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Korean Peninsula: Choice between Peace and Escalation

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Normally tensions run high in the Korean Peninsula when US starts annual joint military exercises with South Korea. Then the time comes for attempts to find diplomatic solutions. This is the usual pattern. It was different this year.

The US and South Korea held Key Resolve (2-13 March) and Foal Eagle (March 2-April 24) exercises. North Korea responded with five ballistic missile tests on February 8 to be followed by two tests of small range missiles on March 2. It also tested four small range KN-2 missiles on April 3. And then something extraordinary happened.

On May 8, 2015 it was reported that North Korea successfully tested a submarine-launched KN-

11 missile dubbed Pukgeukseong-1 (Polaris-1) which is a significant boost in its arsenal. The test took place near Hambung, the Japanese Sea. The North Korean State Defense Committee's Political Department stated the test firing was a new turn in the history of developing the national strategic nuclear arsenal. It assured that the country would boost its nuclear triad. International experts have doubts the test was real and if the missile exists (the word missile was not used in the statement of North Korean military), but one thing is clear - Pyongyang has made progress on the way of implementing its missile program.

Why this change of behavior this year? To answer this question one has to look into the motives behind the behavior of major actors. Recently no whatsoever progress has been achieved in the United States-North Korea and South Korea-North Korea relationships. It gives a reason for concern. The things have even deteriorated. No six-party talks on nuclear problem have been re-launched in Beijing despite serious efforts applied by Russia, China and some other states.

In 2014 the US and North Korea were balancing on the brink of conflict. This situation has not been improved in 2015. In 2014 The Interview, an American political satire comedy film, gave rise to indignation on the part of North Korea which was blamed for a "destructive" cyberattack Sony Pictures came under at the time. There was no evidence produced to prove that North Korea was behind it. This scandal mirrors the US policy towards North Korea in recent years.

In 2014 Washington closely coordinated its anti-North Korean activities with Seoul and Tokyo. The goal was regime change and, finally, neutralization of north Korea.

Many US experts note that contrary to expectations the Barack Obama's policy is tougher than the policy implemented by the previous administration of Bush, Jr. The US resorts to pressure, sanctions, isolation, and deviation from real dialogue and putting an end to the policy of involvement. In 2014-2015 many peace initiatives of Pyongyang have been ignored by Washington and Seoul. They were painted as propaganda efforts.

An unprecedented human rights violations campaign was launched along with military exercises held along the border. Never before the issue had been made part of United Nations General Assembly agenda with open intent to transfer it to the Hague. The pressure is growing. Ambassador Sung Kim, Special Representative for North Korea Policy and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Korea and Japan, has said North Korea blatantly violates all international norms and its own obligations.

President Obama signed an executive order on January 2, 2015 imposing additional sanctions with respect to North Korea. The order envisions a set of measures aimed at enhancing the ability to apply pressure on Pyongyang. It responds to the attack on Sony Pictures, but also provides a framework for addressing the full range of DPRK (the Democratic People's Republic Korea) illicit behavior going forward. Voices are heard in the US calling for preparing plans for military action.

Dr. Van Jackson is a visiting fellow at the Center for a New American Security and a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow. From 2009 to 2014, Dr. Jackson held positions in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) as a strategist and policy adviser focused on the

Asia-Pacific, senior country director for Korea, and working group chair of the U.S.–Republic of Korea Extended Deterrence Policy Committee. In February he testified before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. According to him, nuclear weapons could embolden North Korea to freely engage in various military provocations and the United States should be prepared for «the possibility of limited war with the communist nation». He issued the warning in a statement submitted for a hearing of the House Foreign Affairs Committee's Asia and the Pacific subcommittee, saying the North has now become a de-facto nuclear power. "North Korea is not only now a de facto nuclear state, but the size of its arsenal is unknown, and Pyongyang is progressing toward its own version of a secure retaliatory nuclear strike capability," Jackson said.

The U.S. goal of preventing the North from becoming a nuclear state has "visibly failed," he said. "North Korea may soon believe it has a free hand to engage in various forms of coercive violence and military adventurism precisely because it thinks it has a nuclear deterrent against major war," the expert said. This is the scenario recommended by the Center for a New American Security to Defense Secretary Ashton Carter in January 2015. It's worth to note that experts admit the fact of North Korea being a nuclear capable state. There is an impression that the Washington's unfriendly attitude pursues the goal of provoking Pyongyang into holding new missile tests to provide a pretext for a new package of sanctions.

In May Pyongyang gave a clear signal concerning its response.

There is also a silver lining here. There is a parallel line of contacts. US retired officials with «North Korean experience» regularly meet DPRK's officials. They share their views concerning a two-way street dialogue and six-party talks with the White House. There are signs that their activities have started to bring results evoking evident concern in Seoul. A new research project appeared this February to warn that North Korea's nuclear stockpile could grow from roughly 10-16 nuclear weapons at the end of 2014 to 100 by the year 2020.

The North Korea Nuclear Futures Project, a joint collaboration between the U.S.-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and National Defense University, aims to predict possible futures for North Korea's nuclear and missile programs over the next five years. The project provided three scenarios for the growth of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs over the next five years. Under the «minimal growth, minimal modernization» scenario – a best care scenario for concerned observers – North Korea conducts no further nuclear or missile tests and its technology progresses slowly.

Even under this scenario, North Korea is expected to roughly double its stockpile of available nuclear weapons, from 10 to 20. In the moderate scenario, which postulates North Korea's nuclear and missile programs continue to develop at the same pace as they have so far, Pyongyang will have 50 nuclear weapons by 2020 and will be able to mount them on both mobile intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) and possibly even intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

The worst-case scenario, assuming an increased commitment to the nuclear and missile programs, would involve rapid growth, including successful efforts to gain foreign technologies

and information). Wit described this as a «pretty scary scenario» of «dramatic expansion» that would see North Korea armed with 100 nuclear weapons by 2020 to go along with 20-30 ICBMs. The report also warns that North Korea already has the capability to mount miniaturized warheads on both its short-range Nodong missile (which can cover most of the Northeast Asian Theater) and its Taepodong-2 missile, which has the potential to be used as an ICBM. Wit notes that, given current capabilities, North Korea could amass a nuclear arsenal of around 100 weapons and mount them on Nodong missiles able to reach South Korea and Japan by 2020 even without ever conducting another nuclear or missile test. The analysis of both the current situation and possible future developments make it clear that the current approach to North Korea's nuclear program has failed. Now what about the reaction of the United States and its allies?

Washington and Seoul try to convince themselves that North Korea is on the verge of collapse and the process could be expedited by increasing pressure and isolation. It is nothing but self-deceit based on poor analysis. Such conclusions run contrary to progress achieved by North Korea recently.

Under the circumstances the Democratic Republic continues to upgrade its nuclear potential (called means of deterrence). The nuclear status has become part of the country's constitution. The country officially announces its plans to develop simultaneously civil and military (nuclear) branches of economy.

Some US reasonable thinkers evoke concern over the Washington's policy on North Korea. They say that the administration considers only the worst scenarios. The US goes on imposing the very same conditions for talks that Pyongyang has refuted even under the pressure of China. The experts capable of sound judgement call for a more realistic approach towards the negotiation process. They say Pyongyang should get something in return as an incentive. The six-party talks in Beijing are the only way to seek progress.