



Rash or Rational ?

North Korea and the threat it poses

House of Commons Defence Committee

publié le 13/04/2018

Relations internationales

During 2016 and 2017 North Korea conducted an unprecedented series of missile launches and nuclear tests to advance its ambition to become one of the world's nuclear powers. This testing escalated tensions in the region and increased the risk of renewed conflict.

With its current rate of development, it is possible that North Korea can already strike the United Kingdom with an Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), potentially able to carry and deliver a nuclear warhead. Within the next six to 18 months, it is almost certain to be able to achieve this capability. However, North Korea has not yet publicly demonstrated that it has mastered either nuclear warhead miniaturisation or re-entry.

A North Korean nuclear strike against the UK seems highly unlikely. We do not believe that North Korea regards the UK as a primary target—its goal being to threaten the United States mainland (although also bringing the UK within range of its missiles) in the event of hostilities on the Peninsula.

It will be obvious to Kim Jong-un that initiating a nuclear exchange is bound to lead to North Korea's annihilation: the polar opposite of his objective of regime survival. We consider that Kim Jong-un, though undoubtedly ruthless, is nevertheless rational. As such, he could be dissuaded and deterred from launching a nuclear weapon.

It is far more likely that the UK will continue to suffer from reckless North Korean cyber-attacks, such as Wannacry. North Korea has shown an utter lack of concern about who gets hurt by such attacks. Similarly, there is a definite danger that North Korea would have few, if any, qualms about promoting nuclear proliferation to other states or even non-state actors.

Recent engagement between North and South Korea, and potentially between North Korea and the US, has begun to reduce regional tensions surrounding the North's nuclear

weapons programme. However, Kim Jong-un seems to see such weapons as insurance against any threat to his regime's survival. He is therefore unlikely to give them up now.

If there were a conflict in the region, the UK would have no legal obligation to provide military assistance. Yet in the event of North Korean aggression against South Korea and/or against the United States, it is unlikely that we would stand aside.

1 - Introduction

1. During 2016 and 2017, the self-styled Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) demonstrated its determination to become a nuclear-armed state by conducting an unprecedented series of missile launches and nuclear tests. These tests showed how quickly the North Korean programme was advancing, revealing increasingly powerful nuclear devices and missiles capable of reaching the United States and the United Kingdom.
2. The potential threat posed by North Korea's ability to mount nuclear attacks against the US, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and other countries has led to a crisis in the region. In particular, the rhetoric of the exchanges between the US and North Korea on the missile launches and nuclear testing has escalated tensions in the region and increased the risk of renewed conflict. However, recent developments in 2018, including proposed talks between the leaders of North Korea and the US, may have begun to de-escalate the crisis.
3. At the same time, North Korea has continued to demonstrate its willingness and ability to conduct cyber-attacks around the world, with the UK among those countries seriously affected. For example, the global Wannacry ransomware attack in May 2017 infected many NHS organisations, causing widespread disruption across the healthcare sector. The UK Government later revealed that North Korea was most probably the source of Wannacry.

Terms of reference

4. On 13 September 2017, we held a one-off evidence session in which we examined the recent nuclear and missile testing by North Korea and the situation in the region. As a result of the evidence received, the continued missile testing by North Korea and the UK Government's announcement that North Korea was probably behind Wannacry, we decided to conduct a substantive inquiry into the threats to UK security posed by North Korea.
5. On 14 December 2017, we launched the inquiry with a call for evidence seeking submissions to address the following questions:
 - What is the security threat currently posed by North Korean capabilities in nuclear, cyber and other, conventional weapons to the UK and its allies?
 - Is the UK adequately prepared to defend itself against cyber and other emerging threats from North Korea?
 - How is the Ministry of Defence supporting other government departments and the private sector to defend themselves against cyber threats, such as those posed by North Korea?
 - What might be the potential capability of North Korea in nuclear, cyber and other, conventional weapons in the coming future?
 - How might the UK Government respond to any further escalation of the crisis, such as further development of North Korean military capabilities or conflict on or near the Korean peninsula?

The inquiry

6. We held three oral evidence sessions in total (including the initial one in September) with contributions from academic specialists; a former Assistant Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service, Nigel Inkster; a former Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Capability), Vice Admiral (Rtd) Sir Jeremy Blackham KCB; the Minister of State for Defence, Rt. Hon. Earl Howe; the Minister of State for Asia and the Pacific, Rt. Hon. Mark Field MP; and the Asia-Pacific Director at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Kate White. We are grateful to all of our witnesses who gave oral and written evidence...

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