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A Long-term Strategy for North Korea

by *Georgy Bulychev*

With the North Korean announcement that it now possesses nuclear weapons, (simply meant to intensify pressure on the US to formulate a coherent strategy vis-a-vis Pyongyang) world attention is focused on the issue of solving the nuclear crisis: finding a way to force, or induce, or make North Korea do away with its nuclear program and nuclear aspirations. Millions of words have been written about the methods and tactics best suited to tackle the issue, including the strategy of six-party talks. However, it is rarely mentioned that the nuclear issue can probably not be solved without addressing the deeper issue -- the future of North Korea itself. Without a clear-cut strategy on this, all efforts to solve the nuclear issue are probably doomed, or worse, they could even pave the way for a military solution. So, what is preferable -- collapse or transformation of the DPRK? And if transformation was to occur, would that help alleviate the tension and solve security problems? What should the world community do?

As Communism worldwide came to its end, scores of experts predicted the collapse of North Korea. It never happened, however, because the North Korean system was specifically designed by Kim Il Sung to withstand external pressures and to control and crush emerging internal challenges. The DPRK was no "ordinary" socialist country, but a bureaucratic authoritarian society -- a blend of Communist rhetoric and oriental despotism, based on Confucian tradition, nationalism and a semi-religious ideology. Economic and humanitarian crisis does not always weaken such a system (as can be seen in the examples of Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China) but it fed a deep feeling of insecurity on the part of North Korean leaders. Perhaps predictably, in the 1990s, as Pyongyang sought ways to cope with both external and internal threats, it turned North Korea into a self-declared nuclear state (although it is impossible to confirm or deny such declarations). The result was spiraling confrontation and tension in the region. So, are the possibilities of the regime change/collapse any higher today than 15 years ago? What are the options?

Collapse?

We don't even want to analyze a military scenario of regime change, which would result in unimaginable loss of lives both in the North and South and reduce the economic potential and opportunity for a normal life in the peninsula to ashes.

But even short of such a scenario, regime change (internally generated or assisted from the outside) would be a disaster for Korea and its neighbors. The grave mistake the well-wishers and geo-strategists make is to suppose that North Korean people will generally welcome a momentous "liberation" and that things will eventually work out well for them in the aftermath. Yet even in the less complicated Iraq case the outcome is still far from positive. Regime change in North Korea would mean the disappearance of the country itself. North Korean statehood as such would be finished, as South Korea could not possibly accept any new separate power in North Korea formed "on the local base". Such a new power constellation is anyway highly unlikely, simply because there is no human potential for it in the North in the short run, and would seem even more unlikely in a crisis likely to involve massive refugees and local conflicts with arms falling into the hands of warlords. This means that any change of regime in North Korean case would boil down to the absorption of North by South, with the North becoming an "occupation zone".

Given the differences between Northerners isolated and brainwashed for generations and Westernized Southerners, would a Southern occupation be peaceful? Are more than twenty million North Koreans ready to become a "second rate people" in a unified Korea? What would happen if they were suddenly to be thrown into a 'raw capitalist' environment, when we know that most North Korean refugees today cannot adapt in the South even after coming there on their own volition? And what about the numerous (two to three million) North Korean nomenklatura and military? They would expect the worst -- not just being left out in the cold like their colleagues in East Germany, but repression. That means that they would be likely to resort to armed, guerilla-type opposition, which would be viewed at least with sympathy by the population. There is evidence that such contingency plans already exist in North Korea. And what if the hypothetical nuclear weapons were in the possession of these rebels?

The lesson of many centuries of Korean history is that region-based strife, as slow-burning conflict with the prospect of involving neighboring countries, can continue for decades. This would derail the prospering South Korean economy as well.

Evolution?

Are there other, less radical options? What about the gradual rise in living standards and liberalization of the social and spiritual environment in parallel with modification of the system, while preserving North Korean statehood for the foreseeable future? Provided it behaves responsibly, at least internationally, in the short term the world community should accept the continued existence of North Korea. At present, North Korea has no reason for aggression. It shows no interest in attempting to dictate its ideology to anyone, or to capture territory or economic resources. Moreover, it would not have the slightest chance of winning in case of such an adventure, and that fact is no secret to its leaders.

In that respect Kim Jong Il's state differs most from that of his father, who dreamed of unification by absorbing South Korea. Kim Jong Il, who is now rumored to be choosing his successor, is neither Nero nor Louis XIV -- he thinks about "après moi" and wants to keep the state in place, but he also understands that it is impossible to do this without change. The change of paradigm of the regime, rather than the change of the regime itself, looks more and more like the proper resolution not only to the nuclear crisis but to broader concerns about North Korea.

With every passing day there is ample evidence of change in North Korea. The turning point was the advent of the new century, although subtle undercurrents were obvious from late 1998 after Kim Jong Il was officially recognized as the formal state leader in the course of the September constitutional reform. Changes in North Korea have become especially noticeable since 2002. They include economic transformation to a multi-sector economy employing market principles, social stratification, changes in the ownership system (more property rights falling into the hands of certain classes, institutions and individuals). Sooner or later, such changes are bound to influence the system of political power. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea can no longer be accurately described as a Stalinist country.

The economy has already changed from a centrally planned socialist type to a mixed type, combining state, capitalist (joint ventures and trading companies), semi-private (especially in agriculture and services) and "shadow" (criminalized) sectors. And there is no way back.

The reigning ideology has changed from mostly communist (Marxism-Leninism plus Juche) to national-egalitarian (Songun or "military first") and "prosperous strong nation" theories.

The political system has become more military based than party based, and there is a tendency to move from totalitarianism towards autocracy.

Foreign policy priorities have changed from supporting "national liberation struggles" to the more pragmatic goal of bridging the gap between North Korea and the world, especially the West.

There has been a marked turn from animosity to broad cooperation with South Korea. This is designed not only as a tool to revive a sagging economy, as is often assumed, but also to gain security and a strategic edge over "foreign devils" by appealing to Korean nationalism. In fact a new historic period of North-South national reconciliation has begun. It has survived the nuclear crisis and even pressure on Seoul from its allies, and the trend has become (despite the usual ups and downs, especially in 2004) a new factor in the Korean situation at the dawn of the 21st century.

Roadmap for Transformation

Kim Jong Il seems to be firmly committed to the change. If such positive intentions, rather than media clichés, are taken into account, how can he be helped? What is needed is a long-term (perhaps 20 years) roadmap of Korean settlement including a comprehensive prioritization of targets and stages for implementation.

1. The chief strategic goal should be peace, development and friendly cooperation in Northeast Asia. This consideration now is more or less shared by China, Russia, and South Korea. Therefore it is necessary to solve the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and related issues peacefully and step-by-step, in a manner that will not jeopardize these main issues. In fact solving the main task is the key to solving the "secondary" issues.

2. The most efficient way to implement a peaceful scenario is to transform North Korea into a peaceful, non-aggressive, developing state, open to international cooperation, a state that should have sufficient guarantees of its security, including some degree of assurance that no subversive action will be carried out against it, so that there would be no need felt for WMD. Not only state security but human security should be maintained. By this we do not mean only people's security as this is broadly understood, but the interests of the ruling class also need to be taken into account. This means that North Korean leaders and managers should know exactly what position they will occupy under the new system, what to expect from reform.

3. The international community should, in accordance with the above-mentioned roadmap, assist North Korea to transform both economically and socially without challenging its sovereignty and statehood, though the source of such changes should, of course, come from within the country. What is needed is an internationally sponsored Marshall Plan for North Korea. A long-term program for economic and social transformation is needed to engage North Korea, bring it into the international division of labor and introduce international managerial experience.

The members of the 6-party talks (US, Japan, Russia, China, South and North Korea) should take the initiative, bringing in the European Union and the United Nations as well, although probably South Korea should play the leading role in preparation and later financing of such a program. Japanese "compensation" to North Korea, in order to settle issues arising from the colonial past, could also be an important financial source. Aid, assistance and investment should be delivered not spontaneously, but in accordance with such a program, and its implementation should be regularly accounted for, not only to the initiating group of countries but also, through the UN, to the wider international community.

The program should not raise suspicions as being aimed at regime change -- forcefully or by way of a "velvet revolution." Rather it should provide for the gradual transformation of the current political elite, many of whom are relatives or comrades within the framework of clan politics, by melting it gradually into a more liberal government system. The program should include many stages and the term of its implementation could well exceed 10 or 15 years

Transformation Imagined

How might such a positive scenario look (constructed somewhat imaginatively)? Its main features might be something like the following:

It would include modification of the economic system based on creating North Korean chaebol (conglomerates) -- first based on state property and step-by-step privatization led by their managers, who will be members of the North Korean elite. This would ensure their support for political stability and the introduction of market principles into commodity flows, and for the emergence of a financial system and ownership relationships based on liberalized government control. Later, small and medium businesses (starting from agriculture) could spring up. It would amount to a combination of Chinese, South Korean and Russian models.

Deregulation of the economy will increase popular economic activity, bringing about foreign investment and an increase in international cooperation. Labor-intensive export-oriented production could mean the start of a "Taedong River Miracle."

Increased affluence will diminish the outbound flow of refugees and bring about socio-political stabilization. An increasing proportion of investment should be channeled to civil production, health and education, while the proportion of military expenditure should decrease as North Korea's security concerns are alleviated.

A rise in living standards and a decrease in opposition to the government on economic grounds will enable the authorities -- provided no external subversive actions take place -- to soften their grip on the population, slowly promote social liberalization (less rules and red tape, freedom of movement, etc), and a liberalization in the ideological and spiritual sphere.

Communist ideology will give way to "patriotism" (with the founder of the state assigned a sacral role) as the foundation of a societal mentality. Increased cooperation and exchanges with South Korea will help promote this "national uniqueness" mythology as a cementing force.

There will be a transition to a sort of "constitutional monarchy," in which the Leader of the Nation relies on "collective leadership" for the day-to-day running of the country and there is greatly expanded feedback from the society's grass-roots -- especially when Kim Jong Il's heir assumes the throne. The state will change first from being totalitarian to authoritarian, and then eventually to an Oriental-style managed democracy (consider South Korea for example, or the modern monarchical regimes of Asia).

The military confrontation of North Korea with the outside world will considerably diminish. Maybe by this time it will be called by a different name, perhaps Kimilsungia or Great Korea (Dae-Chosonguk). That will set the ground for military confidence-building measures. A system of international arrangements for Korean security, with checks and balances cross-guaranteed by USA, Japan and China and Russia, will emerge.

North Korea will no longer need any absolute strategic deterrent and will voluntarily abandon its nuclear and other WMD ambitions, a variant of the South African case.

In a couple of decades, the last remaining obstacles between North Korea and the world will disappear. North Korea would become a vibrant member of regional cooperation, an international transportation hub and ecological tourist destination, adding computer science to export-oriented industries as a source of earnings.

The reduction of military threat and confrontation would also provide for increased cooperation and understanding between the two Koreas to bring about in the long run -- but only when conditions permit -- a voluntary integration of the two Korean states.

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