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Decoupling or de-risking North Korea's resilient isolation

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The FRS-KF Korea Program on Security and Diplomacy aims to provide a better understanding of key issues on the Korean Peninsula through the organization of conferences, the publication of interviews and articles. This program is not limited to inter-Korean relations alone and aims to address South Korea more broadly as a global power on the international scene.

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Last October, the author of this note mentioned the likely scenario that North Korea would undertake “*a form of partial and selective diplomatic decoupling from other countries that are not prepared to make the slightest concession to North Korea*”¹. Since then, embassies and diplomatic posts in Angola, Bangladesh, Congo, Guinea, Hong Kong, Nepal, Senegal, Spain and Uganda have been closed. Noting the continuing deterioration in relations between North Korea and a large number of countries, not just in the West, we added that this would lead “*the regime to prioritise its relations with other states*”, particularly those also subject to sanctions or at least international pressure.

An article published by Ruediger Frank a few days ago refers to a new strategy of “de-risking” on the part of Pyongyang, using a term that has become central to the need to reduce the dependence of many Western countries on China². According to this Austrian academic specialising in the country, North Korea is now seeking to “*avoid risks rather than manage them*” in the context of a “*geopolitical return to a new Cold War*”. He points out that “*membership of a new, solid alliance with Moscow and Beijing is helping to offset the economic and political costs of a return to a conservative, state-centred economic policy and international isolationism*”. His analysis takes a long-term view and aims to demonstrate a fundamental change in Pyongyang's posture. It is clear that its strategy is changing, but is the Russian invasion of Ukraine or a “new Cold War” the main reason?

The information reaching us from the country is patchy, even more so since its closure of 2020 due to the pandemic, which led the Western embassies, the four resident foreign NGOs – all of them European – and the UN and non-UN international organisations (such as the Red Cross) to withdraw their staff. It is therefore difficult to analyse the reasons for North Korea's choices, especially as the regime has not tried to justify the recent closing of some of its diplomatic posts abroad. However, there are two major underlying trends which might provide a better understanding of North Korea's strategy: its isolation and its resilience.

Firstly, there is a trend towards the isolation of the country which predates the pandemic and which is due to three interlinked events: the continued development of the country's nuclear and ballistic capabilities, the strengthening of international and unilateral sanctions, and the lack of interest in negotiation on both sides. The North Korean regime is relentlessly pursuing its nuclear and ballistic programmes, despite Security Council resolutions, and is speeding up their modernisation, both in terms of quality and quantity³. The means of delivery are diversified, giving the regime an unprecedented ability to manage an escalation by providing it with military options, while also conferring on it a capacity to harm South Korea's economic capabilities. North Korea is indeed acquiring sufficiently precise strike capabilities to carry out selective, limited and conventional strikes against economic targets with high industrial added value. In response, the international community adopted a series of sanctions, the nature of which changed radically from 2016 onwards, with economic sanctions aimed at drying up the country's sources of foreign currency (international trade, people working abroad, etc.) and imposing the greatest possible financial cost on the country. At the same time, the period of international negotiations in 2018 and 2019, marked in particular by the historic summits in Singapore and Hanoi between the North Korean and American heads of state, as well as the various inter-Korean summits, is well and truly over, and has been since 2020.

¹ Bondaz Antoine, “Isolement ou intégration ? Le réseau diplomatique nord-coréen”, Korea Program on Security and Diplomacy, FRS, octobre 2023.

² Frank Ruediger, “North Korea's De-risking Strategy and Its Implications”, 38 *North*, December 13, 2023.

³ Bondaz Antoine, “North Korea, an ever-expanding nuclear state”, Korea Program on Security and Diplomacy, FRS, décembre 2023.

In addition, the arrival in power of a conservative president in South Korea, the rise in inter-Korean tensions and the American disinterest in a diplomatic solution to the North Korean proliferation crisis do not offer the regime sufficient incentives to try to negotiate and obtain concessions.

Secondly, the North Korean regime has demonstrated its resilience despite international sanctions and also despite the Covid pandemic, which led to the total isolation of the country for over three years. Far from the image of a regime on the verge of collapse that international sanctions could force into dialogue, the North Korean regime has demonstrated considerable solidity and stability, despite the sacrifices imposed on the North Korean population. The staging of the leader with his daughter, whether or not she is the heiress, is intended to demonstrate the regime's long-term durability and further consolidate its dynastic nature. The slow reopening of relations is only a sham, as the country is relaunching its international cooperation with only a limited number of countries, playing up and exploiting them in the media, as with Russia, and deepening them discreetly, as with China. On this point, North Korea's priority partner, and its only ally, remains China, which is the regime's lifeline. Not only are the two countries still in a mutual hostage situation – North Korea needs China not to collapse, and China needs North Korea not to collapse –, but the rise in Sino-American tensions, particularly in the Taiwan Strait, has considerably increased Pyongyang's strategic value in Beijing's eyes.

In this context marked by its isolation as well as its resilience, the North Korean regime seems to accept and exploit a partial and selective diplomatic decoupling, all the more so as it sees no benefit for the moment in a broader engagement. On the contrary, it is in the regime's interest to massively increase its nuclear and ballistic capabilities, to develop its capacity for coercion and regional nuisance, to demonstrate its societal and economic resilience, to showcase its international partnerships, *i.e.* to send out the political message that the regime can afford its isolation because of its resilience, that the choice is made and not imposed. It is all the more important to try to be in a position of strength ahead of potential opportunities to resume international negotiations if, for example, Trump were to be elected in the American elections of November 2024. In this context, what is the point for the regime to show the slightest openness to dialogue with Western countries when it is in the country's interest to play the card of frontal opposition in order to show itself to be an unfailing supporter of its Russian neighbour and its Chinese ally? Above all, what is the potential gain for the regime when international sanctions limit the room for manoeuvre of Western countries which, moreover, have downgraded the denuclearisation of North Korea on their list of international priorities in the context of the war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza and tensions in the Red Sea?

It is therefore still too early to speak of a fundamental change in Pyongyang's strategy, and it would be more appropriate to speak of yet another demonstration of the flexibility and adaptability of a regime that exploits the international environment to achieve its main objective: ensuring the regime's political security. Against this backdrop, the levers available to Europeans to contribute to the stability of the Korean peninsula and the denuclearisation of North Korea are, unfortunately, constantly shrinking⁴.

⁴ Bondaz Antoine, "From critical engagement to credible commitments: a renewed EU strategy for the North Korean proliferation crisis", *EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Paper*, n° 67, EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium, February 2020.

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