

## The Challenge of North Korea and Instability on the Korean Peninsula

May 16, 2017

Ho-ryung Lee and Jina Kim

### Rising Tensions on the Korean Peninsula

ANOTHER CRISIS ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA HAS EMERGED following the first summit meeting between the US and China that took place in April 2017. Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged to increase cooperation in reining in North Korea's missile and nuclear programs, although he did not offer any new formula for cracking Pyongyang's defiance during the two-day summit at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida. Xi and Trump both agree that North Korea's nuclear advances have reached a "very serious stage." The Trump administration has emphasized that the era of strategic patience is over, and that now is the time to focus on maximum pressure and engagement with North Korea. Beijing has also been fast in responding to Washington's policy on North Korea, hinting that it can cut off the oil supply to North Korea in the event of further provocations such as a 6<sup>th</sup> nuclear or ICBM test. Many in Washington and Beijing anticipated a ratcheting up of tensions on the Korean Peninsula will not subside at least until the end of April, as North Korea tends to regard political events such as the 105<sup>th</sup> anniversary of "The Day of the Sun" on April 15 and the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Foundation of the Korean People's Army as an ideal time to conduct additional nuclear and missile tests.

However, the response from North Korea was not as aggressive in terms of actions as it was in words. The North spoke bluntly of their willingness to engage

in an 'all-out-war' against the US if Washington uses military means, and also said that North Korea will conduct more missile tests on a weekly, monthly, and yearly basis. The regime released its first official response to the Trump administration's North Korea policy which consisted of bolstering its nuclear weapons program at maximum speed. These speeches were delivered primarily by diplomats such as North Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Han Song-ryol, North Korea's Deputy Ambassador to the UN Kim In-ryong, and North Korean foreign ministry spokesman.

This series of events seems to indicate that nobody wants a direct confrontation. All players are testing the resolve of their adversaries and hoping to bring about behavioral change that will favor their own coercive policies. North Korea may choose to carry out a low intensity provocation with a new type of ballistic missile<sup>1</sup> test rather than strategic provocation for the time being. Doing so would signal

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

"The Challenge of North Korea and Instability on the Korean Peninsula" ISBN 979-11-87558-64-4 95340

Edit and Typeset: Natalie Grant, Hyejung Suh

The East Asia Institute  
 #909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,  
 Seoul 04548, South Korea  
 Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697  
 Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr



that the regime continues to upgrade its missile capabilities despite pressure from Washington and the failure of all three of its recent missile tests in April. Tillerson is calling for UN members to suspend or downgrade their diplomatic relations with North Korea even as Trump stated he would meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un “under the right circumstances.”

This recent so-called ‘April Crisis’ differs from previous crises on the Korean Peninsula in several ways.

First, the US and China are demonstrating their intentions to engage in mutual cooperation and coordinated approaches toward North Korea. Although these two major players are making very different calculations with regards to this issue, Beijing is supporting Washington’s stance on North Korea indirectly by using phrases such as “simultaneous pursuit of denuclearization and peace treaty talks” and “simultaneous freeze of nuclear/missile provocations and US-ROK joint military exercise” much less frequently. China also did not register any strong opposition to the demonstration of US military assets, such as the re-entry of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Carl Vinson to the waters of the Korean Peninsula. This indicates that the two strong powers have reached a consensus on ‘maximum pressure first’ and ‘then possible engagement’ in the face of an imminent 6<sup>th</sup> nuclear and ICBM test. This is the first time that the US and China have shared the role of pressuring the North. Since 2003, the US has focused on applying military pressure while China remained on the economic side. In 2003, strong pressure coordination between the US and China led North Korea to the multilateral dialogue arena of the six-party talks. China may even reduce the amount of oil it supplies to North Korea, a step it has not considered since the beginning of the six-party talks in 2003. The problem is how long this strong cooperation and coordination between the US and China will last. Historically, North Korea reversed its denuclearization process swiftly and engaged in provocations such as

nuclear/missile tests when the cooperation and coordination between the US and China weakened.

Second, both Japan and Russia have an interest in urging North Korea to refrain from further provocations. At the “two-plus-two” meeting between Japanese and Russian foreign and defense ministers in March, both pledged to work closely in reaching out to North Korea and China to achieve a diplomatic solution.<sup>2</sup> However, the national interests of the two countries differ despite the outcome being a common goal. Currently, Russia acts as a buffer between the DPRK and the US. The role of stressing a diplomatic solution in dealing with the DPRK was largely taken on by China in recent years. Now, it is Russia that is trying to turn down the heat and noise. Russia blocked a draft statement in the U.N. Security Council condemning the latest North Korean missile test, opposing the removal of the words “through dialogue.”<sup>3</sup>

Japan’s interest, on the other hand, currently lies in utilizing the rising tensions on the Korean peninsula to distract people’s attention from domestic political scandals, such as corruption allegations and a series of resignations of cabinet members. This also serves Japan’s desire to advocate for loosening restrictions on the military actions of the Self-Defense Forces. Recently, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has been struggling with a delicate political situation with the revelations that placed him at center of a scandal for his connections to a land deal that benefited an ultra-nationalist organization. Other cabinet members, including the Minister for Disaster Reconstruction, the Vice Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry, and the Parliamentary Vice Minister for Disaster Reconstruction resigned over separate political scandals.<sup>4</sup> Although the Japanese public is dissatisfied with Abe over a whole range of domestic issues,<sup>5</sup> they remain rather keen on security concerns. After Abe warned of North Korea’s launching missiles containing toxic substances,<sup>6</sup> demand for nuclear bomb shelters and air purifiers increased significantly and some areas



even held evacuation drills for the first time.<sup>7</sup>

With the looming threat from North Korea, Japan's military is testing the limits of pure self-defense within its Constitution, while Japan's ruling party urges the government to consider taking on more offensive military capabilities.<sup>8</sup> In March 2016, Japan changed its laws to permit the mobilization of their Self-Defense Force to defend allies and other countries when not doing so could jeopardize Japan's safety and security.<sup>9</sup> The current situation can help boost support for the movement to revise the Constitution, which is a long-cherished goal of Abe.<sup>10</sup> The Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces conducted joint naval maneuvers with the USS Carl Vinson strike group, sharing information on missile interception and other communications. Conducting a joint drill with a US carrier in adjacent waters is rare for the Marine Self-Defense Force.<sup>11</sup> Faced with a new threat level, Japan may further loosen its self-defense-only posture, justifying the change by claiming a need to possess improved deterrence and response capabilities.

Third, South Korea's anxiety about being diplomatically isolated from these dynamic changes taking place in neighboring countries has become intense. The interim government in South Korea has had little room to take initiative in dealing with the North. However, the fact that President Trump spoke on the phone with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe before meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping and did not speak acting Korean President Hwang Kyo-ahn raised concerns that Korea was not being given as much importance as it should in dealing with security issues on the Korean peninsula. South Korea's local media even coined the term "Korea passing" to describe Seoul's diplomatic isolation in the current situation.<sup>12</sup> However, there are facts that run counter to this assertion. After Park Geun-hye was impeached, President Trump communicated with acting president Hwang, stressing that the ROK-US alliance remained strong. There was a telephone conversation in March following North Korea's four missile tests, which was

arranged at the request of the US.<sup>13</sup> Vice President Pence's trip to Seoul in early April, and Secretary of State Tillerson's visit in mid-March were also indicative of Washington efforts to show that the allies maintain a united front in dealing with the North. Envoys from South Korea, the US, and Japan held a trilateral dialogue on April 25<sup>th</sup> to discuss measures to maximize pressure on North Korea. They reportedly agreed to coordinate "all actions" taken with regard to North Korea.<sup>14</sup> The US Navy conducted a maritime exercise with South Korea as a demonstration of their shared commitment to security and stability in the region. South Korea and the United States have been working to secure early operational capability of the THAAD system.<sup>15</sup> The concern of the South Korean public regarding Washington's disregard of Seoul despite ongoing close coordination between the two allies signifies the level of anxiety that people are feeling due to the escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula. President Trump's comments that the KORUS FTA should be renegotiated and South Korea should bear the full cost of THAAD further unnerved the South Korean public, increasing their worries that the two countries will struggle to resolve nuclear and alliance issues.

### Continuing Challenges from North Korea

The problem is whether the resolve of these five players to drive Pyongyang into changing a course is stronger than Pyongyang's resolve not to budge. Kim Jong-un will never give up so-called *Byungin* policy of simultaneous pursuit of economic development and nuclear weapons capabilities, which is very closely tied to the stability of his regime.

During the 2017 New Year's address, the North declared that it had reached an epic turning point in the strengthening of its military capabilities and that its preparations for the test-firing of an ICBM had reached the final stages. The North is showing that it



will continue developing its nuclear and missile capabilities according to its own schedule, regardless of international community's tough sanctions and pressures. This stance has been backed up by rapid actions. North Korea successfully test fired a solid-fuel IRBM named Pukguksong-2 on February 12 and a simultaneous test-firing of four Scud-ER missiles on March 6. In addition, the regime announced the successful combustion test of new missile engines on March 18 with the apparent aim of hinting at the advancement of its ICBM technology. Kim Jong-un placed great weight on this new rocket engine test, calling it the "March 18 Revolution." Provocations from the North did not stop in April. Some preparatory activities for another nuclear test, perhaps the largest yet at over 20kt, were observed. Many predicted that a 6<sup>th</sup> nuclear test would take place sometime in April.

However, instead of another nuclear test or missile provocation, the North displayed strategic weapons, including a new type of ICBM, in a massive military parade to mark the 105<sup>th</sup> birthday of late Kim Il-sung. They also carried out the largest-ever live-fire drill targeting a US aircraft carrier, the Carl Vinson, and South Korea's capital on the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the KPA.

One has to reconsider the implications of the North's actions during the 'April Crisis.' The North tried to send three signals to the international community during its military parade. First, North Korea intends to show its resolve to achieve victory against any threat from the outside. Pyongyang emphasized their win in the armed struggle against Japanese imperialism, the victory achieved by North Korean military units in the struggle against US forces, and marched the Ryu Kyong-su tank division, which first entered Seoul three days after the beginning of the Korea War, in the parade. Second, the North included strategic weapons in a military parade that it claims are able to target US reinforcements and the US mainland. Three new kinds of ICBMs were introduced. These

included a KN-08 ICBM on a 12-wheeled TEL, which in a previous military parade was rolled out on a 16-wheeled TEL, and a new ICBM on a 16-wheeled TEL has never been revealed before. Another ICBM was displayed on a trailer, not a truck. The Pukguksong-2 IRBM and Scud-ER (extended range Scud missiles) were on a tracked TEL instead of a wheeled TEL. More importantly, the Scud-ER that appeared in this parade can be an improved Scud-ER with an attitude control system. This means that the North can target all vessels within a 1,000km range, blocking US military reinforcements. Third, the North unveiled the existence of the Korean People's Army (KPA) Special Forces for the first time during the military parade. These special forces were seen as a counter to the South Korean and US Special Forces 'beheading' operation that was supposedly conducted to take out the North's leadership. To sum up, Kim Jong-un's policy toward the US is not the brinkmanship strategy of the past that raised the cost of bargaining chips. Rather, it is a policy with 'real coercive military capability.' In other words, Kim is determined to show his strong resolve and willingness to respond to any attacks by engaging in an all-out war.

The second implication is that the recent increase in tensions was not caused solely by the actions of the North. The assertive stance taken by the US in responding to possible provocations from North Korea also played a role. The North emphasized its intentions to build up its military strength on the 85<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary of the KPA. Kim Jong-un called 2017 the 'year of military training' and asked all services, branches and special units of the military to make advanced preparations for war. This is why the North staged a large-scale firing drill on April 25. Kim Jong-un introduced the term 'Juche Weapon' in 2016 and vowed during his 2017 New Year's Address to build more kinds of Juche weapons. It is possible that the idea of 'Juche Weapons' is closely related to the development of strategic weapons as well as the advancement of conventional weaponry. In developing



nuclear weapons, missiles, 300mm multiple rocket launchers, and new rocket engines, North Korea is working to create an arsenal of miniaturized, sophisticated, light, diversified, standardized weapons using its own unmanned smart technology that is suitable for the North's geographical location and military systems. It is unlikely that the North will halt its provocative actions for the time being. Rather, it will continue to strengthen its weapons system. As long as these efforts continue, the close cooperation and coordination between the US and China cannot be seen as having much effect.

When will the North stop accelerating nuclear and missile development? It is possible that Kim Jong-un will attempt to show off the North's advanced nuclear and missile technologies as a significant accomplishment in the pursuit of self-reliance and self-defense as a result of one of the "speed battles" that are taking place all around the North. However, without being able to predict the point where the international community will cease to apply maximum pressure, North Korea must decide on its own how far it will go. If international pressure stops following an agreement to another moratorium on North Korea's nuclear and missile tests, the Trump administration may be criticized for giving the North additional time to continue developing nuclear and missile capabilities. If, on the other hand, this pressure is intended to push North Korea until it abolishes all nuclear weapons and mid-to-long-range ballistic missiles, it will be regarded as an unpromising goal. In the meantime, the cycle of provocation from the North Korea will likely continue.

### **A Silver Lining**

Many have raised concerns that the possibility of armed conflict on the Korean peninsula may shortly become a reality. The Trump administration openly stated that it is willing to consider taking kinetic military action, generating a great deal of public

speculation. However, it has become much harder to find good military options to deal with the DPRK since its emergence as a nuclear-armed state. The US military has long estimated that war on the Korean Peninsula would cost hundreds of thousands of lives.<sup>16</sup> Then, a viable option becomes "escalation for de-escalation." President Trump assembled a team of people with military backgrounds to review the situation, and some have raised concerns about the assertiveness of US foreign policy. The upside of this team is that military officers understand the risk of escalation better than others. In theory, expressions of strong resolve and demonstration of overwhelming military force can persuade one's adversary not to climb up the ladder of escalation.

It should be noted that the US has not taken anything off the table so far. Even the Perry Process during Clinton Administration that sought engagement with the DPRK included a precision strike against the North as one of multiple options. Obama's Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, also stated that all options were on the table.<sup>17</sup> Dialogue is always on the table and so is a military option. The DPRK also talks about striking the US military in a similar fashion, and the end result is a situation where both sides warn each other not to move first.

The remaining question is how long the cooperation between China and the US will continue. It is not clear whether Washington's idea to outsource the problem will work. China may not go further than making adjustments to its current relations with the DPRK. Avoiding confrontation with the US is China's interest, but pushing the DPRK to the brink of contingency is not. Considering the fact that China has agreed to items that are generally declining in China-DPRK trade already and made exceptions in order not to hurt regular economic activities in the North so far, it is likely that China will regard pushing the North into total economic and diplomatic isolation only as a last resort. The best option for China is to provide an exit so that the DPRK can escape the



situation in a face-saving way.

If North Korea's aggressiveness remains unchecked despite China's efforts to rein in the regime, will the US respond with 'overwhelming military force' as it has frequently vowed to? There are at least four main points to consider before the US takes military actions against North Korea. These include the threats posed to US vital interests; domestic support, especially from Congress; the cost, and; whether or not all other options have truly been exhausted. Currently, North Korea's neighbors are counseling against military action. A strike alone cannot neutralize all of the ballistic missiles in the North, and would invite Chinese intervention, a nightmare scenario for the US. It is too early to say that all options are exhausted because the US government will lean on China for a while. The worst scenario for South Korea is that the DPRK continues buying time to advance its nuclear and missile technology. In order to avoid this, the next South Korean government must design a detailed road map for denuclearization to take the initiative in dealing with the issues that directly affect South Korea's national interests. Considerations should include ensuring denuclearization as the ultimate goal of any negotiation, deciding on a sequence of actions, particularly regarding where talks on peace arrangement should take place during the denuclearization verification process, and building a mechanism to prevent defection from talks in order not to lose momentum. ■

——— *Ho-ryung Lee* is a Research Fellow, chief of North Korean Military Studies at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, specializing in two-Korean relations, North Korea military and Northeast Asian security. She studied International Relations and received a Ph.D. from the Department of Political Science & International Relations at Korea University in 2001.

——— *Jina Kim* is an Associate Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, specializing in U.S.-North Korea relations, nuclear nonproliferation, and Northeast Asian security. She holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and teaches "Humanitarian Intervention: Theory and Practice" at Yonsei Graduate School of International Studies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This new type of ballistic missile is called the KN-17. If North Korea pursues a new type of missile, it will be an anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) after submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM).

<sup>2</sup> Eric Johnston, "Abe-Putin summit in Russia to spotlight territorial dispute and North Korean threat," *The Japan Times*, April 26, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> "UN security council warns North Korea to stop nuclear tests or face sanctions," *The Guardian*, April 20, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> "Japanese Minister to Resign After Remark on 2011 Quake," *Bloomberg*, April 25, 2017; Tomohiro Osaki, "Lawmaker Nakagawa resigns from LDP over extramarital affair," *The Japan Times*, April 21, 2017; "Parliamentary vice minister replaced following puddle piggyback joke," *The Japan Times*, March 10, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> "With other democracies in flames, Japan is saying 'no thanks' to change," *Quartz*, April 23, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Jamie Micklethwaite, "Japan panic buying Cold War bunkers ready for nuclear war with North Korea," *Daily Star*, 25th April 2017.

<sup>7</sup> "Japan has only 10 minutes to take cover after North Korean missile launch, officials say," *Fox News*, April 25, 2017.



<sup>8</sup> Mari Yamaguchi, “Japan ruling party urges strike ability amid North Korea threat,” *Military Times*, March 30, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> “Security laws usher in new era for pacifist Japan,” *The Japan Times*, March 29, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Koji Sonoda, “The Quest to Revise Japan’s Constitution,” *The Diplomat*, June 2, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> “US Navy Strike Group Joins Japan to Provide Options against Pyongyang,” *Sputnik News*, April 13, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> “The Latest: S. Korea says pressure on North will be maximum,” *Associate Press*, April 25, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> “Hwang, Trump hold phone talks over NK provocation,” *Yonhap News*, March 7, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Tomohiro Osaki, “Japan, US, South Korea diplomats discuss ways to maximize pressure on North,” *The Japan Times*, April 25, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Jumin Park, “US moves THAAD anti-missile defense system to South Korean site as North Korea boasts firepower,” *Reuters*, April 26, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Franz-Stefan Gady, “What Would the Second Korean War Look Like?” *The Diplomat*, April 19, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> “Ex-Defense chief Carter: First strike against North Korea should be on the table,” *Washington Examiner*, April 2, 2017.

