SECURITY

by Scott Snyder

What's driving Pyongyang?

North Korean nukes

Scott Snyder is Director of the Center for US-Korea Policy at the Asia Foundation, and an Adjunct Senior Fellow for Korea Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. His latest book is *China's Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, Security*.

Given North Korea's history of crisis escalation, it should have been apparent that the "Dear Leader"—Kim Jong Il—would not abide the prospect of being ignored by a new American President who has pursued a strategy of continuity, containment, and incrementalism. In fact, North Korean never gave the President a chance to reach out before acting provocatively by conducting a second nuclear weapons test as well as more missile tests. This highlights the need for a proactive US policy toward the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia.

In the face of North Korea's stream of hyperbolic nuclear threats, President Obama's Rose Garden June 16th press conference with South Korean President Lee Myung-bak gave the impression that North Korea had exhausted its threat capacity. The President argued that the US should calmly and firmly break North Korea's past pattern of bad behavior, but North Korea is unlikely to respond well to such an approach.

North Korea's premeditated provocations appear to have been calculated to solidify North Korea's status as a nuclear weapons state. (For an evaluation of the latest UN sanctions, see pg. 12.) The North Koreans say they desire recognition of their status as a nuclear weapons state as the starting point for negotiations. They point to the US relationship with a nuclear-capable India as the model. Although the North Koreans have not ruled out eventual denuclearization, they have taken it off the table as a quid pro quo for diplomatic normalization, in the process further underscoring doubts about the possibility of any voluntary North Korean path to denuclearization.

A common assumption is that North Korean crisis instigation tactics are aimed primarily at drawing the US into dialogue and one-sided concessions. However, internal changes—including preparations for a leadership succession—may be more determinative of its recent behavior.

Leadership Succession

Elites in Pyongyang are primarily focused on securing a smooth leadership succession following Kim Jong Il's illness in the fall of 2008. Such an inward focus decreases the likelihood that North Korean elites will take into account the needs of other states, raising the political risk that diplomacy will end in failure. In this regard, the following developments are worth noting:

First, in January 2009, North Korea's Foreign Ministry reaffirmed its status as a nuclear weapons state, asserting that improvements US-North Korean diplomatic relations should no longer be linked to denuclearization. This assertion directly conflicts with the consensus embodied in the September 2005 Joint Statement of Six Party Talks that explicitly linked diplomatic normalization to denuclearization.

Second, North Korea's launch of a multi-stage rocket in April of 2009 was tied directly to North Korea's leadership succession process, coming days before North Korea held a Supreme People's Assembly gathering at which adjustments in North Korea's governing structure were announced. These changes included the expansion of the National Defense Commission to include new representatives from public security bureaus and other Kim Jong Il allies and family members such as Kim's brother-in-law, Jang Song Taek. Similar events occurred in September of 1998 when Kim Jong Il formally emerged as North Korea's paramount leader immediately following North Korea's first launch of a Taepodong missile on August 31, 1998.

Third, domestic politics have taken a hawkish turn through a renewed political "rectification" campaign and a reversion to North Korea's old style propaganda that now vilifies the US and Lee Myung-bak. Although North Korea's second nuclear test occurred only a few weeks following North Korea's April 14th rejection of a UN Presidential Statement condemning its April 5th missile launch, it seems likely that North Korean preparations for a second nuclear test must have begun prior to this time period. Unlike in the past, North Korea has pursued a series of provocative acts in succession rather than waiting for the international response. Moreover, it has taken actions to alienate both South Korea and the US simultaneously, rather than trying to play one country against the other.

Fourth, North Korean provocations and the international response serve multiple purposes connected to the leadership succession process: a) Missile and nuclear tests project the image of a state that remains in control during a sensitive transition period; b) North Korean nuclear tests may complete North Korea's acquisition of a deterrent against external attack and lower the likelihood of external interference in North Korean domestic politics; and c) provocations and international condemnation serve to heighten the sense of external threat, thereby strengthening internal solidarity among the North Korean people during the leadership succession process.

Obama's Reactive Response

The Obama administration's policies toward North Korea have unfolded gradually, mostly in response to North Korean provocations. There has not yet been time for a proper policy review and North Korea has not been high on the Obama administration's list of priorities, but the following trends have influenced the shape of the administration's response:

First, the Obama administration has not pursued an ABB (Anything But Bush) policy along the lines of the ABC (Anything But Clinton) approach of the early Bush administration, but several lessons drawn from Bush's experience have been adopted. For instance, in response to perceived failures by Christopher Hill—the Bush administration's chief negotiator with North Korea— to reassure allies in Tokyo and Seoul, the US is committed to more effective coordination. This has been shown through efforts to enhance the quality of consultations and

most recently through affirmation of the US commitment to extended deterrence in writing as part of the US-ROK Joint Vision Statement issued during the Obama-Lee White House summit.

Second, despite North Korean provocations, the Obama administration has an understandable case of attention deficit disorder vis a vis North Korea. The administration has so many domestic and foreign issues on its menu that North Korea has become the top crisis at the bottom of the American agenda. There is little near-term prospect that Washington will devote the effort required to effectively resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, especially given the heightened political risk of any attempts to engage a regime that has not yet signaled a willingness to come out of its shell. North Korean provocations have made the American task of coordinating with South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia much easier.

Third, the center of gravity is shifting from a US-centered approach to insistence that North Korea is a regional problem that requires coordination among all of North Korea's neighbors. UN resolutions can only be effective if they are implemented by states neighboring North Korea.

Fourth, Obama has made it clear that the US will not accept a nuclear North Korea and that he intends to break North Korea's past pattern of crisis escalation, renewal of diplomacy, and unwillingness to make or implement its own concessions in return for US economic assistance. This approach may be necessary, but it also risks the unintended consequence of higher tensions accompanied by miscalculation. It would be dangerous to assume that North Korea's capacity to instigate further crisis has been exhausted or to push North Korea too far without a comprehensive plan to counter possible risks of further North Korean escalation.

Fifth, the focal point for Obama administration efforts is shifting from a direct focus on North Korea to a focus on how to promote cooperation with China vis a vis North Korea. Such a shift may be necessary, but it also faces formidable obstacles, given the existing gaps in perception and priorities between the two countries.

Prospects for Sino-US Cooperation

China's traditional approach toward North Korea continues to contradict its overall foreign policy profile and objectives, including its interest in regional peace and stability. This has contributed to the strains in Sino-North Korean relations that have grown since the early 1990s when China normalized relations with South Korea against Pyongyang's wishes. Another factor contributing to China's blind spot regarding North Korea is the tendency of Beijing to see events there through the lens of the Sino-US relationship rather than on its own terms.

China's interests increasingly dictate that Beijing must stand with the international community rather than North Korea. A case in point is the Chinese response to the US Treasury's advisory of September of 2005 warning that the Macao-based Banco Delta Asia had North Korean clients allegedly engaged in counterfeiting or money laundering. China responded by enhancing its scrutiny over North Korean accounts and by freezing over $20 million in North Korean assets while it conducted an investigation of Banco Delta Asia. This represents the first time that an international issue had so clearly shaped Chinese policies regarding North Korea. China's overwhelming financial interests lay in safeguarding the credibility of Chinese banks in the global financial system rather than protecting North Korea.

Beijing's credibility

China's international credibility is being tested in some new areas with the adoption of UN Security Resolution 1874 authorizing increased sanctions against North Korea. It is widely understood that such a resolution cannot be effective without effective implementation by neighboring countries, including both China and South Korea. China's credibility as an effective partner regarding North Korea will be determined in part by China's reaction to that resolution.

A serious obstacle to effective Sino-US coordination is that the agenda for US-China relations is already overloaded, and the possibility of driving the North Korean issue higher on the agenda is low absent a heightened sense of crisis deriving from either military conflict or North Korean internal instability. In addition, the US would need the clear understanding and acquiescence of Tokyo and Seoul prior to the initiation of any strategic cooperation with China over the future of North Korea.

Ultimately, the prerequisite for effective US-China strategic cooperation to shape the future of North Korea will be the extent to which Chinese leaders realize that there is no viable trade-off between the priorities of stability and denuclearization and that a nuclear North Korea is inherently destabilizing to the stability of its neighbors and to China's own national interests. The US should continue to highlight the fundamental contradiction in China's policies, framing the issues in ways that require China to make choices between support for North Korea and efforts to safeguard China's broader regional and global interests. Through this process, Chinese leaders should realize that North Korean instability is as big a problem for China as for the US, especially to the extent that North Korea's destabilizing actions precipitate regional responses that are unfavorable to China's longer-term regional interests.

Chinese risk assessment is shifting

A growing number of Chinese analysts deny that their country has a strategic interest in continuing to support North Korea. A survey shortly following North Korea's nuclear test conducted by the CCP-affiliated Shijie Ribao (Global Times) revealed that half of twenty Chinese specialists interviewed supported sanctions against North Korea. Although the results from that poll are split down the middle, this result shows an increase in support among Chinese elites for the idea that coercion will be necessary as a tool for dealing with North Korea.

Some Chinese specialists on US-China relations and foreign policy in general do believe that denuclearization is imperative, even at risk of regime collapse in North Korea. Zhang Liangui at the China Party School, and Beijing University's Zhu Feng have written to that effect. However, the views of the top leadership on the trade-off between regime collapse and continued nuclearization remain unclear.

To enable such a strategic discussion, the Obama administration must go beyond a focus on disciplining North Korea's leaders and offer a positive vision for the future of the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia that would clarify US expectations and intentions toward the region. Given China's inherent skepticism about US intentions, such a vision would be necessary to secure practical cooperation to jointly address and resolve remaining sources of instability on the Korean peninsula. Under these circumstances, there is an opportunity to shape North Korean choices in ways that make clear that North Korea's survival is dependent on giving up nuclear weapons.