



Why is the Korean Peninsula Trapped in a Vicious Circle of Permanent Crisis?

by Alexander Vorontsov

April 16, 2013

I. Introduction

Vorontsov writes: "Most media, while painting a vivid picture of North Korea's militancy, does not help readers to understand why the conflict in Korea is escalating so dramatically. When they do try, they usually name Pyongyang as the instigator of all the troubles, stressing that it was North Korea's third nuclear test that triggered the "nightmare". Without any approval whatsoever of Pyongyang's overreaction to the UNSC Resolution 2094 and its belligerent rhetoric and disproportionate moves, it is urgent to examine the real, underlying causes of what is commonly referred to as "the Korean problem"."

Alexander Vorontsov is currently the head of the Department for Korean and Mongolian Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russia Academy of Sciences and the MGIMO-University Oriental Studies Sub-faculty associate professor. He is the member of the Russian part of the Russia-DPRK Intergovernmental Commission dealing with trade-economic and scientific-technical cooperation. Vorontsov served as second secretary in the Russian Federation's Embassy in Pyongyang from 2000 to 2002. Vorontsov holds a Ph.D. in history from the Institute of Oriental Studies at the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, and has studied at Lomonosov Moscow State University and Pyongyang Kim Il Sung University.

Recommended Citation: Alexander Vorontsov, "Why is the Korean Peninsula Trapped in a Vicious Circle of Permanent Crisis?," *NAPSNet Policy Forum*, April 16, 2013, at: <http://nautilus.org/?p=30199>

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on significant topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Policy Forum by Alexander Vorontsov

Why is the Korean Peninsula Trapped in a Vicious Circle of Permanent Crisis?

The first half of April was marked by the further escalation of tension on the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang decided to close the industrial complex in Kaesong, which is a joint enterprise zone

with South Korea. It suggested that foreign embassies evacuate the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, for reasons of safety. Most significant in this series of steps has been the decision of the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers' Party, held in March 2013, regarding legal confirmation of North Korea's nuclear status and the decision of the Supreme People's Assembly of North Korea "On further strengthening the status of a country in possession of nuclear weapons for the purposes of self-defense."

Predictably these actions were condemned by the great powers, including Russia Foreign Ministry.

Most media, while painting a vivid picture of North Korea's militancy, does not help readers to understand why the conflict in Korea is escalating so dramatically. When they do try, they usually name Pyongyang as the instigator of all the troubles, stressing that it was North Korea's third nuclear test that triggered the "nightmare".

Without any approval whatsoever of Pyongyang's overreaction to the UNSC Resolution 2094 and its belligerent rhetoric and disproportionate moves, it is urgent to examine the real, underlying causes of what is commonly referred to as "the Korean problem".

In short, the initial cause is the unresolved outcome of the Korean War (1950-1953). This year marks 60 years since the end of the fighting. A peace agreement between its participants has still not been signed. Only the Armistice Agreement exists (possibly on paper only these days), that is, only a temporary cessation of hostilities. Most important, there are no diplomatic relations between the two main warring parties, the USA and North Korea. (The ROK is not included here because North Korea regards inter-Korean relations as internal, not as diplomatic relations between foreign states.)

The anomalous nature of this situation is all too obvious. Pyongyang has repeatedly suggested that this astonishing anachronism of the cold war be removed, but in vain. Washington stubbornly refuses to both normalize intergovernmental relations and replace the Armistice Agreement with a fundamental document that establishes lasting peace on the peninsula. Effectively, the United States is proving by its actions that it has "hostile intentions" – as they are called in Pyongyang – whatever it says. A peaceful co-existence with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea does not figure in America's plans. Rather, the United States is looking to eliminate the state of the DPRK.

This situation is why there is a pre-determined state of permanent conflict on the Korean Peninsula, a cyclical development of the situation from acute crisis to relative "remission" and back again. The actions of the West with regard to North Korea result in a vicious circle. Calls to stop the nuclear programme in order to halt the violation of the principles of the non-proliferation regime of weapons of mass destruction are often used to cover up the realization of a hidden agenda – regime change in North Korea.

As a result, when Pyongyang chooses the bargaining model of relations with the international community and is prepared to agree to mutual compromises with regard to its concerns (the

non-proliferation dossier), the West does not see this as an independent decision by those in the north, but as a display of weakness, a triumph of its policy of pressure. Following such logic, Washington and its allies are not in a hurry to assess steps taken by Pyongyang according to their merit, using them in the interests of constructive cooperation and a way to advance the settlement of the Korean Peninsula's nuclear issue. Rather, they act in the complete opposite manner. Based on the false understanding that North Korea began to make concessions under external pressure, the West considers it necessary to increase this pressure in order to put the final squeeze on its opponent.

This time, the American policy with a “false bottom” has failed irrevocably. Convinced of the true intentions of its partners, Pyongyang, with a view to cooperating with them, but in no way capitulating, has stopped playing the American game and is taking steps to strengthen its national defense capabilities. As a result, instead of the further concessions that were expected and the long-awaited collapse of North Korea, the DPRK is responding to the US-led campaign of pressure with new missile and nuclear tests.

The chronology of the current crisis is well-known.

The successful launch of a North Korean satellite took place on 12 December 2012. The UN Security Council chose the harshest way to respond in the form of Resolution 2087 (22.01.2013), as opposed to a similar occasion in April 2012, when the Security Council confined itself to a statement by its chairman. North Korea strongly disagreed with this decision as well as America's logic, according to [DPRK MOFA?] which “its own launches are satellites, while other people's are long range ballistic missiles”, and announced that “the six-party talks and the Joint Statement of 19 September no longer exist.”

As a “sign of protest”, Pyongyang carried out its third nuclear test on 12 February 2012, having pointed out in a statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that there have been “more than 2,000 nuclear tests and 9,000 satellite launches” in the world, “but the UN Security Council has never passed a resolution prohibiting nuclear tests or satellite launches.” In response, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2094 on 7 March 2013, placing the strictest sanctions on North Korea that the country has experienced in the past few decades.

What caused this rapid worsening of the confrontation in 2013? There are many reasons. Among the main ones, Pyongyang's opponents usually cite the following: the display of inexperience, immaturity and adventurism by North Korea's young leader, and the desire to intimidate Seoul. By forcing the South to believe that nuclear weapons are being acquired, North Korea has drastically altered the military balance on the peninsula in its favour, has gained immunity against the actions of the South, and is now able to intimidate and carry out “military provocations” against the Republic of Korea unpunished. Such attitudes are now widespread and are consequently supported by South Korean public opinion.

In American political and expert communities, voices have risen sharply demanding an immediate and decisive shift of policy emphasis in favour of adopting measures aimed at forcing regime change in North Korea by dramatically increasing external pressure, as well as isolation

and the encouragement of internal opposition. At the official level, the issue of undermining the standard of living of the North Korean population, amongst other things, has been openly discussed.

Advocates of these kinds of actions prefer not to notice that North Korea's nuclear tests at the turn of 2012-2013 were, to a large extent, in response to the West's reluctance to open up a constructive dialogue with Pyongyang. You will recall that after North Korea announced its withdrawal from the six-party talks in April 2009, the five remaining members declared that finding a way to convince Pyongyang to return to the talks was a priority.

And lo and behold, when this goal was almost achieved, in large part thanks to the diplomatic efforts of Russia and China, and the North Korean government during 2011-2012 repeatedly announced that it was prepared to continue its involvement in the six-party diplomatic process, Washington, Tokyo and Seoul, contrary to their own declarations, began to put forward preconditions and essentially did their best to delay the recommencement of negotiations for as long as possible. In so doing, they once again revealed their true aims: extending the policy of "strategic patience" which many American experts have called a variation on North Korea's "strategy of containment," so increasing its isolation with the ultimate aim of its regime change. Having received this perfectly clear signal from its opponents, and taking into account, including the examples of Libya and Syria, the West's growing inclination to use military force to overthrow undesirable regimes, Pyongyang considered itself free in its choice of means and undertook the necessary measures to strengthen its national defense capabilities.

This sequence of events was not the only reason pushing Pyongyang to take such steps, of course. It is more than likely that the desire of the North Korean government to make up for the unpleasant aftertaste that arose in society following the failed launch of the satellite on 13 April and the reality of the space race between North and South Korea also played its part. By sending its first satellite into scheduled orbit on 12 December 2012, North Korea won the inter-Korean competition to breakthrough into space. This was taken rather badly in the South, where they carried out the successful launch of their own satellite one and a half months later.

At one and the same time, these actions built up the spiral of conflict which has now placed the Korean Peninsula on the brink of war.

In order to prevent the situation deteriorating further, all the parties involved need to have self-restraint, first and foremost, and the utmost concentration to search for ways to resume political contacts.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Nautilus Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this report. Please send your response to: nautilus@nautilus.org. Comments will only be posted if they include the author's name and affiliation.