear disarmament in the future.

Recommendations

1. The North Korean authorities perceives development of nuclear weapons as a guarantee that any outside power will not attempt to overthrow the regime in Pyongyang. Therefore, North Korea will remain determined to continue the nuclear program regardless of the costs of international isolation and economic sanctions.
2. Despite regime's aggressive rhetoric, Pyongyang is not keen to fight against the United States and its allies. Such a conflict would lead to North Korea's defeat and the collapse of Kim Jong-un's regime. On the other hand, given the potential of Pyongyang's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, either precision strikes or a frontal attack against North Korea's Armed Forces would be possible but also potentially hazardous for millions of people who live in both East Asia and the United States.
3. The key is to effectively bring pressure to bear on North Korea, cutting off financial sources for Pyongyang's nuclear program and enforcing sanctions against the regime.

Close cooperation between the United States and China will be absolutely crucial to succeed.

4. It is worth noting that a potential deal with the North Korean regime should involve both states located in the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, it is also necessary to reach a compromise between the United States and North Korea and subsequently reduce the size of the US military in the region. Otherwise, it seems impossible that China will abandon its North Korean ally which is perceived by Beijing as a natural buffer between the US forces and the border between Chinese and North Korea.

Author: Przemysław Pacuła, Head of the International Analyses Division at the Strategic Analyses Department of the National Security Bureau