

This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 29 Nov 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



## **East and South-East Asia International relations and security perspectives**

Andrew T. H. Tan

### **North Korea's impact on North-East Asian security**

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203146026-13>

Nolan Theisen

**Published online on: 21 Mar 2013**

**How to cite :-** Nolan Theisen. 21 Mar 2013, *North Korea's impact on North-East Asian security from: East and South-East Asia, International relations and security perspectives* Routledge

Accessed on: 29 Nov 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203146026-13>

**PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT**

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

# North Korea's impact on North-East Asian security

*Nolan Theisen*

---

Despite the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (North Korea) deliberate intractability and imperviousness to trends of global and regional economic integration, the stubbornly reclusive Kim dynasty has defied the conventional wisdom of experts who continue to predict its imminent collapse to this day (Song 2012; Pritchard 2011). Dictatorships are inherently more vulnerable during times of power transition, but Kim Jong Un's appointment and rapid ascent to the top has thus far proceeded without a setback. While there are signals that the ground might be breaking for limited economic reforms under the incumbent leader, there is increasing pessimism over the possibility of a reversal in the country's nuclear policy. It is also unlikely that targeted economic liberalization will have any effect on the North's fundamental dependency on its nuclear programme for security. Substantively Kim Jong Un has not deviated from any of his father's policies yet, although he has identified more with his late grandfather in the soft manner by which he interacts with the citizenry. By its sheer nature economic reform would generate competition and create institutional friction, challenging the existing military-first doctrine of *songun* and potentially compromising the very legitimacy upon which his transferred power rests. The longevity of the regime and its ability to maintain firm control over its population despite horrendous economic conditions and chronic food shortages is indicative of the successful indoctrination of a cult ideology backed by the loyal service of the internal security apparatus that preserves an airtight police state. While the indefinite continuation of draconian economic policies and outside censorship does not appear sustainable in the long run, it is not a pressing concern that will dictate any form of immediate or unpredictable change. Thus, an uneasy and combustible status quo remains in post-Kim Jong Il North-East Asia with the Korean Peninsula at its focal point.

Meanwhile, palpable distrust between the influential stakeholders reinforces an atmosphere of stagnant uncertainty in the region. After the collapse of the Six-Party Talks, the recent demise of the promising Leap Day agreement between the USA and North Korea is but the most recent evidence of the lingering disconnect. The core US policy for bringing about denuclearization via negotiation seems to be increasingly out of reach given North Korea's renewed determination to institutionalize and legitimize its nuclear status. At the same time, efforts to pressure the regime are continually undermined by Chinese intervention meant to enable its survival. Pyongyang's ability to defy the international community could be attributed to two

overriding forces: the unobstructed development of its nuclear programme over the past 20 years and the People's Republic of China's protective policy that has insulated it from international sanctions. The former is a result of the failure of the 1994 Agreed Framework and the eventual collapse of the Six-Party Talks in 2009, bringing down with it the 2005 Joint Statement. There are a number of explanations for the failure of these negotiations, but what has emerged is a growing recognition by US officials that Kim Jong Il never intended to trade in his nuclear programme and that this wisdom was no doubt imparted to his son. China's role as sole guarantor is based on its own security assessments and its belief that North Korea is stable enough to resist outside pressure with its help, and provide a comfortable buffer zone. This has established a status quo favourable to Beijing's interests which the USA has been largely unable to counter.

### **The USA and China: North Korea threat perceptions**

The basic threat emanating from Pyongyang is geopolitical in nature. For China, it is quite direct—that of instability and the repercussions of a disorderly collapse, namely a massive refugee crisis along its shared border. Beijing's greatest fear is an armed conflict that results in a reunited Korea under a pro-US government in Seoul. A close second would be large-scale unrest causing a massive influx of refugees across its north-eastern border. A distant third are concerns over the continued development of North Korea's nuclear programme (Kleine-Ahlbrandt 2012). By extension, the benefit of keeping a friendly and stable US adversary in power is the space it creates between itself and US forces in the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

Conversely, officials in Washington, DC, have always been primarily concerned with the implications of North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes. Although it is years away, if testing continues unimpeded behind China's protective curtain, a nuclear-armed inter-continental ballistic missile could conceivably bring the continental USA within its adversary's range (Revere 2012). Furthermore, the surreptitious uranium enrichment programme poses serious proliferation risks, especially as the North Korean economy becomes more abysmal and the regime grows more desperate for foreign exchange. Finally, if the USA were to acquiesce to recognition of North Korea's nuclear status it would deal a tremendous blow to the integrity of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, which is a tenet of US foreign policy, and would allow for the North Korean regime to declare a major diplomatic victory.

While the nuclear issue remains unresolved, the pervasive threat of attack along the Northern Limit Line is something that Beijing has begun to take more seriously. In 2010 the *Cheonan* and Yeongpyeong incidents proved to be significantly destabilizing. The strong US-South Korean rhetorical and military response served as a reminder to Beijing that condoning this behaviour risked destabilizing escalation.

### **North Korean succession: responding to an anomaly**

From a security standpoint, it is no secret that China needs North Korea as a buffer zone. In fact, Pyongyang's recognition of this axiom is the source of its own leverage and ability to defy the wishes of its hegemonic neighbour despite near-absolute financial dependence. Yet Beijing is willing to stand by the recalcitrant regime even as its influence declines and regional divisions become more explicit. This sends a powerful signal about its own threat perceptions, which are preoccupied with maintaining separation from the US military presence and retaining leverage, if only in perception, over Washington's own interests in the Pacific.

Having signed-off on the leadership of Kim Jong Un, China believes first that he is capable of consolidating power in the absence of his late father, which many doubted but he has certainly proven to this point, and second that the continuation of Kim rule at the apex of a system of hereditary dynastic totalitarianism serves in the best interest of stability. Even if Beijing's leverage over Pyongyang has declined, as some high-ranking officials have acknowledged, the Chinese leadership sees no viable alternative (International Crisis Group 2009). While the Kims' absolute hold on power can be explained by the typically intrusive and overbearing characteristics of a totalitarian dictatorship, the regime has and will continue to depend on outside assistance for its persistent economic shortcomings. China has redoubled its economic commitments to fill the void of declining South Korean investment and US aid amid growing tensions. As long as China's interests are best served by the current status quo, it will continue to make the necessary financial investments to prop up the regime so that it does not become desperate and destabilizing.

Meanwhile, the unique North Korean dynastic brand that China has somewhat begrudgingly embraced continues to baffle conventional wisdom in the USA. The consolidation of power under the Kim family has survived a seismic geopolitical recalibration with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which eliminated a majority of its longstanding communist supporters, while showing no cracks in its leadership structure even as its economy tanked and millions starved in preceding years. US experts and policy makers alike have not been able to fathom the endurance of the isolated state, finding such a system not only inherently unstable but eternally on the brink of collapse. This line of thinking has not only proven to be misguided, but has clouded an already deeply distrustful negotiation climate between the two countries. Furthermore, hope that this inevitable regime collapse might bring about better conditions for negotiations over the country's nuclear programme is a false premise. It would be impossible accurately to predict what would happen if somehow an organized opposition removed Kim Jong Un from the top of the leadership chain, but it would almost certainly be led by military cadres, dissatisfied by their marginalization within the power structure, who would be even more intractable over any form of external negotiations. The fact is that all institutions—the government, the military and the party—depend politically on the Kim name and legacy. Thus, despite his young age and lack of experience, the prospect of his removal by a coalition of high-ranking officials is extremely unlikely.

In light of the seemingly endless futility of denuclearization efforts over the past two decades, the USA has begun concentrating on policies of containment and deterrence alongside engagement. Because these policies are coercive, China is non-committal if not subversive with respect to their implementation. While the USA has spearheaded the multilateral effort to identify and blacklist North Korean commercial entities suspected of involvement in illicit trade under United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1874, reports of widespread Chinese complicity in its border provinces has no doubt undermined the effectiveness of these programmes. China is a signatory of UNSC Resolution 1874, but in the drafting process negotiators were able to make most clauses non-binding. This reflects different threat assessments whereby Chinese officials have determined that it is better to allow the North breathing room even while this permits a window for the continuation of its weapons of mass destruction programme. The USA certainly protests this, but has not been able to interrupt the enabling economic activities between the two.

Lack of guidance, agreement and progress has led to an evolving uncertainty in the region. Through both its behaviour and rhetoric, North Korea has signalled that it has no intention of giving up its nuclear weapons stockpile or uranium programme any time soon. It showed no hesitation in sacrificing potential fruits of the Leap Day deal that would have granted a nuclear

moratorium in return for food aid, but more importantly it dashed any hopes of rapprochement between North Korea and the USA under the North's new leadership. This was followed soon after by a constitutional revision updating its status as a 'nuclear armed state', making it clear that Pyongyang is consolidating its deterrence and aiming for recognition (Kwon 2012). China has always been a proponent of denuclearization precisely because it would improve the security environment, but it will not contest a nuclear North Korea as long as the arsenal is small and it does not provoke an arms race or unreasonable levels of US military expansion in the region (International Crisis Group 2012). These potential long-term risks are outweighed by the short-run benefits of a stable leadership structure in Pyongyang. In essence, China subordinates denuclearization to regime security, while the USA will pursue denuclearization even at the risk of regime change, and the result is that China shields the North from international pressure and US-led coercion (Bosco 2012). While an increased US military presence and the nuclear umbrella over South Korea and Japan provides a sound deterrent against North Korean adventurism and thus a stabilizing mechanism for the region at present, it reinforces a status quo that is detrimental to a conclusive long-term solution. In a sense this environment is sustaining the North's nuclear programme, which increases the likelihood of its *de facto* recognition.

### Policy options for key players

The current North Korean policies of the USA and China are a reflection of their individual and substantially contrasting threat assessments. China is tolerant of Pyongyang's existing and continuing nuclear programme and the USA is not. While a re-examination of policy would naturally unfold in Beijing as part of the 2012 leadership transition, and in Washington following the November 2012 presidential election, one should not expect any significant evolution or convergence of either country's core principles.

China's longstanding policy of 'no war, no instability, no nukes', represents the ordering of its priorities on the Korean Peninsula, and seems to rule the day (Blohm 2012). It believes that the best way of achieving these outcomes is a smooth dynastic succession in Pyongyang with an eventual soft landing buoyed by economic reform that would lead to favourable conditions for dismantling its nuclear programme. It is difficult to imagine any significant deviation from this logic. While frustration was mounting over King Jong Il's resistance to economic reforms and aggravation of the status quo, his son will surely be given a fresh slate and time to consolidate power before serious judgement is passed. China will continue to push him softly in this direction, but it is unlikely to withdraw support if its overtures are refused. No matter how frustrated Beijing becomes with the antics of North Korea and its waning influence over the country, Beijing's pragmatic desire to maintain a stable North Korea buffer zone provides enough of a security return on its current investments.

Up until now, policy makers in Washington have surmised that resolving the nuclear issue was a precursor to improved bilateral relations and thus greater regional stability; no US Administration since the crisis of 1993–94 has accepted anything less than the verifiable dismantling of North Korea's nuclear programme in return for normalized relations. Significant diplomatic energy has been focused on eliminating the threat by compelling Pyongyang to trade in its weapons for reciprocal security concessions and normalization via the Six-Party Talks, and most recently the bilateral Leap Day agreement. Of course, these efforts have failed to produce any tangible results. The USA has also sought to punish North Korea into submission, but UNSC sanctions—Resolutions 1718 in 2006 and 1874 in 2009—have not forced capitulation. Second, and less abstract, is the burgeoning challenge of proliferation activities. The USA fought for stricter provisions in UNSC Resolution 1874 and established interdiction guidelines that allow

suspicious North Korean vessels to be inspected in open waters. Supplementing this campaign is the Proliferation Security Initiative, which is a voluntary organization seeking jointly to monitor and intercept shipments of illegal goods. China has declined to join its ranks thus far.

The USA does not feel that it has any room to compromise its core policy and grant North Korea *de facto* nuclear status, even though gaining this acceptance is clearly Pyongyang's goal. Following the collapse of the Leap Day agreement and faced with the reality that the regime clearly prefers to hold onto its nuclear card, the USA finds itself in an exceedingly difficult position. It is unfathomable that any US Administration will concede North Korea's nuclear status in an implicit or much less official capacity. Yet China, and likely South Korea, will strive to improve relations even under the conditions of an undeterred, ongoing nuclear programme in the regime's possession. Thus the USA is confronted with a somewhat intractable long-run challenge, while at the same time it must address more pressing issues of proliferation and security assurances for its allies.

The strengthening US-centric bilateral and trilateral military alliances with Japan and South Korea in response to the North Korea threat are troubling for China, but it can do nothing to slow their momentum. In order to address more imminent matters of conventional security, the USA continues to emphasize its military commitment to its allies in the region. The *Cheonan* sinking and the shelling of Yeongpyeong Island were followed by military exercises meant to demonstrate a willingness and ability to take measured responses should aggressions continue—a signal specifically directed at China. As long as these asymmetric threats exist, Tokyo and Seoul will continue to seek out an expanded US presence in the region and move more aggressively to improve their own autonomous defence capabilities.

Since the *Cheonan* incident, Seoul has been busy improving its early-warning and surveillance systems, which include the deployment of underwater sensors to detect submarines near the Northern Limit Line. At the same time, the defence establishment has revised its rules of engagement to allow more flexibility in choosing weapons systems with which to respond to provocations (International Crisis Group 2011). Similarly, following the second nuclear test in 2009, Tokyo has partnered with the USA in developing anti-missile systems and is taking a more active role in expanding supplies to the US military abroad, while the merits of its constitutional military constraints are increasingly debated. This past June, trilateral naval exercises were held between the three countries and for the first time South Korea allowed Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF) to participate (Hornung and Tatsumi 2012). While historical legacies remain a sore spot between the two countries, China's rise and its defence of what is perceived to be a hostile regime in North Korea are creating the impetus for unprecedented reconciliation.

Under the Lee Myung-Bak administration, relations between Pyongyang and Seoul were almost non-existent. His hardline positions were exacerbated by the two violent North Korean attacks, which essentially ended any chance of serious rapprochement between the two governments. However, the new administration entering the Blue House in December will likely seize the opportunity for a fresh start and make the political investment necessary to revive inter-Korean relations in an effort to relieve recent tensions (Lee 2012).

Ultimately, the most promising path for US policy is to implement a multifaceted strategy employing measures of containment, deterrence and pressure in an attempt to counter the array of asymmetric North Korean challenges outlined above. Yet these measures are somewhat temporal and reactive in nature, seeking to manage current threats but unable to bring about a fundamental change to the status quo. For this, the USA will need to convince China not only that the US position will not bend or break with time, but also that the best way to ensure security in the region is to remove the nuclear threat from the Peninsula. China can continue to pay lip service to denuclearization, but it is at odds with this premise. Displays of US joint-military

operations with its North-East Asian allies and a continued loss of influence over the current regime are unlikely to erode this perception. Even if the regime tests another missile or nuclear device, it is difficult to imagine China ever aligning with the US position. In the mean time, finding common ground with Beijing over non-proliferation is vital for the successful outcome of multilateral efforts that are underway. A secure and allied buffer, creating space between a pro-US government in Seoul, is vastly more important to Beijing's perceived security, and it will remain this way as long as there is a significant US military presence in South Korea. This is the existential threat to both China and North Korea, which is a barrier to the former's tolerance for a unified Peninsula and the latter's willingness to forego its nuclear deterrent.

### Reform potential under Kim Jong Un

With outside forces deadlocked, regime stability will depend on two factors. First, Kim Jong Un must prove capable of consolidating power. Following the purge of a stalwart element of his father's military brass, Ri Young-Ho, it seems that he is up to the task. Second, he must determine if he will pursue reforms or continue to rule according to his father's *songun* doctrine. Emboldened by an enshrined nuclear deterrent, he might be inclined to pursue the former, but there are systemic risks to this approach.

The factors effecting Kim Jong Un's longevity at the helm of North Korea are primarily internal. Of course, China's endorsement is mandatory, but it does not seem that this would ever be in jeopardy as long as its own security calculus remains in place. As long as Kim Jong Un keeps up his end of the deal by consolidating his appointment as the undisputed head of state absent his father, China is meeting its core objective on the Peninsula. On the domestic side, the loyal support of the secret service is essential for his continuation of power. As long as this apparatus remains undivided and aligned with the Kim name, he will have favourable odds of maintaining his rule (International Crisis Group 2012).

Kim Jong Un made a splash in July 2012 by purging Vice-Marshal Ri Young-Ho, the chief of the general staff of North Korea's Army, in favour of life-long friend Choe Ryong-Hae, who carries no military experience. Some suggest that this is emblematic of an institutional turf war between the Korean People's Army (KPA) and the Korean Workers Party (KWP), where the civilian party is asserting itself and attempting to pry economic and commercial control from the vested pre-eminence of the military branch. However, there are plenty of other explanations that carry far fewer implications, such as personal disagreement, a normal power consolidation, or simply a message to the old guard not to test him. Removing an old, hardline element closely associated with his father could also have been a signal to China that the country will not behave aggressively toward South Korea: a form of concession for ongoing financial support.

While Kim Jong Un has inherited what could be considered a stable and centralized system in which there are no signs of opposition and barriers to change are high, he faces the long-run prospect of a deteriorating economy under continued isolation. Even simple reforms that improve resource allocation, efficiency and productivity would require repudiation of a decades-old system and ideology that serve as the foundation of Kim Jong Un's political legitimacy as passed on by his father. Renouncing such a legacy would not be rational if he wishes to exercise the same type of power in the future.

Nevertheless, some analysts are cautiously optimistic that Kim Jong Un is showing signs of being reform minded (Delury 2012). Indeed, his general style—acknowledgement of domestic problems, including publicly admitting to the failure of the recent rocket launch—is in stark contrast to the more reserved persona of his father. Furthermore, a business magazine based in the North was recently found to be advising the central bank to recollect currencies circulated

among North Korean residents 'on time' to establish a stable monetary system. A variety of other North Korea watchers have verified that Kim Jong Un is trying to empower the central bank and wrestle management of the economy away from the military and the Workers Party which have long held control (Kim 2012).

Of course, the North Korean state media KCNA has strongly denounced any notion that the regime is in need of adopting reforms to fix its ailing economy (Daily Briefing 2012). A majority of North Korea watchers are sceptical over the chances for reform precisely because of the inherent contradiction between the concept of reform and the rigidity of the system from which the Kim power is derived. The continuation of an extremely concentrated, one-man dictatorship is all the more likely owing to the underlying characteristics of chronic insecurity, a command economy, a strong tradition of democratic centralism, a complex structure of political institutions and a well-developed indigenous ideology (International Crisis Group 2012). This all reinforces the Kim family cult, and thus far has led to a seamless succession. Furthermore, economic reform would not be aimed at improving the quality of life of the citizenry, but would be undertaken in order to ensure the economic rewards necessary to appease not only the newly appointed loyalists but also to keep the old guard content in retirement (International Crisis Group 2012). The risk to Kim Jong Un is that a shrinking economy will make life more difficult for cadres and patrons that are being eased out of the power structure and returning to civilian life. Reforms would be meant to increase the size of the pie for these individuals, but nothing beyond. For Kim Jong Un, direct control over the economy—the planning and allocation of resources—is an indispensable tool that he will use to reinforce the top-down dynastic totalitarian state over which he resides. Under current conditions, it is difficult to imagine any type of reform that is not slow in implementation, limited in scope and easily reversible.

Still, there is no denying that continued economic regression coupled with the increasing challenge of managing the dissemination of information from the outside world will place unique and growing pressure on the regime in the coming years. The inefficient resource allocation in North Korea, typical of a command economy but accentuated under Kim Jong Il's military-first doctrine, alienates the population at the expense of an extensive patronage system and a disproportionately bloated military that crowds out civilian enterprise. Perpetuating these economic distortions will only serve to reinforce dependency on China and place constraints on the domestic agenda of the regime. Such dependency contradicts the doctrine of *juche*, or self-reliance, which was a tenet of the state under its founder Kim Il Sung, and continues to be eschewed in state propaganda despite its lack of fulfilment. Ironically, following Beijing's recommended path to reform would enhance the regime's independence by reducing Chinese influence over it, allowing Pyongyang to behave with more immunity. A growing confidence in the state's nuclear deterrent would also serve as a plausible foundation to embark on new-found reform measures. It might convince the leadership that the conventional military does not need to control economic activities so dramatically. The prospect of economic stagnation and increasing dependency on China could also serve as a premise for true *juche* revival. However, one should not conflate economic reform with general changes in policy, particularly regarding the nuclear question and domestic politics (Noland *et al.* 2012).

Absent a specific action forcing event, it would seem practical for the regime to tighten mechanisms of suppression while adopting a limited range of gradual, piecemeal economic liberalization schemes in carefully controlled sectors. Eventually, Kim Jong Un will have to make a more far-reaching choice, but for now he can send hopeful signals to China and the international community that hint of reform and opening without taking any concrete action. In the meantime, and most importantly for now, the country's clandestine uranium facilities will continue to develop its nuclear arsenal without interruption.



## Challenges and prospects for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula

We are entering a period of heightened uncertainty in the region as several key countries face leadership changes or elections. As these countries increasingly focus on domestic politics, there is the chance that Pyongyang will feel little risk in testing long-range missiles or another nuclear device. Realistically, there is not much to dissuade it from doing so (International Crisis Group 2012). In the end, South Korea's new president will naturally deviate from his or her predecessor's stagnant and unsuccessful policies in an attempt to forge reconciliation and at least a working relationship. Another nuclear test would perhaps suspend such engagement and align Seoul with the hardline policy that will likely remain in Washington, but not indefinitely. Surely China's newly assembled Politburo Standing Committee will continue to seek a balance between appeasing the USA with its rhetoric while intrepidly taking necessary measures to protect the nascent leadership in Pyongyang from any form of destabilizing outside pressure.

Even if there is slight directional change in leadership style and trajectory, there is almost no chance that the regime will negotiate away its nuclear weapons under present conditions. Without adequate resources to sustain a conventional arms race, North Korea will need to rely increasingly upon asymmetric capabilities for its security. This is a reality that certainly has been making its way into Washington's strategic outlook. Arguably it has already led to a shift of emphasis from the USA's strategic endgame, seeking to eliminate the nuclear programme, to a focus on more immediate monitoring and containment measures. Preventing the proliferation of nuclear- and missile-related goods and technology has become the *modus operandi*. Yet this is only an acknowledgement of the immediate security risks, and by no means an abandonment of its North Korea policy of the past two decades.

China has continuously sought to restart the Six-Party Talks to resume discussions on denuclearization but North Korea has refused the latest overtures, and in fact it is no longer a viable option for US policy makers who now must engage Pyongyang in a bilateral context. Beijing does not want to exert too much pressure on the emerging leadership of Kim Jong Un before he is even capable of pursuing such initiatives. As China continues to pour money and diplomatic energy into the status quo, providing cover for an internationally blacklisted country coming under pressure for human rights abuses along with clear defiance of UN sanctions, it could be clumsily moving the region towards an arms race. However, this will be difficult to identify as an action forcing event. Under current conditions, the USA will continue to strengthen military ties with its allies in the region to provide protection and deterrence. Washington can cite the North Korea threat as a pretence for its enhanced presence, while China's military rise in and of itself is the underlying cause against which it is ultimately balancing.

Thereby, the current peace across the Peninsula is tenuous and uneasy but arguably stable in the short run. Both China and the USA are interested in preventing a flashpoint of armed conflict, although they harbour different interpretations of how North Korea will become pacified. The danger is that mutual suspicion and mutual distrust will create an atmosphere of hostility rather than compromise, making it extremely difficult to send credible signals and engage in positive sum negotiations in the future.

## Conclusion

The USA and South Korea have made it abundantly clear that any provocative act from North Korea will be met with reciprocal force, but this will not deter the regime from undertaking nuclear or missile tests. In the near term North Korea's fresh-faced leader might feel emboldened to carry out a nuclear test to appease hardliners in a seemingly low-risk external

environment, while China, the USA and South Korea are immersed in domestic politics. With the recent visit of China's Communist Party International Liaison Department head Wand Jiaru as the first foreign official to meet Kim Jong Un, followed only weeks later by a trip to Beijing by Kim Jong Un's uncle Jang Song-Taek to discuss co-operation over special economic zones, it seems as though any suspected friction between the two countries has been mollified (Snyder 2012). Assuming that the next elected South Korean president will seek improved relations with the North and its new leader, regardless of its renewed nuclear aspirations, this could create tension with US policy makers who still cannot accept confronting North Korea over broader security issues under these circumstances. Otherwise, it is difficult to foresee any interruption to the current status quo, which seems to be the default environment created by the policy interaction of the multiple stakeholders.

Kim Jong Un may decide to pursue liberalization simply to reduce China's economic leverage and revert back to his grandfather's vision of *juche*. This would be a welcome development for Beijing, which will continue to urge the reform that they are convinced can bring about a soft landing for the regime and the state as a whole. Yet China seems to forget the potential complications with any amount of liberalization in a country with such a centralized power structure that the military establishment dominates so thoroughly, much more so than was the case in China before its opening. Any such transition would need to be implemented cautiously across an extended time horizon in an effort to retain the regime's control over the process. There is a clear risk that this could open the regime to challengers from the military leadership, but if Kim Jong Un does nothing to stabilize the economy there remains bottom-up systemic risk at the hands of the increasingly marginalized and deprived population. None the less, seismic change in North Korea, whether it is rooted in reform or a challenge to the existing leadership does not appear imminent, which puts more pressure on the USA to act more creatively and aggressively to seek out its objectives.

The idea that China will cut economic ties to the North or that the USA will tacitly recognize North Korea as a nuclear state is highly improbable. However, the USA can no longer afford a 'wait and see' approach that depends on a presumed collapse driven by supposedly inevitable winds of change. The day that access to information or economic suppression triggers some form of grassroots rebellion in North Korea is a distant conjecture. It is far more likely that this will take place well after the regime has gained the ability to enrich uranium, successfully launched a long-range rocket and gained the potential to export these technologies. The current stalemate only continues to buy the regime time to test and improve its offensive nuclear and missile capabilities until they really do become a direct threat to the USA.

North Korea's ability to survive has been consistently underestimated while its drive to obtain deliverable nuclear weapons has hardly paused and has never stopped. Therefore, it is the USA that will have to strengthen its multi-pronged containment efforts, and most importantly convince China of its philosophy that a nuclear-enabled North Korea must be disarmed for any chance at peace and stability in the region. Otherwise China will continue to protect the regime, and the inertia of the current equilibrium will continue to favour the existence of the resilient regime under its newest dictator.

## Bibliography

- Blohm, Robert, *Nelson Report*, 17 July 2012.  
 Bosco, Joseph A., 'Five Tough Truths About U.S.-China Relations', *Christian Science Monitor* (July 2012).  
 Daily Briefing, 'No Reform Here', *Time Magazine* (30 July 2012).  
 Delury, John, 'Reform Sprouts in North Korea', *Yale Global Online* (26 July 2012).

- Gause, Ken E., 'Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of North Korea's Police State', *The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea* (July 2012).
- Gill, Bates, 'China's North Korea Policy', *United States Institute for Peace*, July 2011.
- Hornung, Jeffrey W. and Tatsumi, Yuki, 'Thinking Through Japan-ROK Security Relations,' *Japan Times*, 1 August 2012.
- International Crisis Group, North East Asia Group Report, 'Shades of Red: China's Debate Over North Korea', 2 November 2009.
- 'China and Inter-Korean Clashes in the Yellow Sea', 27 January 2011.
- 'North Korean Succession and the Risks of Instability', 25 July 2012.
- Kim, E.J., 'N. Korea Shows Sign of Monetary Reform: Experts', *Yonhap News Agency*, 28 August 2012.
- Kleine-Ahlbrandt, Stephanie, 'The Diminishing Returns of China's North Korea Policy', *Foreign Affairs* (16 August 2012).
- Kwon, K.J., 'North Korea Proclaims Itself a Nuclear State in New Constitution', *CNN*, 31 May 2012.
- Lee, Byong-chul, 'North Korea in Focus: New Power Struggle or Intelligence Failure', *38 North* (27 July 2012).
- McDevitt, Michael, 'Deterring North Korea Provocations', Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, February 2011.
- Noland, Marcus, Haggard, Stephen and Ryu, Jaesong, 'The "June 28 Directive" and July 26 "Let us Effect Kim Jong-il's Patriotism ...": Not Yet Time to Break out the Soju', *The Peterson Institute for International Economics*, 6 August 2012.
- Park, Jinho, 'Refreshing our Understandings of North Korea Before Approaching its New Leader Kim Jung-un', *Korea Economic Institute*, 23 August 2012.
- Pritchard, Jack, 'My New Year's Predictions for North Korea', *The Peninsula Korea Economic Institute*, 21 December 2011.
- Revere, Evans, 'Tough Challenges, Hard Choices: Dealing with North Korea after the Collapse of the Leap Deal Agreement', *National Committee on American Foreign Policy*, June 2012.
- Snyder, Scott, 'Kim Jung Un's Nuclear Agenda', *The Atlantic* (2 September 2012).
- Song Sang-ho, 'NK May See its End in Collapse', *The Korea Herald* (26 April 2012).