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The Inflated Yet Unsolvables North Korean Nuclear Threat

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Introduction

After Pyongyang conducted its fourth nuclear test on the 5th of January 2016 and declared it a successful experiment with a hydrogen bomb, the international community resumed its appeals for finding a definitive solution to the issue with North Korea's nuclear arsenal. What impresses is the routine of the international response following the North Korean habitual act of defying the nuclear nonproliferation system: diplomatic condemnation mostly coming from the United States, South Korea, Japan, and, in a far more restrained manner – from China. When Pyongyang launched a satellite in space two days later, Seoul responded by shutting down the Kaesong industrial complex – a mutually beneficial industrial zone where South Korean companies employ North Korean labor¹. Even this seemingly harsh action does not constitute a precedent. At that time it was not very demanding to foretell the execution of consequential U.S. – South Korea military drills to display the U.S. resolution to be constantly involved in whatever is happening on the Korean Peninsula and to dismay the latest great leader of the North. Indications appear to suggest that China, completely in terms with its traditional business-as-usual foreign policy, would not apply overwhelmingly dutifully the up-to-date UNSC sanctions imposed on Pyongyang². Then, after months of expected scolding from abroad, Pyongyang remained true to its own behavioral logic and conducted a fifth nuclear test on September 9 2016, the repercussions of which are yet to unfold.

How did North Korea get its nukes? Why has the international reaction to the nuclear development of North Korea been so lukewarm, uninventive and self-contained for years? Should the international community seek far more effective measures to elicit North Korean cooperation in solving the nuclear issue and in the country's returning to the NPT as a non-nuclear-weapon state? Is such a goal even achievable? The following succinct historic hindsight and analysis of the Pyongyang's nuclear weapons development program and its functions aim at answering these particular questions.

¹ McKirdy, Euan and Kwon, K.J., South Korean Workers Leave Kaesong Industrial Park (CNN, February 12, 2016). Retrieved July 28 2016, from <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/11/asia/south-korea-kaesong-industrial-complex-closed/>

² Chunshan, Mu, Why China-North Korea Relations Can't Be Broken (The Diplomat, March 10, 2016). Retrieved July 28 2016, from <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/why-china-north-korea-relations-cant-be-broken/>

1. DPRK takes the juche road not travelled

North Korea and South Korea emerged as independent states in late 1940s, at the beginning of the Cold War and amidst Korean nationalistic upheaval for reunification without foreign intervention. For better or for worse both the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR) attributed the Korean Peninsula with geopolitical significance. On August 8 1945 the Soviet Union declared war against Japan and soon captured Pyongyang. In urgent need for domestic puppet leadership to administer the North for Soviet profit, Joseph Stalin assigned the political power to Kim Il-sung – a young Korean guerilla-fighter educated in China and trained in China and in the Soviet Union. With the crucial support of Moscow Kim Il-sung consolidated power in Pyongyang and established Korean people's Army (KPA) in February 1948. With Kim Il-sung rewarding himself the post of the prime minister, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) emerged as a new independent state on September 9. By the end of the year Soviet occupational forces withdrew from the country.

Kim Il-sung not only concentrated and maintained power within an adamant nucleus of trustworthy comrades, but also purged his competitors and critics as alleged American spies. Furthermore, although Kim Il-sung imitated and introduced theoretical paradigms from the communist ideologies of the USSR and China (the personality cult, the superiority of the proletariat, the unavoidable triumph of communism as the world's most progressive ideology, among others), the North Korean leader inaugurated his own dynasty – a move highly untypical for most communist leaders. That very action presented clearly the ultimate aim of Kim Il-sung's totalitarian regime: the unification of Korean Peninsula under the red communist banners of the North. The whole political-military system of Pyongyang, combining omnipresent revolutionary propaganda with military first political policy, maintained through austere planned economy, demanding ever-increasing efforts and self-sacrifice by the North Korean society, has been designed and designated as a means to achieve that nationalistic goal.

The foreign policy of the young DPRK employed undeviating yet relatively flexible maneuvering between the two neighboring communist giants and careful yet persistent attempts at charming them both. That sincere and practical clientelism practiced by Pyongyang became even more necessary in the years following the unsuccessful military aggression against South

Korea which marked the beginning of the Korean War (1950-53), in which total defeat was avoided only owing to China's intervention. North Korea's constant dependence on consistent import of resources, machinery and technologies motivated Kim Il-sung to copy Mao Zedong and to institutionalize a peculiar type of self-sufficient economy in DPRK. In 1955 Kim Il-sung introduced the doctrine of *juche*. Usually translated as "autonomy", "self-determination" or "self-reliance", according to Kim *juche* (or *chuch'e*) means "the independent stance of rejecting dependence on others and of using one's own powers, believing in one's own strength and displaying the revolutionary spirit of self-reliance." Ten years later Kim Il-sung elucidated the three fundamental pillars supporting the revolutionary vehemence of *juche*:

- political independence;
- economic self-sufficiency;
- dependence on one's own strength.

Despite considerable progress in establishing and propelling the heavy industry and in increasing agricultural production in the first decade following the Korean War, North Korea never built a truthful autarchy. On the contrary, the more Kim pushed forward with *juche*, the more reliant the country became on the colossal support it demanded from China, Soviet Union and the rest of the Soviet bloc. For attaining the outlined goals of the Three-Year Postwar Reconstruction Plan (1954–56), the Five-Year Plan (1957–61), and subsequent seven- and ten-year plans, North Korea remained dependent on the economic and military benevolent assistance and preferential trade with the Soviet Bloc states and China, with sporadic diversified purchases of advanced technologies from the Western world and Japan. Although Kim Il-sung became considerably skilled at maneuvering between the Soviet Union and China, he most probably realized Pyongyang's ever growing unpleasant, perhaps humiliating, military economic dependence on the benevolence of its communist allies. As Jonathan Pollack points out, "Like Mao, Kim was intent on building system that bore his direct imprint and was autonomous from the Soviet Union. He sought to differentiate *juche* from the policies of both of his external patrons"³.

³ Pollack, Jonathan D., *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security* (Routledge, May 17, 2011). Also Mansourov, Alexandre, *The Origins, Evolution, and Current Politics of the North Korean Nuclear Program* (*The Nonproliferation Review*, Spring-Summer 1995), pp.25-38.

Perhaps North Korea's treaties of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance with China and USSR have never been assessed by Kim Il-sung as sufficient for guaranteeing the political survival of the regime based in Pyongyang. Perhaps the North Korean leader got the obvious picture later. As declassified documents from former members of the Eastern Bloc demonstrate, in many cases of demanded assistance Kim received far less than what he almost pleaded for, which fostered his distrust towards the security guarantees he obtained. Therefore it is feasible to conclude that at some point Kim Il-sung fell victim to the classical abandonment dilemma and his fear of abandonment motivated him to launch a four-guideline military doctrine in 1962, requiring the following efforts: "instilling cadre potential in every soldier, modernizing the entire military, arming the entire population, and turning the whole territory into a fortress"⁴. The militarization of the everyday life and the irrefutable prioritization in favor of the army contributed greatly to the self-isolation of the DPRK, with the necessary exception of maintaining the indispensable relations with China, USSR and its satellite states.

In December 1967 Kim Il-sung delivered an illustrative speech during the First Session of the 4th Supreme People's Assembly, stating that "The government of the Republic will thoroughly implement the line of independence, self-subsistence, and self-defense...and increase the defense capabilities of the country so as to reliably safeguard its security on the basis of our own forces, by excellently materializing our Party's idea of *juche* in all fields". The speech, in its advocacy of self-sufficient military forces, could be regarded as a clear indication of Kim Il-sung's already formed vision of completely independent and self-reliant North Korea armed with nuclear weapons. Needless to say, Kim Il-sung witnessed the capitulation of Japan following the nuclear attacks conducted by the United States, the rapid rise to nuclear superpower status by Washington and Moscow, the further nuclear proliferation, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the military nuclear tests by the great powers and the showcase of the hydrogen bomb. During the Korean War both Truman and Eisenhower delivered perceptible threats of use of nuclear weapons, stating that Washington could use any weapon of its vast arsenal⁵. The United States displayed restraint in this regard; nonetheless the country did deploy missiles with nuclear warheads and nuclear artillery in South Korea⁶.

⁴ Yonhap News Agency, North Korea Handbook, Seoul (M.E.Sharpe, Inc., NY, 2003), p.676.

⁵ Walter Pincus, N. Korean Nuclear Conflict Has Deep Roots (Washington Post, October 15, 2006). Retrieved 5 August 2016, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/14/AR2006101401068.html>

⁶ Walter Pincus, N. Korean Nuclear Conflict.

2. The North Korean nuclear weapons development program

Due to the regime's isolationistic nature and Kim Il-sung's growing distrust towards his patrons, the lack of exact information regarding the time of his critical decision to commence an indigenous nuclear weapons development program is comprehensible. Some researchers of North Korean nuclear program such as Alexandre Mansourov infer that the nuclear intentions of Pyongyang have never been written down but only shared verbally with Kim's closest compatriots. Therefore, the time of the takeoff of the nuclear program itself cannot be estimated accordingly. Some researches presume that the nuclear decision was taken and the nuclear weapons development was started in the early 1960's. Mansourov and Jonathan Pollack have argued that Kim Il-sung's order to the North Korean Academy of Sciences, the Ministry of Public Security, and the KPA to launch a joint nuclear weapons development program has been issued at the beginning or middle 1970's and the program began taking shape at the end of that decade⁷.

In fact, North Koreans have started gathering nuclear expertise from middle 1950's, when nuclear physics departments were established at Kim Il-sung University and Kim Ch'aek Industrial College. In 1956 the Soviet Union and North Korea signed two agreements on nuclear research cooperation, which allowed training of North Korean scientists to take place in Soviet nuclear research centers, such as the Dubna Nuclear Research Complex. In 1959 the two countries signed an additional bilateral protocol for delivering a Soviet research-type nuclear reactor to North Korea. According to Mansourov, after the first generation of North Korean nuclear scientists returned to their country upon completion of their training and education at Dubna Nuclear Research Complex, the North Korean government established a similar complex in the Yongbyon area. In August 1965 the Soviet Union delivered a two MWt research reactor and a 0.1 MWt critical assembly under the 1959 additional protocol, whose thermal capacity was expanded by North Korean scientists to eight MWt by 1974. In 1974 North Korea joined the IAEA without adhering to the NPT and three years later signed a "Type 66" trilateral agreement

⁷ Pollack, Jonathan D., No Exit.

with the IAEA and the Soviet Union, which allowed the monitoring of the 2MW IRT-research reactor and 0.1MW critical assembly located at Yongbyon . The DPRK accession to the IAEA permitted its nuclear engineers to gain access to abounding technical information. It seems that by 1975, when North Korea conducted its first plutonium separation experiments, the DPRK scientists have accumulated the expertise necessary for putting in practice the arguably already taken decision for nuclear weapons development.

Presumably exactly in mid-70's – only after the DPRK became a member state of IAEA – the order already given by Kim Il-sung to commence the establishment of an indigenous nuclear arsenal found its technical justification, clarity with respect to the means for achieving it, and a relatively comprehensive plan for all the temporary goals that needed to be attained by the freshly set in motion nuclear weapons development program in order to weaponize the atom in all secrecy, far away from the inquisitive attention of the IAEA nuclear inspectors. Which are the chief factors that encouraged and probably predetermined Kim Il-sung's nuclear decision?

Daniel Pinkston - the North East Asia Deputy Project Director with the International Crisis Group in Seoul - considers the American nuclear threats aimed at China and North Korea for being the main impetus to the North Korean nuclear weapons development program⁸. Further, Pinkston points out some other probable nuclear proliferation factors: the strategically sensitive geographical location of the DPRK between USSR, which at that time was emerging as a nuclear superpower, and China – a state legitimately armed with nukes; the Korean unpleasant historical experience as being a favourite target of foreign invasions in the past, as well as North Korean dissatisfaction with its bilateral relation with both communist titans. The deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea that persevered long after Seoul abandoned its own plans for nuclear weapons development also nourished the nuclear ambitions of the North.

Alexandre Mansourov analyzes “four factors that brought about and shaped Kim Il-sung's nuclear ambitions”: the American nuclear attacks on Japan which allegedly greatly impressed the North Korean leader and turned him into a supporter of nuclear weapons; Kim Il-sung's shocking discovery in late 1950's that the United States has pondered the use of nuclear weapons against North Korean forces; the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, which Kim Il-sung regarded as Soviet Union's betrayal of its ally Cuba; and, finally, what Mansourov

⁸ Pinkston, Daniel A., North Korean Motivations for Developing Nuclear Weapons, (James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies).

describes as “the ultimate breaking point in Kim Il-sung’s mind” – South Korea’s own covert actions in setting up an indigenous program for nuclear weapons development.

Pollack reaches similar conclusions. Pollack also argues that Kim Il-sung has never been convinced that DPRK could and should always depend on China and the Soviet Union for its national defense. As mentioned, Pyongyang’s onerous demands for various assistance were rarely completely met by its two powerful totalitarian allies. At best, the provided support was conditional and temporal. In addition to Mansourov’s notion about the influence of Seoul’s own nuclear weapons program over the North’s strategy calculations, Pollack points out at the growing ties between South Korea and Japan. Having established diplomatic relations in 1965, Tokyo and Seoul’s “political and economic links advanced steadily in subsequent years”, which might have increased Kim Il-sung’s distress and diminished the already elusive chances for unification of the Korean peninsula under his leadership. Finally, according to Pollack, ensuring an abiding regime succession has gradually become an enlarging concern for Kim Il-sung and propelling force for implementing a stricter policy of further self-isolation of the DPRK. This argument has been confirmed by history itself. Ultimately Kim Il-sung did decide to preserve the supreme political power within his family, and in 1973 – one year before North Korea joined the IAEA – the leader chose his son Kim Chong-il as his successor by having him being appointed as the Workers’ Party secretary. Since it is feasible to conclude that the North Korea’s nuclear weapons development program has been initiated in early to middle 1970’s, it might be correct to presume that one of its main motivators was Kim Il-sung’s consideration for regime succession and preservation.

A similar observation has been made by Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig. They imply that the main mission of the North Korea’s nuclear weapons development program is “to keep a Kim in power, not to assure the security of the North Korean state or improve the welfare of the North Korean people”⁹. That notion is shared by Etel Solingen who argues that at the time of the onset of the nuclear weapons program of Pyongyang (beginning to middle 1970’s), North Korea has not been suffering acutely from the dilemma of abandonment, from the perception that great powers would sacrifice their weaker allies when it comes to defending their own national

⁹ Oh, Kongdan and Hassig, Ralph C., North Korea’s Nuclear Politics (in *Current History*, September 2004), 273.

interests. It should be mentioned that, although that argument is viable, the lack of trust in North Korean relationships with its benefactors should not be underestimated.

To begin with, the *juche* ideology by design strives to achieve self-efficient and self-sufficient national defense. Further, the Cuban missile crisis – a bitter proof regarding the limits of Soviet support, preceded the initial technological endeavors of the DPRK to weaponize the atomic energy. Therefore, it is feasible to consider that Kim Il-sung related the survival of North Korea as an independent state to the survival of his authoritarian regime. In the end it can be maintained that the leading motives for Pyongyang's nuclear weapons development were most likely two: first, the need to ensure the survivability of the regime against external interference or internal change and second, Kim Il-sung's yearning to preserve the power within his family. Later, when North Korea did lose all the support of the Eastern Bloc and China and the United States approached each other carefully during the years of rapprochement following the Sino-Soviet split of 1969, in Kim Il-sung's calculations appeared yet another consideration: how to obtain continuously considerable foreign assistance. That necessity that persists even today is a proof of the perceived inseparable connection between the physical survival of North Korea as a nation and the political survival of Pyongyang's elite first in Kim Il-sung's, and afterwards in Kim Jong-il's plans. As we shall see later, the DPRK has found the ideal means of demanding and obtaining foreign aid in its nuclear weapons development program and the concomitant self-controlled provocative actions. Kim Il-sung's nuclear ace stabilized his regime and through appropriate internal propaganda mobilized his supporters. At that time, the grand goal of a smooth power transition to his son Kim Jong-il has yet to be achieved.

During 1980s DPRK speeded up its nuclear weapons development program, although its regulated market failure and declining support from abroad turned that process into a series of uncontrolled suspension and resumption. In December 1985 the DPRK signed the NPT upon Soviet Union's insistence, but without the necessary safeguards agreement, stating that it would sign it after the withdrawal of the U.S. nuclear weapons from South Korea.

In late 1980's the Soviet Union and China accommodated their bilateral relations, which denied North Korea the opportunity to maneuver unperturbedly between the two communist giants. Moreover, both countries moved towards establishing full diplomatic relations with South Korea. Prosperous South Korea found the right way to lure diplomatically the Soviet Union, China and other communist regimes – through active diplomacy favoring trade over politics, thus

shattering the isolation imposed on it by the former Eastern Bloc. The stunning success of Seoul's approach became evident during the Seoul Olympics in 1988, which were attended by national teams of most communist states, including China and the Soviet Union; despite the desperate attempt of North Korean agents to disrupt the event by exploding a scheduled international passenger flight between Baghdad and Seoul. Two years later, Moscow established diplomatic relations with Seoul, followed by Beijing in another two years.

Undoubtedly, the end of the Cold War spelled additional problems for the DPRK. Soviet Union ceased its subsidies and aid to North Korea, China greatly reduced its assistance and recommended economic reforms, and, to make matters worse, maintaining privileged relationship with the impoverished and roguish DPRK held diminishing attractiveness for both great powers. The end of the communist rule in Eastern Europe meant to Pyongyang the cessation of other revenues of assistance as well. Further, Kim Il-sung was able to observe the fall from power and fate of fellow Eastern European dictators such as his friend Erich Honecker. To Kim, at least a temporary truce with South Korea became mandatory.

As if to justify a move towards a tangible North-South rapprochement, it appeared that the Zeitgeist of late 1980's was turning the international tides in North Korea's favor. In line with the revamped U.S. – USSR relations at the end of the Cold War, in September 1991 President George H.W. Bush declared the withdrawal of all ground-based and sea-based tactical nuclear weapons from the U.S. bases around the world. Regarding the U.S. forces deployed in South Korea, a complimentary decision to remove the few remaining U.S. nuclear warheads from the peninsula inspired seemingly ground-breaking progress in bilateral relations between North and South Korea. In November, the South Korean President Roh Tae Woo extended to North Korea his proposal for mutual consent upon general principles outlining the denuclearization of Korean peninsula. North Korea demanded complete withdrawal of the U.S. nuclear weapons from the peninsula. That was accomplished in December and publicly announced by the South Korean President, five days after the two Koreas signed the “Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North” on 13 December, mutually recognizing their systems and calling for a lasting peace and implementation of confidence-building measures. By late December, Pyongyang and Seoul engaged in discussions with respect to attaining Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons.

On 20 January 1992 both Koreas signed the “Joint Declaration of South and North Korea on Denuclearization of Korean peninsula”. Article I of the Declaration stipulated that “South and North Korea shall not test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons. In addition, both countries agreed to use “nuclear energy solely for peaceful purposes” and not to possess “nuclear reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities”¹⁰. In April 1992 North Korea adopted the full-scope safeguards agreement, allowing the IAEA experts to access its nuclear facilities.

Presumably in early 1990s North Korea completed the construction of an indigenous nuclear reactor at Yongbyon – a five MWe graphite-moderated reactor capable of providing fissile material for nuclear bombs, and has almost accomplished the construction of a reprocessing facility at the same site. By that time the U.S. reconnaissance has amassed enough proof related to the illegal nuclear activities of North Korea accusing Kim Il-sung of double play. To make the matters worse for Pyongyang, consecutive inspections by IAEA experts in North Korea in May, July and September 1992 discovered growing discrepancies between the data announced in DPRK’s reports on its nuclear activities and reality. The main issue of controversy became an undeclared reprocessing facility, described by Pyongyang as a “radiochemical laboratory”. According to IAEA experts who participated in the on-site inspections, North Koreans have underestimated the IAEA’s measurement capability. In February 1993 the IAEA demanded mandatory inspections from Pyongyang. On March 9 South Korea and the United States began their annual Team Spirit military exercise, which was cancelled the previous year, and on March 12 North Korea declared its withdrawal from the NPT. In June Pyongyang suspended its decision after the United States engaged with North Korea in a series of bilateral negotiations over the nuclear crisis.

Kim Il-sung put forward a comprehensive solution to the nuclear crisis – to discontinue DPRK’s nuclear weapons development program if the country was provided with light-water reactors for its energy needs. North Korea would allow the IAEA to carry out its general inspections and the country would remain an NPT member in exchange for cancellation of the Team Spirit exercises, further bilateral negotiations with the United States and lifting of the U.S. economic sanctions imposed after the Korean War. Later, Pyongyang announced another

¹⁰ The text of the Joint Declaration is available at: <http://fas.org/news/dprk/1992/920219-D4129.htm>

precondition for letting the IAEA experts do their job – productive negotiations between North and South Korea concerning the exchange of special envoys. As the time passed little progress was achieved in the negotiations between the United States and the DPRK, the Republic of Korea and the DPRK, and the DPRK and the IAEA. In March 1994 the IAEA withdrew its experts from North Korea stating that they were not allowed to verify that the country had not triggered the development of nuclear weapons. A few days later, during bilateral talks with South Koreans, North Korean officials warned that in case of war, Seoul would be turned into “a sea of fire”. During those crucial times a characteristic feature of Pyongyang’s nuclear diplomacy has become pretty conspicuous: North Korean regime never puts its survival at stake. No Kim would risk turning his nuclear bragging and actions of bold yet calculated defiance towards the NPT system into a real, desperate nuclear brinkmanship on the brink of fire-starting a hot war which would obviously put an end to the authoritarian regime. So when the United States started to reinforce its military presence in the South in concordance with Seoul’s own war preparations, Kim Il-sung prudently decided to use the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program in a far more pragmatic way - to elicit more favorable concessions from the United States along the line of the bilateral negotiations without sacrificing the program itself, and, in the same time, with the assistance of the national propaganda, to appear victorious over the “imperialists”.

The former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, quite popular at that time through his role in brokering exits out of complex international conflicts, provided the necessary chance to the Pyongyang’s regime to take a step back from exasperating the nuclear crisis and to save its face internationally. Moreover, the worsening economic situation in North Korea, further deteriorated by a series of floods and droughts in several consecutive years beginning in early 1990’s dictated that Pyongyang should attain international economic assistance as fast as possible. The private meeting with Carter allowed Kim Il-sung to conduct direct talks with a reputable American politician, and again – to appear victorious in the eyes of his nation. Carter also did not leave Pyongyang with empty hands. The positive outcome of his involvement was the negotiation of an agreement called the Agreed Framework.

The Agreed Framework of 1994 stipulated that the DPRK would shut down its 5MWe nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, freeze its nuclear program and ultimately dismantle its existent nuclear facilities in exchange for two 1000MWe light water reactors to be financed and built in the country by an international consortium led by the United States, South Korea and Japan by

2003. Until completion of the first light water reactor, DPRK would be provided with 500 000 tons of heavy fuel oil per year for its energy needs. DPRK would remain a party to the NPT and allow both routine and ad hoc inspections to be carried out by the IAEA. In addition, before completion of the light water reactors, DPRK would fully comply with its safeguard commitments. The DPRK would also refrain from reprocessing more spent fuel. Under the terms of the agreement, the United States would provide security assurances to the DPRK against the threat or use of nuclear weapons, and both countries would take steps in promoting the normalization of their political and economic relations.

As many of the analysts of the Agreed Framework tend to agree, from Kim Il-sung's standpoint, the agreement was necessary to break out of the isolation following North Korea's threat to leave the NPT and provocative diplomacy, and to find immediate revenues from abroad. Arranged personally by "The Great Leader", the agreement was a fitting legacy for his successor, and greatly contributed to enhancing the family's regime survivability by making a friend and a new benefactor out of its most formidable adversary – the United States, without actually disarming North Korea and immediately dismantling its nuclear weapons program. After the unexpected death of Kim Il-sung on 8 July 1994, the ongoing negotiations on the Agreed Framework became the first foreign policy test for Kim Chong-il, the new ruler of Pyongyang.

Most probably the urgent need for humanitarian assistance provided Kim Chong-il with the insight to propel the Agreed Framework. The conclusion of the Agreement on 21 October 1994 denoted U.S. recognition of the freshly inherited regime and gave the new leader the few years needed to solidify his power by distributing privileges to the North Korean top military echelon, by awarding his most faithful supporters with lucrative key posts within the army and through climbing up to the highest post in Pyongyang. At the end of 1997 Kim Chong-il was proclaimed the General Secretary of Workers' Party of Korea, and in 1998 he gained complete ascendancy over North Korean politics by becoming the country's top leader through his reelection for Chairman of the National Defense Commission of North Korea and a convenient constitutional amendment that declared that post to be "the highest post of the state". Since 1996 the much needed humanitarian aid started flowing into North Korea, and the Agreed Framework provided an exit from the regime's international isolation.

In 1998 North Korea launched a three-stage rocket, whose second stage flew over Japan and landed into the Pacific. The launch demonstrated Pyongyang's potential for launching

intermediate range ballistic missile, commemorated the inauguration of the new leader, displayed its dissatisfaction from the slow fuel supply in accordance with the Agreed Framework and aimed at speeding up the humanitarian assistance as well. Such kind of malicious action was not an uncommon tool for North Korean diplomacy. Time and again North Korea reminded its negotiating partners its desperate need for assistance with acts of limited aggression, for example the submarine infiltration into South Korea of 1996. Nonetheless under the leadership of Kim Chong-il that type of antagonistic behavior became utilized even more frequently at the cost of triggering temporary, short-lived regional security crises.

The U.S. concerns over North Korean missiles facilitated the conclusion of a lucrative deal with Washington over letting it inspect a suspected underground nuclear site. In September 1999, DPRK announced moratorium on further missile tests after intensive bargaining with the United States. President Clinton responded with declaring the lifting of most U.S. trade sanctions against Pyongyang. However, Pyongyang maintained unfailingly its policy of refusing any on-site inspections concerning its nuclear and missile development programs.

Most probably driven by the economic collapse and encouraged by the impact North Korea has had in global affairs with its nuclear and missile programs, Kim Chong-il sought to improve Pyongyang's relations with all major powers having high stakes in the future of the Korean peninsula. In 1999 Kim Chong-il sent a high-level delegation to China, and in the following two years he visited China twice, praising the success of Chinese economic reforms. Kim Chong-il also approached Russia and Japan. In December 1999, a Japanese parliamentary delegation visited Pyongyang. Again in 1999, the Russian Foreign Minister was warmly welcomed in Pyongyang, and in 2000 Kim Chong-il met with the Russian President Vladimir Putin. Several months later, in October 2000, Pyongyang hosted a summit meeting between Kim Chong-il and U.S. State Secretary Madeleine Albright, tasked with reaching a deal on curbing North Korean production, deployment and trade in long- and middle-range ballistic missiles. Even South Korea, previously strongly disapproving of the Agreed Framework because it supported an isolated regime which was widely expected otherwise to crumble, adopted a friendlier posture in tackling the North after the election of President Kim Dae-jung in November 1997. His so-called "Sunshine Policy" eventually enabled the two Koreas to engage in cooperate business projects, such as the establishment of the Kaesong industrial complex, where South Korean companies employed North Korean workers in hundreds of factories. President Kim

Dae-jung's policy of engagement paved the way to an unprecedented summit meeting with Kim Chong-il in June 2000.

The international accord in favor of the DPRK did not endure more than a few years. U.S. president George W. Bush's initial mistrust of Pyongyang's reluctance to fulfill its obligations under the Agreed Framework was justified by the gradually accruing evidence that North Korea did not abandon its scheme to muster nuclear weapons. In 2002 various intelligence reports argued that the DPRK is attempting to change the path leading to the atomic bomb. Instead of its already discredited plutonium-based program, North Korea has turned to uranium enrichment. Abdul Qadeer Khan's revelations in 2004 about the illicit nuclear trade network, although impossible to be verified completely, staked up to the reconnaissance evidence that North Korea was not abiding by its nuclear-related obligations in a truly compliant manner. It became apparent that even after the conclusion of the Agreed Framework North Korea did not desist its proliferation activities and trade with similar-minded states. Some researchers point out that nuclear and missile transactions between North Korea and Pakistan can be traced to early 1990's¹¹. The new evidence against Pyongyang led to the complete outright abandonment of the Agreed Framework.

Against the uncompromising U.S. policy towards North Korea stood the intransigent diplomacy of Kim Chong-il, who, even if he wasn't convinced that retaining and expanding the nuclear arsenal is indispensable for the survival of his regime at that time (which is very unlikely), after the U.S.-led "Coalition of the willing" invaded authoritarian but non-nuclear Iraq, most probably had his hesitation dispersed.

Perhaps mostly motivated by fears for regime survival, on 10 January 2003 Kim Chong-il decided to withdraw from the NPT, to restart the frozen North Korea's plutonium program, and to proceed with nuclear weapons development. History demonstrated yet again that, when the leader's anxiety is related to the survival of his regime itself, it is not feasible to believe that the ever-growing sanctions imposed on Pyongyang could dissuade any North Korean leader to give up the nukes perceived as regime's most trustworthy guardians.

¹¹ Smith, Jeffrey R., Pakistan's nuclear-bomb maker says North Korea paid bribes for know-how (Washington Post, July 6, 2011). Retrieved 7 August 2016, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pakistans-nuclear-bomb-maker-says-north-korea-paid-bribes-for-know-how/2010/11/12/gIQAZ1kH1H_story.html

China, concerned about the probability of war next to its borders, sought energetically diplomatic solution. China's efforts led to the Six-Party Talks – a forum tasked with resolving the issue with the North Korean nuclear program and weapons, bringing together negotiating diplomats from the United States, China, Japan, Russia and both Koreas. Despite all the efforts on the negotiation table, the U.S. and North Korean positions never juxtaposed. The United States insisted that until North Korea could prove that it has taken complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of both its plutonium and uranium-enrichment nuclear programs, Pyongyang should not even hope for receiving some beneficial compromises from Washington. North Korea repeatedly argued that it should be treated as a de facto nuclear weapons state, and some generous assistance should precede Pyongyang's ultimate consent. Discontinued and restarted a few times, the Six-Party Talks have been additionally complicated by the traditional North Korean diplomacy of displaying its defiance and disapproval through self-contained acts of violence, which, as Kim Chong-il might have hoped, could turn the direction of the negotiations in favor of Pyongyang. The DPRK conducted seven missile tests and in October 2006 – its first nuclear test.

Reportedly, Kim Chong-il suffered a stroke in August 2008, and perhaps driven by a desire to impress the other negotiating parties and to consolidate his slightly shaken power at home launched a satellite in 2009 and later that year conducted a new nuclear weapon test. In June 2009, Resolution 1874 of the UN Security Council endorsed additional sanctions against Pyongyang. The Resolution prohibited any financial assistance to the DPRK with the exception of humanitarian and development aid aimed at “directly addressing civilian needs”¹². The visit of former U.S. President Bill Clinton in North Korea in August 2009, which succeeded in its aim to convince Kim Chong-il to release two detained American journalists, resembled the unofficial visit paid by Jimmy Carter in 1994. Reportedly, North Korean high-level official interpreted the meeting between Bill Clinton and Kim Chong-il as facilitating the official bilateral dialogue between the two countries. Still, a nuclear breakthrough remained unachievable.

2010 marked another year of provocative North Korean acts, such as the torpedoing of a South Korea's Navy ship in March and shelling Yeonpyeong Island in November. Also in November, Pyongyang proudly displayed to the world a new uranium-enrichment facility,

¹² United Nations Security Council Resolution 1874 (2009), retrieved from [https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1874\(2009\)](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1874(2009))

assessed by the scientist who was invited to visit it as highly sophisticated. All of the above events should be perceived in conjunction with Kim Chong-il's willingness to return to the bargaining table of the Six-Party Talks as an orchestrated attempt at securing a smooth power transition to North Korean leader's chosen successor – his youngest son Kim Jong-un, who was named vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission in September 2010. A secondary goal to be achieved could have been procuring foreign aid, which became even more mandatory after a failed currency reform in 2009. Indeed, history tends to repeat itself - like his father, Kim Chong-il has attained and preserved internally undisputable reign over North Korea, that being done through identical means: a military-first policy, mutual dependence between the ruler and the military, notoriously solid personality cult and propaganda, and a self-centered foreign policy that denied political and economic integration on international and global level. Greatly assisted by the policies implemented by his father, Kim Chong-il employed similar methods to facilitate the coming to power of his own successor: constant maneuvering abroad among the Great Powers, supplemented by unabashed acts of coercive but careful poking at the NPT regime and his Southern neighbor, and perpetuating the social domination of the KPA and the core members of the KPP within the country. To the commandments of Kim Il-sung his son added the imperative advocacy in favor of retaining and enlarging the DPRK's nuclear arsenal which proved to be the most vital ingredient in the efficient recipe for upholding a closed authoritarian regime in an impoverished state almost constantly on the brink of total collapse.

3. Pyongyang's regime survival ver. 3.0

After Kim Jong-un ascended the North Korean throne on December 28 2011, the traditional foreign policy of the country still remained...traditional. Just like the case of his father, Kim Jong-un also obtained a solid proof that Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal has no alternative for his political survival as he witnessed the dethronement and death of Muammar Gaddafi – an authoritarian leader for decades of a state which discontinued its nuclear weapon development program in 2003 and in 2004 joined the Convention on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Therefore, it should come to no surprise the ultimate failure of the Six-Party Talks, as well as the execution of three (as of October 2016) nuclear tests and the seemingly unrestrained provocations in between them. The actions of Kim Jong-un, however disrespectful and disregardful of the commotion and clamor evoked by the indefatigability of the DPRK's nuclear program they might appear, can hardly be regarded as irrational. The new boss in Pyongyang simply displays how really well he has adopted the lesson of his father and grandfather regarding the role of the nuclear arsenal as the main factor that guarantees the survival of the North Korean regime – internally as well as externally – as a means to deter not only a nuclear attack from abroad, but any kind of armed intervention as well.

In the past as well as nowadays, that belief, teaching and postulation, confirmed and reconfirmed empirically in reality, turns into an impossible task Pyongyang's nuclear disarmament. It should not surprise us that Pyongyang still reflects on its nukes as necessary tools for survival. The positive and negative incentives that might be able to convince North Korea to abolish its nuclear weapons program and to give up its WMD should exceed to an extremely great extent the value which any North Korean Kim attributes to his nuclear activities and arsenal. That is a very high price the United States is not ready to pay as an internationally perceived lone superpower, especially so as to cater to the worries of a belligerent authoritarian regime and to guarantee its survival – a regime, which has abused the nuclear nonproliferation system promoted by Washington through the NPT and IAEA in order to develop its own nuclear arsenal.

Then there is China. The country that will definitely challenge the American hegemony in the near future has its own reasons to prevent the total collapse of North Korea. The first motive that comes to mind might be to hinder Korean unification as an economic powerhouse that is a close American ally. China definitely does not serve as a good example of a state in a friendly and cooperative international neighborhood. Further, to all neighbors of the DPRK, its disintegration would spell a very probable international humanitarian crisis with unpredictable consequences.

Moreover, due to the secrecy surrounding Pyongyang's nuclear weapons development program and the deplorable economic situation within the country, some tangible and understandable suspicions exist with respect to the quality and quantity of its existing nuclear arsenal. That might partially explain why the partners of North Korea in the Six-Party Talks were not that willing to offer a handsome reward against Pyongyang's compliance. Researchers of North Korean nuclear weapons program point out different numbers, but most assumptions limit the number of existing North Korean nuclear warheads to no more than 20¹³ - quantity, which makes it very questionable whether or not Pyongyang possesses a second-strike capability, if the country, all of a sudden, completely out of the blue decided to violate its own traditional doctrine to sustain its nukes as the means to thwart the worst-case scenario for the regime (an armed aggression against the country) and to guarantee its survival. The concise retrospective already presented has demonstrated that North Korean leaders are still completely self-aware that turning their threats into an honest unrestrained brinksmanship would put an end to their rule. This argument remains valid even after the allegedly attained capability of Pyongyang to orchestrate a nuclear surprise attack by ICBMs or SLBMs¹⁴.

¹³ Power, John, How Many Nukes Does North Korea Have?(The Diplomat, September 18, 2015). Retrieved 8 August 2016, from <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/how-many-nukes-does-north-korea-have/>

¹⁴ Gertz, Bill, Pentagon Confirms New North Korean ICBM(The Washington Free Beacon, March 31, 2016). Retrieved 8 August 2016, from <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/pentagon-confirms-new-north-korean-icbm/>

Conclusion

When taken into account all of the above, how should the international community respond to the North Korea's resolve to maintain its antagonistic demeanor and illegal nuclear arsenal? As previously argued, the DPRK would renounce the nukes only in exchange of a very attractive comprehensive deal that neither Washington is prepared to propose nor Pyongyang is willing to implement when it comes to verifiable nuclear disarmament. It appears that desperate measures from the hard power kit such as military preemption might prove even more damaging to the regional security environment that deficit of stability might be only fictitious. On the contrary, to offer one-sided positive incentives and to reward with the hope of achieving cooperation the dishonest foreign policy of North Korea that breached the international arrangement in the nuclear field in its favor would be very detrimental to the nonproliferation regime based on the NPT – to a higher degree than the de facto acknowledgment of India as a nuclear-weapon state, due to the fact that New Delhi has never been a party to the NPT.

Actually, the tradition of responding to Pyongyang's hard-boiled actions as mentioned at the beginning of this study demonstrates the level and the means through which the international community is inclined to react – mostly by imposing tighter economic sanctions. Years and years of sanctioning did not convince Pyongyang that nuclear weapons are impractical heritage of the Cold War, not to mention that the nuclear doctrines around the world still claim the opposite. Nonetheless, the sanctions imposed by the UNSC are a legitimate and appropriate answer to every substantial transgression of binding commitments under international law. In the case of North Korean nuclear weapons development program the sanctions confirm an exotic viewpoint – that the nuclear arsenal of Pyongyang is not yet truly considered a global security threat, at least by the nuclear-weapon states, and it probably is not. Otherwise they would undertake due measures to reinforce the NPT deal by making real efforts to propel the nuclear disarmament process – as promised more than 40 years ago – and by decreasing the role attributed to the nuclear weapons in their own nuclear doctrines.

North Korean nuclear weapons are what they are – the most valuable and desperate means of maintaining the authoritarian yet rational regime in Pyongyang, which means would

presumably guarantee successfully that regime's survival at least over the following few years. The achievement of verifiable cancellation of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program and the country's nuclear disarmament depend on the sheer determination streamlined into the negotiation process to conclude a comprehensive deal with North Korea. And, in its turn, that requires to perceive the North Korean nuclear threat as a global one. So far it does not seem that such a perception is agreed upon and adopted even by the United States – the country that initiated nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament processes in creating a less nuclear world.

If and when the parties negotiating the DPRK's non-nuclear future begin to regard the issue as a problem related to the persistent NPT impasse born of non-happening nuclear disarmament then some meaningful measures could be endorsed. When all the cards are laid on the table of negotiation, a series of direct talks with Kim Jong-un or his successor could be undertaken. Such talks could include, but should not be limited to, providing feasible security guarantees to Pyongyang and gradually lifting the sanctions in exchange for the permission to conduct all verification measures adopted by the IAEA in order to confirm the irreversibility of the DPRK's nuclear disarmament. The negotiation process might be based on the theory of Jacques E. C. Hymans, which links nuclear decision-making to state leaders' conceptions of the national identity¹⁵. Further attention could be paid to the concept of Etel Solingen who proposes a specific approach in negotiating with states embracing a model of political survival¹⁶.

Taken all into consideration, until far-reaching, purposeful and context-sensitive approaches that accept the unbreakable bond between nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament are put into practice, the UN sanctions against the DPRK seem to be the most appropriate, lawful and balanced reaction to the nuclear ambitions of Pyongyang, whose leaders nevertheless do not appear to be the completely irrational, unreasonable and bloodthirsty lucifers they are portrayed generally by the media and sometimes even by the specialized publications.

¹⁵ Hymans, Jacques E.C., *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation* (Cambridge University Press, February 16, 2006).

¹⁶ Solingen, Etel, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and The Middle East* (Princeton University Press, August 26, 2007).

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