

# A Failure of Coercion: The George W. Bush Administration and North Korea

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On 9 October 2006, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) tested a nuclear weapon, becoming the most recent state to develop a nuclear weapons capability. This essay examines why the George W. Bush administration (2001–2009) failed to bring an end to the DPRK's nuclear weapons program. I argue this was for the following three reasons. The first two reasons concern the wider context of the DPRK's threat perception. First, the Bush administration's aggressive foreign policy, both in rhetoric (the 'Axis of Evil') and action (the invasion of Iraq), convinced the DPRK that nuclear weapons were the only sure means of ensuring the survival of the regime. Second, this antagonistic posture by the Bush administration led the DPRK's only ally, the People's Republic of China (PRC), to apply pressure on the DPRK in order to try and force it to abandon its nuclear weapons program to avoid the following: being dragged to the DPRK's defence, regional instability for the DPRK's collapse, increased United States (US) military presence in the region, and a regional nuclear proliferation chain reaction.

This context of deep insecurity brings me to the third reason; the Bush administration's inability to implement a successful diplomatic coercion policy to convince the DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapons program. The context of isolation and insecurity, largely created by the Bush administration, made the administration's attempt at coercive diplomacy, aimed at bringing an end to the DPRK's nuclear weapons program, all the more difficult. While the Bush administration made its demands clear, it could not credibly signal its capability and willingness to inflict severe costs on the DPRK if it did not comply with the demand that the DPRK abandon its nuclear weapons program. Furthermore, the inducements offered by the administration did not offer the same assurance as did the DPRK's nuclear weapons, nor did the administration ever engage in confidence-building measures to assure the DPRK.

My analysis adopts Graham Allison's 'rational actor model', which assumes that states make and implement policy as a single entity (1971: 20) and proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief background to the DPRK's nuclear weapons program. Second, I explain how the Bush administration constituted such a threat to the DPRK that the DPRK decided to continue its nuclear weapons program. Third, I explain how the Bush administration's aggressive foreign policy led the DPRK's ally, the PRC, to apply pressure on the DPRK. Fourth, I explain how the Bush administration failed to coerce an end to the DPRK's nuclear weapons program. I conclude this essay with a recapitulation of my argument and discussions.

### Background

The DPRK began its nuclear weapons program in 1952 with the establishment of the Atomic Energy Research Institute. By the early 1970s, the DPRK had acquired plutonium reprocessing technology from the Soviet Union. In the 1980s the DPRK constructed uranium milling facilities and a nuclear reactor; it also conducted high-explosive tests required for a nuclear bomb. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the DPRK successfully reprocessed plutonium on three occasions (NTI 2019). In 1994, the DPRK froze its plutonium program, but began enriching uranium between 1997–1998 (Smith 2019: 566). In 2003, the DPRK claimed that it had reprocessed 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods, giving it enough weapons-grade plutonium for six nuclear weapons. In October 2006, the DPRK tested its first nuclear weapon, becoming a verified nuclear power (ACA 2019). The DPRK's pursuit of nuclear weapons was in accordance with the 'hiding strategy', whereby a state aims to "present a *fait accompli* before the program is

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discovered" (Narang 2017: 113).

## Insecurity

The first reason why the Bush administration failed to bring an end to the DPRK's nuclear weapons program was the DPRK's perception of the threat posed by the US. The Bush administration occupied a seemingly paradoxical position. It was both perceived by the DPRK to constitute such a severe threat, that the DPRK decided to continue pursuing its nuclear weapons program, but at the same time, the US was not threatening enough to articulate threats towards the DPRK that could persuade the DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapons program. As Peter Jakobsen notes, "successful use of coercive diplomacy requires a favourable context" (2016: 290). The Bush administration inadvertently made sure that the context was anything but favourable to coercing the DPRK.

As Hazel Smith notes, the primary goal of the DPRK is regime survival (2013: 121). The Bush administration, through its rhetoric of the 'Axis of Evil' and its doctrine of preventive war, which materialized in 2003 through the invasion of Iraq, "provided the tipping point" for the DPRK and cemented the DPRK's severe threat perception of the US (*ibid.*). This demonstrates that the exercise of hard power does not take place in a vacuum; it can have considerable unintended consequences (Dannreuther 2013: 244). As such, continuing with nuclear weapons development was seen as the "ultimate guarantor of [the DPRK's] survival" (Yahuda 2011: 203), and therefore, in the early 21st century, the DPRK underwent the "formalization of the primary instrument of foreign policy as nuclear deterrence" (Smith 2013: 121). When the DPRK conducted an underground nuclear test in October 2006 (NTI 2019), the DPRK Foreign Ministry stated that this was "entirely attributable to the US nuclear threat" and that the DPRK was "compelled to substantially prove its possession of nukes to protect its sovereignty" (ACA 2019). Future nuclear tests were indicated to be conditional of the US's behaviour, adding that the DPRK might conduct further nuclear tests if the US "increases pressure" on the DPRK (*ibid.*).

It is important here to outline the concept of deterrence and the deterrent value of nuclear weapons. In simple terms, deterrence is the issuing of a threat intended to dissuade an adversary from aggression (Griffiths, O'Callaghan, and Roach 2014: 75). It aims to influence the adversary's calculus for decision making (Pape 1996: 4). In terms of nuclear deterrence, the logic is the same, albeit more severe. As Kenneth Waltz notes, in a condition of anarchy, states are forced to provide for their own security (2001: 159), and the "best way to survive is to be especially powerful" (Mearsheimer 2016: 74). Nuclear weapons are extremely helpful in this regard, given their devastating potential. As the costs of war rise, war becomes less likely (Waltz 2012: 5). As Robert Rauchhaus' quantitative analysis of the 'nuclear-peace' hypothesis shows, nuclear weapons have "statistically significant effects on the chance of conflict" (2009: 269), to such an extent that "when two states possess nuclear weapons, the odds of war drop precipitously" (*ibid.* 260).

Hence, with the DPRK's test of a nuclear weapon in October 2006, the DPRK achieved the ability to deter consideration of a preventive "Iraq-like ground-air attack" (Niksich 2015: 76). Even a small nuclear arsenal, relative to that of an adversary, is sufficient to deter military intervention. Given the devastating potential damage nuclear weapons can cause, they "create their own credibility" (Waltz 2012: 26). States are deterred from war with other nuclear states because they "cannot know how much damage they will suffer" (*ibid.*). As Patrick Morgan quipped, "to attempt to compute the cost of a nuclear war is to miss the point" (1997: 116).

## Isolation

The second reason for the Bush administration's failure was the amplification of the DPRK's perception of isolation and insecurity via the PRC's increasing pressure on the DPRK, largely instigated by the Bush administration, to abandon its nuclear weapons program.

The PRC and the DPRK hold a bilateral defence treaty which was concluded in July 1961 and remains in force (2017 Panda). The second article of this treaty entails a mutual defence clause, which proclaims that the PRC will aid the DPRK in the event of an attack, and *vice versa* (Albert 2019). The PRC is also the DPRK's main source of aid (in terms of energy and food) as well as its main trading partner (CRS 2010: 6-7). The credibility of this alliance,

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however, from the view of the DPRK, was increasingly compromised during the Bush years, which amplified the DPRK's threat perception, and, in turn, made the DPRK's abandonment of its nuclear weapons program all the more unlikely.

The credibility of an ally's commitment has important implications for nuclear proliferation. As Nuno Monteiro and Alexandre Debs argue, the likelihood of nuclear proliferation is determined by a dynamic strategic interaction between states (2014: 9). One particular interaction is the relationship between a state and its ally. If a state were to "remain a reliable guarantor of its security", the state "would lack the willingness to acquire the bomb" (*ibid.* 10). However, if an ally is perceived to be insufficiently committed to providing protection guarantees, the state will have an increased willingness to nuclearize (*ibid.* 16). As pressure from the Bush administration increased, the support of the PRC for the DPRK diminished. This made the DPRK far less "certain of the backing from its remaining ally", thereby necessitating nuclear weapons as the "ultimate guarantor of its survival" (Yahuda 2011: 203).

The DPRK's doubt in the PRC's commitment to this alliance was instigated by the Bush administration's preventive and unilateralist foreign policy post-9/11. As Bonnie Glaser and Wang Liang note, throughout the 1990s, the PRC had largely "preferred to remain uninvolved" in disputes over the DPRK's nuclear weapons program (2008: 165). This changed, however, as the Bush administration began its "unilateralist trend in US foreign policy" (Wu 2005: 40). The publication of the Bush administration's National Security Strategy in 2002—which outlined the doctrine of preemptive war—Bush's inclusion of the DPRK in the 'Axis of Evil', and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, fostered "fear of US military action against North Korea", which "played a role in China's strategic rethinking" (*ibid.*). The PRC began to engage in US-driven efforts "to restrain North Korea's missile program" (Goldstein 2003: 79).

It is also important to consider that this followed the DPRK's increasing isolation in the immediate post-Cold War period. In 1992, the PRC formally recognized the Republic of Korea (ROK), which built upon the DPRK's "sense of betrayal and isolation" that had been instigated by the Soviet Union's recognition of the ROK two years earlier (Yahuda 2011: 202). Furthermore, the economic disparity between the DPRK and the ROK intensified due to the end of the PRC and Russia's substantial food and fertilizer aid to the DPRK (Smith 2013: 127).

Quite simply, the PRC's decision to apply pressure on the DPRK in order to try and force the DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapons program, so that the US's perceived threat posed by the DPRK was lowered, was to reduce the "risks of a war on its border" (Yahuda 2011: 202). Even if the PRC did not itself enter war by refusing to commit to the 1961 bilateral defence treaty, in the event of US invasion, the PRC would face the collapse of the DPRK, which would threaten regional stability (Ogden 2017: 119), not least because of the risks of extensive refugee flows into the north-eastern parts of the PRC (Glaser and Liang 2008: 168). Furthermore, the PRC was keen to avoid an increased US military presence in the region, as well as a nuclear "strategic chain reaction" (Sagan 1996: 58), whereby the ROK and Japan may pursue nuclear weapons to internally balance against the DPRK (Ogden 2017: 119).

Hence, over the course of the Bush administration, the PRC has supported US efforts to apply pressure on the DPRK to limit its nuclear weapons program; what the DPRK's sees as the utmost necessity for its survival (Yahuda 2011: 250). This entailed partaking in multilateral negotiations (the 'Six-Party talks') and rounds of sanctions against the DPRK. The most significant act was when the PRC voted with the other P5 United Nations Security Council (UNSC) members to sanction the DPRK (Glaser and Liang 2008: 173). On 14 October 2006, seven days after the DPRK tested a nuclear weapon, the UNSC passed resolution 1718 (*ibid.*). This was a shift "from diplomatic support to punishment" (Albert 2019). UNSCR-1718 imposed sanctions on heavy conventional weapons, nuclear technology, and luxury goods, and issued travel bans on persons involved in the nuclear weapons program, as well as asset freezes (UNSC 2006: 2-5).

## Coercion

Understanding this context of the DPRK's perceptions of insecurity and isolation provides the bedrock necessary to understand why the Bush administration failed to implement a successful coercive policy to bring an end to the DPRK's nuclear weapons program. To ground this argument, it is first important to define coercion.

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In simple terms, coercion is a strategy that aims to change a states' behaviour by "manipulating costs and benefits" (Pape 1996: 4). In other words, coercion aims to influence an adversary's calculus for decision making in order to force the adversary to alter its behaviour in such a way that is favourable to the coercer (*ibid.*). Suffering has to be signalled to be contingent on the adversary's behaviour, so that it is clear to an adversary as to what behaviour "will cause the violence to be inflicted" as well as what will "cause it to be withheld" (Schelling 2008: 4). Coercion, therefore, is undertaken with specific regard to the interests of an adversary, so as to exploit what the "enemy wants and fears" (*ibid.* 3). It is the expectation of further suffering in the event of non-compliance, and the assurance of ceasing the suffering in the event of compliance that allows the coercer to obtain the behaviour they desire (*ibid.* 2). In order to successfully implement the threats as well as the assurances, the credibility of the coercer is key, both in terms of willingness and capability (Griffiths, O'Callaghan, and Roach 2014: 39).

Coercive diplomacy, therefore, entails the combination of threats (sticks)—such as the use of military force or sanctions—with inducements and assurances (carrots) in order to change an adversary's behaviour (Jakobsen 2016: 287). Below I outline the four key steps required for successful diplomatic coercion of an adversary, which I use to demonstrate why the Bush administration's attempt at coercive diplomacy failed.

Successful diplomatic coercion entails four measures: 1) communicating demands to an adversary through words and/or actions; 2) credibly signalling both the capability and willingness to impose costs that outweigh the possible gains of non-compliance; 3) offering inducements that lower the cost of non-compliance; and 4) assuring the adversary that their compliance will not prompt new demands via the use of confidence-building measures (Jakobsen 2016: 290).

## *Communication*

A state's communication of its demands to an adversary, at least with words, is the most simple step. It requires little effort or resources. The failure of the Bush administration is not particularly evident at this stage, as the administration's objectives were more or less clear. During Bush's State of the Union address in January 2002, he famously stated the objective of "prevent[ing] regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction", specifically referring to the DPRK as "arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction" (WMD) (White House 2002a). Referencing Iraq, Iran, and the DPRK, Bush added that "states like these [...] constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger" (*ibid.*). Bush made clear his administration's demand that the DPRK, along with the other 'Axis of Evil' states, cease its pursuit of nuclear weapons (Cha 2002: 79).

However, while the demands were clear, the Bush administration's approach in this regard was hubristic and negligent. As Martin Smith notes, there was "no indication of thought given to the potential impact of any of this indictment on North Korean sensitivities" (Smith 2019: 565). David Frum, a White House staffer who worked on the 2002 address, conceded that the DPRK was "casually included in the 'Axis', with little attention paid to either the rationale or potential impact of doing so" (*ibid.*). Bush's rhetoric and demands were, at best, counter-productive, as it significantly increased the DPRK's threat perception, making other measures to coerce all the more difficult. As Roland Dannreuther argues, the only long-term way to dissuade nuclear proliferation is to undercut a state's "deep insecurity" (2013: 244).

## *Credible threats*

The Bush administration could not credibly demonstrate both the capability and willingness to impose severe costs, such as military intervention, to the DPRK if it did not comply with the US's demand that the DPRK abandon its nuclear weapons program. Quite simply, the Bush administration lacked sticks, without which it could "put little pressure on North Korea to compromise" (Haass 2005: 74). This is for two reasons.

First, the Bush administration was faced with the potential of severe costs in the event of war on the Korean peninsula. It is important to note that the potential cost of preventive war to thwart nuclear weapons development has important implications for nuclear proliferation. A preventive war, as Nuno Monteiro and Alexandre Debs note, is

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costly in both blood and treasure” (2014: 14). Hence, if one predicts high costs in the event of a preventive war, this “lowers the credibility of threats of preventive war, making strong states more likely to proliferate unimpeded whenever they are willing to do so” (*ibid.* 16). Given the potential of severe costs in the event of war on the Korean peninsula, preventive war never particularly credible, so the Bush administration could not credibly signal to impose severe costs to the DPRK if it did not abandon its nuclear weapons program. As Peter Howard noted in 2004, before the DPRK had even claimed to possess nuclear weapons, US officials were “extremely concerned with the cost of such a war” (2004: 825). DPRK artillery posed a severe threat to the population of Seoul (around 25% of the ROK’s population) and the DPRK’s medium-range missiles were within range of Japan (Howard 2004: 825). In addition to the problems in dealing with the aftermath of the collapse of the DPRK in the event of war, this scenario held the “potential for a chaotic and disastrous outcome in Northeast Asia as a whole” (Yahuda 2011: 250).

Second, given the Bush administration’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as John Mueller noted, the “likelihood of any coherent application of military power or even of a focused military threat” against the DPRK had “substantially diminished” (2005: 54). For this reason, the Bush administration was largely inhibited from making credible signals of its willingness or capability to impose severe costs to the DPRK if they did not abandon its nuclear weapons program. The events of 9/11 brought an end to the US’s ‘Vietnam war syndrome’, removing the reluctance to use force. But when the short-lived success of brute force came to a close in Afghanistan and Iraq, as the US entered costly counter-insurgencies, the conditions hindering US actions soon returned (Jakobsen 2016: 294). Quite simply, the US was over-extended to such an extent that the idea of preventive war or even major military attacks towards the DPRK had been “ruled out” (Yahuda 2011: 250). By the end of 2008, just before the end of the Bush administration, spending on the ‘War on Terror’ had cost US\$428.1 billion (USDOD 2018: 22–23) and 4,852 US service-members’ lives (Crawford 2018: 4–5). As the neoconservative and proponent of the Iraq war, Max Boot conceded, the ‘neoconservative project’ is “hardly permanent or complete”, as the Bush administration had “not adopted neocon arguments to push for regime change in North Korea” (2004: 21).

The Bush administration’s awareness of its limited military options was displayed clearly when the DPRK announced in February 2005 that the DPRK had “produced nuclear weapons” (ACA 2019). The response from the Bush administration was far from treating it as an ‘existential threat’ that necessitated a military response. Instead, it was characterized as “unfortunate” and as “rhetoric we’ve heard before” (Mueller 2005: 54). Despite the Bush administration’s doctrine of preventive war (White House 2002b: 6), there is no publicly available evidence that the administration (or any US administration for that matter) “seriously considered a direct military strike or an explicit policy of regime change”, nor did the administration articulate any threats of military intervention in the event of non-compliance with its demands (CRS 2010: 2). By October 2006, when the DPRK tested its first nuclear weapon, the Bush administration only passed four unilateral rounds of sanctions (in 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2005) towards the DPRK (ACA 2019).

### *Inducements*

The Bush administration issued inducements (carrots) that lowered the cost of non-compliance, however, those carrots were ignored by the DPRK, given that they could never replace the value of nuclear weapons. For instance, in April 2002, the Bush administration issued a memorandum which stated that the administration will not certify the DPRK’s compliance with the 1994 ‘Agreed Framework’ due to the DPRK’s supposed actions of arming with missiles and WMD (Dannreuther 2013: 238). The DPRK was not just decertified, but the Bush administration demanded an “improved implementation” of the Agreed Framework (Smith 2019: 565), that included constraints of missile development, a ban on the export of missiles, and even a reduction in the DPRK’s conventional military posture (Yahuda 2011: 250).

As a consequence of the Bush administration’s decertification of the ‘Agreed Framework’, the aid supplied under the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) was halted (NTI 2019). KEDO was a consortium formed by the US, Japan, and the ROK under the ‘Agreed Framework’ and was responsible for constructing two light-water power reactors and providing 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil per year until 2003 (CRS 2017: 7). Hence, in light of the DPRK’s alleged violation, in November 2002 the US, through KEDO, attempted to induce the DPRK via a carrot, stating that “future shipments will depend on North Korea’s concrete and credible actions to dismantle

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completely its highly-enriched uranium program" (*ibid.*). However, the DPRK was not induced and simply rejected the demand, perceiving the new demands as a call for "unilateral disarmament" (Yahuda 2011: 250). In November 2002, the DPRK announced that it was removing International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and monitoring cameras (CRS 2017: 7). Later in January 2003, the DPRK announced its withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty and also resumed plutonium production (NTI 2019).

## Assurances

The Bush administration never got to the stage in negotiations with the DPRK, bilaterally or multilaterally, in which confidence-building measures to assure the DPRK were even considered (Smith 2013: 128). Furthermore, given the Bush administration's reversal in its commitment to the 'Agreed Framework', the US lacked credibility regarding whether it would even commit to its agreements and not issue new demands in the first place (Cox 2012: 284). This made the Bush administration's ability to negotiate with the DPRK all the more difficult, as it was not clear that compliance would not prompt new demands (Smith 2019: 564). As David Lake observes, "as with any commitment problem, it is not what a country does today that matters but rather what it might do in the future" (2011: 23). As Martin Smith notes, when Bush took office, the 'Agreed Framework' remained in effect and there were "grounds for believing that North Korea policy would be characterised by essential continuity" (2019: 563-4). Bush stated in January 2001 that he "might be willing to pick up [...] Clinton's frame-work", but he reversed in April 2002, where he not only decertified the agreement but also demanded supplementary constraints (*ibid.*).

## Conclusion

Largely by its own design, the Bush administration had inadvertently made sure that the context was anything but favourable to coercing the DPRK. Given the articulation and action of the Bush doctrine, the DPRK became convinced that nuclear weapons, on account of their deterrent value, was the only sure means of ensuring its survival. This was exacerbated by the PRC's decision to apply pressure on the DPRK to try and force it to abandon its nuclear weapons program, which was in order to avoid: being dragged to the defence of the DPRK, regional instability via the DPRK's collapse, increased US military presence in the region, and a regional nuclear chain reaction. In turn, the DPRK's perception of isolation and insecurity was amplified, making the abandonment of its nuclear weapons program all the more unlikely. While the Bush administration made its demands towards the DPRK clear, most fatally, the administration lacked credible signals in terms of capability and willingness to impose severe costs to the DPRK if it did not abandon its nuclear weapons program. The Bush administration's inducements could never compare to the security value and certainty of nuclear weapons.

As long as the DPRK fears for its survival, it is doubtful that any state can coerce the DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapons. Neither carrots nor sticks are likely to be sufficient. The DPRK perceives a severe threat from the US, while at the same time, the US is not able to make threats that could persuade the DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapons program. The US may just have to accept the DPRK as a nuclear state.

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