The Situation on the Korean Peninsula and US Tough Choice

We recently published an article on the tough choice that the Chinese leadership has faced. However, developments surrounding the DPRK’s missile and nuclear program have set an equally hard choice for Washington. Just like Beijing, Washington has to choose between two groups of unpleasant political consequences by determining the lesser of two evils.

In the previous articles that were dedicated to the situation described by the American experts from various political affiliations, we provided a set of reasons or versions of reactions that are criticized or considered as a priority by various parties. However, there are actually only two options when it comes to China: recognizing the DPRK’s nuclear status in one way or the other, or initializing a particular regime change that will lead to an inevitable open confrontation. Taking into account the fact that the nuclear status is included in North Korea’s national principal law, denuclearization is impossible without the elimination of North Korea’s current political regime.

Due to China’s position, the tactic of keeping everything just the way it is and tightening sanctions in the hope that the regime will eventually be disrupted has not succeeded and is unlikely to work. If the sanctions are turned into a full-scale financial, trade, and transport blockade, this will play out as an actual attempt to change the regime, which may result in either internal turmoil or external confrontation. Let us not forget that the oil embargo played the decisive role during the Japanese declaration of war on the US.

A preventive strike on the nuclear facilities, following the Israeli variant, is also impossible as it cannot be implemented as “smoothly” as necessary in the case of the DPRK. Even if it is implemented, it will surely have grave consequences. Taking into account the peculiarities of the North Korean ideocracy, they cannot but respond to an “attempt on national dignity”, even if such a reaction is somewhat unreasonable.

By changing the regime without much pain, they will not be able to disrupt the balance. Serious activities to destabilize the regime and organize a colour-coded revolution are unlikely to be successful. The hypothetical “Maidan” just lacks the background and the possible infrastructure.

An attempt to hold a dialogue on the other issue (for example, a peaceful agreement on the results of the Korean war) does not guarantee that the North will suspend the nuclear problem of the Korean Peninsula as a counter concession and will not use this break for its further development amid a possible easing of the sanctions regime. In addition, a variety of technical and bureaucratic problems that will arise with the confirmation of the suspension will make the required control hardly probable.

Thus, just as in the case with China’s choice, we will describe a set of problems that the US will face in each of the two cases.

If the nuclear status is recognized, then:

1. This will be a serious blow to the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Especially considering the fact that North Korea joined the NPT, and then withdrew from it. According to the author, it had the right to do so, as the non-
nuclear power was declared the target of the US nuclear weapons. But not everybody agrees with this statement, as the North Korean case is supposed to be more dangerous that the India-Pakistan's case. In addition, the recognition of the nuclear status of the DPRK may lead to a regional nuclear arms race, and the concept of a South Korean bomb is ALREADY being discussed.

2. Meanwhile, the fall of the nuclear non-proliferation regime will hit hard on the US capabilities as the world leader. Important to note is the fact that the existing world order is largely based on US dominance, including nuclear potential, which only the superpowers possess, and which is an important status element. A new world order with an increased number of the nuclear powers will probably be more harmful for Russia and China (especially if the United States has a missile defence system, which it may use to repel attacks from other countries whose nuclear potential will be limited to a dozen nuclear warheads). However, even if the US remains the global hegemon, it will find it more difficult to impose its will on a nuclear state and perform the role of the global police officer. This will affect the US relations with its regional allies like Japan and South Korea.

3. Domestic political/reputation consequences should be highlighted on a separate note. Given the level of defamation that North Korea has been facing since the end of the 20th century, as well as the Protestantism incidence in the US (which regards the irreligious collectivism of the DPRK and the personality cult of its leaders as an absolute EVIL), refusal to confront such a state will be considered as a pact with the Devil, a phenomenon which will be very difficult to explain to the American public, and which will be met with a tremendous amount of opposition.

4. At the same time, from the point of view of the enemies of the DPRK, there is no guarantee that the North Korean threat to peace will not increase after the recognition of the DPRK nuclear status. Although the author considers this to be an empty horror story, many people in the US are sure that the DPRK will further blackmail the world community, or start trading nuclear technologies with international terrorists.

5. In addition, the recognition of the nuclear status will mean the recognition of the existence of the DPRK, which still has no diplomatic relations with the US. Judging by the position of Seoul in respect of Japan’s attempt to establish a dialogue with the DPRK, any step towards the establishment of official economic and political relations between North Korea and the US may lead to a considerable deterioration of the US-South Korean relations.

If we are seriously talking about confrontation with the North, then:

1. There is a high risk that there would be a long war, instead of the Iraq-style blitz, which causes a whole range of consequences. First, this is a risk of losses, to which the modern US society is very sensitive. Second, this is a high risk of serious damage that can be inflicted to South Korea, even by means of conventional weapons or possible attacks by the DPRK special forces. Moreover, the preventive disarming strike may miss the target. Important to remember is the fact that in 1993-1994, when the Clinton Administration worked through the military campaign against the DPRK similar to the campaign in Iraq, the data on possible losses had a chilling effect on the "hawks" and urged them to hold negotiations. The result of these negotiations was the Framework Agreement that put an end to the first stage of the nuclear crisis.

2. Then there is the risk that the regional conflict may turn into something more serious. The minimum program is that the DPRK manages to make a counter (potentially nuclear) strike on continental United States. This may be highly improbable, but if it happens, the US may consider this war lost even if the entire North Korean peninsula is turned into a Martian landscape afterwards. The maximum program is the involvement of China and Russia into the conflict, with its transformation into World War Three; Moscow and Beijing are unlikely to support the conflict with the North, but if the US launches the war, what will happen? How will they react to American missiles approaching them? What will the US do if China or Russia shoots down its missiles directed to the DPRK?

3. The victory of the US and its allies in such a conflict will not bring stability and democracy immediately, as the process of the after-war situation stabilization will be long, expensive, and difficult. The rehabilitation of devastated areas, the problems of refugees, greater problems garnering the loyalty of the citizens of the North – all these have been described in a number of articles by the author.

4. In addition, there is the potential restoration of the consequences of North Korean attacks on Japan and South Korea, which raises the question: “Is the American leadership ready to face such a scale of damage suffered by its allies?” Attacks on nuclear power plants in the two countries may lead to an environmental disaster worse than that in Chernobyl and Fukushima.

5. Finally, if preparations for the conflict become more evident, and it becomes clear that the conflict is inevitable,
the DPRK leadership may decide to go to the limit and start dealing in nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism. From the author's point of view, this choice is less complicated than that of China, as, from the perspective of the American values supporter, military approach has more arguments than dialogue, and there are several reasons:

- The personal factor associated with a certain dependence by politicians on public opinion. The author is not sure that any of the presidential candidates has enough determination when coming to power to say, "We have failed our mission in Pyongyang. Moreover, due to our errors, it has become a full-fledged nuclear power in spite of all our actions, and this means that we have to change strategy and negotiate." In terms of psychological and reputational consequences, this decision is even more difficult than the decision made by Kennedy to resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis.

- The consequences of the regime defamation, which we have mentioned above. The politician who wins the patented Evil will have a greater rating than the one who dares to negotiate.

- The problem of misinformation associated with the reliance on biased information of the South Korean origin. The US has no opportunities to collect data on the actual situation in North Korea. In the best case, we are talking about the technical intelligence service, but they need to be interpreted. It seems to me that all these talks about the preventive disarming strike are primarily based on ideas invented by the South Koreans that North Korea is facing a hard political and economic crisis caused by the sanctions, and the fact that public military humiliation of the regime will immediately cause a mass protest against it. In such a situation, one can only hope that the preventive strike will involve very little blood being shed while being able to cause the regime to breakdown, as historically illustrated by the influence of the lost war with Japan on the events of 1905 in Russia.

- A certain illusion of security associated with developing a missile defence system. If not the military, then the politicians might believe that the US citizens will be monitoring the conflict on TV. The outright critics of the United States have added to these reasons cynicism and the desire to weaken the Republic of Korea and Japan so that they will have to carry the major burden of the conflict and will be more dependent. But the author finds this version to be too conspiratorial.

Time will tell how US policy on the Korean issue will finally look like, and the author hopes that the decision that will be adopted will more likely diminish the tension than exacerbate it. However, the choice between the two types of troubles is always bad, and involves a great deal of hard-core politics.

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