

U.S.-China Competition over Nuclear North Korea

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ABSTRACT *The often-used description in the American mainstream media and geopolitical literature of “North Korea’s nuclear aggression” is misleading. I argue in the first section that Pyongyang’s nuclear strategy has been significantly shaped by the perceived U.S. nuclear existential threat since the early 1950s, portending a quest for a self-reliant nuclear deterrent for the DPRK. The shifting role and impact of U.S.-China competition in the course of the first and second U.S.-DPRK nuclear standoffs is explored as background for examining, in the second section, an intensified nuclear confrontation in the first half of 2017. The concluding section considers common-security engagement in charting an alternative pathway toward establishing a working peace system on the Korean peninsula.*

Introduction

The latest flare up of U.S.-DPRK (the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) nuclear confrontation in mid-April 2017 is a sobering reminder that the Korean Peninsula remains the last stronghold of the Cold War. Even today, almost six and a half decades after the Korean War “ended” with an armistice accord, the Korean DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) stands out as the most heavily fortified conflict zone in the post-Cold War world. Indeed, the DMZ has acquired such security-deficit monikers as “the fuse on the nuclear powder keg in Northeast Asia,” “the scariest place on earth,” and “the last glacier of Cold War confrontation.”

With the Korean peninsula as its kinetic center, Northeast Asia (NEA) is the only international region or sub-region where the world’s four great powers (China, Russia, Japan, and the United States) uneasily meet and interact, and where their respective interests coalesce, compete, or clash. The world’s heaviest concentration of military and economic capabilities is in NEA: (1) the world’s three largest nuclear states (the United States, Russia, and China), one

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small nuclear state (North Korea), and three threshold nuclear states (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan); (2) five of the world's top ten military budgets (U.S., China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea); (3) the world's three largest economies (U.S., China, and Japan); and (4) three of the UN Security Council's five permanent members (U.S., China, and Russia).

From the perspective of U.S.-China competition, Washington still maintains its Cold War network of bilateral alliances while Beijing has an impaired alliance with North Korea, often regarded as “an alliance in name only.” This signifies the greatest strategic change on the Korean peninsula in the post-Cold War era, giving rise to an asymmetrical nuclear confrontation between more powerful and less powerful state actors.¹

And yet beneath the surface is Washington's nuclear hypocrisy of “Do as I say, Not as I Do.” While virtually all of the non-nuclear member states of the non-proliferation treaty (NPT) regime have followed their treaty obligations, the five original nuclear weapon states –the five permanent members of the Security Council, or First Nuclear World (FNW)– have reneged on their solemn treaty obligations “to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control” (Article VI of the NPT Treaty). In addition, the lack of any international action –let alone outrage– against Israel, India, and Pakistan (all of which possess nuclear weapons programs operating outside the NPT) speaks volumes about double standards in the global politics of nuclear proliferation. In the wake of 9/11, the international NPT regime seems willing to punish those countries with whom the U.S. is not on good terms (Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Iran, Muammar Gaddafi's Libya, North Korea), while quietly acquiescing to proliferation by those countries it considers friendly (Israel, India, Pakistan).

It is also worth noting in this connection American nuclear exceptionalism: the U.S. was (1) the first country to test and the first to drop atomic bombs (Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 1945); (2) the only state that introduced tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea (1958); and (3) the only state with 180 nuclear weapons deployed at six NATO bases. In June 2016, the largest NATO war games in decades were conducted in Poland, weeks after activation of a U.S. missile defense system in Romania, and the ground-breaking of another in Poland.

The Past as Prologue

In contrast to much mainstream geopolitical literature that blindsides history, this article applies a longer, wider historical and geopolitical perspective to explore the what, why, and how of North Korea's nuclear strategy as it evolved

and mutated through mutually interactive and interdependent domestic politics in Pyongyang and Washington.²

Indeed, Pyongyang's nuclear strategy has been significantly shaped by the perceived American nuclear existential threat since the early 1950s, portending a quest for a self-reliant nuclear deterrent for the DPRK. "While in Washington the North Korean nuclear threat has been a major issue for the past decade," Gavan McCormack reminded us in 2004, "in Pyongyang the U.S. nuclear threat has been the issue for the past fifty years. North Korea's uniqueness in the nuclear age lies first of all in the way it has faced and lived under the shadow of nuclear threat for longer than any other nation."³

The origins of the American nuclear threat to the DPRK can be traced back to the Korean War, which was waged under the shadow of U.S. nuclear weapons. While the United States stopped short of using nuclear weapons, American national security managers "entertained using nuclear weapons in Asia under the Massive Retaliation doctrine on at least four occasions: during the Korean War, in 1984 at Dien Bien Phu, in 1955 in the first Taiwan Straits crisis, and again in 1958 during the second Taiwan Straits crisis."⁴

In January 1958, just four and a half years after the Armistice Agreement of 1953, the United States introduced tactical nuclear weapons onto the Korean Peninsula, in blatant breach of the Armistice Agreement that prohibited the introduction of qualitatively new weapon systems, and thereafter it continued to upgrade its nuclear stockpile near the DMZ and at Osan Air Base. Moreover, the non-nuclear DPRK remained the target of periodic nuclear threats and "extended deterrence" from the United States in the following decades. By the mid-1960s, the U.S. nuclear strategy centered on the use of nuclear weapons very early in any new war. Tactical nuclear weapons virtually required early first use to prevent their capture by North Koreans. The so-called "AirLand Battle" strategy developed in the mid-1970s added an element of preemption, calling for quick, deep strikes into North Korean territory and against underground facilities. The withdrawal of tactical and battlefield nuclear weapons on a worldwide basis in late 1991 did little to diminish the threat as perceived by Pyongyang, since Washington openly continued its rehearsals for a long-range nuclear strike on North Korea."⁵

In the years immediately following the Korean War, North Korea built enormous underground tunnels and facilities in mountain redoubts, from troop and material depots to munitions factories, and even subterranean warplane



North Korean military forces both expanded and redeployed in the late 1970s as a response to the AirLand Battle doctrine

The U.S. Vice President Mike Pence visits the truce village of Panmunjom in the Demilitarized Zone on the border between South and North Korea, after the latter failed in its attempt to test another missile, on April 17, 2017.

AFP PHOTO / JUNG YEON-JE



hangars. North Korea is said to have some 15,000 underground facilities of a security nature. North Korean military forces both expanded and redeployed in the late 1970s as a response to the AirLand Battle doctrine.

A sense of Soviet betrayal and abandonment fears gave further impetus to the DPRK's nuclear deterrent development. When the Kremlin announced in 1990 that it would normalize relations with Seoul, the DPRK stated that this would mean an end to the DPRK-USSR alliance and that Pyongyang would have “no other choice but to take measures to provide for ourselves some weapons for which we have so far relied on the alliance.”⁶

In the 1990s and since, Pyongyang's nuclear card has consistently been a very potent and fungible instrument for negotiating regime security-cum-survival. In 1993 and 1994, the North Korean nuclear issue emerged for the United States as the single greatest “crisis.” After a year of back and forth actions and reactions, including the suspension of withdrawal from the NPT, alleged tampering with IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) seals, a newly announced intention to leave the IAEA, and attempts by the UN Security Council to impose sanctions, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter went to Pyongyang where he received Kim Il Sung's personal pledge to freeze and eventually dismantle North Korea's nuclear program. This catalyzed the revival of U.S.-DPRK negotiations at a time when the United States was veering dangerously toward military action against North Korea. The Clinton administration learned the

hard way that the United States had no viable alternative but to accept North Korea's package-deal proposal that culminated in the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework (AF) of October 21, 1994.

But, unwilling to use its limited political capital, the Clinton administration backpedaled on implementing America's "nonbinding" obligations. A more important, albeit unspoken, critical threshold assumption underlying the U.S. backpedaling was the unfounded belief that North Korea would collapse within either six months or three years. Why not wait?

Having transitioned from passive containment to a form of passive engagement, Washington had little to do with North Korea until 1998, when a new "threat" (the August 1998 launch of the Taepodong-1 missile that passed through Japanese air space) ushered in another U.S.-DPRK standoff characterized by a more vigorous pursuit of engagement. In response, President Clinton drafted his former Secretary of Defense, William Perry, to conduct a thorough review and assessment of U.S. policy toward North Korea.

The Perry Report, issued in October 1999, noted the centrality of the AF and called for a two-track approach of step-by-step engagement and normalization with a concurrent posture of deterrence. The report stressed that a policy of regime change and demise – "a policy of undermining the DPRK, seeking to hasten the demise of the regime of Kim Jong Il" – was one of four policy options considered, but rejected.

Indeed, the second half of 2000 witnessed a flurry of Pyongyang-Washington interactions, including a quasi-summit meeting between President Clinton and Vice Marshal Jo Myong-Rok in Washington and then a remarkable meeting between Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Chairman Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang. These meetings yielded significant progress toward improving U.S.-DPRK relations. By the end of 2000, however, the "grand bargain" fell between the cracks, due largely to the transition to the Bush administration.

Under Bush, it was not North Korea itself but Clinton's North Korea policy that had a crash landing. Despite Pyongyang's immediate condemnation of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and subsequent accession to international conventions on terrorism, 9/11 became the enabler for the Bush

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halt shipments of heavy fuel oil to North Korea. Pyongyang reacted by announcing that it would reactivate a nuclear power program at Yongbyon – a program that had been suspended under the AF– and then started dismantling IAEA monitoring equipment at the Yongbyon nuclear facilities.

The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq beginning in March 2003 signaled to Pyongyang that the changes in Washington were more than simply doctrinal. As it became clear that the United States was looking for regime change in North Korea as well, the sense of urgency increased. To Kim Jong Il, U.S. military deployments around the Korean peninsula at this time were indistinguishable from preparations for regime-decapitating air strikes similar to those launched against Iraq.⁷

Meanwhile the first few months of 2003 witnessed Beijing’s uncharacteristically proactive mediation/shuttle diplomacy in an effort to prevent the U.S.-DPRK nuclear standoff from spiraling out of control. The logic of Beijing’s preventive diplomacy was to avert the crystallization of conditions under which Pyongyang could calculate that lashing out –to preempt America’s preventive strike, as it were– would be a rational course of action, even if ultimate victory were impossible. From Beijing’s perspective, the perverse and self-defeating consequences of the Bush administration’s evil-state strategy were seen as aiding and abetting hard-liners in Pyongyang and fueling compensatory brinkmanship behavior.

China’s mediation/shuttle diplomacy facilitated multilateral dialogues among the concerned Northeast Asian states. Whereas in 1994 China wanted the United States and the DPRK to handle their dispute bilaterally, in 2003 China succeeded in drawing North Korea into a unique regional, multilateral setting that Pyongyang –and Beijing– had previously foresworn: the Six-Party

administration to pursue whatever policies it wanted. For North Korea the most critical threat was Bush’s “Axis of Evil” State of the Union speech in January 2002, in which Washington’s rogue-state strategy was upgraded to an evil-state regime-change strategy. A series of radical shifts in America’s military doctrine made it increasingly evident that this was more than mere rhetorical posturing.

In November 2002, the United States announced its decision to

Talks. This was made possible by a “*qiutong cunyi*” formula (“seeking common ground while preserving differences”) of allowing “bilateral talks within the six-party talks framework” for the much-delayed fourth round of talks. Chinese diplomats are reported to have been even-handed to a fault in producing five successive drafts of a possible joint statement designed to seek common ground between the U.S. and North Korean positions during the second and final phase of the fourth round of talks. By September 17, 2005, China’s fifth and final draft of a possible Joint Statement became acceptable to all five parties other than the United States, thus reaching a breakthrough or breaking point.

China was the most critical factor in achieving a group consensus in the form of the Joint Statement of Principles. The Joint Statement was issued by the participants in the fourth round of Six-Party Talks process on September 19, 2005, the first-ever successful outcome of the on-again, off-again multilateral six-party dialogue of more than two years.

But further progress came to a screeching halt one day later with the U.S. imposition of financial sanctions in the form of designating a small Macao bank, Banco Delta Asia (BDA), as a primary money laundering outfit. With the Six-Party Talks process stalled, Pyongyang raised the ante, testing missiles in July 2006 and a nuclear device in October 2006. Successful October 2007 bilateral negotiations between the United States and the DPRK on the BDA issue –perhaps thanks in part to North Korea’s October 2006 nuclear test– permitted the resumption of the Six-Party Talks and two major implementation agreements on February 13, 2007 and October 3, 2007.

By early to mid-2008 North Korea seemed serious enough in going along with the process of denuclearization and improved U.S. relations. Pyongyang provided Washington in May with over 18,000 pages of documents on its plutonium program going back to the early 1990s, and in June with the long delayed declaration covering its nuclear facilities, the amount of plutonium produced and extracted, and how it was used. In late June, North Korea allowed the spectacular televised destruction of the cooling tower at the Yongbyon nuclear reactor.

And yet that July the unraveling of the landmark implementation process began when Washington presented Pyongyang with a new sweeping verification plan. Under the new proposal Washington would have “full access to any site, facility or location” deemed relevant to the nuclear program, including military facilities.” David Albright, a former weapons inspector in Iraq, said this would be “completely unacceptable to any country’s sovereignty” and amounted to “a license to spy on any military site they have.”⁸ At the same time, the DPRK Foreign Ministry complained that it had already disabled 80 percent

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of its main nuclear complex but had received only 40 percent of the promised energy shipments, and it warned that it would move on to the next phase of denuclearization only when it has been awarded all the energy aid and political benefits promised under the deal.⁹

Even without Kim Jong Il’s guidance, Pyongyang went much further in the disablement process than in the first U.S.-DPRK nuclear standoff, only to receive much less in return. Pyongyang had gained neither promises of normalization nor even any glimpse of the hoped-for light water reactors (LWRs), though these had been part of the AF. It is no surprise that the voices in Pyongyang saying that engagement policies were ineffective became louder.

Pyongyang’s high hopes for a new “engagement” direction in the Obama administration’s North Korea policy appear to have crashed as well. Almost unnoticed in the lead-up to an April 5, 2009 rocket/missile launch, the Obama administration had already backpedaled from its campaign promise of direct negotiation and “new diplomacy,” initiating instead a trilateral mobilization of threatening military force – up to nine Aegis destroyers, submarines, surveillance aircraft, satellites, and radar systems of the United States, Japan, and South Korea, as well as the highly provocative March 9–20 U.S.-ROK Key Resolve joint war games, which mobilized 50,000 men and an armada of ships and fighter planes to rehearse renewed peninsular war.

The Obama administration seemed to be “grabbing with two hands” – one wobbly hand continually urging Pyongyang to return to the negotiating table in the Six-Party Talks while with the other hand firmly holding onto sanctions. Even on the role of nuclear weapons the promise-versus-performance gap remained unabated, as “the same Barack Obama who had promised at Prague in April 2009 to ‘reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy’ also promised, in the Joint Vision Statement with South Korea’s President Lee Myung-bak, to maintain ‘extended [nuclear] deterrence’ against North Korea.”

In 2014 President Obama ordered Pentagon officials to step up their cyber and electronic strikes against North Korea’s missile program in hopes of sabotaging



test launches in their opening seconds, and soon a large number of North Korea's military rockets began to explode, veer off course, disintegrate in midair, and plunge into the sea.¹⁰ In short, Obama's policy of "strategic patience" was nothing more than containment by another name, to wit: a "patient" policy of continuously seeking to contain and undermine through sanctions, military maneuvers, boycotts, and so forth.

Xi Jinping vs. Donald Trump in the "Third Nuclear Crisis"

At the onset of 2017, the global security situation worsened as the global community failed to effectively come to grips with humanity's most pressing existential threats: nuclear weapons and climate change. *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* set the hands of the symbolic Doomsday Clock at two and a half minutes to midnight, giving President Trump as the main reason for this two-sided crisis situation. While the 2015 Paris Climate Accord was a major step forward in coping with the challenges of climate change, there was little progress toward global nuclear disarmament. To the contrary, the two nuclear superpowers –the United States and Russia– remained at odds in a variety of conflict zones, from Syria to Ukraine to the borders of NATO, even as they continued wide-ranging modernizations of their nuclear weapons. With threats of nuclear warfare in the background from the India-Pakistan conflict, the long shadow of America's nuclear threats continues in an endless series of crime-and-punishment sanctions against nuclear North Korea.

An unidentified mobile rocket launcher is displayed during a military parade marking the 105th anniversary of the birth of late North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung, in Pyongyang on April 15, 2017.

AFP PHOTO / ED JONES

America's military and industrial complex, as if yearning to become great again, has now become a "military-industrial-presidential complex," as made manifest in Trump's budget proposal for 2018

In certain respects President Trump's "America First" agenda of anti-globalization, anti-UN, and anti-Paris Climate Accord is a godsend to Globalizing China. In stark contrast with America's worldview, President Xi Jinping offered a vigorous defense of globalization in his first-ever keynote speech at the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland on January 17, 2017, three days prior to Donald Trump's inauguration. Xi's speech, titled "Jointly Shoulder Responsibility of Our Times, Promote Global Growth," was all about China's embrace of economic globalization.¹¹ The highly nuanced view of globalization was remarkable: "economic globalization is a double-edged sword" and "voices against globalization have laid bare pitfalls in the process of economic globalization that we need to take seriously." As if also to remind the global audience about Donald Trump's claim during his campaign that "climate change is a Chinese hoax directed at the U.S. economy," Xi stated: "We should meet the challenges of climate change." Herein lies the largest contrast between Xi and Trump, as well as between Obama and Trump (who defiantly withdrew the U.S. from the Paris Climate Accord on June 1, 2017).

Even more revealingly, in a lengthy (54 minute) keynote address at the UN's European headquarters in Geneva on January 18, 2017, President Xi called for a world without nuclear weapons: "Nuclear weapons, the Sword of Damocles that hangs over mankind, should be completely prohibited and thoroughly destroyed over time to make the world free of nuclear weapons."¹² In contrast, Trump said in a tweet "the United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes." Apparently having read or learned about Graham Allison's book, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap* (2017), President Xi stated: "As long as we maintain communication and treat each other with sincerity, the 'Thucydides trap' can be avoided." Xi also invoked "common security" and "absolute security": "We should build a world of common security for all through joint efforts. No country in the world can enjoy absolute security." All that said, however, there can be some discrepancy between policy pronouncements (words) and policy performance (deeds) in China's (or any state's) foreign policy.

In mid-April 2017 the U.S.-DPRK nuclear confrontation escalated to a new high, beginning a third nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula. U.S. Vice President Pence said on a visit to South Korea that the "era of strategic patience is over." Speaking at the DMZ, Pence cited recent high-profile bombings in Syria and Afghanistan as proof of President Trump's willingness to use force if necessary.

America's military and industrial complex, as if yearning to become great again, has now become a "military-industrial-presidential complex," as made manifest in Trump's budget proposal for 2018: a \$54 billion (9 percent) boost in annual spending for the Pentagon alongside dramatic cuts to the State Department (29 percent), the Department of Health and Human Services (16 percent), and the Environmental Protection Agency (31 percent).

True to form, the Trump administration took a series of unprecedented military *actions* in the first half of 2017. First, the United States and South Korea (ROK) held their annual Key Resolve command-and-control exercise from March 8 to 23. The ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command also simultaneously held the eight-week-long Foal Eagle exercise in March and April, involving a series of several joint and combined field training operations conducted by air, ground, naval, and special operations forces.

Second, the U.S. Navy is sending an unprecedented third carrier strike force—the Nimitz group, Carrier Strike Group 11—to join the strike groups centered around the USS Carl Vinson and the USS Ronald Reagan. The Nimitz group was to deploy to the Middle East but has now been rerouted to the Western Pacific because of the tensions on the Korean peninsula. Three aircraft carrier strike groups have never before been deployed to the Korean peninsula.

Third, the U.S. military announced on the eve of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's Asia trip that it will permanently station attack drones in South Korea (the Gray Eagle Unmanned Aerial System). The drones have upgraded reconnaissance and surveillance technology over that of the predator drones widely used by the U.S. in the Middle East.

Fourth, the CIA chose the day after Moon Jae-in's victory in the South Korean Presidential election to announce that it had established a Korea Mission Center "to harness the full resources, capabilities, and authorities of the Agency in addressing the nuclear and ballistic missile threat posed by North Korea."¹³

Fifth, an American Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system arrived in South Korea on March 6, 2017, and became operational on May 2, a week before the South Korean presidential election. The prospect of DPRK missile launches, Key Resolve and Foal Eagle exercises, and the South Korean presidential election apparently induced the United States to expedite deployment of a THAAD unit to South Korea ahead of the previously planned deployment later in the year.

THAAD is having far-reaching negative geostrategic repercussions for Northeast Asia. For North Korea it serves as another incentive for accelerating its long-range missile capability, including such countermeasures as develop-

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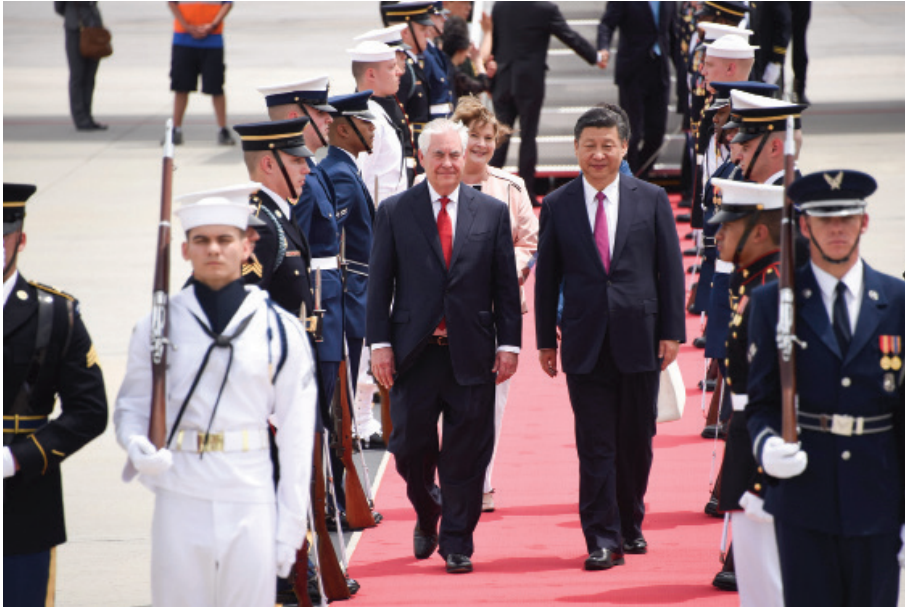
ing a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) that would render THAAD useless. Japan is engaged in operating two THAAD radar units and co-developing a more advanced missile defense system with the United States. At the same time, North Korea’s nuclear and missile “threats” have been used to justify the drive to expand Japan’s military capability and weaken constitu-

tional constraints on its military. Chinese reactions are driven by their perception that THAAD is intended not to protect South Korea but rather to serve as part of U.S. global missile defense systems. Misplaced overconfidence in missile defense could prompt Trump to think he can escalate in response to another North Korea nuclear or missile test without having to worry about a potential North Korean nuclear response. This would greatly increase the risk of armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the familiar *danse macabre* has continued unabated with each North Korean nuclear weapons or missile test, giving rise to U.S./UN sanctions and a vicious and deadly cycle of interactive security dilemmas. The UN Security Council (UNSC) first imposed sanctions on Pyongyang in 2006 over its ballistic missile and nuclear programs and has increased the sanctions measures in response to four more nuclear tests and multiple long-range missile launches.

The widely anticipated nuclear test on April 15, 2017, the biggest holiday in North Korea, did not happen. On June 2, 2017, however, the UN Security Council passed another sanctions resolution (Resolution 2356) targeting and adding 18 North Korean officials and entities to the current blacklist of 39 individuals and 42 North Korean entities already under UN sanctions. This is the first UNSC resolution since the anti-UN Trump administration took office. The measures in Resolution 2356 could have been agreed to by the Security Council’s North Korea sanctions committee behind closed doors, but Washington pressured China to back a public vote on the blacklist. The resolution did not, however, contain some of the biting sanctions measures the Trump administration had pushed in previous months, such as an oil embargo, a ban on maritime shipping, trade restrictions, and curbs on North Korean workers abroad.

Meanwhile, in a departure from past patterns, China-U.S. differences on nuclear North Korea were laid bare for the public. Chinese Ambassador Liu Jieyi described current tensions as “complex and sensitive” but added that there remained “a critical window of opportunity” to return to “the right track of seeking a settlement through dialogue and negotiations.” He then offered the



U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson greets the Chinese President Xi Jinping as he arrives in Florida on April 6, 2017.

AFP PHOTO /
MICHELE EVE
SANDBERG

understated reminder that all progress with Pyongyang on eliminating nuclear weapons from the Korean peninsula has come through dialogue.

America's inexperienced UN ambassador Nikki Haley, on the other hand, responded with the longstanding party line –disarmament first, negotiation later: “We want a negotiated solution, but North Korea must fulfill its basic obligations by first stopping all ballistic missile launches and nuclear weapons testing and taking concrete steps towards getting rid of its nuclear weapons program.” This is a variation on Vice President Dick Cheney's mantra: “We do not negotiate with evil, we seek to destroy it.” But she added: “Beyond diplomatic and financial consequences, the United States remains prepared to counteract North Korean *aggression* through other means, if necessary.”

Constantly invoking “North Korea's nuclear provocations/aggression” has become a favorite sport for the UN Security Council in recent years, with an endless series of sanctions passed. Nuclear India joined this game in April 2017 –taking a free ride on its own nuclear weapons– by banning all trade with North Korea (except for food and medicine) in compliance with the sanctions resolutions. As noted above, the United States has invoked “North Korean nuclear aggression” to justify ever more sophisticated and expensive antimissile technologies and nuclear weapons systems. On May 4, 2017, the U.S. House of Representatives joined the game when it approved on a 419–1 vote a new sanctions resolution against North Korea, targeting North Korea's shipping industry and people (Russians) who employ North Korean “slave labor abroad.”

This “red herring” game is conceptually misleading and practically self-defeating. Conceptually, North Korea’s nuclear “provocations” and “aggression” are conflated into the one whole (nuclear aggression). We may ask whether we have seen any changes in North Korea’s *actions* stemming from having this nuclear arsenal. Robert Carlin and Robert Jervis, in their well-reasoned and well-documented empirical analysis of Nuclear North Korea, conclude that:

the short answer is no. Apart from bolder rhetoric and more threatening propaganda, there has been very little in the way of unusual or enhanced aggressive action over the past five years. What have been labeled ‘provocations’ consist almost entirely of North Korean test launches, possibly improving capabilities but by themselves posing no immediate threat nor necessitating a military response. A nuclear test in 2013 –the North’s third, and widely considered its most successful to date– was an unwelcome development, but even that was not in itself an act of aggression.¹⁵

Pragmatically, international sanctions are self-defeating and counterproductive, as they offer more incentives for North Korea to push ahead with additional development and production of new weapons for existential deterrence. There are a great variety of reasons and factors as to why sanctions are not working and even counterproductive: (1) smuggling is common along the China-DPRK border; (2) Beijing is just as fearful about how Pyongyang might react if it is backed into a corner; (3) Beijing doesn’t want to be seen as engaging in regime change; (4) helping destabilize North Korea might create an unmanageable refugee crisis in Northeast China; (5) when all is said and done, North Korea still remains China’s strategic buffer; and (6) Chinese leverage is not equivalent to Chinese control.¹⁶

Toward a Common Security Solution

Any effective security paradigm must address the legitimate concerns and interests of all its members. Common security takes on special significance and urgency in the context of the divided Korean peninsula, given its position as a sensitive flashpoint and strategic pivot of Northeast Asia. In this environment, as elsewhere, we have to start from the premise that there has never been and never can be *absolute* security. No lesser realist than Henry Kissinger spotlighted the basic flaw in any quest for it: “The desire of one power for absolute security means the absolute insecurity for all the others.”¹⁷ Because so much U.S. perception of other states’ levels of cooperativeness has been viewed through the Manichean lens of 9/11 –states are either for us or against us (Ambassador Haley’s mantra in the Security Council)– the danger exists of speeding up security-dilemma dynamics, perhaps even transitioning Pyongyang into more irreversible nuclear directions. The quest for absolute security is a sure recipe for nuclear proliferation.

The common-security approach breaks away from the vicious cycle of interactive security dilemmas and the dynamics of self-fulfilling prophecies via their impact upon the behavior of other states. To follow a common-security approach that relies on recognizing the interrelations and interdependencies among countries, Washington must step back and reassess the moral and practical implications of its foreign-policy commandment “Do as I say, Not as I do” when it comes to the issue of nuclear weapons.

In the last two years, and especially since mid-April 2017, there have emerged several hopeful but underappreciated signs of movement toward common security. First, the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK), the founding and ruling party of the DPRK, held its 7th Congress on May 6, 2016 after a 36-year hiatus. While there is no surprise that Kim Jong Un was reconfirmed as the leader of the party and the ruler of the country, the congress took a major step back from the first strike doctrine by announcing that “we will not use nuclear weapons first unless aggressive hostile forces violate our independence with nuclear weapons.” Not only did this announcement add an authoritative interpretation of the North’s domestic law on nuclear forces but, more significantly, it reversed the nuclear first-strike posture with the unexpected “no first use” doctrine. This move was followed on July 6, 2016 by a more concrete proposal for a denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Notably, the statement was issued by a spokesperson for the DPRK government invoking, for the first time since 2013, “the will left by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il” to denuclearize the peninsula.¹⁸

Second, after ten years of conservative rule, South Korea now has a progressive President in Moon Jae-in, who is seemingly determined to revive the Sunshine policy of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-Hyun administrations.

Third, China’s repeated appeals to return to “the right track of seeking a settlement through dialogue and negotiations” represent the most hopeful sign given China’s economic and geopolitical leverage on North Korea. China voiced opposition to North Korea’s fifth nuclear test (September 9, 2016) while calling for an early resumption of the Six-Party Talks in order to solve the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue through political means.¹⁹

Fourth, as the U.S.-DPRK nuclear confrontation was heating up, female peace activists from more than forty countries, including North and South Korea, urged President Trump to defuse military tensions and start negotiating for peace to



Only by taking steps to revive the notion of common security, largely by a legally binding peace treaty or non-aggression treaty, can U.S.-DPRK relations and Northeast Asian international relations come to rest on a more stable, safe, and sane footing

prevent war from erupting on the Korean Peninsula. “We are united by our belief that diplomacy is the only way to resolve the nuclear crisis and threat of war now facing the Korean Peninsula,” said their letter to President Trump, dated April 26, 2017. The letter was also signed by North Korea’s Socialist Women’s Union. This was significant, according to Christine Ahn, international coordinator for Women Cross DMZ, a group of female peace activists that helped organize the letter campaign, “because like other organizations in the North, it would not act independently of the wishes of the central government in Pyongyang.”²⁰

Fifth, worried over what they described as President Trump’s erratic behavior, 64 Democratic legislators urged him on May 23, 2017, to talk directly to the North Koreans –and warned that he would need congressional approval for any pre-emptive military strike. “Few decisions are more needing of debate than a move to launch attacks, or declare war, on a nuclear-armed state such as North Korea,” read a letter signed by the lawmakers, led by Representative John Conyers Jr. of Michigan, the last Democrat in Congress to have served in the Korean War.²¹

To revive the Six-Party Talks, Beijing has to do more than issue perfunctory diplomatic appeals. First of all Beijing must resume its proactive mediation/shuttle diplomacy to acquire Pyongyang’s consent. Given what happened to Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi and the lessons Pyongyang learned, the often repeated mantra –denuclearization first, cooperation later– is a deal-killer, not a deal-maker. And pacifying North Korea’s insecurity by formally ending the Korean War with a peace treaty, establishing diplomatic relations, allowing membership in keystone multilateral economic institutions, and providing humanitarian food aid would cost little but would go a long way in building mutual trust and confidence in the negotiation process.

The abolition of nuclear weapons requires that we understand why North Korea chose to go nuclear in the first place. After some twenty-three years of on-again, off-again U.S.-DPRK confrontation and negotiation, it now seems clear that Pyongyang will not give up its nuclear and missile programs without sufficient evidence of the end of U.S. enmity and its crime-and-punishment strategy. Only by taking steps to revive the notion of common security, largely by a legally binding peace treaty or non-aggression treaty, can U.S.-DPRK relations and Northeast Asian international relations come to rest on a more stable, safe, and sane footing. ■

Endnotes

1. For an excellent analysis of U.S.-China competition in Asia including the Korean Peninsula, see Lowell Dittmer, *China’s Asia: Triangular Dynamics since the Cold War*, (Lanham: MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, forthcoming), chapters 2 and 5.
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