



## **Dealing with Pyongyang** by Ralph A. Cossa

*Ralph A. Cossa ([ralph@pacforum.org](mailto:ralph@pacforum.org)) is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS.*

North Korea-related events have been capturing headlines with alarming frequency in recent weeks. The most intriguing saga, the Feb. 13 assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's half-brother Kim Jong Nam in Malaysia, continues to unfold. It quickly overshadowed the most significant event, the Feb. 12 launch of a solid-fueled *Pukguksong-2* (North Star-2) Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM), theoretically capable of hitting targets as far away as US bases in Okinawa and Guam with minimal warning. In case the message from this launch was missed, the North on March 6 fired a salvo of four modified medium-range *Scud* missiles into the Sea of Japan. According to Pyongyang, the units firing the missiles are tasked to strike the bases of the US imperialist aggressor forces in Japan in contingency. (While South Koreans hate to acknowledge it, North Korea is well aware that US access to Japan bases is critical to the defense of the ROK in the event of a crisis or war.)

*Scud* launches, while troublesome (and another United Nations Security Council violation), are not unprecedented and are frequently used to signal Pyongyang's discontent over ROK-US military exercises like the one currently underway in the South. The *Pukguksong-2* launch, while still not the promised (by Kim Jong Un) inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) test that President-elect Trump tweeted won't happen, presents a serious new challenge which, among other measures, fully justifies the accelerated deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system to the ROK.

Also in the news was Beijing's announcement that, in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2321, it was terminating coal purchases from the DPRK for the remainder of the year (their annual quota having already been reached). This news was most welcome and, if true, could cut off an important source of hard currency for the North Korean leadership. The interesting thing about the Chinese announcement was that it was made, not after either of the missile launches, but soon after the assassination of Kim Jong Nam, who had been living under Chinese protection in Macao. This tells you everything you need to know about China's strident protests and attempted economic blackmail against the ROK over its joint decision to expedite the deployment of THAAD defense missile systems to South Korea after the IRBM launch.

If Beijing were really worried about THAAD, it would have taken punitive action immediately after the *Pukguksong-2* IRBM launch and would have been calling for increased sanctions after that missile test and/or in response to the most recent *Scud* firings. It did not and has not; while the UNSC issued its usual (toothless) strong letter of protest, it is safe to

predict Beijing will once again attempt to water down any new sanctions put forth by the other UNSC members.

This leads me to the inescapable conclusion that Beijing's THAAD protests have little to do with Chinese security concerns – the Pacific Forum, among others, has provided Chinese officials with in-depth briefings on THAAD capabilities showing minimal, if any, threat to China's second-strike capability – and everything to do with China's desire to stir up political unrest and anti-American feelings in South Korea (dare we say by interfering in the ROK's internal affairs?). With the Constitutional Court's decision confirming President Park Geun-Hye's impeachment forcing new presidential elections within the next 60 days, Beijing is now applying a full-court press.

While international press attention remains focused on the diplomatic confrontation between Kuala Lumpur and Pyongyang over Kim Jong Nam's assassination, insufficient attention is being paid to the unprecedented (and illegal under the 1925 Geneva Protocol and 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention) use of the deadly VX nerve agent in a crowded public space. There are a dozen or more ways North Korea could have killed Kim Jong Nam. So what message was Pyongyang trying to send the international community by using a chemical agent so powerful as to be branded a weapon of mass destruction (WMD)? At a minimum, Pyongyang is warning the rest of the world that it is capable, and willing, to employ more than one WMD not just in defense or retaliation for a WMD attack, but aggressively in pursuit of more limited objectives. Even if North Korea could be persuaded or compelled to give up its nuclear program – and the prospects for that are already pretty slim – it possesses other means of wreaking havoc, along with the political will to use them.

As a result of these various acts of aggression, pundits are calling on the Trump administration to expedite the Korea policy review currently underway while demanding a tougher stance against Pyongyang. They are half-right. A firm international response is required in response to this latest series of UNSCR violations and Washington should, and apparently is, leading the effort to secure even tighter sanctions. In cooperation with the ROK it has also rushed deployment of THAAD to South Korea, another prudent move, disingenuous Chinese complaints notwithstanding.

But the Trump administration's North Korea policy review should not be rushed; it's more important to do it right than quickly. To be effective, any US policy toward North Korea must also be in sync with South Korea's policy and, until the ROK election is over, South Korean policy is adrift. In addition, announcing a new US policy during the presidential campaign in the ROK will guarantee that it becomes enmeshed in the domestic political process, which

could lock candidates into positions that could prove counterproductive in the long run.

A tightening and stricter enforcement of sanctions is certainly called for now, as are increased defensive measures on the Peninsula. But any new policy approaches or initiatives must await the selection of a new ROK president and then be closely coordinated with the new ROK administration and with our Japanese allies as well.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*