It’s Time for Bold US Thinking on North Korea

By Gregory J. Moore

Efforts to stop North Korea becoming a fully operational nuclear-weapons state have been protracted and frustrating, dating back to 1994 and gaining special urgency due to the series of nuclear tests that began in 2006.

But two surprise nuclear tests in 2016, combined with numerous ballistic missile tests, suggest that Pyongyang may be close to being capable of delivering miniaturized nuclear weapons atop such missiles. Gregory J. Moore argues that “pre-emptive recognition” of North Korea by the US might achieve a denuclearized Korean Peninsula.

NO ONE currently outside of North Korea — and quite possibly no one inside — knows if Pyongyang has a deliverable nuclear weapon. There can be no doubt, however, that North Korea has a nuclear weapon, or several, as evidenced by the five nuclear tests it has conducted (in 2006, 2009, 2013 and two in 2016), but whether or not the weapon tested can be miniaturized to fit atop a functioning missile or inside a bomb that can be dropped from a North Korean IL-28 aircraft or delivered in some other way is not known.

While Pyongyang boasts of such capabilities,1 as of late 2013, my colleagues and I estimated it did not yet possess them.2 In the last year or two, however, there seems to have been a shift in the consensus among North Korea watchers and arms control wonks that North Korea “probably” (to use a description by Jeffrey Lewis) has mastered technologies sufficient to achieve the following: 1) miniaturization of the warhead; 2) making the warhead strong enough to sustain the rigors of ballistic missile flight; and 3) making a re-entry vehicle that can endure the high heat of re-entering the atmosphere as it homes in on its target, the three things that Pyongyang needs to master to have an operational nuclear weapon.3 Other experts confirm that if, indeed, North Korea can miniaturize a functioning nuclear warhead, it has a number of adequate delivery systems.4 North Korea has continued to test its missile capabilities as well, despite international condemnation, no doubt increasing its understanding of its missiles’ viable and still not yet viable elements. US Army General Curtis Scaparrotti said in late 2014 that he believed the North Koreans could mount a nuclear warhead on a missile; this was seconded by US Admiral Bill Gortney in April 2015, who added that he even believed they could mount it on a missile that could in theory reach the United States. No tests have been observed to date that can verify that North Korea has these capabilities, and because experts believe North Korea has not yet tested either the warhead or the mix of the warhead and delivery system, North Korea may not even know if the system would work. In any event, if Pyongyang has indeed achieved operational nuclear-weapons status, or when it does,
this will be an extremely important development for Northeast Asian security, as well as for global non-proliferation efforts.

Despite this, surprisingly, North Korea has not been the focus of US anti-proliferation efforts in the past two years, but Iran instead. The US and its partners with great fanfare reached an agreement with Tehran in 2015 to limit its nuclear program in exchange for a number of rewards.

This, despite the fact that North Korea is likely further along toward fielding an operational nuclear weapon than is Iran, which has apparently not tested a nuclear device to date. But the reasons for the greater interest in Iran than North Korea are not the topic of this article. Instead, I will address the impact of a fully operational, nuclear-armed North Korea on Northeast Asian security. I will conclude with an argument for restarting the stalled Six Party Talks and forging a US-North Korea peace agreement that can lead to denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula.

ARME D AND DANGEROUS

What are the likely implications for regional security if Pyongyang has deliverable nuclear weapons? North Korea’s missile and nuclear tests obviously increase its potential to field a long-range delivery system, and consequently this question seems more pressing than ever. There are a number of important implications, some of which are elaborated upon below.

It would be one more hindrance to rapprochement between North and South Korea: It goes without saying that a North Korean move toward operational nuclear weapons would complicate relations between South and North playing into the hands of the political right in South Korea and lending credence to the argument that North Korea is bellicose, unco-operative, unrestrainable and ruled by hard-liners. It might lead to a permanent freeze on Seoul’s co-operative ventures with Pyongyang, such as those involving Mt. Kumgang and Kaesong — both currently on hold because of North-South tensions. Seoul could also be pushed down the path of developing its own nuclear weapons, something that South Korean public opinion already is tipping toward.7 The empowerment of the right would weaken the more accommodationist left and make it much harder to realize North-South reconciliation. It it would harden regional Cold War era alignments: One truly unfortunate, but likely, byproduct would be to push the parties involved in the nuclear dilemma back into regional Cold War alignments. The US might respond with bellicosity, moving its North East Asia policy further right, with more denunciations, UN Security Council resolutions, sanctions or even military action of some kind. South Korea would be drawn closer to the US and even Japan in security matters. In Japan, it would further empower rightists, strengthening their arguments that Japan must become a “normal country” on defense matters.

Though the Chinese are not keen on Pyongyang having operational nuclear weapons, the chain of events that would likely be unleashed by North Korean nuclear operationality and its impact on the US, South Korea and Japan would, of course, be viewed as threatening by the Chinese, who would have to respond not only to the growing tension on the Korean Peninsula, but to a possible Japanese move to the right, as well as other changes to the regional security environment brought about by Pyongyang’s moves. Depending on how things played out, China might be pushed to support its surly neighbor to a greater or lesser extent. If Beijing views Pyongyang as overly provocative, it would offer only the bare minimum of support. But if the response to such a crisis by Washington, Seoul or Tokyo is seen as over the top by Beijing, China might come to North Korea’s aid. It seems likely that under such circumstances Russia might also be inclined to lean toward Pyongyang’s side, providing one more potential wedge between Russia and the West. This confluence of events would certainly not be good for trade or regional co-operation in general.

It it would push Japan further to the right: Operational North Korean nuclear weapons would likely further empower the Japanese right, giving them more ammunition to drive the country to the right on the defense. Pyongyang’s 1998 firing of a missile over the main Japanese island of Honshu has already served as an important catalyst to growing hawkishness in Tokyo, raising great alarm in Tokyo about the danger North Korea poses to Japan, and matters have worsened with each succeeding North Korean nuclear test. China has in recent years been Japan’s primary security concern, but we should not underesti- mate the fear the Japanese have toward North Korea, stemming in particular from the abductions of Japanese citizens after the Korean War. When North Korea rattles its sabers, Japanese grow wary and become more receptive to rigidist rhetoric, electing rigidist prime ministers like Taro Aso and Shinzo Abe. Japan’s recent lower-house elections went strongly in Abe’s favor, showing support for his conservative policies. North Korea’s aggressive nuclear moves will not help political doves in Tokyo, though they might help draw South Korea and Japan closer together. Empowering Japanese rigidists would not be positive for Northeast Asian security from most perspectives, including those of the Chinese, South Koreans, North Koreans and most Americans. It should be remembered, for example, that rightist Shintaro Ishihara’s well-known book, The Japan That Can Say No, was an anti-American diatribe, highlighting the fact that some Japanese rightists are not only anti-Chinese or anti-Korean, but also anti-American.8

It could lead to armed confrontation with the US and increased sanctions: US diplomat have for some time said that the US would not allow North Korea to become a nuclear-weapons state. The US position is reflected in US Secretary of State John Kerry’s statement, “Our position is clear: we will not accept [North Korea] as a nuclear weapons state, just as we said that about Iran.”9 US President Donald Trump has emphasized as well that he would not allow North Korea to attain nuclear operationality. It is not clear what the US will do as Pyongyang comes close to or achieves full nuclear capability, nor is it certain that experts in Washington have reached the conclusion that Pyongyang is fully operational, although the consensus seems to be shifting in that direction. Washington will be limited in its choices, because of the vulnerability of Seoul to North Korean retaliation should the US choose a military response. In the words of one Pentagon expert involved in discussions about this topic in the George W. Bush administration: “The mainstream view is that if any kind of military strike starts against North Korea, the North Koreans would invade South Korea, and they will cause enormous destruction of Seoul. And we are not prepared to handle this.”10 Even if Washington opted for a surgical strike, such as Israel’s against Iran in 1981, and the US and South Korea had a plan to deal with the potential costs, there would be no guarantee that all the nuclear facilities in North Korea could be found, targeted and neutralized. North Korea’s mountainous terrain

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It could spur a regional arms race: While Washington’s exact response is not clear, it seems certain the US would ramp up regional missile defense programs that currently include Japan and are now planned to include South Korea. North Korea’s fourth nuclear test helped clear the way in Seoul for acceptance of the deployment of the US Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system despite stiff opposition from China and Russia — as well as the political left in South Korea. Continued North Korean nuclear development would only cause Seoul to deepen its commitment to a US-led regional missile defense system. This trend is a blow not only to North Korea, but also Russia and China, which have argued that THAAD exposes their own first-strike and other capabilities to undue threat. In response, they may decide to upgrade their systems to deal with the new reality, which could contribute to the danger of a high altitude arms race as Japan, South Korea and perhaps Taiwan find themselves with new vulnerabilities.

It could complicate China’s relations with Pyongyang, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington: Lastly, a nuclear armed North Korea would put China in a very awkward position. Bad North Korean behavior puts China, being Pyongyang’s guarantor, in a bad light generally and increases international pressure on Beijing to rein in its neighbor, something not easily done, to Beijing’s chagrin. China has made no secret of its disapproval of Pyongyang’s moves to obtain nuclear weapons, variously cutting off North Korea’s cross-border oil flows, and signing on to UN condemnations and sanctions among other things. The reasons are not surprising when one considers China’s core interests. North Korean provocations might drive Seoul closer not only to Washington, but to Tokyo, and China has until recently been enjoying the fruits of frigid relations between South Korea’s President Park Geun-hye and Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. North Korea’s latest nuclear tests have strained ties between Seoul and Beijing, and to some degree warmed ties between Seoul and Tokyo. In addition, Sino-American relations have suffered in recent years because of China’s increasingly assertive maritime policies in the East and South China Seas, and Washington’s subsequent, much heralded “pivot” to Asia. North Korea’s behavior has at times brought Beijing and Washington together, but North Korea is prickly for all involved. If North Korean actions push the US to act (or overreact) in ways that Beijing cannot tolerate, China and the US could be at odds. The Chinese prefer not to have such complications, and greatly resent Pyongyang’s penchant for provocation and brinkmanship. It’s hard enough for Beijing to manage relations with the US and its neighbors as it is.

**PRE-EMPTIVE RECOGNITION** BY THE US

Whatever conclusions we might reach regarding Pyongyang’s willingness to give up, at least freeze, development of its nuclear weapons, we must keep the following in mind: two events — Libya relinquishing its WMD programs under pressure from the United States in 2003 followed eight years later by the March 2011 US attack on that country, and the 2007 Israeli airstrike that destroyed a North Korean nuclear reactor under construction in Syria at Al-Kibar — reinforced Pyongyang’s view that neither event would have occurred had those nations possessed nuclear weapons.

North Korea arguably faces a more grave security threat than Iran, and at the same time it enjoys a degree of what might be called *escalatory spiral-induced invulnerability* that makes it harder to hold it accountable. That is to say, it would be

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difficult to do to North Korea what Israel did to Iran at Natanz in 1981 given Seoul's close proximity to North Korea and the potential for escalation. Therefore, dialogue and deal-making must continue to be the first line of attack in the effort to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula.

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Since the North Korean nuclear crisis emerged in 1994, there have been two avenues to address the issue that have met with limited success: US-North Korean bilateral talks, and the Six-Party Talks. Because the ultimate confrontation today is arguably between the US and North Korea, the most direct way to address that is by direct bilateral talks. However, whatever agreements might be reached could only be successfully guaranteed with the help of South Korea and China. The roles of Japan and Russia have been of secondary importance, but it has still been generally constructive to have them involved in the Six-Party Talks.

The most promising way forward would be for Washington to launch what I have called “a pre-emptive act” of recognition of North Korea as a sovereign state and an agreement to sign a peace treaty with it (and China), formally ending the Korean War. Along with this would come a US guarantee not to attack North Korea if Pyongyang agrees not to attack its neighbors or the US (or US territories). This would be an important step in undermining Pyongyang’s argument that the US is determined not to recognize the regime but rather to overthrow and destroy it. As a confidence-building measure, this could pave the way for the opening of a US embassy in Pyongyang and a North Korean embassy in Washington when the time is right, as the UK has already done. As part of this package, the US should request that North Korea freeze its nuclear weapons programs and agree to put them on the negotiating table in the near future, with the ultimate goal being the denuclearization of the entire Korean Peninsula. North Korean denuclearization would not be a prerequisite to this deal. They have been for many years, and this approach has not led to a sustainable breakthrough on the impasse. This sort of rapprochement with Pyongyang would be extremely risky politically for an American president, but could conceivably be done by President Donald Trump because of his general hawkish posture and his reputation as a dealmaker. I would argue that US President Richard Nixon was successful in making the opening to China because he had sufficient anti-communist credentials as a former McCarthyite to avoid being called soft on communism. It would have been a difficult thing for a Democrat to do. In the same way, Donald Trump has enough standing with hawks in Washington that he might be in a position to broker a deal with the Kim regime if the stars aligned for such a move, so to speak. This could only be done during a season of relatively benign behavior from Pyongyang. While early indications are that Donald Trump is open to negotiating with Pyongyang, as indicated by the recent establishment, with the help of Donald Zagoria, of a back-channel diplomatic effort toward North Korea, the recent North Korean missile tests and the murder of Kim Jong-nam in February seems to have prompted a closure of this channel by the Trump administration for the time being. For the moment, the season may not be ripe for the moves proposed here, but an opportune time should still be sought. As a guarantor of a rapprochement between Washington and Pyongyang, the other parties in the Six-Party Talks — China, South Korea, Japan and Russia — would have to underwrite such an agreement, and the Six-Party framework could become a regularized security dialogue in the region, not just to hold North Korea and the US accountable to their commitments (as well as South Korea, which would undoubtedly have a vital role to play), but as a long-term forum for conflict resolution and dialogue.

A recent study by Robert Carlin suggests that Pyongyang might be quite open to an approach such as that outlined here. He notes that an overlooked official North Korean statement on July 6, 2016, says the following: “The denuclearization being called for by the DPRK is the denuclearization of the whole Korean Peninsula and this includes the dismantlement of nukes in South Korea and its vicinity.” He argues that Pyongyang has quietly resuscitated the terms of the Jan. 20, 1992, North-South denuclearization declaration that both Pyongyang and Seoul signed. This would be a change in North Korea’s position. Denuclearization is apparently on the table if there are no nuclear weapons on or near the Korean Peninsula. The statement also says: “The US should ensure that it would never bring again the nuclear strike means to South Korea, which the US has frequently deployed on the Korean Peninsula and in its vicinity.” This presumably alludes to US B2 and B52 bombers that made rare appearances over South Korea as part of US-South Korea military exercises following North Korean nuclear tests in 2013 and 2016, and which are a serious strategic threat to North Korea. This is a formula that Washington found palatable in the past, and which it could accept again under the right circumstances.

Regardless of the climate of relations between Pyongyang and Washington at the moment, and the recent unhelpful behavior of Pyongyang, the Six-Party Talks should be restarted as soon as possible. Even if they do not bring about the desired breakthrough in the end, the talks have provided an important forum for discussion and a sounding board for ideas about how to resolve the continuing dilemmas on the Korean Peninsula. They have also provided experience for diplomats on all sides to relate to each other constructively, so that when the time does come, not only the North Korean nuclear issue, but the unfortunate division of the Korean Peninsula might be resolved as well. In the right political context, a US policy of “pre-emptive recognition” of North Korea as described here, coupled with a reboot of the Six-Party Talks as a regional security framework, is the best bet we currently have to help bring about such ends.