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**CRISIS AND NEW POLITICAL AGENDA
FOR THE KOREAN PENINSULA
AND REGIONAL POWERS**

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The report reviews fundamental reasons, main features and consequences of the political crisis with regard to the Korean peninsula in the context of North Korean missile and nuclear programs. It presents an assessment of domestic political and economic processes in DPRK after Kim Chen Un’s coming to power. Analysis covers Pyongyang’s key foreign policy priorities, commonalities and differences between the Republic of Korea and regional powers (China, Russia, USA and Japan) regarding key issues of missile and nuclear crisis, prospects for multinational cooperation to maintain peace and security on the Korean peninsula.

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INTRODUCTION

This research paper has been written in the Centre for Asia Pacific Studies at Primakov National Institute of World Economy and International Relations (Russian Academy of Sciences) while working on the project "Are the six-party talks possible? A new agenda for the Korean Peninsula and Regional Powers" and was supported by **the Korea Foundation (the Republic of Korea)**. The report was prepared by Senior Research Associate **Oleg Davydov**, IMEMO Vice-President academician **Vasily Mikheev**, Head of Sector of Asia-Pacific Region Problems and Korea program at IMEMO Prof. **Alexander Fedorovsky** using the research materials supplied by **Dr. Kristina Voda**, **Sergey Ignatiev** and **Evgeniya Klyueva**. Also **Dr. Vitaly Shvydko** and **Marina Novichkova** participated in the preparation of the report.

In this work the authors sought to demonstrate that the crisis that vividly manifested itself in 2016-17 as continuation of North Korean nuclear-missile tests has a complex nature. At the same time, these nuclear-missile ambitions of the North Korean regime are fueled not so much by external factors, but by internal factors as well. It is the latter that explains the attention paid by the authors to domestic political and socio-economic processes that are taking place in present-day North Korea, as well as to the new challenges facing the current authorities in Pyongyang in contrast to their predecessors.

At the same time, the authors proceed from the fact that the leading regional powers can make a positive contribution to improving the situation on the Korean Peninsula through bilateral and multilateral contacts. The form of international dialogue which can be most productive is also considered in this work in the context of assessing the potential of and opportunities for regional powers' cooperation, as well as their priorities in this field.

I. DOMESTIC POLITICS SITUATION IN NORTH KOREA AFTER KIM JONG-UN CAME TO POWER AND THE NUCLEAR PROBLEM

The change of the head of state in the DPRK always has a decisive influence on the character of the ruling regime. Especially in the context of challenges faced by North Korea in the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century.

After the death of Kim Jong Il on December 17, 2011 by the decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea his youngest son Kim Jong-un was appointed the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army and, thus, the country's leader.

The problems of leader change

At that time, political situation in North Korea was extremely ambiguous and unpredictable. The fact is that Kim Jong Il was inclined to consider himself as a relatively "young" leader. Confidence in his political "longevity" prevented him from timely and correctly solving the problem of preserving the strategic course of the country in case of his unexpected departure from power. Accordingly, serious preparations for the succession of power weren't discussed.

The situation began to change rapidly after a sudden and severe illness of the leader in 2008. As a result, he was already unable to fully return to state duties.

Under the circumstances, the issue of Kim Jong Il's successor was resolved without proper elaboration. In the end, the choice fell on Kim Jong-un. However, he was brought to the political arena only in September 2010 by a decision of the Conference of Representatives of The Workers' Party of Korea. At the same time he was appointed deputy chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Central Committee of the WPK – a political body, which in those years had little to decide in practice.

The main problem was that the young leader (at the time of nomination he was no more than 27-28 years old) had not got any proper preparation for his new mission. And not only because of a lack of life experience, but also from absence of appropriate education

and administrative practices, special knowledge (in the field of foreign policy and security), understanding of the situation and so on. He did not also have his consolidated base of supporters. Moreover, until January 2009, when the country celebrated Kim Jong-un's birthday for the first time, the overwhelming majority of the population did not even suspect his existence.

Since October 2010, Kim Jong-un gradually began to enter to the political life of the DPRK. But it was rather slow and hesitant. In official news reports, Kim Jong-un appeared only as an escort-person for Kim Jong Il during his travels around the country. Throughout 2010-2011, there wasn't any single instance that Kim Jong-un showed himself as an independent and responsible political leader.

It is known that after the death of Kim Jong Il, his son was supported by a "group of old people", which wanted to maintain continuity and ensure stability in the country. Obviously there was also a desire to set up a kind of a guardian council to correct carefully the activities of the new leader in the right direction.

The biggest mystery was that, apparently, practically nobody, even the most influential people in the country had clear understanding of Kim Jong-un's political beliefs. It is also noteworthy that a significant part of the international expert, diplomatic and journalistic community had an illusion that the young leader who had received education abroad would implement political reforms in North Korea. In fact, at his initial stage, Kim Jong-un had all the political trump cards in his hands: an unblemished "blood" reputation, non-participation in the activities of the previous regime and so on.

The period of high expectations ended after the 7th Congress of the WPK in 2016. It was accompanied by a deep profound restructuring of the government and party bodies, which was subordinated to concentrate full power in Kim Jong-un's hands.

As was already noted, Kim Jong-un was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Korean People's Army (KPA) by the decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the WPK on December 30, 2011. At the 4th Conference of the WPK held in April 2012 he was elected first secretary and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CEC) of the WPK. Then, during the 5th session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK Kim Jong-un

was elected First Chairman of the State Defense Committee of the DPRK. At the 7th Congress of the WPK (May 6-9, 2016, Pyongyang) Kim Jong-un was nominated to the post of Chairman of the WPK.

The Constitution of the country was changed according to the results of the 4th session of the Supreme People's Assembly on June 29, 2016. After that the State Affairs Commission of North Korea was declared supreme state authority of the country, and Kim Jong-un was elected chairman of this body.

It is important that the State Affairs Commission of North Korea has concentrated control over all key structures of the power enforcement bloc, namely, the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, the Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of National Security.

Thus, the issue of the legitimacy of the new leader was formally resolved in 2016.

*Internal prerequisites for changes in foreign policy priorities
under the new leadership*

In March of 2013 Pyongyang made a decision to proclaim a new strategic course of "simultaneous building of both national economy and the potential for nuclear deterrence" at the plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the WPK. All these decisions have practically buried hopes that the new regime will gradually move away from the previous confrontational and militarized line in foreign policy and will gradually take the path of economic and political renewal of the country. Moreover, Pyongyang changed its Constitution and declared North Korea a "nuclear power" on April 13, 2012. Then, the "Law on strengthening the status of a state possessing nuclear weapons of self-defense" was adopted during the 7th session of the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK on April 1, 2013.

Consolidation of the course for reinforcement of the "nuclear deterrence forces" was formally completed at the VII Congress of the WPK held in May of 2016. The DPRK was presented to the world as a "responsible state which possesses nuclear weapons and will not use it first". Accordingly, readiness to move towards denuclearization was announced but only in the context of the global process of nuclear disarmament. Until then it was stated necessary to exclude the issue of

the nuclear status of the DPRK from the agenda of any negotiations between Pyongyang and other states.

In other words, Pyongyang officially announced its intention to further ignore the decisions of the UN Security Council regarding its nuclear and missile programs and encourage the outside world to reckon with the DPRK as a competent nuclear power. This approach naturally called into question the very idea of continuing negotiations on denuclearization of North Korea and the restoration of its status of a non-nuclear state. In other words, there was a complete deadlock - the most serious one since the beginning of the 1990's.

From all points of view, the above-mentioned extraordinary steps seem to be unmotivated, illogical and difficult to explain. Moreover, nuclear status of North Korea caused a completely understandable growth of distrust on the part of its neighbor countries. It significantly narrowed Pyongyang's room for maneuver in case of continuing its bargaining with external opponents on a wide range of issues. One reasonable explanation suggests it has to do not so much with the influence of external factors but with the pressure of internal circumstances. After the demise of Kim Jong-Il, during the Kim Jong-un regime the processes of rebalancing the main forces and groups of influence were unfolded. As a result, we can state that the military elite with the support from the defense industry complex was interested to continue and even exacerbate confrontation with the outside world in order to strengthen its power status, and it prevailed over more moderate functionaries who advocated "reasonable sufficiency" in defense and accelerated development of civil sector of the North Korean economy.

In this regard, we can say that the real leaders of the country currently are top military officials and leaders of the military-industrial complex. It was them who imposed on the country and most importantly on its supreme leadership the idea of the need for not ritually "conservative" but open, permanent and intentionally adventurist confrontation with the "enemies" – the US, Japan and South Korea.

This leads to another fundamental postulate of North Korean politics – the rejection of any peace talks that could bring in the issue

of reducing the country's military might, especially the nuclear missile potential.

It is likely that the "civilian" environment of Kim Jong-un really made an attempt to create a counterbalance to the domination of the military bloc. However, the subsequent development of the situation in the DPRK has clearly shown that these intentions have never materialized. It is also important to keep in mind that at least half of the leading units of the central apparatus of the WPK are to some degree involved in the development and implementation of military policy or are engaged in servicing the army and defense industries.

Economic realities under Kim Jong-un administration

It should be noted that the party and state documents of recent years also call for economic development. Given the extremely limited financial, material, technological and human resources of North Korea, it is quite obvious that the course for simultaneous movement along both tracks is unrealistic.

The fact remains that the basic production assets are obsolete and worn out. There is an acute shortage of fuel, raw materials and electricity, and most importantly, of investments and technologies. For example, according to some sources, there are 24 "economic zones" in the DPRK, but they haven't received investments from abroad because of economic risks, unclear political prospects and readiness for a total war with "external enemies".

In this regard, it is noteworthy that a number of Russian and foreign researchers have become more confident in recent years of success of economic policy based on quasi-market, which seems to have already yielded positive results in terms of revitalization of economic activity. For example, they refer to tolerant attitude of Kim Jong-un to private business; implementation of the agrarian reform; transfer of state enterprises to self-financing.

Particularly overestimated is the scale of transformation in Pyongyang, where new and attractive residential neighborhoods are being built; markets, "private" restaurants as well as saunas and shops with Chinese goods are now being opened too.

First of all, Pyongyang has long been turned by the ruling regime into a showcase city designed to demonstrate very good life of ordinary Koreans. This is usual practice of authoritarian regimes to maintain the attractive appearance of their capitals. In contrast, life of ordinary citizens and even bureaucracy in North Korean provinces is extremely difficult.

Many researchers who pay attention to significant increase of wages do not take into account obvious or hidden increase in the prices of food and essential goods. It is very important to add that it is almost impossible for a non-market economy to calculate dynamics of macroeconomic indicators. That's why many expert's conclusions are based on their own impressions and conclusions.

The fundamental problem is that due to lack of adequate education and professional experience neither Kim Jong-un nor his immediate or more distant environment can rule the country in the framework of modern economy. The current generation of North Korean management elite, like their parents, spent their entire lives in an isolated country where they could not get normal economic knowledge. There are no competent people in the DPRK who could provide an unbiased analysis of the state of affairs in the national economy.

Since 1990's the key problem of the state sector of economic and social spheres has been the total failing of government, which is no longer able to carry out the tasks of rational management and control. Due to the degradation of the administrative, financial, resource and intellectual base of North Korean state, as well as to the collapse of the distribution system, the central government objectively had to squeeze the sphere of its responsibility especially in the socio-economic field. That is, the state could no longer provide the entire industry with raw materials, fuel, and the civilian population with food, clothing and housing.

The implicit contract between the state and society is expressed in the following – legal entities and individuals are looking for a way out from a difficult financial situation independently, and the state doesn't interfere.

At the same time it is permitted not to follow certain basic "socialist principles" (possibility to wage commercial activity,

softening of the planned economy system). In fact, the only "sacred cow" is the political and ideological foundation of the regime – any attempts to undermine it are severely punished.

As a result, the state preserves direct control over key enterprises, such as power production, transport facilities and military-industrial complex.

Since the beginning of 2000's small private enterprises have been allowed in the DPRK, but no legislative basis has been introduced up to now. As a rule, wealthy people give bribes to officials in order to get the right to create the business they actually conduct, but do not have any legal rights to it.

Another possibility to receive "compensation" for corrupt officials lies in the specifics of domestic legislation of the DPRK, which prohibits citizens from leaving their areas of permanent residence without obtaining the appropriate consent of the authorities.

The next one is the creation of small shops established through theft from state and even military depots. This is possible due to creation of criminal links between "businessmen", the leadership of the relevant points of storage of food and material resources, as well as representatives of law-enforcement officers that cover these abuses or are directly involved in them.

In other words, North Korean private sector (in which, according to various estimates, up to 40% of the active population is working) is a shadow, illegal and even a criminal economy.

The main problem of modern North Korea is that economic relations that are now being developed in the country do not provide economic growth. Thus, it is no longer stagnation, but the unfolding process of decay and disintegration of the country's economic potential. In the long term, it is exactly this factor that can become a "trigger mechanism" leading at a certain stage to disorganization of the whole life of North Korea including the sphere of political power.

But the current regime does not want and does not even know how to integrate mechanisms of state and public self-development to make possible a gradual transition to a more rational economic system. The reason is a paranoid fear of creating a "domino effect" depriving the ruling regime of control over economic and political spheres.

Such kind of policy makes North Korea an extremely dangerous country for its neighbors in the region.

II. HIERARCHY OF NORTH KOREA'S FOREIGN POLICY GOALS

The main feature of modern policy of the DPRK is the development of the program of nuclear-missile weapons. High intensity of missile launches and nuclear tests as well as proclamation of the country's nuclear status in the Constitution inevitably led to an increase of North Korea's isolation in international arena. As a result, Pyongyang's aggressive behavior and refusal to discuss nuclear disarmament issues undermine the ability of responsible powers to conduct substantive negotiations.

Official declaration of the nuclear status of the DPRK in its Constitution and all subsequent steps in fact transformed foreign policy into the category of secondary activities designed to provide and cover the strategy of the state in the military-defense sphere.

On the other hand, North Korean leaders turned their nuclear exercises into "working tools" of foreign policy, thereby further exacerbating its subordinate role within the framework of the "nuclear deterrence" strategy.

In the last period we have seen obvious signs of the deterioration of the situation around North Korea:

- Since 2013 North Korea has conducted four nuclear tests. There is no guarantee that this practice will cease. In official statements Pyongyang has consistently maintained that the country will continue to increase the quantity and quality of nuclear weapons. Therefore, we can expect new tests.

- Since 2016 Pyongyang has begun to test missiles of various classes and modifications.

- The aggressive rhetoric of the DPRK has significantly increased.

- A lack of channels for communication between North and South Koreans.

- At this stage, attempts by neighboring countries to persuade the DPRK to abandon dangerous policies have not yet yielded results.

- One of the main problem is that the DPRK from its side does not offer any proposals to address the nuclear missile problem or, at least, to freeze it.

Compared to the former leader, Kim Jong-un's demonstration of aggressiveness seems to be his goal.

There is an impression that the North Korean leader does not believe in any dialogues and peace agreements with the United States and other opponents, that is why he focuses on supporting the image of North Korea as a "dangerous power", which is ready to do everything for the sake of its survival.

Accordingly, the idea of multilateral or other negotiations is categorically rejected. The only thing Pyongyang is ready to talk about is the rejection be the US of its "hostile policy", which can induce Pyongyang to show restraint. This implies that Washington will have to stop all military exercises near the Korean Peninsula and the DPRK, and ultimately, withdraw its troops from South Korea, conclude a peace treaty with Pyongyang and "guarantee" North Korean regime a safe existence.

However, the problem is that even such hypothetical and practically unimaginable concessions from the US will not encourage the DPRK to abandon the nuclear missile potential. It is demagogically stated that the DPRK will be ready for denuclearization only if and when global nuclear disarmament process is launched.

The favorite thesis of Western politicians is that Kim Jong-un is a schizophrenic who can act inadequately and is capable of irrational steps. As Senator J. McCain noted, "we have to deal with a person who cannot think reasonably". Such assessments have recently been firmly established as characteristics of identity of the North Korean leader.

Accordingly, a number of analysts believe that considering Kim Jong-un such a leader simply plays into his hands. This point of view, in particular, is supported by the fact that the new leader, despite the extremely unfavorable circumstances and initially pessimistic forecasts of his rule, managed to hold power for almost six years.

Despite international sanctions, colossal defense spending and a lack of real prerequisites for normalization of both social and economic spheres, Pyongyang still manages to keep the situation "afloat", first of all to avoid the collapse of the economy. At the same time, the regime manages to somehow accumulate funds for illegal purchases from abroad of technologies, units and components, which are necessary for the intensive continuation of its missile programs.

It is interesting to note that some opinions on Kim Jong-un and his activity among serious experts from the United States begin to change gradually. For instance, the head of the national intelligence D. Coates notes that Kim Jong-un's actions are driven by "the desire to survive by any means".

Nevertheless, it is important to understand that while Korean leader may not deserve extreme assessments, this does not mean that the decisions he and his environment make are optimal or rational for Pyongyang. In other words, he is not a madman, but he is not a great strategist either.

Companions of the current leader are rather ordinary people, who have little control over the situation and can organize only one-time intimidating actions. In the absence of new minds and flexibly thinking strategists North Korean politics have fizzled out so much that it is difficult to expect any creative, unconventional ideas and actions from it.

The main miscalculation of the North Korean elite when they included a "nuclear" article in the constitution and deployed an extensive nuclear missile test program was that Pyongyang itself facilitated the transfer of the long-smoldering conflict on the peninsula from a latent situation to a "hot" stage.

The current regime's activities in the nuclear missile sphere are perceived as an extremely dangerous, thawing threat by a significant part of the Asia Pacific region. Regional leaders consider DPRK an unpredictable state in the region. So, international atmosphere for North Korea is constantly deteriorating and the space for Pyongyang's foreign policy maneuvering is steadily shrinking.

In general, we can conclude that while staying in power the current regime managed to untwist a huge flywheel of activity, which now, on the one hand, is very difficult to stop, and on the other, it is

hard to avoid inevitable negative consequences of this adventurous game. North Korea needs to constantly confirm by practical actions that Pyongyang is an extremely dangerous player. The course of the "hybrid escalation" chosen by Kim Jong-un is no more than an attempt to scare the West by extremist and shocking actions.

But at the same time, there are fears that the ruling elite in the DPRK will ultimately "exhaust" the country materially and morally earlier than it will achieve its foreign policy goals.

III. US-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS UNDER TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

When President Trump came to power, he began his Korean policy with a criticism of his predecessor. According to his opinion, the policy of B. Obama led to the fact that North Korea, in fact, have gone so far in the development of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons.

As we know, D. Trump and his administration made a number of statements stating that the policy of "strategic patience", pursued by B. Obama for many years, was completely exhausted, and Washington should take decisive steps to curb nuclear-missile ambitions of Pyongyang. The new US President discussed this issue with Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Florida in early April 2017, with expectations that Beijing will pressure a proper effect on its unpredictable neighbor.

The policy of North Korea led to the fact that the United States accelerated the elaboration of various options for the solution of the nuclear missile problem, namely the possibility of strikes on military targets in the DPRK using heavy bombers based on Guam and Tomahawks from US Navy ships in the Pacific; conducting special operations to destroy and damage North Korean military infrastructure, as well as cyberattacks; seizure or "displacement" of North Korean military-political leadership by special forces.

One of the options discussed was the expediency of the re-deployment of US tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea. These steps caused a serious reaction, especially in the camp of the closest US allies in the region. Seoul demanded that any hypothetical military actions against Pyongyang would be undertaken only after

consultations with South Korea. Official Tokyo was talking about the need for urgent evacuation of its citizens from South Korea and expressed concerns that the reaction of the DPRK could be missile strikes on the territory of Japan. Chinese representatives made it clear that Beijing will never allow the outbreak of military conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

It is also noteworthy that the US military cycles of the current and past administrations resolutely opposed military action. Analysts of Department of Defense pointed out that unlike the "Syrian experience" in North Korean case the Pentagon does not have a clear idea of the location of dangerous facilities of military infrastructure. As a result, probably under the influence of this argumentation Washington was forced to reduce the intensity of its rhetoric. Secretary of State R. Tillerson stated in his comments that the White House's intentions might have been misunderstood, and they meant only the need to increase pressure on Pyongyang to force it to abandon its nuclear-missile ambitions.

In his turn, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General J. Dunford said that "today the discussion of a preemptive strike against North Korea was at least premature". According to him, the United States is currently focused on diplomatic and economic pressure on Kim Jong-un's regime to force North Korea to abandon its destructive intentions.

As a result, it is very important for researchers from the US and other countries to identify the true parameters of the North Korean threat more clearly and determine adequate ways of responding to it. At this stage, the advantage of Pyongyang is that no one knows for certain the following points.

First, **the degree of advancement of North Korean missile program.** It is obvious that North Korea has made a decisive step and tested new more powerful rocket engine, as well as solid-fuel rockets and those that are launched from mobile-based installations. At the same time, the question about a reliability of these systems is open. Many experts believe that at this stage there are serious problems with control. Technological level does not allow to work on the creation of intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Second one is **the real assessments of nuclear potential**. North Korea made six underground nuclear tests, the latter of them of 70 to 120 kT. According to experts, fissile material in the country is sufficient to produce 10-16 nuclear weapons. It is believed that a military program based on highly enriched uranium is being developed in addition to the plutonium program. In this case, a number of warheads could increase to 30 units. Some experts believe that actual number may be twice as large. However, aside from purely "speculative" calculations, there is no reliable data on whether North Korea has passed from testing of explosive devices to actual production of ammunition suitable for military use.

The third one is **industrial and technological aspect**. The main question is, taking into account the current technical and technological level of North Korean science and industry, whether it is possible to make progress in creating a compact nuclear warhead to put it on long-range ballistic missiles? The North Koreans themselves confidently assert that such a potential is already available, but reliable verification of these statements is very difficult.

For experts the biggest question is what Pyongyang is striving to achieve. In general, North Korea doesn't have a clear list of claims or concrete proposals for their external opponents, except a vague demand to end the "hostile policy" of the US against the DPRK. Meanwhile they claim that the country will retain its status of a nuclear power. Elimination of this is foreseen only in the context of global efforts for comprehensive nuclear disarmament. So what should we then negotiate with Pyongyang?

The advantage of Trump as a state leader is that he reflexes less, and under certain circumstances can go much further than his predecessor. The problem is the US Congress and other forces, which influence policy of the White House.

In addition, the emotionality, changeability of the views and actions of Trump often become his weak points. The President from the first days of his stay in power and even in the previous period strongly urged voters and the political elite that he will be able to quickly and effectively resolve the North Korean problem.

As a result, Trump fell into a trap, which he himself enthusiastically had built throughout the initial period of his administration. He linked his name to a swift and cardinal solution of

the Korean problem. So now any attempt to depart from this initial position would be perceived by Americans as recognition of the failure of the declared course.

In the foreseeable future Washington is unlikely to agree to have any official contacts with Pyongyang. In the United States, the time for public discussion on North Korea's policy has passed after the collapse of the six-party talks. In the US political and military establishment, in fact, there has been a broad and stable consensus on Kim Jong-un as an unacceptable partner. In academic circles, the United States is no longer considered a good judge to talk about a peace treaty on the Korean Peninsula without reference to the urgent measures to stop the military activities of Pyongyang.

For the American elite, the regime in North Korea is "absolute evil". At the same time, increasingly evoking North Korean threats are actively working on this negative image. It seems that it will be extremely difficult to change this firmly formed point of view.

The main task for the American side at this stage seems to wrest the strategic initiative from the hands of the DPRK and demonstrate that Pyongyang has not yet experienced the limits of rigidity that can be applied to it. Most likely, in the near future the ruling administration will have to maneuver somewhere in the interval between the former Obama's strategy of "political patience" and the policy of increasing comprehensive pressure on North Korea.

At the present time, the view has spread that the DPRK is ready to produce and deploy ICBMs with a range of at least 7,000 to 8,000 kilometers, and will therefore be able to attack US cities as early as 2018.

It should be noted, however, that this data contradicts with the assessments of Russian experts who believe that the US military concerns about the degree of advancement of the DPRK missile program are greatly exaggerated.

According to experts, North Korea most likely continues to experience serious technical difficulties with the development of ICBMs. According to Russian Defense Ministry, the above-mentioned missiles belong to the medium-range category.

Trump Administration had to play a few back from the previous militant line. Secretary of State R. Tillerson and a number of

other American politicians stated that the United States didn't aim to change the regime in North Korea and wasn't interested in the collapse of this country. Moreover, they said that America was even ready to establish relations with the DPRK when it becomes a "normal state". However, until this happens, Washington, along with its allies and closest partners, will widely use the tactic of "peaceful pressure" which implies the adoption of sanctions tools.

There is reason to believe that D. Trump, who has taken personal responsibility for solving the North Korean problem, will act more decisively than his predecessor.

However, official Washington never denied the likely possibility of using military force against the DPRK in case of "extraordinary circumstances." It was about the fact that certain "red lines" for Pyongyang should be installed, which it should not cross. Of course, this sounds somewhat strange, because Pyongyang has already repeatedly crossed a lot of such "lines", while actually remaining unpunished. At the same time, Washington is continuously studying military options of action on the Korean Peninsula.

In this regard, the US would first need to create favorable regional "political climate" by working preliminary with neighboring countries, such as China and Russia. It would also need to elaborate on creating international coalition with the aim of providing moral support from a wide group of allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific. On the other hand, probability of miscalculating possible military, political, economic and other consequences need be regarded as well.

It should be kept in mind that in addition to the possibility of military response from Pyongyang there could be additional complications associated with hypothetical US military strike against the DPRK. First, it is the position of China, which has repeatedly declared that it will not allow "war and chaos" on the Korean Peninsula, and in case of serious aggravation of the situation, Beijing will be aware of its "historical responsibility".

Secondly, it will not be easy for Washington to find support for a violent action. East Asian countries condemn Pyongyang's provocations, but North Korean threat is still largely perceived by them (apart from South Korea and Japan) as a conflict between the US and the DPRK, only hypothetically affecting their vital interests. In

addition, it will be difficult to organize these states, which value their independent role in world politics, into some kind of temporary block.

Of course, there may be an option of involving NATO countries in the participation or support of US hypothetical military plans against the DPRK. But this scenario seems difficult for many reasons. First, there are geopolitical factors. Secondly, Asia-Pacific region is excluded from NATO's zone of responsibility.

In this case we are considering options that will be put on the table only in the event of Washington's preparations to launch a preemptive strike directed at the DPRK.

IV. CHINA'S APPROACH TO THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR PROBLEM

After a series of North Korean missile and nuclear tests, Beijing's approach to the problem began to change. China is now in transition from a passive policy of monitoring the situation and declaring a "peaceful option" to solve the problem, to a more active one, which applies pressure of sanctions on the DPRK. However, a systemic transition to active actions has not yet occurred. It will take time and can be accelerated in case of aggravation of the military-political situation in Korea.

Chinese perception of potential threats

Beijing considers threats from the latest North Korean nuclear missile tests in several dimensions.

First, it is a threat of nuclear contamination of Northeast China in case of possible catastrophe caused by new nuclear test.

Secondly, it is destabilization of military and political situation occurring near the Chinese territory in case of military action by the United States against North Korea with negative political, economic, environmental and humanitarian consequences for China, including a massive influx of North Korean refugees and transformation of North Korea into a territory under control of criminal gangs.

Thirdly, it is deterioration of bilateral relations between China and the US what will affect Chinese economy and its global plans.

The fourth one is a new challenge to China. An ambitious plan to become one of the world's leaders requires from Beijing to have an ability to resolve international conflicts, especially in such sensitive area as nuclear proliferation.

And finally, Beijing sees the risk of an arms race unfolding in Asia Pacific region, including the danger of Japan and South Korea launching their own new military (possibly nuclear) programs.

Weak points of the official Chinese position

The main vulnerability of Chinese diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula is the absence of a realistic plan to resolve the problem of nuclear North Korea. Beijing does not yet know exactly how it is possible to achieve Pyongyang's nuclear disarmament.

China now relies on already available tools, which cannot fully ensure the solution of the problem of nuclear disarmament of the DPRK.

Firstly, the six-party talks, which started in 2003 and from which Pyongyang released itself in 2009, lost sense after Kim Jong-un's coming to power. Under the administration of Kim Jong Il Pyongyang used its nuclear missile program as a "bargaining card", which could be exchanged for external assistance.

Today, this nuclear missile potential is seen as an instrument of "containing" countries which in the perception of the Pyongyang regime pose a threat to its existence. This approach is reflected in the Constitution of DPRK, official party and parliamentary documents. That means that in order to make Pyongyang return to the negotiation process, it is necessary first to change basic postulates of the North Korean regime.

Secondly, it is the joint statement of six countries (September 19, 2005). In our opinion, it is a victory of North Korean diplomacy, which managed to reformat the six-party process from negotiations on Pyongyang's nuclear disarmament into talks on "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." This approach allows North Korea to delay negotiations on verification of any agreements reached, and blame Seoul and Washington for the fact that they, as Pyongyang believe, still have nuclear weapons in South Korea, which must be

"liquidated", and it is necessary to convince Pyongyang, which in its turn can always remain "suspicious."

Thirdly, in 2017 Beijing initiated a proposal on the so-called "double containment," which provides an exchange of the DPRK's abstaining from missile and nuclear tests for the termination of military exercises by the United States and South Korea.

There are two weak points in this approach.

First, as noted above, Pyongyang's nuclear program is not a reaction to anybody's military doctrine, but rather reflects the strategic course of the North Korean leadership.

Secondly, the illegal nuclear program of the DPRK, condemned by the UN Security Council, is not a suitable bargaining coin for ending military exercises conducted in accordance with world practice.

New strategic goals and approaches of China to develop relations with Pyongyang

As Beijing's global and economic positions strengthen, it is developing a new strategic agenda for its international relations – the Belt and Road Initiative. Recently, China expanded its military and political presence in the world, primarily in the Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, as well as in Africa and in the Middle East.

To strengthen its global positions, Beijing has to cooperate with the world leaders, including the United States. This will encourage China to maneuver between Russia and the US.

With regard to the affairs of Korean Peninsula, the positions of Moscow and Beijing may be increasingly diverging in the near future. First, China more than Russia feels the threat of radiation contamination because of Pyongyang's nuclear program. Secondly, unlike Moscow, which now relies on the dialogue with Pyongyang, Beijing believes it is necessary to combine it with sanctions and pressure on Pyongyang.

The main connecting point between Moscow and Beijing over Korean affairs is the problem of THAAD. However, in case of positive development of military relations between China and the United States, the role of this factor of conversion may decrease.

Under the circumstances, the US is seeking to deeper involve China in the policy of international pressure on the DPRK. However, it seems that the main thing for Washington here is not the desire to "tear off" Beijing from Moscow, but to expand the field for its own pressure on Pyongyang through the development of US-China cooperation.

On the other hand, the opinion is being formed in the PRC that while cooperation with Russia on North Korea is important in terms of strengthening China's negotiating positions vs US, it is the cooperation with the US that is central to solving the nuclear issue.

Prospects of China's policy in the Korean Peninsula

The ability of the international community to finally resolve North Korean nuclear issue will depend on when and under what conditions China could cooperate with the US against Pyongyang, and to what extent Beijing will put the interests of nuclear disarmament of the DPRK above its priorities in deterrence and confrontation with USA.

So far, China is not ready for joint work with the US in the framework of hypothetical new five-party talks on the coordination of strategic positions of the US, China, Russia, South Korea and Japan.

For the final transition to active policy on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing needs a "hard push". Such a "hard push" could be made, for example, by tangible large-scale environmental consequences of nuclear missile tests conducted by the DPRK for Northeast China.

At the same time, the US military strike against North Korea without agreement with China is fraught with the danger of strategic aggravation of Sino-US relations. The threat of strategic aggravation of relations will deter the United States from unilateral actions on North Korea. It again may be considered strategic benefit for the Pyongyang regime.

The main questions are followings:

- Are the US prepared for joint military operations with China on the Korean Peninsula?
- Are the US ready to act here with a UN mandate or only individually?

- Are the US willing to collaborate and aid financially to maintain existence and viability of North Korea?

The other side of the problem is that China itself is not yet ready for such level of cooperation with the US and, of course, with South Korea. At the moment, the answer seems to be negative. However, in any case the latest nuclear-missile steps taken by North Korea laid the strategic basis for changes in the Chinese position in the future:

- China will not return to the passive policy, which was limited only to calling for "diplomatic methods," and will follow the path of tightening sanctions;

- China will not consider North Korea a "buffer" against the US;

- China admits that it does not have enough influence on Pyongyang. That is why it understands the inevitability of international cooperation on one of the most acute problems - nuclear security.

However, there is a risk of China not "reaching the end", but only "stopping" a few steps from active and effective collective actions to ensure international security. At the same time, to "cross the line" Beijing will need a "hard push" in the form of adventurous actions by the North Korean regime.

V. JAPANESE POSITION REGARDING NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

The implementation of Pyongyang's nuclear missile program holds a significant place in Japanese foreign and domestic political agenda. The total amount of attention paid to this issue is gradually increasing and has reached its historic maximum.

Pyongyang's testing of nuclear explosive devices and ballistic missiles is officially considered by Tokyo as one of the two most important external threats to Japan's security. This view is reflected in official documents and publications on security issues, such as the White Paper on Defense and reports of the National Security Council of Japan.

The threat posed by missile launches, in the opinion of many analysts, played an important role in consolidating the positions of the ruling liberal-democratic party on the eve and during the elections to the lower house of the Japanese parliament in October 2017. Shinzo Abe took this threat as one of the key topics in his pre-election rhetoric.

At the same time, Tokyo introduced the issue of the "North Korean nuclear threat" to the agenda of its diplomatic consultations with the US, its allies and partners in the Asia Pacific region. Expressing protests and identifying countermeasures Tokyo constantly calls for more international cooperation in dealing with this problem.

Japanese officials also try to include this issue in the agenda of Russian-Japanese relations. In particular, this refers to the inter-ministerial consultations held in 2017 in the form of the "Dialogue on strategic stability". During these consultations, Japan presented the "North Korean problem" as a key issue of international security in Northeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region.

However, specific ideas and plans to counter the "nuclear missile threat from North Korea" have not been put forward. There were only calls to abandon the idea of the dialogue with Pyongyang and to increase political and economic pressure on it through further tightening of economic and financial sanctions. At the same time, an alternative point of view existed and continues to exist within the Japanese political class, which argues ineffectiveness and inexpediency of such pressure, at least in its present form, from the point of view of ensuring the security of Japan. There is skepticism about the effectiveness of the US military "umbrella" in relation to its security interests; many analysts point to inability of the US to contain North Korean and Chinese military activities, and note the need for more of Japan's own defense efforts.

It is not ruled out that the growing tension in connection with the ongoing North Korean tests will act as a factor that will ultimately remove the taboo on the topic of Japan's own nuclear weapons.

VI. REACTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA ON THE CRISIS AROUND THE NORTH-KOREAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Domestic political crisis of 2016-17 had an impact on the South Korean elites' priorities in domestic and foreign policy. The Democratic Party, which supports the current president Moon Jae-in, can be referred to as a left-centrist party. Inside the country, it prefers active social policy (employment support, subsidizing low-income groups). In foreign policy, while remaining loyal to the US-South Korean military alliance, the democrats are determined to seek constructive engagement with China and Russia.

The priorities of the Liberty Party are close to the right-conservative values. In foreign policy conservatives remain committed to diversifying foreign policy priorities in favor of more cooperation with neighboring countries, including China and Russia.

For the South Korean political elite the most important problem is the line of relations with the DPRK. In South Korea, the development by the DPRK of weapons of mass destruction causes great concerns in society and the ruling elites. The deployment of the US missile defense system THAAD has begun in the country. However, there is no consensus on the necessary further responses and possible final solution. The range of solutions under discussion ranges from the proposal to develop own nuclear weapons to mitigating the policy towards the North.

With regard to the DPRK, the Democratic Party supports the policy of containing North Korean nuclear ambitions and maintaining a dialogue with Pyongyang if it shows readiness for compromise. The Liberty Korea Party supports more harsh line which includes tightening sanctions and limiting contacts with Pyongyang.

Regarding the problems associated with the deployment of the US missile defense in South Korea, there are sharp differences. The Liberty Party actively supported this decision while the Mengjun Party didn't.

As a result, positions of the parties on the North Korean issue largely coincide in condemning the DPRK's nuclear missile tests and calling the North Korean leadership to return to the path of dialogue. The fact that this problem is reflected in the Russian-South Korean talks has a great importance in terms of bilateral relations between the Russian Federation and the ROK, as well as the policies of the two countries to strengthen security and regional cooperation on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia as a whole.

VII. PRIORITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR RUSSIA IN ENSURING PEACE AND COOPERATION ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

Today, Korean Peninsula issues have great importance for Russia's national interests. The turbulent processes occurring there directly affect non-proliferation issues, security and stability of the Russian Far East, as well as its prospects for economic integration in the Asia-Pacific region.

Accordingly, in the past two decades, Moscow has consistently insisted that, along with the other powers involved, Russia is vitally interested in its direct participation in the achievement of the Korean settlement.

The Russian Foreign Ministry emphasizes that the DPRK and its actions aimed at undermining the global non-proliferation regime pose a serious threat to peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and in the region as a whole.

In principle, Moscow does not directly regard DPRK's activities in the nuclear missile area a military-political threat to Russian security. It would be a complete adventurism from the North Korean to launch missile or bomb attack on Russia. At the same time, one cannot deny tangible risks of North Korean nuclear and missile programs, most of which are related to low technical level of the North Korean products. Among them:

- A danger of missiles falling on the territory of the Far East because of failure of the system of control;
- environmental threats related to the high probability of accidents at North Korean missile sites;

- a threat of nuclear contamination;
- a danger of major disasters in case of a series of nuclear explosions or testing of high-power nuclear devices;
- poor technical condition of the nuclear complex in Nenben;
- possible attempts by the DPRK leadership to sell nuclear or missile weapons to governments or individuals of third countries;
- Pyongyang's loss of control over nuclear, chemical and biological weapons; the emergence of a "power vacuum" situation.

At least in the last decade Russia's policy had two incompatible elements. First, it is the growing irritation at increasingly aggressive activities of the DPRK, which result in the violation of the non-proliferation regime and lead to changes in the established military-strategic balance in Northeast Asia.

On the other hand, as the confrontation around North Korea grows, Moscow with growing apprehension has been watching active steps of the US to build up its military presence and combat capabilities there, the scale of US-South Korean joint military exercises.

In other words, the Russian side had a feeling that the US was using the situation to build up offensive weapons in the region with the aim of using it to pressure major regional powers, including Russia.

That is why Moscow sees direct relationship and interdependence between North Korea's nuclear missile activity and military activities of the United States and its allies in the Korean Peninsula.

One of the major issues that Moscow was pushing persistently in contacts with foreign partners was creating the necessary conditions and atmosphere to reset the working group on the mechanism for ensuring peace and security in Northeast Asia. However, it was traditionally encountered by the polite but firm refusal from most partners. For them the restoration of this format is undesirable, because it will lead to an increase of Russia's role in the affairs on the Korean Peninsula.

Russian leadership concerns over US policy on the Korean Peninsula were embodied in the sharp criticism of the US-South Korean steps to deploy the missile defense facilities in the Republic of Korea in 2017.

According to many independent experts, THAAD does not pose a direct threat to Russia, taking into account the limited range of both missiles and the radar of the system.

Nevertheless, there are political and psychological aspects present from the very beginning. Any new steps by Washington in this area are perceived by the Russian leadership with high concerns as another attempt to put new military pressure on Russia. Therefore, the Russian side intends to take into account \actions of the United States for the deployment of THAAD in South Korea in its military and foreign policy planning.

Similar or even more serious concerns about THAAD are expressed by China. That contributed to the strengthening of Russian-Chinese relations, whose goal was to minimize the possible costs of Washington's actions in the field of missile defense in South Korea. It should be noted that the emergence of this issue gave rise to mistrust and significantly complicated interaction of Russia and China with the United States on subjects related to North Korea. Pyongyang turned out to be the main beneficiary of this "disagreement".

Thus, the main drawback in solving the nuclear missile problem was the lack of tight coordination between the five countries most interested in the Korean settlement (Russia, China, the United States, the ROK and Japan). In this regard, Moscow's mistake was the refusal to create a "five-party talks" consultative mechanism to work out the common platform for a settlement.

The main argument of the Russian side was that such a dialogue makes no sense without Pyongyang, which avoided joining any multilateral format on nuclear issues. Accordingly, Moscow believed that North Korea could perceive the creation of such a mechanism as an attempt to form a "joint anti-Pyongyang front" and finally close all external contacts on the issue. As a result, the United States and its allies insisted on tougher sanctions against the DPRK, while Moscow and Beijing advocated the resuming of the "six-party talks" with Pyongyang.

In the past two or three years, strengthening of Russian-Chinese contacts on Korean affairs has taken place. In fact, the role of its working mechanism was played by the dialogue on security issues in Northeast Asia.

Moscow and Beijing tried to convince the North Korean leadership to make a choice in favor for a more constructive line on the issues of concern to the international community. However, all these attempts were ignored by the North Korean side.

The next step of Russia and China was a joint initiative to achieve the lasting settlement on the Korean Peninsula, which includes the proposals of the Chinese side regarding the "double freezing" (freezing both nuclear missile activities of the DPRK and large-scale joint exercises by the United States and the Republic of Korea) and "parallel promotion" of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as well as Russian ideas on the comprehensive and stage-by-stage plan for the Korean settlement.

Of course, Beijing and Moscow proceed from the desire to take into account concerns and interests of all parties involved in the Korean conflict.

The implementation of such a comprehensive plan takes a long time and has not yet yielded any tangible results.

According to assessments made by the United States, Japan and even South Korea, it is very difficult to deal with the complex package solution of such complicated issues because of sharp contradictions between parties.

It is also significant that the Russian-Chinese initiative was developed outside of the framework of preliminary consultations with Pyongyang, for which it was also a surprise. Such a situation undoubtedly reduces the productivity of joint Russian-Chinese efforts to normalize the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

An important factor for stabilizing the situation on the Korean Peninsula is the establishment of a bilateral dialogue between Russia and the United States. At present, the chances for it are very small given the ongoing degradation of Russian-American relations.

The United States considers China the only important partner in Korean affairs. It is interesting to note that all US-initiated drafts of UN Security Council resolutions on the DPRK are first bilaterally

negotiated between Washington and Beijing, and only then mutually agreed texts are submitted for consideration to other members of the UN Security Council.

The United States believes that Russian presence and role on the Korean Peninsula in general and in North Korea in particular are not too large, so the Russian factor at this stage can easily be neglected. On the other hand, Washington is artificially slowing down the pace of dialogue with Moscow on the Korean problem "beyond the necessary" in order to exclude the possibility of increasing Russia's role in the settlement on the Korean Peninsula.

For example, Russia is unlikely to agree to talk about new serious sanctions against the DPRK because there is extremely negative attitude from the Moscow side to any ideas to make additional pressure on Pyongyang.

Not only ordinary Russian citizens, but also many politicians now have feelings that both countries are "in the same boat" and are experiencing political and economic difficulties because of the course pursued by Washington. Therefore, on public and foreign policy levels it is now difficult for the US to count on support for its position from the Russian side.

However, in the long term the dialogue between Moscow and Washington on the Korean Peninsula seems necessary to solve the problems of supporting peace, security and stability, ensuring nuclear non-proliferation and reducing the level of military threats in this region. Such a dialogue could accelerate the process of searching for creative ideas to achieve the overall settlement, primarily in the nuclear-missile sphere.

Of course, an indispensable condition for this is a consistent and steady movement towards "unfreezing" the entire bloc of political relations between Russia and the US, which looks hardly realistic in the nearest future, if we take into account the current situation.

CONCLUSION

The current crisis on the Korean Peninsula should be viewed in the light of some fundamental circumstances.

First, this is not the first crisis associated with the development of nuclear missile capabilities by the North Korean regime. However,

this is the first crisis, the exit from which cannot end by the involved parties' taking a pause or going back to old positions. It is more than true for the leaders of the countries that have actively played this political "game", mostly for Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump.

Secondly, the use of military force the US is considered probable and remains in the arsenal of the Trump administration.

Thirdly, one should keep in mind the uselessness of six-party talks, since the subject of previous negotiations has disappeared. Pyongyang is not going to abandon its nuclear-missile potential under any circumstances.

What makes the situation even more dangerous is the fact that there is no general concept to solve the problem. Russo-Chinese proposal on "double freezing" gives a chance to start negotiations, but to bring them to a successful end one needs trust, mutual understanding of the ultimate goal and a consistent program of actions.

Much will depend on the extent to which it will be possible to make the Republic of Korea and the four regional powers agree on joint measures to counter the nuclear-missile ambitions of the DPRK. To a decisive extent, this will depend on convergence of positions on Korean issues of Beijing and Moscow on the one hand, and Washington and its allies on the other.

Five-party talks could determine general principles of maintaining peace and security on the Korean Peninsula, considering the interests of all parties concerned, which would allow to develop joint measures to bring about a peaceful solution of the North Korean nuclear problem.

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