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Session III: Stability for Northeast Asia

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Security Situation in North-East Asia

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The death of Kim Jong-Il was sudden, but did not change too much domestic situation in North Korea. At the same time change of leadership in Pyongyang considerably worsened security standing in the Korean peninsula.

From my view, the only possible domestic development in the North is collective regency of old guard combined with efforts aimed on practical legitimating of Kim Jong-un. Situation is rather typical for Eastern totalitarian states with Confucian ideology and well established hereditary system of power. The difference between Japan during Meiji restoration and DPRK today is complete absence in Pyongyang of strongly motivated Satsuma and Chosun samurais who were sure in needed changes. North Korean generals and high bureaucracy are thinking only about conservation of existing situation in the country. The situation in North Korea is under control of existing leadership, there is no system opposition, and real chances for any kind of changes are minimal. They are more minimal now than before, because of weak new leader who needs strong confirmation of its power.

If we try to model the logic of existing power, it is based on usual totalitarian understanding that population is strongly indoctrinated with the idea that system in which they live is the best in the world and the only problem is that “bloody regimes of Washington and Seoul are doing its best to prevent bright future.” If 14-th years old Meiji Emperor in 1868 was made a symbol of progress, 29-th years old Kim Jong-un surrounded by highly experienced in political cynicism generals with their high level of living, which they do not like to lose.

The possible worsening of security situation is based on understanding that consolidation of people around new leader needs growing threats and corresponding response of leader and army. It is difficult to say for how long Pyongyang nuclear and missile rattling will last, but it is clear that it will not add much for preserving stability in NEAsia in general and Korean peninsula in particular.

There are several scenarios of rising tensions on the peninsula. The first and typical development of situation is efforts to raise level of nuclear and missile threat with following trade of softening of the threat for food aid. It worked several times, but it leads to gradual increase of threat level. Those who will pay for the food should remember that Pyongyang is spending on nukes 8 years food ration for its own people.

In the beginning of May 2012 North Korea leaders said that it is no longer bound by February 29 agreement with the US pledging to halt missile and nuclear arms

development in exchange for food aid. It is not yet clear to which degree Pyongyang is serious in its intentions to “change butter for guns”, but it shows growing tensions between North Korea and world.

More dangerous scenario is strengthening of hostility on the borders of divided state and triggering of hot war with predictable consequences. Pyongyang has no chances to win such war, but the losses for the South are enormous and unbearable. Unfortunately, logic of self-survival is not always works. In response of South Korean Lee Myung-bak remarks that “deterrence is the best defence against a provocation”, which was done after missile launch failure, Pyongyang stated that DPRK has a possibility to “reduce all the rat-like groups and all the bases for provocations to ashes in three or four minutes, or in shorter time, by unprecedented peculiar means and methods of our own style”. On May 3d 2012 editorial of Pyongyang “Rondong Shinmun” mentioned term “songun” (“military first doctrine”) 21 times. DPRK has about 5000 artillery systems near to DMZ, of which many can reach Seoul and other important centers in South Korea.

On the other side of the barricade US Pacific Commander Admiral Samuel Locklear asked about possibility of a “surgical strike” against North Korean nuclear facilities, answered “that we are potentially looking at all options”.

The future developments of the situation mainly connected with the domestic situation in DPRK. If Kim Jong-un wants to preserve its power, he needs to conserve ideology of its father and grandfather. It is more or less clear that in visible future there are not too many chances for beginning of ideological and economic reforms. Such assumptions based on several factors. First, the attempt to start reforms in 2002-2004 failed. Second, all political system of DPRK is based on assumption that their country is the only country with real socialist system, and will never betray ideals of communism. Third, North exists only under conditions of divided country. Pyongyang will never admit that South is democratic and prosperous. Forth, DPRK is completely isolated from the world, and its relations even with China are far from ideal. And last, but not least, nukes and missiles are one of the most important preconditions of regime survival. For DPRK it is main factor of deterrence of aggression, and factor of domestic consolidation. As late Kim Jong-il said in one of his last speeches “yesterday, we were a weak and small country trampled upon big powers. Today, our geopolitical location remains the same, but we transformed into a proud political and military power and an independent people that no one can dare provoke.” It is pure propaganda, but it works, and people in totalitarian state are really proud of military achievements.

Reaction of Russia on changes on Korean peninsula was rather restraint. Moscow is trying to preserve good, but formal relations with Pyongyang. Practically Russia

has no leverage on policy of the North. It is limited only by Moscow participation in the weak activity of Group-6. The share of DPRK in Russian foreign trade is about 0.01% of total volume. At the same time Russia, as well as South Korea, China, and Japan are very much aware of military conflict or humanitarian collapse in Korea.