

North Korea: truculent but worrisome

by Kim Wilkinson and Rod Lyon

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Foreign Minister Rudd has recently emphasised the danger that North Korea poses to its neighbours and to the wider Asia–Pacific region, including Australia. His statements at an ASEAN Regional Forum meeting on 23 July this year, and later at a dinner speech in Canberra after the Australia – South Korea 1.5 track talks on 12 October, suggest that the issues surrounding North Korea—particularly its nuclear and missile programs, leadership transition and troubled future—sit rather closer to the centre of Australian policymakers’ concerns than one might imagine, given the relative paucity of media coverage of those issues.

This paper tries to unpack why that’s so. In fact, it is timely to do so. 2011 stands between two significant years in North Korea. 2010 was the year when planning for the leadership succession began to quicken appreciably in Pyongyang. It was also the year when a North Korean submarine sank the South Korean naval corvette, *Cheonan*, and when North Korean artillery shelled Yeongpyeong Island. And it was the year when Pyongyang revealed to US scientists the construction of a light-water reactor and a modern facility for enriching uranium, the sophistication of which took analysts by surprise. Meanwhile, 2012 is already being heralded by Pyongyang as a year rich in symbolism, as a ‘strong and prosperous year.’ April 15 will be the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung, the nation’s founder. 2012 is also the year of Kim Jong-il’s 70th birthday. For an auspicious nation, 2012 threatens to be a year of special significance.

So where do we stand? The Americans are about to meet the North Koreans in Geneva on 24–25 October for a second round of exploratory talks (the first was in New York in July). The inter-Korean dialogue has recommenced. But the possibilities for a negotiated solution for the North’s nuclear program are slim: the Six Party Talks are yet to be revived, and even some prominent American analysts regard them as having been, all along, ‘an exercise in self-deception [that] ceded significant advantage to Beijing, and ended up giving the North the chance to advance its nuclear weapons program.’¹ Additionally, planning for the leadership succession within North Korea—whereby an ailing Kim Jong-il will give way to his third son, Kim Jong-eun—might be sucking the oxygen out of other issues. But we should be cautious about reading too much into that: North Korea signed on to the 1994 Framework Agreement in Kim Il-sung’s final days.

Still, developments in recent years have made both South Korea and the US focus more intently upon the continuing need to contain Pyongyang's ambitions, and have undercut the idea that time is broadly on the side of Seoul and Washington. The US has so far played a long game—a game of 'strategic patience'—on the North Korean issue. But the game requires a measure of North Korean compliance—that it doesn't indulge in blatant aggression against the South; that it's content to see its own nuclear program creep along like a tortoise; and that the regime follows a dual-track approach in which it simultaneously builds nuclear weapons and trades them away. On all three counts, North Korean compliance is under question.

Military incidents in 2010

Tensions between North and South Korea reached the highest levels in decades after the sinking of the *Cheonan* on 26 March 2010 and the shelling of Yeongpyeong Island in November that year. South Korean President Lee Myung Bak's administration was praised for its measured response to the *Cheonan* sinking, commissioning a task force that found the sinking to have been caused by a North Korean torpedo. The 23 November shelling of Yeongpyeong Island, adjacent to the Northern Limit Line (a disputed maritime border with the North), by North Korean artillery further aggravated the relationship. The South responded assertively by returning fire across the border, and the North and South exchanged inflammatory statements.

Those military incursions were a dangerous new development in North–South relations. The North probably doesn't intend to provoke a full-scale war on the peninsula—that could scarcely be in its interests, despite its rhetorical posturing—but another limited military encounter in the near future would place Lee's government under real pressure to respond, and escalation controls on the peninsula might be seriously challenged. Reducing the likelihood of future military provocations should be the highest priority. If the rate of such provocations can't be slowed, our other endeavours in relation to North Korea will be in vain. If the rate can be dampened, both sides can move on to other tasks, none of them easy.

Uranium enrichment for 'peaceful purposes'?

For many years, Australian policymakers have judged that a nuclear North Korea would be both an acute threat to regional stability and a worrying tipping point in nuclear proliferation, so the newest revelations about Pyongyang's expanding nuclear program are certainly cause for concern. On 12 November 2010, Siegfried Hecker, a well-known American scientist, and two colleagues from the Center for International Security and Cooperation visited North Korea's key nuclear sites. On that visit, the North Koreans unveiled an 'ultra-modern' facility for enriching uranium, with 2000 gas centrifuges and a 25 to 30 MW(e) experimental light-water reactor, which was in the initial stages of construction.² Hecker could not verify whether the uranium enrichment facility was working.

Those revelations are alarming. The North Korean scientists told Hecker that the enrichment facility was for making LEU (low enriched uranium) fuel, a message also taken up by state media.³ The facility would be about the right size to meet the annual fuel requirements of the future reactor. But enrichment is enrichment: estimates suggest the plant could be altered to produce about 40 kilograms of highly enriched uranium (HEU) each year. HEU is fissile material, and as a rule of thumb about 25 kilograms is needed to produce a weapon.⁴ There's also the possibility that facilities for developing HEU could exist elsewhere in North Korea.

While the facility for making plutonium (another form of fissile material) appeared to be disabled, Hecker theorised that the North Koreans could mobilise the plant and produce plutonium within six months if they wanted to. Pyongyang is already thought to have sufficient plutonium for between four and seven nuclear warheads,

assuming a requirement of 6 kilograms of plutonium for each warhead.⁵ Over the next five years, then, the North Koreans could plausibly double the size of that arsenal, given the capacities of the uranium enrichment facility.

How close the North Koreans are towards actual weaponisation remains a mystery. Neither of the two North Korean nuclear tests (one in 2006, the other in 2009) seems to have been a resounding success. Indeed, Pyongyang might have concluded that designing and building a robust, reliable nuclear weapon from plutonium is just too difficult; designing and building one from highly enriched uranium, a task most nuclear scientists view as less technically challenging, might now look more appealing.

Clearly, North Korea wants to have an overt nuclear program rather than a covert one, or else it wouldn't have shown the facility to Hecker and his colleagues. During the Bush era, a North Korean provocation was typically seen as 'a bombshell that was actually an olive branch',⁶ and was understood by the US as a desire to engage in bilateral or multilateral talks. Along that vein, it could be posited that Pyongyang's recent provocations and the unveiling of the uranium enrichment facility might be an attempt by North Korea to increase its bargaining leverage, in the hope of gaining economic concessions from its neighbours and the US through negotiations.

Alternatively—or perhaps additionally—North Korea may be signalling its military strength in order to help smooth the upcoming power transition. Its assertive behaviour could be intended to quell factional opposition inside Pyongyang, or to warn the rest of the world not to intervene in the regime's succession arrangements.

Pyongyang's latest nuclear revelations also raise some troubling questions. How successful have the North Koreans been at enrichment? We can't answer that question; indeed, it might take a sustained physical presence at the facility to be able to answer it. Where did Pyongyang's centrifuges come from? And how easy would it be for North Korea to obtain more? Again, answers to those questions aren't clear. Evidently, North Korea acquired the technology from somewhere—perhaps in the first instance from the Pakistani nuclear merchant, AQ Khan—but getting a small number of centrifuges from one source and turning them into 2,000 still takes some doing. It's a reminder that North Korea isn't quite as isolated as we in the West frequently imagine it to be.

Friends with (nuclear) benefits

Pyongyang's uranium enrichment facility is concerning not only because it could potentially be used to develop nuclear weapons. Some believe that unveiling the facilities to Hecker and his colleagues was a public relations exercise, intended to 'advertise' Pyongyang's nuclear wares to less savoury parties—rogue states and, potentially, non-state actors—who may be interested in purchasing the technology.

There's a precedent for that behaviour. Pyongyang has long enjoyed a role of supplier in the ballistic missile trade. It also had a well-established relationship with the AQ Khan network. More recently, other relationships have become apparent. There's evidence implicating Pyongyang in the construction of the Syrian reactor destroyed by Israel in a 2007 air raid. The Syrian reactor was of the same blueprint as the Yongbyon 5 MW(e) reactor, and is thought to have had the sole purpose of producing plutonium.

In 2010, a leaked report by a UN panel of experts identified North Korea as having most likely transferred ballistic missile technology to Tehran, in violation of UN sanctions. Additionally, Western intelligence sources have been quoted as saying that Pyongyang sent Tehran software that could be used to develop nuclear weapons, as well as sending a team of North Korean scientists to train members of the Iranian Defense Ministry in February 2011.⁷

North Korea's alleged nuclear partners may not be limited to Pakistan, Syria and Iran. Some believe North Korea may also have been involved with Burma's nuclear program. A number of incidents indicate that this may be the case, such as the *Kang Nam 1* incident in 2009. The *Kang Nam 1* left North Korea on 17 June, thought to be headed for Burma. Unconfirmed reports suggested its cargo included missiles or nuclear materials. The boat was followed by a US Navy ship until 29 June, when it headed back to North Korea. Some believe this was an attempt to circumvent interdiction and inspection of the ship under the Proliferation Security Initiative. The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, has previously said that the US is concerned about 'the transfer of nuclear technology and other dangerous weapons' from North Korea to Burma. Neither the incident nor the claim is by itself definitive proof of an illicit relationship between the two, but it does suggest that analysts should be watching their interactions closely.

The future of the Six Party Talks

One of the most intriguing questions concerns the future forum in which the North Korean nuclear program might once again be negotiated after the resumption of dialogue. The future of the Six Party Talks (between North Korea, South Korea, the US, China, Japan and Russia) looks questionable in the current environment. The US and the South Koreans appear to be investing in bilateral exchanges with the North Koreans at the moment. And Washington has outlined a number of preconditions for any resumption of the multilateral Six Party Talks—preconditions that essentially require the North Koreans to recommit to the joint declaration of 2005, agree to a moratorium on nuclear and missile testing, and re-engage with the South Koreans in an inter-Korean dialogue.

For its part, North Korea has recently called for the 'unconditional' resumption of the Six Party Talks. But with the inter-Korean dialogue showing signs of life, South Korea seems in no hurry to race back to the Six Party Talks. Lee's government doesn't have much to show for its hardline policies towards the North, but nor does it want to reward North Korea for Pyongyang's recent adventurism. China's position is uncertain, and Beijing might believe that North Korean dependency is increasing in the current environment, in which Pyongyang has almost nowhere else to turn. In 2010, China's proportion of North Korea's overall trade was 57.1%, up from 41.6% in 2007.⁸ Besides, Beijing has long seen North Korea as a buffer to US power, so it wants to head only slowly down any path that might subtly change the balance of power in the region.

Whether any talks will achieve what everyone (including Australia) wants—specifically, a halt to Pyongyang's nuclear program—is highly doubtful. The problem that lies at the heart of any negotiated settlement is that Pyongyang wants to have its cake and eat it too—to keep its nuclear program and take the concessions as well. The revelation about the uranium enrichment facility is just another blow to those who've worked with Pyongyang on nuclear disarmament. Talks may slow North Korea's nuclear program, but the prospects for achieving comprehensive, verifiable, irreversible nuclear disarmament on the Korean peninsula are, at best, thin.

Pyongyang has limited bargaining chips and is highly unlikely to trade away its nuclear trump card. Recent messages coming out of its state media highlight this. One Korean Central News Agency article notes that:

The present Libyan crisis teaches the international community a serious lesson. It was fully exposed before the world that 'Libya's nuclear dismantlement' much touted by the U.S. in the past turned out to be a mode of aggression whereby the latter coaxed the former with such sweet words as 'guarantee of security' and 'improvement of relations' to disarm itself and then *swallowed it up by force*.⁹

Keeping it in the family

Meanwhile, the wheels of political change are turning in the North. While it's hard to discern exactly what's occurring there, because of the opaque nature of the regime, it's now widely believed that Kim Jong-il's third son, Kim Jong-eun, is set to accede to the leadership. Kim Jong-eun has been given high-level military and government positions in an attempt to raise his public profile. He was made a four-star general, even though still in his twenties, and, according to the South's unification ministry, he has been on 100 appointments with his father since he was identified as the heir apparent.¹⁰

Succession represents a period of potential instability for the North Korean regime. In personality cults, power transfers require a substantial nurturing of the new 'personality' figure to ensure that loyalty moves faithfully from the old Dear Leader to the young Dear Leader. In the North Korean case, though, the question's about more than popular acceptance—whether the succession is successful rests on whether the family and the military support the transition.

Kim Jong-eun hasn't had the 'grooming' that his father did before taking power. Additionally, the country's in a state of economic disrepair, which puts added pressure on the leadership. Still, the longer Kim Jong-il holds on to power, the better the young Kim's chances of getting his feet under the top desk. And so far, the campaign to install the young Kim seems to be working. Increasingly, it seems likely that we'll face a North Korea ruled by a third generation of the Kim family.

A ticking clock

Whose side is time on in the Korean peninsula? In truth, the answer isn't obvious. Some in the West believe that the longer the North can be contained, the more likely the regime will simply collapse. Australians typically see the collapse of authoritarian regimes as a good outcome, but in this case regime collapse might be a complicated thing—one recent study suggests it would give China great scope to shape Korea's future.¹¹ And each year that goes by, the more the North's nuclear capabilities grow. Yes, the program moves at the pace of a tortoise, but over time even a tortoise can cover ground. Moreover, it's unlikely that time will, by itself, solve the strategic dilemmas that characterise the peninsula. Today the peninsula remains one of Asia's most challenging flashpoints, and it seems unlikely that it will become safer anytime soon.

Australian interests

Australia's interests in North Korea turn upon several fulcra—our interest in a secure, liberal, prosperous regional order; our interest in nuclear nonproliferation; our interest in the good management of a potential flashpoint that sits at the heart of Northeast Asia and entangles so many of the region's great powers. Australia's probably not directly threatened by North Korea, even though we might eventually fall within the increasing range of its ballistic missiles. But North Korea keeps South Korea heavily focused upon peninsular events—and that limits Seoul's strategic partnership with Canberra. And North Korea helps keep the US focused on Northeast Asia, making Washington more interested in its Northeast Asian allies, rather than ones further south.

Australia has few cards to play in the North Korean case, but a large interest in how others play their cards. Our role is principally a supportive one, and can't be otherwise. We hold no magical solution to strategic stability in Korea. True, we may have options to alleviate the suffering of the North Korean people, by the provision of food aid, for example. But we shouldn't fool ourselves and expect aid to translate into influence with Pyongyang. Other countries have been down the food aid route, and often they don't even receive thanks from the regime for their efforts. Moreover,

those in Pyongyang should be under no illusions about Australia's view of their behaviour.

A nuclear-armed North Korea is a rolling boulder on the mountain of Asia's growing nuclear latency—a boulder that threatens to trigger a landslide that would not be in our interests.

Notes

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- 2 Siegfried Hecker (2010), 'A return trip to North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear complex', Centre for International Security and Cooperation, United States, 20 November.
- 3 The Korean Central News Agency reported on 30 November 2010 that North Korea had a 'modern factory for uranium enrichment equipped with thousands of centrifuges'. The article also noted that 'The development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes to meet the need for electricity will be stepped up in the future.'
- 4 Mary Beth Nikitin (2011), *North Korea's nuclear weapons: technical issues*, Congressional Research Service report for Congress, 20 January, p. 9.
- 5 Nikitin, *North Korea's nuclear weapons*, p. 5.
- 6 Victor D Cha (2009), 'What do they really want?: Obama's North Korea conundrum', *The Washington Quarterly*, 32(4):119–138.
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