

Far Eastern Affairs

© East View Press

<http://www.eastviewpress.com/Journals/FarEasternAffairs.aspx>



The Situation around the Korean Peninsula: Time for Difficult Choice

Konstantin ASMOLOV

Abstract. Another North Korean nuclear test and the launching of inter-continental ballistic missiles have marked an end of the period of ambiguity, when great powers could think that the nuclear problem of the Korean Peninsula would be resolved as a matter of course. In the existing situation, North Korea, the U.S.A., the PRC, Russia, South Korea, and Japan are faced with a difficult choice. The article analyzes the reasons and consequences of this choice and factors capable to influence it.

Keywords: *nuclear weapons, North Korea, geopolitics, security problem, choice of bigger or lesser evil.*

The policy of “strategic patience” practiced at the time of Obama presidency was based on three theses: a) that North Korea would abandon its nuclear program simultaneously with the change of the regime; b) that the country in the grip of an economic crisis would hardly be able to ensure serious progress of its nuclear program; c) that North Korea is a Colossus with feet of clay and could crumble due to internal collisions at any time.

“Strategic patience” boiled down to the absence of any attempts at a serious regulation of the problem, at the same time augmenting sanctions imposed on North Korea in the hope that the regime would disintegrate and the matter would be taken off the agenda.

However, North Korea was well aware what faced it and redoubled efforts to build up its defense potential.

North Korean Choice

North Korea sees itself encircled by enemies and has enough reasons to perceive the situation precisely in this vein. From the point of view of the official

Konstantin V. Asmolov, Ph.D. (History), leading research associate at RAS IFES and International Center for Korean Studies, Moscow M.V. Lomonosov State University. E-mail: asmolov@ifes-ras.ru

position of the Republic of Korea fixed in the country's Constitution and in a number of legislative acts like the South Korea National Security Act, there is no such state as North Korea. The territory of the Republic of Korea consists of the Korean Peninsula and the adjacent islands (Article 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, edition of 1987).¹ However, the northern provinces of the country are under control of an "antistate organization."² Nevertheless, the Republic of Korea formally manages the seized territories through the so-called Committee for the Five Northern Korean Provinces,³ whose officials will take their seats as soon as "the order is reestablished."

The official strategy of the South with regard to the North is "absorption," and within the past decade the unified country was regarded as "the bigger Republic of Korea." Even "the policy of solar warmth" pursued by Kim Dae Jung and Hyongmu presupposed the achievement of this goal by somewhat different means. A course to abolition of the DPRK is expressed not only in statements of political figures, but also in systematic large-scale South Korean and South Korean-American military exercises aimed at training not defensive but offensive actions.

The North Korean concept of unification includes a rather vague variant of "the Democratic Confederate Republic of Korea," but not presupposing the "communization of the South." Although the state ideology of the DPRK is largely based on nationalism, there are no premises of "enlarging the *Lebensraum*," or of "our Manchuria,"⁴ which occupy considerable space in the concepts of South Korean nationalists.

For a long time North Korea has been, and still is, the object of demonization on the part of the United States and its allies. Any, even the most insane piece of information about the DPRK, in the Western press is accepted at its face value and finds readers. From the point of view of a considerable part of U.S. audiences atheist collectivism and the cult of North Korean leaders are unquestionably taken for an empire of evil.

We may add to that a distorted idea about the correlation of the military potentials of the North and the South. It is often mentioned that North Korea holds fourth place in the numerical strength of its army often disregarding the fact that a considerable part of the Korean people's army is not combat units as the universal mobilization reserve. Whereas the Republic of Korea holds sixth place in numerical strength, and its military budget exceeds the North Korean one by 25-fold, on average, which reflects its advantage and makes futile the attempts of the North to catch up with the South in this field. Apart from that, according to the Treaty on mutual defense signed by the United States and South Korea in 1953, in an event of aggression of the DPRK, the former is obliged to defend the latter with all capabilities possible, but the South Korean army is subordinated not to the President of the Republic of Korea, but the U.S. Command. Finally, since the time when North Korea was added to the pariah countries in the world, it is on the list of the targets of the U.S. strategic nuclear weapons, despite the fact that it was not a nuclear state at the time.

The DPRK has no similar allies. Although there is formally a treaty between the DPRK and the PRC under which Beijing may render Pyongyang military aid, this is a controversial subject as far as China is concerned and North Korea cannot rely on China's immediate aid without preconditions.

It is indicative that the "iron curtain" works both ways. Like the closed character of a country gives rise to various ideas about what its domestic life looks like, the views of the North Korean leaders have a similar level of distortions concerning the policy of the United States and its allies in the Korean issue. All the more so since they have received a number of objective lessons increasing their mistrust to the peace initiatives of the probable adversary. One can recall the fate of the US-DPRK Agreed Framework of 1994, which was not fulfilled by the U.S. side (there was no diplomatic recognition, deliveries of fuel oil were stopped due to political considerations, only the foundation was built for light-water reactors, which could not be used for military purposes),⁵ crossed-out complexes of the results of the inter-Korean summits of 2000 and 2007, as well as the fate of agreements within the framework of six-party negotiations adopted in 2007-2008.

The people of North Korea learn other object lessons from the experience of other countries "which were offered democracy on the missile warhead tips." The lesson of Iraq boiled down to the fact that "if the world community suspected that the country worked on developing a weapon of mass destruction, any attempts to dissuade it will be utterly futile. The lesson of Syria shows that even despite the presence of influential and serious allies, the situation may end in a civil war with weak chances for victory. In Libya, for the nuclear program given over to the West the Gaddafi regime received much more than was offered to Kim Jong Il (including oblivion of past sins). Right up to the Arab Spring the Libyan scenario was often cited as a positive example of how the DPRK nuclear problem could be solved, if Pyongyang had been more compliant. The overthrow of the Gaddafi regime and subsequent developments in Libya have put an end to such talk.

There is a possibility of a repetition of the "Iranian lesson." Renunciation of nuclear weapon and abolition of the ruling regime in the country were not linked or discussed, and Iran wanted to increase export of gas and oil and raise its welfare. But, first of all, Tehran's nuclear program was only beginning and Iran could exchange it for lifting the sanctions without any losses.⁶ Second, North Korea is not a country living off the export of strategic resources, the structure of its economic ties is quite different. Third, observing the attitude to the Iranian deal of certain representatives of the new U.S. administration, a variant is not excluded when its conditions may be suddenly revised just like in the deal with fuel oil according to the Framework agreement.

The North Korean leadership has, therefore, the right to suppose that it is not only the regime, but the country's national sovereignty that are going to be destroyed, and this will be done at the first opportunity. And North Korea will

not be able to appeal to the institutions of international law, which were discredited during the intrusion in Yugoslavia, or to allies capable to guarantee its defense.

This situation leaves no choice to North Korea. Its strategy is to create a missile and nuclear program and reach the level of reliable containment with which any attempt to solve the North Korean problem by force of arms will be met with a nuclear reply capable to annul any successes of the adversary.

Deeming itself a nuclear power,⁷ North Korea believes that when it “leaps through” the window of vulnerability, the United States will have to come to agreement with it at least due to impossibility of power answer, and after that relations between the two countries will develop according to the model of the U.S.A.-U.S.S.R. or U.S.A.-China confrontation.

However, such strategy is too risky. First, the North Korean actions deal a serious blow at the existing security system. Primarily, it is the ostentatious ignoring the UN Security Council’s resolutions compulsory for execution. Second, North Korea’s desire to proclaim itself nuclear power undermines the world order model according to which nuclear weapon can be possessed only by those “who are allowed to have it.”⁸ Besides, North Korea has already been a party to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons. From a formal point of view, this is an unpleasant precedent.

If the North Korean problem is not settled, the success of the North Korean strategy will lead to the situation when practically all major regional actors will go along the road of creating nuclear weapon of their own in order to ensure their security in this manner. As to Northeast Asia, among such states may be South Korea,⁹ Japan, and further on Taiwan, which is a dreadful dream for Beijing and puts an end to the concept of “one China.” Taking into account the existence of peaceful atom and the engineering and technological potential of the Republic of Korea and Japan, after adoption of a corresponding decision, these countries may receive the first fruits of their missile and nuclear program within one-and-a-half-two years.

Such prospect places Moscow and Beijing in a very unpleasant situation. On the one hand, the motives forcing North Korea to go in this direction are quite understandable, just as it is also clear that its nuclear weapon is not aimed at Russia or China. On the other hand, as the members of the UN Security Council, Russia and China cannot but denounce North Korean ambitions categorically refusing to recognize its status as nuclear power. This is why the Council’s resolutions on sanctions are adopted unanimously each time.

North Korean activity creates the regional dilemma of security, stepping up the arms race in the Asia-Pacific Region. A reflection of this is a gradual remilitarization of Japan and the use of the North Korean threat for increasing the U.S. strategic positions in the region, which are aimed not only at North Korea. The most striking example of late is the deployment of the U.S. THAAD system of antimissile defense in South Korea, which is not to the liking of China.

The Choice of the U.S.A.

The question as to what U.S. strategy should be in this connection has become to be broadly debated prior to D. Trump's coming to the White House. Naturally, experts propose various options.¹⁰ However, despite the seemingly wide range of "answers to the North Korean challenge," the choice of variants boils down to two. Either to recognize the nuclear status of North Korea, or to change the ruling regime, in one way or another, which will inevitably lead to an open confrontation. Taking into consideration the fact that the nuclear status has been included into the country's Basic Law, denuclearization is unfeasible without the abolition of the present political system of North Korea.

To leave everything as it is, stepping up sanctions and hoping that sooner or later the regime will crumble is useless. Sanctions have not proved effective enough so far. North Korea has learnt to live on in the regime of sanctions, partly bypassing them, partly using import substitution. Besides, far from all countries are prepared to observe the sanction regime. If sanctions are turned into a full-fledged financial, trade, and transport blockade, this will actually be tantamount to the attempt to change the ruling regime by provoking domestic disorders or outside confrontation.

The preventive strike at the nuclear assets in North Korea will not go unpunished. The country will definitely retaliate. And if attacks are made not only at nuclear assets, but also the weapons of potential retaliatory blow, the strike will assume the character of a large-scale military operation.

This also concerns an attempt to bring down a North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile in its test flight. Pyongyang's response may be similar to an attack at nuclear assets.

There is little hope to change the regime by milder ways. Serious work for the destabilization of the regime and organization of a color revolution will hardly be successful there. There are neither prerequisites nor the possible infrastructure in the country.¹¹ Moreover, the optimization of defense expenditures combined with domestic political measures has contributed to raising the quality of life of the North Korean people, which allows them to compare the present situation with the "difficult period" and preserve loyalty to the existing system.

If the nuclear status of North Korea is recognized, the unpleasant consequences of this decision could be summed up as follows:

- This will be a serious blow at the nonproliferation regime. Especially taking into account the fact that the DPRK first joined it and then withdrew from it. Besides, the recognition of its nuclear status may lead to a regional nuclear race.
- The collapse of the nonproliferation regime deals a blow at the U.S.A. as the world hegemon – the existing world order is largely based on U.S.A.'s domination, including due to its nuclear potential. Even if the U.S.A.

remains the hegemon, it will be more difficult for it to force its will on another nuclear state and play the role of the world policeman.

- There is no guarantee that after recognition of the nuclear status of the DPRK the “North Korean threat to the world” will not grow. Many people in the United States are sure that in that case the DPRK will further “blackmail” the world community, may begin selling nuclear technologies to international terrorists, or decide to attack South Korea.
- Apart from that, recognition of the nuclear status means recognition of the existence of the DPRK with which the U.S.A. does not have diplomatic relations until now. Meanwhile, observing the position of South Korea concerning Japan’s attempts to establish a dialogue with North Korea, any step forward to establishing official economic and political connections between North Korea and the United States may result in a considerable worsening of U.S.A.-RK relations.

If the United States starts a serious **confrontation with North Korea**, then:

- The risk of a protracted war that will entail grave consequences is too great, and a heavy damage may be inflicted on South Korea. “Preventive disarming blow may not reach its aim.” It is not accidental that a considerable number of U.S. military experts note that a military operation against North Korea will not be a pleasure trip, moreover, it may turn out a confrontation no less heavy than the Korean War of 1950-1953.
- There is a risk of the regional conflict growing into something greater. As a minimum, North Korea will succeed to deal a retaliatory blow (potentially, a nuclear blow) at the continental territory of the United States. As a maximum, China and Russia will be drawn into the conflict and it will turn into a third world war. Moscow and Beijing will hardly support the conflict initiated by North Korea, but what will happen if the war is started by the United States?
- Even the victory of the U.S.A. and its allies in such conflict will not bring about immediate bliss and democracy. The rehabilitation of what was destroyed by the war, the refugee problems, greater problems of the loyal behavior of the population of the North – all this will make the process of postwar stabilization long, arduous, and expensive.
- The potential rehabilitation of Japan and South Korea after North Korean strikes puts forward the question: “Will the U.S. leadership be ready for such amount of damage among its allies?” Blows at nuclear power plants of these countries alone may cause an ecological catastrophe much greater than the ones at Chernobyl and Fukushima.
- Finally, if preparations for the conflict become evident and it is clear that it is inevitable, the DPRK leadership may indeed engage in nuclear proliferation or nuclear terrorism.

What will happen then? The choice is difficult, but a bellicose approach has more arguments in its favor than a dialogue, for several reasons.

- The personal factor connected with definite dependence of politicians on public opinion.
- Consequences of a demonic character of the regime: a politician conquering a “patent evil” will have a higher rating than another one who will try to come to an agreement with that “evil.”
- Problem of misinformation. The United States has no possibilities to gather true information about the state of affairs in the DPRK. At best, such data are gathered by technical reconnaissance, but they need proper interpretation.¹²
- The illusion of immunity connected with antimissile defense developments. Nonmilitary people and politicians may presume that the U.S. population will watch the conflict on TV.

Such trend to the possibility of a forcible solution is not directly connected with the change of power in the White House. It only catalyzed the process, but one should not think that if H. Clinton had come to power her administration would have behaved differently.

How does the Trump factor influence the probability of a forcible solution? First, there is no adequate expert backing of the adopted decisions. The presidential administration has not been fully formed, and this means that its expert-analytical apparatus cannot work properly. In this situation, the probability of adopting voluntary decisions is rather great.

The domestic situation in the United States considerably narrows down the space to maneuver for D. Trump. For him the program of domestic political reforms is the priority, but to implement it he has to reach at least a minimal consensus with public opinion, the mass media, and bureaucratic circles which actually sabotage his internal political decisions. Thus, for him the most optimal position is that of a “resolute president,” which raises the possibility of adopting a power decision.

Naturally, to make a heavy choice is far from pleasant, and the U.S. administration is trying to find a third way. So far it boils down to words about failure of the policy of “strategic patience,” although the U.S. Administration insists on pursuing it, having slightly changed the cover. North Korea is being strangled with sanctions, both international and unilateral. Emphasis is made on “another boycott,” when any country or company trying to do business with North Korea is faced with the dilemma: “Whose friend are you – his or mine?” China is the first object of such pressure.

The Choice of China

Beijing understands full well that there is no “good” solution to this problem. To call for its solution via political and diplomatic means is hardly feasible.

Resumption of the six-party negotiations is connected with the question as to what to discuss: in the existing situation denuclearization is only possible along with the change of the regime which proclaimed the nuclear status of the country in its Constitution. But the actions of the North Korean leadership are dictated not by the “ill will” of Kim Jong Un, but by the geopolitical trend to change which is no less difficult than to change the North Korean position.

The North Korean card plays its role in the domestic political situation in China. In the fall of 2017, at the 19th CPC Congress, there was a harsh discussion concerning the country’s development ways, as well as a struggle for power between Xi Jinping and his opponents. China had to definitely choose a strategy on the North Korean problem before the opening of the congress.

Besides, against the background of China’s formation as a responsible global power, its participation in the Korean War of 1950-1953 acquires a major propaganda importance. First, that war is regarded as one of the wars in which China tried to save Korean statehood from foreign intrusion and internal embroilment. Second, the war put an end to the “age of shame.” New China not only got on its feet, but also smashed predatory plans of the West for the first time since the Opium War.

Just like the United States, China tries to draw the “red line” beyond which China will be forced to defend the security and stability of the Northeast by all means. Judging by an article in the *Huanqui shibao* of April 5, 2017,¹³ it will be a situation when:

- a) North Korean nuclear activity contaminates China’s Northeast, including radioactive precipitation after the use of a nuclear weapon;
- b) as a result of humanitarian catastrophe or internal instability there is a great influx of refugees from the DPRK;
- c) a regime hostile to China emerges on its border, or U.S. troops arrive to the Yalu/Amnok River.

One can remember that in 2006-2007, China elaborated plans to intrude in North Korea. True, this was regarded as a retaliatory step to the collapse of the regime to ward off the flow of refugees or ensure security of the uncontrolled nuclear charges and fissionable material.¹⁴

For the medium term, there are three possible decisions:

- China preserves North Korea, but changes its regime to pro-Chinese.
- China recognizes the nuclear status of North Korea and renounces measures aimed at its containment, thus helping major changes of the world order.
- In alliance with the U.S.A., China aims at changing the regime, thus presupposing the inevitable absorption of the North by the South.

It is more realistic to examine the second and third variants, inasmuch as the first variant presupposes the question of methods. As shown by experience, political persuasions are ineffective, because when the sovereignty of the country is

concerned the DPRK does not listen to anyone, and the development of the missile and nuclear program is regarded by Pyongyang as the only method to avoid forcible actions aimed at changing the regime.

If Beijing supports North Korea against the U.S.A., trouble may be as follows:

- Using the North Korean threat as a pretext, the United States will be strengthening its positions in the region and augmenting the military infrastructure there aimed not so much at the DPRK as at the PRC. The THAAD in this context may be taken as the first step.
- Stubborn support of the North finally turns the relations of the two countries into a conflict. There can hardly be any hope that cooperation will triumph over confrontation in relations between Beijing and Washington as a short- or medium-term prospect. Cooperation means a relative preservation of the *status quo*, when contradictions between the two countries exist at a permissible level, and the potential of economic interaction grades political differences.
- Stepped-up support of North Korea may entail proliferation of sanctions against China.
- In the view of certain Chinese experts, China is not yet ready to throw a challenge to the United States openly. Theoretically speaking, time works for China, but the sooner things go close to military confrontation, the less China will be prepared for it. There are fears that the United States is already using the North Korean trump card in order to force confrontation on China on more advantageous conditions for the U.S.A.
- Apart from that, support of nuclear ambitions of the North Korea erodes the *status quo* based on the UN prestige and the concept of nuclear non-proliferation, which limits the nuclear club by the big Five. Under the existing order, China holds a firm place among them, and a question may arise whether the new world order, which may emerge in case of confrontation, will be more favorable for Beijing.

Accordingly, the main risk for China in this variant will be to draw into a conflict in disadvantageous position or to violate the world order which gives it definite bonuses.

It seems that there are enough reasons to refuse from helping the North. However, a question arises as to what China's policy on the Korean problem will be if the United States continues its policy of opposing the PRC. If concessions are taken for granted, and U.S. policy to contain China remains unchanged. It is not clear that in answer to the new round of concessions or joint actions against the DPRK Washington will turn its criticism of China to other directions.

If China begins to cooperate with the U.S.A. against North Korea, which may lead to the change of the regime or elimination of the DPRK, it may come across other troubles.

- China will hardly accept the variant under which in the course of a military conflict on the territory of the Northern part of the Korean Peninsula or the absorption of the North by the South, China becomes a haven not only for a great masses of refugees, but also for organized crime or terrorist organizations which will try to fight the South Korean invaders from its territory. All this will have to make China spend enormous efforts and huge sums of money on settling these problems, which could have better been used for domestic needs.
- In case of the Republic of Korea's expansion to the North, the buffer territory in the form of the DPRK is lost, and the United States receives a very convenient springboard from which it can threaten effectively Chinese interests in the Northeastern region. It is hardly likely that in case of Korean unification the U.S. troops will leave it there and then. They will rather move to the North, for instance, to fight the illegal armed units of the previous regime, and the U.S. military bases can find themselves on the border of the PRC. In case of a conflict, it will be a very serious strengthening of the U.S. position.
- Unified Korea is not to the liking of China as a regional power. First, the loss of a vassal is a blow at prestige greater than inability to control it. Second, ideology of unified Korea will most probably be aggressive nationalism, which may mean growing attempts to turn the Korean diaspora in China into the fifth column. One can expect reemergence of territorial claims, for example to Jiandao district, or as a minimum state support of historical claims, including the old ideas that the ancient Korean states occupied a considerable part of modern China.
- After disappearance of North Korea, the next country where human rights are violated is China about which there is a whole number of preposterous myths, from eating babies to taking out human organs of political detainees. Falungong may prove a more serious destabilizing factor than "Christian resistance" in North Korea, whose existence in the country the fighters against Pyongyang are trying to prove.

Now, about factors which may change the views of the Chinese leadership to one or another direction. On the whole, it is rather well informed about the domestic political situation in the DPRK and adopts its decisions independently of populist reactions of public opinion.

China's tactics is determined by the correlation and mutual dependence of two trends. The first is connected with the confrontation between the PRC and the U.S.A. in which North Korea is not so much an ally as an enemy of the enemy, or some buffer area between U.S. troops in South Korea and Northeast China. The other trend is the increasing "sovereign sentiments" and transition of China to a foreign political model within whose framework the surrounding smaller countries should take into account Beijing's interests and not contradict

them: from this point of view, it is possible to talk of the level of Beijing's irritation caused by Pyongyang's actions, which, pursuing an independent policy, does not want to take into account Chinese interests.

Besides, within the Chinese leadership itself there can be a certain rivalry between supporters of ideological and pragmatic approaches, although the latter is dominating. Despite the fact that China has always been trying to act pragmatically, in certain situations it is forced "to play the second fiddle," in reply to U.S. steps to "solve the Korean problem" as it thinks fit. This is why in case of the United States taking the road of escalation Beijing's policy will have to be oriented to taking retaliatory measures.

Meanwhile the Chinese position boils down to harsh statements both with regard to the DPRK and the U.S.A. In each case Beijing tries to use definite levers of pressure.

As far as the DPRK is concerned, it is a certain set of threats of an economic character,¹⁵ although it is not quite clear whether they are effective.

As to the United States, China is trying at least to bring to Washington's attention certain information and also offers a project of "double freezing,"¹⁶ which was a North Korean initiative at a certain stage. However, the realization of such plan is doubtful, even with the change of power in Seoul. As a result, it looks likely that the United States underestimates Beijing's resolution, believing that it succeeded in winning the Chinese leadership to its side.

Factors of Irrationality

An important component is added to the situation of the doubly-difficult choice facing both Washington and Beijing. It is a dilemma of security and growing tension which raise the probability of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula not only as a result of the rational decision adopted by the country's leadership, but also as a consequence of the factors which can be conditionally termed "irrational."¹⁷

This term is used because in analyzing the model of the interaction of the two states it is supposed that:

- a) each side painstakingly studies its counterpart, tries to understand it and obtain a maximally complete volume of objective information about it;
- b) political figures proceed from the model of rational actions and personal preferences, emotions, and ideological blinders have an additional, but not decisive significance;
- c) the central authorities have a considerable level of control over its regional units in order to cut short "foolish and harmful initiatives" and dangerous self-activity, and thus key decisions, especially capable to lead to aggravation are adopted only after consultations with the Center.

Unfortunately, in the relations of North Korea with the outside world this is not so. The “iron curtain” works both ways, giving birth to distorted ideas about the other side of it.

This is clearly seen on the example of North Korea. The number of people who are allowed to receive information about the outer world is very limited. In this situation, the level of correct understanding of information about the outer world and principles of its functioning is quite low. This means that the actions of the opponents can be interpreted erroneously.

However, similar problem exists in the West conformably to North Korea. Expert conclusions are based on data, which are usually not enough to make conclusions based exclusively on them. This is why experts rely on their own ideas about the goals and motives of the North Korean leadership, which directly depends on what image of North Korea one or another expert has formed. Evidence of deserters should be checked and rechecked, and photos from sputniks are not discernable enough. This means that information lacunas are filled with silence, and this has a negative influence on the image of the country in the interpretation of experts.

As a result, each side sees a distorted picture of the partner and does not try to improve the situation. This means that in case of the emergence of a conflict situation the sides cannot be well aware of their problems or will wrongly interpret one or another event.

Usually, even the state of aggravation presupposes the existence of a hot line between the opposing sides, but due to the efforts of the North and the South all contacts between them along the military line have been severed, and in the event of an incident, the two sides may have no time or opportunity to warn each other.

The image of the enemy is added to definite ideological clichés due to which the two sides are unable to see the real picture. Such approach leads to a witch hunt, when a country, a group of persons, or a person, already labelled, cannot get rid of suspicions, inasmuch as any variants of their behavior are interpreted in a definite vein. Relations with such enemy cannot be normal and no agreements can be made with him. On the contrary, rules and agreements may be violated and promises unfulfilled.

Lack of understanding is augmented by demonization which has several dangerous consequences hampering the attempts to establish a dialogue. The partner in negotiations is taken for an enemy, and hence, the very process is considered a confrontation and a game with a zero sum, but not a desire to reach consensus.

Demonization leads to the two sides taking the concept of disproportionate reply to hostile provocations, which should be one hundred times stronger. Second, a stressful situation is created which influences strongly the participants in the conflict and raises the probability that a reaction to some vague or unusual events may prove inadequate. As a result, the probability of a conflict due to an insignificant or nonexistent reason becomes much greater.

Today, neither in the DPRK nor in the U.S.A. there is an ideally working bureaucratic system. This is why it should be remembered that the units engaged in analyzing and forecasting are far from doing their work impeccably. Reasonable warnings may be ignored, and those who try to reveal the real state of affairs may be pushed to the background and those who please the powers that be with “pleasant news” may come to the fore.

Finally, the prolonged situation of mutual tension raises the general level of stress as a result of which dangerous and important decisions may be adopted not in a cool and calm mood, but under the influence of irrational factors or emotions. In this situation, as the Chinese military expert Jia Xudong notes, “any involuntary shot, lack of understanding or wrong decision can become the cause of the development of an irreversible situation.”¹⁸

What Does Seoul Think?

On May 9, 2017, Moon Jae In came to power in South Korea, representing left-wing forces. His program included rejection of the THAAD project, the need to improve inter-Korean relations, and a whole range of other initiatives, which became a pretext for definite illusions along with those accompanying Trump coming to power among certain Russian experts. However, as far as the South Korean situation is concerned, it is not so much a choice, as an attempt to sit on two chairs, in an attempt not to spoil relations with any one from among important actors.

As a representative of the left camp, Moon is obliged, on the one hand, to follow its program, with due account of strong populist trends which he demonstrates in tackling economic problems.

On the other hand, connections between the South Korean and U.S. establishments are much stronger than they seem. Although the South Korean regime has never been puppet, the foreign policy of Seoul always depended on Washington.¹⁹ The entire modern South Korean elite has grown from the liberal intelligentsia, which was under the protection of American missionary organizations at the time of colonialism. As a result, it has no alternative system of values within whose framework it could abandon its orientation to the United States.²⁰

As a consequence, the political and economic ties between Seoul and Washington are stronger than any ties between Seoul and Beijing. Should Moon’s administration break up agreements with the U.S.A., the latter will definitely find its own weighty arguments.

Therefore, if the deployment of the THAAD was suspended on June 8, 2017, by one side prior to the completion of full ecological tests on the corresponding plot of land transferred to the American military for deploying these complexes,²¹ on the other hand, the Moon administration announced on June 9 that despite the change of political power in the Republic of Korea, the new govern-

ment retains its serious attitude to the THAAD system and is ready to continue close cooperation with the United States.

Similar situation is taking shape concerning inter-Korean relations. On June 16, 2017, special advisor of the President on foreign affairs and security Moon Jung In made public a new strategy of inter-Korean relations, which actually dubbed the Chinese double freezing proposals.²² The South Korean mass media immediately presented it as “the confirmation of Moon Jae In’s proposal to resume the inter-Korean dialogue without any preconditions in case of the North’s stopping its missile and nuclear tests.”²³ But as soon as the representative of the U.S. Department of State said that the position voiced by Moon could reflect his personal view, but not the official policy of the authorities, the South Korean Presidential administration immediately reported that President Moon did not agree the content of his statement with the government.²⁴

On the whole, the tone of Moon’s statements largely depends on the situation and the composition of the audience. If announcing the “Berlin declaration,” he stated that he was against unification by absorption and was ready to meet with the DPRK leader, then during his visit to the United States, the head of the Republic of Korea stated that if President Trump succeeded to solve the problem of the North, this would be a tremendous success, which not a single of the previous U.S. presidents was able to achieve: all of them spoke about a serious nature of that problem without undertaking any real steps. “The great alliance of the Republic of Korea and the United States can become greater still, if it does not step back in the face of the nuclear threat from the North.”

Vociferous statements in South Korea are not identical to their immediate implementation also because the new president of the country spends the first period of his rule on a radical purge of the official personnel, placing on the key posts his supporters, having ensured in this manner an efficient vertical of power. Usually, this operation takes from one to one-and-a-half year, and only after that one can speak of a full-scale implementation of the political course of the new leader. Judging by the opposition with which President Moon was met when appointing the new prime minister and the minister of foreign affairs,²⁵ it can be expected that the period of placing the necessary persons on the key posts may take quite some time.

However, a good news is the appointment of the new chief of the National Intelligence Service. The person in charge of it now is Seo Hun, who has worked in intelligence for 28 years as a specialist on the North. It looks likely that he is going to make his subordinates submit more reliable data based on the real situation instead of reports about the imminent collapse of the North Korean regime based on dubitable data from doubtful persons. This could, first, somewhat lower the level of demonization of the North Korean regime, and, second, influence the U.S. strategic course fraught with a major regional conflict.

Thus, even when Moon positions himself as a consistent left-wing figure, the new administration in Seoul will be able to lower inter-Korean tension only in a

medium-term prospect. For the time being, it remains as it is, inasmuch as it may take much time for the new president to change the political course with a view to elaborating a whole range of measures strengthening trust, lowering the level of demonization of the North and exchanging information which would diminish the danger of a clash as a result of misunderstanding or mishap. However, taking into account the speed of a regional crisis development, the crux of the matter is the ability of the new administration of the Republic of Korea to begin pursuing its new course before the situation enters a critical stage.

The Choice of Russia

In the present situation Russia cannot stay on the sidelines. Any serious conflict on the Korean Peninsula touches this country even if not a single piece of the U.S. high-precision weapons reaches its territory. The most important is a range of consequences connected with the war: from the refugees flow to the essential chance of contamination of part of Russian territory as a result of the use of nuclear weapons, or attacks on North Korean nuclear assets, or those elements of its industrial structure, which could be the reason for a serious ecological catastrophe.

Undoubtedly, Russia does not consider North Korea a nuclear power, denounces it for its ambitions, and strictly adheres to the UN Security Council's resolutions. At the same time, we regard unacceptable unilateral sanctions or another boycott, just as the attempts to deal economic blows not at the nuclear program, but the living standards of the population in order to destabilize the situation in the country.²⁶ Russia, just as China, is against the military presence of nonregional forces in Northeast Asia and their buildup under the pretext of opposing the North Korean missile and nuclear programs, including the deployment of the antimissile defense THAAD complexes.

However, despite the crucial character of the problem, the Korean settlement is not the main priority for Moscow. The basic strategic area of Russia's foreign policy is the territory of the U.S.S.R. former republics, primarily Ukraine.

We have not too many opportunities to influence the North Korean leadership. Indeed, it does want to maintain active and goodneighborly relations with Russia (at least, to counterbalance China). At the Russian Embassy in Pyongyang there is a team of highly-qualified experts. However, Moscow's political and economic involvement in North Korean affairs is rather limited. Moscow and Beijing are interested in them on a par and their views coincide in many respects, although there are some differences, too. Even from the point of view of economic interests, one can speak of limited rivalry between them, primarily in the Rason Special Economic Zone.

The outlines of the Russian variant of settling the Korean problem can well be seen on a road map evolved by our diplomats, which proposes "to move forward without preconditions stage by stage, beginning with manifestation of

restraint, nonprovocation of each other, talks about the general principles of mutual relations, such as nonaggression and refusal from the use and threats of the use of force.”

These proposals have found response in Beijing, and at the Moscow Summit of 2017. V. Putin and Xi Jinping “agreed to promote their common initiative based on the Russian stage-by-stage plan of Korean settlement and Chinese ideas of the parallel freezing of the North Korean nuclear activity and large-scale military exercises of the United States and South Korea, striving to increase our foreign policy coordination.”²⁷

The essence of the agreement is expressed in the joint statement of the foreign ministries of Russia and China,²⁸ in which, apart from combining Russian ideas with the Chinese initiative of the double freezing, the two parties note that “the just concern of the DPRK should be respected.” Other states should exert efforts for resumption of negotiations and jointly create the atmosphere of peace and mutual trust.

Thus, the position of Russia and its actions may tip the scale toward maximally favorable developments.

NOTES:

1. URL: <http://worldconstitutions.ru/?p=35>

2. Definition is given by the South Korea National Security Act. See: URL: http://antinsl.jinbo.net/nsl_full_text_en.html

3. See, for one: official site of management: URL: <http://www.ibuk5do.go.kr/>

4. See: URL: <http://old.russ.ru/politics/20020916-lan.html>

5. One can familiarize himself with the document on URL: <http://www.pircenter.org/media/content/files/9/13508169390.pdf>; compare what has been done and note that proofs that at that period the DPRK secretly worked on nuclear program have not been presented until now.

6. Conditionally, Iranian level can be likened to development of the DPRK nuclear program in 2005-2007, when the DPRK behaved constructively and could destroy, for instance, the cooler in Yongbyon.

7. This point was even specially included in the country’s Constitution.

8. Formally, only countries which acquired nuclear weapon prior to 1968 and which are, correspondingly, permanent members of the UN Security Council, can possess it. Informally, to them are added India and Pakistan, which are regarded, to an extent, “clients” of the U.S.A. and China, as well as Israel possessing the “nuclear status” of Schrödinger and holding the position “We have no bomb, but we shall use it if necessary.” Thus, North Korea as a nuclear state is an absolutely exogenous actor, which evokes understandable reaction.

9. The Republic of Korea evolved a nuclear program in the 1970s, but was stopped by the U.S.A.; at present, talks of the need to have its own nuclear weapon for opposing the North are under way in radical conservative circles.

10. Review of main concepts see in: K. Asmolov, *SShA – KNDR: amerikanskiye eksperty predlagayut strategiyu* [U.S.A.-DPRK: American Experts Offer Strategy], NVO, 12.11.2016. URL: <http://ru.journal-neo.org/2016/11/12/ssha-kndr-amerikanskiye-eksperty-predlagayut-strategiyu/>

11. For more details as to why the Arab Spring is hardly possible in the DPRK see: K. Asmolov, *Stoit li zhdatt' kollapsa KNDR?* [Is It Worthwhile Waiting for Collapse of the DPRK?], NVO, 16.10.2013. URL: <http://ru.journal-neo.org/2013/10/16/stoit-li-zhdatt-kollapsa-kndr/>

12. One's own unit engaged in intelligence is organized by U.S.A. only now. *See*: URL: <http://k-window.com/army/ssha-sozdadut-v-yuzhnoj-koree-podrazdeleniye-agenturnoj-razvedki-humint/>
13. URL: <http://w.huanqiu.com/r/MV8wXzEwNDIONzc0Xz14M18xNDkxMzLzNDYw>;
URL: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1040827.shtml> (English)
14. URL: http://www.usip.org/pubs/working_papers/wp6_china_northkorea.pdf
15. International Radio of Korea. URL: http://world.kbs.co.kr/russian/news/news_In_detail.htm?No=47948&id=In
16. Report of Russian Information Agency. URL: <https://ria.ru/world/20170408/1491814312.html>
17. For more detail *see*: K. Asmolv, *Irratsionalniy faktor i bezopasnost' na Koreyskom poluostrove* [Irrational Factor and Security on Korean Peninsula], *Severo-Vostochnaya Aziya: regional'niye izmereniya bezopasnosti i rossiysko-kitaiskoye sotrudnichestvo* [Northeast Asia: Regional Measurements of Security and Russian-Chinese Cooperation], Moscow, 2014, pp. 359-371.
18. *Renmin ribao*. URL: <http://russian.people.com.cn/n3/2017/0417/c95181-9203953.html>
19. Under Lee Myung-bak and last years of Park Geun-hue conservative elements actively tried to persuade Washington to use forcible variant, wishing to liquidate the DPRK with Washington's hands. There were instances when Seoul played its own games, but it could be afforded only by Park Chung-hee with his attempted nuclear program. But even then there was no talk of actions which were at variance with U.S. views.
20. As to anti-Americanism widespread among left-wing elements, in reality it is largely used as a sham. Just recall the demonstrations of 2008 against American beef which ended in nothing. And stormy anti-American acts, which accompanied Roh Moo-Hyun's coming to power, they were immediately stopped at the first hollo from Washington.
21. URL: http://world.kbs.co.kr/russian/news/news_newsthema_detail.htm?No=10071598
22. URL: http://world.kbs.co.kr/russian/news/news_Po_detail.htm?lang=r&id=Po&No=48723¤t_page=
23. In actual fact, something like this was put forward during the rule of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hue – “in the morning – money, and in the evening – possibly, chairs.”
24. URL: http://world.kbs.co.kr/russian/news/news_In_detail.htm?lang=r&id=In&No=48728¤t_page=
25. On candidacy of prime minister Moon reached consensus with representatives of several opposition parties who discussed his candidacy with no less nicety than the democrats in opposition used when discussing Park Geun-hue. However, this attempt failed when discussing the figure of foreign minister, after which she was appointed without discussion in parliament, which was desirable, but not necessary.
26. URL: http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/nota-bene/-/asset_publisher/dx7DsH1WAM6w/content/id/2729503. URL: <http://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreeneews/595b9c369a7947abb1193197?from=newsfeed>
28. URL: http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2807662

Translated by Yevgeny Khazanov
