

What underlies North Korea's drive to acquire nuclear weapons?

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The speaker devoted the first part of his talk to outlining the historic background to the DPRK's nuclear weapon programme. Kim Il-Sung first approached China and the USSR for help in developing a civil nuclear programme in 1962. Both turned him down but a year later the USSR relented and offered him a small reactor. In Kim's memoirs his motives at that point are not spelled out. In any event, it was only in the early 90s that grounds for suspecting a non-peaceful intent surfaced: IAEA inspectors found that a declaration made by the DPRK after accession to the NPT was incomplete. The DPRK reacted angrily. Its threat to withdraw from the NPT was only averted at the last moment by the conclusion of an Agreed Framework with the USA (1994).

The Agreed Framework proved to be a disappointment to the DPRK. But it held until 2002 when the DPRK was accused of having violated the agreement by pursuing a parallel, undeclared uranium enrichment programme, perhaps drawing on technology released by AQ Khan. The North Koreans pointed out that the Framework did not explicitly prohibit their enriching uranium but renounced it anyway. They then completed their withdrawal from the NPT. The Six Party talks that followed failed to persuade them to re-join the NPT and halt their programme. Foreign aid was no longer an adequate inducement.

The DPRK's first nuclear test came in 2006. Four more have followed (2009, 2013, 2016, 2016). A hope that the accession of Kim Jung Un in 2010 would lead to a change of course has been disappointed.

The motivations for this nuclear programme have varied. Back in the 60s Kim Il-Sung saw a nuclear programme as a source of prestige. More recently regime survival and deterrence have come to the fore. The regime sees the USA as a threat, and sees the overthrow of Gadhafi in the aftermath of Libya surrendering its WMD as a warning of what could await it. Also DPRK's leaders believe that at some point, to survive, they must destroy South Korea; they have drawn up plans

to use nuclear weapons to destroy South Korean ports, to deny their use to US reinforcements, and to threaten the USA, to deter US intervention.

A list of US targets has indeed been made public. It consists of US Pacific bases and continental US cities. The DPRK still lacks the capacity to hit continental US targets with ground-based ICBMs; but they have built a submarine that could launch nuclear-tipped missiles from a single tube.

Are these DPRK plans credible or just posturing? In the speaker's view, the DPRK nuclear threshold may be lower than the media and others assume. The leadership's thought processes are not altogether predictable. They have reserved the right to make first use of nuclear weapons under threat of conventional attack. Since they lack a second-strike capability other than their single-tube SSBN, the logic of their predicament is "use or lose". It is not certain that they have grasped that DPRK first use would entail massive US retaliation.

That last point is symptomatic. North Koreans tend to find making sense of the wider world hard. They confuse Wall Street Journal editorials with expressions of US policy. Very few have travelled outside the DPRK.

China's paramount objectives are to avoid instability on its north-east border and to deny DPRK territory to US forces (no US troops along the Yalu River). But polls suggest that 60% of Chinese see the DPRK as a burden and an awkward neighbour, and the Chinese government has no liking for the DPRK nuclear weapons. Following the Trump/Xi meeting in Florida China has embargoed DPRK coal exports (probably about 30% of DPRK foreign exchange earnings) and might be prepared to cut off oil supplies to the DPRK in the event of a sixth nuclear test.

What the future holds cannot be predicted. The intensification of economic sanctions over the last year may have an effect. But at least four unofficial channels of communication between US academics and former officials on the one hand and DPRK representatives on the other have reported no DPRK interest in a nuclear deal, despite extensive exploration of the options. The leadership has rejected any resumption of Six Party Talks. In the speaker's view, opportunities to cut a deal were missed during the years that followed the conclusion of the Agreed Framework (President Clinton was due to visit Pyongyang but failed to do so) and during the Six Party Talks. Now a deal may well be beyond reach.