

Does the USA view North Korean Foreign Policy as Rational?

Written by Jean-Baptiste Tai-Sheng Jacquet

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'Rationality' as a concept lacks any clear definition, and hence appreciation of what is 'rational' and what is not, is subject to varying degrees of interpretation. Accordingly, the Merriam-Webster (2003) defines 'rationality' as "the quality or state of being agreeable to reason." This ambiguous definition leaves open opportunities for setting and resetting boundaries of reason and logic. It is this vagueness that leads me to the question: Is North Korea viewed as a rational actor by the US government?

To answer such a broad question, I begin by scrutinizing the two main US political parties and their diverse viewpoints regarding North Korean rationality or lack thereof surrounding the nuclear weapons question. I then delve into an analysis of two case studies, beginning with Bush's Republican standpoint during the 2003 North Korean nuclear crisis and finishing with an assessment of the current 2013 nuclear crisis under Obama's Democratic cabinet. This section will help demonstrate how varying stances towards said North Korean rationality are reflected in the foreign policies carried out by each administration. Finally, I evaluate whether the act of defining rationality is a political move in itself. This will permit me to question the definitions of rationality elicited by the Republicans and Democrats whilst also providing insight into why both of their definitions differ. However, such a section will present itself with a major limitation, which lies in the fact that the US government has hitherto never released an official statement defining its view of 'rationality'. Furthermore, there may be a disparity between the policy that political parties advocate and the one they truly believe in or act out themselves; this disparity results from their method of pursuing and achieving a particular agenda. Here, it must be stated that my essay takes into account the form of rationality that they overtly advocate and naturally this leads to the chief shortcoming of my essay, which is the necessity to speculate in certain areas due to the nature of the question. Finally, as the main area of contention between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the USA lies in the DPRK's lack of adherence to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and pursuit of nuclear weapons, most of my analysis will revolve around the debate vis-à-vis North Korea's potential acquiring of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).

In light of the recent escalation of threats that transpired from the Korean peninsula, tensions remain high between the USA and its allies, and the DPRK (Foster-Carter, 2013). Such a situation is mainly due to North Korea attempting to obtain a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) arsenal through its nuclear research, which America and most Western nations strongly disapprove of. Although such a current level of tension has not been seen in decades (Carr, 2013), crises like these have cropped up every ten years or so (BBC, 2013b) and have been handled differently by various US presidential cabinets. Exasperation regarding the continuous re-emergence of nuclear crises can be seen in Secretary of State John Kerry's interview where he "made it very clear that we [the USA] do not want to go into another round of artificial talks that are clearly calculated to play a game [...] there have to be real steps here" towards denuclearisation (BBC, 2013a). Subsequently, as various cabinets have managed crises differently in the past it is primordial to understand how the Republicans and Democrats differ on their outlook concerning rationality with regards to the DPRK and its potential nuclear capacity. To begin with, each of these two political parties perceives North Korea's rhetoric under a different light and thus have a different opinion concerning said rationality. As Myers elaborates, on one side "the Right talks in moralistic terms of Kim Jong Il's evil and perfidy in refusing to disarm. [...] The Left meanwhile, continues to call for bold American trust building measures" (Myer, 2010: 167).

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The Republican Standpoint

Since George W. Bush's tenure in office, the Republican platform has advocated "the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear programs", and advocated a policy which aims to convince DPRK leaders that "nuclear weapons ambitions are deeply contrary to their own interests" (The American Presidency Project, 2004: 11). From this wording, it is possible to elaborate that the Republican Party does not perceive any rationality behind North Korea's desire to become a nuclear power. Moreover, this source demonstrates that the Republican Party believes that North Korea is mistaken in what is best for the interests of its people; therefore, this party wishes to convince and somewhat usher the DPRK back towards a more rational attitude vis-à-vis nuclear weapons. This stance is reinforced by threats of violence as the text continues: "Americans have shed their blood to stop North Korean aggression before and remain prepared to resist aggression today" (Republican Party, 2004: 12). Such a belligerent rhetoric stands as a clear testimony to the Republican Party's position regarding North Korea and nuclear matters. Cumings (2004: 92) explains that "Washington [under Bush] won't negotiate with the North Koreans, which would reward nuclear blackmail". Upon refusing dialogue on nuclear matters, it is possible to assert that the Grand Old Party is in total disagreement with the DPRK's nuclear rationale, so much so that negotiations are perceived as ludicrous. Although this may seem as an assumption, evidence of this Republican rhetoric is also seen in how this party has repeatedly issued threats against North Korea and historically has vouched for its destruction. Under Clinton, Republicans opposed the Agreed Framework, and "railed on against the nuclear deal for months and years [...] [asking] why help out this 'Orwellian state at its moment of maximum vulnerability?'" (Cumings, 2004: 82). Furthermore, during Bush's presidency "every year various CIA directors told Congress that DPRK was 'the worst fear we face,' 'the critical major military threat for the next few years'" (Cumings, 2004: 62). Moreover, almost as though the threats were not clear enough, the Republicans have expressed their profound distrust of the DPRK, notably through their constant stringent demands concerning the nuclear realm. One such demand that re-emerges regularly is that of "a mandate to roam North Korea's heavily guarded military sites at will" (Cumings, 2004: 61). From this, although it is difficult to make assertions when confronted with the question of rationality, the Republicans' refusal of negotiations, military threats and outlandish demands seem to be motivated by the perception of North Korea as irrational and illogical.

The Democratic Standpoint

On the other hand, Democrats perceive the DPRK's nuclear rationale not entirely as illogical as they have generally sought out further cooperation under Clinton and Obama's first term. In stark comparison to the 2004 Republican platform, the Democrats advocated in 2008 "the belated diplomatic effort to secure a verifiable end to North Korea's nuclear weapons program [...] [and a continuation of] direct diplomacy" (The American Presidency Project, 2008). Here, it is possible to see that the Democrats are attempting to espouse various elements of constructivism, where mutual understanding and cooperation occupy central roles. Cumings (2004: 102) elaborates, "the DPRK believes that its 'very survival' is at stake [...] North Korea often says it prizes national sovereignty like life itself". Under Clinton's administration these North Korean fears were taken into account and lessened during diplomatic talks. It is even possible to stipulate that mutual understanding of varying rationalities ushered in the arrival of greater trust between both parties under the Agreed Framework that was signed in October 1994. "The talks set the guidelines for resolving the nuclear issue, improving U.S.-North Korean relations, and restarting inter-Korean talks." (Global Security, 2007) Effectively, the Agreed Framework went about implementing all the main changes that both sides desired, such as "full normalization of political and economic relations" sought out by the DPRK and "the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" that the USA so wished for (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization, 1994: 3). While it would be unwise to assume that the Democrats view the North Koreans as rational, I can assert that unlike the Republicans, they take DPRK fears seriously and attempt to bring about a mutual understanding of peace. Clinton's Agreed Framework and Obama's politics of diplomacy in the Far East that I will be analysing both stand as testimonies of the Democratic Party's understanding of North Korean rationale. Whilst much progress was made through the Framework Agreement, the arrival of Bush's Republican administration jeopardized US-DPRK relations by moving "toward[s] a general reversal of previous American strategy" as Bush was "determined first of all to be the anti-Clinton" (Cumings, 2004: 95). Consequently, by upholding the Republican rhetoric of rationality, Bush effectively reversed the Democrats' peace process that had slowly settled between the USA and the DPRK.

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Upon this, from this bi-partite analysis, I have demonstrated the difference in Democratic and Republican rhetoric of rationality regarding North Korea's nuclear program. Although I may not have entirely determined whether or not the Democrats perceive the North Koreans as rational, I have established more importantly that they have an advanced understanding of the DPRK's rationality. The final part of this section briefly touched on how such dissimilarities profoundly affects US-DPRK relations as administrations changed. Subsequently, this links into my next section that will analyse two case studies in an attempt to determine how each cabinet's varying opinions regarding rationality have affected and continue to affect US-North Korean relations.

Eruption of Crisis Under George W. Bush

Prior to Bush's tenancy in power, Clinton had already presided over a nuclear crisis with North Korea that had led to the Agreed Framework 'treaty.' "In October 2002 a second nuclear crisis erupted which was [...] a virtual rerun of events that transpired a decade ago" (Cumings, 2004: 89). As they had done previously, the DPRK expelled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, withdrew themselves from the NPT and re-opened their 30 megawatt reactor (Kirgis, 2003). This crisis may have been avoided if the Bush administration had not "declared it [the Framework Agreement] a dead letter soon after coming to power" (Cumings, 2004: 89). Nonetheless, as the crisis persisted, Bush maintained a Republican standpoint regarding North Korea and its presumed irrationality when it came to the re-advent of its nuclear program. This can be seen in how his administration twice refused (October 2002, April 2003) to sign a deal where the North was ready to trade "its nuclear programs and its missile exports in return for American aid and recognition of the DPRK" (Cumings, 2004: 93). From this, it is possible to assert that the Republican Party not only perceives the DPRK's nuclear program as irrational but also views its existence as unjustified, thus rendering all diplomatic endeavours futile as was seen in the 2003 nuclear crisis. Consequently, this makes diplomacy practically impossible; the Bush administration made this quite clear when the DPRK was ready to give up its nuclear program for recognition; however, it was precisely this recognition the Republicans are not willing to give. "Diplomacy with the north is anathema, because the Republican right won't allow it and because [...] it [the US] wants to over-throw Kim Jong Il" (Cumings, 2004: 94). Unsurprisingly, this crisis dragged on for three years as the USA and the DPRK were unable to broker any agreement that would lead to a normalisation of relations. Tensions subsided for a short period during the end of Bush's tenancy but redoubled upon Obama's inauguration in 2009 (BBC, 2013b). The effects of Bush's perception of North Korea's irrationality can still be felt today as the ongoing tensions amplified in March 2013. As of now, it is possible to assert that the Obama administration is still attempting to resolve a Korean standoff triggered by Bush's Republican position concerning North Korea.

Obama's Doctrine

Upon election, Obama set out to execute the diplomacy he had advocated on his Democratic platform. Although this proved to be extremely difficult given Bush's legacy on the peninsula, by December 2009 the USA and the DPRK reached "a 'common understanding' on [the] need to resume six-nation talks on nuclear programme" (BBC, 2013a). In addition to this, in January 2010, North Korea made "calls for an end to hostile relations with US and vow[ed] to strive for a nuclear-free Korean peninsula" (The Guardian, 2010). However, by March 2010 the situation changed drastically as the North Korean navy sunk the South Korean warship, the Cheonan. Since then, various events in North Korea such as nuclear arms testing and the death of Kim Jong Il have only reintroduced and exacerbated tensions between both nations. Contrarily to Bush's aggressive attitude towards North Korea, Obama's present doctrine reflects the very Democratic rhetoric analysed in my first section. Since 2010, Obama has attempted to put an end to North Korea's greatest fear of an American invasion. "Washington has repeatedly said it has no intention of invading the country [DPRK]" (The Guardian, 2010). This type of diplomatic reassurance is a stark contrast to Bush's continuous aggressive statements notably that of "his preference for 'toppling' the North Korean regime" (Cumings, 2004: 97). More recently, Obama's cabinet reacted to North Korea's newfound threats not by designating them as an evil or irrational actor but by attempting to reason with their fears and calling upon greater diplomacy. "We will continue to try and resolve some of those issues diplomatically" (MacAskill, 2013). In addition to this politics of reassurance, the Obama administration has also begun to engage in closer diplomatic endeavours with North Korea's only ally, China; though relations between the two have cooled as a result of China's support for sanctions against the DPRK. By reasoning with China, the USA hopes that eventually the DPRK will succumb to pressures from its ally and roll back its nuclear program (Mardell, 2013).

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Following on from my analysis, it is possible to argue that the Obama administration's diplomatic approach seems to indicate a consciousness of the DPRK's modus operandi. Contrary to the doctrine of Bush, Obama portrays a degree of understanding of the DPRK's belligerent stance, hence the latter President's prioritisation of diplomatic endeavours. US Secretary of State John Kerry's recent trip to South-East Asia is indicative of this point, and this highlights that the US is attempting to alter its pejorative stance and image in a bid to influence the DPRK, and to send a message that any DPRK fears about being invaded by the US are flawed (MacAskill, 2013). Now the question is not so much whether the US sees the DPRK as rational or irrational; rather the importance lies in quashing any preconceived notions that the DPRK may have. From here, I will now ponder whether defining rationality is a political act in itself, which would explain why the USA has consistently condemned North Korean nuclear activity and the rationality behind it.

Rationality As A Political Act

Hitherto I have objectively scrutinized the various perceptions of American political parties regarding North Korea and its nuclear program. However I am aware that defining rationality can have a certain political weight and could also be used to reinforce a political party's platform. Here, I will argue that indeed defining rationality is a political act that may aid a party in completing the image it markets of itself. In fact, the act of defining the boundaries of rationality is something that society witnesses frequently. For example, the on-going gun control debate that took place in the USA in March 2013 (Lexington, 2013) was in essence a debate of whether or not the right to own a firearm was rational or irrational.

In terms of foreign policy on the Korean peninsula, the Democrats and the Republicans both advocate the de-nuclearisation of North Korea. However, from this point on their means of operation to yield such a result differ widely; this I believe is due to the divergence of interests and political values both parties are attempting to embody and market. Since the end of the Vietnam War, Democrats are designated as 'Doves'; politicians that consistently attempt to find peaceful solutions to international tensions (Cohen, 2011: 3). Subsequently from my analysis, it seems that their advocacy of diplomacy with North Korea and their outlook on rationality has been shaped by their 'Anti-War' political values (Cohen, 2011: 2), which means that their definition of rationality, in effect, can be seen as a sturdy political act.

When analysing the Republicans I have come across a similar phenomenon. As I demonstrated, the Republicans employ military threats and diplomatic blackmailing in an attempt to force the DPRK towards their preferred path. This belligerent stance which not only designates the DPRK's nuclear program as irrational but also the whole country and its government as such, can be seen as a political statement hell-bent on fulfilling its image of a more war-inclined party. Such an image is embodied in the Republican Party and how it is known as the party of the 'Hawks', with members who are notorious for promoting higher defence budget expenditures. Just recently, the GOP spokesperson Lynn Jenkins charged "Obama with proposing a 2014 Pentagon budget that would leave the military unable to deal with instability in Syria and the Korean Peninsula" (Bennett, 2013). Upon this, it seems that both Democrat and Republican parties attribute divergent definitions of rationality as it stands as a statement that could reinforce their political image on the domestic and international scene.

Conclusion

Overall, in my analysis I have demonstrated that the USA does not have a fixed definition of rationality; instead, each ruling governmental cabinet tends to have a different political stance when it comes to determining rationality and irrationality. Consequently this means that I have had to examine the two main American political parties and their varying viewpoints regarding North Korea and its nuclear program. From my analysis of both political platforms and two case studies where each were placed in similar situations, I established that on one hand the Republicans perceived the DPRK as irrational, whilst the Democrats understood North Korean motives without labelling them as irrational. This phenomenon meant that both parties, when confronted with tensions on the Korean peninsula, reacted with extremely different foreign policies. The Republicans reacted to North Korea's nuclear program with military threats and even went as far to refuse diplomatic agreements that would have resolved the standoff. Contrarily to this, the Democrats engaged in a diplomacy of reassurance and attempted to reason with North Korea's fear of an

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American invasion. Thus, it is possible to establish that whatever the ruling American party's outlook is on rationality vis-à-vis the DPRK, such a stance will drastically affect the US foreign policy and whether it will be one of peace or bellicosity. This deduction can very much be summed up with Mandela's adage "where you stand depends on where you sit" and hence linked in to the question of whether defining rationality was a political act. In this final section I determined that in effect, setting the boundaries of rationality was a political construct that could be used by parties to supplement their image or reinforce the values that they advocated. From this, it is possible to finally conclude that whether the US perceives the DPRK as rational is entirely a question of what political party is in power and what values it attempts to advocate or represent.

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