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The situation on the Korean Peninsula and China's tough choice

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The fifth nuclear test conducted in North Korea and the situation unfolding around it on the Korean Peninsula and in the region, obviously, raise the issue of how it might affect the relations between China and the countries of the Korean Peninsula? Although, from the author's point of view, the question should be formulated somewhat differently – how soon will the Chinese government be forced to make that “tough” choice, whose inevitability is increasing?

In previous articles, the author has repeatedly drawn attention to the fact that China-Korea relations depend on the balance of two trends. The first is related to opposition between China

and the USA, where North Korea may not be an ally, but an enemy of the enemy, or some kind of a buffer space between the US forces in South Korea and the territory of the north-eastern region of China. The second trend is China's ever intensifying "superpower" mood and its transition to a foreign policy model which envisages that the surrounding "small countries" should take the interests of Beijing into account and not contradict them: from this point of view, North Korea as "an unruly neighbour" should be kept on a tighter leash.

Let's also recall that after the fourth nuclear test, at first Beijing didn't take a very tough stand. However, when North Korea launched a satellite in spite of its warnings, it joined US sanctions, and, moreover, actually participated in the development of the resolution that approved them.

It seems that this step can be explained by either a desire to use this situation as a lever of pressure on Pyongyang, or as an agreement with the United States on the exchange of concessions where China would make this "step forward" in exchange for consideration of Chinese regional interests, primarily in respect of the situation in the South China Sea or the placement of the US missile defence in South Korea. However, in both cases, these interests were not taken into account. The Hague Tribunal made a tough anti-Chinese decision, the decision to place the THAAD complex was made, while a number of representatives of the American establishment openly stated that China's position was not of any interest to them.

As a result, China's leadership may have received an object lesson in the value of American promises, and in whether it makes sense to follow the same course in the future.

Nevertheless, the United States is putting active and diverse pressure on China so that it would be China itself that solves the North Korean problem in the way that benefits the United States. This includes the accusation that the North Korean regime actually depends on China and functions due to its connivance and its superpower self-image: unable to moderate North Korea, China is thus losing the regional prestige that it needs as a superpower.

Based on the author's conversations with a number of Chinese experts, Beijing understands that there is no "good" solutions to the problem. It seems possible to call for resolving the nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula (KPNP) using political and diplomatic means, but these words continue to be hot air. Restoration of the six-party talks process is, at least, related to the question what issue should be discussed there now: in the current situation, denuclearization is possible only in connection with the change of regime in North Korea that put the nuclear status in its Constitution. Finally, the actions of the North Korean leadership are not dictated by the evil will of Kim Jong-un, but by the geopolitical trend, which is no less difficult to change than insisting on the change of North Korea's standpoint. In general, it is also clear that the US-Chinese struggle in the spaces of East Asia is unlikely to diminish in the near future. We can draw attention to a series of incidents that allegedly accompanied Barack Obama's visit to China. Given the usual coordination of major events in terms of protocol, such inconsistencies are difficult to explain as simple working forces.

All that we discussed above is a frame, a context, in which the Chinese leadership needs to make a decision and serves as an explanation of why it will be difficult in any case. In global politics, it is not a choice between a good and bad decision, otherwise everyone would easily choose the

good one. It is also not a choice of the clear lesser of two evils. As a rule, it is a choice between two types of evil, where the attempt should be made to choose the lesser. Each of these decisions is bad, each has a certain set of unpleasant consequences, and below we will try to figure out which of the options is more or less unpleasant for China.

If we look in the medium term and factor out the option where China continues to postpone its choice, there will be three possible decisions (but, in fact only two):

- China continues to support North Korea, but changes its local regime to a pro-Chinese one.
- China recognizes the nuclear status of North Korea and rejects measures aimed at controlling it, so encouraging significant changes in the world order.
- Or, in an alliance with the United States, China takes the lead in bringing about change in the regime, and in particular the acquisition of the North by the South which is unavoidable in such circumstances.

The second and third options should be the only two that should be seriously taken into account, as the first option raises the question about methods. Let us suppose that China will start to “influence” North Korea, but how? Experience shows that political persuasion does not work, because when it comes to ensuring the country’s sovereignty, North Korea does not listen to anyone, and the development of its missile and nuclear program is perceived, not without reason, by Pyongyang as the only working way to avoid military action for regime change. The North-Korean leadership apparently believes the experience of Iraq, Libya and Syria serves as evidence of this as well as the feeling that it is only thanks to the fact that it adheres to such a policy and “shows its teeth at the right time” every time it has to, that the next large-scale US-South Korean exercises in immediate vicinity of the North-Korean borders have not escalated into something more after the similar “Tonkin incident”.

Yes, China can cut off oxygen to North Korea in order to trigger a full-blown economic crisis there, expecting that the North Korean leadership will subsequently approach on bended knee, or pro-China lobbies conduct a take-over there. But such a policy rather strongly disservices the interests of Chinese citizens, who are currently actively investing in the North, and for which North Korea is an important foreign trade area, which is especially true for the north-eastern region that already has enough economic problems, including stunted growth. If they manage to rein in Pyongyang, the sponsorship of a pro-China North Korean regime may cause disapproval among the Chinese masses, whose attitude towards North Korea is more mundane. The country has enough of its own problems, and a great deal of money should be spent on them.

More importantly, the policy of destabilization of the situation in the North has a very high probability that the fruits of this destabilization will be reaped not by China, but by Washington and Seoul, thus we are forced to move on to option three.

If Beijing supports the North against the US or abandons the tactics of “let’s swap our agreement on the Korean issue for your climbdown in more fundamental issues”, trouble may rear its head in the following way.

1. Using the North Korean threat as a pretext, the United States will strengthen their position in the region and increase the military infrastructure there, aimed not so much against North Korea as against China.

2. Support for the North would serve to burn bridges and finally bringing the relationship between the two countries to a state of conflict. In particular, it significantly reduces the possibility that in the short or medium term, the cooperation trend will nevertheless prevail over the trend of confrontation in the relationship between Washington and Beijing. After all, cooperation means a relative preservation of the status quo, when the differences between the two countries, even if they exist, are at an acceptable level, dirty linen is not washed in public, and the potential for economic cooperation neutralizes political differences.

3. More active support of North Korea in one way or another may result in China being subject to certain sanction measures – for example, under the pretext that China does not perform UN sanctions resolutions adequately or condones the violation of human rights there. The China-USA trade relationship could be jeopardized and the cobbling together of a regional anti-Chinese coalition would take at an accelerated pace.

4. Meanwhile, according to some Chinese experts with whom the author spoke, China is not ready to openly challenge America yet. In theory, time is on China's side, but the sooner it comes to a military conflict, the less China will be prepared for it, and in this context, the author even found a thesis that the Americans had been playing the North Korean card to obtrude a stand-off on China under more favourable conditions.

5. In addition, supporting the nuclear ambitions of the North blurs the status quo built both on the authority of the UN, which would be neutralized by the Chinese position, and on the concept of nuclear weapon non-proliferation, theoretically limiting the nuclear club of the Big Five. Under the current order, China occupies quite a significant place, and the question is whether, in the case of a stand-off, the new world order, where, for example, nuclear North Korea would be followed by nuclear Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, would be more profitable than the former one for Beijing.

Accordingly, the main risk for China in this option is getting involved in the conflict in an unfavourable position or destroying the world order, which affords it certain bonuses, in exchange for uncertainty.

It seems that there are enough good reasons to abandon support for the North. However, the question arises: what if a stand-off with China is promoted by the United States REGARDLESS of what policy in the North Korean issue China will adopt? What if concessions are taken for granted, and the US policy of restraining China remain unchanged? It is obvious that, in response to a new round of concessions or joint actions against North Korea, Washington would brush off China's criticism.

But if China starts to cooperate with the US against the North (which, in the author's opinion, would lead to regime change, or more precisely, the elimination of North Korea), it would face another package of troubles.

1. The option where a military conflict in the northern part of the peninsula or the acquisition of the North by the South would leave China become the target not only for the flow of refugees, but also for the potential organized crime or terrorist organizations, which would try to “fight with South Korean invaders on its territory”, is not likely to be acceptable for Beijing. All this will force China to expend large efforts and resources to settle problems that may be better spent at home.

2. In the case of “South Korean expansion to the North”, the buffer area made up of North Korea would be lost, and the United States would acquire an extremely convenient political springboard, from which they can effectively threaten Chinese interests in the Northeastern region. I doubt that should the union of Korea take place the American troops would immediately leave. On the contrary, they would most likely move to the North, too, for example, “to combat the illegal armed groups of the former regime”, and the US military bases may crop up on the borders of the country. In the event of conflict, this seriously strengthens the US position.

3. A united Korea itself is unacceptable for China as a regional power. Firstly, the loss of an assumed dependant is an even greater blow to the prestige than the inability to fully control it. Secondly, the ideology of a united Korea is likely to be an aggressive nationalism, and that could mean an intensification of attempts to convert the Korean diaspora in the PRC into a fifth column. We could even expect a revival of territorial disputes right up to the resuscitation of claims for the Jiandao area or, at least, state support for historical claims, including the idea that the ancient Korean states occupied a considerable part of modern-day China.

4. After the disappearance of North Korea, the next country ranked in terms of “human rights violations” would be China. If previously a variety of rumours about savage executions, mass rapes and other similar events concerned North Korea, then when it is gone, the “main villain of the region” will be China which is already subject of a number of common myths from eating babies to cutting up political prisoners for organs. Falun Gong may be a much more serious destabilizing factor than “Christian resistance” in North Korea, which fighters against Pyongyang are trying to prove exists.

But a tricky question arises here – how unchanged is the current trend to counter America? Is the situation really going downhill or is there a chance to correct it after all?

The severity of the choice, in the author’s opinion, is associated with the following. Although, according to the Russian proverb “better a terrible end than an endless terror”, it is psychologically difficult to accept a decision that the world has changed forever and will never be the same again. There is a very strong hope that the possibilities for a peaceful settlement of the regional problems have not been exhausted. However, analysis made in the cold light of day shows that the space to achieve consensus is rapidly shrinking, and in a climate of increasing confrontation, the question is not “whether the conflict will happen”, but “when it will happen” and “how severe it will be”. The new world order obviously requires a new policy. If the situation develops such that peace is inevitable, the concept of concessions and the search for consensus are reasonable and relevant, then if the situation develops such that peace cannot be

maintained for certain, it pays to recall the statement that has been attributed to a number of historical figures: “A country that decides to prefer humiliation to war, will receive both.”

As a historian by education, the author recalls a situation where China’s leaders faced a similar choice when deciding on whether Chinese volunteers would participate in the Korean War of 1950-1953. Back then, China had just come out of a civil war, and it wasn’t a good idea to expend energy on a new war, but on development; the war in Korea meant a guaranteed confrontation with the United States and de facto put an end to the possibility of the rapid accession of Taiwan, if only because the Northeast became the priority instead of the South. However, Mao may have wondered about where the guarantee was that the UN troops led by MacArthur and inspired by the successes over the communism, upon victory over North Korea, would not continue, and then China would be embroiled in war with the United States in any case, but on much less favourable conditions.

So what should they wait for? Of course, it is difficult to imagine what final decision the Chinese leaders will make, and what they consider to be the lesser of two evils. Beijing certainly sees many problems differently than Moscow, but the author believes that sooner or later China must take this “tough choice”, whatever it will be.