

NORTH KOREA: SOME OBSERVATIONS

Notes for a presentation by Marius Grinius to the G78 on 30 Jan 18

- North Korea: lots of moving parts; do not fit into any neat pattern, and these parts keep changing shape
- plan to take 20 minutes to make a series of personal observations to highlight major issues related to North Korea; then use Q&A for more detailed discussion

Global Context

- “new Great Game” being played out globally between an ascendant China and a retreating United States
- Xi Jin-ping: on a roll (post-19th Party Congress, One Belt-One Road initiative, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank); Xi has a plan/roadmap, the “Chinese Dream” to make China great again; includes a modernized/restructured military
- China aided and abetted by its junior partner Russia and best friend Putin
- on the other side: we have Trump; the West currently in some disarray with few strong leaders with vision

North Korea

- in the global new Great Game context: North Korea is a dangerous, unpredictable side-show
- nasty little Stalinist state since its creation in 1948
- terrible human rights record; UN Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry condemned NK leadership for “crimes against humanity” (China’s HR record also sullied for returning NK asylum seekers back to NK)
- still a brain-washed society, albeit more information about the outside world is seeping in
- scariest place that I have had to deal with (spent time in the jungle with the KR)

North Korea's Regime

- Kim Jong-un: nicely consolidating his power (executed his uncle, a few generals, implicated in the murder of his half-brother); always rumours of palace intrigues
- seems to be convinced that he needs nuclear weapons to survive
- will continue his nuclear weapon and missile development program until he has a viable nuclear weapon capacity
- also has a formidable CW arsenal and perhaps BW also

UN/Security Council Sanctions

- have now had 13 SC resolutions, first dating back to 1993 (when NK first announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT, finally happened in 2003; 2006: first nuclear test)
- latest 4 in 2017, each successively tougher; each still full of loopholes regarding implementation
- sale of textiles, seafood, coal, issue of NK workers overseas (#s? 24 months), crude oil max per year: 4 million barrels, refined petroleum products: max 500,000 barrels, maritime interdiction: read the fine print: ports or 12 NM, high seas: consent of flag state
- China and Russia have made sure that wording of SC resolutions have been watered down; China and Russia: slow to implement
- NK: master at evading UN sanctions: overseas front companies, diplomats, false registrations of ships, intricate international financial webs, sales of weapons and military technology
- main issue: China wants to send NK a message but does not want sanctions to bite hard enough to cause regime instability or collapse
- “lips to teeth” relationship unravelling
- BUT China does not know what to do next wrt North Korea

United States

- “strategic patience” has morphed into “maximum pressure; maximum engagement”, not much real change
- Tillerson mantra: “complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization” simply will not happen
- Kim Jong-un will not negotiate away his nukes
- no viable military options to coerce Kim
- now need to look at long-term strategy of deterrence, containment and de-escalation, accompanied by efforts to maximize flow of info into North Korea
- plus continuing robust UN sanctions

Kim Jong-un’s Olympic Gambit

- nothing to lose by appearing to be reasonable
- pluses for South Korea: N/S talks, restored hot line, possibility of future mil-mil talks, peace and quiet during Olympics themselves
- pluses for Kim: annual joint RoK/US military exercises postponed, already pushing to cancel such exercises; made clear that weapons program will not be discussed
- potential for some mischief-making: Kim New Year speech: issue of reunification mentioned 11-12 times, play up idea that inter-Korean relations is an internal matter “to our Nation”, principle of “By Our Nation Itself” (I would be nervous about such language)
- dangers during Olympics: NK defection, anti-NK protests (burning of NK flag + Kim3 picture – demand for apology), NK cancellation of cultural event (bad SK press)

- key: what will happen after the Olympics: back to weapon testing?
- especially when RoK/US military exercises resume

Long-Term Resolution

- China needs to admit that NK is now a strategic liability to its long-term global ambitions
- China has to accept that a unified democratic Korea is in its long-term interest

Role of Canada?

- marginalized since 2010 and Harper's "controlled engagement policy"
- remains a marginal player on NE Asian security issues
- Vancouver Meeting: helped Tillerson, primacy of diplomacy
- ? attitude of China and Russia: could not control outcome of meeting
- Freeland: "sanctions working": how does she know"? Canada is not there
- dilemma: how to re-engage with NK when US is discouraging any diplomatic ties
- UK, Germany, India, Indonesia still have embassies in Pyongyang