SIX KEY FACTORS TO UNDERSTAND THE CRISIS IN THE KOREAN PENINSULA

Abstract:

Since December 2012, the Korean peninsula is in a crisis situation, with heightened tension, especially dialectic, albeit with some significant decisions in recent weeks. The paper analyses six key factors: political, military, economic, geographic, social and nuclear elements, in order to try to explain the current situation and its possible evolution.

Keywords:

Asia, Korea, China, United States, Security, Crisis, Nuclear, Conflict.
INTRODUCTION

Since the 12th of December 2012, after the successful rocket launch that orbited a small North Korean satellite, the situation of the peninsula has not stopped being involved in a rhetoric of confrontations, in some cases, pre-war like.

The success, in extremis, of this new launch after the failure of the 13th of April, which expected to commemorate the centenary of Kim Il-Sung’s birth, the ‘Eternal President’\(^1\), sets the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the path of intercontinental ballistic missiles production. Thus, the North Korean government reaches success in order to compensate the economic failure, the year on which the official propaganda had set its goals to achieve great level of development, highlighting, nonetheless, the technological achievements and its military level and nuclear status at the level of the great superpowers.

But that challenge to the international community is immediately responded by the Resolution 2087 of the United Nations Security Council, which summarises the cyclical scheme of the DPRK since the end of the Cold War, a design implemented by Kim Jong-II, and whose son Kim Jong-Un maintains, at least in his first appearances. So much so that, the foreseen nuclear detonation of the intended scheme, matches the first weeks of assumption of the Presidency of the new Government of South Korea. Thus, on the 12th of February 2013, the third and most successful nuclear explosion so far is detected by the seism team of the Republic of Korea (RK). A new resolution, the 2094, matches the beginning of military manoeuvres of the RK and the US, which for the first time were directed by the Chief of the General Staff of the Defence Department, were the detonator of a new and deeper clashing positions which worsens the crisis.

In the middle of the crisis, Kim Jon-Un calls a plenary session of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers’ Party on the 31st of March, and the 7th session of the 12th Supreme People’s Assembly on the 1st of April, in which important officials are appointed to strengthen his leadership, as well as affirming the objective of continuing in the nuclear path as the only way of the defending the independence and national sovereignty.

Thus, we are witness of the unilateral armistice action and the closure of the lines of communication with the southern neighbour; the crossing of the demilitarised line is forbidden and the Kaesong Industrial Complex is closed; a notice to the accredited diplomatic delegations in Pyongyang is published, which would not guarantee their safety if hostilities broke out from the 10th of April; movements of two musudan intermediate-range ballistic towards the oriental shore that could lead to new tests of ballistic missiles matching another nuclear test; along with continuous demonstrations of patriotic fervour and support to the army.

\(^1\) Kim Il-Sung’s date of birth: 15th of April 2012
At the same time, the US, South Korea, and Japan adjust their defences, and the first two are preparing contingency plans to respond to a possible attack by the DPRK, while continuing with the combined manoeuvres until the 30th of April. In this regard, President Park Geun Hye asserts emphatically that she will respond in the line with the received attack without any political consideration. Meanwhile, the General Staff Committee of the Korean People’s Army of the DPRK confirms that a group of B-52 based in Guam flew over the peninsula, simulating a nuclear attack, protected by a squadron of F-22s based in Okinawa, indicating, in turn, that these were changing their deployment to the South Korean base in Osan. In the same statement echoed the overflight of the Yellow Sea by ‘Spirit’ B-2 strategic bombardiers based in the American continent. The statement of the 4th of April literally threatened: “The moment of explosion is approaching fast. No one can say a war will break out in Korea or not and whether it will break out today or tomorrow”.

Nonetheless, which are the key factors that can help us understand the current state of affairs, which manifests in a rhetoric and an antebellum atmosphere activity, and compelling the Secretary General of the United Nations to state, on his visit to Madrid, about the devastating consequences that a ‘miscalculation’ could imply.

1. POLITICAL FACTOR

Domestic Politics

The continuity of the regime and its hereditary nature mark the great strategic goal of the DPRK. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall the subsequent opening of diplomatic missions in Moscow and Beijing in Seoul, secrecy and isolation of the regime have been accrued. In addition, the need to ensure the dynastic transfer of power imposes tight control of the regime’s key institution, the military. In turn, this makes it necessary to equip their leader, in this case Kim Jong-Un, with the prestige and history enough to unite the wills of his militias.

After the crisis scheme established by the DPRK that marked the transition of political power and support to China’s new leader, it would seem that, once that continuity is ensured, it could generate an extended period of institutional stability. However, the rapid and drastic step taken by Kim Jong-Un to strengthen the internal control of the military, increased by a very different domestic situation from the dream of his grandfather, regarding the celebration of its centennial, there is no doubt that it has caused tensions between the hardliners of his father and what it appears to be a symptom of opening and reform, with greater military control of the party and the group of trust of the new leader.

The Politburo, which has reduced its members from 19 to 17, sees the reduction of the military presence down to 5, so that the new power relation is 5-12, between the military and the party, with three new generals as candidates, including the current Minister of Defence Kim Kyol Sik and the Minister of Internal Affairs Choe Pu II, both very close to the
young leader. Another important appointment is to Pak Pong Ju as Prime Minister, replacing the 84-year-old Choe Yong Rim, putting in office a man regarded as a reformer. Also, the appointment of a man from the party and close to the new leader, Choe Ryong Hae, as Vice Marshal and Chief of the Armed Forces, is very significant.

**International Politics**

The situation of the region is dominated by the China-US relations, seeking the stability and security to allow a gradual and sustainable development in the Asia-Pacific. This development should strengthen interregional cooperation and enhance mutual trust.

After the recent political changes in all countries of the region, the second Obama administration and the new Chinese President XI Jinping showed unmistakable signs of a path that seeks understanding and closer cooperation and dialogue that could mean a new G-2. Meanwhile, the other nations in the region seem to be in favour of a nationalist character, which, in words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, would really threaten the stable framework of the relations between the two, and revitalised by unwanted events or lack of strategic calculation, would slide into the situation towards the “kind of nationalistic fervour that precipitated conflicts in 20th-century Europe over resources, territory or power”.

**2. MILITARY FACTOR**

The world’s fourth military power with the most powerful artillery threatening Seoul; besides having the third arsenal of chemical and possibly biological weapons, and other asymmetric warfare capabilities as the first special operations forces, including important fleet of submarines, and a vast constellation electronic warfare and cybernetic capabilities, constitute themselves an actual conventional threat. In addition, their continuing progress on the development of what could be 12 nuclear weapons and the uranium enrichment program that could add up to one or two weapons per year, vectors associated, would imply a regional and, in its case, intercontinental range of devastating effects.

In turn, there is one of the most important military partnerships, the one maintained between South Korea and the US. The importance and the status of readiness are shown in the frequent exercises, which are on the most important elements in the dialectic of the confrontation. For instance, the closure of the passage of South Korean workers into the Kaesong multinational industrial complex, as a usual measure during the period of exercises.

Also, as a result of the serious incidents of 2010, with the sinking of the corvette Cheonan

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2 Remarks on the 11th of December 2012 during the dinner of the “US-China Policy Foundation”.
3 Seoul has over 10.5 million people and it is located 80 miles from the demilitarised strip. In addition, its metropolitan area, including the port of Inchon, has over 25 million inhabitants.
and the artillery duel in the island of Yeompyeong, the operations command in the case of war should have been transferred to the South Korean in 2012, but it has been delayed until 2015.

Meanwhile, the new guidelines for the transfer of technology regarding the South Korean missile system, along with the increased scope that would make it possible to attack any South Korean target, as well as the new attitude of response to further provocations, could gradually change the focus of a self-restrictive position to promote stability and gradual changes to the situation towards a more proactive one, which allows, through legitimate targets, force the scheme of “strategic patience” that has not got the desired result yet. Given this potential new scheme, the contingency in which North Korea’s actions make it difficult to attribute authorship decreases, so that the freedom of action of the regime is being limited to the cyber realm.

Another aspect, highlighted by the US administration to insist on a greater pressure from China on Pyongyang, refers to the fact that the on-going North Korean military threat requires continuous and visible maintenance of the US force in the region, which the China’s People’s Liberation Army would probably want to see decrease progressively.

3. ECONOMIC FACTOR

The region's economic factor is undoubtedly China. The Asian giant is the first trading partner of both Koreas. In the case of North Korea, its dependence exceeds the 60% for both imports and exports, after the South drastic cut as a result of the serious events of 2010. With regard to South Korea, it is also the first commercial partner, which in relation to exports, reaches the 24.4%, whereas the US and Japan account for 10.1% and 7.1%, respectively. In relation to imports, the figures are: China, 16.5%; Japan, 13%; and the US, 8.5%. That also keeps it in a privileged position regarding Japan: Exports, China 19.7%, US 15.5% and South Korea 4.7%.

Another important factor refers to the volatility of financial markets and a situation of great tension in the international monetary system, which requires strengthening of market confidence. The situation that requires moderate statements of policy makers seeking to redirect a situation, which will maintain the spectacular growth of East Asia as an engine of the global economy. The growth, from which the US – which has recently signed the free

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4 The amount of China, in relation to North Korea, regarding exports, exceeds the $3,100 billion with imports reaching the $2,500 million. In relation to South Korea, the amounts are: exports, about $135,000 million and imports worth $85,000 million. The numbers in Japan are: exports, $156,200 billion and imports of $184,200 million.
trade agreement with South Korea – does not want to be absent and seeks to strengthen the Trans Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement, pending the incorporation of Japan. This group currently represents the largest market for US exports of goods and services, with a total of about $895,000 million, accounting the 60% of the exports of goods in 2011.

China’s capability to strangle the North Korean regime is real, but the experience and lessons learned by the Chinese Communist Party regarding the fall of the Soviet Empire show us that the basic imperative for reform in the interior of the regime is to achieve a solid economic growth that supports the stability needed to make directed transitions. It seems clear that, since China supported economic reforms that took advantage of the rapid growth of the region, it would support the growth of the northeast regions and that would make a progressive opening of the DPRK’s political regime.

4. GEOGRAPHICAL FACTOR

The Korean peninsula, the traditional bridge of invasions in the Chinese Empire, has played an important role in the stability of its northeast area. In its new role of regional and global actor, the peninsula is a traditional way of penetration that can become an exit route for China’s new energies.

The peninsula, divided by the 4km wide and the 238 length most militarised zone in the world, is now involved in a technical state of war that is constantly hit by skirmishes, especially in the line of delimitation of the maritime zone. However, the peninsula has no territorial claims on its 1,500 km border with China and its 17 km with Russia. The first is one of the world's most reinforced borders in order to prevent illegal immigration and trafficking. In its maritime areas, the only sticking point concerns the Dokdo-Takeshima Islands, according the Korean and Japanese denomination, whose sovereignty is supported by North Korea against Japanese claim.

In terms of geopolitics, Saul Bernard Cohen describes the peninsula the meeting place of the three strategic domains, East Asia dominated by China, the continental area of Eurasia dominated by Russia, and the maritime zone dominated by the United States. Thus, he considers that if the peninsula reunified itself, the three superpowers should find a way of demilitarise it and make a bridge linking the three domains.

5. SOCIAL KEY

The ethnic homogeneity is clear, with small numbers of Chinese population in both Koreas. Meanwhile, in China, the Korean ethnic, one of the 55 officially recognised by the government, is close to two million people, occupying the 13th place. The largest number of
immigrants that got into the country during the Japanese occupation of Korea, which constitutes a historical period still very present in the feelings of the population, most of all regarding the “sex slaves”, which has led to statements of disapproval of the two Koreas by the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, about the possibility that modifies the apology statement of 1993, known as the Kono statement.

With a population twice as large as South Korea, close to 49 million inhabitants, and an area less than its northern neighbour, with a 0.2% growth (one of the world’s lowest) is doomed to a significant aging population. This concern considers the possible inability to nurture its armed forces with enough people.

Also, the international community, on the 21st of March, by an absolute majority of the 47 members of the Human Rights Council, has instructed the creation of a Commission to report human rights violations in North Korea, and the possibility of determining if there have been crimes against humanity in some cases.

6. **NUCLEAR FACTOR**

Nuclear proliferation, since the birth of the DPRK, has been an essential element in understanding the development of the regime.

Since the launch of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which caused the immediate surrender of the Japanese army, with the consequent occupation without combat by the Soviet army in the northern part of the peninsula, the Pyongyang’s regime’s propaganda runs out of narrative support for liberation, and is marked by the instantaneous crumbling of Japanese defence. This fact is followed by the access to the status of nuclear superpower by China in 1964 and the proliferation, outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), of India. Meanwhile, North Korea was incorporated into the International Atomic Energy Agency in 1974 and signed as a State party to the NPT in 1984, which doesn’t alter the fact that there has always been suspicion of dual use of nuclear technology with scientists trained in Japan and key support of the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, it is the different economic drift of the two Koreas, with the North having a per capita income twice as the one of its neighbour prior to 1976, in which they balanced and the North progressively sank until decreasing to the current 18 times worse than the South.

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent exchange of ambassadors between Moscow and Beijing to Seoul, delves into the ideology of the “Juche”, promoted by Kim Il Sung, whose strategic autonomy based on nuclear weapons becomes one of its main goals.

The “Eternal President” is succeeded by his son Kim Jong Il, who ends denouncing the NPT and begins a cycle of provocation with nuclear tests and necessary technology tests to

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5 The per capita income is $1,800 of the DPRK, and the ROK is $32,400, according to the data from the “World Factbook” of the CIA.
manufacture ballistic missiles, as well as programs of uranium enrichment and plutonium processing, in addition to the strategic autonomy goal, for propaganda purposes in order to strengthen the system and serve as bargaining chip to get more international aid.

This pattern is altered by the sudden death of the “Beloved Leader”, and the apparent smooth transition to his third song, the young Kim Jong Un, prepared from the first stroke suffered in 2008. A new period is marked at first by the continuity of the will of his father, supported by his aunt Kim Kyong Hui and her husband Jang Song Tack, Vice President of the National Commission for Defence; the need to exalt the nationalist pride to mark the centenary of the birth of his grandfather; and the new nuclear test on the 12th of February with a statement of continuity and impulse of the nuclear program.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVE

Among the analysed factors, it appears the fence on the Pyongyang regime narrows, giving the conditions to end the provocations pattern used and that, sooner or later, will cause a miscalculation that will imply the reaction of the international community and the definitive end of the power of the Kim family, based on:

- A favourable regional economic situation, with a Chinese scheme that, preserving the continuity of the one-party model, promotes economic growth, which has allowed to get rid of poverty and malnutrition in more than 600 million people.

- The transition of power, apparently finished, with reformist personalities close to the young Kim Jong Un, also supported by the new Chinese government, with an extensive diplomatic team experienced in the North Korean dossier.

In addition, the new governments of Japan and South Korea, along with the second Obama administration, make a clear difference red line with a tougher stance in not accepting more provocations as those in 2010.

También, los nuevos gobiernos en Japón y Corea del Sur, unidos al segundo mandato de Obama, establecen una clara línea roja de referencia con una postura más dura que no debe aceptar más provocaciones como las de 2010.

- The recognition of the absence of reasonable strategic goals for military and nuclear tracks, in an increasingly favourable environment to understanding and cooperation, which will try to avoid, at least in the medium term, the escalation of conflict at a regional level. Almost certainly, the start of a conflict by the DPRK would be suffocated with the least possible damage to the fragile security scheme in the area, so that the great loser should be the continuity of the Pyongyang regime. On the latest news received from the area talk about the closure of one of the border crossings with China.

Three key dates are on the horizon, the 11th of April, the official commemoration of the first anniversary of Kim Jong Un’s appointment as the Party Secretary General; the 15th of April,
date of the 101st anniversary of the birth of his grandfather; and the 30th of April, the end of the US and ROK military manoeuvres. So we will probably witness an increase of the rhetoric propaganda of the regime until the 15th of April, with a likely ballistic and/or nuclear test, with a gradual and progressive decrease in pressure in the second half on the month, due to the end of the period of exercises, to begin to see the real new strategic policy of Pyongyang.

To conclude, and following the thought of Richard Nixon on the personality of the four new leaders in the region, all descendants of the former major national leaders in their respective countries would lead us to the consideration of a solution to the crisis through negotiation and dialogue, without force that generate situations of great suffering for their people. However, in the case of South Korea, China and Japan, the vital experiences of Park Geun Hye, Xi Jinping, and Shinzo Abe have gone through moments of great drama and tribulation, which would make them more likely to make tough and courageous decisions to avoid a false start of a conflict, in the case of miscalculation by the weakest of the leaders, Kim Jong Un.

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6 The latest threat from North Korean authorities has been asking all foreigners living in South Korea to leave the country as a precaution in the case of hostilities.