

**Monthly Global Security Briefing – April 2013**

## **NORTH KOREA: TAKING ACCOUNT OF THE VIEW FROM PYONGYANG**

Paul Rogers

With rising tensions between North Korea and the United States, this month, Paul Rogers asks: what lies behind North Korea's sense of insecurity and what is the impact of western policy since 9/11 on decision-making by North Korea's leadership?

### **Context**

While tensions between North Korea and the United States peaked early in April, by the end of the month, there were indicators that relations were entering a longer-term period of difficulty. Following the withdrawal of many thousands of North Korean workers from the Kaesong joint economic zone, over a hundred South Korean managers stayed on to oversee the considerable investments of their companies. By the end of the month, they had been reluctantly withdrawn across the border to South Korea, making it likely that the zone would remain inoperative for many months in spite of the inevitable impact this will have on the North Korean economy. This - together with the regime's decision to prosecute Korean-American Kenneth Bae on charges that carry the death penalty, and the announcement of plans for new military exercises on the west coast of North Korea - suggests that the regime is intent on maintaining a forceful image, with little prospect of progress on negotiations over the status of its nuclear programme.

The crisis in relations between North Korea and the United States, taking in tensions with South Korea, Japan and China, may be yet another example of the kinds of crises that have occurred before. Even so, such tensions are risky, because there is the possibility of miscalculation, as well as the crisis escalation phenomenon known as AIM - accidents, incidents and mavericks - which can turn a crisis into something much worse. This is a particular reason why the motives for the current behaviour by the North Korean regime should be subject to careful examination.

There is currently something of a consensus among external analysts that regime behaviour may have much to do with the internal necessity of promoting the new leader and may also concern relations with China. There is also a powerful argument that an accurate representation of the motives for regime behaviour must take into account an assessment of the "view from Pyongyang" - an ability to recognise aspects of North Korea's world-view from its own perspective, however odd that might appear. In this regard, an important factor, which is rarely included in the analysis, relates to the US security posture immediately after the 9/11 atrocities and how North Korea came to figure in that posture.

### **Internal Factors**

Kim Jong-un is a young and inexperienced leader, in power because of his father and grandfather, and with a position made inherently less secure by not being the eldest son. While he is presented as the sole leader, in reality, there is a powerful elite behind him, most importantly, including his aunt Kim Kyong-hui and her husband Chang Song-taek, together with Vice-Marshal Hyon Yong-choi of the People's Army who appears to have replaced the previous army chief Ri Yong-ho. The army is the most powerful institution in the country, but there is

some evidence of recent purges and enforced changes of leadership relating to the determination of the group behind Kim Jong-un to consolidate his (and their) power. In such circumstances, engineering a sense of crisis and demonstrating the ability of the regime to confront its enemies can be advantageous in terms of domestic status.

While most of the angry rhetoric is directed at the United States and South Korea, it is highly likely that much of the current concern within the regime is with the changing attitude of China, North Korea's only significant ally. Frustration at the regime's recent nuclear test was reflected in China's decision to support a new round of UN sanctions, which has been received very badly in Pyongyang. It is therefore highly likely that while much of the rhetoric is directed at the United States, it is actually targeted more at China in an attempt to remind Beijing of North Korea's ability to determine its own path. At the same time, there is a further major and long-standing element of North Korea's outlook that is rarely recognised and requires consideration – the impact of the Bush Jnr. era idea of the “axis of evil”.

### Axis of Evil

After the appalling atrocities of 9/11, the Bush administration reacted vigorously in its pursuit of the al-Qaida leadership and its Taliban hosts in Afghanistan. In the space of ten weeks, the Taliban were ousted from power in Kabul and al-Qaida elements within the country were thoroughly dispersed. The leaders of neither movement were killed or captured, with Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri eventually escaping into North-West Pakistan and the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, reportedly moving to Quetta in the western Pakistani province of Baluchistan.

Nevertheless, the rapid success in Afghanistan was hugely popular in the United States and was reflected in President Bush's first State of the Union Address to Congress on 29 January 2002, a speech punctuated by numerous bouts of standing ovation. As well as celebrating the success of the response to the 9/11 attacks, the speech is hugely significant in that it heralded a fundamental expansion of the “war on terror”, extending it far beyond al-Qaida to encompass a cluster of states including North Korea that sponsored terrorism and were seeking weapons of mass destruction.

Having declared that the first task was to continue the war against al-Qaida, Bush gave great prominence to the second task, which was:

“...to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction. Some of these regimes have been pretty quiet since September the 11<sup>th</sup>. But we know their true nature.

Bush then singled out three states as the most dangerous, North Korea being the first listed: “North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens.”

“Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom.”

“Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade.”

Bush made it utterly clear in his speech that these states were thoroughly dangerous and their regimes had to be checked, using for the first time the phrase “axis of evil”:

“States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger.

“...We’ll be deliberate, yet time is not on our side. I will not wait on events while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.”

Four months later, on 1 June 2002, President Bush gave the Graduation Address at the US Military Academy at West Point and emphasised that the United States had the right to pre-empt future threats. Thus:

“We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants, who solemnly sign non-proliferation treaties, and then systematically break them. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.”  
and:

“...the war on terror will not be won on the defensive. We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act.”

In addition to the three named members of the “axis of evil”, sources in Washington made it clear that three other states were considered lesser but still significant members - Libya, Syria and Cuba.

### **Defeating the Axis**

Within the United States, the use of the term “axis of evil” is associated primarily with the Bush administration and neither that term, nor “war on terror”, feature prominently in Obama’s lexicon. However, for an isolated fortress state such as North Korea, that is of little significance alongside the reality of events of the past decade. Relations between the United States and Cuba may have eased under Obama but in more general terms three of the remaining five members of the “axis of evil” have faced action from the west.

Thus, the Saddam Hussein regime was terminated the year after the State of the Union Address and the Gaddafi regime was ousted two years ago in an operation that would have been impossible without extensive NATO military support. Libya is particularly significant in North Korean eyes because it had earlier eschewed its WMD programme. From a Pyongyang perspective, Gaddafi might still be in power if it had not done so. Finally, the anti-regime rebels in Syria are getting substantial western aid in a process aimed at terminating the Assad regime.

Furthermore, from Pyongyang’s perspective, the United States is adamantly opposed to Iran and North Korea developing nuclear weapons (Secretary of State Kerry’s recent declaration that the United States will not allow North Korea to do so, with an implication of a willingness to use force, being evidence of this).

In most current western political analysis, concepts from the Bush era such as “war on terror” and “axis of evil” are now largely forgotten when assessing the current motivations of the North Korean regime, but this is frankly unwise. North Korea has the outlook of a fortress state surrounded by enemies, with the now uncertain exception of China. The Obama administration may be seen in the west as more liberal, but from Pyongyang’s perspective Mitt Romney could have easily won last November, and there is nothing to stop an even more radical administration winning in 2016.

In the mindset of the elite in Pyongyang, this means that a nuclear weapons capability is essential for North Korea. Any expectation in the west that it will be readily possible to negotiate this away without considerable concessions is wishful thinking. North Korea’s sense of insecurity is at the heart of its nuclear programme and only by significantly addressing this perception in Pyongyang will efforts to solve the crisis have any chance of succeeding.

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