

# The Rational Logic Behind North Korea's Military Diplomacy

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## The Rational Logic Behind North Korea's Military Diplomacy

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When addressing this question it is important to contextualise our definitions and conceptual framework from which we will apply our lens. Defining what we mean by 'rational' logic is essential as it will establish a base from which we can compare and analyse North Korean actions in the hope of achieving a North Korean perspective. To give an example of the vast differences in the interpretation of rational logic, if we were to assume the Kantian thesis that all rational animals possess an innate cognitive 'logic faculty' and take Robert Hanna's argument that "human beings are rational in the sense that we have an innate grasp of the concepts needed for appraising the cogency of our own thinking"[1], then everyone innately follows a rational decision that makes 'logical sense' to them and therefore will always be deemed 'rational'. However, for the purpose of this discussion the 'rational logic' will be examined through international relations models, and in particular deterrence theory, to assess North Korean decisions overall. This approach does have its limitations but will seek to provide the best analytical framework. To quote Paul Samuelson, "[a]bstract models are like scaffolding used to build a structure; the structure must stand by itself. If the abstract models contain empirical falsities, we must jettison the models, not gloss over their inadequacies." [2] It is therefore the intention of this discussion to demonstrate that there is a 'rational logic' behind North Korea's military diplomacy, which inexplicably intertwines national identity, 'military first' politics and domestic internal strife under the mystical, hereditary leadership of the Kim family.

In its simplest terms 'deterrence' theory involves using the threat of military action to compel an adversary to do something, or prevent them from doing something. Thomas Schelling was the first to produce a scholarly appraisal on the subject with his groundbreaking, *Strategy of Conflict*, in which he argues that the concept of military strategy can no longer be defined as the science of victory, but instead more the art of coercion, intimidation and deterrence.[3] The use of power to hurt as a bargaining chip is the foundation of classic deterrence theory and is most successful when held in reserve. This method assumes governments behave 'rationally' in calculations of the cost/benefits. However this approach was criticised in the 1970s, among which is Graham Allison's analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which inspired studies of how organisational routines and bureaucratic policies can lead to 'irrational' outcomes.[4] Successful deterrence therefore must be considered not only in military but also political terms. The predominant approach to theorising about deterrence has entailed the use of rational choice and game-theoretic models of decision making. There is a consistent argument amongst scholars that deterrence success is more likely if a defending state's deterrent threat is credible to an attacking state. Paul Huth states that there are four key factors to consider with 'rational' deterrence theory.[5] The military balance, which is short term and driven by the concerns of the military to respond quickly and in strength. The signalling and bargaining power, as costly signals are required to communicate the credibility of the state's resolve. The reputation for resolve, analysing the defending state's past behaviour, and finally the interests at stake. The defending state with greater interests at stake will be more resolved to use force and endure losses to secure those interests.[6]

Of course the development of nuclear weapons has had a profound impact on deterrence theory. Schelling is prescriptive in outlining the impact of the development of nuclear power in the analysis of military power and deterrence. Nuclear weapons give the potential to not only destroy enemies but humanity itself. A nation's credible threat of such severe damage empowers deterrence policies and fuels political coercion and military deadlock, which in turn can lead to proxy warfare. Therefore it was inevitable that early deterrence theorists turned to deductive

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models and game theory rather than historical analysis, as the pre-nuclear history was considered irrelevant.[7] Scott Sagan challenges the view that states seek to develop nuclear weapons when faced with a military threat to their security that cannot be met through alternative means. Nuclear weapons are more than a tool of national security; they are also political objects in domestic debates and internal struggles and can serve as international normative symbols of modernity and identity.[8] Sagan identifies three theoretical models about why states decide to build nuclear weapons and it is necessary to briefly contemplate them as we will be able to analyse North Korea from this context. The security model develops neorealist theory that states exist in an anarchical international system and must rely on self help to protect their sovereignty and national security, and therefore build nuclear weapons to increase national security against foreign threats.[9] The domestic politics model views nuclear weapons as a tool to serve bureaucratic or political interests of some individual actors within a state. This is not necessarily from top down decisions but the conditions are created that favour weapon acquisition by encouraging extreme perceptions of foreign threats, promoting supportive politicians and lobbying for increased defence spending.[10] Finally, the norms model interprets nuclear decisions as important symbolic functions, shaping and reflecting a state's identity. Nuclear weapons, in this case, are part of what a state believes it has to possess to be a legitimate modern state.[11] These models are quite compatible and states can possess characteristics of all three. Therefore there are often quite 'rational' decisions beneath a myriad of factors which drive states such as North Korea to develop seemingly 'irrational' policies.

The problem when assessing North Korea is the fact that the political evolution, strategic identity and institutional goals must largely be analysed from outside in. Some commentators argue that the North Korean pursuit of nuclear weapons reflects anxieties triggered by the end of the Cold War and the loss of explicit security guarantees from Russia and China.[12] While these are important factors, the quest for strategic autonomy has far deeper roots. The North Korean ruling elite tried to define and build a state apart from the international system from its inception. A point which is often overlooked is the fact that North Korea is technically still at war with South Korea, with only an armistice in place in the dividing form of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Coupled with the encirclement of far more powerful states unprepared to accord it autonomy and international standing, it is not surprising that North Korean diplomacy has an aggressive military flavour. Other key aspects to North Korea's strategic thinking include the presence of US nuclear weapons in South Korea from the 1950s, the transformation in Sino-US relations in 1972, South Korea's attempted nuclear weapons programme and the ideology of '*juche*' (self-reliance). Peter Hayes argues the North Korean experience with nuclear weapons is unique, as no other state has faced four decades of a continuous nuclear threat without a countervailing nuclear retaliatory capability of its own.[13] Throughout the life of North Korea's leader and architect, Kim Il-sung, the entire identity and existence of the North Korean state was threat based. Judging by the situation one can suggest Kim Il-sung concluded that nuclear weapons were necessary to maintain strategic autonomy, counter growing South Korean power and support the leadership transition he meticulously planned for his son, Kim Jong-il.[14]

When Kim Jong-il took power after his father's death, he was intent on preserving the system which had been created. He never waived from the strategic identity established by his father, nor from the co-dependent relationships with the coercive institutions that dominate the state.[15] The loss of USSR aid and support in 1992 after the dismantling of the Soviet state, just before Kim Jong-il took power, led to a number of crises and pressures impinging on North Korea. The first of which was the agricultural crisis which resulted in an enduring famine. These domestic concerns would come to dominate Kim Jong-il's strategic thinking. As Kim Jong-il was reliant on support from the military ranks, political crisis was diverted through the use of foreign affairs. For example the timing of the first attempted satellite launch, 31 August 1998, was closely linked to Kim Jong-il's elevation to the top of the leadership.[16] Slogans of 'military first' (*Songun*) and 'a powerful and prosperous nation' (*kangsong*) also appeared for the first time.[17] The leadership was thus conjoined with the power and prerogatives of the North Korean military which would impact the way in which foreign relations would be conducted.

Understanding the development of 'military first' politics is essential in order to view the rationale behind North Korean diplomacy. The military had always attained an influential place in Korean politics, however this increased under Kim Jong-il's leadership while the role of the Korean Worker's Party (KWP) gradually diminished.[18] Two-thirds of Kim Jong-il's public appearances in 1997 were devoted to visiting the army.[19] Ilpyong Kim argues that this was because Kim Jong-il did not trust some of the party members and so relied on the younger generation in the

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military.[20] This goes some way to understanding the rationale behind the military diplomacy. 'Military first' politics was based on his father's ideology of *'juche'*, self-reliance through strength, and had been around for a while. The *Rodong Shinmun* June 1998 editorial entitled, "Our Party's Military-First Politics Will Inevitably Achieve Victory And Will Never Be Defeated", demonstrated the military first priorities and a clear plan.[21] The logic behind Kim Jong-il's promotion of this policy is to compensate for weaknesses in food shortages and economic failure. The military is used as a basis for strengthening his authority in which national survival has priority over policy. This in turn is strategically consistent with the aims of the army, his primary supporters. The result is strained relations with the US as it is politically difficult to accommodate their demands when relying on the support of the generals, hence the rationale behind a seemingly 'irrational' military diplomacy.

The US had figured highly in North Korean calculations since the deployment of forces in the peninsula from the Korean War. The two have never experienced 'normal' diplomatic relations and this relationship is critical to analysing foreign policy. The US dealt with North Korea in four contexts; as an enemy in the Korean conflict, a primary focus of defence planning in East Asia for over sixty years, an intelligence priority and as a hostile nuclear state.[22] Despite intermittent political and diplomatic contact over the past twenty years, animosities and mutual suspicions have deepened ever since. The North Korean nuclear tests and accumulation of fissile material are the lethal manifestations of this legacy. The Bush administration and September 11 changed the relationship dramatically. The hardened US attitude was demonstrated by the reference to North Korea as being on an 'axis of evil', alongside Iran and Iraq in his State of the Union address in 2002. The subsequent invasion of Iraq on claims of development of weapons of mass destruction and the reference to potential use of nuclear weapons in a Korean contingency plan, further fuelled North Korea's suspicions of US strategy. North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kang stated in October 2002, "we are part of the axis of evil and you are a gentleman. This is our relationship. If we disarm ourselves because of US pressure, then we will become like Yugoslavia or Afghanistan's Taliban, to be beaten to death".[23] It is easy to characterise North Korean fears of attack as justifying measures it would already take. However the fact that the US invaded Iraq, in which North Korea was placed in the same category, makes North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons, from a deterrence perspective, very rational.

North Korea's relationship with South Korea is equally as complex. Sixty years have passed since the founding of rival states on opposite sides of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. There have been periodic negotiations for four decades but these have faltered since neither side is prepared to confer genuine equality and legitimacy to the other.[24] For the majority of its existence, North Korea's explicit aim has been to reunite the country. While this is still a consistent aspiration, the subsequent crises of recent years have made national survival dominate policy. The ethnic homogeneity and common language have not stopped the two Koreas from developing completely separate worlds. There is a huge political and economic imbalance. This instable atmosphere has led to repeated clashes including the March 2010 sinking of the South Korean navy corvette Cheonan, and the November 2010 shelling of the island Yeongpyeong. Both incidents are the result of a consistent rational strategy from North Korea to divert the attention away from internal problems, and provoke instability within the South Korean government.

Assessment of the North Korean leadership as 'irrational', 'violent' and 'unrestrained' is common in the US and indeed the world. However North Korean behaviour has an internal logic and receptiveness to it with consistent policy objectives. The challenge is in assessing the mindset of a leadership that has isolated itself internationally by its own choosing. Scott Snyder argues that North Korea's historical experience has ensured "stubbornness", "self-reliance" and "a strong defence of national sovereignty" are major characteristics of their strategy and tactics in the international system.[25] The dynamics of negotiations follow a distinct pattern in which hard line statements are followed by a period of flexibility then a return to the hard line positions, as part of an end game designed to extract the maximum concessions. Thus it would suggest there is a rational logic behind its diplomacy. Brinkmanship has become the most distinctive characteristic of the North Korean strategy with a mixture of aggressive and provocative tactics. These include issuing unconditional demands, bluffing, threatening, stalling, manufacturing deadlines and walking out of negotiations. These tactics have been most successful when North Korea is able to demonstrate unconcern with its counterpart's reaction and the threats put pressure on the negotiating partner to avoid the worst outcome. For example, a demand of unilateral concessions by North Korea led to South Korea and Japan sending 650,000 tonnes of rice in 1995 in the hope of a return to political negotiations.[26] However North Korea did not return to the negotiating table. These tactics are also a means of concealing North Korea's 'true' position, which

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Snyder also contends are a way of covering weakness.[27]

The style of Kim Jong-il's diplomacy can be considered an extension of domestic politics. The economic shortcomings internally necessitate North Korea to want the economic benefits that the US offers. It seems 'irrational' that North Korea wants to continue to arm itself with weapons of mass destruction rather than trade this pursuit for promises of prosperity. The brinkmanship is consequently intended to ensure regime survival with diplomatic wrangling to secure economic and humanitarian aid. This suggests there is logic behind the North Korean actions of securing aid then not continuing agreements. However this is a gamble which will not last forever. Nevertheless this demonstrates a certain skill and sophistication in his style, with strategic goals coupled with tough negotiations on the edge. The North Korean decision making follows the rational choices of action and strategy within the rules of 'mini-max' (minimum cost and risk with maximum benefit and rewards).[28] The calls for bilateral talks with the US to replace the armistice are based on the strategic calculus of undermining the rationale for US troops to be stationed in South Korea. The similar requests for bilateral talks on the nuclear issue are part of a broader strategy to isolate South Korea and weaken the US-South Korean alliance by sequestering South Korea from negotiations. Due to the imbalances on the peninsula, it is very logical to take a tough stance with South Korea. If economic exchanges and cooperation were to occur, then the North would be no match for the dynamic economy of the South which could lead to forced reform. This concept would clash with the priority of regime survival and, in part, explains the hard-line measures to the South's '*sunshine policy*' of closer ties. The other reason for which is part of overall end game of Korean unification. Similarly North Korea's economy is too weak to compete in a conventional arms race against South Korea, hence a factor in the pursuit of unconventional weapons.[29]

The pursuit of nuclear weapons is not a momentary or impulsive action by a 'rash' state; it is the product of a purposive long-term commitment. The catalyst which set the course for North Korea's nuclear ambitions occurred at the end of the Cold War. In September 1990 the USSR informed North Korea that Moscow intended to establish relations with South Korea. In 1992 the Chinese also announced the establishment of relations which coincided with the end of communist rule in Eastern Europe and the USSR. These events profoundly affected North Korea as they were viewed as a lasting affront which invalidated prior security guarantees and compelled the pursuit of an independent nuclear capability.[30] North Korea contends that the US 'hostile policy' towards it has required the development of a nuclear deterrence in accordance with its 'sovereign right'.[31] If we were to analyse this rhetoric through Sagan's outline of *why states would want to build a nuclear weapon*, then it clearly demonstrates that North Korea correlates with the rational theory of the security model and deterrence theory in general. The national security and domestic political concerns of the North Korean leadership are often ignored by the US in their negotiations. It is critical we take these into consideration when assessing the rationality of their diplomatic actions, as in this case a pursuit of nuclear weapons would be a completely 'rational' choice. The prestige and power of nuclear weapons at the international level suits North Korea's security aims and creates a powerful buttress for the leadership. The pursuit of a nuclear capability also coincides with cycles of economic poverty and repression. The domestic politics have a dominating influence on nuclear proliferation. Kenneth Quinones argues that proliferation is directly linked to North Korea's economic woes.[32] This assertion supports Sagan's domestic politics model and links in with the wider strategy of North Korean negotiating behaviour. North Korea aims to achieve national security and economic development. While there is inherent conflict between these ideas, the leadership overcomes these by disconnecting and separately prioritising economic development from nuclear weapon development so the former is not thwarted by the latter.[33] Seongii Woo argues that North Korea will doggedly uphold a nuclear programme for as long as possible as it provides a safety valve for regime survival.[34] Therefore when assessing North Korea's military diplomacy through the lens of deterrence theory, a number of patterns emerge which demonstrate a rational logic behind their actions.

North Korea has defied predictions of an early demise and has made it through economic hardship internally, and diplomatic pressures externally. In the face of these challenges, North Korea has adapted to the climate by pursuing a consistent set of objectives to ensure regime survival. The military diplomacy has thus served North Korea well so far and contains a 'rational logic'. The fear of a US attack has been used to keep the population vigilant while the ideology of '*juche*' has been used to sustain popular unity and cohesion at home. '*Juche*' exhibits seclusion and self-righteousness rather than the flexibility and pragmatism of modern diplomacy and therefore is often difficult for commentators to understand. The most distinctive characteristic of which is the use of brinkmanship to serve the

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dominating policy objective of national survival. Foreign policy has remained 'rational' in the sense of being coherent in its pursuit of a consistent set of policy objectives. But while North Korea's military diplomacy does have a 'rational logic' behind it, the style is certainly not fool proof nor will it always be successful. The recent sudden death of Kim Jong-il has elevated his son, Kim Jong-un, to the top of the leadership. The intimate details of the internal power struggles are unknown to the outsider, yet so far there has been no change in policy, which would suggest the military still holds a significant influence. On February 29 2012 an agreement was reached with the US to suspend uranium enrichment in the Yongbyon facility and impose a moratorium on tests of weapons and long range missile. In return the US will send 240,000 tonnes of food aid.[35] However in March North Korea announced plans to launch a long range missile to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Kim Il-sung. The familiar pattern of North Korean diplomacy is apparent, but this time has come under condemnation from not just Japan, South Korea and the US, but China too.[36] With one of its few remaining allies condemning its military diplomacy, is this one provocation too far?

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[9] *Ibid*, 57.

[10] *Ibid*, 64.

[11] *Ibid*, 73.

[12] Jonathan Pollack, *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 14.

[13] Pollack, *No Exit*, 47.

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[17] *Ibid*, 127.

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[19] *Ibid*, 64.

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[22] Pollack, *No Exit*, 16.

[23] *Ibid*, 141.

[24] *Ibid*, 17.

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[26] *Ibid*, 78.

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