

NORTH KOREA: THE DENUCLEARISATION DELUSION

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ABSTRACT

From the 1990s to 2016, North Korea developed a ballistic and nuclear **weapons of mass destruction programme that neither multilateral negotiations** under the auspices of the United States and China, **nor** United Nations Security Council **sanctions could restrain**. This research paper revisits the political and technical conditions that set the context for the acquisition process engaged in by North Korea. It highlights the regime's perseverance, the investment made as well as the diplomatic cost of the programme, which caused the country to be increasingly isolated. It also emphasises the regime's ideological shift, as the nuclear programme went from being a tool for negotiation to one of deterrence, and has now become the sole source of legitimacy for the ruling power. In other words, it acquired a strategic and political dimension that will not be easily negotiated and allows little room for fresh dialogue with the international community.

In this context, the fifth North Korean nuclear test on 9 September 2016¹ sparked heated debate and brought with it new regional tensions, in which the following questions prevail: is the nuclear threat brandished by Kim Jong-un to be taken seriously? If yes, do sanctions remain the most efficient method to contain the threat? And lastly, is the US's security guarantee still credible?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

North Korea's nuclear programme: from proliferation to deterrence	2
The North Korean security dilemma	2
Building "nuclear nationalism" in North Korea	2
<i>Byungjin</i> and the ideological primacy of the nuclear programme	3
Strategic perspectives for North-East Asia	3
Progression of the nuclear threat <i>versus</i> a headlong rush by the regime	3
The US-South Korean alliance under strain	4
The disruption caused by the introduction of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) in North Asia	4
Conclusion	5
For further reading	6

NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME: FROM PROLIFERATION TO DETERRENCE

In the last thirty years, a convergence of external and internal factors gave an **increasingly defined shape to North Korean “nuclear diplomacy”**. The result is a **vision of international relations based on power relationships and a deep mistrust of the outside world**. Today, no negotiation agreement has been respected and the sanctions policy has merely boosted the regime’s autarchic nationalism.

The North Korean security dilemma

As disciples of *realpolitik*, **Kim Il-sung and his son Kim Jong-il used their nuclear programme as a tool for negotiations** designed to save them time. Their ambition was to construct research reactors, establish a weapons-grade plutonium enrichment industry and develop a ballistic missiles programme. **The first nuclear crisis in 1994 resulted in the setting up of a specific structure, KEDO²**, tasked with constructing two light water reactors. This was in order to meet Pyongyang’s energy requirements in exchange for the dismantling of the Yongbyon nuclear facilities. However, the Agreed Framework (or Geneva Agreement) signed for this purpose was never truly implemented. **On both sides, there was palpable distrust**: Kim Jong-un refused to release the inventory of the country’s plutonium production, while the members of KEDO, and first and foremost the United States, engaged in a wait-and-see strategy, believing that the regime – threatened by serious famine – would collapse at any moment. The construction of the promised reactors did not begin until 2002 and the project was abandoned in 2006, when Pyongyang conducted its first underground nuclear test.

This lack of trust and the North Korean “security dilemma” also led to the collapse of the negotiations known as the “Six-Party Talks”, which began in 2003³, despite significant Chinese involvement. Undoubtedly concerned by the invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein, the North Korean regime sought to reduce the threat represented by the United States by accepting the negotiation principle, while simultaneously furthering its efforts to acquire credible deterrence. However, its conventional assets were outdated and its chemical and ballistic capabilities offered a limited security guarantee. In addition, on the domestic level, Kim Jong-il needed to consolidate the basis of the North Korean “social contract”⁴.

Building “nuclear nationalism” in North Korea

Beyond the security imperative, the possession of nuclear weapons was an important factor for the internal legitimisation of Kim Jong-il’s regime; meanwhile, due to a lack of economic reform, North Korea was sinking into underdevelopment. The regime was unable to satisfy the most basic needs of its population, struggling with several shortages (food, electricity, medicine, transport)⁵. Ideologically, the possession of nuclear weapons, which could keep the American superpower and South Korea at bay, was a source of national pride. This was massively seized on by internal propaganda which incessantly condemned the military “threat” of the USA.

The 2006 nuclear test can therefore be seen as a sign of defiance towards the Bush administration, who they suspected of harbouring intentions to invade North Korea and execute its leader, following the invasion of Iraq and the execution of Saddam Hussein. The Bush administration, after criticising the Clinton administration and the failure of the 1994 Agreed Framework, adopted a hard-line policy by freezing North Korea’s foreign assets. This resulted in the refusal of any negotiations between 2001 and 2006, until Pyongyang agreed to total, permanent and verifiable disarmament. The 2006 test changed the situation, and the US government strived to adopt a more conciliatory political line, with the negotiation of an agreement withdrawing North Korea from the list of states supporting terrorism and granting significant food aid. This did not prevent North Korea from conducting a second nuclear test in 2009 to attempt to obtain the same concessions from the Obama administration. The Obama administration adopted a “strategic patience” approach, meaning it would continue to maintain pressure and refuse any concessions or dialogue without prior, solid advancement in denuclearisation. However, the North Korean threat did not diminish, and no dialogue took place.

The increased sanctions contributed to strengthening the regime's nuclear nationalism. The American economic and financial sanctions initiated under George W. Bush, alongside those adopted via the United Nations Security Council, collided with the regime's resilience and its capacities to adapt. They also strengthened China's grip on Pyongyang's mining resources, creating a stronger tie between the two countries in a mutually opportunistic alliance. Indeed, while Beijing had no desire for a nuclearized North Korea on its doorstep, it feared the sudden collapse of the regime which would bring with it lasting instability in the peninsula and the North-Eastern provinces (Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang)⁶.

Byungjin and the ideological primacy of the nuclear programme

Kim Jong-un's accession to the country's leadership resulted in the firm establishment of the nuclear programme, while the regime sought to strengthen the operational capacities of its ballistic and nuclear order of battle through accelerated missile launches⁷. **The nuclear programme was included in the country's constitution, and gradually became an identity marker.** Attacking the nuclear programme was therefore equivalent to attacking the regime itself.

The fourth nuclear test on 6 January 2016, followed by a new satellite launch masking that of a ballistic missile, **confirmed the primacy of the nuclear programme.** A deterrence doctrine tentatively began to take shape, essentially focusing on the capability to keep the American threat at a distance and embodying a "weak versus strong" rationale. **At the 7th Congress of the Workers' Party of North Korea, which took place in May 2016**, Kim Jong-un set out the policy lines of his future action⁸ through **the parallel development of the nuclear programme and the economy, known as the Byungjin line**⁹. However, the pursued objectives appeared contradictory. **The desire to continue developing nuclear weapons would only damage the economy's modernisation**, as the regime of sanctions severely hampers any cooperation with the outside world at a time when Pyongyang needs capital and technology and knowledge transfer. Support is lacking and even China has had to fall in with the sanctions imposed by Resolution 2270, implemented after the nuclear test of January 2016, by restricting its imports of North Korean minerals (coal, iron, titanium and rare earth elements). 80% of North Korean trade is with China, namely via the border city of Dandong.

STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES FOR NORTH-EAST ASIA

The fifth nuclear test, the culmination of an intensely paced two-year missile launch campaign, and the subsequent request for North Korea to be recognised as a nuclear-armed state, bolsters the regime's provocation posture. It sends out an image of a leader who sees himself in a position of power and **has no intentions of negotiating with the departing Obama administration**, but rather highlights the failure of his sanctions policy and the perverse effect of strengthening military cooperation with South Korea¹⁰.

Progression of the nuclear threat versus a headlong rush by the regime

The North Korean programme appears to be reaching a turning point. What do we know at this time¹¹?

North Korea conducted its first nuclear test on 9 October 2006. Four others took place in 2009, 2013 and 2016. The last two, on 6 January and 9 September 2016, were the most powerful, reaching 6-8 and 8-10 kilotons respectively. Contrary to the regime's claims, these were classic nuclear fission weapons, and not thermonuclear weapons.

The country could have six to eight operational nuclear warheads and it is likely to be seeking to produce as many as possible by attempting to mount them on a large variety of vectors.

Until now, North Korea has not succeeded in sufficiently miniaturising their atomic weapons to mount them atop a ballistic missile. The increase in missile launches in the past two years and Pyongyang's latest declarations indicate, however, that this scenario is not to be disregarded.

The launch technique and the capabilities of North Korean ballistic missiles (IRBM) do not appear to be fully mastered but have progressed.

The launching of intercontinental ballistic missiles from submarines highlights the progression of the North Korean threat. While the launch of 9 July 2016 was inconclusive, the missile launched on 24 August travelled approximately 500 km towards Japan, which is an undeniable advance. If this capability is confirmed, it will bring the nature of the North Korean threat to the next level, because Pyongyang could expand its deterrence beyond the peninsula. Furthermore, the use of a submarine platform leads to the belief that Pyongyang is seeking to establish a “second-strike capability” in the event of an attack against its military bases¹².

The US-South Korean alliance under strain

Alongside the sanctions, the strategic move to strengthen US-South Korea relations aimed to reassure Seoul while offering a policy framework that could reverse the destabilising effects of the North Korean initiatives. However, the military option is nonetheless a dangerous one. **The United States are caught between two imperatives:** on the one hand, the desire to **clearly demonstrate their political-military commitment** and the credibility of the mutual defence alliance signed in 1953 with Seoul; on the other, **the need to avoid military escalation from occurring.** It is a laborious task and the United States fears the loss of control of its ally. **President Park had to firmly intervene** in a budding debate, including within her own party, **on the benefit for South Korea of considering the acquisition of nuclear weapons,** in order to restore strategic equality deemed at risk¹³. Fearing one-upmanship and heated arguments from South Korea’s nationalists, Washington made it known that neither the acquisition of an autonomous nuclear capability by Seoul, nor the redeployment of US nuclear weapons on South Korean territory were reliable methods to ensure the country's security¹⁴.

The joint exercises conducted with North Korea, in which the scenarios clearly indicated a crisis situation in the peninsular area, **sparked a new series of tensions each time.** The same was true of the operation plans drafted prospectively by the US command in South Korea. Among them is OPLAN 5029 which foresees the disarmament of the North Korean forces and the reunification of the peninsula under the leadership of the South in the event of the collapse of North Korea. These plans are seen as threats to Pyongyang, believing them to be in preparation for an invasion. In 2012, the United States authorised South Korea to lengthen the range of its ballistic missiles from 300 to 800 km, which Pyongyang saw as “permission” to proliferate at its expense. These elements persuaded Kim Jong-un that the **US-South Korean alliance** is making every effort – particularly a military effort – to induce a regime collapse, **which encourages it to take risks, the limits of which are unknown because all discussion channels are suspended. Everything leads us to believe that the tests will continue, because Pyongyang wants to rapidly acquire operational capabilities.**

The disruption caused by the introduction of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) in Northern Asia

The announcement made last July about the impending installation by South Korea and the United States of the American antimissile defence system, THAAD, resulted in the US-South Korean alliance being caught up in a strategic bidding game. The debate centred on the North Korean nuclear threat is slowly shifting, provoking discussions about a hidden American agenda in terms of Chinese and Russian powers. Washington had already declared that its antimissile defence in Alaska would be strengthened in March 2016 following threats from Pyongyang mentioning a “preventive” nuclear attack on American soil. This time, however, there would be a deployment on China’s borders. However, although added sanctions are being discussed at the Security Council, it is important that a minimum degree of consistency is maintained among the key actors in how they perceive the objectives to be reached. The US nonetheless publicly rejected the notion that THAAD may be negotiated with China in exchange for its support in voting on additional sanctions for North Korea¹⁵.

Kim Jong-un believes he can rely on the active support of China and Russia, whom he knows are hostile to the introduction of this system in Northern Asia. The project, which had long been postponed by Seoul, reluctant to sacrifice its relations with China, was presented as being essentially directed against the North Korean threat, intended to damage the strategic credibility of Chinese nuclear forces. Furthermore, it could set the stage for ground-breaking political-military cooperation between Seoul and Japan and help lay the foundations for a strategic Washington-Seoul-Tokyo triangle, capable of changing the regional balance, which China would not accept and would strive to prevent from occurring¹⁶. The deterioration of the China-US relationship, in particular on the topic of the South Chi-

na Sea, as well as the United States' faultless support for its Japanese ally in the dispute between Beijing and Tokyo over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, do not foster calm dialogue. Once more, North Korea is the bone of contention in an increasingly tense square-off between Beijing and Washington¹⁷. However, Pyongyang has found an indirect security guarantee with renewed Chinese and Russian support which it will not hesitate to take advantage of.

CONCLUSION

What is the solution for North Korea's nuclear programme? Should the technical approach adopted until now be renewed by stepping-up sanctions to dry up the economic resources that fuel the North Korean arms programmes? Could a political analysis suffice, meaning the totalitarian nature of the regime must be defeated to put an end to the nuclear threat it generates? On this last point, it is important to note that the Kilby report on the human rights situation in North Korea¹⁸ did not lead to any action mentioned by the rapporteurs being taken, including referral to the International Criminal Court.

Despite the continuous debate on their actual impact¹⁹, **we must not be mistaken on the strategic results of negotiations carried out and sanctions** developed against North Korea. Indeed, these actions taken by the international community **ensured that the most negative aspects of the North Korean threat were neutralised:**

- **Proliferation in North Korea was contained**, and there was no transfer of sensitive technology to third countries or non-state actors²⁰;
- The American security guarantee towards the South Korean and Japanese allies remained credible;
- **A major crisis was avoided.**

These initiatives must therefore be maintained, their remit expanded and the investigation resources for the North Korean Sanctions Committee increased²¹. As matters stand, **it is important to work swiftly to strengthen Resolution 2270** adopted earlier this year following the fourth North Korean test. The context of the American presidential elections could mean a period of uncertainty conducive to fresh North Korean provocations.

In this respect, cooperation with China remains essential, but is overshadowed with great ambiguity. The international media took up the story of Chinese-US cooperation to sanction the directors of a Chinese company, the *Dandong Hongxiang Industrial Development Company Limited*, accused of transferring components susceptible to be used for the North Korean arms programme. The remarks made by the spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry, stating that China was opposed to any country using domestic laws to carry out "long-arm jurisdiction" against Chinese individuals, reveal the limits of this cooperation. **China is therefore reluctant to extend the scope of the sanctions, just as it is reluctant to accept negotiations that would include Japan and South Korea in the Security Council discussions.**

Nonetheless, aside from strengthening Resolution 2270, there are other avenues for exploration: it may be worthwhile to pay greater attention to the North Korean diplomatic network's activities, a source of numerous forms of trafficking, particularly in Africa. Similarly, **refusing to import North Korean workers**, many of whom work in the Gulf States, could deprive the regime of significant sources of revenue and isolate it further.

However, these actions, which aim to keep pressure on North Korea and strive to prevent its behaviour from becoming accepted as normal, should not replace an international community effort to establish dialogue, even if the regime is proving to be unyielding thus far. On the contrary, the strategy pursued by Kim Jong-un highlights a particular determination to convince the world of the operational capabilities of North Korea's nuclear programme as a pursued political priority, i.e. the **recognition of its status as a nuclear-armed state and of the existence of a credible deterrence power. This leaves little room for negotiation**, unless the international community agrees that there would be a benefit to a gradual approach. In the short term, this would aim to bring North Korea to negotiations at a minimum in order to firstly obtain from Pyongyang its commitment to a moratorium on its ballistic and nuclear programmes and agree to non-proliferation.

In the longer term, it is likely that discussions on denuclearisation would be more complex. **This means beyond signing the peace treaty that has long been sought by the North Korean regime, the granting of serious security guarantees**

from the United States. The US promised to withdraw tactical nuclear weapons from South Korean soil in 1991 but granted protection under their nuclear umbrella to South Korea and Japan. As we can see, **the perspective of a denuclearised North Korea appears complex, as Pyongyang seeks to place it within the overall context of a nuclear-free peninsula and include in the discussion the American nuclear commitments made to Seoul and Tokyo.**

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² Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization, which brings together the United States, South Korea and Japan. Note that the United States included a commitment to provide oil throughout the duration of construction of the reactors.

³ Forum bringing together the six neighbouring states affected by Pyongyang's nuclear activities: the United States, South Korea, Japan, Russia, China and North Korea. The United States are particularly willing to partake in the forum as they want to avoid falling into the trap of a bilateral standoff with Pyongyang and encourage China to become more involved.

⁴ Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁵ Marianne Péron-Doise, "[Corée du Nord : l'impossible transition](#)", *Politique Étrangère*, 4/2005, p. 110.

⁶ Lee Kil-seong, "[China's Trade with North Korea Surges in August](#)", *Chosun Ilbo*, 23 September 2016.

⁷ The feeling of hopefulness after the Leap Day Deal in February 2012, which involved a moratorium on the nuclear programme in exchange for humanitarian aid, soon evaporated.

⁸ Kim Jong-un, "[Discours à l'occasion du 7^e congrès du Parti des travailleurs de Corée du Nord](#)", Maison de la culture de Pyongyang, 6-7 May 2016.

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¹⁸ United Nations Report of the Commission of Inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea directed by Australian jurist Michael Kilby, made public on 17 February 2014.

¹⁹ Bernt Berger, [“Sanctions against North Korea: a tricky dilemma”](#), *ISSUE Brief n°23*, 9 July 2015.

²⁰ The sale of missiles or the transfer of sensitive technology to Pakistan, Iran and Syria have proven to be important sources of potential revenue for the regime, which furthermore is highly involved in various forms of trafficking (counterfeit currency, drugs, counterfeit cigarettes, etc.).

²¹ United Nations Security Council [Sanction measures imposed by resolution 1718](#), 13 December 2006.