

## Dealing with “North Korea 3.0”: The Same Game?

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A year has passed since Kim Jong-un became the leader of North Korea. While there are some underlying changes, the current leadership looks and has acted a lot like its predecessors. The satellite launch on Dec. 12 was essentially a message from Pyongyang – “Merry Christmas, we’re still here and we’ll be back again next year.”

“North Korea 3.0” will stay the course to bolster domestic legitimacy while surveying regional reactions and influencing security dynamics. Yet despite the new leadership’s consistency and continuity, the US, South Korea, and Japan as a coalition must revise their strategy vis-à-vis North Korea.

North Korea’s ultimate goal remains the unification of the Korean Peninsula under its terms. Reality forces the leadership to focus on regime survival through three strategies – “politicization,” “centralization,” and “inheritance.” These concepts, established and strengthened by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, remain the bedrock of North Korea’s political, economic, and military policies.

This triple strategy relies heavily on symbolism. The cold-weather satellite launch allows Pyongyang to claim victory in the inter-Korean space race, even though *Kwangmyongsong-3* is reportedly “tumbling” in a low-altitude orbit. Frantic reporting to the contrary, this does not give North Korea an intercontinental ballistic missile capability. Pyongyang faces myriad technological barriers such as target precision and miniaturization of warheads before it can claim to have strategic weapons capabilities. Further technological advances will pose challenges.

Symbolism is also vital as the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) tries to politicize the entire state. The same framework applies to its military capabilities, where North Korea believes that military modernization is not so much about technological innovation as it is about the innovative application of existing technology for asymmetric capabilities. This raises expectations of the party and military cadres toward the leadership, further fixing the regime on its current path. This could lead to a nuclear test or even more deadly military provocations like the Cheonan or Yeongpyeong Island incidents.

North Korea will continue to exploit China without being overly reliant on Beijing. China’s political leverage is not that great, given the difficulties and distrust between Beijing and Pyongyang. Despite China’s strong economic influence and unflinching support from elders in the Communist Party of

China (CCP) leadership along with the new Xi Jinping regime, North Korea views its ally as an asset to be exploited. Yet both countries want the North Korean regime to survive, which compels them to maintain their alliance. North Korea will engage heavily with the Xi Jinping leadership to keep the Chinese “shield.”

Extortion remains North Korea’s primary policy vis-à-vis South Korea. The new South Korean president Park Geun-hye will be more flexible than Lee Myung-bak (at least until North Korea conducts a deadly military provocation like those in 2010). Expect Pyongyang to test the new administration and then decide whether to deal with Seoul via dialogue or pressure. North Korea will also attempt to manipulate South Korea’s politics by taking advantage of the cleavage between conservatives and progressives, which is the most effective way to blunt Seoul’s leverage against Pyongyang.

With the return of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to power in Tokyo, North Korea will continue to isolate Japan. For Pyongyang, the LDP’s pursuit of stronger defense capabilities and Shinzo Abe’s strong stance on the abduction issue are a threat and an irritant, respectively. North Korea is aware of Japan’s efforts to expand military relations with third parties such as South Korea, Australia, and some ASEAN states. This will further drive Pyongyang to adopt diplomatic and militarily hostile attitudes toward Tokyo.

As always, North Korea will pursue dialogue with the US under its terms. Pyongyang will utilize military provocations and the secretive nature of its regime to force Washington into engagement. For Pyongyang, a peace treaty with the US is ideal. In the short term, North Korea will seek any agreement that offers political and material benefits.

Despite the continuity in Pyongyang’s strategy, it is a mistake to assume that regional powers can pursue business as usual. North Korea’s military provocations have revealed weaknesses of the US and its alliance partners’ Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities and their military readiness. A more expansive and flexible strategy is needed to deter North Korea. In truth, China has the most diplomatic leverage when it comes to North Korea. But for the US, Japan, and South Korea, strengthening trilateral coordination and coherence in ISR, as well as amphibious and air power projection capabilities to penetrate Korean People’s Army’s (KPA) weaknesses are priorities.

Key to successful trilateral efforts is greater cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo. While animosities remain, Japan and South Korea must acknowledge shared concerns on the Korean Peninsula and formulate the means to synergize their capabilities. Increasing military-level dialogues and finalizing the previously negotiated Acquisition Crossing Supporting Agreement (ACSA) and General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between Seoul and

Tokyo is an essential starting point. Then, more advanced items such as inter-operability and contingency plans should be discussed.

While the exact fate of the regime is hard to predict, expect more of the same from Pyongyang in 2013. The US, Japan, and South Korea must work together to show the North Koreans that play time is over.

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