

The Korean End-Game

- Three quite different outcomes are easily conceptualized as evolving from the current situation. The first we are all familiar with and has been addressed in other sessions at this forum. It is the happy ending of denuclearization of the North and the creation of a peace regime of some sort in Northeast Asia.
- If we can imagine ourselves there, weapons of mass destruction and the capability to produce them, along with extended range ballistic missiles, would be gone from the peninsula, and North Korea would join the family of nations as a normal state, shedding its pariah status.
- What this exactly means is hard to describe, but it is difficult to imagine without the North at least evolving from a kind of totalitarian dynasty to perhaps an authoritarian regime with governmental institutions and the rule of law, ending human rights violations as an international concern. North-South relations would evolve from detent to entente, and perhaps to confederation and reunification. External powers, particularly Japan, China and the US, would look to de facto understandings or even de jure institutional architecture to assure their security interests are protected. It's a nice image.
- A less appealing , but perhaps more likely outcome would be a plateau in the evolution of internal and external politics in the region, driven by US-DPRK relations settling into a "saddle point" where neither is motivated to overcome inertia, and both only do what is necessary to avoid far worse outcomes. For the game theorists, this is the mini-max solution.
- If we end up here, sanctions, indifferently implemented, remain and continue as source of major irritation to the North. In response, the North seeks to make the US and the ROK pay for pursuing policies that undercut Chairman Kim's economic goals by testing nuclear weapons and IRBMs and MRBMs, but probably not ICBMs, and launching occasional deadly actions in and around the peninsula.
- Under these circumstances, the ROK and the US would visibly cultivate their alliance, with the US sustaining its presence and operations with the South, while China would attempt to restrain the North and persuade the ROK and US to moderate their responses to DPRK provocations. We have lived on this plateau, on and off, for at least thirty years.
- The third outcome, decent into military conflict, is desired by no nation but is nevertheless one that must be considered as not just possible but quite plausible. It could come about if the North concludes that its status as international pariah, subject to crippling sanctions, is intolerable, and decides to raise the stakes by launching limited but deadly attacks against the South on land or at seas, or by confronting the US directly with ICBM tests or threatening US forces on Guam.
- There are other ways the situation in the region could deteriorate and have us all fall off the plateau, some just involving accident or miscalculation, but calculated risk taking has been seen before. The North's announced

intension to develop ICBMs for the express purpose of threatening continental United States with thermonuclear weapons in January 2017 was just that, and the new US president took it just that way. We all lived on the edge of the plateau that year.

- Some may think that nuclear weapons make major war between nuclear armed states too horrible to contemplate, that deterrence will always work. Perhaps. Or perhaps the North will think its nuclear weapons will deter the US from responding to its conventional provocations for fear of a nuclear response. But to believe this is to believe that the US has lost confidence in its own ability to deter attack – but, in fact, it has not. It is not at all clear that the North understands this.
- Conventional war on the Korean peninsula would most likely remain conventional, but it would be catastrophic nevertheless for the participants, and its outcome could not be expected to fundamentally change the situation on the ground.
- What this all suggests is that we should not be too happy living on the plateau, not the least because slipping off into major conflict is all too easy.

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