North Korean Power and Kim Jong Un’s Smaller H-Bomb

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I. Introduction

In this essay, Hayes and Cavazos articulate the strategic connections between Kim Jong Un's annual New Year address, his birthday, and North Korea's fourth nuclear test.

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II. Policy Forum by Peter Hayes and Roger Cavazos

Three landmark events occurred in North Korea so far this year.

The first was Kim Jong Un’s annual New Year address on Jan. 1. [1]

The second was North Korea’s fourth nuclear test on Jan. 6, hailed by the North’s official media KCNA as a “smaller H-bomb.”[2]

The third was Kim Jong Un’s birthday on Jan. 8.

These three events are related. Let’s connect the dots.

Let’s start with the nuclear test, which dominated international media whereas Kim’s speech was barely noted outside of Pyongyang, Seoul and Beijing.

Smaller H-Bomb

Western experts noted that the explosion, confirmed by the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBO), was indeed smaller—somewhere between 6 and 15 kilotons[3] -- than what is typically understood to be an H-Bomb. Indeed, this test had a seismic signature that was similar to past North Korean fission tests.[4] Nuclear weapons experts suggested that North Korea may have conducted a fusion-boosted fission detonation rather than two-stage thermonuclear explosions which are typically at least one hundred and have been as much as one hundred thousand times bigger than the latest North Korean test.[5]

Until North Korea demonstrates that it has the ability to deliver such a fission-based, even a boosted one, weapon long distances with credibility and reliability, all such tests do is to create an aura of power around its leader for domestic purposes, and project threat on an opportunistic basis to conduct psychological warfare against its external adversaries and even its “friends” such as China.

A boosted fission device *is* useful to develop a long-range nuclear force. This is because it enables the North to miniaturize a warhead that can be put atop a long-range missile. But short of a long-range missile force that is well-tested, all this test has done from a military perspective is to demonstrate yet again that the North Koreans can blow up a nuclear weapon in Korea, either in

their own territory during a war, or against South Korea. After which, assuming it goes off at all, one always asks, what then?

Youth Power

Just as important as the test was Kim's Jan.1 address. Unlike his rather defensive and introspective New Year's speech in 2015, this year's text brimmed with confidence. And, the word nuclear appears only twice in a 4,700 word English translation.

If he gave away nothing about the pending nuclear test, what was noteworthy about this speech?

In it, Kim dwells at length on what delivers "dignity and self-respect" to North Koreans. He immediately praises the performance of the North Korean military in the military confrontation with the South in August 2015, when the two sides fired artillery into the Demilitarized Zone, leading to what Kim called a "hair-trigger situation teetering on the brink of armed conflict."

Kim refers to this episode of inter-Korean brinksmanship--in all likelihood initiated by the North in response to the South's collapsist reunification rhetoric and related policy initiatives—as a way to introduce an entirely new theme.

"What makes us look back upon last year with greater delight," Kim declares, "is that our young vanguard who are [sic] reliably carrying forward the lineage of the Juche revolution and faith demonstrated the might of the youth power without parallel in the world by means of their loyalty to the Party and heroic struggle."

Youth power is a new theme in the rhetorical arsenal of North Korea's leadership. Kim continues:

"Educated and trained in the embrace of the great leaders and the Party, our young people rushed ahead along the course of the Korean revolution set by the Party, creating the charging spirit and culture of young people of the *Songun* [military first] era and performing laudable deeds that touched people's heartstrings."

And just in case North Koreans and external readers didn't get the point, he reiterates it: "The millions of young people, fully equipped with the revolutionary ideology of the great leaders and firmly rallied behind the Party, have grown strong in ideas and faith, to become successors to the cause of the Juche revolution. This is the greatest dignity, pride and success for us."

Of course, Kim also notes the importance of the Korean People's Party and its role in directing the military. Thus, he exhorts the army to train in a "real-war atmosphere" and to modernize itself on a " scientific and modern footing," that is, to strengthen its conventional, non-nuclear strategy—and nary a mention of nuclear weapons.

But even on this traditional theme, Kim returns quickly to appeal to youth, noting that: "Our Party pins a great hope on the role of young people in today's general advance."

"Young people," he explains for those having difficulty tracking him, "cherishing the trust of the Party that has given prominence to them as masters of the youth power, should train themselves further to be dependable pillars of the country and become artists of miracles and heroes on all the sites where a thriving nation is being built."

In his January 2015 New Year's speech, Kim's approach was relatively muted. At that time, he said that North Korea's goal was to consolidate past achievements. Moreover, during 2015, North Korea suffered a series of undeniable setbacks and retreated by repairing its damaged relationship with

China in October 2015 after the August shootout with the South at the DMZ. Thus, at the end of 2015, Kim appeared to have adopted strategic patience, that is, a willingness to wait out American refusal to engage on terms acceptable to the regime while riding out the storms of criticism from the international community on its appalling human rights record.[6]

Starting the New Year with an H-bomb test to underscore the rise of a new generation of leadership suggests that Kim will be much more pro-active in 2016. He will devote much of his attention and national resources to demonstrating to the great powers and to South Korea that his signature *byungjin* line/병진노선/平行发展 / (that is, the parallel development of the economy and nuclear weapons) appears to be working, albeit slowly and unevenly.

Generational Shift

A fourth nuclear test without concurrent progress on intermediate and long-range delivery systems makes little difference in a military context to North Korea's inferior and deteriorating strategic position.

But it makes a huge difference to a youth-based, hyper-nationalist appeal aimed at lending Kim Jong Un with celebrity status and legitimacy to the youth of North and South Korea.

Well informed strategic analysts have explained at length the range of options available to Kim Jong Un to develop a credible nuclear weapons capability over a five- to fifteen-year time frame.[7] Unfortunately, far less attention has been paid to the domestic and political dimension of Kim's regime survive-and-prosper strategy which is superordinate to the nuclear-military, not least because of the popularity of collapsist theories of the demise of the North Korean regime and other forms of lazy thinking.

In reality, Kim Jong Un is not crazy. He is not erratic. He is not at the end of his strategic tether.

Far from a last gasp, the Jan. 6 nuclear test was merely the punctuation point at the end of his Jan. 1 speech, and the opening salvo in a generational transition in Korea, as well as a poke in the eye of South Korea's leadership whose response was to turn on broadcast speakers of K-pop and other anti-regime propaganda at the DMZ,[8] thereby resuming the cycle of inter-Korean competition for who will inherit the Korean soul.

It reinforces that Kim is North Korea's hardest liner as he prepares for the resumption of the party congress after a 30-year break. Kim will set out to re-order North Korea's rigid bureaucracies and ailing state-based economy at this congress. The spastic American response—sending a B52 bomber to fly over Osan Air Force Base on Jan. 10,[9] simply lends credence to Kim's embrace of The Bomb and the power of his leadership. This flight was a repeat performance of the tactically smart but strategically stupid flight made during the 2013 confrontation between the two Koreas.[10]

Thus, the test was a birthday present of national fealty delivered to Kim by the North Korean scientific and technical elite on Jan. 8, his 33rd birthday, two days after the test. This carefully choreographed sequence of events underscores the legitimacy and potency of his leadership in contributing to and even surpassing the achievements of his father and grandfather.

Comprehensive Security Settlement

Two and a-half decades of incremental attempts to stop and reverse North Korea's breakout have failed completely. The only actions that were at all effective were President Georg H. W. Bush's 1991 unilateral withdrawal of nuclear weapons from South Korea and the region; and the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework. The former led to benchmark inter-Korean agreements that remain a baseline

for future denuclearization of the North, in particular, the 1992 Denuclearization Declaration. The latter reshaped the strategic landscape in ways that altered Kim Jong Un's father, Kim Jong Il's calculus sufficiently to slow North Korea's proliferation activity and delay its nuclear weapons by more than a decade.

More of the same will do nothing to move Kim Jong Un in a new direction, let alone revise his course of acquiring a full spectrum nuclear deterrent over the next two decades. Only a comprehensive regional security settlement between the great powers combined with a regional nuclear weapons-free zone[11] could provide a substitute for North Korea's nuclear weapons worth considering, from Kim Jong Un's perspective—not because the US or other military threats would recede greatly as recessed nuclear threat would remain in the background even if such changes are made in the regional security framework, but because his leadership would gain more recognition from such treaty-based agreements than he could ever hope to gain from a renegade nuclear weapons program.

Because Kim lacks a militarily meaningful long-range missile system and will continue to lack one for years to come, the United States and South Korea still have years to turn around the North Korean program, if they were so inclined. However, the US is unlikely to attempt such a reversal due to the political risks it would pose to Democratic candidates in the run-up to the US presidential elections; and the US-China relationship is already fraught with other issues in ways that preclude close concert on North Korea.

This external environment leaves Kim Jong Un free to use nuclear tests and irregular missile activity for opportunistic psychological warfare against the South while continuing to rely on conventional artillery and rockets aimed at Seoul as the foundation of North Korea's deterrence strategy against attack by the US and South Korea.

Unfortunately, South Korean K-pop broadcasts and American crude B52 threats in response to Kim's "smaller" H-bomb test do not portend a Blue House effort any time soon to break this cycle of threats and brinksmanship.

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