

## **North Korean Nuclear Issue: Regime Collapsism or Negotiation?**

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The North Korean nuclear issue has become one of international importance since North Korea's withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty and acquisition of nuclear capabilities. It threatens both the US and its Asian allies even as the DPRK regime reveals its intentions for more sophisticated nuclear tests. The international community has two rational options: 1) wait for collapse of the DPRK regime 2) and/or restart diplomatic negotiations to settle the North Korean nuclear issue. Currently, the Six Party Talks enacts tough economic sanctions on the DPRK while the world "waits and sees" how and when the DPRK's regime will collapse. Given the failure of the international community in preventing the North Koreans from acquiring atomic weaponry, this article describes why diplomatic negotiation and reengagement with the DPRK's existing regime, not a collapsism framework, is the most viable strategy to deal with the prevailing situation in the Korean Peninsula which, in turn, could ensure peace and stability in the East Asian region.

**Keywords:** Nuclear North Korea, regime collapsism, the Six Party Talks, Diplomatic negotiation, Peace and stability

### **Introduction**

The Korean Peninsula became a victim in the Cold War between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. It dealt with a civil war from 1950 to 1953 between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the DPRK, North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea), although the two adversarial superpowers each played a major role in the struggle between the two Koreas in their efforts to achieve their own strategic and military goals. Both Koreas

remain locked in struggle despite attempts for unification and the acceptance of both nations to the United Nations in 1991. The Republic of Korea, more advanced both economically and militarily, continues to enjoy the security guarantee extended to it by the United States and its extended deterrence policy, shared with its allies and partners in Europe and Asia. Conversely, the DPRK is less developed economically and possesses weak conventional forces, though it continues its efforts to test nuclear weapons and increase its stockpile of nuclear warheads.

Due in part to their past hostilities and conflict with the United States and its Asian allies, namely South Korea and Japan, North Korea withdrew from the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003 and conducted several nuclear tests with security as their rationale. North Korea's continued tests of nuclear weapons has led to an increased reliance upon them for their defense. Both the governance of the DPRK and their acquisition of atomic weaponry have become an issue for the international community, particularly for the states involved in the Six-Party Talks (the United States, Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea). Given the current inactivity with the Talks, there is no strategy towards progress in effect on the Peninsula, with both Koreas at a stalemate. The international community has imposed strict economic sanctions on the DPRK, but absent any diplomatic negotiation or overall strategy on how to deal with its nuclear capabilities, they have given into an attitude of collapsism, merely waiting and hoping for peace to prevail through the collapse of the DPRK regime. This unguided and vague strategy of "wait and see" has further deteriorated the prospects for future diplomatic negotiation, be they bilateral, tri-lateral, or multilateral. Conversely, this strategic vacuum has instead benefited the DPRK regime, as it continues to survive and conduct nuclear tests threatening the United States and its Asian allies. The absence of a multi-pronged negotiation strategy, such as that of the Six-Party Talks, has allowed the DPRK to continue their efforts in maturing their nuclear weapons program, in turn further complicating the prospects of future talks.

The international community now needs to adopt a strategy that

would reengage the North Korean government to both resolve the nuclear issue and maintain strategic stability in the Korean Peninsula. The reengagement could use a multi-pronged and sophisticated negotiations strategy that involves not only the Six-Party Talks, but also include bilateral negotiations (involving the DPRK and the US), trilateral negotiations (involving the DPRK, the US, and the ROK), and other multiparty negotiations that suit both the DPRK and ROK, eventually crafting a road for a sustainable peace on the Korean peninsula.

“Waiting and seeing” for the DPRK’s regime failure has not worked even though the international community has waited for such a possibility for more than 25 years. The DPRK’s leadership has learned which measures to take to avoid domestic hostility and prevent the collapse of its regime. Evidently, the international community’s failure to devise a strategy to resolve the prevailing North Korean nuclear issue equals its failure in stopping the DPRK from going nuclear in the first place. Isolating the DPRK’s regime from contemporary world politics, enacting strict sanctions, and cancelling the Six-Party Talks do not comprise a viable strategy for the key players at the negotiating table. Similarly, waging an outright war or conducting preemptive strikes against the DPRK’s nuclear assets believed to be dispersed and concealed closer to the Chinese and Russian borders are not rational options, given their likelihood of making matters go from bad to worse.<sup>1</sup>

This article cites several key studies; namely, academic works and policy papers which talk about the North Korea’s nuclear weapons development program, the overall nuclear issue, and the process of conducting the Six-Party Talks. Most of these works are based on the history of the North Korean nuclear weapons program and the cultural and domestic conditions of the people of the DPRK. Others discuss the evolution in North Korean nuclear strategy since its acquisition and first tests of atomic weaponry. There are a few works that discuss the process of negotiation between other key state actors and

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1. Shane Smith, “North Korea’s Evolving Nuclear Strategy” (US-Korea Institute at SAIS, August 2015), pp. 1-22.

the DPRK in terms of resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. Nevertheless, there is little to no substantial work carried out that substantially discusses the importance of multiple layers of negotiating strategies which, in turn, could lead the DPRK to either stop further testing of nuclear weapons and production of deterrent forces or to become outright convinced to divert its nuclear weapons program towards peaceful uses.

In using these readings from existing literature, this article unpacks why and how various negotiating strategies will play a significant role toward resolving the DPRK nuclear issue despite the international community's failure to prevent the North Korean withdrawal from the NPT and testing its nuclear capability and the miserable failure of "waiting and seeing" for the collapse of the DPRK regime. This article attempts to discuss both why the international community has failed in its "wait and see" strategy and why a multi-pronged negotiating strategy, including the revival of the Six-Party Talks, has become essential to resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. It also discusses why sanctions have failed to persuade the DPRK's regime away from conducting more nuclear weapons tests and how military options could worsen the situation on the Korean Peninsula. By synthesizing all the ingredients essential to diplomatic progress, this article will make a valuable contribution to the existing literature, with policy implications for the two Koreas.

This article begins by elaborating how efforts by the international community failed to prevent the DPRK from going nuclear and, later, failed to de-nuclearize the Korean Peninsula. The following sections analyze how the DPRK takes certain measures to prevent domestic upheaval which could lead to regime collapse and what measures it adopts to sustain the survivability of its regime. Moreover, it discusses the central theme of how the key players of the international community "wait and see" for the collapse of the DPRK regime and an ensuing internal resolution to the nuclear issue. Finally, it advocates the revival of a multi-pronged negotiation strategy, such as that of the Six-Party Talks, to create an opportunity to reengage the North Korean leadership in hopes of a mutual resolution to the nuclear issue.

## **The International Community's Futile Efforts in Convincing the DPRK**

It is interesting to note that the international community, particularly the US, failed to strike an Iranian-type of deal with the DPRK back in the early 1990's, when North Korea was still a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), wherein other powers would provide attractive incentives to the DPRK to prevent the North Korean withdrawal and subsequent acquisition of nuclear weapons. There were initial bilateral efforts between the DPRK and US to prevent North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons. This type of bilateral negotiation failed because, despite the Clinton's administration efforts in this regard, the DPRK was not convinced of the value of the incentives offered by the international community. Although the efforts of the 1990's kept the DPRK away from acquiring nuclear weapons for quite some time, they showed their failure when the North finally decided to give notice of their intent to withdraw from the NPT. Even though the DPRK had expressed its long-lasting intent to acquire nuclear weapons and had placed national security at the forefront of their strategy in the wake of the Korean Civil War (1950-1953), the international community, under the so-called banner of non-proliferation, missed the chance to persuade North Korea not to acquire nuclear weapons. This remained a quandary for the international community and the task of non-proliferation.

The strategic environment thereby dramatically changed in the Korean Peninsula when the DPRK, a formal member of the NPT since 1985, finally withdrew from the NPT and made efforts towards acquiring nuclear weapons for security purposes. This reflects the failure of the international community, especially of the US, in switching from a normative posture as a member of the NPT, to a more assertive posture in the prevention of nuclear proliferation. It was a blow to the overall cause of global non-proliferation, as well, given that North Korea was the first NPT signatory to later withdraw and acquire nuclear capabilities.

Compared to the Clinton administration, which believed in an

“engagement policy” that offered economic aid, diplomatic normalization, and regime assurance for the DPRK, the Bush administration failed to pursue what Clinton and his team proposed to gradually dissuade North Korea from acquiring atomic weaponry. The Clinton administration would later become highly critical of the Bush administration’s hawkish strategy towards the DPRK. Although the Clinton administration delayed North Korea in their efforts towards acquiring nuclear weapons in accordance with their 1994 agreement, it was not particularly effective in convincing the DPRK of the value of the prescribed terms. His successor’s administration would later undermine these political and diplomatic efforts when they pronounced North Korea as a member of the “axis of evil” along with Iran and Iraq. Bush’s team would also talk openly of overthrowing the North Korean government through armed force, and was avowedly skeptical of South Korean “sunshine” policies towards their northern neighbor.

In the wake of the American War on Terror, stemming from the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington DC, hawks within the Bush administration prepared to wage war and bring about regime change in many countries deemed counter to American interests, including North Korea. The US Nuclear Posture Review of 2001/2002 also reflected the hawkish policies of the Bush administration through their consideration of North Korea as a rogue state. After the invasion and overthrow of the government of Iraq — another presumed rogue state — North Korea withdrew from the NPT. They would later conduct tests of their nuclear capability in 2006, 2009, 2013, and most recently, 2016, spanning across both Democratic and Republican-led administrations within the American government. Arguably, this harsher stance towards “rogue states” like the DPRK did nothing to advance American material interests, instead encouraging the DPRK regime to speed up their research into atomic weaponry to prevent something like the Iraqi debacle from happening within their own countries. Although the Bush Administration genuinely sought regime change within North Korea, their ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq absorbed the strategic focus of the international community, precluding them from seeking similar regime

change in Iran and North Korea. Even though it had the power to act on it, the United States could not create a strategy of regime change with a reasonable chance of success across so many nations at once.

Both American Democratic and Republican administrations failed, as part of their bilateral initiatives, to convince North Korea of the value of their terms, which in turn could have successfully averted the North Korean acquisition of atomic weaponry. It can be argued that the international community and the main actors in the cause of non-proliferation were hoping for an internally-led collapse of the DPRK regime, given the prevailing wisdom of the time concerning its impending doom by its economic poverty, severe famine, the death of Kim Il-Sung, and the harsh attitude of the North Korean regime toward its people. Later, it was widely believed that the newest regime under Kim Jong-un (young but inexperienced) following the demise of his father, Kim Jon-il, in 2011 would not survive for long. All these predictions were to be proved wrong. As the international community “waited and saw” for the collapse of the North Korean regime, the regime survived, continuing to develop more deterrent forces. How did this happen, and how does the DPRK ensure its continued existence? This will be discussed in the next section.

### **The DPRK’s Strategic Efforts to Ensure Regime Survival**

As mentioned above, the international community, led by the efforts of the United States, did their best to bring about and wait for the failure of the North Korean regime, with many in both the Clinton and Bush administrations awaiting the predicted sudden collapse of the DPRK regime. Notably, in the wake of a severe North Korean famine, the top US military command within the Korean Peninsula predicted that the North Korean government would “disintegrate.” George Tenet, then-Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, warned that “sudden, radical, and possibly dangerous change remains a real possibility in North Korea, and that change could come at any time.”<sup>2</sup> A few years later, US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz

remarked that North Korea was “teetering on the edge of economic collapse.”<sup>3</sup> These high-profile voices predicted regime failure, and in so doing failed to conceive of a comprehensive justification for how and why the North would instead survive.

Instead, the actions of the DPRK regime helped ensure its survival in both the pre- and post-nuclear periods. The international community did not expect that their strict sanctions and strategic plans against North Korea would not achieve their desired ends. Indeed, the DPRK regime actually managed to strengthen their efforts towards ensuring survival every time pressure from abroad was placed upon the country; in spite of facing the threat of collapse for more than two decades, it has readily adapted to the tough conditions facing it. Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind identified several key tools in this effort such as restrictive social policies, manipulation of ideas and information, use of force, cooption, manipulation of foreign governments, and institutional coup-proofing, which enabled the North Korean regime to be in consistent power.<sup>4</sup> All of these factors are backed up by the contemporary scholarship on the Korean security and strategic studies.

First, the Kim family successfully coopted any effective opposition from emerging against the regime. To ensure their continued governance of the country, the Kim regime engineered a successful effort to prevent a revolt from emerging among the ranks of the clergy, business leaders, students, and workers, with restrictions and social engineering effectively disabling these groups’ capacity to criticize the regime’s policies and minimizing the possibility of revolt.<sup>5</sup> One

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2. Quoted in Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, “Pyongyang’s Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,” *International Security* 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010), p. 44.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

4. For excellent study on this see, Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, “Pyongyang’s Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,” *International Security* 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010), pp. 44-74.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49. For other important readings on this perspective see, Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003); Andrei Lankov, *North of the DMZ: Essays on Daily Life*

important aspect of such a strategy built upon “coordination goods” that restricted social uprising against the regime. These “coordination goods” included tactics such as “outlawing any organization independent of regime, limiting the strict free speech and rights of assembly, and preventing the scope of opposition from mobilizing in the first place.”<sup>6</sup> The goal ultimately is to prevent strong opposition against the regime whose effective mobilization could threaten its survival. This simply may not be in the best interest of the Kim regime.

Second, cults of personality, charismatic leadership, and ideological guidance of the masses under the controlled and centralized information regime helps a regime survival. Many states in Asia and Middle East wielded these conceptual tools to help the regime maintain its power.<sup>7</sup> A combination of ideology, charisma, and religion, combined with strict control of ideational tools, served to help the leader attract the population and reduce the desire to rebel.<sup>8</sup> In the DPRK, the Kim leadership exercises all tools at its disposal for a regime survival. It makes sure that in every possible medium — education, arts, entertainment, monuments, and national myth — the regime is depicted to the masses in such a way as to imbue it with a greater charismatic and ideational influence.<sup>9</sup> For example, it advocates Juche ideology (i.e., the ideology based upon self-reliance) to lead North Koreans to believe they need to rely on themselves rather than others in terms of resolving their issues.<sup>10</sup> The Kim regime declares itself to be as part of the

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*in North Korea* (Jefferson, N. C.: Macfarlane, 2007).

6. Byman and Lind, “Pyongyang’s Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,” p. 48.
7. See James Jankowski, *Nasser’s Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2001); Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
8. Joel S. Wit, “North Korea: The Leader of the Pack,” *The Washington Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2001), pp. 77-92.
9. Byman and Lind, “Pyongyang’s Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,” pp. 51-52.
10. Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (New York: New Press, 2004), p. 158.

suryong system which depicts the Kim leaders to be the “sun of the nation” and the “eternal President of the Republic.”<sup>11</sup> With all these ideational ingredients such as centralizing information control, depicting stories of bravery of the Kim family in textbooks, and associating charismatic attitudes with the leadership and personality cult, the Kim regime is well-settled to preclude stronger opposition from within the Kim’s family and the North Korean masses.

Next, a regime that so stridently makes efforts towards its survival is willing to mobilize force to suppress any opposition that could emerge to challenge its continued existence and capacity to wield power. The DPRK regime’s most loyal forces have become the crucial component in their efforts to repress opposition.<sup>12</sup> Byman and Lind remark that, “in the event that the information campaign fails, nationalism wanes, and independent social classes emerge, authoritarian leaders retain their most important tool for staying in power: the regular and often brutal use of force.”<sup>13</sup> The regime will wield their most loyal forces to ensure that opposition cannot mobilize against it, discharging punishment to suppress any threat to their existence. Anyone taking part in opposition against the regime place themselves and their family members under the risk of punishment via what Eva Bellin describes as a “robust coercive apparatus”<sup>14</sup> including physical and mental torture, “disappearances,” exile, and execution that in turn provides a signal to others to restrain from participating in anti-regime activities.

The Kim regime also makes use of widespread surveillance to

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11. Samuel S. Kim, “Introduction: A System Approach,” in *The North Korean System in the Post-Cold War Era*, Kim (ed.) (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 14.

12. For interesting readings on this, see Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf Jr., *Rebellion and Authority: An Analytic Essay on Insurgent Conflicts* (Chicago: Markham, 1971); Ian Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel’s Control of a National Minority* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980).

13. Byman and Lind, “Pyongyang’s Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,” p. 55.

14. Eva Bellin, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective,” *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004), p. 143.

ensure that no group, organization, or institution can mobilize against it, using these tools to help police and party officials ascertain against whom to discharge punishment. A refrain in existing literature on modern North Korean society is that “everybody’s watching each other in North Korea.”<sup>15</sup> Given the strategy of effective surveillance, “a basic principle in North Korea is that two people who trust each other may discuss sensitive issues, but when a third joins them, nothing can be said.”<sup>16</sup> This strict surveillance and the threat of retaliatory violence of force go hand in hand as essential ingredients for regime survival. Oh and Hassig remarked that, “this form of punishment has proved extremely effective in deterring all but the most brave, selfish, or reckless individuals from going against the Kim regime.”<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the Kim regime relies upon selected elites in the form of loyal army personnel, rising part officials, and bureaucrats, showing them with perks and privileges to ensure their continued loyalty and coopt the threat of coup or revolt. The Kim regime dedicates a large portion of their national budget to its army, which it considers reliable, organized, disciplined, and accountable for ensuring its continued viability. Paradoxically, the armed forces have played a key role in preventing regime change, though they themselves have the singular ability to effect regime change through an armed coup. This has led to the Kim regime taking special efforts to identify rogue elements within the army and bestow punishment as it deems to fit to protect its interests. This was seen most recently when Kim Jong-Un sought punishment against a senior military officer on various presumed charges.<sup>18</sup> The regime executed its former Defense Minister with an anti-aircraft gun in front of hundreds of spectators.<sup>19</sup>

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15. Quoted in Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*.

16. Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, *North Korea through the Looking Glass* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2000).

17. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

18. Euan McKirdy and K. J. Kwon, “Ranking North Korean Army Officer Said to be Executed by Regime,” *The CNN*, February 12, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/10/asia/north-korea-army-chief-ri-yong-gil-executed/>.

19. Emma Glanfield and John Hall, “Kim Jong-Un Executes Defense Minister

In sum, given the above factors, the survival of the Kim dynasty and the overall DPRK regime are closely intertwined. The family has done everything within its power to not only protect its own members, but also to protect the regime, no matter the price. The introduction of atomic weaponry has made the rationale for ensuring the continued survival of the Kim regime even more basic. Presumably, the Kim family can use the prospect of acquiring additional nuclear armaments as a foundation for their continued rule due to the role nuclear deterrence will play in ensuring the continued survival of the DPRK regime.

### **The DPRK's Nuclear Odyssey and the Banner of Collapsism**

Is there any hope of the Kim regime in compromising their strategy towards ensuring its continued survival, satisfying those that cling to the concept of collapsism even after North Korea successfully detonated numerous nuclear weapons in testing? Given the level of support that this notion still holds within academic and political circles, it demands additional work to fill the gap in existing literature. As it currently stands, it is likely that North Korea's nuclearization has instead weakened the banner of regime collapsism.

North Korea acquired its nuclear capability largely because it perceives a threat from the United States and its forces stationed in South Korea, even reduced as they are in the aftermath of the Cold War. Security thus remains the predominant factor in its decision. Although the DPRK regime had already issued notice to the international community of its intent to withdraw from the NPT as early as the 1990's, it was the changed strategic environment it faced in 2003 that led to its ultimate withdrawal and subsequent efforts towards going nuclear. In 2003, the US's Nuclear Posture Review in 2003

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Hyon Yong-Chol," *Daily Mail*, May 12, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3079172/North-Korean-defence-minister-executed-anti-aircraft-fire-disrespecting-leader-Kim-Jong-doing-military-events-answering-back.html>.

declared North Korea to be a member of the “axis of evil.” Given the American-led invasion of another non-nuclear country recently deemed to be a member of this axis, Iraq, the DPRK regime feared it would be next. Presumably, the regime believed the acquisition of nuclear weapons would prevent a similar American-led invasion of their own territory and serve to bolster their deterrent forces.

In the aftermath of the Six Party Talks, the DPRK successfully conducted tests of their nuclear capability in 2006, 2009, 2013, and, in 2016, a series of tests. These nuclear tests served a) to enhance the credibility of its deterrent forces; b) to increase their lethality and range; c) to miniaturize its deterrent forces and d) to signal to the US and allies not to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system in Asia which in turn could undermine the credibility of the DPRK’s deterrent forces. It also raised strategic concern for China, who remained an essential part of the Six-Party Talks. Since it is not clear what nuclear strategy the DPRK would practice after it acquired nuclear weapons, it is largely assumed that it could follow a doctrine of minimum credible deterrence.<sup>20</sup> However, it appears that North Korea could expand the capacity of their deterrence force to retaliate against forces well outside the Korean Peninsula given the development of warheads and delivery systems, including Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), that the North Koreans have been working towards for much of the past two decades.<sup>21</sup>

The advent of nuclear weaponry bestowed the Kim dynasty with enough confidence to consolidate both their family and the regime as a whole. Atomic weaponry allows the DPRK regime to potentially engage with their adversaries on much more equal terms, and the role of the Kim dynasty in procuring these weapons and commanding

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20. Zafar Khan, “North Korea Evolving Nuclear Strategy under the Pretext of Minimum Deterrence: Implications for the Korean Peninsula,” *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 24, no. 3 (2015), pp. 181-216.

21. See Anthony H. Cordesman, *North Korean Nuclear Forces and the Threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Northeast Asia*, July 25, 2016, Center for Strategic and International Studies, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160725\\_Korea\\_WMD\\_Report\\_0.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160725_Korea_WMD_Report_0.pdf).

their potential usage has strengthened its grip within the regime. The Kim dynasty remains visibly at the forefront of efforts to upgrade, sustain, and modify their deterrent forces according to the perceived level of deterrence needed. Any blow to the command of the regime could have deleterious effects on the survivability of the command and control of the overall deterrent forces and thus their credibility as a deterrent to attack. A non-nuclear North Korea would give credence to the concept of collapsism and the possible installation by the international community of a political regime deemed more amicable to international interests. Accordingly, the regime endeavors to refine and develop their nuclear deterrent.

The chances of the “wait and see” school being correct grow ever fainter. Given the previous preeminence of the collapsism theoretical framework, the international community must consider the most likely future contingencies for the DPRK regime. Should the international community continue to entertain the notion of collapsism any longer, given the continued development (and ensuing benefits towards regime survival) of North Korean nuclear weapons? Would these deterrent forces maintain their credibility in the face of a collapse of the ruling regime? For that matter, what would come of these forces and their weapons following the end of regime control? How would a strategic rethink by the international community of the credibility of North Korea’s deterrence forces impact the Korean Peninsula as a whole?

The international community, and in particular the United States and the Republic of Korea, confronts two fundamental issues, collapsism and the very real consequences of regime collapse given their acquisition of nuclear weapons. The international community has “waited and seen” for regime collapse for far too long. Nothing positive has happened, and the Korean Peninsula remains divided. The longer the international community waits for the regime to collapse on its own, the further it gets away from diplomatic and political negotiations and the more the North Korean leadership is able to exploit currently prevailing conditions for additional nuclear tests. Can the international community afford such a scenario, given its potential

threats to peace and stability throughout the entire Peninsula?

Nuclear weaponry, in ruining the collapsism school, has also prolonged the conflict between North and South Korea. There is a genuine need for an alternative strategy to resolve the nuclear issue in a way that suits the needs of both nations. Rather than waiting for the DPRK regime to collapse from internal factors, the US, China, and other major players in the international community need to reengage the DPRK regime alongside their counterparts in Seoul. Negotiation, not collapsism, must be seen as the way forward. When it comes to negotiation, this should be a multi-pronged, result-oriented, and sufficiently complex effort to strike a deal that meets the needs of all concerned parties, regardless of the specifics of how individual parties negotiate together. Doing so will help ensure continued stability of the Korean Peninsula in addition to meeting the individual security needs of these nations. How it will do so is discussed in the next section.

### **The International Community Reengagement Policy: A Road to Restart the Six Party Talks**

Attractive as preemptive strikes against DPRK nuclear facilities may appear, these efforts would only engender additional complications on the Peninsula, likely escalating to a full-blown military conflict that would not benefit any of the parties involved. Given the success of diplomatic efforts in the case of Iran, military invasion should not be seen as an ultimate viable solution, even in consideration of the differences between the Iran and Korea situations. Namely, Iran was in the process of acquiring a nuclear capability and had already tested ballistic missiles but had neither acquired nor formally tested atomic weaponry, and it remains unclear if they have acquired the capacity to do so. Moreover, they are still a full member of the NPT and are thus not allowed to pursue a nuclear weapons program for military purposes. Therefore, it was easier, if still very complicated, for the international community and particularly the US to strike a nuclear deal that benefits all affected parties so long as there is no threat to

any party's security. This is compared to the situation faced with North Korea, a self-declared nuclear state that has formally withdrawn from the NPT and demonstrated their nuclear capabilities. An Iranian-type deal may not be likely; nonetheless, there is still a chance for the major players within the Six-Party Talks framework to engage the North Korean leadership on the nuclear issue. Regular talks and consistent diplomatic efforts could eventually pave the way to revive the Six-Party Talks involving key players in the politics of the Peninsula. Further efforts can be made to enable these diplomatic endeavors to become sufficiently complex and comprehensive enough to create the results desired by all parties, involving anywhere from two to six (or more) of the participating parties as the situation demands.

First, these talks or negotiations could be bilateral between the US and the DPRK. For example, the US President-elect, Donald Trump, stated during his presidential campaign that he would have no issue meeting and talking with Kim Jong-un to help resolve the current impasse.<sup>22</sup> Both states could discuss issues of mutual concern and come to a peaceful resolution. The US could offer, as the Clinton Administration did in the 1990s, formal Confidence Building Measures that could lead to the eventual lifting of sanctions and the provision of economic assistance in return for guarantees that North Korea would either stop further development of its nuclear weapons program, including a ban on the production of nuclear warheads or more sophisticated delivery mechanisms or an outright North Korean transformation of its nuclear weapon program towards peaceful nuclear technology. Given the number of tests already conducted by the DPRK, the latter option remains unlikely, but the former could remain viable if both parties are willing to settle for a halt to continued development in lieu of outright disarmament at this juncture.

Second, there could be benefits to the Korean Peninsula through

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22. Nick Allen, "Donald Trump Says he Would Meet North Korea's Kim Jong-un for Talks" *The Telegraph*, May 18, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/18/donald-trump-says-he-would-meet-north-koreas-kim-jong-un-for-fac/>.

the use of trilateral talks between the two Koreas and the United States. Given the South Korean proximity to its northern neighbor, its interests could not be ignored during bilateral talks between American and North Korean diplomats; however, this is not to say that the US and the DPRK could not have their own negotiations. Assuming the success of bilateral talks in halting further nuclear development, they could then cooperate with the Republic of Korea to create an ensemble of Confidence Building Measures between the two Koreas that would benefit both nations.

Third, to add an additional layer of sophistication, there could be four-sided talks between the two Koreas, the United States, and China. China remains crucial to the overall process of diplomacy with Korea and the US has realized that, absent a central role for China, there is little chance of a quick resolution for the North Korean nuclear issue. China's role is a priority for a number of reasons: One, China shares a border with the DPRK and holds a good historical relationship with the North Koreans. Two, China is a recognized nuclear weapons state with a recognized responsibility within the global nonproliferation regime. Three, it is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, where it plays a key role in global politics overall. Four, it is a rising regional power with ambitions towards strengthening their economic and military might. Therefore, China's role, as it continues its rise as a regional power, can be positive in terms of developing a strategic environment in the Korean Peninsula where all countries could have a win-win result concurrent with strategic stability in the Korean region. It is expected that the US would be able to put pressure on the Chinese to play a central role in this context without needing to intimidate the DPRK. Without a substantial role for China at the negotiation table, especially in consideration of its regional rise, both the United States and the Republic of Korea are unlikely to see any positive outcome materialize from talks.

Last but not least, sustainable diplomatic negotiations could be a key source for resolving the Korean nuclear issue. Resumption of all types of diplomatic effort, including that of the Six-Party Talks,

would be possible given the following factors that would favor engagement with the international community to reengage the DPRK on the nuclear issue.

First, although North Korea formally withdrew from the NPT and conducted tests of their nuclear capabilities, their nuclear weapons program has not fully matured, even as it emerges from its current embryonic stages. For example, the DPRK has not reached a sufficient level of development to create a credible second strike deterrent in the form of nuclear submarines, nor have they demonstrated the development of tactical nuclear weapons. They have thus far failed to fully develop ICBM technology, to say nothing of Multiple Independent Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs) wielded by the preeminent nuclear powers. To date, the North Korean nuclear forces are not considered as being able to reliably strike targets within the continental United States, at least not when compared to their potential for striking American allies in East Asia.

Thus, the North Korea nuclear weapons program still offers an attractive opportunity to the international community to reengage with its leadership to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. If the international community were to delay too long, there is a real chance the DPRK would succeed in their intentions of upgrading and modernizing their nuclear capabilities, making it increasingly more difficult to negotiate (and perhaps all but impossible, should they fully develop the mature technology required). This would represent the ultimate failure of talks and diplomacy. There is a very real chance of “missing the boat” if the key players do not begin to adopt a sufficiently sophisticated negotiation strategy today, with a consequent chance of greater harm befalling upon them.

Second, it is important to note that North Korea does not confront a real nuclear rival within East Asia. China is a nuclear state, but the DPRK does not face a major threat from their forces. Neither South Korea nor Japan are nuclear states, instead enjoying the protection and deterrent offered by advanced and well-trained American conventional forces.<sup>23</sup> The only realistic potential threat perceived by North Korean leaders is the continued presence of the US in East

Asian affairs, along with the security guarantee extended to its allies — indeed, this was North Korea's original rationale for going nuclear in the first place. The fact that American allies have eschewed nuclear weapons in favor of the nuclear security guarantee by the US creates the possibility for engagement on the nuclear issue.

Third, given the above two scenarios that would constitute reengagement with North Korea through a multi-pronged negotiation stage, both the United States and China would play an extremely important role. The US, a predominant player in the Asia-Pacific region, could develop a strategy in which the DPRK no longer feels threatened and is thus ready for diplomatic negotiations over its nuclear armament. The US could also further convince the Chinese to play a crucial role in denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula while encouraging the Japanese and South Koreans to maintain a sustainable relationship of greater regional economic integration, reducing the likelihood of war. This would become most likely when regional negotiation efforts reach a sufficient level of sophistication to convince the DPRK regime that diplomatic solutions are the best ultimate guarantor of regime survival. After all, there are no American nukes stationed in East Asia, nor a formal deployment of the THAAD missile defense system. Fears of tactical nuclear weapons at their border are an artifact of the past.

To revive the Six Party Talks in conjunction with other negotiating strategies, the US and its allies could lift the economic sanctions levied on North Korea to provide the country with a chance to openly discuss how they believe the nuclear issue could be resolved. The key powers could convince the DPRK to allow their nuclear program to be inspected by the International Atomic Energy Agency to ensure that they only pursue a peaceful nuclear program. Furthermore, they could work to ensure that the DPRK carries out the practice of "complete, verifiable

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23. For a more recent articles on the US extended deterrence towards both Japan and South Korea see, Fintan Hoey, "Japan and Extended Nuclear Deterrence: Security and Non-Proliferation," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 4 (2016), pp. 484-501. Also see, Se Young Jang, "The Evolution of US Extended Deterrence and South Korea's Nuclear Ambitions," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 4 (2016), pp. 502-520.

and irreversible denuclearization" (CVID) of the Korean peninsula.<sup>24</sup> These diplomatic efforts, if genuine, could help the international community and the DPRK to revive the February 2012 nuclear deal in which the North Korean leadership agreed to suspend their nuclear and missile programs and to allow for the inspection of nuclear sites in exchange for food aid.<sup>25</sup> This is nowhere near the distant past; it begs to be revived without additional monitoring of the DPRK's taste for additional nuclear tests. "Wait and see" will only become even more unrealistic as the North Koreans continue their efforts. According to Jong, "after 25 years of consuming the myth of North Korea's imminent collapse, it would be unbearably painful to face a future where North Korea emerges as an operational nuclear state. If such a scenario were to materialize, we would have only ourselves to blame."<sup>26</sup> In the process of ongoing negotiation with the DPRK, it is indeed possible that they may not agree to completely reverse their nuclear program; however, they could at the very least elect to stop further production and development of nuclear weapons and gradually move towards a peaceful nuclear program under the surveillance of the IAEA. This would be possible if and when the key states involved in talks with North Korea undertake sufficiently complex diplomatic efforts to bring the North Korean leadership back to the negotiation table.

Finally, unanimous agreement among the key players in East Asian politics on how to best reengage the DPRK regime will likely be difficult, but not outright impossible, even with complications emerging from the own efforts of North Korean leadership. There remains significant responsibility on the shoulders of the major powers to find an avenue for diplomatic agreement rather than waiting for the emergence of additional factors that would worsen affairs on the

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24. Elizabeth Phillip, "Is North Korea's Nuclear Program Irreversible?" *The National Interest*, March 19, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/north-koreas-nuclear-program-irreversible-15537>.

25. Victor Cha and Nicolas D. Anderson, "A North Korean Spring?" *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2012), pp. 7-24.

26. Jong Kun Choi, "The Perils of Strategic Patience with North Korea," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (Winter, 2016), p. 68.

Peninsula. The longer collapsism holds sway among the international community, the more difficult it will be to resolve the nuclear issue and the longer the Kim regime will have to entrench themselves against military and political upheaval within the regime. Simply put, there remains substantial room for misinterpretation on both sides of the nuclear issue, despite the potential best efforts for all involved parties. There is consequently a need to develop a strategy to avoid mistrust between the parties involved with the Six-Party Talks, with an emphasis placed on “opportunities,” not the “threats” of the current situation and a genuine effort made towards finding mutually beneficial solutions. As Chinese crisis management scholarship states, the difference between “danger” and “opportunities” depends upon the intensity of the impending crisis, with a real danger of armed conflict emerging but also a genuine opportunity to control the situation to prevent the outbreak of war.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

The DPRK regime and the nuclear issue have fallen under the lime-light of the international community, especially in light of the cancellation of the Six-Party Talks, the imposition of economic sanctions, and North Korean efforts to continue nuclear testing. If collapsism continues to enjoy its predominance among international political actors, the probability of conflict will only continue to grow, with their “waiting and seeing” for a domestically-led collapse that will likely never occur. The international community has adopted such a strategy for much too long, and not only has it not happened, the DPRK regime’s employment of disparate survival strategies has yet to show any signs of failure. Nuclear weapons have only strengthened

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27. For a conceptual understanding on crisis and crisis management, see Alastair Iain Johnston, “The Evolution of Interstate Security Crisis-Management Theory and Practice in China,” *Naval War College Review* 69, no. 1 (Winter, 2016), pp. 29-71.

government control, increasing the need for centralized command and control to best wield their deterrent effect. Indeed, regime failure in North Korea would affect the security of their nuclear weapons and greatly increase the possibility of their misuse within the DPRK or elsewhere on the Korean Peninsula, with ensuing major strategic implications.

This article emphasizes the need for revival of the Six-Party Talks while also for the international community to make efforts for a sophisticated, multi-pronged negotiation strategy that would reengage the DPRK regime and establish common interests to create opportunities away from danger. The aim would be to encourage the North Korean leadership to open up to a diplomatic solution of the nuclear issue, especially given the failure of the regime to collapse on its own. Collapsism is a disproven theoretical framework, made all the more so by the regime's efforts to ensure its continued survival, especially through the acquisition of atomic weaponry. Were regime collapse to actually occur, the possible loss of control over these weapons could now have grave consequences for the security of other nations in East Asia.

Therefore, the major actors in East Asia need to design a negotiation strategy that would fully convince the North Korean leadership to come back to the negotiation table, with the revival of the 2012 Talks serving as a potential avenue for the resumption of diplomacy. This strategy could peacefully resolve the North Korean nuclear issue to the mutual benefit of the DPRK regime and the global community as a whole. Ultimately, it is in the best interests of everyone involved to prevent a catastrophe from befalling the Korean Peninsula, given the potential for losses by all the key players in Asian diplomacy. Therefore, the most rational approach is to prevent this contingency through diplomatic reengagement by the parties currently at odds with each other. Belief in collapsism has not worked, will not work, and will only serve to mar the prospects of future negotiation efforts. It has created a strategic vacuum on the Peninsula, which the North Korean leadership has exploited to bolster their own nuclear deterrent and their odds of survival. The international community must strive

to resume the Six-Party Talks and make an all-out effort to revive diplomatic negotiation before the DPRK achieves a truly mature nuclear capability. Once that occurs, it may be all but impossible to fully denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, a contingency that would only serve to further destabilize the region and irrevocably damage the interests of both the East and the West.

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