

8 Key findings regarding the Korea nuclear arms crisis from recent discussions with experts in China, Russia and Korea

Preface

In December I traveled for two weeks in northeast Asia for expert consultations on the Korean situation. Traveling by high-speed rail in China from Beijing to Shenyang, then to Changchun, then to Hunchun, I then crossed the border on a bus into southern Siberia, followed by a long taxi ride to Vladivostok. From Vladivostok I flew to Seoul before returning to Beijing for the flight home.

A principal objective I had for this trip was to bring back to the US regional perspectives on the North Korean nuclear crisis -- collected from nearly thirty hours of discussion with nineteen international relations specialists from six universities and institutes, the U.S. Consul General in Shenyang, China and an air force brigadier general and member of the joint staff from the Republic of Korea.

In this report I provide a summary of my key findings and observations.

~~ Charles Knight

Findings

1. There was near unanimous agreement that the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) has achieved the status of a nuclear-armed state. It is unclear how secure or effective that deterrent is. It seems likely, that under the presently intense diplomatic and military pressure led by the US, the North Koreans will not feel confident about their deterrent until they can credibly put at risk a number of continental US cities. Nonetheless, Chinese and Russian analysts generally believe that the US is effectively deterred from employing the military counter-proliferation option, notwithstanding what the US National Security Adviser and other administration officials have at times claimed.^[1]
2. Neither China nor Russia, North Korea's immediate neighbors, are pleased that the DPRK is a nuclear state, but they believe this is the new reality they must now adjust to. China and Russia are concerned that US leaders are in a state of unproductive and dangerous denial. Several times an analogy was offered to Pakistan's nuclear weapons: a politically unstable country with nuclear weapons, but "a situation we have been dealing with for years."
3. Most interlocutors thought that there is almost no chance that the presently stringent sanctions can force the DPRK to agree to disarm. The Chinese and the Russians generally believe that the maximal concession that sanctions can win from the DPRK is an agreement to freeze their warhead and missile development -- particularly inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) development -- in return for some combination of confidence-building measures, security guarantees and progress

toward political normalization. The North Koreans will not give up the nuclear weapons they already have... at least not until there is a permanent peace on the peninsula and the US is no longer understood to be an enemy.

4. The US Consul General in Shenyang, China said that he sees evidence that the Chinese are quite strictly enforcing the UN-mandated sanctions in border regions such as around Dandong on the Yalu – at a measurable economic cost. He added, “Of course smuggling continues” – through China’s long and mostly remote border with the DPRK. Conversations in Hunchun (another border area) also confirmed the local costs of the sanctions for the Chinese. That said, trade with North Korea is a very small part of the Chinese economy.

5. Neither China nor Russia will support economic sanctions that are so severe that they are in effect a total embargo or blockade of the North. Humanitarian concerns such as potential starvation in the North were cited as reasons to refuse further tightening of sanctions. The Chinese are also clear about not wanting to make a “permanent enemy” of the DPRK, a concern that reflects the hostility that China presently feels from North Korea as a result of China’s support of sanctions.

6. Several Russian experts in Vladivostok believe that the DPRK may be on the verge of doing an atmospheric nuclear test. One called that possibility a ‘rash response’ to the US practice of continually ratcheting up sanctions. Another suggested it could happen soon after the Olympics. Such an eventuality would be an extremely dangerous flash point, especially during March/April 2018 when there will be large US-ROK military exercises which the North Koreans think of as preparations for a war that the US intends to initiate in the near future.

7. During overland travel from Changchun, China to Vladivostok, Russia I observed the considerable Chinese investment in a northeast transportation corridor from Changchun/Jilin to Hunchun, China, a town that borders on both Russia and the DPRK. The Jilin-Hunchun high speed rail line runs 359km through rich farm lands of Manchuria into the foot hills and mountains of northeastern China with 66% of that distance comprised of either bridges (87km) or tunnels (149km). The extraordinary level of infrastructure investment was obvious in transit. The cost of this line has been estimated at more than \$7 billion and considering that the present eastern end of the line is the town of Hunchun, small by Chinese standards with only 250,000 inhabitants, it is clear that China is investing heavily in a future northern trading route to the Pacific. This will be realized eventually through rail connection and lease arrangements of a pier at Rajin Port in North Korea (generally free of ice in the winter) and improved highway and rail access to Vladivostok, Russia. This is the economic context for the high priority that China puts on moving beyond the present sanctions and conflict with the DPRK to something like normal relations with its neighbor.

8. Traveling through Manchuria and then to Vladivostok, Russia (sometimes only a few kilometers from the DPRK) I saw very few military personnel in train stations or on roadways and almost no military equipment (with the exception of warships at Vladivostok’s Russian Navy piers and one ancient looking radar installation in Siberia.) This was somewhat surprising considering the heightened regional tensions and the explicit threats from the US to use military means to disarm the DPRK. Regarding the latter, Russian interlocutors (Lukin, et al) have stated that should war break out they believe China will move troops into North Korea to “secure” weapons of mass destruction (WMD) sites near China; and even the Russians might send special operations forces into the northeast of the DPRK. It should be noted in regards to ground troop deployments that a series of agreements between Russia and China signed in the 1990s settling intense border conflicts during

the 1960s limit troop deployments within 100km of their mutual border. However, there is no such constraint on Chinese forces deploying along their Yalu river border with North Korea. As of 9 December there was no visible signs of Chinese ground force mobilization in the Manchurian province of Jilin adjacent to Korea. As reported in the press, the Chinese have recently done air exercises over the Yellow Sea and East China Seas (December 4) and the Russians have done marine landing exercises in the vicinity of Vladivostok (November 28.)

[1] See: Uri Friedman, "The World According to H.R. McMaster," *The Atlantic*, 09 January 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/hr-mcmaster-trump-north-korea/549341/>
Van Jackson, "Want to Strike North Korea? It's Not Going to Go the Way You Think," *Politico*, 12 January 2018. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/12/north-korea-strike-nuclear-strategist-216306>

Meetings and discussions held in China, Russia and South Korea (30 November – 10 December 2017)

30 November: ZHA Daojiong of Peking University.

01 December: Anthony Kuhn, NPR China correspondent, Beijing.

01 December: Renmin (Peoples') University, Beijing hosted by Professor WU Zhengyu. In attendance were SHI Yinhong, ZUO Xiying, QINGSI Li, LI Chen, and WU Riqiang, all of Renmin U. Also participating was WANG Fudong of the Chinese Institute for Contemporary International Relations.

03 December: US Consul General Gregory May and two deputies, Eric Phelps and Sam Yi in Shenyang, China.

04 December: Liaoning University in Shenyang hosted by Vice-Dean YANG Yanlin. Participating were professors ZHAI Liming, YUAN Jing and six graduate students.

08 December: Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU), Vladivostok, Russia hosted by Professor Artyom Lukin. Participating were Tamara Troyakova, Sergey Sevastianov, Pavel Cherkashin, Evgenii Pustovoi, Semyon Korotich, Andre Gubin, all of FEFU, and Anastasia Barannikova of the Center for Maritime International Studies at the Maritime State University.

10 December: Brigadier General (Air Force, PhD and member of the ROK Joint Staff) KIM Kwang-jin.

Charles Knight is non-resident Senior Fellow at the Center for International Policy, Washington, DC. He is co-founder of the Project on Defense Alternatives. <http://www.comw.org/pda/>
cknight@comw.org