

# Engaging the Insecure Pariah: North Korea's Nuclear Ambitions

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With the continued failure to either eradicate or regulate North Korea's nuclear ambitions, what has emerged is the practical conundrum as to whether, and specifically how, the issue can be resolved. While indisputably a pariah of international society and a threat to regional security, it is vital to determine whether Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions are based on revisionist aims or are the product of insecurity, as the nature of its ambitions could determine the relative effectiveness of means to address the matter (Cha 2002: 211-212). It is in this respect that this essay will analyse the causes and aims of North Korea's nuclear ambitions and, based on such an analysis, propose a general approach for key actors, namely the United States (US) and China, to follow. Correspondingly, this essay will suggest that the Kim regime's nuclear ambitions primarily constitute a means through which to address its progressively deteriorating security situation by constructing an absolute deterrent against external military intervention. Devising an approach to counter such a threat must therefore be centred on mitigating the extreme insecurity that functions as the primary determinant of its ambitions. The US and China must therefore cooperatively adopt a pragmatic engagement strategy centred on mitigating Pyongyang's insecurity as to establish a constructive dialogue to incrementally dissolve its weaponry or, at a minimum, suspend their further development and testing.

In substantiating this conclusion, the essay will preliminarily contest the notion that North Korea's nuclear ambitions are of an irrational or revisionist nature, but rather it will indicate the centrality of insecurity as the primary determinant of Pyongyang's nuclear program. The essay will then critically analyse the problems of previous approaches to North Korea's nuclear program and propose an alternative strategy of pragmatic engagement. Following this, the essay will discuss the key historical and ideological impediments that could possibly limit the effectiveness of the approach, while continuing to assert the viability of the strategy despite such possible obstructions.

### The Causes and Aims of North Korea's Nuclear Ambitions

A common perspective on North Korea's nuclear program suggests that its ambitions are of a radically revisionist nature. What is implied by such a perspective, evident in the rhetoric of the Bush administration, is the notion that traditional concepts of nuclear deterrence are not applicable to "rogue states" due to their irrational disposition to use weapons of mass destruction and engage in revisionist actions (Walker 2007: 432). Whether it is Pyongyang's perpetration of international terrorism, missile and nuclear tests, or its trafficking in illicit materials, its actions have been fundamentally destabilising and contrary to contemporary norms and laws of state conduct (Fitzpatrick 2013: 8; Sagan 2013: 206-208). However, despite its bellicose rhetoric and destabilising actions suggesting otherwise, the Kim regime's primary aim since the 1951-1953 Korean War has not necessarily been the domination of the peninsula, but rather regime survival, with the former being subordinated to the latter (O'Neil 2005: 327). For instance, due to the conventional power of South Korea and the second-strike nuclear capability provided by the US, the Kim regime has rationally restrained from deliberately reigniting the Korean War, a conflict that would undoubtedly result in its destruction (Kang 2003: 54-56). Furthermore, Pyongyang's use of nuclear weapons in either an offensive manner or as a strategic shield behind which to engage in a more limited conventional conflict would inexorably threaten to produce retaliatory actions or escalate to a state of general warfare, thereby jeopardising the security of the Kim regime (Kang 2003: 59-60). It is thus problematic to suggest that North Korea aims to construct a nuclear arsenal to deliberately instigate a suicidal war, whether nuclear or otherwise, that it has hitherto been

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deterred from reigniting based on a rational calculation to perpetuate regime survival (Ramberg 2009: 16). However, this is not to suggest that Pyongyang's actions do not constitute a threat to regional security. Nor is this discussion suggesting that nuclear war is an impossibility, as inadvertent escalation or nuclear retaliation in response to a preventive intervention both remain logical possibilities. Rather, it is indicating that simplistic assessments based on North Korea's irrationality fail to comprehend the causes and aims underpinning its ambitions and could consequently provide problematic prescriptions to address the matter (Cha 2004: 98). To avoid a misinformed approach, the determinants of North Korea's nuclear ambitions must be located elsewhere.

By analysing the correlation between events in the international system and Pyongyang's resultant escalation in its nuclear program, it is evident that North Korea aims to establish a second-strike nuclear capability to deter external intervention and compensate for its deterioration in its strategic situation. Specifically, it was primarily the threat of abandonment in the Cold War and North Korea's strategic isolation *vis-à-vis* US hegemony in the era that followed which compounded its insecurity and conditioned its aim to construct an independent nuclear deterrent (O'Neil 2005: 325). For example, Pollack (2010: 99-101) notes that the de-escalation in US-Soviet hostilities following Gorbachev's disengagement from the Cold War diluted the credibility of the Soviet Union's positive security guarantees to North Korea, while its subsequent establishment of relations with South Korea in 1990 invalidated such assurances within the perception of Pyongyang. North Korea's situation degenerated further with the dissolution of the communist bloc, rendering it strategically and economically isolated in a unipolar system dominated by US hegemony (Park 2016: 61-62). It is not coincidental that with the disintegration of its security assurances and the emergence of US unipolarity, Pyongyang threatened to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1993 and rapidly instigated its weapons program as to construct an independent nuclear deterrent that was not subject to problems of alliance credibility or abandonment (Nah 2013: 65-66). Similarly, the escalation in Pyongyang's weapons development, its 2003 withdrawal from the NPT, and the collapse of the 1994 Agreed Framework coincided with its deteriorating security environment following the September 11 terrorist attacks, primarily due to North Korea's designation as a "rogue state", the emergence of preventive action in US foreign policy, and the onset of the legally dubious Iraq War (Wheeler 2008: 503-504). The cumulative effect of such events on Pyongyang's strategic calculations is exemplified in a statement by Senior Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Sok-ju (cited in Pollack 2010: 141), wherein surmising that North Korea is "part of the axis of evil" and as such, if it is to abandon its nuclear weaponry, it will be subject to intervention comparable to that against "Yugoslavia or Afghanistan's Taliban." Fundamentally then, the correlation between international events and the escalation in Pyongyang's nuclear program suggests that its ambitions primarily constitute a means through which to address its strategic insecurity by constructing a deterrent against intervention, rather than being the product of an irrational revisionism. Based on this conclusion, the following is to discuss previous approaches to North Korea's weapons program and delineate the core foundations of an alternative strategy.

## Engagement: A *Realpolitik* Approach

Whether it be aggressive containment, ambivalent engagement, or strategic patience, the various strategies aimed at addressing North Korea's nuclear ambitions have, to varying degree, been ineffective, thereby indicating the necessity of a different approach (Akhtar and Khan 2014: 620-622). For example, Akhtar and Khan (2014: 620) note that while the 1994 Agreed Framework managed to significantly hinder the development of Pyongyang's nuclear program in exchange for certain concessions, it failed to effectively address either the security dilemma underpinning its ambitions or North Korea's inherent distrust of the US. Alternatively, the Bush Doctrine compounded the problem that it aimed to resolve by furthering the insecurity of the Kim regime and escalating its retraction from the NPT and the Agreed Framework (Walker 2007: 447). Additionally, the Bush administration obstinately objected to bilateral negotiations with such a pariah, while the multilateral approach that was attempted via the Six-Party Talks (6PT) was problematically centred on the maximalist objectives of the immediate dismantlement of Pyongyang's nuclear program and its complete denuclearisation (Akhtar and Khan 2014: 621). By contrast, the approach of strategic patience adopted by the US under President Obama, while avoiding the rhetoric of the Bush period, rejected the notion of engaging North Korea prior to the latter's unilateral suspension of its weapons development (Kim 2016a: 33). As the Kim regime perceives that unilateral disarmament could result in its demise by external powers, the passive nature of strategic patience naturally created a dilemma of inaction by both parties (Shen 2009: 180).

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In a similar manner, the imposition of escalating economic sanctions since North Korea's 2006 nuclear test have yet to have its intended effect in either coercing Pyongyang to abandon its weapons program or to destabilise the regime (Weissmann and Hagström 2016: 72). Rather, Weissmann and Hagström (2016: 72-73) indicate that the North Korean leadership has managed to effectively circumvent and adapt to the sanctions regime, while also suggesting that such expansive sanctions could be counterproductive by limiting the penetrating effects of globalisation on the hermit kingdom and, by proxy, further instantiating and legitimising a hostility towards the outside world. While the Chinese leadership has become progressively antagonised by North Korea in response to its nuclear belligerency, its approach thereto continues to centre on preventing the collapse of the Kim regime in order to counter the emergence of a refugee crisis across the Yalu River and a West German-style absorption of the peninsula by a US-aligned South Korea (Plant and Rhode 2013: 61-62). Without an irresolute commitment by China to cease the vital economic assistance which it provides to the Kim regime, the viability of sanctions independent of a diplomatic solution would appear improbable (Weissmann and Hagström 2016: 72). It is therefore evident that due to such varying challenges, a different approach must be adopted if this Gordian Knot is to be resolved.

Based on the previous discussion, it is indicative that the US and China should cooperatively engage Pyongyang through mitigating its insecurity in order to create the preconditions for effective negotiations to dissolve its weaponry or, at a minimum, suspend their further testing and development. For this approach to be effective, the actions of the US, as the principal antagonist within the perceptions of Pyongyang, must be predicated on a "security dilemma sensibility", whereby recognising how its actions, while primarily of a defensive nature, can be perceived by others as threatening (Herz 1959: 249; Wheeler 2008: 496, 504). Similarly, despite the moral repulsiveness of the Kim regime in both its domestic human rights abuses and its destabilising actions internationally, it is central to avoid predicating foreign policy of an aggressive moral crusade (Herz 2003: 414-415) or, in the terminology of Booth and Wheeler (2008: 68-69), an "ideological fundamentalism", exemplified by the Bush administration's rhetoric of a war between the civilised world and an illiberal "axis of evil". Such a Manichean dichotomy between virtuous and evil compounds the insecurity of other non-liberal states, while disallowing for a constructive dialogue based on a recognition of the security dilemma (Tan 2014: 134-136; Booth and Wheeler 2008: 68-69). To summarise, it is suggested that engagement must be centred on a *realpolitik* approach to North Korea, which, while not appeasing the destabilising actions of the Kim regime, must be pragmatic in recognising and addressing the primary determinant of its ambitions: Pyongyang's strategic insecurity (Gaertner 2014: 340).

By adopting a *realpolitik* approach, this proposal is centred on the notion that pragmatic concessions toward mitigating Pyongyang's insecurity could beget a degree of cooperation, creating a phased action-reaction process of reciprocal and progressive commitments. By analogy, the 6PT, despite subsequently failing in its ambivalent approach to engagement, did manage to produce an interim agreement in 2007 resulting in Pyongyang's suspension of its program at the Yongbong nuclear facility and its declaration that it would not export nuclear materials (Pollack 2010: 151-153). In exchange, concessions included the removal of its designation as a state sponsor of terrorism (Pollack 2010: 152). In a similar manner, preliminary concessions by the US and its allies could include the provisional cessation of US-South Korean military exercises, the declaration of negative security guarantees, and a commitment to further bilateral negotiations (Nah 2013: 75-76; Shen 2016: 345-346). Subsequently, more radical alterations to the *status quo*, such as the progressive normalisation of relations with the US and Japan, the establishment of a peace-treaty to supersede the 1953 Armistice, and economic assistance could be progressively enacted in the instance North Korea reciprocate through complying with certain regulations on its nuclear behaviour, such as a moratorium on further nuclear development and testing (Gaertner 2014: 341; Moon 2016: 344). It is therefore suggested that a *realpolitik* approach to engagement by the US and its allies could assist in incrementally progressing negotiations toward denuclearisation or, at a minimum, institute a degree of restraint on Pyongyang's nuclear behaviour.

In addition to the US and its allies, China also has an indispensable role in accordance with this approach. In order to respond to the contradictory challenges underpinning China's policy towards North Korea, namely in balancing its opposition to the threat of Pyongyang's destabilising actions with its simultaneous objective of preventing the collapse of the Kim regime, Beijing should reiterate the credibility of its security commitment based on their mutual interest: the continuation of a stable regime north of the 38th parallel (Shen 2009: 185-187). However, China must reaffirm that its continued provision of economic assistance and positive security guarantees are contingent on

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Pyongyang engaging in negotiations and suspending further provocative behaviour (Shen 2009: 185-187). The US should delineate a formal commitment to Beijing specifying that in the instance the peninsula is reunified in the aftermath of regime collapse, it will provide humanitarian assistance if required and maintain the *status quo* by not establishing military bases north of the 38th parallel. Such a commitment could assist in mitigating, albeit not fundamentally transcending, Beijing's insecurities regarding a unified, US-aligned Korea, while consequently providing a degree of economic and diplomatic leverage in its relations with Pyongyang by potentially creating a perception within the North Korean leadership that it would allow for the collapse of the regime (Fitzpatrick 2013: 16). This engagement strategy is therefore inextricably linked with ensuring a degree of cooperation between the great powers, without which a peaceful resolution to the nuclear predicament will remain unattainable.

To summarise, through a phased, pragmatic, and reciprocal approach centred on mitigating the Kim regime's insecurity, it could address the primary determinant of Pyongyang's ambitions and avoid the limitations of other approaches.

## The Possible Limitations of Engagement

While pragmatic engagement provides a viable strategy relative to previous approaches, there are inherent limitations in its power to fundamentally alter the behaviour of Pyongyang toward total denuclearisation. Central in this respect is North Korea's nationalist ideology of *Juche*. With the perceived threat of allied abandonment during the formative period of the Cold War, the concept of *Juche* was devised as a Korean alternative to conventional Marxism-Leninism which aimed to establish the domestic legitimacy of the Kim regime independent of the communist movement, while also designating the paramount objective of maintaining autonomy in economic and security matters (Park 2016: 59-60; Ramberg 2009: 14). *Juche* has subsequently morphed into a general ideological rejection of Western "imperialism" and the contemporary norms of a progressively liberal and globalised international society that is perceived to be threatening to the survival of the archaic totalitarianism of the Kim regime (Miyeong 2009: 183-185; Ogilvie-White 2010: 122). In addition, since the 1990s the concept of *Juche* has been inextricably linked with the *Songun*, or military-first, policy. This doctrine was articulated under Kim Jong-il as an explicit response to the internal collapse of the communist bloc and the catastrophic 1994-1998 famine (Miyeong 2009: 183-184; Park 2016: 62-63). It has essentially portrayed the military as the indispensable guardian of the nation's unending socialist revolution, thereby legitimising the diversion of resources to the military in order to ensure internal stability, the nation's defence from external threats, and ensure the loyalty of the Korean People's Army to the Kim regime (Park 2016: 61-64). Accordingly, Habib (2011: 58) suggests that with the relative decline in the North's conventional capability, the expansive nuclear weapons program under the military has had, in addition to its primary deterrent value, a key domestic function in accordance with the "legitimising paradigm" of the military-first policy. Consequently, this ideological antipathy of the West, the centrality of maintaining an independent defence, and the politics of the military-first doctrine could inhibit, to a degree, the capacity of external powers to exchange security guarantees for the abandonment of its nuclear arsenal (Ogilvie-White 2010: 122-123).

In addition, North Korea's historical antagonisms and mistrust of the US constitute a hindrance in negotiating its denuclearisation. For example, despite Obama's abandonment of the Bush-era doctrine of preventive war, it has not had a substantial effect in mitigating North Korea's threat perception of the US (Ogilvie-White 2010: 122). Similarly, the perceived danger of denuclearisation has been compounded by Pyongyang's observation of the 2011 intervention in Libya, which was preceded by Muammar Gaddafi's abandonment of the regime's nuclear program in exchange for economic assistance and progress towards the normalisation of relations with the US (Lankov 2016: 340). In turn, this mistrust has created a reluctance towards absolute nuclear disarmament, rendering negotiations towards such an objective improbable (Lankov 2016: 340; Pollack 2010: 155). Fundamentally then, it is logical to suggest that engagement could assist in regulating certain aspects of North Korea's nuclear behaviour; however, ideological impediments and a history of mistrust could possibly prevent Pyongyang from abandoning its present weaponry.

Despite such limitations, a *realpolitik* approach to engaging North Korea continues to represent a more viable alternative to the previous approaches discussed. North Korea's ideological principles are not insurmountable, but are commonly subordinated to the primary objective of regime survival. This is evident in the Kim regime's deviation

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from its ideological foundations by progressively introducing marketisation to counter its deteriorating economic situation (Kim 2016b: 136-137), as well as its aim of engaging in a bilateral dialogue with, and acquiring a credible security guarantee from, its primary ideological antagonist, the US (Pollack 2010: 191). Additionally, Ogilvie-White (2010: 128-129) notes that the commonalities between China and North Korea in adopting a more pluralistic approach to international order, which centres on the primacy of state sovereignty and non-intervention, could assist in providing credibility to Beijing's security commitments and avoid the ideological antipathy and historical mistrust that characterise Pyongyang's relations with the West. Furthermore, despite this approach requiring the provision of concessions to a morally abhorrent pariah, it nonetheless provides an alternative to either formally recognising North Korea as a legitimate nuclear state or acquiescing to the precarious scenario of a nuclear-armed outlaw uncontrolled and unhindered in its actions by the regulations and norms of international society (Cha 2009: 129). In addition, the catastrophic human and economic consequences, in conjunction with the irreducible possibility that the Kim regime will pre-emptively use their nuclear weapons if its survival is perceived to be under immediate threat, render a military alternative extremely ill-advised (Moon 2016: 344). Thus, despite the possible obstructions and limitations discussed, a *realpolitik* approach aimed at mitigating the primary determinant of Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions continues to provide a viable means relative to the discussed alternatives.

The dilemma of this approach is therefore not whether it should be adopted, but rather in how to resolve the practical difficulties of its implementation. This includes the inherent challenges associated with mitigating the perniciousness of the security dilemma and negotiating *vis-à-vis* ideological differences as well as accepting the necessity of incrementalism and the prioritisation of imposing regulations, rather than the complete or immediate denuclearisation of the peninsula, and the predicament of maintaining a balance between constructive engagement and avoiding perceptions of simply appeasing Pyongyang's destabilising actions, the latter having notable implications for the possibility of either South Korea or Japan developing an independent nuclear capability (Moon 2016: 343-344).

## Conclusion

In summary, this essay has analysed the causes and aims of North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and, based on such an analysis, proposed a general approach through which the US and China should logically approach the matter. As such, it was suggested that Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions constitute a means of addressing its progressively deteriorating security situation by constructing a deterrent to prevent external intervention, and thus, strategies to counter Pyongyang's development of nuclear weapons must be predicated on mitigating the extreme insecurity that continues to be the primary determinant of its ambitions. Specifically, it was proposed that, despite certain ideological and historical impediments, the US and China should cooperatively adopt a pragmatic engagement strategy centred on recognising and mitigating Pyongyang's insecurities in order to establish a constructive dialogue to dissolve its weaponry or, at the minimum, aim for the suspension of their further development and testing.

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