

Nazmul Arifeen**A. S. M. Tarek Hassan Semul****DRUMMING OF NUCLEAR ARMAGEDDON: LOOMING NUCLEAR STANDOFF ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA****Abstract**

After Pyongyang's test of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) capable of hitting the mainland United States (US), the possibility of an Armageddon or the 'end of the world' seems more realistic than ever. In particular, North Korea's threat to take out the US military base in Guam has altered the strategic equations. Given the recent escalation of tension between North Korea and global powers, this paper provides an insight into the triggers and the credibility of North Korean nuclear threats with a view to analysing way out for de-escalation. By exploring the triggering factors behind the standoff and their ramifications, it contends that policy dichotomy of great powers, unrestrained rhetoric from the key players and ill-suited bargaining tactics may lead to miscalculations by adversaries, potentially aggravating the crisis. Based on these arguments, the paper ends with an exposition of possible options to de-escalate the situation.

1. Introduction

An all-out nuclear war is often equated with an Armageddon—a biblical notion that implies a catastrophic conflict which will end the world as we know it, along with the human race. Ever since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, which took the world on the verge of nuclear destruction, the international community has not come any closer to a nuclear standoff.¹ Political leaders are deemed rational actors and they are aware that a nuclear exchange might outweigh the cost. Pyongyang's recent missile tests, capable of carrying nuclear warheads, alarmingly intensified the fear of a nuclear standoff on the Korean Peninsula. To a lesser extent, the coincidence of the election of the United States (US) President Donald Trump, the election of a relatively-dovish South Korean President Moon Jae-in, and the timing of the assassination of Kim Jong-un's half-brother Kim Jong-nam at a Malaysian airport have added to the complexity of the crisis in one way or another. Despite the recurring nature of Korea's nuclear problem in international politics, never in the past did a nuclear crisis appear so imminent. Since the beginning of the year 2017, North Korea has fired 18 missiles

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¹ For a closer look at how the nuclear crisis between the US and the former USSR was averted, see James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, *The Armageddon Letters: Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro in the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012.

as of the first week of August 2017 (see, Chart 1),² some of them capable of carrying nuclear payloads and able to reach targets as far as the continental US. Pyongyang has threatened to use nuclear weapons as a deterrent against Washington's alleged plot for 'decapitation strike'. While such provocations are not completely new to the Korean Peninsula, as North Korea tested missiles in the past, nonetheless, the looming crisis is regarded as more grave than the country's past provocations.

In the backdrop of a looming nuclear conflict and potential further escalation, this paper intends to provide a fresh and useful insight into the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. Such endeavour is justified given the triumph of Donald Trump as the President of the US who has hinted more hardline policies towards North Korea in his recent statements. The question it seeks to answer is how to de-escalate the looming nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. In order to achieve this objective, the paper analyses whether the nuclear threat from North Korea is credible, what North Korea wants to achieve with its nukes and what triggered the crisis and finally, what the objectives of the great powers and other players directly involved in the crisis are.

This paper intends to explore the causes behind the unfolding of the nuclear crisis by looking at the credibility of threats and the policy objectives of the great powers. Given the isolationist nature of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) or North Korea, it was imperative for the global community to engage Pyongyang in a multilateral talk to dial down its nuclear ambition. The collapse of the 'Six-Party Talks'³ owing to contradictory positions and interests of the parties involved, and North Korea's determination for acquiring nuclear weapons are the causes behind the recent crisis. The paper argues that rather than becoming too optimistic about complete de-nuclearisation, the foremost and crucial task at hand should be to neutralise an imminent nuclear war, not the 'complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement' (CVID) as pursued by the US. Once the crisis is relatively de-escalated, further diplomatic channels can be used to revert North Korean nuclearisation, through incentives and effective deterrence. To dissuade the looming crisis on the Korean Peninsula and to avoid a potential nuclear Armageddon, all parties must take into account the importance of strategic assurance.

² Joshua Berlinger, "North Korea's Missile Tests: By the Numbers", *CNN*, 07 August 2017, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/29/asia/north-korea-missile-tests/index.html>, accessed on 10 August 2017; Bonnie Berkowitz, Laris Karklis and Kevin Schaul, "How Three Recent Launches Signaled New Leaps in North Korea's Missile Capabilities", *Washington Post*, 10 August 2017, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/world/north-korea-launch/>, accessed on 11 August 2017.

³ The "Six-Party Talks" was multilateral negotiation mechanism to prevent nuclearisation of North Korea after it had withdrawn from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003. It comprised of countries that were either immediate neighbours of North Korea or a global power. The members were the US, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and North Korea. No round negotiation was held after 2007 and the talk was finally discontinued when Pyongyang tested missiles in 2009.

The research conducted for this paper relies on secondary sources, gathered from academic journals, books and newspaper articles. Given the unfolding nature of an imminent crisis where real-time information was crucial, the developments upto the second week of August 2017 were analysed. The research is not variable-driven, *i.e.*, it does not seek to establish a causal mechanism to justify why certain set of things might or might not happen. This complexity arises because the paper has considered multiple actors with diverging interests and courses of diplomatic manoeuvre at their disposal. The nature of the paper is, therefore, suggestive - to argue the best possible options to get out of this crisis by analysing alternatives and what *may* and *may not* work in this scenario. It employed case studies and content analysis (of speeches and official positions of the actors) to understand the key stakeholders' policies which was analysed in light of offensive realist theories.

The arguments in this paper are developed in six sections. The second section following the introduction provides a comprehensive theoretical framework to understand the behaviour of North Korea. This provides a solid understanding of the problem in the light of various International Relations (IR) theories. The third section provides a background on the nuclearisation process of the DPRK by taking a fresh look into North Korea's nuclear development, its objectives for nuclearisation, and its motivations for the latest escalation. By analysing motivations, policy positions and major issues of contention for the key players, the fourth section discusses the role of major powers and North Korea's neighbours. The fifth section analyses the potential outcome of the conflict by focusing on possible options to de-escalate the crisis. Finally, the sixth section draws conclusion based on the discussion.

2. Theoretical Overview of the Problem

Theories are intended to help grapple with complex problems of international relations. As such, an analytic framework is necessary to better understand the problem informed by theories of International Relations. The looming nuclear crisis cannot be resolved until the underlying causes are identified. There are two important theoretical puzzles that need to be answered in this regard. First of all, what dictates North Korea's behaviour? Is it caused by its position in international society or is this just a manifestation of its internal problems?

The second puzzle is to understand whether there is a real threat from North Korean nuclearisation. If the threats are mere rhetoric, regional and global powers will not take the country seriously to warrant a negotiated settlement of the imminent crisis.

Nicholas Anderson points out that there are two primary groups of scholars when it comes to explaining the nuclearisation of North Korea.⁴ The first line of

⁴ Nicholas Anderson, "Explaining North Korea's Nuclear Ambitions: Power and Position on the Korean Peninsula", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, May 2017, pp. 1–21.

arguments claims that the problem is rooted in the US policies regarding the Korean Peninsula, which has threatened Pyongyang militarily by forming alliance with South Korea and Japan, isolated it politically by constraining its ability to manoeuvre at international forums, and finally, severely weakened it economically through imposing trade embargoes. This group of analysts, known as the *doves*, believes that North Korea is not inherently belligerent, rather it reacts to these threats by strengthening its nuclear capabilities. Peace-loving doves view the international pressure on the country as the driver for its nuclearisation. Conversely, the other group of scholars, known as the *hawks*, believe that the problem does not lie with the policies of the US. Instead, it is a demonstration of North Korea's authoritarian and undemocratic internal policies, *i.e.*, the crux of the problem lies at the domestic politics. The *hawks* are convinced that nuclearisation is a means for North Korean regime to cling to power and is a sign of its authoritarian internal politics. This 'dove-hawk' debate speaks to the fact that depending on what 'level of analysis' is chosen to analyse the issues, root causes of the problem would be entirely different.

There is a great debate in IR scholarship as to *what* causes this state behaviour: Is it the structure of international system, domestic politics or a combination of both? The paradox here is to untangle whether or not it is the external factors or the domestic politics that motivates North Korea to acquire nuclear bombs. This paper takes the view that the problem lies in the anarchic nature of international system. Different variants of realism render meaningful theoretical lens to understand the intricacies of the problem. All variants of realism concur that the international system is "anarchic"⁵ due to the states being primary actors. In this view, North Korea must pursue self-interest because of the structure of the anarchic international system. As far as IR theory is concerned, anarchy signifies the lack of order-imposing authority. In the absence of a supranational authority above sovereign states, North Korea must depend on "self-help"⁶ and maximise its national interest. Its primary goal is survival in an anarchical system, akin to Hobbesian "state of nature"⁷ where every man must fight with another for survival.

Neoclassical realism, a term coined by Gideon Rose, differs from the other variants of structural realism in explaining state behaviour. It argues that state behaviour is not merely conditioned by the 'anarchic nature' of the international system, rather the domestic factors are equally important as the key motivating factor for states' actions.⁸ Despite the role played by the prevailing international system, neoclassical realists believe that domestic politics also plays an important role. Leaders are often constrained by domestic pressure and how decisions are taken within a

⁵ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited", *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2000, pp. 128–61; Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 1988, pp. 615–28.

⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, *ibid.*

⁷ John M. Hobson, *The State and International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 21.

⁸ Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy", *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 01, 1998, pp. 144–172.

state. Hence, neoclassical realism posits that, to decipher a particular foreign policy behaviour of state, examining only the systemic variables is not enough, rather the composition and priorities of the domestic actors are also imperative.⁹ In North Korea's case, neoclassical realism would prescribe to scrutinise the domestic dynamics along with the structural determinants to understand the motivation for its nuclearisation. However, to employ this particular theory in North Korean case poses different sets of challenges. DPRK, being an isolated actor in the international system with an authoritarian regime, has one of the most closed societies. The little information that is available on the regime and its power structure often lacks reliability. One crucial challenge, therefore, is to isolate the facts from the fiction, as information gets filtered through the Western lens of scrutiny and thus can be blamed as biased. On the other hand, since many authoritarian rulers employ propaganda to consolidate and legitimise their positions, it will be unscientific to rely on North Korean official sources for information. Therefore, using neoclassical realism is troublesome to understand the motivation for North Korean nuclearisation.

Two other variants of neorealism - offensive and defensive realism - concentrate on structural constraints rather than domestic variables to explain state behaviour. According to these two theories, a 'self-help' structure requires that Pyongyang ensure its survival either by 'maximisation of power' or 'maximisation of security'. These two, however, are mutually exclusive. As Jeffrey Taliaferro contends, "offensive realism and defensive realism generate radically different prescriptions for military doctrine, foreign economic policy, military intervention, and crisis management".¹⁰ Defensive realists believe that in an anarchic system states cannot trust each other; they can, nevertheless, maximise their *security* by means of alliance building and cooperation so as to enhance their security *vis-à-vis* their adversaries. Again, it is the order or structure of the international system that dictates states' behaviours in this regard. Taking the case of North Korea, it can be argued that it has very limited options to enhance its security by forging alliance and economic cooperation, because of economic sanctions and trade embargoes.

Conversely, offensive realists would posit that North Korea must pursue self-interest and maximise *power*, not because it is inherent in the human nature as classical realists believed;¹¹ rather, the order of the international system dictates state behaviour. Its focus remains on the external factors for states behaviour instead of domestic or individual determinants of state actions. Power maximisation has its own limitations. As a state increases its power by arming itself, it causes insecurity for other states. As such, it leads to a never-ending arms race between states. These arguments are closely aligned with what Nicholas Anderson calls the *hawks*. Extrapolating this

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁰ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *op. cit.*, pp. 129–130.

¹¹ Thucydides' *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Thomas Hobbes' *The Leviathan*—all attempted to show that states' aggressive behaviour is, in fact, a manifestation of human propensity for self-interest.

theory to the North Korean case implies that from its perception of its power and position in the international system, only accumulation of power can guarantee its survival. The impact of domestic constraints is relatively negligible as the systemic pressure is overwhelming enough to dictate a state's behaviour within an 'anarchic structure'.¹² Therefore, this paper applies offensive realism as the tool for analysing North Korea's aspirations for nuclearisation and its ramifications for the looming nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

3. Reassessing Nuclear Threat from North Korea

The Korean Peninsula is perhaps one of the most capricious regions of the world today. In the aftermath of the Korean War in the early 1950s, when two great powers locked horns in a battle for ideological supremacy and military primacy in the region, North Korea aligned itself with the Soviet bloc during the Cold War. It still continues to reject Westernisation.¹³ The end of the Korean War between the two Koreas came not through the signing of a formal peace treaty, but a mere agreed armistice. As such, hostility between the warring parties remained. It was exacerbated by the fact that the end of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union did not bring any shift in the ideological orientation of the DPRK.¹⁴ In the ensuing decades, sporadic tension has led to deteriorating relationship between the two countries.

The Korean nuclear crisis has been a recurrent problem. Former editor of Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper noted that the recent crisis is the third of its kind.¹⁵ Similar crisis surfaced in the past and was diffused when North Korea first declared its nuclear programme in the early 1990s and again in the early 2000s when the world came to know about its secret uranium enrichment programme. This time around, the already-tensed relationship reached a tipping point due to North Korea's repeated nuclear tests. The ambiguity regarding its purpose and intentions has heightened tension across the Peninsula, which is home to some of the key US allies in the region. North Korean domestic and foreign policy being secretive in nature, it is difficult to decipher DPRK's true intentions regarding its nuclear ambition. This is what has been stated earlier as the second puzzle. The assumption of this paper rests on the premise that the nuclear threat from DPRK are credible. Hence, the rest of the section analyses North Korea's intentions, discusses a brief history of how it obtained nuclear weapons, and reassesses the credibility of its threat.

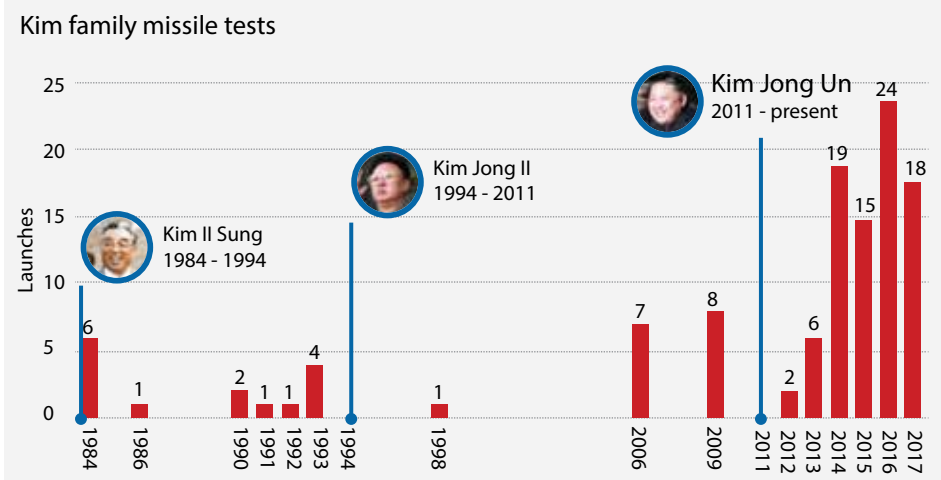
¹² Gideon Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

¹³ Charlotte Alfred, "How North Korea Became So Isolated", *Huffington Post*, 17 October 2014, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/17/north-korea-history-isolation_n_5991000.html, accessed on 27 May 2017.

¹⁴ Moira Lavelle, "A Brief History of Border Conflict between North and South Korea", *Public Radio International (PRI)*, 20 August 2015, available at <http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-08-20/brief-history-border-conflict-between-north-and-south-korea>, accessed on 25 June 2017.

¹⁵ Yoichi Funabashi, "A Third Nuclear Crisis on the Korean Peninsula", *The Japan Times*, 09 May 2017, available at <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/05/09/commentary/world-commentary/third-nuclear-crisis-korean-peninsula>, accessed on 25 May 2017.

Chart 1: North Korea's Missile Tests: Frequency and Numbers



Source: Joshua Berlinger, "North Korea's Missile Tests: By the Numbers." *CNN*, 07 August 2017, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/29/asia/north-korea-missile-tests/index.html>, accessed on 10 August 2017.

3.1 *What North Korea Really Wants: Objectives and Priorities*

Explanations for nuclear proliferation maintain that the anticipation of war and the threat to the state's survival are the key motivators for proliferation.¹⁶ North Korea's interpretation of the global structure drives it to go nuclear to augment its chances of survival in a hostile international system. Pyongyang's demand for a rightful position as a nuclear armed state along with the withdrawal of all economic sanctions against the regime is a testament that North Korea is dissatisfied with its current position in the international system. The US-South Korea alliance, the former's military deployment to safeguard the latter from the DPRK's aggression has been treated as the sign of hostility from the US to North Korea. The reversal of security arrangements which augments its insecurities and perpetuates its pariah status is what it really wants.

Although offensive realists argue that domestic politics plays insignificant role as to why states go nuclear, nevertheless, it does have significant internal ramifications. On the domestic front, acquiring nuclear weapons means solidifying the position of the Kim dynasty. A robust nuclear and missile programme also implies that popular support would rally behind the political elites further consolidating their power and stifling any opportunity for political opposition that may arise. It, thus, serves the dual purpose of projecting power internationally and legitimising a despotic regime locally.

¹⁶ Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, "Conflict and Cooperation on Nuclear Nonproliferation", *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2017, pp. 333-334.

The demands that the DPRK made to the US through different channels of communications revolve around a common theme: the acceptance of the North Korea as a worthy member of the international community; and the Kim dynasty as a legitimate regime.¹⁷ In pursuit of these, North Korea uses its nuclear programme as a bargaining chip not only to gain political leverage at the negotiating table but also makes it a primary strategic objective to counterbalance the US conventional military strength on the Peninsula and its predominance in the region. Thus, in Pyongyang's view, having nuclear bombs is the ultimate game changer in this strategic chessboard.

3.2 *Origins of the Bomb*

Despite Pyongyang's desire to acquire nuclear bombs, the difficulty to obtain them cannot be overstated. This also pertains to the question of credibility and its capacity to mount a nuclear attack. Not only uranium enrichment is a time-consuming process, it also requires state-of-the-art technologies which economically weak countries cannot afford. North Korea is one of the poorest countries in the world. It faces difficulties in feeding millions of its population. Average North Koreans are a few inches shorter than their southern counterpart because of widespread malnutrition.¹⁸ Given the international isolation that severely stymied its economic growth, how credible is it that North Korea has acquired nuclear bombs and ballistic missile capabilities to target its adversary states?

The first hurdle was obtaining financial resources to continue advancement of nuclear devices and delivery systems. While it might be elusive to common knowledge, North Korea has been able to inflate its state coffer by selling arms, munitions and spare parts to its clientele.¹⁹ In the years prior to its Taepodong-2 missile test in 2006, Kim Jong-il exported Scud-type missiles worth US\$ 110 million to Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen and Syria. The annual income of the regime was believed to be around US\$ 1-2 billion from international aid, arms sale and remittances.²⁰ Despite a heavy toll on overall economic performance and mass destitution, North Korea did not have so much trouble as to prevent it from going ahead with its nuclear programme. Scholars also suggested the existence of a network between countries like Iran and North Korea where they offshore or outsource materials from each other.²¹

The second obstacle was to manage technologies for both nuclear bomb and ballistic missiles devices used for delivering them to a desired destination. North Korea signed nuclear cooperation agreements with the former Soviet Union and China in

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁸ Richard Knight, "Are North Koreans Really Three Inches Shorter than South Koreans?", *BBC News*, 23 April 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17774210>, accessed on 29 June, 2017.

¹⁹ Andrea Berger, "Disrupting North Korea's Military Markets", *Survival*, Vol. 58, No. 3, 2016, pp. 101–130.

²⁰ Jasper Becker, *Rogue Regime: Kim Jong Il and the Looming Threat of North Korea*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 164.

²¹ John R. Haines, "Foreseeable, Foreseen, Ignored: Is Iran Advancing Its Missile Program at Home While Offshoring Its Nuclear Program to North Korea?", The Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), January 2016.

1950.²² Following China's first nuclear test in 1964, North Korea's request for a nuclear bomb was unanimously rejected by the Soviet Union and China. Yet, assistance and cooperation continued; especially from Moscow which helped Pyongyang establish its experimental reactor in Yongbyon in the early 1980s.²³ Given that the reactor was built with Russian assistance, Russia was able to mount pressure on Pyongyang to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

However, without a functional delivery system, only nukes cannot pose a credible threat or deterrence. It was widely believed that North Korea's highly enriched uranium (HEU), required to produce a nuclear bomb, came from Pakistan's nuclear scientist A. Q. Khan, who travelled to Saudi Arabia, Libya, Syria and North Korea to sell technological know-how. He visited North Korea a total of thirteen times and traded nuclear bomb with Pyongyang in exchange for the ballistic missile technology, which Pakistan needed to be able to strike India.²⁴ It was not a mere coincidence that when Pakistan tested its first Ghauri missile in 1998, North Korea announced its Taepodong long-range missiles.²⁵

3.3 Credibility of the Threat

A successful nuclear deterrence lies upon the credibility of threat. The more credible the threat of a nuclear strike is, the more likely it is that the deterrence will work. And this will only function when the deterring party has the power to inflict unacceptable degree of damage on its enemy, and the enemy also perceives that the deterring party is willing to do so.²⁶ Hence, the credibility of threat rests on two key variables: the balance of military capabilities between the belligerent parties and their relative level of resolve. For the DPRK to pose a credible nuclear deterrence against the US, it is imperative not only to achieve the nuclear strike capability, but also to send a clear signal to convince Washington regarding the determination of Pyongyang to strike. Nuclear capability entails the possession of nuclear bombs as well as a combination of a credible delivery system, *i.e.*, land-based Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBMs) or Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs), aerial-based strategic bombers and finally sea-based Submarine-launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs) - a combination known as the 'nuclear triad'. North Korea's domestic production of Hwasong-class missiles capable of carrying conventional, chemical and possibly biological weapon at a maximum range of 1000 kilometres marked the first breakthrough in its missile development programme

²² Glyn Ford and Soyoung Kwon, *North Korea on the Brink: Struggle for Survival*, London: Pluto Press, 2008, pp. 148–150.

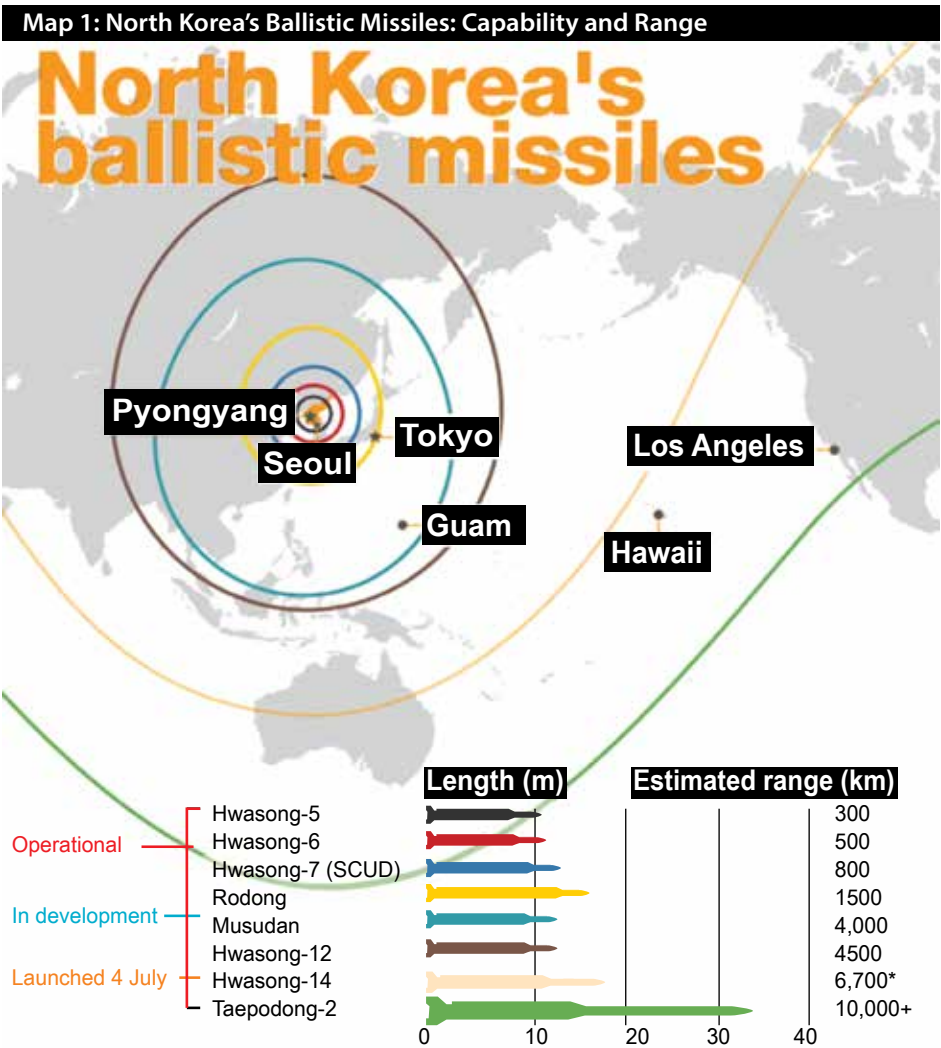
²³ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

²⁴ Jasper Becker, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

²⁵ Former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto also admitted she had bought missile technology from Pyongyang in 1993 when she was in power. However, she stressed that it was not in exchange for nuclear bomb, but Pakistan bought it with money. See, "Missile Technology Bought from N. Korea: Benazir", *Dawn*, 19 July 2004, available at <http://www.dawn.com/news/364962>, accessed on 05 June 2017.

²⁶ Paul Huth, Christopher Gelpi and D. Scott Bennett, "The Escalation of Great Power Militarized Disputes: Testing Rational Deterrence Theory and Structural Realism", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. 3, 1993, pp. 609–623.

in 1984.²⁷ After Kim Jong-un took over in the late 2011, Pyongyang’s nuclear programme gained a rapid momentum making it a ‘primary strategic commitment’. During his regime, more than 80 test missiles were fired in addition to three nuclear tests, in which he surpassed his father and grandfather’s combined efforts.²⁸



Source: “North Korea Fires Long-Range ICBM Missile: Reports”, *Al Jazeera*, 29 July 2017, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/pentagon-north-korea-ballistic-missile-launch-detected-170728153900450.html>, accessed on 02 August 2017.

²⁷ “What We Know about North Korea’s Missile Programme”, *BBC News*, 10 August 2017, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17399847>, accessed on 10 August 2017.

²⁸ Eleanor Albert, “What’s the Status of North Korea’s Nuclear Program?”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 15 August 2017, available at <https://www.cfr.org/background/north-koreas-military-capabilities>, accessed on 15 August 2017.

The above map shows different types of ballistic missiles with different ranges that the DPRK has developed and are in either operational or developmental phase. For example, Pyongyang tested two ICBMs of Hwasong-14 class in July 2017; which the Pentagon confirmed has the capacity of hitting a target within 9000+ kilometre range, bringing the US state of Alaska in its reach. There is a debate as to the size of the payload it can carry or whether it will survive an atmospheric re-entry. There is also ambiguity regarding the target-accuracy of these ballistic missiles, because of their reliance on Soviet-era guidance system. Some have claimed that those obsolete guidance systems have been replaced with GPS guidance system making the nuclear threat from DPRK considerably more credible than ever before.²⁹ These debates notwithstanding, North Korea is now believed to have means to mount a nuclear strike on the US soil.

3.4 The Triggers: Guam Incident

As well as credibility, North Korea also sent clear signals of its intent to attack US interests in the Pacific. Following the July 2017 ICBM test, it was reported in international media on 08 August 2017 that Kim Jong-un regime was "carefully examining the operational plan for making an enveloping fire at the areas around Guam"³⁰ with its Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) Hwasong-12. US President Donald Trump responded that any North Korean attack "will be met with fire and fury...the likes of which the world has never seen before."³¹

Guam is a tiny island of 544 square kilometres located in the western Pacific. Famous for its tourist attractions, the island suddenly became the centre of looming nuclear standoff. The question remains as to why Pyongyang would put its regime at risk by threatening to take out Guam. A careful scrutiny is required to understand and appreciate the strategic value of Guam to the US. Firstly, the Pacific island's location is pivotal to serve as the US military outpost for surveillance and to project military clout. It is also strategically located in between the Korean Peninsula and South China Sea.

Guam has been the home to approximately 7,000 of the US armed forces and their families. It has three key military bases. The Andersen Air Force Base enables flights and operation of strategic long-range bombers like B-1B as well as the Navy's Helicopter Combat Support Squadron 25. The naval base is rightly regarded as one of the most 'strategically important' installations for the US in the Pacific. The island is guarded by the US Army's Terminal High Altitude Area Defence or the THAAD missile defence system. The strategic deployment of B-1Bs in the region since 2004 has been

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ "North Korea 'Considering Missile Strike on US Guam Base'", *BBC News*, 09 August 2017, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40871416>, accessed on 10 August 2017.

³¹ Nick Allen, "North Korea 'Examining Plan to Strike Guam' as Donald Trump Warns Threats Will Be Met with 'Fire and Fury'", *The Telegraph*, 08 August 2017, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/08/north-korea-has-produced-miniaturised-nuclear-warhead-fit-inside/>, accessed on 10 August 2017.

vital to ensuring support for exercise and often as a display of military might. The patrolling of US strategic bombers in close proximity of DPRK's airspace has long been the reason of headache for the North Korean leadership.³²

Therefore, the threat from the DPRK came as no surprise to Washington as the US intelligence agencies were well aware of the regime's recent success with manufacturing a miniature nuclear warhead that can fit inside an ICBM. A recently-leaked US Defence Intelligence Agency report to *the Washington Post* suggests, "The intelligence community assesses North Korea has produced nuclear weapons for ballistic missile delivery, to include delivery by ICBM-class missiles."³³ Although not official, but the report confirms Pyongyang's nuclear capability to successfully launch a nuclear ICBM which may bring some parts of the US mainland under nuclear threat.

Moreover, despite escalation of tension with North Korea, the US remained committed to a prescheduled annual-joint exercise with South Korea known as 'Ulchi-Freedom' from 21-31 August 2017, which involved sea, land and air forces. Past exercises like these often included 'decapitation strikes' – trial operations to enhance the skills to kill Kim Jong-un and his military top brass; and is interpreted by Pyongyang as a direct threat to its regime.³⁴ This is also seen as an effort to send a clear signal of resolve to Pyongyang regarding the US determination to stand by its allies.

4. The Role of Global and Regional Powers: An Analysis of Stakeholders' Objectives

This section intends to discuss the first puzzle that was mentioned in the beginning of the second section regarding North Korea's aspiration for nuclear weapon in relation to its position in the global power structure and the objectives or interests of the global and regional players. Offensive realist interpretation entails that the interests of key global and regional players shape the existing power structure. In consequence, it influences the North Korea's aspiration to acquire nuclear weapons as Pyongyang perceives the existing world structure as a hostile one and intends to shift the status quo. Therefore, the threat of a nuclear Armageddon emanating from the Korean Peninsula is as much a cause of concern for the US as its immediate neighbours. In order to resolve the issue, a multilateral negotiation mechanism was set-up in 2003 comprising North Korea and the regional states in the Korean Peninsula, named after the number of parties to the negotiation. China hosted the talks participated by the US, South Korea, North Korea, Russia and Japan. Six rounds of talks were held from 2003 until it stalled when Pyongyang tested ballistic missiles accompanied by a nuclear test

³² Krishnadev Calamur, "Why North Korea Is Threatening Guam", *The Atlantic*, 08 August 2017, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/08/north-korea-guam/536286/>, accessed on 09 August 2017.

³³ Joby Warrick et al., *op. cit.*

³⁴ Oliver Holmes, "US and South Korea to Stage Huge Military Exercise Despite North Korea Crisis", *The Guardian*, 11 August 2017, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/11/north-korea-us-south-korea-huge-military-exercise>, accessed on 12 August 2017.

in 2006.³⁵ The negotiation ultimately fell apart in 2009. The US Treasury Department accused Pyongyang in September 2005 of laundering money and counterfeiting currency through Macau-based Banco Delta Asia.³⁶ Therefore, the US removed North Korea from 'the state sponsor of terrorism' list to pave the way for further negotiation.

A multilateral negotiation with Pyongyang has been proved to be difficult due to the parties' diverse interests and priorities. This section analyses the objectives of neighbouring countries and global powers *vis-à-vis* North Korea's de-nuclearisation.

4.1 *US in the Korean Peninsula: Déjà Vu of Cuban Missile Crisis all over again*

There are some clear drivers of the US policy in the Korean Peninsula. These priorities greatly shape the US foreign policy objectives. Firstly, the US does not want to increase the number in the nuclear members' club. Therefore, the US advocated a comprehensive, verifiable, irreversible de-nuclearisation (CVID) of the North Korea. However, as the paper has argued before, this policy was unacceptable to Pyongyang.

Secondly, the US policies in the region are shaped by its commitment as a security provider to Japan and South Korea. Its policies are also influenced by the growing role of China and a potentially resurgent Russia. The US has the responsibility to protect its allies in the region. It is bound by treaty to protect Japan. With South Korea, it shares the core values of democracy promotion, peace and stability in the region. The balance of power in the Korean Peninsula is shifting towards China, due to its increasing economic and military clout. By reining in a nuclear North Korea, the US can maintain status quo in the region.

During the Obama administration, there was relative calm regarding the Korean nuclear issue. The US policies towards North Korea remain uncertain under the new administration of Donald Trump. While some have claimed that Trump's stance on Pyongyang does deviate much from his predecessor Obama's, nonetheless, the current US President made contradictory remarks on how to pursue foreign policy with regard to North Korea. There are three major points of departure which can be identified from Trump's policies. Firstly, he envisaged a "chance that [the US] could end up having a major, major conflict with North Korea".³⁷ Although some believe that Trump is likely to follow Obama's footsteps. However, he has resorted to harsher rhetoric and declared to be tough on North Korea. Secondly, and on the contrary, he said that he would be "honoured" to meet the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un,

³⁵ Tara O, *The Collapse of North Korea: Challenges, Planning and Geopolitics of Unification*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 78–79.

³⁶ David Lague and Donald Greenlees, "Squeeze on Banco Delta Asia Hit North Korea Where It Hurt", *The New York Times*, 18 January 2007, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/18/world/asia/18iht-north.4255039.html>, accessed on 21 May 2017.

³⁷ Gerry Mullany, "Trump Warns That 'Major, Major Conflict' With North Korea Is Possible", *The New York Times*, 27 April 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/27/world/asia/trump-north-korea-kim-jong-un.html>, accessed on 28 May 2017.

under right circumstances.³⁸ The phrasing and the timing of this words were highly criticised. It is not customary for an incumbent US President to note that meeting an autocratic leader from a rogue nation would be a lifetime opportunity. It has given all the wrong signals that a running US President can possibly give. Thirdly, one of the major security issues in the Korean Peninsula is the proposed THAAD missile defence system. The defence system with intercept capabilities is aimed at detecting and destroying any ballistic missiles fired by Pyongyang. In a recent interview with the *Reuters*, President Trump demanded that South Korea should shoulder the financial burden of one billion US dollars for the defence system.

These policy changes have affected the regional balance of power, and have sent provocative signals to North Korea. Because of power asymmetry and positions in the regional relational dynamics, Pyongyang seeks to bolster its regime security by eliminating possible threat. Indeed, the regime feels that it is under threat owing to US policy shifts.

4.2 China: A Test for Legitimacy as a Global Power

China has historically played an active role in dialing down the nuclear tension with North Korea. It is widely believed to have wielded considerable diplomatic clout over Pyongyang. Until recent escalation, in the face of persistent economic sanctions, China was the only friend which stood by the country. Beijing has historically provided unwavering support to Pyongyang. The relationship is more than the camaraderie of communist ideology. North Korea is also China's security guarantor on the Peninsula where both Japan and South Korea consider the US as their close allies. Because of China's cozy relations with North Korea, it is justifiable to ask what its interests are vis-à-vis Pyongyang. Notwithstanding China's historic support to North Korea, Beijing is deeply connected to the global economy. Its recent emergence as an economic superpower exceeding the US has expanded its sphere of influence. Stephen M. Walt, a professor of Harvard University, succinctly summarised China's policy with regard to North Korea. He noted:

"China doesn't want North Korea to collapse and certainly doesn't want the Korean Peninsula unified under a pro-U.S. government in Seoul, but it doesn't like Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities or missile program one bit".³⁹

³⁸ Julian Borger, "Donald Trump: I'd Be Honored to Meet Kim Jong-Un Under 'Right Circumstances'", *The Guardian*, 01 May 2017, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/01/donald-trump-kim-jong-un-meeting-north-korea>, accessed on 27 May 2017.

³⁹ Stephen Walt, "Donald Trump Is Defining Successful Foreign Policy Down", *Foreign Policy*, 08 August 2017, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/08/donald-trump-is-defining-successful-foreign-policy-down/>, accessed on 12 August 2017.

The country also feels uneasiness on a number of US policies in the region. First, the deployment of THAAD anti-missile shield worries China. The US and its allies' ability to intercept and neutralise missiles fired by North Korea would also be able to weaken China's deterrence against its adversaries and alter the status quo in favour of the US. Chinese concern on the Peninsula is not merely gaining an upper hand in a political game; rather, it has serious domestic challenges unrelated to politics arising out of the crisis. For example, the influx of refugees in the wake of a full-scale war in the region as well as a political chaos ensuing regime collapse of Pyongyang remains the top concern for China.⁴⁰

Despite China's interest in not allowing further US presence and influence in the region, it has genuinely taken measures to put pressure on Pyongyang. After recent UN Security Council Resolution 2371 which imposed restrictions on North Korean seafood and coal, key sources of its foreign currency reserve, the Chinese government has restricted North Korean imports.⁴¹ The US reliance on China to rein in North Korea also exhibits China's clout over the situation and its increasing role in defusing the tension.

4.3 Opportunity for Resurgent Russia

As well as China, the nuclear crisis is an opportunity for Russia to flex muscle in Northeast Asia. Van Jackson contended in the *Foreign Affairs* magazine that Russia's relations with the "hermit kingdom"⁴² of North Korea are inversely proportional to Pyongyang's relations with the US;⁴³ whenever US-Russia relations deteriorate Russia-North Korea relations get better. This coziness is further explained by a resurgent Russia's desire to counterweight US hegemony in its backyard. The other reason for enhanced backing of North Korea is strategic. Russia opposes the idea of the anti-ballistic missile system in the Korean Peninsula. US-developed THAAD was being deployed in South Korea until it was halted by the new South Korean President Moon Jae-in. The problem with such missile shield is that they weaken deterrence and increases tension.

In the recent time, the two countries continue to enhance their bilateral relations. President Vladimir Putin maintains a close relation with the North Korean regime. Moscow pardoned Pyongyang billion dollars in debt which the latter received

⁴⁰ Shi Yinong, "Painful Lessons, Reversing Practices, and Ongoing Limitations: China Facing North Korea since 2003", in Carla P. Freeman (ed.), *China and North Korea: Strategic and Policy Perspectives from a Changing China*, First edition, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 19.

⁴¹ Jane Perlez, "China's Crackdown on North Korea Over U.N. Sanctions Starts to Pinch", *The New York Times*, 16 August 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/16/world/asia/china-north-korea-seafood-exports.html>, accessed on 16 August 2017.

⁴² Any country uninclined to engage in dialogues with rest of the world is called a hermit kingdom. In recent times, the term often used exclusively for North Korea to denote its isolation and detachment from the international community.

⁴³ Van Jackson, "Putin and the Hermit Kingdom", *Foreign Affairs*, 22 February 2015, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2015-02-22/putin-and-hermit-kingdom>, accessed on 25 May 2017.

from the former Soviet Union. North Korean labourers often travelled to Siberia to work in the constructions site.⁴⁴ Despite strategic calculations, Russia has a keen interest in resolving the crisis which would strengthen its position as a global leader.

4.4 *Return of South Korea's 'Sunshine': Eclipse for US Dominance*

No country has a more direct stake in an increasing nuclear tension than South Korea - North Korea's sibling separated by the Korean War of 1950-1953. Not only will any nuclear fallout directly cause casualty in the North, the problem has serious ramifications for the South. Both Koreas anticipate a future unification of the two countries, as was the case with Germany in the late 1990s. The border between the two Koreas, officially called the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ), is often dubbed as "the Korean Wall", a metaphor to allude to that of the divided Germany until the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, mutual distrust and animosity persist.

During the heydays of six-nation negotiation, South Korea took a lenient policy towards Pyongyang known as the 'sunshine policy' guided by neoliberal theories. At its core, the policy aimed to promote mutual trust and demilitarisation of North Korea by providing aid and assistance. A separate Unification Ministry was established in Seoul to channel funds to the North. The then South Korean President Kim Dae-jung received Nobel Peace prize in 2000 for the sunshine policy. The policy, nonetheless, failed to live up to its promises and the six-party talks collapsed. There were several reasons for the failure of the policy. With the election of George Bush in 2001, neo-conservatives believed that if the US becomes too much lenient on North Korea, it would undermine the US supremacy in the region. The situation was aggravated when Bush declared North Korea an 'Axis of Evil', along with Iran and Iraq, in 2002. The US also designated North Korea a 'state sponsor of terrorism'. This reinforced North Korean paranoia that its external security concerns are well-founded. These exposed serious fault lines in the neoliberal thinking with regard to Korean crisis.

The anticipation of the two Koreas' reunification notwithstanding, South Korea has largely sidetracked from formulating a clear policy objective with regard to the North. As the recent Presidential election in Seoul suggests, North Korea remains a vital political agenda in the election campaign. In a recent *Foreign Policy* article Patricia Kim argued:

⁴⁴ Amanda Erickson, "Russia Warns against 'intimidating' North Korea after its Latest Missile Launch", *Washington Post*, 17 May 2017, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/05/15/russia-warns-against-intimidating-north-korea-after-its-latest-missile-launch/>, accessed on 29 May 2017.

⁴⁵ Key-young Son, *South Korean Engagement Policies and North Korea: Identities, Norms and the Sunshine Policy*, New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 1–2.

"While the North Korean nuclear crisis was front and center in the South Korean presidential election, the policy debates that took place were largely short on substance. Instead of presenting innovative or concrete ideas to the South Korean people, the candidates engaged in the same old myopic arguments about which previous administration was to blame for the current situation."⁴⁶

After the triumph of the liberal politician Moon Jae-in, this lack of direction in the foreign policy was expectedly picked by the North Korean regime.

There have been some hopes of a return of sunshine policy. The new South Korean leader Moon Jae-in, who sworn in on 10 May 2017, is a proponent of engagement with the North.⁴⁷ He served as the Chief of Staff under the former President Roh Moo-hyun during the mid-2000s and closely oversaw the implementation of the policy. His policy changes would undermine a hardline US policy.

These developments provided an impetus for North Korea to intensify its drive for nuclear weapons. First, new South Korean President's intention to return to the sunshine policies are deemed as weakness. Second, return to the sunshine policy would put South Korea and the US on a collision course.⁴⁸

4.5 Japan as a "Spoiler"

Japan's uneasiness to the crisis is well-founded. Besides its proximity to Pyongyang, Japan has history of animosity with North Korea. Several of North Korea's recent missiles landed off the Japanese coast. However, Japan's interests go beyond the nuclear threat. Several authors have argued that its primary intentions to become a party did not only rest on nuclear issue; rather, the locus of its attention remained on resolving bilateral issues with North Korea rather than a political solution to the nuclear crisis.⁴⁹ Japanese policies are driven by domestic political considerations. A number of internal factors explain its objectives. First, North Korea's perception of the Japanese occupation of Korea in the early twentieth century followed by the latter's demand for compensation for atrocities committed by Japan. In the case of possible reunification, two Koreas would be united in demanding compensations from Japan for its crimes committed during its imperial rule.⁵⁰ The second is the abduction of

⁴⁶ Patricia Kim, "South Korea Doesn't Have a Clue What to Do About the North", *Foreign Policy*, 12 May 2017, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/12/south-korea-doesnt-have-a-clue-what-to-do-about-the-north/>, accessed on 25 May 2017.

⁴⁷ Emily Tamkin, "In South Korea, Will Moon Bring Back Sunshine?", *Foreign Policy*, 09 May 2017, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/09/in-south-korea-will-moon-bring-back-sunshine/>, accessed on 22 May 2017.

⁴⁸ Dan De Luce, "South Korean Elections Could Derail Trump's Plans to Get Tough on North Korea", *Foreign Policy*, 10 April 2017, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/10/south-korean-elections-could-derail-trumps-plans-to-get-tough-on-north-korea/>, accessed on 24 May 2017.

⁴⁹ Leszek Buszynski, *Negotiating with North Korea: The Six Party Talks and the Nuclear Issue*, Oxon: Routledge, 2013, pp. 42–43.

⁵⁰ Gilbert Rozman, *Strategic Thinking about the Korean Nuclear Crisis*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 131.

Japanese fishermen by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, Japan has pushed these issues to the negotiation agenda, sidelining core issues of contention relating to North Korea's nuclear programme.

Besides domestic politics, Japan has regional political considerations that may have caused it to feel hesitant about the prospects of multilateral talks. While Japan wants a peaceful resolution of the crisis, nevertheless, the existing mechanisms of negotiation - where China acts as the chair of the six-party talks - is in conflict with its national interest. Under no circumstances would Japan allow a permanent security umbrella that inherently accepts China's supremacy in the region. Furthermore, North Korea provides a welcome justification for enhancing military capabilities of Japan.⁵¹ As far as a multilateral negotiation with North Korea is concerned, Japan's role has often been deemed as "spoiler" in the negotiation forum because of its insistence on resolving bilateral issues that has little value for the nuclear negotiation.⁵² It was deemed a spoiler not because it differed over the outcome of the negotiation but its preference for certain course of actions.⁵³

5. Avoiding a Full-scale Nuclear War

As the preceding discussion suggests, the six party talks was destined to malfunction owing to self-interest of the parties involved in the negotiation. This section analyses possible policy options to de-escalate the crisis. Autocratic regimes often do not make any distinction between state security and regime security. For Pyongyang, the security of the state of North Korea is inseparable from the security of Kim Jong family. The division of two Koreas is a Cold War relic, in a sense that they were divided based on capitalist-communist ideological lines that are barely relevant to present-day global politics. One obvious limitation of the recommendations discussed in this paper is that devising a platform to negotiate these would be difficult. Nevertheless, understanding the solutions would mean that stakeholders are more cognisant of the root causes and it would also make readers appreciate the intricacies of the problem. The possible solutions are categorised in two types: one that relates to the regime of Kim Jong-il and one that relates to the future of it *i.e.*, what ensues after the expected reunification of two Koreas.

It is said that nuclear weapons do not have war values; they only have symbolic and deterrent values meaning that most countries that possess these bombs do not plan on using them. Nevertheless, possessing a nuclear arsenal makes sure that adversaries would think twice before attacking. This is why some realist

⁵¹ Maaike Okano-Heijmans, "Japan as Spoiler in the Six-Party Talks: Single-Issue Politics and Economic Diplomacy Towards North Korea", Clingendael: The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 22 October 2008, available at <https://www.clingendael.nl/publication/japan-spoiler-six-party-talks-single-issue-politics-and-economic-diplomacy-towards-north>, accessed on 25 May 2017.

⁵² Gilbert Rozman, pp. 190–191; Leszek Buszynski, pp. 15 and 45.

⁵³ Marie-Joëlle Zahar, "Reframing the Spoiler Debate in Peace Processes", in John Darby and Roger Mac Ginty (eds.), *Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, Peace Processes and Post-War Reconstruction*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

scholars of International Relations such as John Mearsheimer argued that nuclear weapons can ensure stability. If this line of argument is correct, the US or any other country is unlikely to attack North Korea given that it already has nuclear warheads and delivery systems in its arsenal. Its effectiveness is as good as the rationality of actors and decision makers. Leaders with suicidal tendencies or those who believe that mass death of their own population would be preferable to a humiliating defeat may well act entirely differently. Therefore, provocations, threats and rhetoric will not de-escalate the nuclear tension on the Korean Peninsula.

5.1 *Imperative for Restrained Rhetoric*

The members of nuclear club of states have nuclear doctrines outlining under what circumstances they would use nuclear weapons. Some countries have no-first-use policy in place. They will not use their nuclear weapons first unless they are attacked by a nuclear weapon first. However, this also requires that they have 'second strike capability', i.e., they are able to mount a nuclear attack in case their nuclear stockpile is destroyed by the adversary in a first attack. Yet, this is a luxury that not all nuclear powers can enjoy. If a nuclear power does not have credible second-strike capability, it will not risk its total destruction by not initiating the first attack. This is applicable for countries with no credible nuclear triad: a combination of land, submarine and air-based delivery system.

This is why signal from belligerent parties plays an important role. No country would want to falsely provoke its adversary because it might lead the latter to use nuclear weapons first. In the latest crisis, both sides are giving wrong signals by engaging in a cyclic game of rhetoric and exchange of heated words. While President Trump has recently said the US nuclear weapons are "locked and loaded". Deterrence works when both parties take each other seriously and threats are not exaggerated. If the US cannot follow through its threat of responding with "fire and fury", there will be questions as to its willpower or courage to mount a preemptive strike on North Korean nuclear sites. There are at least two possible consequences: US would lose the credibility of its threats, or in a worst case scenario, North Korea would be frightened to initiate a nuclear war to overcome its strategic disadvantage. Because it has been observed that in an asymmetric warfare, it is usually the weaker power that initiates the war to baffle the enemy with an element of surprise.⁵⁴ Given the doubt that weaker party would be able to survive an attack, it is more likely that it would attack first. As such, the immediate priority of the parties involved in the Korean nuclear crisis should refrain from engaging in a battle of words to prevent a surprise attack. The onus is on President Trump because of the US's superiority and higher stake.

⁵⁴ This theoretical question has been addressed at length by T. V. Paul of McGill University, Canada. For further scrutiny on why this is the case, see, T. V. Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

5.2 Perils of 'Good Cop, Bad Cop'

'Good Cop, Bad Cop' is an old bargaining/negotiation technique where one cop threatens a person during interrogation with grave consequences, if he does not comply. Another cop treats the interrogatee nicely and offers incentives for cooperation. President Trump's initial response to prevent North Korea seems to show that it has engaged in playing the good cop, and the bad cop bargaining game with Pyongyang. Sometimes his senior officials have assumed the role of good cop while the President played bad cop. His statements, thus, have oscillated between appeasement and provocation. He previously praised the North Korean leader for being able to maintain his powerful position despite internal/external conspiracies against him. Trump said of Kim Jong-un in an interview given to the CBS News:

"At a very young age, he was able to assume power. A lot of people, I'm sure, tried to take that power away, whether it was his uncle or anybody else. And he was able to do it. So obviously, he's a pretty smart cookie."⁵⁵

However, his recent statements against Pyongyang were fierce and strong. He forcefully said that any North Korean provocation "will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen."⁵⁶ This good cop/bad cop policy may also signal a lack of policy coherence within the US foreign policy making circle. On the other hand, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has assured the American public that the US is not sliding into a possible nuclear war and there is no imminent threat.⁵⁷ A White House staff Sebastian Gorka who serves as the Deputy Assistant to the POTUS criticised Secretary Tillerson for "speaking out of turn" and commenting on a military issue that does not concern the Secretary of State.⁵⁸ This shows that it may not be a good cop/bad cop technique; instead, the US does not have a well-thought-out policy on how to prevent North Korea from firing more missiles.

Curtis Martin argued, complexities of international diplomacy prohibit the imitation of an interrogation room.⁵⁹ Because actors may use indirect channels to communicate, as in the case of Washington and Pyongyang, messages are likely to be distorted and threats miscalculated. Especially, when a threat of nuclear war is concerned, playing good cop and bad cop should not be the diplomatic tool of choice.

⁵⁵ John Dickerson, "Full Transcript: President Donald Trump's Interview with 'Face the Nation'", *CBS News*, 30 April 2017, available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-interview-full-transcript-face-the-nation/>, accessed on 25 June 2017.

⁵⁶ Jeff Zeleny, Dan Merica and Kevin Liptak, "Trump's 'Fire and Fury' Remark Was Improvised but Familiar", *CNN*, 09 August 2017, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/09/politics/trump-fire-fury-improvise-north-korea/index.html>, accessed on 10 August 2017.

⁵⁷ Paul McLeary, "Trump Increases Rhetoric on North Korea, As His Aides Fight It Out", *Foreign Policy*, 10 August 2017, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/10/trump-increases-rhetoric-on-north-korea-as-his-aides-fight-it-out/>, accessed on 12 August 2017.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Curtis H. Martin, "'Good Cop/Bad Cop' as a Model for Nonproliferation Diplomacy Toward North Korea and Iran", *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2007, pp. 61–88.

One internal dynamics that explains the actions of the current leader is that the regime suffers from legitimacy crisis. In the psyche of North Korean leadership, this apprehension was fortified by the US talking about regime change, demonstrated in the wake of Arab spring.

5.3 *Charting the Course for the Aftermath of Reunification*

What happens after potential reunification of Korea is a concern for all parties. Both Korea anticipate a future reunification of the country. What is disputed is, however, who would be at the political control. North Korea is isolated and economically weaker; but militarily superior. Conversely, South Korea has a booming economy, it is internationally well connected in terms of trade and foreign investment, and finally, is backed up by its western allies. Pyongyang's political elites are apprehensive of losing their political fortune on case of such future event.

Aside from both Korea, neither China nor Russia wants permanent presence of US forces in their backyard. As long as there is no assurance from the US that it would play a limited role in case of a regime collapse or reunification, both China and Russia will resist any likelihood of US preeminence in the Korean Peninsula. This question is intricately linked with a negotiated settlement of the crisis.

5.4 *Strategic Reassurance*

For China, reunification poses another challenge. North Korea shares land borders with China and South Korea does not. The collapse of North Korea's current regime would invariably lead to the deepening role of South and its western allies. Because of the treaty between the US and Seoul, American troops will be on the ground. A unified Korea with the political control resting in the hands of political elite from the South would imply that American troops maintain a presence in the region. This will be unacceptable to both Russia and China for strategic reasons. As such, the US policy makers should focus on what Eduardo Aralar calls "strategic reassurance" between China and the US.⁶⁰ The US should guarantee the regional actors that its role in case of a reunification would be limited and it would not interfere in the internal affairs of other neighbouring countries. The recent escalation has brought all powerful state closer than anytime they were in the past. China and Russia are eager to cooperate to defuse the crisis more than ever. Stephen Walt argues that "North Korea deserves most of the credit for this display of great-power unity".⁶¹

⁶⁰ Eduardo Aralar, "U.S.-China Relations: A Game of Strategic Reassurance", *Foreign Affairs*, 07 August 2017, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/sponsored/us-china-relations-game-strategic-reassurance>, accessed on 12 August 2017.

⁶¹ Stephen Walt, *op. cit.*

5.5 *Bringing back Multi-Party Negotiation, Save Spoilers*

The major parties to multilateral negotiation have diverging interests and objectives with regard to Korean nuclear problem. There were some inherent problems of the multilateral negotiation mechanism devised to resolve the nuclear armament of North Korea. Japan has an “inflated sense of its power” in the region and the US also concedes to this view.⁶² Gilbert Rozman argues that neither Japan nor the US is willing to turn the Six-Party Talk into a permanent security mechanism, because doing so would officially recognise China’s predominance in the region. This would change the status quo of the region.

5.6 *Diplomacy and Negotiation*

North Korea has relatively advanced nuclear reactors and, despite some failures, it has successfully launched several Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs). The United States should not rule out limited de-nuclearisation in dealing with Pyongyang. Mutual assured destruction (MAD) would imply that North Korea has credible nuclear deterrence and the US cannot mount a decapitation strike without risking a retaliation from North Korea. If that is the case, threats and rhetoric will no longer work. The only option would be diplomacy and negotiation.

The *hawks* in Washington are eager to start a war with North Korea without resorting to diplomacy. Those in favour of this argument claim that nuclear deterrence is strengthened by a country attaining ‘second strike capabilities’—when a country is able to strike even after being hit by its adversaries. Second strike capabilities bolster deterrence because they ensure mutual assured destruction (MAD). The current stand-off cannot be peacefully resolved without giving diplomacy a chance. It has become clear that rhetoric and hollow threats from either side cannot dissuade the other from further escalation. Given the delicacy of the matter and grave consequences involved, it is high time both sides agree to negotiate.

5.7 *Engaging the United Nations*

The UN is often handicapped by the veto power of permanent members of its Security Council. But the biggest advantage of engaging through the UN is its ability to garner international support. The composition of multi-party negotiation framework is parochial. Given the global implications of the problem, the UN should play a bigger role. The merits of UN’s direct involvement are twofold. First, this would allow other neutral parties to talk to Pyongyang out of its current stance. Third parties are known to be effective in international negotiation. Secondly, any decision that may involve use of force against North Korea would have much international credibility if the UN is directly involved.

⁶² Gilbert Rozman, *Strategic Thinking About the Korean Nuclear Crisis: Four Parties Caught Between North Korea and the United States*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 28.

Secondly, in the face of persistent missile tests by Pyongyang, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2371 was passed unanimously on 07 August 2017. Although this resolution is unlikely to significantly alter the current state of affairs, it would nonetheless put pressure on North Korea by the way of stifling its foreign exchange earnings by limiting its international trade.⁶³ The resolution seeks to reduce the country's international trade to below US\$ 1 billion annually, from its current US\$ 3 billion export revenue.⁶⁴ This would prevent North Korea to send migrant workers to other countries, imposed trade restrictions on its major imports including seafood. It will be denied port access to North Korean vessels. Since test missiles are very costly to manufacture, it is expected that North Korea would require to channeling funds from other domestic source to be able to produce more missiles. The resolution also gives due recognition to the achievements of the Six-Party Talks.

Regardless of the tougher wording of the latest resolution, it is 16th of its kind since North Korea left the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1993.⁶⁵ In fact, the previous resolution was adopted only five months ago. Passing a resolution does not guarantee that clandestine trade and illicit trafficking would end overnight. Despite this, what is required is to internationalise the gravity of the problem by having more countries on board. As the decision was adopted unanimously in the UN Security Council, it will have more legitimacy than unilateral preventive actions by the West.

6. Conclusion

A North Korea with fully armed nuclear capability is a threat to peace and security not only to the US and its allies but also to China and Russia. The stakes are much higher when the leaders of nuclear-armed states are bereft of rationality. Therefore, despite the relative coziness of relations, both China and Russia cannot overrule the threats from Pyongyang. Nevertheless, for both countries the permanent presence of US troops so close to their borders is a bigger cause of concern. This has prevented deeper cooperation among powerful stakeholders such as China and Russia.

Any attempt for peaceful resolution will need to acknowledge the bitter truth that it is now a reality that North Korea is a nuclear state, like India and Pakistan. This would be imprudent to overlook two recent significant developments: first, North Korea has already exhibited that it possesses ICBM capable of hitting the US mainland; and second, it has warheads compact enough to fit in a ballistic missile as noted by Joby Warrick *et al.* in a recently *Washington Post* article.

⁶³ Joseph DeThomas, "UNSCR 2371: An Invitation to Evasion", 38 North, 07 August 2017, available at <http://www.38north.org/2017/08/jdethomas080717/>, accessed on 10 August 2017. For a list of prior UN sanctions, see Kelsey Davenport, "UN Security Council Resolutions on North Korea", Arms Control Association, August 2017, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/UN-Security-Council-Resolutions-on-North-Korea>, accessed on 13 August 2017.

⁶⁴ Stephen Walt, *op. cit.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

When it comes to effective deterrence, miscalculations and miscommunications are the major impediments. President Trump's apparent policy of playing good cop and bad cop is a dangerous game to be played in an international crisis, where nuclear bombs are at stake. A regime that is bent to protect itself cannot be prevented by using appeasement either.