Understanding the DPRK

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The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (commonly known as North Korea) seemed to dominate the news headlines in early April as tensions rose on the Korean peninsula. There were many developments in the aftermath of North Korea's third nuclear test on February 12, 2012 and ROK (Republic of Korea, aka South Korea)-US Key Resolve exercises March 11-21, 2013 (joint military exercises that had previously been called Team Spirit or RSOI – Reception, Staging, Onward Movement, Integration). North Korea announced that it was nullifying the 1953 Armistice Agreement (for the seventh time since 1994) and it also barred South Korean access to the Kaesong Industrial Complex on April 3 (as it had done once before). The United Nations and the United States renewed sanctions against North Korea. North Korea, in turn, threatened pre-emptive strikes against the United States and moved two mobile missile launchers to the east coast, directed toward Japan and the United States. It also warned embassies in Pyongyang to consider evacuating as the DPRK could not guarantee their safety. How much of this was the same old same old, and what warrants new concern?

The events of early 2013 were indeed familiar, as Bruce Cumings (professor and chair of the history department at the University of Chicago, and leading scholar on the Korean War) has pointed out: "Nothing is more characteristic of this regime than its preening, posturing, overweening desire for the world to pay it attention, while simultaneously threatening destruction in all directions and assuring through draconian repression that its people know next to nothing about that same world" ("Korean War Games," *The Nation*, April 3, 2013). With more than a month's hindsight behind us, we can concur that North Korea was doing exactly that. Although the situation this time did seem more serious than before, tensions quieted down as the DPRK celebrated what would have been "Eternal President" Kim Il Sung's 101st birthday on April 15. While some of these developments are continuations of previous tensions, how can we understand new twists and how can we move forward?

Andrei Lankov (Russian scholar of North Korea and professor at Kookmin University in Seoul) said in an Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times* that North Korea is not really looking to launch a war that would last only weeks, if not days, and would result in their "fiery oblivion." He added that North Korea's leaders are not irrational zealots and do not want to commit suicide. Lankov said the latest round of North Korea threats were not new. He says the "only real change" is that "the tune is being played louder" ("Stay Cool. Call North Korea's Bluff.," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2013). Lankov added that North Korea is just trying to get more foreign aid and when the situation calms down, negotiations can begin for North Korea to seek assistance and make concessions toward those goals.

The situation seems to have partly diffused, so is it time for a return to the negotiation table? Will anything be different this time? The Kaesong Complex issue is far from resolved and while it is a loss for South Korea, North Korea undoubtedly needs the complex more. In response to North Korea's actions to ban South Korean access to the complex on April 3 and withdrawing of North Korean workers on April 8, and by May 3, South Korea had pulled out all its employees and left with what they could carry. In just one month, the complex went from annual productions of $90 million to being completely abandoned. President Park has asked to open discussions to resolve the Kaesong issue, but nothing has happened as of yet. This is one indication that the situation is more serious than before.

What else was different this time? One new twist is that the conservative leadership of the two Koreas, China, and Japan are all relatively new but come from political families: South Korea's Park Geun-hye (daughter of President Park Chung-hee who ruled 1961-1979) was inaugurated on February 25, 2013; the PRC's Xi Jinping took control of

the Chinese Communist Party and military on November 15, 2012 and became president on March 14, 2013; and Japan's Abe Shinzō became prime minister on December 26, 2012 as a sequel to an earlier term as PM in 2006-07. Kim Jong Un could argue that he actually has seniority among the East Asian leaders since he has been in power since December 2011. Albeit not quite as powerful as Park Chung-hee and the first two Kims, the Abe and Xi families are also politically successful and well-connected. So East Asia found itself with new leaders who were perhaps eager to show their mettle.

Added to that is the United States' "pivot to Asia" and increased militarization in East Asia. The situation could probably have escalated and become even worse. Jeremi Suri (professor of history and public affairs at the University of Texas, Austin) published an Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times* saying that "[t]he best option is to destroy the North Korean missile on the ground before it is launched… [in] an act of self-defense in response to explicit threats from North Korea and clear evidence of a prepared weapon" ("Bomb North Korea, Before It's Too Late," *The New York Times*, April 12, 2013). While the United States fortunately did not follow Suri's suggestion, it is obvious that there are plenty of hawks on both sides of the Pacific Ocean.

Robert Oppenheim (associate professor Asian studies and head of the Korean studies program at the same university) responded in a letter to *The New York Times* ("Make North Korean an Offer," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2013):

The best path forward begins with an unconditional offer to sign a peace treaty ending the Korean War, an idea that, 60 years after the armistice of 1953, still has never been tried. This would not be a concession to North Korea demands, because it is not a concession. Instead, peace is the substance of what all countries involved in Northeast Asia want, or should.

As much as a peace treaty is likely to be the only solution to the start of peaceful relations on the Korean peninsula, it is also an unlikely scenario given the particular dynamics of the leadership of the four countries. But how can we try to decrease tensions and move gradually toward peace?

It would be useful to dispel some myths about North Korea. As Joel S. Wit and Jenny Town outlined in *The Atlantic* ("It's Not a Hermit Kingdom, and 4 Other Myths About North Korea," *The Atlantic*, April 2013), while recognizing the "horrific realities of an authoritarian North Korea, which is guilty of a multitude of human rights violations," we also have to see that "painting a black and white, comic book caricature of North Korea only increases the chances that we will continue pursuing misguided policies." Thus, Wit and Town pointed out that North Korea may be isolated vis-à-vis the United States, but it is not isolated from the rest of the world. The DPRK leaders (Kim Il Sung, his son Kim Jong Il, and now his grandson Kim Jong Un) follow "pragmatic interests, not irrational moves." Additionally, Wit and Town stated that North Korea is not a failed state, and while it cannot compare to South Korea, it is comparable to other developing nations around the world. They also said that North Korea does not always cheat on agreements and that China can influence the DPRK but China cannot control it.

By seeing North Korea as rational, or as Bruce Cumings has said, perhaps only acting as if they are "nuts," we might be able to look beyond the posturing and threats from all sides, and try something truly radical, namely in moving toward resolving the Korean War with a peace treaty. While this may not be in line with conservative politics, it may put a much-needed rupture in East Asian politics. With a peace treaty, North Korea will not have a justification to emphasize its military strength and it will have to answer to the international community as well as its people's demands for economic reforms and improved human rights. So instead of hoping for détente at best, how about if we try something radical and aim for peace?

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