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NORTH KOREA – TO BE OR NOT TO BE NUCLEAR



Ambassador Sergey Batsanov is a retired Russian diplomat and international official who has devoted much of his career to arms control, disarmament and international security issues. As head of the Russian delegation to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, he played a key role in negotiating the multilateral Convention on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. He participated in many US/Russian bilateral meetings and negotiations, including at the ministerial and summit levels. Between 1993 and 2004, Ambassador Batsanov was a senior official of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Since 2005 he has been Director of the Geneva office of Pugwash International (Nobel Peace Prize 1995), working on a variety of issues including East-West relations, Middle East, Syria, Iran nuclear deal and non-proliferation in general.

As if all the volatility, conflict and human suffering around the world this year were not enough, in recent months the crisis over North Korea's (DPRK) possession of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles has mutated from serious to potentially catastrophic, raising fears, especially in the United States, South Korea (ROK) and Japan, that a nuclear war is imminent.

Amid a busy trade in insults and threats, numerous proposals for resolving the crisis are in play. Several of these would entail further pressure on, and further isolation of the Hermit Kingdom. Some are advocating a direct military attack on the DPRK's nuclear and military facilities, and its leadership. President Trump has even spoken of "destroying" North Korea. In short, the situation has become extremely tense. The risk of a nuclear war is probably at its highest since the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

But it does not follow that a nuclear war is likely. For the North Korean leadership starting such a war would be a recipe for self-annihilation, the opposite of one of their goals in seeking to possess a nuclear deterrent. For Washington it would mean risking the nuclear devastation of South Korea and Japan – even, possibly, of big cities on the US Pacific coast. Despite statements to the contrary from some US officials, there are no good military options for Washington, since there is no guarantee that a surprise attack would neutralize all DPRK nuclear missiles. And yet....both sides are engaged in such fierce brinkmanship that the worst may happen against their wills.

The crisis has been looming for almost 30 years. I remember well how alarm bells sounded in Moscow in the late 1980s, when we first saw construction work in North Korea for which the only logical explanation was a nuclear weapon program.

There are several reasons for the situation to have become acutely tense of late. This year North Korea demonstrated that it had made important progress towards possessing thermonuclear (hydrogen)

devices. It has also claimed to have miniaturize some of its devices. And it has come very close to acquiring an ICBM capable of reaching a significant part of the United States. Experts differ on how exactly to measure this progress, but many in the US tend to believe the worst.

These developments have shocked and alarmed many in the United States. Americans are realizing that they can no longer afford to perceive North Korea as a technologically backward state that can easily be contained. They feel a need for a new strategy, and an urge to “do something”.

Another factor that explains recent US behavior is a determination to assert US supremacy in the Western Pacific, which, they fear, is becoming a Chinese sphere of influence. That leads them to press China not only to accept US leadership in defining how to coerce Pyongyang into compliance with UN resolutions, but also to play a leading role in applying the instruments of coercion.

China, for its part, needs to be seen as cooperative, does not wish to have an irredentist, nuclear armed state as a neighbor, and is keenly interested in avoiding a military confrontation between the United States and North Korea, since that could result in millions of refugees crossing into China, and an eventual need for China to rebuild North Korea. But China does not want what it suspects are long-term US goals: a unified Korea with the ROK system of governance and strongly embedded in a US-led camp.

The extent to which the North Koreans have put themselves in the wrong is striking. They have violated the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, which they joined in 1985 (under strong pressure from Moscow, not Beijing, which itself joined only in 1992). They have been ignoring Security Council demands to halt nuclear weapon and missile tests. They have been refusing to return to 6-party talks (DPRK + USA, China, Russia, ROK and Japan) on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, which they quit in 2009. And they have taken to ruling out denuclearization, unless all nuclear weapon possessor-states take part. Such behavior is unacceptable.

However, the United States has contributed to the situation. An excellent chronology of this saga on the Arms Control Association's site <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron> suggests a tale of promises under-fulfilled or devalued by confrontational US actions. It also shows that sanctions on North Korea, in nuclear, missile and other, unrelated areas, have mostly played the role of spoiler, undermining diplomatic efforts to halt first and later roll back the DPRK's nuclear weapon program.

Today things have gone too far to hope for a speedy solution to this crisis. There are too many red lines crossed, too much bad history, too many misperceptions and too little trust. But the need for action is indeed urgent. And the only answer is diplomacy - serious diplomacy, meaning a search for win-win situations through better understanding of each other's underlying concerns.

Any initiatives to give diplomacy room and time should be encouraged. The first order of business should be the defusing of current tensions. This is the only way to prepare the ground for subsequent talks about bigger issues. It need not mean the recognition of the DPRK's nuclear status; that can be finessed, to allow temporary confidence-building measures to take effect.

In this respect the more active involvement of Russia, which for the last 25 or so years was “in the back seat”, could be helpful. Russia's influence in Pyongyang has grown of late, it is resolutely critical of North Korean nuclear ambitions, it sees diplomacy as the only way forward and, like China, though perhaps to a lesser degree, it has grave concerns about the potential consequences of another Korean war. However,

there is a school of thought in Moscow which advocates caution and argues against “helping the US” to avoid another strategic disaster, and against being seen to be seizing the reins from China.

Nonetheless, on 4 July China and Russia jointly put forward a noteworthy proposal for immediate and longer-term steps. In essence they proposed a DPRK moratorium on nuclear and ballistic missile tests, in return for which the United States and ROK would refrain from large-scale joint military exercises. Simultaneously, the conflicting parties “would begin talks and assert common principles of their relations, including the non-use of force, the renunciation of aggression, peaceful coexistence and determination to do all they can to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula with a view to promoting a complex resolution of all problems”. It is still not too late to take up this proposal, modify it if necessary, or add to it - and start building new relationships in this part of the world.

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