

Testing times in the Korean peninsula

The sixth nuclear test by North Korea on Sunday has provoked a predictable chorus of condemnation and hand wringing in capitals around the world. The test was anticipated, given the shrill rhetoric accompanying North Korea's missile tests. Yet there is little to indicate if the key countries (the U.S., China, South and North Korea and Japan) are ready to acknowledge that old policies no longer work and a new approach is needed to de-escalate tensions.

Measuring 6.3 on the Richter scale, this test indicates an explosive yield of approximately 120 kilotons, six times bigger than the Hiroshima bomb. The North Koreans described it as a successful hydrogen bomb test and also released a photograph of 'Supreme Leader' Kim Jong-un posing with a hydrogen bomb. In August, reports had appeared in the U.S. based on intelligence estimates that North Korea had succeeded in producing a miniature warhead that could be mated with its missiles.

While experts continue to debate whether North Korea has mastered the technology behind a fusion device or whether the posed picture was of a mock-up, the fact is that under Mr. Kim, the nuclear and missile programmes have accelerated. Four of the six nuclear tests have been conducted after he took over in 2011; the earlier two were conducted in 2006 and 2009. Missile development began earlier but while Kim Jong-il conducted 16 missile tests during his rule from 1994 to 2011, his son and successor Kim Jong-un has undertaken more than 80 missile tests. Longer range and solid fuel missiles have been tested and North Korea's fissile material stockpile is enough for 25 devices.

On July 4, North Korea tested Hwasong-14, described as an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching the U.S. mainland. Tested in a lofted trajectory, it reached a height of 2,800 km and travelled a distance of 933 km, implying a range of 6,500 km in a normal trajectory, bringing mainland America within range. It was described as a 'game changer', something that U.S. President Donald Trump had vowed he would prevent by doing 'whatever was necessary'.

The U.S. policy under Mr. Trump has been 'maximum pressure on North Korea' and 'engagement with China'. Since July, Mr. Trump's tweets indicate a growing impatience with China's inability to restrain North Korea. He has blamed China for increasing its trade with North Korea despite sanctions and conveyed 'disappointment' that "they do nothing for us with North Korea, just talk".

In August, he tweeted that North Korean threats will be met with "fire and fury like the world has never seen". North Korea countered with a threat to launch four missiles around Guam "enveloping it in fire", adding that "sound dialogue is not possible with such a guy bereft of reason". Meanwhile, the U.N. Security Council has met regularly to condemn North Korean missile tests and tighten sanctions.

While Mr. Trump has indicated that "military solutions are now fully in place, locked and loaded, should North Korea act unwisely", his Secretary of State Rex Tillerson adopted a measured tone when he said, "We do not seek a regime change, we do not seek a collapse of the regime, we do not seek an accelerated reunification of the peninsula, we do not seek an excuse to send our military north of the 38th Parallel."

China and Russia have been critical of North Korea's missile and nuclear tests, proposing that if the U.S. and South Korea were to suspend their joint military exercises, North Korea could agree to suspending its tests, opening the way to a dialogue. This was rejected and the joint exercises took place in end-August, as scheduled. Meanwhile, live firing drills have been taking place in the region raising the risks of a crisis erupting through miscalculation or miscommunication as North

Korea prepares to celebrate its Foundation Day this week with military parades.

Since 1991, this is the third nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula. Post-Cold War, there was a thaw when the U.S. (and then the U.S.S.R.) withdrew naval and tactical nuclear weapons globally, including the ones in South Korea. A Joint Declaration on the Denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula between the two Koreas followed, even though the two countries do not recognise each other. With resumption of U.S.-South Korea military exercises and new U.S. sanctions on North Korea, positions hardened leading to the first crisis in 1993 with North Korea threatening to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In Pyongyang, there was a leadership change with Kim Jong-il taking over after his father's death. The crisis was averted by direct talks with the U.S. leading to an Agreed Framework in 1994 under which North Korea suspended its decision to withdraw from the NPT, agreed to freeze its nuclear activities and in return, the U.S. pledged to build two light water nuclear power reactors.

The Clinton administration also provided more than \$800 million of food aid and humanitarian assistance. The fact that the NPT was to be extended in 1995 was undoubtedly a factor in ensuring that North Korea's withdrawal be blocked.

The Bush administration annulled the 1994 Framework Agreement (the two reactors remain unfinished), and in 2002 declared North Korea part of the 'axis of evil'. North Korea reacted by formally quitting the NPT in 2003 provoking the second crisis. China and Russia initiated the Six-Party Talks in 2003 which the U.S. joined under pressure from its regional allies, Japan and South Korea. These took place in a broader context leading to the 2005 Joint Statement which reiterated the commitment to the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, agreed to negotiate a peace treaty to replace the 1953 armistice, provided for a U.S. security guarantee to North Korea which in turn agreed to rejoin the NPT as soon as possible. However, when the U.S. imposed new sanctions a few months later, North Korea responded with its first nuclear test in 2006 and the Six Party Talks collapsed.

Kim Jong-un took over in 2011 and, having seen the outcome of western interventions in Libya and Iraq and Russian intervention in Ukraine, is convinced that he needs a nuclear deterrent for regime survival. In addition, he wants direct talks with the U.S. that will provide him recognition and lessen his dependence on China, and finally, an easing of sanctions. He might agree to a temporary halt in testing as a means to start a dialogue but will not accept any restriction on capabilities in return for mere verbal assurances. The old carrot and stick policies will not work. Military action may lead to nuclearisation in Japan and South Korea. Sanctions have limited utility because China accounts for 90% of North Korea's foreign trade and for China, a nuclear North Korea is a lesser threat than a regime collapse that could lead to a unified Korea allied to the U.S.

The 1953 Armistice Agreement was signed by North Korea, China and the U.S. (representing the U.N. Command) ending hostilities and was to be followed by a peace treaty which remains pending. South Korea (and the U.S.) and North Korea do not recognise each other; North Korea considers the South under U.S. occupation while South Korea considers the entire peninsula as its territory. Sovereignty issues have been bypassed when politics is favourable as in 1991 when both Koreas were simultaneously admitted to the UN. China, looking for investment and technology, pragmatically recognised South Korea in 1992, much to North Korea's annoyance.

Today, times have changed and there is more mistrust all around. Moreover, Mr. Kim is suspicious of China and the Chinese consider his provocations timed to embarrass President Xi Jinping — with missile tests during the Belt and Road summit and the nuclear test during BRICS, and with the crucial Party Congress due in October.

The old objectives of 'denuclearisation' and 'reunification' have to be set aside. North Korea's

nuclear capability will have to be accepted, at least for the foreseeable future. Mutual recognition will have to precede reunification and for this, the two Koreas need to begin a dialogue in due course. Managing this requires closer understanding between the U.S. and South Korea than is currently on display. For Mr. Kim, the stakes are existential and parallel negotiations on political and nuclear tracks are needed if the current crisis is to be averted.

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