

North Korea – Potent Threat or Paper Tiger?

For
Sanyo Shimibun

By
Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones
Former North Korea Affairs Officer
U.S. Department of State, Retired

March 2005

North Korea's recent declaration that it is a nuclear power and discarding of its moratorium on ballistic missile tests suggest that the North Korean threat to Japan has just become much more potent. Actually the exact opposite is true.

Kim Jong Il and his generals since 1994 have faced the dilemma of either modernizing their nation's economy first or replacing their obsolete conventional weapons arsenal of tanks and artillery with weapons of mass destruction, i.e. nuclear bombs and ballistic missiles. The international community offered North Korea a deal. If North Korea gave up its nuclear ambitions and cooperated with the international community, the United States, Japan, and other nations would help North Korea modernize its economy and gain access to the international market.

North Korea's leaders have finally made their choice clear. On March 3, 2005, North Korea's Foreign Ministry declared that North Korea is "no longer bound" to its September 1999 moratorium on the testing of ballistic missiles. Two weeks earlier, on February 10, the Foreign Ministry had declared that North Korea had nuclear weapons and would not return to the Six Party Talks "until the United States had dropped its hostile policy." These announcements followed those of December 2004 when North Korea tried to blame Japan for Pyongyang's failure to resolve the abduction issue.

Kim and his generals obviously believe that they can secure their regime's future by building weapons of mass destruction. This is a profound miscalculation that greatly weakens North Korea's defense capability. A nation's ability to defend itself relies on more than the size of its army and the destructive power of its weapons. National defense is a four legged stool that requires: political stability, economic prosperous, international respect and a professional military. If just one leg is missing, the stool becomes unstable.

Kim Jong Il's recent decisions have made North Korea's defense stool very wobbly. He has further isolated North Korea from the international community, including Japan and its closest ally the United States. This weakens North Korea's ability to modernize its economy by denying it access to billions of dollars in grants and loans as well as modern technology and the world market. Without these things, North Korea's economy will

remain backward while Kim's domain teters on the brink of famine and economic collapse. Neither situation is conducive to sustaining loyal followers.

Kim's mishandling of the abduction issue impedes the normalization of relations with Japan well into the foreseeable future. Until the issue is resolved, North Korea cannot hope to obtain the approximately US dollars ten billion in compensation that the Japanese government previously indicated might be available once relations were normalized. Nor can North Korea gain entry to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and access to billions of dollars in low interest loans that it needs immediately to develop its economy. Kim's recent missteps have also prompted Japan to close its ports to North Korea's uninsured merchant and fishing fleets. This will further reduce the already dwindling bilateral trade.

North Korea has unwittingly strengthened Japan's position vis a vis North Korea. The governments of the United States and European Union fully understand and support Japan's reluctance to deal with North Korea. They support Prime Minister Koizumi's decision to restrict the entry of North Korean ships into Japanese ports and exclusion of North Korea from the ADB.

Similarly, the governments of the world's leading trading nations and their wealthiest businessmen are now more reluctant to lend money to North Korea or to invest there. Even South Korea's business community is hesitant to invest in the joint South-North Korean Kaesong Industrial Park project because of increasing uncertainty about prospects for peace on the Korean Peninsula. The same is true of North Korea's closest allies, China and Russia, whose capitalist do not wish to risk their money in North Korea.

Kim and his generals have locked their nation's economy into a vicious cycle that is prone to perpetuate North Korea's poverty. Preoccupied with modernizing his military and feeding his subject, Kim Jong Il lacks the money necessary to re-vitalize North Korea's economy. Its infrastructure remains obsolete and rusting, its technology backward and its workers poorly trained and unproductive. Without foreign capital, loans and investment, North Korea cannot possibly modernize its industrial infrastructure, retrain its work force and expand its foreign trade. Lacking income from trade, North Korea cannot pay for the food it must import, nor acquire the farm machinery and fertilizers it desperately needs to increase food production. Nor can it purchase the machines and technology it must have to improve the quality, quantity and competitiveness of its manufactured goods.

Nor has North Korea's leadership significantly reinforced their million man army's military capability. Its arsenal consists of Soviet-era weapons that more sophisticated US weapons rendered obsolete in the First Gulf War fifteen years ago. North Korea simply lacks the economic ability to replace its old arsenal with sophisticated conventional weapons. Even its ballistic missiles are based on Soviet-era technology that dates from the 1950s. It has not been unable to test successfully more advanced, longer range and more accurate missiles. Its nuclear weapons remain too bulky to be launched via ballistic missiles.

In short, North Korea's leaders have severely damaged their nation's prospects for achieving self sufficient prosperity while failing to improve either their nation's defense posture or the ability to strengthen it.

All the while, North Korea's neighbors, particularly Japan and South Korea with the United States' help, have greatly reinforced their defenses while sustaining economic prosperity and international support. The United States' nuclear umbrella remains firmly in place over both allies. Given the very negative image North Korea has created for itself, the people of the United States would not hesitate to support their government's implementation of its defense commitments to Japan and South Korea. Even if North Korea were able to strike one of its neighbors with a nuclear weapon – a virtually impossible task for North Korea – this would immediately make North Korea the target of a far superior US nuclear arsenal. North Korea's self proclaimed nuclear capability, in the final analysis, lacks offensive potency.

Similarly, the United States and Japan have jointly developed and deployed an increasingly effective shield against North Korea's ballistic missiles. This "theater missile defense system," known as TMD, is already in place. It may not be a perfect system, but it has the capability to greatly diminish the potency of North Korea's ballistic missile threat. Also, if North Korea were to be so foolish to launch a ballistic missile against either Japan or South Korea, sophisticated US fighters armed with "smart" bombs would quickly eradicate North Korea's other ballistic missile launch sites.

Relatively speaking, North Korea has greatly weakened itself, internationally, economically and in terms of its over all defense capability, while at the same time it has strengthened Japan's international stature and defense posture.