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The DPRK and China: Hard Choices

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Summary

- The DPRK continues its talent for delivering nasty surprises. Despite a good beginning to President Obama administration's relations with China, the DPRK remains an area of possible conflict.
- The DPRK regime is wholly focussed on survival, built on its military and nuclear capacity. But the DPRK faces the possibility of implosion.
- China's role might not be as clear as some observers might claim but for historic, geopolitical and ideological reasons it remains the key player. It will play the main role in the event of the worst-case scenario either controlling the impact of implosion, or rebuilding a new entity.

Introduction¹

By common consent, 2009 has been a good year so far for US-China relations. President Obama's initial period in power has been marked by cordial relations with China, with the two countries working together on climate change, the global economic crisis and even international security issues. US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's visit to China earlier in 2009 was a success. Past experiences of the rocky opening months of new administrations in the US in their relations with China have not been repeated.

This is all the more remarkable when put against the fiery rhetoric and aggressive actions of the DPRK. While world leaders were debating what to do about the international economic situation at the G20 summit in London in early April 2009, one of the world's most impoverished economies, North Korea, was stealing the headlines by testing nuclear-capable missiles. Despite international condemnation, the DPRK held two more conventional missile tests a few weeks later, sentenced two US journalists, one of Korean ethnicity and the other of Chinese ethnicity to 12 years hard labour, and then unleashed a series of threats to the US, South Korea and Japan.

North Korea is, to all intents and purposes, a failing state, but through relentless state propaganda, it has persuaded its people that their best chance for future survival lies under the current leadership. Its secrecy about almost every aspect of its economy, government structure, and internal politics means that hard information about what motivates the DPRK government and on why it acts in the way it does is scant. But the rest of the world agrees that the DPRK is an increasingly big irritant and needs to agree on what to do about a poor country with only 22 million people but with one of the largest military machines.

This paper will look specifically at the role that China plays in all of this. China has the strongest historic link with the DPRK. Kim Il Sung, the founder of the regime, was to spend many years during the Second World War in North East China, fighting in guerrilla units there. He spoke decent Mandarin Chinese. In the early years, he and the Chinese lived under a technical and security arrangement from the Soviet Union that bound them together tightly in terms of ideology, political outlook, and economic structure. From the 1960s, and specifically the period of the Cultural Revolution in China, from 1967 onwards however, cracks began to appear in the relationship. And from 1978 onward,

¹ The authors are grateful to Dr Jiyong Song for her comments on the first draft of this paper.

and the era of opening up and reform in China, the differences between the two countries has grown deeper. In essence, China has fully accepted the introduction of market reforms. The DPRK, despite very limited experiments in the early 2000s, has not.

Despite this, the rest of the world continues to believe that China has a big influence in North Korea. Are they right to think this? Certainly, at critical periods, China has been able to apply pressure on its truculent neighbour. During the first nuclear tests in 2005, the then State Councillor Tang Jiaxuan was to be sent by the Chinese leadership to see North Korean leaders and tell them to back down. That took the heat off the crisis, but in 2009, four years on, the DPRK is still pressing ahead with its plans to be a nuclear power. Rumours that China cut off the power to the DPRK for a few days a bit earlier in this decade also showed, to some foreign commentators and analysts, that when things came down to the line, China was willing, and able, to hit the DPRK where it hurts. Some in South Korea and Japan in particular, see that a large proportion of China's annual overseas aid (almost USD2 billion, half of all the aid that the DPRK receives) has been given to the DPRK. They look at the fact that as much as 90% of the DPRK's energy comes from China, and that more than 70% of its foreign trade is being done with China. They feel that this gives China a massive stick by which to goad and force North Korea to behave more rationally. There was strong evidence even before this year that the current regime has tied its very survival to having some nuclear capacity, and that on this issue it will take no counsel from any other quarter, no matter what help it gets from them. This time, however, this regime has stunned the world, especially China, its biggest supporter, by going too far off-track. In this area, at least, Chinese pressure is limited.

Going Nuclear

There are two questions that need addressing. Firstly, can China modify DPRK behaviour? And secondly, what does the DPRK actually want? The second question is harder to answer than observers might think. Nurtured from a clan-like system and with a patriarchal ruling elite, Kim Jong Il's family sees its interests as the same as those of the state. The Kim dynasty has bred a huge military machine, with more than 1.5 million troops to safeguard its rule. The country's economic development comes secondary to this priority. The view of the current elite is that economic development, especially any reform, will be likely to challenge the totalitarian regime by changing peoples' minds. Therefore, for such an isolated and impoverished country

with poorly exploited natural resources and lack of capital and technology, the strategy at the moment is to survive economically by obtaining aid, particularly for essentials like food, from the outside world. In this regard, pure blackmail has proved effective. The international community and many economic powers have kept their philanthropic aid to the DPRK for many years, even though from time to time it has been reduced. Sanctions or any punishments, even when threatened, have rarely caused a fundamental change in the DPRK's behaviour. In the meantime, the DPRK has been able to maintain its military machine and start to acquire nuclear capacity, the very things the West fears most. The DPRK has even been able to build up a relatively developed military industry and transfer parts of its nuclear technology to some countries, creating a badly-needed source of foreign currency. Kim Jong Il is well aware that the memory of the Korean War in early 1950s remains a nightmare for the west. The DPRK's nuclear capacity serves as the Sword of Damocles over the head of the West. It won't abandon this card.

In this sense, the DPRK's strategy is both naïve and effective. Alone amongst countries as poor and small as it is, it gains the attention of major powers, from Russia, to Japan, to China, to the EU and the US. It has stacked all of its options on having a massively destructive military capacity which could destroy the region if it were directly confronted. President Clinton looked at this during the first nuclear crisis in 1994. According to his analysts, even with its conventional forces, North Korea could destroy most of the northern part of South Korea (where most of the population lives), and lead to hundreds of thousands of casualties, within a few hours of any attack. The consequences of this are unthinkable. Even surgical attacks on key facilities would be high risk, and probably result in the all out deployment of the huge North Korean army.

Basing its future on such a basic strategy, this raises the question of whether the DPRK can survive as it is. In fact, it is clear that it cannot. In the medium to long term, the system is unsustainable on almost every level - economically, politically and culturally. But in short term, as long as Kim Jong Il lives, it is likely to manage to survive. From time to time we do see some changes in its stance. Since the UN adopted sanctions against it, the DPRK initially upped its aggression, but has recently calmed down. Kim Jong Il also began to flirt with the US for unilateral dialogue, succeeding in getting the visit by former President Bill Clinton, though he secured this not through nuclear threats but by the issue of the two US detainees. Called by some the last remaining major residue of the era of cold war confrontation, it remains an

increasingly incongruous and eccentric entity. On many indicators it does not function according to usual norms. A country with a highly educated population, which is an economic failure, and a country which had a decent industrial infrastructure in the last four decades, but simply ran this down, is wholly unique. The causes of this are purely political. And the question therefore is can the DPRK and its people solve its problems without changing its political model?

The Role of China

With the current regime, there are a number of possible short to medium term scenarios. One is that things continue as they are, with the DPRK escalating tensions, getting compromises and concessions, largely from the US and then reverting to a more biddable member of the international community. This is, however, a strategy with diminishing returns. The latest crisis already had many in the Chinese, South Korean and US governments stating that their patience had been tried to the utmost, and that they were simply weary of having to deal with the DPRK's unreasonable behaviour. The UN resolutions and sanctions against the regime were stronger, and supported across the key players, than ever before. A stronger consensus and greater unity is appearing. For the DPRK, if they were listening more carefully, this should be ominous.

There is the strong possibility that, in view of Kim Jong Il's health, succession, and the impact of that, will start to appear more strongly. Most agree that his sons (they are the main ones talked about as successors, though his brother-in-law is also a possibility) would not be able to exercise power like Kim. The key question here is how those that eventually succeed Kim are prepared for their rule, how much they embrace reform, or whether they simply stick as far as possible with the existing model. They will inherit from Kim Jong Il a bankrupt economy, a huge military army, and a population unprepared for the 21st century. Even the greatest and most resourceful leaders would find this a massive challenge.

The world is confronted with the possibility that North Korea will implode. The impact of this on neighbouring countries like Russia, China and South Korea, and on regional players like Japan, will be huge. Serious thought now needs to be given to confronting this eventuality, if it happens. How can North Korea's economy be rebuilt? How can a massive population exodus be avoided? And most pressing of all, how can widespread, destructive violence be avoided? In the last 60 years North Korean leaders have built up a Frankenstein-monster type geo political entity, with almost a quarter of the

country's GDP going into the military. This induces largely unmerited feelings of power and importance and a dependency on the military.

For China, despite its 'privileged' position, things look as bad as for anyone else. The DPRK's recent deeds have pushed it into a corner. Though China has joined the sanctions against the DPRK in line with UN resolution, it is obviously reluctant to see the complete collapse of this 'naughty brother', by reducing or even halting its main lifelines – aid and food. There are several considerations for China in this respect. Firstly, there is geo-politics. The DPRK might be a headache, but the worse thing is that if it failed to survive and the successor state became an ally of western world, China would be immediately confronting the allies of the US on one of its key borders. At the moment, in the thinking of the People's Liberation Army, the DPRK acts as a buffer zone, to ward off the external invasion.

Secondly, the two countries, whatever their differences, ostensibly maintain the same ideology, and share much recent history. 'Communism' is still the ultimate ideological value for them, even if this is purely a theoretical issue for the Chinese. The DPRK remains one of very few authoritarian regimes in the world. China dislikes becoming more isolated in this regard. The continuing existence of an even more extreme authoritarian regime therefore plays a significant role, no matter how much it would cost, in China's diplomacy.

The Chinese government on the DPRK in fact faces a very narrow range of choices. On the one hand, China, used to being regarded widely as the main player in the six-party talks, has been humiliated heavily by the DPRK's claim for unilateral talks with the US (this has happened on several occasions, and each time China has simply had to bite the bullet). On the other hand, the Chinese government is meeting mounting public pressure for a re-evaluation of its relationship with such a stubborn 'brother'. For many Chinese, the efforts of the six-party talks have proved a waste of time and resources.

Like it or not, while China might claim that it is less influential than observers believe it is, in fact, it still has at least more influence over the DPRK than anyone else. Most significantly, it has most to lose if North Korea fails. It will be its borders that are challenged, and Chinese will help rebuild the country. Problems over North Korea may well lead it into nasty, and wholly unwanted, conflict with the rest of the world. This is something that China has tried to steer well clear of for the last three decades. It has enough of its own problems to worry about, without being lumped with a host of almost intractable, and largely self inflicted problems, by its neighbour.

Chinese assistance helps keep the DPRK afloat. And it seems that there is only one language that the DPRK leaders understand, and that is the one which affects their own interests and survival. The freezing of their assets by the US in Macau only three years ago concentrated the minds of the DPRK and they quickly returned to the Six Party Talks. China's use of its money, energy and other links to the DPRK give it at some leverage. So despite the historic links, when it becomes a choice between China's interests and those of the DPRK, China will be brutally self-interested. In a real crisis it has the main levers to make the DPRK do what it wants. But until now it has never been willing to deploy them.

Conclusion

China may well be right to be so patient. Perhaps it is simply waiting for the DPRK to dig its own grave. It may hope that over time the DPRK slowly evolves, and finds its own path to a more sustainable, internationally palatable mode of action. What is clear from the events of the last few months is that the world needs a consistent, unified policy towards the DPRK. Only that seems to really make the leadership in Pyongyang listen and change, even if only marginally, its behaviour. The international community has to live with a highly volatile, frustrating and, often unpredictable player, one who is motivated mostly by a desperate fight for survival but unfortunately has huge military, and some nuclear, assets. Like it or not, China has to be prepared, perhaps sooner than it might think, or like, to play a leading role in resolving this situation.

The DPRK may well be the issue in which the rest of the world sees China playing a leading diplomatic role, and can start to make really informed judgements about just what sort of global player it will be as the 21st century proceeds. China is anyway standing at a crossroads. It has to make a final choice between national economic interest and face and the 'traditional ideology and geo-politics'. If it gave up the so-called 'ideology and communist complex', the 'geo-politics consideration' would not stand up, and its room for manoeuvre would be much greater. This maybe creates a dilemma for the Chinese government. But like it or not, they have to do something, and sooner than they want, or are prepared for, because the world, and the DPRK, are watching it, and its calculations will be fundamental to the resolution of this whole messy situation.

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