The Situation on the Korean Peninsula. Part 3

The author is continuing his series of articles to improve our understanding of the situation on the Korean Peninsula: • How North Korea and the West view each other and how much they both distrust and misunderstand each other; • North Korea’s current system, and to the extent to which its new leader increases or decreases its stability; • How North Korea’s relations with China and Russia will evolve; • The extent to which chance can increase the likelihood of war.

Where Moscow and Beijing stand

My previous articles make it clear that without a third force to serve as a moderator to translate ideas and push for a consensus, relations between North Korea and the United States will continue growing worse due to trivial misunderstandings and an unwillingness to understand, because “everybody knows” that the other side is a Mordor. Russia, China and, to a lesser extent, pre-Lee Myung-bak South Korea have functioned in that capacity. Let’s examine those countries’ policies and how they might change.

Both China and Russia are held hostage to the Korean conflict, trapped as they are between two priorities and the need to choose the lesser of evils.

First, there are our international obligations; abandoning them would damage our standing in other regions. That includes the nuclear problem: We favor a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula because an expansion of the nuclear club would not be to our advantage as nuclear powers, and as permanent members of the UN Security Council we cannot ignore North Korea’s violation of sanction after sanction.

Border stability is particularly important. Russia’s Far East and China’s Dongbei already have enough problems. Any political or, especially, military exacerbation of the situation on the Korean Peninsula would be equally disadvantageous to both countries because it would threaten their internal stability directly (movement of the war to their territories; effects of the conflict in their countries; involvement in the conflict arising from the need to fulfill allied obligations; or radioactive fallout caused by sabotage, military operations or a technogenic disaster at North Korean nuclear facilities) or indirectly (an influx of refugees due to a humanitarian disaster and the problems that entails, the need to raise additional capital to meet new challenges in a difficult economic environment, etc.).

A unified Korea larger than South Korea, as Lee Myung-bak put it, would also be to our disadvantage. It would bring NATO’s eastern flank right up to our borders, but also from the standpoint of security and economic prosperity the new state would not be a “scaled-up South Korea.” Absorption of the North could endanger China’s territorial integrity. Territorial claims cannot be ruled out given that fans of democratic values and human rights love to support the rights of small nations to self-determination, and the state ideology of a unified Korea would likely be aggressive nationalism.

It seems to me that these factors would make stability a key issue no matter what public statements are made. Stability is dictated by realpolitik, not considerations of ideological approval, although for Russia and China North Korea is very much like a “suitcase without a handle” — it’s hard to carry, but you can’t put it down.
This dictates a very specific policy of balance between the two priorities discussed above. For the sake of regional stability, Russia and China have been actively working to curb extremist tendencies and prevent provocations no matter where they come from. An important example of this was the UN Security Council session in December 2010 during which Russia and China overcame tensions or at least stopped them from escalating for at least six months. Although the meeting officially ended with nothing being done and the members of the Security Council failed to reach a consensus, it visibly halted the escalation of tensions and prevented the Security Council from condemning North Korea based on “one-sided evidence.”

As far as the current situation is concerned, Russia and China are unable, on the one hand, to join in the public condemnation of North Korea. On the other, they have to maintain the status quo while doing everything they can to improve the standard of living in North Korea. Pyongyang needs to be reined in, although not in such a way as to seriously damage regional stability, and measures against Pyongyang must not be excessive.

It cannot be said that China is doing nothing to “shorten the reins.” After all, it is the only country with any real influence on the North, although its influence has limits and is frequently misunderstood. The methods it uses are referred to as “soft power.” First of all, the more North Korea is isolated by sanctions, the more dependent it is on China. Thus, closing the border with China could cause an almost immediate economic collapse with political consequences.

Second, China is actively gaining market share in North Korea in areas that were intended for inter-Korean cooperation.

Third, China is actively taking upon itself the training of North Koreans in modern technologies, and most of those studying abroad do so there. The combination of the second and third factors is creating a stratum of people who are inclined to cooperate with China for one reason or another. They cannot yet be called a pro-China lobby from the standpoint of promoting political or economic interests, but they are uniquely interested in seeing them develop and not languish. And this group will become more and more influential as these contacts expand.

As to the reports that China was developing plans in 2006 to intervene in North Korea if rioting should erupt for any reason, a close analysis of the documents reveals that the plans called for inserting troops only if the situation changed radically and had already become unstable. It was assumed that Chinese troops would take control of the nuclear and other strategic facilities and then act to deal with the humanitarian disaster. Also, the Chinese documents indicated that China would prefer to obtain official UN permission and would closely coordinate its actions with that body.

In addition, if we imagine a hypothetical situation in which the United States and South Korea begin absorbing North Korea and Chinese forces enter the country at the same time, that would not so much mean that Beijing is complicit in partitioning the country as that North Korea’s future would have to be decided jointly because of the PLA presence. Thus, China could lobby more successfully for its interests, and not for its alone. For example, it could mean that the accession of North Korean territory to the South would not be a given, or it could guarantee immunity and/or a means of escape for part of North Korea’s elite.

To recapitulate: China and especially Russia will support North Korea up to a point, and if North Korea periodically attempts to “kick over the traces”, Moscow and Beijing would prefer its actions to be less headstrong and more appropriate to the needs of the time. A certain amount of mutual irritation has built up in relations with Pyongyang, and the question is, how much can we stand?

That is why we have to expect that under its new leader North Korea will react more harshly than it did under Kim Jong-Il, not least because it is unclear where the demonstrations will lead. Kim Jong-un does not yet have his father’s credibility, and it is best to exercise more caution with an unknown politician.

It is also natural that a tightening of the sanctions policy and other demonstrative measures will be most useful for forcing North Korea’s leadership to play according to the rules. That is a very important consideration because it is less about Russia’s or China’s affiliation with the “international community” than about overlapping goals and methods: The instability initiated by North Korea will be contained just as will the attempts by South Korea’s right-wing radicals to “rock the boat.”

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