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2017**Fears of War on the Korean Peninsula***By Dr. Dario Kuntić*

War is lurking on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea has embarked on an accelerated buildup of weapons of mass destruction and modernization of its already large conventional force. It has been consistently testing a series of ballistic and intercontinental missiles, performing nuclear tests, and accelerating toward development of a fully functional nuclear weapon that could strike the United States. The North Korean regime is now estimated to have as many as twenty nuclear warheads and could soon be able to make some to fit on the missiles necessary to deliver them. With time running out, Washington may come to the conclusion that a preventive military strike against North Korea's nuclear and missile programs is the only way to deprive Pyongyang of capability to launch a nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missile on the US. On a visit to Seoul in

March this year, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson left open the option of a military strike to prevent the development of nuclear weapons program from advancing too far, vowed to defend allies in the region, and ruled out negotiations with Pyongyang. As Washington and Pyongyang escalate their war of words, with both sides hinting it could end with a nuclear conflict, the prospect of serious conflict is stronger than ever.

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## North Korea's ideology and foreign policy

A country's foreign policy is always affected by its ideological stance. North Korea is not an exception. North Korea's guiding philosophical principle is the ideology of *Juche*. The word *Juche* simply means "self-reliance". *Juche* is the guiding ideology of the country and the ruling party. The first leader of North Korea Kim Il-sung pointed out that the "*Juche* idea means that the popular masses are the masters of revolution and construction and they are also the motive forces of revolution and construction. In other words, it means that the people see themselves as the masters of their own destiny."

*Juche* places commitment to the state above anything else. The state, its leaders and its political vision come before the interests and identities of individuals. This unconditional loyalty of the citizens has evolved into a functional equivalent of state religion. Its influence on civic life explains why freedoms of any sort are scarce and submitted to the will of North Korea's leaders who are considered as heroes of mythic proportion.

*Juche* teaches that the history of human society is the history of struggle of the masses to defend and realize independence. This includes ideological independence, political independence, economic independence and military independence. Under *Juche* ideology, self-reliance in defense is a fundamental principle of an independent sovereign state. Only when the country implements the principle of self-reliant defense will it be able to repel imperialist aggression, safeguard the

revolutionary achievements and ensure the security of its people. Military self-reliance was viewed as a necessary condition for political sovereignty.

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Strong emphasis on self-reliance in defense was further developed into the doctrine of *Songun* politics under the leadership of Kim Jong-il. The guiding principle of *Songun* politics is giving precedence to arms and military. This particular experience is the ideological foundation of *Songun* politics based on the principle that army is the party, the country and the people. *Songun* politics is a basic political mode making military affairs a national priority, relying on the revolutionary spirit and fighting strength of the army to protect the country, revolution and socialism. This revolutionary fighting spirit is the spirit to protect leaders to death, the spirit to implement the party's principles and policies to death and the spirit to heroic sacrifice. To protect the party, the nation and the people, no amount of resources devoted to building military strength was considered too large. Given this, it is not surprising that the regime has been obsessed with development of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles. North Korea's nuclear program must be seen in the greater context of its ideological doctrine of military self-reliance.

After Kim Jong-un took office, he introduced a mixture of both *Juche* ideology and *Songun* politics, proposing Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism as the only guiding ideology for the party. He has remained faithful to the existing conservative ideology, demonstrated hardline tendencies, replaced old cadres linked to his father with figures loyal to him, strengthened his rule and remained hostile to any type of negotiations with international interlocutors.

He abides to the myth that Korea and the Kim dynasty are one and the same. Kim is the great leader, heir to divinely inspired ancestors with mystical, magical powers of leadership, vision, diplomatic prudence and military genius. Like his father Kim Jong-il and grandfather Kim Il-sung before him, Kim Jong-un is the anointed defender of all Koreans. This belief in the supernatural status of the Kim dynasty defines North Korea and illustrates how unlikely it is that diplomatic pressure will persuade Kim Jong-un to back down.

### **Security dilemma in the Asia-Pacific**

After the Second World War, the Korean Peninsula was divided into two states, the Soviet backed Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the US backed Republic of Korea. In 1950, the Korean War broke out because North Korea wanted to reunite the peninsula under communist rule. The US moved quickly to intervene under the United Nations auspices to stop the expansion of communism. It helped South Korea to change the course of war and destroyed much of the northern half of the

peninsula with massive air strikes. After the US troops crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, the People's Republic of China launched a major counter-offensive and reversed the war once more. The war ended in a stalemate between the two sides who divided the peninsula around the 38th parallel. Following the war, the Chinese have withdrawn their forces from North Korea, but the US has continued to maintain about forty thousand troops in South Korea, even down to the present day.

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Following the war, North Korea found itself confronted with the US, a powerful enemy who prevented the unification of both Koreas under the communist rule. The fact that US forces have been stationed continuously in the South Korea, with routine military exercises conducted jointly with South Korean armed forces, has made North Korea insecure and on alert that Washington may renew hostility.

Pyongyang worries that one of these joint exercises is not going to stop wherever the stop line is, but will continue and roll over the 38th parallel. For the regime in Pyongyang, the American decision to keep thousands of its troops on the peninsula after the war have become striking evidence that the US wants to keep the South Korea firmly under its control, prevent unification with the North Korea and start a military intervention to overthrow the Kim dynasty and replace it with a friendly one.

Believing that North Korea is on the verge of being invaded by the US, Pyongyang has become decisive to develop a credible deterrent to preclude an attack from an adversary power. There lies the reason why North Korea strives to strengthen and consolidate its national defense. Its nuclear program has a dual purpose: to deter external threats and to bolster the strength and image of Kim Jong-un who believes that nuclear weapons are his guarantee of regime survival. Given this, it is not surprising that the regime in Pyongyang has been obsessed with development of nuclear weapons. The Pyongyang government argues that its nuclear program is purely defensive and that it does not want to intimidate anyone else, except as that is necessary for its defense. It emphasizes that the reason it needs nuclear weapons and the missiles is to make sure that the US does not attack it and overthrow the regime. However, in the last couple of years the threats from Pyongyang have become more serious as the regime, which always referred to its nuclear weapons as a deterrent, has increasingly talked about a preemptive strike.

Menacing rhetoric from Pyongyang made

Tokyo, Seoul and Washington take these threats more seriously. They worry that Pyongyang has been developing its nuclear program and accelerating missile tests as a practice run for a nuclear attack. Building an intercontinental ballistic missile and lobbing the projectiles in the direction of the US bases in Japan substantiate that Pyongyang is working doggedly toward making this possible. The threat of a nuclear attack and the ability to inflict catastrophic damage in a single go made Seoul, Tokyo and Washington even more decisive to try to neutralize it before it happens. South Korea has installed and deployed launchers of the US anti-missile Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) while Japan has started deploying land-based Patriot interceptors. At the same time, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington are forming a closer alliance and doing joint military drills and missile defense exercises to act faster in the case of an attack.

The US could also ease the fears of its allies somewhat by deploying tactical nuclear weapons to the region, most likely South Korea. But that would meet vehement opposition from both China and Russia who are already complaining that a reliable anti-ballistic missile network could rob them of their own strategic deterrents.

Washington has also tried to ward off attacks against South Korea and Japan by vowing to come to their defense, regardless of whether North Korea could target American cities with nuclear weapons. But would the US truly be willing to risk Los Angeles to save Tokyo or Seoul? Unknowns surrounding this question

will raise the prospects of easing their insecurity by building up their own defenses. Moreover, any hint that Washington is not fully committed to responding forcefully to attempted coercion from Pyongyang during crises may have the effect of encouraging Japan and Seoul to explore their own nuclear weapons option.

The broad strategies that the US, South Korea and Japan put in place against North Korea, however, leave Pyongyang more insecure and thus more eager to rapidly develop a warhead small enough to arm any of the many missile types it has stockpiled. All these moves provide a powerful incentive for arms race and other types of hostile reactions in East Asia.

### **Risk of miscalculation**

It is not doubtful that North Korea's recent intercontinental missile tests and the country's improved ability to manufacture nuclear weapons pose a serious risk of regional destabilization. However, there is little evidence that North Korea's weapons of mass destruction serve any purpose other than to deter the US, exert greater influence in the region and raise its status in the international community. Kim Jong-un has seen what happened to Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya who failed to acquire nuclear weapons and concluded that only nukes can guarantee his survival.

The Kim dynasty has always been motivated by the straightforward goal of survival. Kim Jong-un may be ruthless dictator but he is not

senseless and suicidal. He knows if North Korea were to use nuclear weapons, the US would amass huge military force to eliminate him and his regime. In the case of unprovoked attack North Korea cannot even count on China with which it signed a mutual defense pact in 1961. In August, an editorial in China's nationalistic Global Times newspaper warned that "China should ... make clear that if North Korea launches missiles that threaten US soil first and the US retaliates, China will stay neutral. If the US and South Korea carry out strikes and try to overthrow the North Korean regime and change the political pattern of the Korean Peninsula, China will prevent them from doing so." China does not want North Korea to collapse because that would leave many uncertainties regarding its weapons, refugees and the American troops at its doorstep, but it is also not eager to risk an open war with the US.

However, this is not the entire story. Pyongyang insists that the Korean War never ended and maintains as an official policy goal the reunification of the Korean peninsula under its rule. A strong US presence in South Korea provided Pyongyang with the necessary ammunition to condemn Seoul for being pathetically subjected to foreign domination. It is still convinced that it can destabilize South Korea with both clandestine and open military provocations such as the infiltration of the presidential residence in Seoul by a North Korean commando unit in 1968, or, more recently, the sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan in February 2010. Moreover, as North Korea's nuclear and missile programs have evolved, Pyongyang seems to have become more

confident that issuing direct nuclear tests of its own can change the behavior of its adversaries. In other words, that coercion can work.

Intimidations, however, are difficult to tolerate indefinitely. There are aspects of behavior of the government in Seoul that lead to a conclusion that South Korea might change its strategic patience with the North. Reports that Seoul has approved plans to establish a special operation force to assassinate Kim Jong-un appear to signal a sharp change of direction in the foreign policy of South Korea's President Moon Jae-in. It is a sign that the South Korea may not be willing to tolerate its citizens being threatened indefinitely by the regime in Pyongyang.

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Frequent nuclear provocations and threats also make it much more likely that the US will conclude that Kim Jong-un is an irrational actor who could actually use nuclear weapons. That, in turn, could make it easier for Washington to launch a preemptive strike. The recent North Korean threat to detonate a thermonuclear bomb over the Pacific could be a breaking point

for the US. If North Korea detonates the bomb, it could force the US to launch a preventive strike against Pyongyang, convinced that military intervention is the only way to stop it on its path of destruction.

The dangers that any of the sides involved in the crisis could miscalculate other's actions are real. The stakes are higher on all sides, but the repercussions for Kim Jong-un's regime if it overplays its hand would be fatal.

## **Conclusion**

East Asia has entered an unstable period in which miscalculations frequently occur, tensions are aggravated and conflicts often erupt. The escalation of military tension on the peninsula is likely to develop in a more complex and dilemmatic way than before, due to the possibility of military action by either the US or North Korea. Precautionary military measures by the US and its Asian allies to enhance deterrence or even undertake actual preparations for military action, may be regarded by Pyongyang as a sign of imminent attack against North Korea and thereby compel it to act preemptively. The risk that Kim Jong-un will use nuclear weapons first will surely rise if he is pushed in a corner and faced with the prospect of the collapse of his regime. Under pressure to issue a military response ahead of a seemingly imminent nuclear attack, or, from Pyongyang's perspective, a strike meant to decapitate the North Korean government, parties on each side could easily trigger a devastating conflict on the basis of a simple

misunderstanding. Given the particularly high level of mistrust and risk of miscalculation on both sides of the dispute, growing tensions between them could escalate into an actual military conflict with devastating consequences.

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