

by Cristiana Era

Three nuclear tests, the second and the third carried out in less than 3 months, followed by military threats to Washington and Seoul, by the nullification of the 1953 Korean War armistice, by the announcement of the reopening of the dismantled Yongbyon nuclear complex, by the frontier blockade for South Koreans working in a jointly operated industrial park in Kaesong, and eventually by the closing of this North-South joint venture: a dangerous escalation or a mere provocation? Is Pyongyang rekindling an old conflict? Are we on the brink of a nuclear conflict? Those are the basic questions that analysts and observers are trying to answer these days. North Korea has become more aggressive after Kim Jong-un took power in 2011.

Little is known so far about the young leader who succeeded his father Kim Jong-il when he was only 28. Indeed, he inherited a poverty-torn and internationally isolated country with a collapsing economy. The need to assess North Korea's role both domestically and vis-à-vis the international community – that confirmed the economic sanctions against Pyongyang in the aftermath of its latest nuclear test - as well as to build up a personal influential leadership, might have been a strong drive for a renewed provocative politics. His young age and his study-abroad experience might have spurred speculations about a possible limited internal reform, but recent history – see Bashar Assad case - shows that these are not key factors in political change.

However, what is new in this scenario is Washington and Seoul reaction, which prompted the show of force over the past weeks. South Korean President Park Geun-hye decided for a strong stand against the North, warning that her country will not stand by, while Washington sent the USS Fitzgerald destroyer along the south western Korean coast, in addition to B-52 and B-2 aircrafts. The Department of Treasury imposed new sanctions on North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank and, last but not least, on April 3 the Pentagon announced it would speed up the deployment of an advanced missile defense system in Guam as a "precautionary move" to protect US interests. Joint military US- SK drills were also publicly announced, but this can hardly be considered a retaliatory measure, as those two-month long drills are routinely scheduled each year.

In fact, Washington does not seem to believe that there is a real willingness by Pyongyang to reach a go no-go point and shell South Korea, Japan or Guam. But Seoul and Tokyo do, and while the US administration has eventually tried to play down the crisis, the Abe government arranged the deployment of three batteries of patriot missiles in the center of the Japanese capital. In the past, North Korea's provocations helped reassessing the leadership's role domestically also obtaining political and economic concessions from the international community. The fear of an incoming threat by a foreign enemy – let's not forget that the country has no access to foreign media and information – is a powerful consensus building tool and a rationale for the establishment of a state of emergency. The popular perception of a strong leader who does not surrender to external threats also supports his personal authority. In short, there is nothing new in North Korea's international approach; the search for a conventional skirmish is an opportunity for asserting Kim's domestic leadership and possibly obtain an ease of the economic sanctions for a population which is on the edge of starvation.

What remains unknown is how far Kim is willing to push this brinkmanship game, since Beijing – a longtime regime's ally – seems to be weary of his neighbor's strategy of destabilizing the

North Korea: a clear and present danger?

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area every now and then. This is even more so in the light of a new Chinese leadership definitely more inclined to develop and manage his rising economic and political influence than to resort to old communist rhetoric to defend his protégée who is increasingly perceived as a troublemaker. Evidence of this different attitude by Beijing has been its intelligence “leaks” about Kim’s plans to go ahead with other nuclear tests in addition to a long range missile test in additions to its many attempts to cool down the escalation. Therefore, North Korea is currently a lonely player. Analysts do not expect a resumption of a Korean war – which is still ongoing, by the way, since the 1953 agreement was nothing else than a truce – nor a nuclear conflict to be likely, but indeed there are risks that the situation might run out of control and turn into an unpredictable outcome.