

## UNITED STATES AND THE POLITICS OF A NON-NUCLEAR POWER NORTH KOREA

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### **Abstract**

*The regrettable devastating effects of the first atomic bomb thrown at Japan's Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Second World War saw to the increased urge by countries to acquire nuclear weapons especially by the world powers as a sure way of deterrence and consequently maintaining power balance. However, the United Nations as a way out of maintaining peaceful co-existence brought the resolution on nuclear non-proliferation. Despite this resolution, most countries have renewed efforts at developing nuclear capability but which are being rebuffed by the United Nations championed principally by the United States of America. Utilizing the theory of Deterrence as a framework, this paper therefore interrogates the painstaking efforts of the United States in ensuring that North Korea does not achieve nuclear capability with a view to proffering necessary panacea to obviate the ensuing worrisome logjam. The paper views that a nuclear power North Korea may not significantly present danger to the world but may lead to a comprehensive balance of power and deterrence. The paper recommends amongst others a negotiation-oriented engagement with North Korea rather than the ongoing ineffective strangulating sanctions; stoppage of provocative security threats (such as incessant USA-South Korea military maneuvers near North Korea) as well as drastic reduction (if not total elimination) of nuclear warheads by the world powers (like USA and Russia) to prevent the ambition of other threatened countries to acquire nuclear technology for national survival.*

**Keywords:** Nuclear Power, Deterrence, Korean Crisis, Balance of Power.

### **Introduction**

With the atomic bombing of Japan's Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States of America (USA) during the ugly experience of the Second World War (1939-1945), the entire world was awoken to the destructive effects of nuclear weapons. Consequently, most advanced countries started the acquisition of nuclear technology and thereafter nuclear

weapons as a perfect way of maintaining the concept of balance of power and deterrence within the comity of great world nations.

However, the United Nations as a global organization charged with the responsibility of preventing another world war and maintaining global peace adopted the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear weapons commonly known as Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). According to United Nations official publication:

The Non-Proliferation Treaty is an international treaty whose objective is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, to promote cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament ([www.iaea.org](http://www.iaea.org), retrieved 17<sup>th</sup> July, 2017).

The United Nations opened signatures for countries to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968 and the treaty came into force in 1970. The Treaty was expected to be renewed within twenty five years and this culminated in the NPT meeting of May, 1995 with the agreement that the treaty be extended indefinitely. According to the international body:

More countries have adhered to the NPT than many other arms limitation and disarmament agreement, a testament to the treaty significance. As of August 2016, 191 states have adhered to the treaty, though North Korea, which acceded in 1985, but never came into compliance, announced its withdrawal from the NPT in 2003, following the detonation of nuclear devices in violation of core obligations. ([www.iaea.org](http://www.iaea.org), retrieved 17<sup>th</sup> July, 2017)

The withdrawal of North Korea from the NPT in 2003 was seen as a potential threat and danger to the global community. Within the United Nations' Security Council, the United States as the strongest contributor had to rise to the challenge posed by North Korea resulting in the unceasing verbal challenge and confrontations between the two countries. It should however be noted that the genesis of the hostile relationship between the United States and Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) stem from the activities of the United States during the 1950s Korean war, when the United States Air Force devastatingly napalm-bombed parts of North Korea leading to the "death of 20% of its population" (Blaine, 2015: 20).

Be that as it may, in contemporary era, the relationship between the two countries (USA and DPRK), according to Harden (2013) has been largely defined by North Korea's five test of nuclear weapons, its development of long range missiles capable of striking targets thousands of miles away and its ongoing threats to strike the United States and South Korea with nuclear weapons and conventional forces.

The United States in her strongest desire and efforts aimed at preventing North Korea from acquiring nuclear technology and consequently nuclear weapon formed a strong military and strategic alliance with South Korea, a development which had more often than not heightened the tension between the USA and DPRK on one front and the North and South Korea on the other end. Utilizing the instrumentalities of the United Nations and not excluding United States solo efforts, a plethora of strategies have been adopted aimed at either coercing or persuading North Korea to come back to the NPT but all these have proved futile judging from the hard stance of North Korea and her continued test of missiles to the condemnation of the global community. It could be stated that between 2006 when North Korea launched its first missile test and 2016 over seven resolutions have been passed by the United Nations imposing sanctions on North Korea. According to Davenport (2017) the various sanctions are largely concerned with North Korea's nuclear weapons' program and mainly to dissuade her from continuing the nuclear weapon program. Besides the various US-led strangulating sanctions such as the recent embargo on sale of oil against North Korea, there were equally instances where persuasion such as the United States food programme in North Korea have been used but to no avail.

Worried by the escalating possibility of a post- World War II nuclear warfare between intransigent North Korea and the world Leviathan (USA) and the attendant catastrophic global consequences, this paper, therefore, sets out to x-ray United States-led actions against Nuclear-power seeking North Korea as well as North Korea's intransigence with a view to proffering credible panacea against another possible nuclear holocaust.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The ambition of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) to acquire nuclear technology and subsequently nuclear weapons have severally met brick wall especially judging from the oppositions to this goal by the United Nations and in most particular the United States of America. It is reasoned that a nuclear power DPRK is a threat to the entire globe. To achieve a non-nuclear North Korea, a lot of sanctions have been imposed by the UN and the US, yet North Korea has continued its missile tests unabated.

While the continued missile tests by North Korea has more often than not provoked the entire global community especially the United States, utilizing the option of direct military confrontation as a way out is not in the first cards of either the United Nations or the United States of America. It is as a consequence of this that the "Theory of Deterrence" becomes the most appropriate framework in explaining the actions and inactions of USA and North Korea over North Korea's nuclear-power programme.

Deterrence Theory gained increased prominence as a military strategy during the Cold War with regard to the use of nuclear weapons. It is a strategy intended to dissuade an adversary from taking an action not yet started or to prevent them from doing something that another state desires (en.m.wikipedia.org, culled: 02 July, 2017). For Huth (1999),

Deterrence is the use of threats by one party to convince another party to refrain from initiating some course of action. He further opines that Deterrence in International Security generally refers to threats of military retaliation directed by leaders of one state to the leaders of another in an attempt to prevent the other state from resorting to the threat of use of military force in pursuit of its foreign policy goals. Obasi (2005:114) sees deterrence as a policy of preventing war and other hostile action by convincing the opponent, through objective and subjective measures, of the dire consequences of aggression, viewed in some respects as a corollary to containment. In the same vein, Eke (2000) notes inter-alia that deterrence is derived from a Latin word *deterre* (to frighten) and that the logic behind deterrence lies in the apprehension of potential aggressors in carrying out their intentions for fear of punitive action, up to and including destruction of the society through an all-out war. Lending credence to Aja (1999), Eke also observes a nexus between Deterrence and a situation of 'Mutual Assured Destruction' whereby "states are able to inflict, through a counter-value retaliatory strike, an unacceptable degree of (collateral) damage on the aggressor, even in the worst case of an all-out attack on the strategic forces of the state, which is under attack" (Eke, 2000: 3-4).

From the foregoing, we can observe the relevance or applicability of the theory of Deterrence to this study. Amidst the atmosphere of belligerency, one international actor is striving to achieve nuclear power deterrence capability, another enemy nuclear power actor and her allies are vehemently opposed to its realization. Thus, while the United States of America already possesses nuclear military power with First Strike and Second Strike capabilities, her North Korea adversary for purposes of national security and survival is adamantly striving to develop same nuclear military First and Second Strike capabilities that will ensure a situation of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) and hence, a 'deterrence' to US and her allies attacking and humiliating them as they did to the likes of Saddam's Iraq and Gadaffi's Libya.

### **Nuclear Weapons Efforts of Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea**

It is no longer news that the ambition of North Korea is to be among the nuclear powers states within the global system and the strong political will of successive administrations in the country towards the realization is ever present. To this end, various regimes in the Korean Republic have heavily invested in the building of nuclear technology. Accordingly, Pike (2010:2) opines that: "The nuclear program of DPRK can be traced to about 1962, when the country committed itself to what it called 'all-fortressization', which was the beginning of the hyper-militarized North Korea of today".

He went further to state that when in 1963, North Korea asked the Soviet Union (USSR) for help in developing nuclear weapon. Soviet Union refused but at the same time agreed to help North Korea develop a peaceful nuclear energy program, including the training of nuclear scientists. It should however be noted that Soviet Union did not only train nuclear

scientists for North Korea but went ahead to help them build a nuclear plant that was meant to boost energy in the country.

While it is crystal clear that the objective of USSR in helping in the training of North Korea scientists and the building of nuclear plant in the country was not ill-intended but to boost their energy level that will consequently lead to industrialization and a consequent good life for the people of North Korea, the people at the corridors of power in the country saw this as a great opportunity to actualize their ambition of building a nuclear weapons and achieving the status of being a nuclear power within the comity of nations and most importantly within the Korea Peninsula.

An avalanche of reasons have been advanced as why North Korea defies the dictates of the United Nations and equally the United States and continues to engage in the nuclear weapons programme and which has consequently led to continued nuclear tests despite the uproar the actions have caused the International Community. Be that as it may, experts have advanced major reasons for North Korea nuclear weapon development and they amongst others include:

*Survival:* One of the most prominent reasons for North Korea embarking on the development of nuclear weapon is hinged on survival. The country believes that the only option to survival in present day international system where the most developed and nuclearized states like the United States, Russia, France, Britain and the likes lord it over to other countries was the development of nuclear weapons. Lankov (2016) opines that North Korea leaders decided to go nuclear and that subsequent global event have increased their resolve. He was further to state North Korea openly states: (i) That Saddam Hussein would still be alive if he had actually possessed weapons of mass destruction. (ii) That Muammar Gaddafi of Libya agreed in 2004 to surrender his nuclear programme in exchange for economic riches but he then ended up being killed by rebels who were supported by Western powers. (iii) That in 1994, Ukraine agreed to remove the nuclear weapons it had acquired after the collapse of the Soviet Union in exchange for security guarantees from Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom, but Crimea was subsequently annexed by Russia. North Korea leaders see these examples as justification of their belief that nuclear weapons are vital for their regime survival (Lankov, 2016, p15-16).

*United States has learned to live with other states' nuclear missilization:* North Korea also reasoned that since United States live peacefully with other states that possess nuclear weapons such as Russia, China, Pakistan, India, etc, U.S. can also do the same with a nuclear power North Korea. In the words of Kelly (2017), Russia, China and Pakistan are powers whom Washington would almost certainly prefer were not nuclear, yet the United States adjusted. Each of those three, including Pakistan has treated its weapons reasonably carefully. There has not been the much feared accidental launch or hand-off to terrorist groups, all appears to think of their nuclear weapons as defensive and for deterrence purposes because the offensive potential of nuclear weapons is curiously constrained. This

therefore goes to show that North Korea's possible use of its nuclear arsenal is highly constrained and totally unlikely. A nuclear North Korea can reasonably fit into the profile and objectives of other nuclear states which have to do with the guarantee of national defense and sovereignty as well as national prestige and pride. This is viewed against the backdrop of the realities of the risk involved in offensive use of nuclear weapons.

*To retake South Korea:* In yet another angle to the nuclear ambition of North Korea, Lockie (2017) opines that North Korea is ostensibly developing nuclear weapons with the sole aim of retaking South Korea in an eventual unification of the Korean peninsula. Thus, North Korea's nuclear development is not aimed at the US, not aimed at South Korea, but aimed at unification. The import of this lies in the realities that the younger generations of Koreans want unification without hostilities and to that North Korea believes that when unification eventually happens, its nuclear power status will prevent the United States from getting involved in matters that would be of concern to the Koreans. It is an indubitable fact that judging from the United States military presence in South Korea, there are slim chances of North Korea unification with their Southern neighbours and brothers, therefore the ambition of North Korea in nuclear weapon development does not have attack on South Korea as one of its agenda.

While the reasons given as the driving force over North Korea nuclear weapons' development may appear reasonable especially taking cognizance of the happenings in the global system where countries tend to spend more on defense than other critical sectors, it remains to be adjudged the best action to take in present globalized world.

### **Reasons for United States Stand on a Non-Nuclear Power North Korea**

The United States has never hidden her strong opposition to the development and eventual acquisition of nuclear weapons by North Korea. To this end, the United States in alliance with other leaders in the International Community have tried various methods from subtle persuasions to the imposition of sanctions as a way out of ensuring that North Korea abandon her nuclear weapons developments but little or nothing have been achieved in that direction. Davenport (2017: 18) lends credence to this position when he states thus:

For years the United States and the International Community have tried to negotiate an end to North Korea nuclear and missile development and its export of ballistic missile technology. Those efforts have been replete with periods of crisis, stalemate, and tentative progress towards denuclearization.

He went further to state that the United States has pursued a variety of policy responses to the proliferation challenges posed by North Korea, including military cooperation with U.S. allies in the region, wide ranging sanctions, and non-proliferation mechanisms such as export controls. The United States also engaged in two major diplomatic initiatives to have

North Korea abandon its nuclear weapons effort in return for aid (Davenport, 2017). Given that these efforts by United States to ensure a non-nuclear power North Korea are commendable, the obvious question remains; of what danger is a nuclear power North Korea is to United States? This clearly brings us to why United States is strongly opposed to a nuclear power North Korea.

The development and acquisition of nuclear weapons by North Korea poses certain dangers to the world system. Presently with the various launchings of nuclear armament by North Korea, there is no gainsaying the obvious that North Korea is on the path to the achievement of nuclear capability. Heazle (2017: 3) outlined the following dangers associated with a nuclear power North Korea: (i) United States extended deterrence credibility would be damaged, perhaps irreparably; both China and North Korea would use this to their advantage especially China in further establishing its territorial claims and its ability to tactically leverage other states in the region. If U.S. won't risk conflict with North Korea, why would it do so with China would be the conclusion drawn by U.S. allies and others in the region when pressured by Beijing. It will pose serious danger to South Korea and Japan who will rely on United States for protection, should there be any nuclear war on them by North Korea. (ii) An emboldened North Korea would further develop its nuclear capability, using it to lever a growing list of concessions from the U.S., South Korea and Japan. Kim will likely believe he is much closer to reunifying the Peninsula under Pyongyang. (iii) Japan and South Korea, now in an even more unstable and uncertain environment, would endeavour to go nuclear, and Vietnam will probably want to follow: Northeast Asia thus becomes significantly more dangerous and conflict prone over the next decade or so. (iv) The threat of North Korea leaking its nuclear secrets, as Pakistan did, cannot be entirely dismissed, making further proliferation more likely.

The fear being expressed by the United States over the potential danger to humanity with a nuclear power North Korea as a member of the International Community is not in doubt; however, the central question remains whether the world can fare better or worse with a nuclear power North Korea.

### **A Nuclear Power North Korea – An Appraisal**

It is common knowledge that the devastating impact of nuclear bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the dying moments of the Second World War precisely on August, 06, 1945 and August, 09, 1945 by the United States was a pointer to the decisions of the most advanced countries such as USSR, Britain and the United States in the continuous acquisition and increment in the development of nuclear weapons (Obasi, 2015). Since then other countries in line with the principles of balance of power/deterrence have either acquired or are ambitiously on the threshold of developing nuclear weapons. However, with the acquisition of nuclear weapons by countries like Pakistan and India, other countries like Iraq under late Saddam Hussein, Iran and North Korea started the build-up to the development of nuclear weapons.

Though the ambition of Iraq to develop nuclear weapons was halted by the Gulf War where the regime of Saddam Hussein was ousted and Saddam eventually killed in the war, that of Iran is being carefully managed by the United Nations and the United States. However, North Korea has remained the contemporary recalcitrant state and the headache to the United Nations and most importantly the United States. All measures that have been devised by the United Nations and especially the United States to persuade North Korea to halt its development of nuclear weapon have not yielded any positive outcome leading to the present tension between North Korea and the United States. This scenario promptly elicit the obvious question: 'Can't the world live with a nuclear North Korea or are there pecuniary interest on the part of the United States in seeing a non-nuclear North Korea?

The devastating effects of chemical weapons especially in the face of present day international terrorism which had culminated in the growth of many terrorist organizations across the globe coupled with the apprehension that the world would not be a better place again should these dangerous weapon be accessible to the terrorists was principally why the United Nations brought about the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). While both countries with or without chemical weapons bought into this novel initiative and stand of the UN, North Korea has over the years been playing the tricky game till they lastly pulled out of the treaty thereby presenting itself as the potential danger of the International Community.

While it is the exclusive right of North Korea to acquire nuclear power as a sovereign nation, however, realizing this feat will send a danger signal and would lead to more countries aspiring to develop nuclear technology that would ultimately lead to acquisition of nuclear weapons. Bush (2017: 3) corroborated this view when he stated thus: "In my view, it is less about the actual ability of North Korea to hit continental United States with a nuclear weapon. Rather, the real danger stem from the possibility of weakened alliance and unchecked escalation in the Korean Peninsula that spiral out of control".

With the present incessant testing of missiles by the North Korean authority, there is palpable tension in the Korean Peninsula especially between the United States and North Korea as seen in the provocative utterances coming from the leaders of both countries but not without caution from other world renowned leaders. It is on records that Donald Trump vowed before taking office in January, 2017 that North Korea would not develop an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) during his presidency. However, with various missile launchings which might be confirming that North Korea had developed ICBM, the American leader has been caught off-guard leading to his various utterances about North Korea.

In a bid to halt the various provocative launchings of missile tests, the United States spearheaded new strong UN sanctions against North Korea as a consequence of her assessment that North Korea has mastered the miniaturization of nuclear warheads for



ballistic missile delivery, to include delivery by ICBM-class missile (Borger and McCurry, 2017). Also along the same line, in its defense white paper, Japan's government stated thus:

It is conceivable that North Korea's nuclear weapons programme has already considerably advanced and it is possible that North Korea has already achieved the miniaturization of nuclear weapons into warheads and has acquired nuclear warheads (Borger and McCurry, 2017: 8).

The United States believes that a new set of strong sanctions that will fully ban oil exports to North Korea as well as freezing of all assets of the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and his government for all financial assets held overseas, among other measures will be apt in bringing the regime to the negotiation table. The North Korea leader wasted no time in issuing threats to the United States in which it states that the United States will pay dearly and would strike the US territory of Guam for harsh sanctions by the United Nations against her country. According to Westcott (2017: 2) the North Korea's Foreign Ministry in a release states thus:

If the US does rig up the illegal and unlawful resolutions, the DPRK is ready and willing to use any form of ultimate means, the forthcoming measures to be taken by the DPRK will cause the US the greatest pain and suffering it had ever gone through in its entire history.

However, the United States President Donald Trump cautioned the North Korea regime about making any more threat to the United States as she will be met with fire and the fury like the world has never seen. This growing tension between DPRK and US has elicited various reactions from world leaders. According to Barnes (2017), the United Nations Secretary General, Antonio Guterres warned that military intervention in the stand-off between the US and DPRK would be dangerous and that the potential consequences of military action are too horrific to even contemplate.

For the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, the North Korea could cause a planetary catastrophe and a huge loss of life. In his words: "Ramping up military hysteria in such conditions is useless; it is a dead end, it could lead to a global planetary catastrophe and a huge loss of life. There is no other way to solve the North Korea nuclear issue, save that of a peaceful dialogue" (McCurry and Tom, 2017: 3). He further stated that the Iraqi experience is still fresh in the memory of the North Korean leader and that sanctions may not prevent his nuclear development. According to him:

We all remember what happened with Iraq and Saddam Hussein. His children were killed, I think his grandson was shot, the whole country was destroyed and Saddam

Hussein was hanged. We all know how this happened and people of North Korea remember well what happened in Iraq. They will eat grass but will not stop their nuclear programme as long as they do not feel safe (McCurry and Tom, 2017: 4).

Other world leaders have voiced out in opposition to war but would rather prefer more sanctions while urging Donald Trump and the North Korea leader to tone down on their war rhetoric. The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel; British Prime Minister, Theresa May; the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe and other world leaders plead for a peaceful negotiation and at most sanctions against the North Korean government but are strongly against any war within the Korean Peninsula.

To this end and as a sure way of de-escalating the present tension in the Korean Peninsula while aiming at bringing North Korea to the negotiation table, “the UN Security Council on Monday, 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2017 unanimously approved new sanctions on North Korea but not to the toughest ever measures sought by the Trump administration to ban all imports and freeze international assets of the government and its leader Kim Jong Un” (Edith, 2017: 3). The new UN sanctions of 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2017 are the toughest ever on North Korea and according to Cohen and Roth, (2017: 4), “it is designed to accomplish six major goals: cap North Korea’s oil imports, ban textile exports, end additional overseas labourer’s contacts, suppress smuggling efforts, stop joint ventures with other nations and sanction designated North Korean government entities”.

However, in a swift reaction, North Korea’s ambassador, Han Tae Song states that the United States was fired up for political, economic and military confrontation and that his delegation condemns in the strongest terms, and categorically rejects, the latest illegal and unlawful UN Security Council resolutions (Nick, 2017). With the new tough sanctions against North Korea and taking cognizance of the recalcitrant nature of the North Korea’s leader, it remains to be seen whether the new sanctions would bring the much needed peaceful settlement or lead to escalation of the crisis.

## **Conclusion**

There is no gainsaying the fact that North Korea has the right under the principles of ‘Sovereignty’ and ‘Political Realism’ to acquire nuclear weapons for core interest of self-preservation in the increasing ‘predatory’ terrain of international politics. However, such should not be to the danger of the International Community. While it is the duty of the United Nations to regulate the behaviour of countries to bring about world peace, the world powers (such as the US) should also be regulated.

Notwithstanding the refusal of North Korea to back down on her nuclear programme and missile launchings which has subsequently led to the imposition of more harsh sanctions on her, it should be of essence that the international body engage in a peaceful method of solving the problem. It is equally recommended that the world powers should drastically reduce (if not totally eliminate) their nuclear warheads as a way of sending meaningful

signals to the aspiring nuclear weapon development countries that there might be no need for them to acquire nuclear weapon. The UN should also pass resolution against conducting intimidating and threatening military exercises (such as those of US-South Korea incessant provocative military maneuvers near North Korea) that act as catalyst (in Stimulus-Response paradigm) in gingering less powerful nations (such as North Korea) towards seeking nuclear military power capabilities, for deterrence purposes and national survival.

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