

► *There is little or nothing new in the crisis between the supreme leader of the Popular Democratic Republic of Korea Kim Jong-Un and president Trump. The roots of this crisis problem date back to the end of World War II. Since then, the maintenance of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea has been in the interest of all the main regional players. The People's Republic of China, the Republic of Korea and Japan, they all converge on the need to support a strategic balance within which there is plenty of space for the People's Democratic Republic of Korea. Nevertheless, since the end of the Cold War, the North Korean leadership believes that it can only survive in power by promoting and supporting a foreign policy driven by the continued destabilization of the international system through the implementation of ever-new, and potentially devastating, military capabilities. So far, the persistence of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea has been the least of all evils. At least for the time being, there are no reasons to believe that it is no longer.*

The Korean crisis, issue 2017

History seems to repeat itself somewhat monotonously in the Korean peninsula. On the one hand, it is a small communist state, the People's Democratic Republic of Korea, backed by another more powerful communist country, the People's Republic of China. On the other, there is only a relatively more powerful liberal democracy, but the Republic of Korea is strong with the support of the United States, the largest and richest liberal-democracy as well as the last military superpower. More than sixty years after the armistice that ended the fighting, but not the war fought in Korea between 1951 and 1953, the People's Republic of China continues to refuse the possibility of bordering with a country aligned with the United States. On the other hand, the United States does not particularly welcome the possibility that the People's Republic of China extends its influence so close to Japan.

For itself, the fate of the Korean Peninsula has never particularly interested the People's Republic of China. It is no coincidence that the People's Democratic Republic of Korea of the Fifties was not Maoist but Stalinist; Pyongyang was looking at Moscow and not at Beijing. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union did not oppose the right of veto on the day when the United Nations decided to intervene in favor of the Republic of Korea. At that time, the People's Republic of China was a weak and largely volatile strategic player whose main weapon was a huge work force. Today the People's Republic of China is a world-wide emerging nuclear power. The People's Democratic Republic of Korea was strong in a large conventional army. Today, it is believed to have successfully tested at least a first-generation atomic charge. Some sources believe that the miniaturization of such nuclear capacity is imminent, so that it can be combined with an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of covering six thousand kilometers. Too few to pose a threat to the entire North American continental platform, but more than enough to pose a major threat to the Republic of Korea, Japan, and US military facilities in Okinawa and Guam.

In the United States strong is the consensus that the People's Democratic Republic of Korea is pursuing essentially two goals. The first is to continue to force neighboring countries and big powers to support their own economy. The second is to keep the discipline strong on a fully militarized society. Even if the crisis of these days was resolved with the explicit assurance that the United States, and the Republic of Korea, will not work to replace North Korean leadership and that the People's Republic of China will formally engage in a security assurance of this country, the People's Democratic Republic of Korea would have no better choice but to raise the stakes, opening up some other even worst crisis.

The analysis of economic data seems to suggest the un-sustainability of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the absence of significant injections of foreign resources, provided that the country is not already socially and politically incapable of performing the basic functions of a State.

Indeed, the Popular Democratic People's Republic of Korea has so far enforced this strategy with success. For the time being, supreme leader Kim Jung-Un seems clearly willing to face some sort of armed clash, but it is far less clear how much he really is willing to fight a nuclear war that he would never win. And that is even clearer after the People's Republic of China has explained how it has no intention of supporting Pyongyang in a nuclear confrontation with the United States.

The determination with which the supreme leader Kim Jong-Un pursues its nuclear program seems to be based on the reckoning that a nuclear capability is now an indispensable requirement not only for the country's security but also for its personal survival, given what happened in Iraq in 2003 and in Libya in 2011. This belief is probably confirmed by the recent U.S. launch of a new round of sanctions on Iran, as well as by the visible desire of the Trump administration to extract the United States from the nuclear agreement with that country. In any case, the United States and the People's Republic of China do not seem to have successfully penetrated the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the point of getting a flow of information so reliable to establish with sufficient degree of consistency what Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un really has in his mind.

The Popular Democratic People's Republic of Korea is trying to extend the scope of its military ambitions in the belief that it needs an enemy like the United States to survive. The problem in this strategy is that the price that international internationality has to pay for the survival of the regime is growing. For its part, the People's Democratic Republic of Korea has invested enormous amounts of its ever-limited resources in the development of new nuclear and missile weapons. Several U.S. administrations and the group of six states including the People's Republic of China, do not seem to have got much from the effort to block the nuclear proliferation of a Popular Democratic People's Republic of Korea whose conventional forces are in any case a serious threat to the twenty million inhabitants of Seoul, the capital of the Republic of Korea. In these circumstances, the People's Republic of China is perhaps the only country that could possibly undertake an effective preventive military operation.

As a matter of fact, Beijing does not seem to be insensitive to Washington's concerns. Unexpectedly, the People's Republic of China has not opposed the recent resolution of the United Nations Security Council imposing economic sanctions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In addition, the People's Republic of China seems to have begun imposing its own sanctions in critical areas such as coal, iron, lead, and fish food. Moreover, it seems that an increasing number of Chinese armed forces are preparing to take position very close to the Korean peninsula. However, any evolution of the Korean question cannot ignore the strategic tensions between the People's Republic of China and the United States in the whole of Asia Pacific region. Over the past few weeks, the United States has complained again and again about the Chinese violation of intellectual property laws while exercising the freedom of navigation in a South China Sea claimed by the People's Republic of China as its own. In other words, this last stage in the long history of the Korean peninsula political issues potentially encloses the crises of a classic clash between great powers. And that is exactly what the Democratic People's Republic of Korea wants.

Analysis, assessments and forecasts

Given the nature, the complexities and the difficulties inherent in this crisis, most of the U.S. efforts do not seem to focus on anything different than a diplomatic solution. In addition to deterring the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and securing the defense of the Republic of Korea, Japan, and Guam, the United States does not seem able to do much more because none of the pre-emptive military offensive options is particularly attractive.

The United States could deploy close to the 38th parallel, and perhaps in Japan, an even bigger number of the anti-missile systems known as Theater High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD). However, such a weapon could not counter the heavy artillery bombardment that the North Korean military system could inflict to Seoul in response to a U.S. attack. Moreover, THAAD is not particularly well-received by the Chinese authorities in the belief that it may compromise the effectiveness of their own strategic ballistic missiles. Not long ago, the Chinese ambassador to the Republic of Korea officially explained how the mass deployment of THAAD in this country would instantly impede bilateral relations.

The People's Republic of China has never hidden its aversion to the development by the United States of any kind anti-ballistic defense. Over the last few years, the People's Republic of China has engaged in numerous anti missile development programs, so as to get real interception tests and analytical assessments of the benefits of deploying such new weapons systems in order to guarantee the availability of a national second strike force. The Trump administration has endorsed new anti-missile defense programs and new nuclear capabilities, promising to deliver both of them by the beginning of next year. It seems that the Trump administration seeks to find new ways to strengthen U.S. anti-missile defense capabilities by developing weapon systems capable of destroying ballistic missiles before their launch and of intercepting both cruise missiles and hypersonic gliders. In response to the growing North Korean ballistic threat, Japan has collaborated with the United States in developing missile defense capabilities, such as the SM-3 Block IIA anti-missile system. It should be stressed that Japan's decision to invest heavily in cooperation with the United States in this area is perfectly compatible with the constitutional constraints of this country. The Japanese constitution forbids the deployment of offensive missiles, but authorizes defensive missile systems conceived not in substitution but in integration of the nuclear umbrella so far offered by the United States. Nonetheless, Prime Minister Abe recently stated that he is evaluating the acquisition of new Tomahawk cruise missiles to be deployed by the Japanese Navy to gain the capability to destroy enemy missile launch sites.

Unlike Japan, the Republic of Korea has no constitutional restrictions against the use of military force to counter threats such as the People's Democratic Republic of Korea but has an agreement with the U.S. to limit the range of its offensive missiles. Missile defense has never been a priority for the Republic of Korea. The short flight time required to cover the entire Korean Peninsula has always fueled the skepticism of the South Korean military system. Nevertheless, in 2015, the Republic of Korea has decided to buy the MIM-104F (PAC-3) system. Lastly, he decided to deploy the THAAD system. The impression derived from the positions expressed by the Republic of Korea is that President Moon Jae-In is trying to strike a balance between the U.S. and Chinese positions. On one hand, President Moon Jae-In announced the intention to resume the THAAD deployment soon. On the other hand, President Moon Jae-In seems willing to open a channel to talk to North Korea in the belief that effective management of the crisis requires by all players the implementation of clear and balanced communication, in addition to coherent and predictable policies.

However, to eliminate the risk that the crisis will fall out of hand, the U.S. approach should be much clearer. The United States should be able to separate other regional issues from the problems of the Korean peninsula. Instead, with regard to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Trump administration seems to pursue at the same time a classic nuclear deterrence strategy and a policy of total denuclearization. In other words, apparently conflicting signals continue to emerge from the United States. In all honesty, must be acknowledged to President Trump that he has never concealed the desire to bring the U.S. foreign policy to a remarkable level of unpredictability. Nonetheless, it is still too early to determine whether the latest U.S. foreign policy is the result of a complex vision agreed by members of the current administration, or the symptom of a lack of internal cohesion so strong to lead to political incoherence.

In the foreseeable future, the North Korean crisis seems going to evolve on the same path traced in recent years without any particular deviation. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea will continue to experiment with new ballistic missiles and possibly to test new nuclear devices, while international reaction will focus on the imposition of ever-new commercial sanctions not including truly vital sectors such as oil, just to give an example. The only real uncertainty pertains to the approach chosen by the United States. Every post cold war U.S. administration has never show itself willing to allow the People's Democratic Republic of Korea to achieve the capabilities needed to launch a nuclear attack. If the U.S. decides on military intervention, such a move could not be described in a different way than an act of war and, at least in theory, should be subject to Congress approval, as the U.S. Constitution stipulates that war is a prerogative of the Congress. Although the last war declared by the United States was the Second World War, the administrations of the latter twenty-five years have always chosen to consult the Congress before launching the country into some major military operation. The big uncertainty of the coming months is about what could justify that now quite difficult alignment between the White House and the Congress, needed to trigger a major military operation that has not already happened. The answer to this kind of question is usually traced in a red line to not trespass, but in the case of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea it is difficult to assess what such a red line may ever be, since the recent launch of two ballistic relatively long range missiles has caused nothing more than a call for a new round of sanctions.

Perhaps not even the impact of some North Korean ballistic missiles in the international waters overlooking the Guam Island may push the administration to resort to the military option. Even the sixth nuclear test that appears to be already in preparation since many months would probably not represent a turning point. Perhaps only a series of repeated nuclear tests could lead to a direct U.S. military response, especially if seismic surveys would indicate a sure mastery of nuclear fusion processes. Even then, however, it would still be quite difficult to demonstrate beyond any doubt a similar mastery of the technologies needed to miniaturize nuclear weapons, not to mention the technologies needed for mating such a weapon to a long range, intercontinental, ballistic missile. Technologies such as the thermal shield needed to protect the headboard during the return flight, the decoys needed to confuse the defensive anti-missile devices, and the driving systems needed to accurately drive the warhead toward its target during the final phases of its flight. According to the latest Defense Intelligence Agency assessments, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea needs at least two years before achieving some true ballistic capacity. This implies that it will take at least another six months, probably another year, before reaching the point when the Defense Department will have to take the final decision on whether to recommend or not to the President of the United States a preventive attack, and in less than one year the U.S. political system will be directly or indirectly dealing with a new and important electoral season.