Nuclear Strategy and Leadership Change in North Korea: Old *Soju* in a New Bottle

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Resumo

Estratégia Nuclear e Mudança de Liderança na Coreia do Norte: Velho *Soju* numa Garrafa Nova

Sob as lideranças de Kim il-sung e Kim Jong-il, a Coreia do Norte desenvolveu uma estratégia nuclear que misturava ciclicamente ações de confronto e aproximação junto dos restantes atores do palco político do Nordeste Asiático. Essa estratégia visava evitar o fim do programa nuclear de Pyongyang e, de modo complementar, procurava extrair benefícios internacionais através de negociações. Ao suceder ao seu pai, Kim Jong-un trouxe sinais de transformação ao nível da imagem pública da liderança, da predominância dos militares no regime, e da reforma económica. Contudo, a tendência transformadora da nova liderança não se estendeu à estratégia nuclear. Kim Jong-un manteve basicamente intacta a estratégia herdada de Kim Jong-il, uma opção que é perfeitamente ilustrada pelo teste nuclear de 12 de Fevereiro de 2013. Este artigo oferece uma explicação para o facto de a mudança de líder não ter afetado a estratégia nuclear da Coreia do Norte, argumentando que tal se deve à persistência de um contexto internacional negativo para a sobrevivência do regime norte-coreano e à fragilidade política de Kim Jong-un a nível interno.

Abstract

Under the leaderships of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, North Korea developed a nuclear strategy that cyclically mixed acts of confrontation and engagement towards other actors in the political stage of Northeast Asia. That strategy sought to avoid the end of Pyongyang's nuclear program and, in a complementing way, to extract international benefits through negotiations. When he succeeded his father, Kim Jong-un signalled transformation at the levels of leadership's public image, the military predominance in the regime, and economic reform. However, that transformative tendency did not reach nuclear strategy. Kim Jong-un basically kept intact the strategy inherited from Kim Jong-il, an option that is perfectly illustrated by the nuclear test of 12 February 2013. This article offers an explanation for the fact that leadership change did not affect nuclear strategy, arguing that it was due to the persistence of an international context that is negative for the survival of the North Korean regime and to the political fragility of Kim Jong-un at domestic level.

Introduction

North Korea has the estimated ability to produce at least half a dozen plutonium-based nuclear weapons, started a program of uranium enrichment, and has been improving its ballistic deployment systems (Nikitin, 2013). Whether those capabilities are actually operational or constitute mere paper tigers, North Korea's nuclear program became a central security concern in Northeast Asia. Since Pyongyang was confronted about the development of a nuclear program in the 1980s, its international "nuclear strategy" – the set of planned actions whose purpose is to bring North Korea as close as possible to its preferred international outcome at the level of nuclear policy[1] – has consistently followed a broadly predictable pattern, despite the image that North Korea is an unpredictable actor. Developed under Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, that strategy is a cyclical combination of engagement and confrontation actions that end up preventing the denuclearization outcome sought by other Northeast Asia's political actors, which include the United States (US) due to its military presence in the region. It is evident that "leadership change" – Kim Jong-un succeeding his late father, Kim Jong-il – had a transformative impact at some domestic political levels but Pyongyang's nuclear strategy remained unaffected. In fact, despite showing signs of convergence towards the preferences of other actors in Northeast Asia – less conservative image, willingness to decrease the weight of the military in the regime, and signaling interest in economic reform – Kim Jong-un did not alter the nuclear strategy of his predecessors, as reflected by the recent nuclear test on 12 February 2013. In this sense I suggest that nuclear strategy under Kim jong-un has been old *soju* in a new bottle: an old strategy used by a new leadership. In this context, my goal is to answer the following question: why was North Korea's nuclear strategy fundamentally unaffected by leadership change?

It is assumed here that North Korean leaders, as any other political leader, are instrumentally rational actors when they make foreign policy choices: they have pre-defined preferences over outcomes and beliefs about which actions lead to each outcome, seeking to maximize their political profits (Bueno de Mesquita, 2006: 308). Hence, this perception of rationality is noncommittal to the moral merit of actors' goals or the quality of the actors' performance in the pursuit of political profits. I consider that the basic goal of leaders is to remain in power by tackling international and domestic challenges to its leadership. At international level

*Este artigo descreve e analisa acontecimentos ocorridos até 20 de fevereiro de 2013.

1 On the general definition of strategy see Frieden (1999: 41).

a political leader must tackle military threats to national integrity and economic outcomes that decrease available capital to fund his or her policies; whereas at domestic level a leader must focus on keeping a support coalition that sustains her or him in power. Given this analytical framework, I argue that Kim Jong-un was internationally and domestically constrained to maintain the nuclear strategy of Kim Jong-il, since the international position of North Korea and his fragility as leader prevented policy choices that led to denuclearization.

The following section outlines North Korea's nuclear strategy under Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, describing the most relevant focal points that reflect the application of that strategy. Section 3 briefly explains the success of that nuclear strategy, reflected in the regime's ability to keep its nuclear program alive despite the opposition of its powerful foe and ally, the US and China. In Section 4 I review the process of leadership change in Pyongyang, examining the rise to power of Kim Jong-un and its transformative political impact at domestic level. Section 5 describes the fundamental elements defining the nuclear strategy followed by the new leader up to the nuclear test of February 2013, highlighting its similarity to his father's strategy. Section 6 explains how international and domestic constraints shaped the nuclear strategy of Kim Jong-un. Finally, Section 7 sums up the findings.

Nuclear Strategy before Kim Jong-un

Due to its fragility North Korea was constrained to develop nuclear weapons. In principle Pyongyang was aware that other regional actors – US, South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia – would try to terminate its nuclear program. Therefore Pyongyang needed to develop a strategy in order to prevent the end of its program and if possible use it to obtain capital, energy or food aid through international bargaining. Accordingly, a strategy was developed by Pyongyang under Kim Il-sung and consolidated under Kim Jong-il. What was that strategy and how did it shape the international behavior of North Korea?

Threatened by the might of the US and by its own inability to reform the country's economy due to the risks of absorption by a more powerful South, nuclear weapons constituted a very useful solution to North Korea. In principle, those weapons could achieve three goals essential to the regime of Pyongyang: to deter external military attacks; to extract political and economic benefits from other countries; and to increase control over the population by booming the popularity of leaders and dissuading foreign states that wish to promote regime change in North Korea. Additionally, those weapons could bolster the domestic position of North Korean leaders. In this setting, the primary goal of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il was to keep the nuclear program alive and the secondary one was to obtain material concessions to compensate for the deficient output of their malfunc-

tioning economic structures. The best scenario for Pyongyang would be the one in which the international "community" or at least the most powerful actor in the system – the US – recognized its nuclear status, while the worst scenario would be forced denuclearization in exchange for mere economic benefits. Given that the best scenario was unlikely in the short-term and the worst scenario would be damaging for the sustainability of the regime, North Korea opted for a strategy of cyclical engagement-confrontation that ultimately prevented denuclearization: firstly, engagement by denying any wrongdoing or demonstrating openness to denuclearization by negotiating a deal involving minor and major concessions[2] in exchange for benefits; secondly, confrontation through nuclear tests, ballistic missile launches, military provocations, or political rhetoric, in order to impose the implementation of acquired benefits, to avoid making major concessions, or to force the return of stalled negotiations; thirdly, engagement at subsequent denuclearization negotiations – thus simultaneously closing and opening the cycle – which eventually collapses again due to a new act of confrontation.

This mixed strategy was challenging for actors interacting with North Korea. Although one could grasp if Pyongyang benefited from engaging or confronting at a given period in time (Magalhães, 2006, 2011), it was highly problematic to determine when engagement and confrontation would actually occur – especially the duration of engagement and the occurrence of acts of confrontation that do not involve logistical processes that are easily detectable by systems of intelligence. To predict the behavior of any state is already hard enough – to say the least – but in the case of Pyongyang that task became virtually impossible due to the secretive informal political structures that lay under the regime's formal ones (McEachern, 2010; Cha, 2012; Park and Snyder, 2013).

I suggest that North Korea's nuclear strategy had three nuanced phases before Kim Jong-un's rise to power. The first phase lasted from the moment North Korea joined the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) up to the death of Kim Il-sung (1985-1994); the second one regards Kim Jong-il's strategy before Pyongyang acknowledged the possession of nuclear weapons (1994-2004); and the third one concerns the post-acknowledgment period until Kim Jong-il's death (2004-2011). The strategy's fundamental engagement-confrontation structure remained unaltered but the nuances came from the ability to exert confrontation, which increased as a function of Pyongyang's perceived military capabilities. The more powerful North Korean military capabilities were perceived to be, the more confrontational Pyongyang

2 Minor concessions being those that do not destroy the nuclear program – such as moratoriums on testing, visits by IAEA inspectors, or closing of accessory infrastructure – and major ones being those that may destroy it – such as the submission of nuclear materials, the destruction of irreplaceable nuclear weapons and delivery systems, or the closing of essential infrastructures.

was able to become: hence Kim Il-sung's ability to confront its international counterparts was lower than Kim Jong-il's before the acknowledgement of nuclear weapons, and Kim Jong-il's confrontational ability increased after that acknowledgment.

Pyongyang's quest for nuclear weapons goes back to the 1960s but it would only be accomplished in the post-Cold War period. During the Cold War Pyongyang's relations with Moscow were damaged by several episodes – such as Joseph Stalin's weak support in the Korean War – but it was evident that the Soviets would prefer to pay the costs of military and economic assistance rather than the political costs of a pro-Seoul reunification. Such Soviet predisposition was vital for North Korea due to the decline of its economy in relation to South Korea and to their inability to autonomously prevent a potential invasion by Seoul and Washington. Pyongyang's economic shortages and military weakness could be compensated by Moscow but there was a price to pay at the level of defense autonomy: the Soviets rejected the development of North Korean nuclear weapons. In this sense, the Pyongyang's *Juche* ideology of self-sufficiency was sacrificed on the altar of Moscow's economic and military umbrella.

Although Soviet patronage constrained the development of a North Korean nuclear program it was not able to stop it, especially when two trends in the 1980s became obvious to Pyongyang: Soviet decline and Moscow's approximation to Seoul. The sense of vulnerability of Pyongyang increased proportionately to those growing trends and prompted the effective development of a military nuclear program, despite the Soviet and international efforts to prevent it. Such efforts pushed North Korea to join the NPT on 12 December 1985, which I consider to symbolically mark the beginning of the regime's nuclear strategy of engagement-confrontation. After years of international suspicion and tension about North Korea's program, in 1992 Pyongyang signed the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula with Seoul and finally signed the safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).[3] However, those actions of engagement towards the international community and the agreement with its Southern neighbor were merely smoke and mirrors: the development a nuclear program was a rational aspiration that those agreements could not suppress. When the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signaled Soviet Union's inability to protect allied regimes, it became demonstrated that Moscow's support would no longer be a sufficient condition for regime survival in North Korea. Therefore,

3 The Joint Declaration of South and North Korea on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was signed on 20 January 1992 and the safeguards agreement was signed on 30 January 1992. See http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t297463.htm and http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Infcircs/Others/inf403.shtml .

when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, North Korea was already effectively developing its nuclear program.

The post-Cold War brought great international and domestic challenges to North Korea's "Great Leader", Kim Il-sung. At international level Pyongyang had lost its most important economic and military ally; the US was the only superpower; South Korea had become the magnet of reunification; and communist regimes had lost credibility. At domestic level, without Moscow's support Pyongyang faced economic degradation and was unable to reform its centralized economic system due to the fear of unleashing a Southern absorption. Hence, if the development of a military nuclear program was desirable during the Cold War, it became absolutely essential in the post-Cold War.

When in the period of 1993-1994 the US confronted North Korea about the nuclear weapons both countries were on the brink of war. However, following a visit by former US President Jimmy Carter, Kim Il-sung agreed to negotiate in June 1994. Unluckily for Pyongyang, Kim Il-sung died in July and thus the regime's position at the negotiation table became obviously weaker. The crisis ended up solved through the Agreed Framework of October 1994 signed by North Korea and the US.[4] Despite its weak negotiation position, this agreement ended up being positive to North Korea. The inclination of the United States to sign that agreement can be explained by the perception that the regime of Pyongyang would soon collapse (Mazzetti, 2006). In fact, that ended up being an apparently safe bet: Kim Il-sung left North Koreans orphans of their "Great Leader"; economic continue declining; and natural disasters devastated the country, provoking an unprecedented famine which according to an informed estimation led to a number of deaths that ranged from 600,000 to 1 million (Haggard and Nolan, 2007: 1). In this context Washington did not have incentives to fulfill its end of the bargain but, contrarily to the expectations, Pyongyang survived.

Kim Jong-il continued to signal engagement with the US by supposedly complying with the Agreed Framework. However, Washington was being slow on delivering the agreed benefits, required by Kim Jong-il to finance its military programs, to please the political-military elites that sustained him in power, and

4 The Agreed Framework between the United States of America and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was signed on 21 October 1994. In sum, North Korea agreed to respect the inter-Korean Joint Declaration of 1992, to remain in the NPT, to allow IAEA inspections, not to reprocess nuclear fuel, and to comply with the safeguards agreement; the US agreed to organise the provision of two light water reactors, to deliver 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil each year, and to formally assure that it would not threat to use or use nuclear weapons against North Korea. Moreover, both countries agreed to move towards the normalization of relations at political and economic levels. See http://www.nti.org/media/pdfs/aptagframe.pdf?_=1316553697&_=1316553697.

mitigate the famine effects in order to avoid a popular revolt against the regime. This prompted Pyongyang to orchestrate a confrontation act, especially because it had achieved the technological ability to test ballistic missiles with a longer range than the medium-range *Rodong-1*. Therefore in August 1998 North Korea presumably tested a *Taepodong-1* missile while claiming to send a satellite into orbit, the *Kwangmyeongseong-1*.[5] After the political dust settled, a new engagement period started with a bilateral meeting between North Korea and the US in Berlin in September 1999 – Pyongyang agreed with a moratorium on the tests of long-range missiles in exchange for Washington's partial lifting of sanctions (Song, 1999). The implementation of the Agreed Framework proceeded. In the meantime, apparently combining his ideology with the pragmatic recognition of the enduringness of Pyongyang's regime, South Korea's president Kim Dae-jung – in office since early 1998 – had developed a novel engagement policy. Whereas the Kim Young-sam, his predecessor, did not actively engage North Korea and was focusing on collapse scenarios, Kim Dae-jung approached Pyongyang through his "sunshine policy" – which basically rejected the idea of a Southern absorption and promoted cooperation with the North. The Inter-Korean Summit of June 2000 was the corollary of that policy, with Kim Jong-il and Kim Dae-jung meeting in Pyongyang.

However, the severe political incompatibility between Pyongyang and Washington prevented the normalization of relations and the difficult co-existence of Bill Clinton with a Republican majority in Congress made the economical implementation of the Agreed Framework difficult to achieve. It became obvious that the agreement was fatally wounded. The final blow came with the entry of George W. Bush into office in 2001. Ideologically conservative, Bush was less inclined than Clinton to negotiate with a totalitarian regime which supposedly sought to develop nuclear weapons. That inclination of Bush decreased even more after the September 11 terrorist attacks led to a more assertive foreign policy against non-allied countries and put nuclear terrorism on top of the list of Washington's worst nightmares. In the beginning of 2002, the famous "axis-of-evil" categorization of Iraq, Iran and North Korea (Bush, 2002) represented the announced death of the Agreed Framework. Apparently trying to force the revival of the Agreed Framework, in October 2002 North Korea has been reported to have boasted about the existence of a nuclear program to an American official during a bilateral meeting in Pyongyang (Yoo, 2003: 105). The rupture with Washington was evident, so in January 2003 North Korea

5 The launch occurred on 31 August 1998 and despite North Korean claims of success the satellite was never detected by other countries.

announced its retreat from the NPT and in April 2003 Pyongyang told American officials that it possessed nuclear weapons, solely one month after the invasion of Iraq – one of the members of the "axis of evil". The exit from the NPT and the decay of North Korean-American relations led to creation of the Six Party Talks (SPT), involving North Korea, the US, China, South Korea, Russia and Japan. Despite the efforts of North Korea to extract concessions, the first three rounds of the SPT – between August 2003 and June 2004 – did not produce the expected benefits. The lack of negotiation results – which despite allowing time to develop nuclear weapons did not deliver the much needed economic benefits – remained partially compensated with the engagement with Seoul, since the sunshine policy of Kim Dae-jung continued to be promoted in its essence by the following president, Roh Moo-hyun, who came to power in 2003.

Since the improved relations with the South were far from being a guarantee of regime survival, Pyongyang made a provocation that marks the beginning of the third phase of its strategy. On 28 September 2004, Vice Foreign Minister Choe Sun-ho publicly acknowledged at the UN that North Korea had turned plutonium from spent fuel rods into nuclear weapons as measure of self-defense against the US nuclear threat (BBC, 2004). In February 2005 the public acknowledgment of possession of nuclear weapons was reiterated. As a result of those provocations, the fourth round of the SPT led to the Joint Statement of September 2005.[6] However, the rocky relationship between Pyongyang and the Bush administration made implementation very difficult. In a move to strengthen its position and test technology, in July 2006 North Korea launched several missiles, including a long-range *Taepodong*-2. The latter launch was unsuccessful so Pyongyang needed to save its face and obtain another trump card for future negotiations. Hence North Korea opted for a new provocation: on 9 October 2006 it supposedly performed its first nuclear test. The international community protested and

6 The Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks was signed on 19 September 2005. Regarding its practical obligations, North Korea agreed to abandon all nuclear weapons and programs, return to the NPT, respect the safeguards agreement, and implement the inter-Korean Joint Declaration of 1992 in exchange for: collective respect for its right to the peaceful use of atomic energy; the future discussion of a provision of a light water reactor; American acknowledgement that it does not deploy nuclear weapons in the Korean peninsula and has no intentions to attack or invade North Korea with nuclear or conventional weapons; South Korean pledge not to receive or deploy nuclear weapons and acknowledgement that these do not exist in its territory; North Korean-American peaceful co-existence, mutual respect for sovereignty, and move towards normalization of relations; North Korean-Japanese move towards normalization of relations; energy assistance by the other five countries; South Korea's provision of 2 million kilowatts of electric power; and collective commitment to negotiate peace regime for the Korean peninsula. See http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t212707.htm.

the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) approved the condemnatory resolution 1718.[7]

Negotiations returned and an implementation agreement was reached at the SPT in February 2007.[8] The following months was marked by mutual actions of engagement, with North Korea closing down the Yongbyon in July 2007, the second Inter-Korean Summit occurring in October 2007, the demolition of Yongbyon's cooling tower in June 2008, and the October 2008 removal of North Korea from the American list of states that sponsor terrorism. However, North Korea was not interested in making major concessions and the US – despite Bush being substituted by Barack Obama in January 2009 – was not inclined to reward Pyongyang for minor concessions. Obama's policy of "strategic patience" reflected that logic. Moreover, Washington's coordination with Seoul had improved after a new president came to power in early 2008, Lee Myung-bak, a conservative politician that eschewed the engagement policies of presidents Kim and Roh (Voice of America, 2010). Hence, North Korea was not able to compensate the estrangement with Washington through Southern aid and investment. In this context, time was ripe for another North Korean act of confrontation, hence continuing to implement its cyclical strategy. In April 2009 Pyongyang launched the *Unha-2* rocket – with the reported goal of putting a satellite in orbit, the *Kwangmyeongseong-2* – which was internationally considered a provocative missile test. In protest North Korea abandoned the SPT, increasing the intensity of the crisis. After little more than one month Pyongyang conducted its second nuclear test, on 25 May 2009, which led to the UNSC resolution 1874 in June.[9] In July 2009 North Korea conducted further missile testing, though not involving long-range devices.

7 Basically, the UNSC Resolution 1718 of 14 October 2006 condemned the nuclear test; prohibited North Korea from performing nuclear and missile tests, suspended its missile and abandon its nuclear and suspend its missile programs; demanded the return to the NPT and respect for the safeguards agreement; authorised the inspection of shipments of cargo leaving and approaching North Korea; banned imports and exports of military material and technology related to the nuclear, ballistic and non-nuclear weapons of mass destruction programs; authorised the freezing of overseas assets of individuals and companies related to the nuclear program and a travel ban regarding involved individuals and their families; prohibited exports of luxury goods to North Korea; established a sanctions committee; and called upon North Korea to return to the STP without preconditions and to work towards the implementation of the Joint Declaration of September 2005. See http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sc8853.doc.htm.

8 The agreement on Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement was reached on 13 February 2007. See http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t297463.htm.

9 The UNSC Resolution 1874 was signed in 12 June 2009 and in essence it toughens the sanctions established by the UNSC Resolution 1718. See http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/sc9679.doc.htm.

From that point onwards, Kim Jong-il tried to force bilateral negotiations with the US or at least to achieve a strong bargaining position in the SPT. Since little progress was made in that sense, Kim Jong-il went back to confrontation. In March 2010 the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* was allegedly sank by North Korean forces, resulting in 46 deaths among crew members. Pyongyang denied the accusation and inter-Korean relations deteriorated rapidly, with the South demanding an apology. Those relations became deadlocked because neither country backed down. In order to put an end to the stalemate and perhaps to promote Kim Jong-un's position in the regime, in November 2010 North Korea opted for another act of confrontation by shelling Yeonpyeong-do – provoking the death of two civilians and two military. Also in November, North Korea let the world know about the existence of facilities of uranium-enrichment. The year of 2011 was marked by a virtual stalemate in inter-Korean relations – despite meetings to discuss low-profile issues such as joint research in Baekdu-san (The Chosun Ilbo, 2011a) or invitations for official visits to Kaesong (Agence France-Presse, 2012) – which led to the perpetuation of the SPT blockade. When Kim Jong-il passed away in December 2011 there was still no visible progress.

The Strategy's Success

Altogether, this strategy has generically paid off for Kim Jong-il because the regime survived him and the nuclear program was not shut down. But how can one explain that a small and poor country – with an estimated population of around 24.5 million, GDP of 40 billion dollars, and GDP per capita of 1800 dollars[10] – was able to resist the pressure of the US and China, respectively the major world power and the vital ally of Pyongyang?[11] To answer the question one needs to address the fundamental preferences and strategies of these two actors, and explain how North Korea calculated its strategy accordingly.

As mentioned above, the military nuclear program of North Korea was unanimously repudiated by its five interlocutors in the SPT. Supposedly those states considered that the real danger of a nuclear North Korea laid especially in proliferation rather than nuclear holocaust. Namely, nuclear weapons threatened the international regime of non-proliferation at state and sub-state levels: at state level Pyongyang could directly export nuclear technology to other states and could indirectly lead to proliferation by provoking the nuclearization of South Korea, Japan, or even Taiwan;

10 Estimative of 2012 for the population and of 2011 for the GDP (PPP) and GDP per capita (PPP). Central Intelligence Agency, "North Korea", The World Factbook. Available at https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kn.html.

11 For reflexions about denuclearization strategies see for example Cha and Kang (2003), Chang (2006), and Lee (2011).

at sub-state level the danger laid in the transfer of nuclear technology to terrorist organizations (Magalhães, 2006: 95-96). The bigger states – US, China and Russia – were focusing almost exclusively such proliferation. On the other hand, South Korean and Japan were also very anxious the possibility of escalation to a military conflict that devastated South Korea and Japan. Proliferation was much more likely than a war, but the latter's potential costs for Seoul and Tokyo were so high that ignoring that scenario was not an option. Washington, Beijing and Moscow would certainly not enjoy the rise of such a conflict, but their costs would be lower in terms of territorial integrity. In this context, the US and China had a similar perspective about the dangers posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons.

Since the perspectives of Washington and Beijing about the mentioned nuclear dangers were similar, what varied essentially was their risk-propensity regarding how hard to push Pyongyang towards denuclearization. The risks of war on the one hand and regime collapse on the other were the most relevant ones. South Korea and Japan were more risk averse when it comes to war and South Korea and China were more risk averse when it comes to regime collapse – due to the short-term socio-economic costs of reunification for Seoul and the social-political-strategic costs for China. Consequently in the case of China the stability of the North Korean regime was valued over regime collapse and resulting denuclearization. Nonetheless, the strengthening of Pyongyang's nuclear capability and its confrontational actions increased the propensity of Beijing moving towards positions closer to risk-seekers – although not the extent of the US. In the case of the US and Russia neither one would profit from a new Korean war. As for regime collapse, Moscow would be displeased to lose an ally and Washington would have to incur in economic costs due to the likely ensuing regional economic crisis. However, these two states were less risk-averse than South Korea, China, and Japan, especially the Americans. In fact, although the existence of a threatening North Korea continued to be part of the narrative to legitimize American presence in South Korea and Japan, the utility of the regime decreased as a result of the development of its nuclear program, whose dangers were proportional to the degree of technological sophistication achieved by Pyongyang. Since the latter had been increasing, the idea of a reunified Korea militarily protected by Washington up to the frontiers with China became more attractive – despite the economic and legitimacy costs. Therefore while the Chinese were risk-averse in relation to heavy international and bilateral sanctions against North Korea, the US became risk-seeking. In that strategic setting, the US and China developed distinct strategies regarding North Korean denuclearization.

Starting with the US, Washington was far from willing to recognize North Korea's nuclear status as it explicitly and implicitly did, respectively, in relation to

India and Israel. Another crack in the non-proliferation regime was only worthy when it involved compensating political gains, which was clearly not the case. The alternative would be to make North Korea feel safe through normalization of the relations between both countries, as established in the SPT Joint Statement of 2005. In the process Pyongyang would demand not only a peace treaty and the start of diplomatic relations, but also a formal non-aggression pact that assured non-interference – in order to avoid the fate of Iraq and Libya, whose leaders would probably be alive if they had nuclear weapons. However, Washington could not opt for such degree of normalization because it would ruin its alliances with Seoul and Tokyo. As a result, the American strategy of containing the rise of China as an offshore balancer would be seriously jeopardized. Hence, despite the fact that the term "normalization" was often thrown around in political meetings and agreements, it was never really on the menu if one presupposes that American leaders behaved in a substantively rational way. Since full normalization was not an option, the US preferred to put intense pressure on Pyongyang through bilateral and multilateral sanctions, while at the same time showing willingness to negotiate – in comparative terms, strong willingness with Clinton, medium with Obama, and weak with Bush.

As for China, it was not willing to support Pyongyang's nuclear program but still it preferred to sustain the regime with political, military and economic support rather than witnessing regime collapse. Beijing was not willing and capable to protect Pyongyang to the extent of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but that support seemed crucial for the survival of Kim Jong-il's regime. Hence, in theory, a full aid cut by China would have thrown North Korea into the brink of collapse. Since Beijing does not wish that outcome to occur, it chooses a strategy that reconciles vital aid support with a mix of rewards and limited punishments contingent on Pyongyang's nuclear policy.

Aware of this, Pyongyang was able to resist the pressure of the US and managed the disapproval of its ally. North Koreans presumably knew that Washington was not willing to militarily enforce their preferences for denuclearization, so they defiantly endured pressure. Regarding China, Pyongyang was supposedly aware that Beijing would not permit the regime to collapse. As a result, Beijing could not make credible threats. Even if China voted damaging resolutions in the UNSC, scolded North Korea's ambassador after a provocative act, or privately threatened to cut aid, it was rational for Pyongyang to assume that Beijing was limited in its ability to punish defection because it did not wish to risk a North Korean regime collapse. All in all, the powerful hands of the US and China were too large to open the small lock of Pyongyang's nuclear safe.

Leadership Change: the Rise of Kim Jong-un

The process of leadership change gained a vital importance to the regime after Kim Jong-il's health declined in 2008. One can visualize two types of dynamics at play at that time: on the one hand Kim Jong-il and his close "entourage" thinking about a successor that guaranteed regime stability; on the other hand a group of potential contenders – belonging or not to Kim's entourage – thinking about the likelihood of successfully leading a *coup d'état*. The collective goal of Kim Jong-il's entourage was to find a leader that allowed a smooth political transition, avoiding elite divisions and popular uprisings that could be fatal to the regime – provoking its collapse and very likely the trial of political leaders and officials controlling the mechanisms of Pyongyang's domestic suppression. The four types of hypothetical leadership options available to the entourage were the following: Kim Jong-il's male offspring[12] – Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-chul, or Kim Jong-un; Kim Jong-il's sister or brother-in-law – Kim Kyong-hui or Jang Sung-taek; a leader not belonging to the Kim family, such as O Kuk-ryol; or a collective decision-making body. As for the group of contenders, it could advance with a singular or a collective alternative to leadership, coming from the military, the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), or even from the Kim family – such as Kim Jong-nam or Kim Pyong-il, Kim Jong-il's half-brother. In the end, the outcome of leadership change was the following: the "Brilliant Comrade" Kim Jong-un was chosen as leader – closely aided by members of his father's entourage such as Kim Kyong-hui, Jang, O, and Ri Yong-ho – whereas the potential contenders did not make a move.

The appointment of Kim Jong-un as successor was obviously advantageous to the regime's stability due to the political weight of his family in relation to the elites and masses. Regarding the former, Kim Jong-il had a solid influence over the Korean People's Army (KPA) – the fundamental group in the regime. Due to his *Songun* policy – military primacy – Kim Jong-il attracted the support of the armed forces by allocating economic resources in their favor, especially to the military elites of Pyongyang and to the nuclear program. The militaristic control of the regime was exerted through the National Defence Commission (NDC). Being the Chairman of the NDC and the Supreme Commander of the KPA, Kim Jong-il controlled the military. Moreover, the "Dear Leader" also had a strong position in the WPK, being its General Secretary. Such weight in the military and political pillars of the regime would lead one to suppose that a family member such as Kim Jong-un would aggregate the support of such groups more easily than a political contender outside

12 Given the patriarchal structure of North Korean society and the existence of three sons, the two daughters of Kim Jong-il – Kim Sul-song and Kim Yo-jong – were virtually condemned to oblivion in the process of succession.

the Kim family. As for the popular allure of Kim Jong-il among the masses, it was based upon the cult of personality that North Korean propaganda successfully constructed around the Kims during decades, benefiting from a Confucian culture that emphasizes leadership and hierarchy. Kim Jong-un would supposedly also benefit from such allure, especially give his physical resemblance with Kim Il-sung.

The costs of choosing Kim Jong-un were basically related to five factors: age, origins of his mother, foreign education, lack of political experience, and the confirmation that in practice the regime became a monarchy. Given the abovementioned cultural Confucian structures in North Korea, age is a highly relevant factor in shaping social relations and in principle older members have prevalence over younger ones. This could pose problems because most high officials of the regime were substantially older than Kim Jong-un. As for his mother – Ko Young-hee – Kim Jong-un could be attacked by the fact she was an ethnical Korean born in Japan, a country that remained on top of the regime's hate list. In regard to his foreign education, Kim Jong-un apparently studied in Switzerland and this could be received with scepticism by a regime that is notorious for its racist-xenophobic narratives (see Myers, 2012). Regarding his inexperience, Kim Jong-un did not have time to gain experience in the KPA or the WPK as his father did. Hence, despite the honors bestowed upon him and the hagiographic propaganda typical of the Kim "dynasty", Kim Jong-un's inexperience would likely make many eyebrows rise in suspicion of his leadership ability. Lastly, the fact that another Kim was put in power would definitely make the regime intrinsically connected with that family. That fact constituted a long-term problem in terms of political narrative and, most importantly, made the regime dependent of suitable Kim heirs.

After weighing the benefits and costs to the regime, the net profit of placing Kim Jong-un in power was not as high as Kim Jong-il would have wished, but it ended up being higher than that of other candidates considered by the entourage of the "Dear Leader". Despite being older, Kim Jong-nam and Kim Jong-chul apparently were not adequate candidates due to the mismanagement of public conduct of the former and to the personal traits of the latter. Kim Kyong-hui seemed psychologically unstable and in a male-dominated society her appointment would likely lead to contestation. As for Jang, despite seeming the most prepared alternative for leadership, he lacked the essential popular charisma and legitimacy of the Kims – so necessary to guarantee social stability and national cohesion. Regarding the appointment of a leader outside the Kim family such as O or a junta led by a Kim or Jang, those solutions would lack the popular legitimacy or lead to a divisive decision-making body, respectively.

In relation to a revisionist leadership solution led by a contender within or outside the entourage, it would have few chances of succeeding. Firstly, contenders would

have difficulties in forming a successful coalition of supporters at the level of the elites because Kim Jong-il and his entourage kept a tight control over the military and political structures, thus prohibitively increasing the risks of contestation. Secondly, a revisionist solution would lack popular support. In these conditions, even if a coup was successful in the short-term, elite dissension or popular rebellion would likely occur in the long-term. Hence, potential contenders either remained silent or criticized the new leadership from a safe distance, as Kim Jong-nam did.

When Kim Jong-il died the process of leadership change was already prepared and went smoothly without relevant reactions against it. On 26 December 2011 Kim Jong-un was declared "Supreme Leader" of the country – following his father – a title that he has accumulated with the positions of Supreme Commander of the KPA, First Secretary of the WPK, Chairman of the Military Committee of the WPK, and most importantly, First Chairman of the NDC. In that setting, the new leader felt comfortable enough to promote transformations or signal them at certain political levels. The most noticeable transformations refer to public image but more subtle and crucial ones also seem to have been promoted by the new leader, namely by decreasing the preponderance of the military and signaling its willingness to perform economic reforms.

Concerning the dimension of public image, Kim Jong-un is evidently different from Kim Jong-il. In particular, the new leader opted for a less conservative posture in comparison to his father. For instance, Kim Jong-un gives New Year speeches (Korean Central News Agency, 2013), appears in public with his wife Ri Sol-ju (Choe Sang-hun, 2012), and watches shows featuring North Korean "girls-bands" and Disney characters (Korean Central News Agency, 2012; The Telegraph, 2012). This type of behavior was highly unusual in Pyongyang when Kim Jong-il was leader and seems to reveal an attempt to attract popular support on behalf of Kim Jong-un.

As for the military, Kim Jong-un seems to be promoting a gradual shift in terms of political and economic control. Although the *Songun* policy is still in place and the military remain the most important group in the regime, the new leader made options that reveal a gradual shift. Besides the usual purges in processes of power transition in North Korea – which seems to have included the protégés of O (The Chosun Ilbo, 2011) – Kim Jong-un has been making the military lose face with highly symbolical gestures. For instance, Kim Jong-un removed Ri – a well known supporter of *Songun* – from power (Yonhap, 2012), promoted a shift in economic control from the military to the cabinet (Yonhap, 2012a), and failed to visit the legendary 105th Tank Division in the beginning of 2013 (Lee, 203). Thus, although the military are still a force to be reckoned with in Pyongyang, Kim Jong-un seems interested in decreasing their weight.

Regarding economic reforms, despite not having advanced with concrete ones Kim Jong-un's seems to be more interested than his father in promoting them. Kim

Jong-il promoted some limited reforms[13], but his low enthusiasm is reflected by the fact that he regarded reforms *à la* Beijing as a "Trojan horse" against socialism that would not have the same beneficial results as in China and Vietnam (Rowen, 2003). Besides having picked up the projects started by his father, there are subtle signals that Kim Jong-un seeks to surgically promote further changes in North Korea's economical structures, very likely guided by Jang. The signs are discourse references to "radical" economic change[14]; the pushing aside of officials that opposed economic reform[15]; and the fact that it was reported that North Korea was asking for international advice on foreign investment (Spiegel, 2013). The conservative opposition and the dangers of reform leading to absorption by Seoul are still present, but Kim Jong-un seems slightly less risk-averse than Kim Jong-il when it comes to the promotion of liberal reforms.

In conclusion, the selection of Kim Jong-un as leader ended up being the less risky choice when it comes to the promotion of regime stability in the short-term. Other Northeast Asian actors were surely pleased to see indications that Kim Jong-un was less conservative, militaristic, and averse to economic reforms than his father – signs that perhaps he was more likely to support dialogue, to abstain from developing military programs, and to pursue economic reforms that required international cooperation. However, Kim Jong-un was quite adamant in not promoting denuclearization, keeping North Korea's nuclear strategy essentially intact.

Nuclear Strategy under Kim Jong-un

From the new leader's designation as "Supreme Leader" in December 2011 to the nuclear test of 12 February 2013, North Korea pursued the cyclical strategy with an emphasis on confrontation. Although signaling openness to engage in negotiations, Kim Jong-un's regime performed two ballistic missile tests, relentlessly criticized the South Korean administration of Lee Myung-bak and the US, and performed a nuclear test.

The return of the SPT remained blocked by Pyongyang's unwillingness to recognize its responsibility in the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong-do incidents – thus rejecting the pre-negotiation conditions. The goal of Kim Jong-un seemed to be to win

13 Especially the establishment of special economic zones (Rason, Hwanggumpyong and Wihwa islands), the creation of the Kaesong Industrial Park with South Korea, and the limited market liberalization of 2002.

14 For instance, in the New Year speech Kim Jong-un urged North Koreans to "bring about a radical turn in the building of an economic giant" (Korean Central News Agency, 2013) The word radical is used several times and despite having an ambiguous sense it seems to indicate a slight shift from the *status quo* of economic centralization.

15 A group in which Ri can also be included. See McCurry (2012).

time to improve North Korean military capabilities and foster domestic support, besides trying to achieve a favorable grand bargain at bilateral level with the US. In fact, an agreement with the US was reached in February 2012, with North Korea declaring on the 29th that it would freeze nuclear tests, the enrichment of uranium, and the launching of long-range missile, as well as allowing nuclear inspectors back into the country. In exchange Washington agreed to provide food aid (Reuters, 2012). This agreement was far from being a grand bargain, although it could be explored further by Pyongyang. Instead, North Koreans opted for confrontation and announced a satellite launch that made the agreement collapse (BBC, 2012). In April the satellite *Kwangmyeongseong-3* was launched through the *Unha-3*, thus the perception that this was a disguised missile launch. Since it failed, confrontation was likely to continue because Pyongyang's international position was weakened and only a successful confrontational action would compensate failure, as it happened in 2006 when the failed missile launch of July was compensated by the nuclear test of October.

The following months were marked by an aggressive discourse against the South Korean administration of Lee and the US, in particular against the former – for instance, terms such as "rats" and "traitors" became very frequent. The political rhetoric against Lee and Washington was lashed practically on a daily basis through the media, such as the Korean Central News Agency or the *Rodong Sinmun*.[16] Such attitude prevented the return of negotiations and signaled willingness to proceed with further provocations, especially when the last quarter of 2012 would be marked by processes of leadership selection in the US, China, and South Korea, which Pyongyang sought to influence. To avoid isolation, North Korea opted for engagement with Russia[17] and Japan.[18]

The confrontation act came with the launch of the *Unha-3*/*Unit 2* with the satellite *Kwangmyeongseong*-3/*Unit 2* on 12 December 2012. Contrarily to the earlier launches, this one was successful and demonstrated North Korea's evolution at the level of ballistic deployment systems. If Pyongyang becomes able to miniaturize a nuclear device into a ballistic missile using the tested technology, it can target not only Northeast Asian countries but also the US. The negative reaction to

16 For instance, see "Divine Punishment Awaits S. Korean Group of Traitors: KCNA Commentary", 5 June 2012 and "US Accused of Intention to Keep Pro-US Regime", *Rodong Sinmun*, 29 May 2012, on http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm.

17 Besides maintaining military cooperation, North Korea and Russia are cooperating in the economic field. For instance, regarding North Korea's debt of 11 billion dollars, Russia agreed to write off 90 percent of it and invest the other 10 percent in North Korea (Lulko, 2012).

18 The abduction of Japanese citizens was the focus of the meetings between Japan and North Korea (Daisuke, 2012).

that launch was unanimous, but the UNSC was prudent due to China's position. The latter seemed particularly cautious due to the recent election of Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China.

In the meantime, Kim Jong-un made his surprise 2013 New Year speech in which a conciliatory tone was used in relation to South Korea, who had recently elected Park Geun-hye as president in detriment of the liberal candidate, Moon Jae-in. A conservative politician and the daughter of former dictator Park Chung-hee, in principle Park Geun-hye was not the preferred candidate of Pyongyang but notwithstanding Kim Jong-un opted for that engaging act. It was a signal of engagement that sought to highlight North Korea's willingness to negotiate from a position of force. However, that tone would change following the UNSC Resolution 2087 of January 2013,[19] which condemned the launch of December 2012. China accepted the resolution and again demonstrated its willingness to impose limited punishments on North Korea. North Korea strongly criticized the resolution, threatened its rivals, and vowed to proceed with a new nuclear test, which in fact would happen shortly afterwards.

On 12 February 2013 North Korea performed its third nuclear test. As expected, it was condemn by the UNSC (Charbonneau, 2013). That nuclear test indicates a technological attempt by Pyongyang to miniaturize its nuclear weapons in order to fit ballistic missiles and raises international concerns about a shift from plutonium-based to uranium-based devices. Regardless of the actual state of technological development, North Korea is signaling that at least it is on the verge of achieving that capability. Additionally, to strengthen its position, Pyongyang seemed to have informed Beijing that it is willing to conduct further nuclear tests and a missile launch during this year, hence signaling that negotiations are required in order to avoid that otherwise inevitable scenario (Lim, 2013).

In conclusion, Kim Jong-un's nuclear strategy remains basically the ones utilized by his father and grandfather. During the leadership of Kim Jong-un, Pyongyang used that strategy with an emphasis on confrontation, culminating in its third nuclear test. The puzzle lies in explaining why Kim Jong-un opted for such strategy when at domestic level he appeared to be a reformist who sought more openness. As I suggest in the following section, the choice for keeping the strategy of engagement-confrontation is explained by the continuing international constraints on North Korea and by the domestic constraints faced by the new leader.

19 The UNSC Resolution 2087 was approved on 22 January 2013: http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2013/sc10891.doc.htm.

International and Domestic Constraints

Internationally, North Korea's position remained mostly unaltered since Kim Jong-il passed away. The country was still surrounded by powerful foes, since the relative positions of North Korea, South Korea and the US in the structures of military and economic power have remained basically unaltered. Thus, Pyongyang was still incomparably weaker than Washington and Seoul. Moreover, Pyongyang remained dependent of an ally that was not strong enough to guarantee the regime's survival and remained displeased about its nuclear policy, as illustrated by the summoning of the North Korean ambassador in China – Ji Jae-ryong – by the Chinese Foreign Minister – Yang Jiechi – after the last nuclear test (Fox News, 2013). As Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il did before him, Kim Jong-un and his entourage were aware that under such negative international conditions the best tool to promote regime survival was the nuclear program, despite its international costs regarding isolation and scolding by its ally.

As if those structural conditions were not sufficient enough to keep unaltered the nuclear strategy of North Korea, there were three political shifts in 2012 that damaged Pyongyang's interests: South Korea increased the range of its ballistic missiles; North Korea's economic dependence of China increased; and Japan has recently re-elected Shinzo Abe as Prime-Minister. Regarding the first alteration, South Korea was able to negotiate with Washington an increase of the range of its missiles. From the previously allowed range of 300 km Seoul can now deploy missiles that reach 800 km, which allows it to hit any target in North Korean territory. Although Washington prefers to control the military capabilities of its ally, it acknowledged that the recent behavior of North Korea justified the strengthening of Seoul's autonomous military capabilities. As for the second alteration, it was reported that trade volume between China is likely to have increased in 2012, surpassing the already amazing growth of 2011 and perhaps increasing China's share of 70 percent in Pyongyang's foreign trade (Demick, 2012). This indicates that Chinese leverage over Pyongyang will likely increase a bit. Lastly, Shinzo Abe returned to power in Japan. With the previous government led by Yoshihiko Noda, Pyongyang was actually able to improve North Korean-Japanese relations during 2012, as mentioned above. However, with the election of a conservative prime-minister whose government includes members that support revisionist foreign policy shifts – which in practice may eventually lead to a military build-up in Japan – the relations with Tokyo will likely turn sour again. Hence, in theory North Korea's strategic position was damaged by such election, even if a Japanese threat remains more of a narrative than a foreseeable reality.

Despite the harsh international conditions, one could suggest that North Korea could have accepted Washington's agreement and defected later on as soon as it

obtained economic benefits or it became evident that Pyongyang would get none if major concessions were not made. Prematurely rejecting such agreement by launching a missile could be explained in two senses: Pyongyang felt that its negotiation position was not strong enough or Kim Jong-un domestically profited from confrontation. I suggest that even if the negotiation position was in fact improved by a provocation, Kim Jong-un's decision to confront the US was strongly affected by domestic constraints.

Besides the international factors obstacles to regime survival, the new leader also had to deal with domestic factors that damaged his probabilities of remaining in office. As previously noted, the selection of Kim Jong-un as leader encompassed risks of contestation – especially due to his age and lack of political experience. Even if contenders did not show up for the game of Kim Jong-il's succession, it did not mean that a conspiracy was not occurring. The fact that a young and inexperienced leader made decisions that started to shake the political and economic establishment has likely promoted dissatisfaction among members of the elite. Since the increase in the quantity and quality of discontent members of the elite can make the domestic balance of power swing in favor of an alternative leader, Kim Jong-un was required to take protective measures.

At domestic level Kim Jong-un could control dissatisfaction by gathering popular support through a pleasing public image, purging members of the elite that oppose his measures, or conducting surgical economic reforms that not only reduce dependency on foreign aid but also increase the leader's ability to distribute goods among subsets in the population that are fundamental to keep him in power. Alongside those domestic actions, Kim Jong-un could also use international confrontation as a political tool to remain in power, by shaping how elites and masses perceive him.

In relation to the elites, a confrontational posture would boost his credentials among them, especially the military. To boost his credentials means exploring positive and negative reactions: on the positive side it means being admired as a leader, consequently decreasing the perception that his age and inexperience would lead to mistakes that threaten the regime; on the negative side, by challenging giants such as the US and China, Kim Jong-un signals that he is able to tenaciously fight potential contenders – thus leading the latter to review their expected utility of challenging the young Kim.

As for the masses, international confrontation would increase Kim Jong-un's control over the general public. Since an act of international confrontation is generally accompanied by legitimating rhetoric, it can be used to fuel the sense of insecurity of masses in relation to actual or fabricated threats to their security. In the case of Pyongyang that tactic has been widely used in order to continue justifying its anachronistic regime, hence perpetuating the existence of the ideologi-

cal divide that keeps the Korean nation separated. By fomenting fear of and hate against the US and South Korea, Kim Jong-un is likely to have the masses rallying around him, supporting the nation's savior against an imminent external danger. Besides strengthening his allure in times of crisis, through international confrontation Kim Jong-un can also justify his failure to fulfill the regime's promise of turning North Korea into a "strong and prosperous nation" by 2012. As a result, North Korean masses forget or excuse the failures of public policy and become less inclined to protest. Moreover, in times of crisis the domestic security apparatus has legitimacy to increase the suppression of general population in order to prevent potential protests.

Given that domestic setting, Kim Jong-un's emphasis on confrontation is a rational choice. Through missile and nuclear tests, as well as aggressive discourse towards South Korea and the US, Kim Jong-un was able not only to strengthen the international position of North Korea but also to strengthen his leadership. Those domestic incentives seemed so strong that even when engagement could bring some advantages, Kim Jong-un opted for confrontation. This was illustrated by North Korea's eschewing of the agreement with Washington by launching the satellite in April 2012, especially because that month marked the centennial commemoration of the birth of Kim Il-sung. This was the perfect opportunity for the young leader to demonstrate that his similarities with his "great" grandfather went beyond physical appearances.

Conclusion

In sum, leadership change from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un did not alter the foundations of North Korea's nuclear strategy, which is still based upon a cyclical use of actions of engagement and confrontation that ultimately seek to prevent denuclearization. Although leadership change brought some political shifts or signs of them at the level of public image, the *Songun* policy, and economic reform, the nuclear strategy inherited from his father remained basically intact. International and domestic conditions have constrained Kim Jong-un to follow that strategy and to emphasize confrontation through an aggressive discourse against South Korea and the US, missile launches, and a nuclear test. In order to assure regime survival and to remain in power, Kim Jong-un's optimal choice was to thoroughly implement the nuclear strategy initiated by Kim Il-sung and consolidated by Kim Jong-il.

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