

A Nuclear Battle of Nerves

The nuclear fight between North Korea and the United States is escalating. Kim Jong Un against Donald Trump: it could get even scarier.

By Matthias Nass, February 2017

Even last fall, when Barack Obama was still in the White House, the word heard in Washington was that not Russia, nor China, nor even the Islamic State State stands at the top of the American security services's concerns. At the top of their list of worries is North Korea.

And in fact, the Pyongyang regime significantly increased the number of nuclear and rocket tests in 2016. In his New Year's speech, dictator Kim Jong Un announced that preparations for an intercontinental rocket (ICBM) test had reached its "final phase".

On February 12th, however, North Korea again fired just a medium-range rocket, which descended into the Japanese Sea after 500 kilometers – the same weekend US President Donald Trump was visited by Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe. If the goal was to provoke, then it was done correctly.

An ICBM test, however, would be something completely different. With it Kim would approach the red line, which the White House – unlike in Syria – has never officially drawn, but about which North Korea should have no doubt. A functioning, nuclear intercontinental rocket capable of reaching America would never be accepted by any US-President.

Donald Trump definitely would not.

A crisis is developing in East Asia, but it has not drawn the attention it deserves. According to Lee Sang Hwa, Director General of the South Korean Foreign Ministry's North Korean Nuclear Affairs Bureau, 2017 will be "critical". "We are at a tipping point." This is not only because of the technical progress North Korea has made, but also because of the current political environment.

First South Korea, then NATO

What worries DG Lee the most is that North Korea is approaching the "zone of immunity". Once that point is reached, North Korean development towards a nuclear weapon state will no longer be reversible. "North Korea is very, very close to this dangerous line."

It is no coincidence that new US Defense Secretary James Mattis' first trip abroad was to South Korea; his visit to NATO in Brussels followed thereafter. Mattis has reaffirmed America's allegiance to South Korea, an area where Donald Trump had initially raised doubts during the election campaign.

The Interests of South Korea and America

But the oaths of allegiance cannot conceal the fact that South Korea's and America's interests are not entirely in alignment with one another. How else could it be? The entire Pacific Ocean lies between North Korea and the United States, while the Korean Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea is only 60 kilometers away from Seoul and its 11 million inhabitants.

While US military experts are discussing the possibility of preventive strikes, the South Koreans fear the consequences of an American attack on Kim's nuclear facilities. A North Korean counter-attack, even with conventional weapons, would be devastating. Tens of thousands of artillery shells and short-range missiles are aimed at Seoul.

Worries about THAAD

South Koreans have learned to live with the threat, much as the Germans did during the Cold War. But something has changed. Conversations in Seoul confirm: anxieties grow.

Pyongyang has always been unpredictable. But is it likely that Washington will be any more predictable under Trump?

Defense Secretary Mattis, the epitome of seriousness when compared to Donald Trump, has not been able to dispel these worries. His visit was mainly concerned with the new American missile defense system THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense), which should be installed early this summer. The resistance to THAAD is great, even in the National Assembly. "We have become slaves to fear," said Kim Jong Dae, deputy of the Justice Party.

The chief accusation of THAAD opponents? THAAD, whose launching facility would be south of the capital, is said to be protecting mainly American bases in the country. Seoul, however, is not offered any protection by the system. Moreover, in conjunction with similar systems in Japan, an integrated US-Japanese-South Korean missile defense system can be created – most likely to be aimed at China. This is also a concern for Beijing, which is using great diplomatic and economic pressure to prevent the THAAD project.

Return of the Sunshine Policy?

In the midst of this crisis, South Korea has no political leadership. On December 9th, the National Assembly decided to impeach President Park Geun-hye due to allegations of corruption and misuse of office. The supreme court of the country will rule on this issue in a few weeks. If the court finds against President Geun-hye and rules to remove her from power, then South Korea will have sixty days to choose a new president.

In this case, liberal candidate Moon Jae-In is almost certain to win. Moon, a former human

rights prosecutor, wants to build on the “sunshine policy” of former presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, a type of Korean “Ostpolitik” aimed at easing the tensions between the North and the South.

It is possible, that the THAAD will already be installed at the time of the election. The US House of Representatives has recently introduced a resolution that calls for rapid action in the field of missile defense. And following Kim Jong-un’s New Year’s speech, Donald Trump, laconically tweeted that a North Korean nuclear rocket that threatened America would not occur. "It won't happen."

A battle of nerves has begun between two egomaniacs, both of whom are quick to lose their composure. North Korea's nuclear program could soon be the worry of the whole world.

This article is part of a regular series of contributions from Matthias Nass for the Bucerius network. Matthias Nass began his career with ZEIT in 1983, and from 1998 to 2010 served as Deputy Editor-in-Chief. Since 2011, he has served as Chief International Correspondent for the newspaper. His area of expertise is foreign and security policy. This article was originally published in ZEIT Online on February 17, 2017.

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