



The Stalker State: North Korean Proliferation and the End of American Nuclear Hegemony

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By Peter Hayes

Three US administrations have failed to avoid North Korean breakout from the Non-Proliferation Treaty and a gaping hole in the IAEA safeguards system. Nuclear war is once again conceivable in Korea after a brief interlude in the early 1990s when this prospect all but disappeared. The North's announcement on October 4, 2006 that it intends to test a nuclear weapon underscores this failure.



A TV monitor in Seoul following the announcement of North Korea plans to conduct a nuclear test

So long as the Cold War threat environment persisted, the United States was able to construct and sustain a system of nuclear hegemony that revolved around shared understandings of the role played by US nuclear weaponry in deterring Soviet and Chinese nuclear threats to regional states. These understandings were shared by both Washington's allies and its antagonists, the Soviet Union and China. The United States used its overwhelming power to curtail the nuclear aspirations of its allies in the midst of the Cold War, and entered into an explicit bargain wherein local elites surrendered their nuclear sovereignty in return for not only extended deterrence but also the assurance that they would not be faced by further nuclear proliferation in their neighbourhood.

However, this system proved completely incapable of encompassing North Korea, a country profoundly affected by decades of nuclear threat from the United States and insulated by virtue of its geopolitical position from any external influence that might have been exerted by its erstwhile allies, the Soviet Union and China, – until it was too late.

In light of this dismal record, two questions need answering. First, why did US nuclear hegemony fail so completely to curtail Pyongyang's nuclear challenge? Second, was this outcome inevitable, or are there lessons from this decade of nuclear confrontation that might lead the DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapons, even at this late stage?

Stalking the United States

The DPRK nuclear challenge came at the same time that US nuclear strategy became highly contested within its own alliance system. Allied elites were increasingly disaffected by US unilateralism on the one hand, and the inability of the global non-proliferation regime to halt the spread of nuclear weapons on the other. A DPRK nuclear breakout effectively nullifies the bargain underpinning US nuclear hegemony and we can see the effects of this shift unfolding in the region.

Ironically, the DPRK first tried to use the nuclear threat to establish a dialogue and eventually achieve a security relationship with its nuclear arch enemy, the United States. The latter notion was so improbable that almost the entire US security establishment was unable to discern, recognize or respond to the North Koreans except in orthodox strategic terms of projecting more nuclear threat, thereby almost guaranteeing that the DPRK would proliferate. The more the DPRK tried to evoke a response from the United States with nuclear threat, the more it was spurned; this in turn generated even more outrageous responses from North Korea, until it finally left the non-proliferation regime.

Unsurprisingly, North Korea's 'stalker' strategy was bound to fail. In part, the United States was unmoved because it had other, more important concerns and could afford simply to ignore North Korea's threat and rely on raw power to respond rather than negotiate on Pyongyang's terms. At

a strategic level, therefore, the DPRK's use of nuclear weapons to stalk the United States in an attempt to obtain a security relationship was flawed from the start – extortion can only breed distrust and worsen relations – and left the DPRK in an exhausted, ruinous condition, possibly near collapse and uncertain as to its ability to survive in the long term.

Conversely, the failure of the nuclear hegemon to overcome nuclear threat from a small state has damaged badly US leadership in the region as well as the global non-proliferation system. North Korea's apparently successful proliferation of nuclear weapons poses the possibility of a chain reaction of proliferation in East Asia involving Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and possibly Australia, Indonesia and even Burma in the long run as states abandon their acquiescence to US nuclear hegemony.

How did we get to the point where the North is now preparing to conduct a nuclear test? The response to the North's challenge of the Bush Administration, already consumed with the global war on terror and the escalating costs of the occupation of Iraq, was to launch in April 2003 multilateral negotiations involving the two Koreas, Russia, Japan, China and the United States, hosted by China. By December 2005, four rounds of these six-party talks had failed to deliver any concrete commitment by Pyongyang to reverse its nuclear weapons programme. Instead, faced with US obduracy, the DPRK escalated first by hinting, then declaring with increasing volume, that it had made weapons-grade plutonium metal (even handing a leading US nuclear weapons expert a chunk of the metal to examine in January 2004) and averring that it had 'weaponized' this material. For its part, the United States continued to refuse to engage the DPRK on a bilateral basis, insisting that China and the other regional powers should wrestle the DPRK to the ground on the nuclear issue.

Faced with the virtual abdication of the US superpower in dealing directly with the DPRK, regional states began to cut their own deals with Pyongyang. The nascent strategic bifurcation of Northeast Asia into a China-led bloc including the two Koreas and a countervailing US-Japan bloc became apparent in 2005. The refusal of the United States to lead, its increasingly unilateral actions in the war on terror, and its insistence on faux diplomacy by insisting on the form of the Six-Party Talks without any real content in 2003–2005 may prove to be the low point in the decline of US nuclear hegemony. For the regional powers, it was obvious that the United States had no genuine intention of achieving the denuclearization of the DPRK, and no coercive capacity to impose it either.

For its part, by mid-2005 the DPRK had thrown out IAEA inspectors, broken the seals on the spent fuel stored at Yongbyon, and reprocessed that spent fuel, thereby acquiring perhaps 8 to 10 nuclear weapons' worth of fissile material. In February 2005, it declared outright that it had constructed nuclear weapons; and on 31 March, Kim Il Sung was cited as blessing Pyongyang's nuclear deterrent strategy as the way to achieve denuclearization of Korea in DPRK domestic propaganda, thereby fusing North Korean nationalism with nuclear weapons. The DPRK demanded co-equal treatment from the United States as a nuclear weapons state.

Thus, the core deal underlying US nuclear hegemony – that it would stop proliferation of nuclear weapons by adversaries of US allies on the one hand; and between nuclear weapons states, that it would not foster the spread of nuclear weapons among such key US allies as Germany and Japan on the other – had all but failed. By 2006 it was clear to all parties to the Korean nuclear conflict that the United States was strategically adrift in the region. The Bush Administration's last hurrah has been to try to press the Kim regime to capitulate on a range of peripheral matters such as narco-criminal and counterfeiting issues, but even this strategy seems to be backfiring as it is forcing the rapidly expanding legitimate trade in North Korea into corruptible channels rather than getting Pyongyang back to the Six-Party Talks. Since the end of 2005, the United States has imposed financial and shipping sanctions, and is now attempting to squeeze the DPRK leadership into submission or into collapse.

Compellence, Not Deterrence

So what is going on here? To most US policymakers, such DPRK claims to be recognized as an equal partner and to be willing move from a hostile to friendly relationship at this late stage seem preposterous, and are discounted as bizarre. Some view it as impossible for the DPRK to make such a move due to the state's alleged narco-criminal character, the "Soprano State" thesis. Others believe that the 'simplest' explanation of Pyongyang's behaviour – that the leadership has and always will put acquiring a strategic nuclear arsenal first and foremost in its priorities – is preferable until proven otherwise. Such analysts simply ignore any anomalies that are inconsistent with this approach or that indicate that DPRK motivations may be more nuanced and conflicting. Yet other analysts view statements from senior party figures, and even from Kim Jong Il himself, to the effect that a non-partisan US military might stay in Korea, as totally incredible and purely tactical in nature, aimed at splitting US alliances with South Korea or Japan. As one former US official who met with Kim Yong Sun put it, there may be less to this North Korean position than meets the eye.

It is useful, therefore, to return to the fundamental question of North Korean motivations in obtaining nuclear weapons. North Korea has not enunciated a nuclear doctrine for its claimed nuclear weapons. Translating an inferior and relatively tiny nuclear weapons arsenal of untested reliability into political and military terms may prove difficult. North Korea is not the only nuclear weapons state (assuming its claims to have nuclear weapons prove to be true) to face the daunting problem of converting a fourth-rate nuclear force into the currency of power and capacities in a way that can actually strengthen the regime once the first flush of nationalist pride wears off. Arguably, India faces a similar problem.

Yet Pyongyang's slow-motion proliferation is not easily explained by the theories that it is simply hell-bent on gaining nuclear weapons, or that it was induced to delay this programme by a relatively small pile of carrots under the Agreed Framework. The US ability to coerce the DPRK on objective power ratios has increased with time, not decreased. Pyongyang had nothing to gain by delaying its proliferation efforts by nearly a decade under the Agreed Framework, and there was little or nothing that the United States could have done in the mid-1990s to stop it. Thus, an alternative explanation is in order.

In my view, the DPRK used nuclear threat as a form of compellence of its own, to force the very much larger nuclear power, the United States, to engage it on critical security and regime survival issues. Such threats have been left deliberately ambiguous and its capacities to act on these implicit and explicit threats remain very opaque and uncertain. However, it is clear that the DPRK could threaten vital US interests with a nuclear weapon at the brink of a war in Korea, either directly in Korea or in Japan, or even against the United States itself.

It also plays on the fear, linked for many to the post-9/11 mentality, that the DPRK might sell nuclear materials or even whole weapons to other states or to non-state terrorist organizations. In the case of the DPRK, the nuclear weapon is a weapon of the weak and the desperate, but one with a very unusual levelling capacity due to its exceptional power. Given the rigid and tenacious US stereotypes about the DPRK's inability to change from a nightmarish child of the Cold War into something more compatible with post-Cold War international norms of state behaviour, Pyongyang used the nuclear threat to batter away at the American door.

This challenge to nuclear inequality goes to the heart of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and therefore, to the fundamental foundation of American nuclear hegemony. As Kim Yong Sun, then in charge of nuclear strategy in the Korean Workers' Party, explained to me in Pyongyang in 1991:

I'd like to compare the need for discussion between ourselves and the United States on the nuclear issue with two people sitting at a table, one wearing a big visible knife and the other unarmed. Is it acceptable for the armed one to demand inspection of the pockets of the unarmed one? We see that this is a superpower demand on a non-nuclear small country to be imposed unilaterally. (...) There might be big and small nations, but there can't be superior and inferior nations. There might be developed and developing countries, but there can't be dominating and dominated countries.

The DPRK has sought to use nuclear weapons not only to counter the US nuclear threat and other interrelated insecurities derived from the Korean division and war, a typical negative use of nuclear weapons. Pyongyang has also tried to gain a security relationship with Washington, due to its perception that it needs distant great-power allies to offset the proximate power of Japan, China, and Russia; and because it wants to avoid being crushed by South Korea, which is twice as large in population and fifty times bigger in terms of economy – and which has already been recognized by both China and Russia.

This positive use of nuclear weapons by an adversary rather than an ally is incomprehensible to Americans – that the North Koreans could imagine that they could be security partners with the United States. Yet this is what senior North Koreans have consistently said, and there is no reason to disbelieve them. There is no place in US nuclear ideology for an adversary who uses nuclear weapons to try to assert its right to achieve a security relationship with Washington. For this reason, US nuclear strategists failed to perceive what the North Koreans were doing, over and over again. Their stereotypes simply precluded this possibility. In my view, they were mistaken in shunning the various overtures from Pyongyang, such as that made by the now deceased party leader Kim Yong Sun, who said to me in 1993, referring to the need to put aside the profound conflicts dividing North Korea and the United States, "It is possible and probable to solve the nuclear issue by this direct dialogue. Koreans have a saying: 'Sword to sword: ricecake to ricecake'. It is time to throw away the sword and hold up the ricecake."

Of course, there are other reasons that explain why Americans may not have heard – or believed if they did hear – when DPRK leaders (including Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il) and diplomats stated that they were attempting to achieve a political breakthrough with the United States as their highest priority. The long stream of DPRK propaganda denouncing the United States in vitriolic terms, the propensity to use endless salami-slicing tactics in negotiations, maximalist demands to retain 'give-away' options in last-minute final compromises, and Pyongyang's action-reaction negotiating style, drowned these signals or rendered them incredible to US policy-makers. The harder the North Koreans beat their drums, the more difficult it became to hear what they were saying. The less Americans heard what they were saying, the more the United States responded with classical Cold War deterrence or compellence strategies, except for brief interludes of limited reassurance.

Regional Makeshift Repair

Barring a miraculous change in political culture and orientation in Washington and/or Pyongyang, the only way to repair the damage is for an authentically regional system of nuclear non-proliferation to be developed by local states, consistent with the global NPT/IAEA system. Such a system can be attached to the latter, but it must be developed and tailored to the needs of regional states to reduce the nuclear threat emanating from within the region. Over time, such an approach may render Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme less salient, and eventually lead to its dismantlement as part of inter-Korean rapprochement.

The obvious starting point for such an approach is to expand the scope and participation in the existing Korean Nuclear Weapons- Free Zone (NWFZ) declared in 1992 by the two Koreas to cover parts of China, the Russian Far East, Japan and Taiwan. At the outset, this could be as simple as attaching protocols for non-Korean signature to the Joint Denuclearization Declaration. Over time, other states could partly or completely accede to the commitments made in that declaration and apply these conditions to part or all of their territory.

In this regard, maintaining the ROK's non-nuclear commitments is now the highest non-proliferation imperative in the region. In the interim, it is critical to ensure that Japan does not seek nuclear weapons in response to a blatant demonstration of North Korean nuclear weapons capacity such as a nuclear test. In both instances, the role of independent policy analysts and the emergence of more influential civil society organizations may prove to be the essential missing ingredient for reinstating the non-nuclear status of these countries, currently deeply implicated in the nuclear alliance system and complicit in the US nuclear hegemony.

Finally, the impact of the North Korean breakout on US nuclear hegemony – built around the core deal that extended nuclear guarantees to allied states against nuclear threats from nuclear great powers, and promised to halt the spread of nuclear weapons to local enemies – is devastating. Many Americans still manage to delude themselves that the six-party talks somehow represented a masterpiece of US diplomacy that facilitated the 'coming out' of China as a responsible regional power while ensuring that North Korea, even if armed with nuclear weapons, will be isolated, contained, and eventually will somehow go away. It will be hard to maintain even the pretence that the six party talks were worthwhile in the recriminations that will follow a North Korean test.

In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. The reputation of the United States as a superpower and nuclear hegemon lies in tatters in East Asia. In effect, the United States has abdicated its hegemonic role, and left the locals to fend for themselves. Not surprisingly, they are doing so, and nowhere more so than in South Korea, now determined to stabilize nuclear-capable and shortly it appears undeniably nuclear-armed North Korea, and to diversify its great-power interdependencies away from almost sole reliance on the United States. Military procurement in South Korea now includes substantial purchases from the Russian Federation, much to the chagrin of US arms manufacturers.

Reducing the Risk of Nuclear Next-Use

Does it matter that a small hermitic state with almost no awareness of or commitment to international norms of political and interstate behaviour has nuclear weapons? Leaving aside the global cost of establishing that states not in compliance can get away with pulling out of the NPT, and ignoring the cost of on-going division and instability in Korea to Koreans and non-Koreans alike – a nuclear North Korea increases the risks of nuclear next-use in the coming decades.

If, as I have suggested, the DPRK has become a nuclear 'stalker state' that seeks to redress past wrongs and use nuclear leverage to force the United States to treat it in a less hostile and more respectful manner, then the United States will have to ask itself whether continued isolation and pressure on the regime is more likely, or less so, to ameliorate stalking behaviour in time of crisis, when the risk of nuclear next-use becomes urgent. Like a repeat offender, the DPRK is likely to continue to use nuclear threat to stalk the United States until it achieves what it perceives to be a genuine shift in Washington's attitude. Unlike an individual who stalks, there is no simple way to lock up a state that stalks another with nuclear threat.

Currently, the United States has no common language for discussing nuclear weapons with the North Korean military in the context of the insecurities that bind the two sides together at the Demilitarized Zone.

Continued rebuffing of Pyongyang's overtures may lead to more 'nuclear stalking' – that is, the development of creative and unanticipated ways of using nuclear threats, deployments, and actual use in times of crisis or war. There are no grounds to believe that the DPRK will employ a US or Western conceptual framework of nuclear deterrence and crisis management in developing its own nuclear doctrine and use options. Indeed, US efforts to use 'clear and classical' deterrent threats to communicate to North Koreans that 'if they do acquire WMD, their weapons will be unusable because any attempt to use them will bring national obliteration' – as Condoleezza Rice put it in her Foreign Affairs essay in 2000 – serve to incite the DPRK to exploit this very threat as a way to engage the United States, with terrible risks of miscalculation and first-use on both sides.

In fact, the scenario of nuclear next-use in Korea that is most worrisome is not the result of war involving the United States with its allies, and the DPRK: rather, it involves the consequences of the DPRK falling into a state of war with itself. Should the DPRK collapse violently, then its nuclear weapons or fissile material might be commandeered either for provocative use in order to draw the ROK into such a war by one or other faction in the DPRK, or simply spirited out of the country by the residual narco-criminal networks operating out of the DPRK and become available to another proliferating state or a non-state actor with nuclear aspirations. For this reason alone, it is urgent that the international community cooperate to stabilize the political and economic situation of the North Korea.

Such is the awesome power of nuclear weapons that there is no alternative.

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