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Security Nexus Perspectives

WHY WE NEED A REGIONAL APPROACH FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT WITH NORTH KOREA

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Introduction

For the first half of 2020, various signs of internal instability in the Democratic Republic of Korea (North Korea) have drawn international media attention. In April, North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, disappeared from public view for twenty days, prompting speculation about his health status. After resurfacing in May without visible evidence of illness, experts still worry that Kim Jong-un's obvious poor health is a big risk factor (Katz and Cha 2020). Following this, Kim Yeo-jung, a younger sister of Kim Jong-un, released a series of public statements that blamed the South Korea government for failing to prevent its citizens from flying leaflets into North Korea (AT 2020). She promised to take military measures in response, and North Korea blew up a joint liaison office used for talks between itself and South Korea in June (Bicker 2020). Washington and Seoul have repeatedly expressed their willingness to talk with Pyongyang, but have not met with success during this period of instability.

Many experts suspect that North Korea's renewed provocations have something to do with internal problems that have been exacerbated by a COVID-19 outbreak in the country (Choe 2020). The North Korean economy has been under stress from the sanctions over the past two years, and it is believed that North Korea's internal problems will significantly increase as the country enters the summer season. The high likelihood of natural disasters will compound the pains and hardships currently being experienced by the North Korean populace. To divert people's attention from the internal problems, Pyongyang is highly likely to launch even more military provocations for the rest of the year. Avoiding escalation of tension surrounding the Korean Peninsula requires world leaders to better understand the internal challenges faced by North Korea before they react to these provocations.

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This paper examines North Korea's health crisis, including the possibility of a COVID-19 outbreak and its impacts, and the types of natural disasters that we expect to see in the summer. It focuses on how a multilateral approach through regional organizations would be more effective in addressing North Korea's internal challenges and how it can complement the bilateral approaches to address North Korea's external challenges with missile and nuclear capabilities.

COVID-19 and the Ongoing Health Crisis in North Korea

Despite Pyongyang's repeated denials, there is evidence that North Korea has already experienced a COVID-19 outbreak (Nebahay 2020). In March, North Korean state media reported that the government placed approximately 7,000 people under medical monitoring for apparently showing coronavirus symptoms (Borowiec 2020). Furthermore, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Russia had provided North Korea with 1,500 kits designed for the rapid diagnosis of coronavirus at the request of the North Korean government (Hotham 2020). These measures suggest that North Korea itself does suspect an outbreak, but either lacks the resources to confirm it or is concealing the outbreak from the outside world.

North Korea shares a 1,450 km-long, porous border with China. COVID-19 emerged and started to circulate in China from mid-November 2019, and tens of thousands of people had already crossed the border into North Korea by the time the border was closed on January 23, 2020 (Euro News 2020). Given that there were already many confirmed cases within China by mid-January, it is highly probable that the virus made its way into North Korea well before the border closure.

It is likely that a COVID-19 outbreak would be particularly devastating in North Korea because of the country's health system, which is near-collapse. North Korea once "had achieved an efficient and effective free universal health-care system accompanied by impressive health indicators" prior to the 1990s (WHO 2009). However, the system suffered a severe blow as the national economy fell into recession in the 1990s. The combination of recession and disasters no doubt contributed to a health system collapse the following year with plenty of doctors, but no supplies (MSF 1997). In 1998, the World Food Programme began the largest emergency operation in its history to provide aid to 7.5 million people and prevent a further escalation of the crisis (BBC 2017). Traditional partners China and South Korea were major donors and provided significant assistance. After a few quiet years from 2001 to 2005, North Korea ended humanitarian aid to reduce exposure to international aid agencies and expatriate aid workers.

The poor public health infrastructure exacerbates other health-related problems in North Korea. It has been widely reported that around 45% of the North Korean population suffers from malnutrition and many lack access to drinkable water or sanitary facilities (Park 2019). North Korea was ranked 193 out of 195 countries in the World Sanitary Index 2019, ahead of only Somalia and Equatorial Guinea.

To make matters worse, African Swine Fever (ASF) caused major damage to the pork industry, which accounts for about 80% of North Korea's protein consumption (Lee 2019). Since the first report of cases in May 2019 to World Health Organization, a widespread outbreak of ASF is believed to have worsened hunger and malnutrition. With international sanctions in place, it is hard for North Korean people to find an alternative protein source. The chronic lack of medical supplies, including facial masks, and poor health

care infrastructure for a population already suffering from malnutrition makes North Korea uniquely vulnerable to COVID-19 (Bowden 2020).

We can expect that the ongoing health crisis in North Korea will only be worsened in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which will create an even bigger challenge for the authorities as the country enters the rainy season from summer to early autumn when natural disasters occur more frequently.

The Vicious Cycle of Natural Disasters

The mismanagement of land has had a profound impact on crises in North Korea. The nation experienced food and energy shortages from the 1980s and attempted to remedy this by logging forests for energy and clearing land for agriculture. Over-cultivation, mono-cropping farming and chemical fertilizers dependence resulted in decreased soil fertility and widespread food shortages (Myeong 2014). Considerable efforts attempted to turn the barren mountainous geography into agricultural lands, but this only increased land clearing and susceptibility to mudslides and landslides, resulting in more flooding during the monsoon season. A direct positive correlation between flood vulnerability and deforestation was observed for North Korea provinces and cities (Myeong and Hong 2009, Myeong 2013). For example, reports collected by Reliefweb from 1995 to 2017 show fairly consistent typhoons and flooding with drought being added to the mix in 2015 (Reliefweb 2018), and then in the mid-1990s, North Korea populations were hit by extensive flooding that affected 3.7 million people.

Aid donors were once more engaged when the following five years witnessed 3.9 million more affected flood victims. Two decades after the problem began, flooding remained high up to the mid-2010s with a further 1.2 million affected, but a new environmental threat emerged. Catastrophic droughts in 2015 and 2017 affected 18.2 million people, close to three quarters of the total population. The concern is that drought may result in even worse flooding in the years to come (Seitz 2017). When soil becomes dry and compacted for long periods, it becomes less able to absorb rainfall, which results in more surface water and thus more flooding. In a March 2015 speech, Kim Jong-Un said, “Unauthorized felling of trees is tantamount to treachery. All the people on this land should treasure and protect even a blade of grass and a tree of their country” (Seitz 2017).

North Korea remains in dire need of adequate food, health, nutrition, water and sanitation with 70% of the population suffering from food insecurity and 28% of children under the age of five being chronically malnourished (Oxfam 2018). Poorly maintained water supplies and the lack of sanitary installations cause diarrhea and related illnesses that are widespread in North Korea (Swiss Cooperation Office 2017). In 2010, the WHO stated that North Korea has an adequate number of doctors and that despite severe ongoing problems with malnutrition and corruption within the health care system, hospital care had improved significantly since the 1990s (Ramani 2016).

The Need for Regionalism and its Limits from Geopolitics

Crises of this magnitude completely overwhelm internal disaster management structures and support from the region is vital. North Korea engages with humanitarian agencies, including UNICEF, WHO and private NGOs to supplement their healthcare system and stimulate resilience. However, the system remains

alarmingly vulnerable due to its reliance on international humanitarian aid and regional assistance (Barrett 2011).

The presence of need, however, is not always a guarantee of assistance. Nations in the Northeast Asia region engage in geopolitical strategic calculations accompanied by periodic overstatement of threats and conflicts with neighbors. Those in power maintain and garner public support by focusing on historical grievances with continued references to historical territorial disputes, military incursions and political tensions. This behavior limits the development of trusting relationships that are prerequisites for collaborative and cohesive regionalism. Despite growing regional economic interdependence, China's expansionist policies in the South China Sea and the unfinished war between North and South Korea continue to make neighboring nations so anxious that they are incapable of moving forward and developing a regional crisis management architecture (Jackson 2015).

Emerging transnational security threats have the potential to override these barriers and obstacles to cooperation. Mongolia, North Korea, Russia and Taiwan are important regional stakeholders, but China, Japan and South Korea are economic powerhouses providing the resources that sustain weaker regional nations during times of crisis. While unity between these three nations may be the key to initiating and maintaining regional cooperation, the establishment of regional ties between weaker nations is an easier and more achievable first step because barriers to cooperation are strongest between China, Japan and South Korea. Dewitt and Acharya's (1994) cooperation framework includes necessity, inclusivity and habits of dialogue. These elements are all necessary for successful transnational security cooperation regardless of the approach to regional cooperation.

The Positive Signs toward Regional Cooperation

In Northeast Asia, there is no mechanism that equates to the ASEAN AHA Centre with a dedicated focus on the promotion and coordination of regional disaster management, including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). However, there are positive signs of cooperation. For instance, China, Japan and South Korea engage in biannual trilateral ministerial meetings on disaster management (Seiji et al 2009). After eleven years of negotiation, the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) was established in 2011 with a vision to promote peace and common prosperity among the three countries (TCS, 2011).

This development rises above historical grievances and sets the tone for a future-oriented relationship geared towards peace, mutual benefit and regional cooperation (Shin 2014). This resulted in an annual trilateral disaster response and relief tabletop exercise activity that has improved habits of dialogue between the three parties (Japan Minister of State for Disaster Management, 2015). Other participants and observers include Mongolia, Russia, U.S., United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations Development Programme and International Federation of the Red Cross. The TCS has been instrumental in progressing the future of disaster management cooperation in the region by implementing the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Two further regional cooperation mechanisms emerged in 2014. Firstly, to overcome the issue of increasing economic interdependence tied with hegemonic struggles, South Korea developed the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI). This long-sighted endeavor fosters small yet meaningful

forms of cooperation and is a companion, not a contender, to present bilateral and multilateral efforts (CSIS 2016, Kim 2017). Notably, it has the potential to become a systematic mechanism to cooperatively address non-traditional, transnational security issues, such as the containment of pandemic diseases, cybersecurity and disaster management (Jackson, 2015).

NAPCI provides opportunities to policy makers, opinion leaders and experts across the region to dialogue actively and discuss critical security issues to generate ideas for facilitating regional cooperation (Kim 2015). Secondly, Mongolia developed the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asia Security to reduce regional distrust and increase collaboration and cooperation through multi-layered activities, including mutually reinforcing Track 1, 1.5 and 2 gatherings (Caprara et al, 2015). This effort may be more successful in increasing trust between North and South Korea and has the potential to attract North Korea participation (Caprara et al, 2015). These developments are encouraging, but they are in need of a crisis to engage their capacities and test their usefulness.

The Strategic Logic of HADR Engagement with North Korea

For the last two years, the US, South Korea, and China have bilaterally engaged with North Korea to address the country's missile and nuclear challenges. However, the negotiation between Washington and Pyongyang on the denuclearization of North Korea has stalled. South Korea's Moon Jae-in government has attempted to facilitate dialogue between the US and North Korea, while patiently reaching out to Pyongyang to enhance the inter-Korean cooperation. Pyongyang has been pressing Washington to lift sanctions as a precondition to moving forward with negotiation. As North Korea tries to hold a strong position in nuclear bargaining, it has little incentive to appear weak by cooperating with the US and South Korea on HADR issues.

However, China has provided assistance for the survival of Kim Jong-un regime. As China is a member country of the TSC and NAPSI, China's bilateral engagement with North Korea can expand to include other countries like South Korea under the framework of multilateral regionalism. Mongolia does not pose any security threat to North Korea, therefore that country is also in good position to suggest the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asia Security as a venue to discuss North Korea's need for HADR assistance at Track 1.5 gatherings. While Pyongyang is wary of receiving any form of help from the US or South Korea bilaterally, it may feel more comfortable taking external aid through multilateral institutions that North Korea engages with in regional cooperation on HADR issues.

Some critics might ask why the international community should provide HADR assistance for North Korea when the country precisely needs to be pressed to abandon its nuclear programs. While we agree with the maximum pressure approach to address North Korea's external challenges, we suggest that the international community provide a breathing space for North Korea as far as internal challenges are concerned.

North Korean authorities tend to blame sanctions as the root cause of all internal problems. The more people suffer from health crises and natural disasters, the more the Kim Jong-un regime is likely to launch another series of outward military provocations. Therefore, there is a need to release Pyongyang's stress level and HADR engagement is the best mechanism for achieving pressure release. Our approach to North

Korea should be divided between pressuring Pyongyang on traditional security issues and engaging where possible in non-traditional security issues. Otherwise, Pyongyang will continue to combine the two issues as an excuse to challenge externally with military measures.

While North Korea has an image of a “rogue state” that threatens neighboring countries with missiles and nuclear arsenals, we must not forget that North Korean people are experiencing starvation, malnutrition, poor health system, swine flu, flooding, drought, and land-slides, all of which will only be exacerbated in the wake of the global COVID-19 crisis. North Korea’s internal problems are expected to continue to grow in the foreseeable future and disasters experienced during the summer of 2020 will exacerbate current circumstances. Separating HADR from sanction issues and being proactive in providing assistance to a suffering population may prove to be the most effective strategy for engaging with Pyongyang. The U.S., its regional partners and other concerned countries need to work with regional security institutions and other instruments of soft power to explore viable options for multilateral collective cooperation to build trust and relationships that pave the way for more difficult conversations on harder security issues.

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