



Never say never by Robert Carlin

Robert Carlin (rcarlin@stanford.edu) is a visiting Fellow at Stanford's Center for International Security and Cooperation. Prior to that, he served in the State Department and the CIA. This article is based on a longer analysis that was published at 38 North and is available at <http://38north.org/2016/01/rcarlin011916/>

North Korea's fourth nuclear test surprised a lot of people. That surprise unleashed the notion that Kim Jong Un is erratic, a loose cannon with no advisers who might counsel restraint because they have all been kicked aside or died. If that were true, one might wonder about the North's first two nuclear tests, which took place under Kim Jong Il. Presumably, if we accept the "erratic Kim Jong Un" thesis, the earlier tests occurred because the old advisers thought they were a good idea, and not because of fear of contradicting the leader. But how would we know the difference?

Consider for a moment: What if, as seems possible, Beijing (although furious with the North) is still not prepared to go along with tough UN Security Council sanctions? How will Kim Jong Un look then? Like someone who studied the history of Chinese reaction to the North's first three tests, and decided the risk was worth taking?

The argument that the North's policies are hard to predict because Kim is erratic is easy to make but tough to defend if examined closely. To do so, we have to posit that "predicting" North Korean policies, i.e., knowing which way the ball will bounce at any particular time, was easier when Kim Jong Il was in charge, or before him, Kim Il Sung. But that was rarely the case; the North Koreans have always been good at pulling fast ones. Although it's tough to predict what will happen on any given day, it has been possible to see trends over time. Over the past four years, under Kim Jong Un, that remains the case. The recent nuclear test was a surprise only insofar as we didn't know exactly when it would occur. Barring something to stop it – and there were windows of opportunity to explore since the third test in 2013 – there was going to be a fourth.

How do those who think they see "erratic" moves from Kim Jong Un make their case? One way is to attack the question from an unusual flank, i.e., the quality and courage of the leader's advisers. Before December 2011, when Kim Jong Il died, few observers worried with this issue. The question was usually put in terms of who parted with the leader; pondering the advice they might offer was rarely considered. In truth, we have rarely known who was, is, or will be "advising" the leadership, and thus potentially influencing policy. One of the few exceptions was in the late 1990s, when there was reason to believe that Kang Sok Ju, then the first vice foreign minister, had at least some influence with Kim Jong Il on policy toward the United States. Starting in 2014, perhaps the late Kim Yang Gon had somewhat similar

influence (how similar is the interesting question) with Kim Jong Un. The argument that Kim Yang Gon's death in December was a serious loss to the leader is a useful hypothesis, and may even be a testable proposition. We can only wait and see whether policy changes toward South Korea with KYG gone.

The idea that policy under Kim Jong Un is unhinged because he has gunned down all of his close advisers holds no water. If someone has information suggesting that former defense minister Hyon Yong Chol was a close or influential adviser to Kim, I'd welcome hearing it. As far as I can tell, he was neither. Jang Song Taek may have been influential at the beginning of Kim's reign, but he was probably under close watch, and was falling out of favor for nearly a year before he got the axe. Yes, Choe Ryong-hae was sent down for "reeducation," but Kim Jong Il also banished people from the court for months at a time.

From late August through today, the North has been notably careful in its public treatment of President Park Geun-hye. It virtually ignored the US-ROK summit in October, including an unusual US-ROK joint statement specifically focused on North Korea. Pyongyang's initial reaction to the stalemate in the North-South talks in mid-December was brief and mild. DPRK media have virtually ignored the South's resumption of DMZ loudspeaker broadcasts earlier this month (the North, instead, has apparently decided to bury the South in a blizzard of its own balloon-delivered pamphlets). Similarly, there has been almost no public reaction to the January 10 low-level flight of a US B-52 over Osan Airbase. Why are such details important? Because they show months-long and carefully sustained calculation, not erratic swings.

Since Kim Jong Un assumed power in December 2011, North Korea's economic policy, its approach toward South Korea, and even its approach to the US have remained within the normal range of oscillation. The fact that these policies may tack over the course of several months does not make the decision-making behind them erratic. "Erratic," if the word means anything, would be abrupt, almost inexplicable swings over short periods of time to significantly different policies. But we have not seen anything like that. In North Korean terms, "erratic" is not periods of calm punctuated by loud explosions.

A question worth pondering is, how does one distinguish between "erratic" and "opportunistic," or perhaps better put, "quick on their feet"? Consider:

- In summer of 1992, Kim Jong Il began planning withdrawal from Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). When he finally pulled the trigger in March 1993, he was out in the field with his troops, expecting a military strike by the US. Only when his foreign ministry noted international calls for the North

to return to the NPT did Pyongyang work out new plans to engage the US. Erratic?

- In the spring of 1994, the North withdrew spent fuel rods from its reactor at Yongbyon, knowing full well the extent of the crisis that would entail. Some of Kim Jong Il's advisers urged him to do it, others counseled against it. Kim went ahead. Erratic? Bull headed? Crazy like a fox?
- In early 2013, Pyongyang declared the nuclear issue off the table. Months later, the issue was put back on (in a June 16 statement from the National Defense Commission), a surprise even to some DPRK officials. Erratic? Calculated?
- On January 6, in the DPRK government statement announcing the recent nuclear test, Pyongyang declared, "As long as the United States' heinous hostile policy toward the DPRK is not eradicated, **our suspension of nuclear development or nuclear abandonment** cannot happen under any circumstance." Although not unqualified, that formulation would seem to have taken off table the North's previous offer to temporarily halt testing in return for a temporary suspension of US-ROK joint exercises. Nine days later, a Foreign Ministry spokesman's statement said that the previous offer to stop the testing was still valid. Erratic? Tacking? Taking advantage of signs that Beijing was looking for reasons not to go along with Washington's call for new, tough steps against the North?

Perhaps rather than retreat to "erratic," a better observation is that one should never say never when dealing with the North.

The following are six hypotheses to mull for now, and test over the next several months.

1. After a year of signaling interest in engagement on the nuclear issue and receiving no positive response from the US, the fourth test was an "attention getter" to bring Washington to the negotiation table in response to a crisis.
2. Kim Jong Un intends to get markets back under close control, and with increased international pressure, sanctions, etc., will now have a good reason to do so.
3. The purpose of the *byungjin* policy was to build up the nation's security through nuclear development to the point that it would be possible to divert resources from the military and concentrate on the economy. It is possible that Kim will use this test of a "hydrogen-bomb" to declare victory and state that North Korea has developed a sufficient deterrent to allow for shifting focus to the economy. A January 7 article in *Chosun Sinbo* included this line.
4. North Korea has concluded that negotiations with the US will not be possible in the waning months of the Obama administration, and in analyzing the election season is bracing for a hostile policy from whoever succeeds the current president. Therefore, Pyongyang

is setting the stage to make clear to whoever takes office in January 2017 that it possesses a strong and credible nuclear threat, and must be taken seriously.

5. The test was planned for a particularly inopportune time for the Chinese, who are addressing their own issues, including softness in their economy and a major, multi-year reorganization of the armed forces. It also seems to have been carried out to demonstrate maximum independence from the Chinese. (Beijing says that, unlike in the past, it did not receive any advance notice of the test.)
6. Give the devil his due: dictators are erratic, and this decision was erratic but, if North Korea's luck holds, not irretrievable. If there is anyone who knows how to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, it is the North Koreans.

Is there a bottom line? Kim Jong Un is young, but not as inexperienced as many outsiders think. If he is still learning the ropes, he also now has 5 or 6 (or even 7) years of experience at or near the top of the regime. He does not seem all that different from his father at the same age, who also had a reputation for impulsive behavior and wild living. Whatever Kim Jong Un's level of maturity or immaturity in the eyes of outsiders, and whatever the tonal shifts reflected in official North Korean statements over the past four years, the North's policies since he took power have not been noticeably out of line with historic norms. This – in some sense the essential interests North Koreans believe they must defend – is what we have to deal with, difficult though it might be. Scaring ourselves with dancing shadows on the walls of a cave of our own making will, in the end, lead us nowhere good.

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