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## North Korea Is in China's Strategic Backyard: It Should Deal With It

Here is an admission that you probably won't hear from many television-news talking-heads and newspaper columnists these days: I don't know and I'm not sure about a lot of things, especially those that are happening in North Korea.

I don't know, for example, what illness North Korea's "Dear Leader" (or is it "Supreme Leader") Kim Jong-il is suffering from and when exactly he is going to join his dad, "Great Leader" Kim il-Sung in heaven (or hell). And I certainly don't know how old is the ailing leader's son, Kim Jong-un (it has been reported that he is the youngest among three legitimate and a few illegitimate children), although I have no reason to doubt the speculations by respected Korea Watchers that Kim il-Sung is Kim Jong-il's apparent heir.

I also admit that I'm not sure why the North Koreans launched an artillery attack on a South Korean island of Yeonpyeong on Tuesday, leaving two South Korean marines and two civilians dead, and more than a dozen wounded, or for that matter, why they decided to publicize their new uranium enrichment plant in Yongbyon which could produce fuel for making nuclear bombs.

In fact, these two most recent aggressive moves by Pyongyang seem to be just two more dramatic scenes in a North Korea Groundhog Day-like production. In March, North Koreans torpedo sank a South Korean warship the Cheonan, (according to the conclusions of international investigators, killing 46 sailors, igniting an international crisis, recalling the responses to North Korea's nuclear test in May last year which followed an earlier ballistic missile tests in April.

One thing is sure. The North Koreans know how to draw a lot of attention. But why are they

doing it? Again, those who (pretend to) know speculate that some members of the political-military clique that rules the North, including members of the Kim Dynasty are apprehensive about, if not opposed to, the choice of the young and inexperienced Kim il-Sung as a successor. So perhaps Kim Jong-il is trying to secure the loyalty of the military by demonstrating that his son is not a wimp who will try to appease the Americans by giving-up the country's cherished nuclear military program?

That makes some sense; although I doubt that a military dictator like Kim Jong-il has kept alive any potential challenger to his rule in the military. More likely, the North Koreans have been misbehaving and making sure that everyone takes notice because they want, to make sure that everyone -- the South Koreans, Japan, the U.S. -- takes notice and responds to their pressure for financial assistance and food (the country's population of twenty-five million is starving) and diplomatic recognition (renewing talks with the U.S. and the rest of the international community).

In a way, if that is what the North Koreans are doing, they are acting in a somewhat rational way. Former U.S. President Richard Nixon described such behavior as the Madman Theory, explaining to his aides in 1968 that he would have to demonstrate to then North Vietnam that he had reached the point where he might "do anything" to stop the war in Vietnam. "We'll just slip the word to them that, 'For God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about communism,'" Nixon explained. "We can't restrain him when he's angry -- and he has his hand on the nuclear button."

But again, I'm not sure if that is what the North Koreans are trying to prove to the world -- that they are "crazy" and that unless they get what they want, they would return the Korean Peninsula back to the stone age.

What I do know is that U.S. was drawn into the Korean Peninsula during the Cold War and as part of an effort to contain the threat of Communist military aggression -- in the form of Communist China -- in Northeast Asia. Despite the fact that the Cold War ended a while ago (that I also know) U.S. military commitment that was formalized through a security agreement with South Korea and is demonstrated by the continuing presence of 37,000 U.S. troops in that country is still in place.

The main threat that is being raised as a way of justifying this U.S. military commitment and presence is that of North Korea. In particular, Pyongyang's drive to develop nuclear military capability has become the main rationale for U.S. military intervention in the Korean Peninsula. Ironically, one of the reasons that North Korea has taken the nuclear military direction has to do with legitimate concerns -- considering U.S. policies in Iraq and elsewhere -- over a possible U.S. attempt to do a "regime change" in Pyongyang.

In any case, the main threat that North Korea is posing today is to its neighbors in northeast Asia. There is the long-term concern over the economic problems, including the flow of refugees into South Korea and China that could follow the collapse of North Korean. And there is no reason why Japan and South Korea should not be worried over the rise of a nuclear North Korea.

Indeed, these worst-case-scenarios reflect what should be seen as direct threat to the core national interests of South Korea, Japan -- and China -- and not to that of the U.S. It is not difficult to imagine the U.S. response if the central government in Mexico disintegrates and/or if Chavez's Venezuela goes nuclear. But Korea is not in America's strategic backyard but in China's. A China that is trying to project itself as a responsible regional power in East Asia should be concerned that Japan and South Korea would have no other choice but to develop their nuclear military capability -- an idea that has been opposed by Washington -- in order to deter a nuclear North Korea ruled by the Kim Dynasty.

So in a way, the most effective way for the U.S. to help achieve a stable balance of power in the

Korean Peninsula is not by sending more war ships to South Korea but by providing incentives to the Chinese to stop making excuses for the North Koreans -- not to mention honoring Dear Leader during his visit to Beijing -- and to start "doing something" about North Korea. Washington could help by working with Seoul and Tokyo -- and Beijing -- in drawing an outline for a timeline for a nuclear military disarmament of North Korea as part of a package deal involving economic assistance to the North as well as process of diplomatic détente with that government, including ties with Washington (and perhaps eventually the peaceful reunification of the peninsula).

There is no doubt that it is China, as Pyongyang's only regional (and global) patron, that would have to play the main role in forcing North Korea to accept such a deal. The alternative should not be an all-out war in the Korean Peninsula involving U.S. troops, but an American "green light" to Seoul and Tokyo to take all the necessary steps to protect their security -- including the nuclear military option. And while I don't know many things, I am quite sure that the prospect of Japan and South Korea going nuclear will make it more likely than not that China will finally start acting like the responsible regional power that it claims to be.

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