

## “Allegro Ma Non Troppo” in Korea



The late Carlo M. Cipolla, in his delightful booklet “Allegro Ma Non Troppo” detailed the Basic Laws of human stupidity. He warned that whenever a serious threat suddenly emerges against ourselves or our interests, our very first step shall consist in assessing whether the threat comes from a bandit – i.e., someone who is aiming at acquiring some illicit gain for himself by robbing us – or rather a stupid individual. The latter is defined as someone who would spread havoc and destruction all around him not in view of some nefarious plot, but simply because he is stupid. The implication is that stupid people are far more dangerous than bandits, because their actions are inherently irrational and it is thus impossible to foresee those in advance and implement the appropriate countermeasures.

Mr. Cipolla’s warning is particularly appropriate, when nuclear weapons come into the play. For although the prospect of nukes in the hands of a bandit is not pleasant, still it is much safer than the same being controlled by a fool.

The really alarming aspect of the ongoing nuclear/missile crisis in North Korea does not lie in the fact that the country is allegedly in violation of international obligations (which it is not), and not even in the fear that the regime there could come to threaten the entire region or the whole world (which it can’t possibly do in the near/medium term, apart from neighbouring South Korea). Rather, the really frightening point is, the latest moves by Pyongyang do not at first glance appear to make any sense and be in view of any logical objective. The carefully pondered if risky policy North Korea had implemented so far would now seem having degenerated into sheer madness. Now *this* is where the real danger lies.

It all started twenty years ago, when the late “Great Leader”, Kim Il-Sung and all other communist or Soviet-client

leaders around the world were contemplating in sheer horror the total collapse of a political system, they firmly believe was scientifically pre-determined to eventually come to dominate the globe. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing quick German reunification, the writing was (very appropriately) on the wall for North Korea and its regime, too. Something had to be done, and pretty quickly to try and “freeze” the partition of the Korean peninsula. Kim Il-Sung had the very brilliant (from his point of view) idea to table a gigantic bluff based on the possession of nuclear weapons.

The terms of the question are clear enough and indeed self-evident. The (real or suspected) availability of even a very small arsenal or primitive nuclear weapons, plus some rudimentary delivery means and a strategic target very conveniently located just the other side of the border, provide a rock-solid guarantee for survival to even the most despicable regime and failed state. Not even the nuttiest neocon would seriously contemplate imposing “regime change” or “export of democracy” to a nuclear-capable country. The problem is how to get there without creating too much alarm, and thus risk attracting a pre-emptive attack.

Not sitting on any oil does help, but basically it all boils down to a game of high poker. As the leader of a nuclear-hopeful country you would want your potential enemies and the world at large to know that you just “might” be sitting on a nuke or two, and thus need to be treated with all due respect. At the same time, however, you have to ponder your moves very carefully so as not to project the impression you are a madman and must be stopped before it is too late. If you play your cards judiciously, don’t push your bluff beyond certain limits, and all you want to win is your own political survival plus some help in feeding your people (forgetting for a moment that your people is starv-

ing because of your very political lunacy), then you stand some good chances for success.

Thus, during the 1990s North Korea deliberately started spreading multiple “hints” about a secret nuclear weapons programme.

In late 2002, the country officially acknowledged the existence of such a programme, and in early 2003 it formally withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and indicated that it “might” abandon the then moratorium on missile tests. In October 2003, it was announced that all technical problems for the construction of a nuclear device had been solved. In early February 2005, Pyongyang officially stated that it had developed and possessed nuclear weapons, although it did not claim a nuclear power status. On 9 October 2006, North Korea detonated what appears having been a low-yield nuclear device.

Needless to say, at least up to that point North Korea viewed its nuclear programme exclusively as a tool to extract political and economic concessions from the West and most particularly the US. Six-party negotiations (involving China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and the US) reached a preliminary agreement on 15 February 2007 under which North Korea did freeze all activities at its Yongbyon nuclear plant and allowed IAEA inspectors back in return for 50,000 tons of fuel oil. A comprehensive agreement was then signed on 3 October, under which North Korea was to permanently disable all its nuclear facilities and provide a comprehensive account of all its past nuclear programmes, including plutonium extracted from used fuel rods, in return for an additional 950,000 tons of fuel oil and the start of bilateral talks with the US, aimed at establishing full diplomatic relations and ending North Korea’s designation as a “state sponsor of terrorism”. The main provisions of this agreement were to be implemented by 31 December 2007, but the process was delayed due to various disputes – as well as the manoeuvres by some elements within the Bush administration to cut across the President’s decisions and torpedo any possible negotiated solution.

On 27 June 2008, North Korea blew up the cooling tower at Yongbyon, so placing the plant out of use. In return, the US administration removed North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism and lifted some specific sanctions. North Korea, however, did not pledge to renounce nuclear weapons.

In August 2008, "Dear Leader" Kim Chong-Il suffered a stroke. If you think this has nothing to do with strategy and international policy, please be informed that the possible consequences of a stroke include personality change and dementia.

The renewed "satellite launch"/missile test on 5 April 2009 was a fairly predictable development, as a modest move to keep things going and a reminder of North Korea's capabilities. After the missile test, the UN Security Council passed a relatively bland statement declaring North Korea in breach of UN resolutions. This, too, was eminently predictable, and indeed well in line with the likely political goals of the manoeuvre. Yet, from this moment on North Korea appears having suddenly gone berserk, and moved from eminently rational (albeit admittedly devious) to wholly irrational behaviour.

Pyongyang over-reacted furiously to the Security Council's resolution by vowing "never to return" to six-party talks. It expelled IAEA inspectors, and threatened to restart the process of extracting plutonium from spent reactor fuel rods. On 25 May, a second nuclear test was carried out. And as if it were up to deliberately further raising the tension, North Korea has since indicated it no longer recognises the 1953 Cease-fire Agreement that ended the Korean War, and as these lines are being written another long-range missile test appears to be imminent.

It is very difficult to see how the leadership in Pyongyang could perceive these moves as being in the ultimate interest of the country and the regime, for they effectively undermine a substantial part of the results that had been

achieved so far. While the original nuclear bluff worked like a charm until now to protect and guarantee Pyongyang's survival, it appears having degenerated into senseless provocation for its own sake. Or, to put this in a different form, a (quasi) nuclear power status that was so far wisely used as sort of a life insurance and a bargaining tool, has now suddenly become a goal in itself.

There are two possible explanations for what is going on. The first sees Pyongyang's recent moves as but a domestic affair, being linked to Kim Chong-Il's declining health after the stroke and his urge to formally establish his youngest son, Kim Jong-Un as his designated successor in the communist dynasty. Given that Jong-Un is still in his 20s and thus far too young (particularly by Asian standards) to be in any position of real power, so goes the tentative analysis, his ailing father would want to artificially trigger a crisis in order to gather political and military support around the Heir Apparent.

The alternative analysis, and the one I personally tend to subscribe to, is of a toxic combination of sheer desperation and paranoia having led to Pyongyang further raising the ante to impossible levels, and attempting a final monumental bluff. North Korea is no longer content with more or less guaranteed survival through a primitive form of nuclear deterrent; it now wants political recognition (most particularly by the US) through a peace treaty that would replace the current ceasefire and formally recognise Pyongyang as the legitimate government of the northern half of the Korean peninsula. And, a legitimate government that is an acknowledged nuclear power to boot.

Problem is, this goal is blatantly beyond the pale. There is no way the US – or Asia, or the world – could be coaxed or bullied into accepting such a nightmarish situation. Amongst many other negative aspects, the emergence of North Korea as a recognised nuclear

power would most assuredly led to Japan "going nuclear" in a matter of weeks, with South Korea following within a year maximum. Now the foolish pursuit of a goal, that is clearly outside one's own reach is the very hallmark of stupidity.

The difficulties inherent with trying to counter a very stupid move that nonetheless represents a grave strategic threat are well in evidence in the first actions by the US administration, which apparently could conceive nothing better than countering Pyongyang's bluff with a bluff of their own. Defense Secretary Gates' recent statements to the effect that "the US will not accept a nuclear North Korea" and "would not stand idly by" while Pyongyang continues to develop nuclear weapons were arguably necessary in order to reassure regional allies and confirm the role of the US as the guarantor of strategic stability in Asia. But at the same time, such an openly declared position risks trapping Washington into an exceedingly unpleasant dilemma. What would the US do, should "Dear Leader" call Mr. Gates' bluff? Escalate the confrontation to an armed conflict, or accept a monumental loss of face?

We are thus facing the very real prospect of a completely unnecessary war in the Korean peninsula, or at least the nearly total destabilisation of the very delicate regional balance. And all of this is happening not because the Pyongyang regime has been ruminating on some evil scheme of visionary power and conquest, but simply because of a blood clot in Kim Chong-Il's brain.

Give me a clever, cool-minded bandit all the time...

  
Ezio Bonsignore

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