

FPC Briefing: North Korea wants peace, and it should be given peace

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It is 60 years since the Korean War came to an end with an armistice and yet, to this day, no peace treaty. Tension and exhaustion once more characterise the Korean Peninsula, with North Korea conducting a ballistic missile test in December 2012 and its third nuclear test in February 2013. This is not a sustainable situation for the six parties involved on the Peninsula¹ or, indeed, for the wider international community, considering that nuclear weapons are involved. Aside from traditional state-centric security concerns, we must also consider the horrendous humanitarian situation in North Korea, which was exacerbated by heavy flooding last year to the point where the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) appealed to the international community for assistance. This is not to say that the DPRK is not itself responsible for raising tensions regarding nuclear weapons, for oppressing its population, ignoring their human rights almost entirely, and making political and economic decisions that serve only to worsen this state of affairs. But in the current situation, the onus is on the other regional actors, primarily the US, to enter peace talks. The opportunity cost to this line of action is a stalemate that perpetuates the hopeless situation outlined above.

The time for nuclear disarmament has passed

North Korean nuclear disarmament was once a possibility, when the state had yet to weaponise and operationalise its nuclear programme. That time passed officially in October 2006 when North Korea tested its first nuclear weapon, but realistically if the US and its allies were to intervene and forcibly disarm the DPRK,² without the high risk of a nuclear war breaking-out, this would have had to have occurred before the 1990s at the latest. This evidently did not happen, and could not have happened, as the 1990s was a decade characterised by the failure of Western liberal states to intervene in other sovereign nations,³ before the advent of the UN's 2001 Responsibility to Protect (R2P)⁴ and the US's 2002 'Bush Doctrine'⁵ in the new millennium.

As it happened, by the time North Korea was declared part of US President George W. Bush's 'Axis of Evil' in 2002,⁶ and therefore a potential target for intervention, policymakers could not be absolutely certain beyond all doubt of the DPRK's nuclear abilities, despite all estimates.⁷ And that is the point: once a state cannot be absolutely certain that their rival does not have working nuclear weapons, it becomes very difficult to intervene in that rival state. Despite the slim likelihood of a retaliatory nuclear strike, the potential costs of this occurring are high enough to prohibit actual intervention. With the aforementioned first North Korean nuclear test occurring in 2006, the DPRK effectively saved itself from ever being seriously considered as a target for intervention in the future. Once a state joins the nuclear club, by invitation or by gate-crashing, it is largely down to that new member to decide whether or not it will leave (i.e. disarm). This is because, although economic

¹ North Korea, South Korea, China, Russia, Japan, and the United States of America (the latter an external actor).

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³ Rwanda and Bosnia of course being the most regularly cited examples of the failure on the part of Western states to intervene in other states and 'save' their suffering populations.

⁴ ICISS, *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001).

⁵ POTUS, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2002).

⁶ BBC, 'Bush's 'evil axis' comment stirs critics', *BBC News*, 2 February 2002 [accessed 9 June 2013], available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1796034.stm>. North Korea was later removed from the 'Axis' and the state sponsors of terror list in 2008 – see: Tim Shipman and Philip Sherwell, 'North Korea's removal from the Axis of Evil is good news for George Bush, Kim Jong-II and Barack Obama', *The Telegraph*, 11 October 2008 [accessed 9 June 2013], available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/3179531/North-Koreas-removal-from-the-Axis-of-Evil-is-good-news-for-George-Bush-Kim-Jong-II-and-Barack-Obama.html>; Philip Sherwell, 'US to remove North Korea from terror list after nuclear deal', *The Telegraph*, 11 October 2008 [accessed 9 June 2013], available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/3179335/US-to-remove-North-Korea-from-terror-list-after-nuclear-deal.html>.

⁷ Christoph Bluth, *Korea* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008): 113-114.

sanctions and 'international' condemnation⁸ can be deployed against an unwanted nuclear club member, no state can actually force it to disarm, precisely because of the possibility that this may cause the latter to use those very weapons. However, there is really very little need to force North Korea to disarm and, indeed, a more secure situation might be achieved both regionally and for the DPRK's citizens if sharp rhetoric was tempered and economic sanctions dropped. By adopting nuclear weapons, North Korea is trying to avoid war, not provoke it.

If the DPRK is not preparing for war, then why the weapons and the bellicose rhetoric?

North Korea wants to ensure its survival, meaning avoiding war, and this has been the case since at least the 1990s. Power preponderance⁹ distinguishes itself from other theories of the realist tradition in its assumption that the US is fundamentally unchallengeable by other actors in the international system. Thus, the structure of the system encourages other states not to balance against the US but to simply accept its hegemony.¹⁰ This adds an additional point to the case made so far for the deterrent nature of North Korea's nuclear development: the DPRK was *not* challenging America's power.

While North Korea had not tested a nuclear device by the time Kim Jong-il took power in 1994 (and was not to do so for over a decade after), its possession of nuclear materials that could be turned into weapons was highly worrying for the US. However, this worry seems to have been unfounded. Brodie noted that before Soviet Russia acquired weapons of mass destruction, the Soviet leadership felt impelled firstly 'to acquire them as fast as they could', and secondly 'to depreciate their importance'.¹¹ The same seemed true of North Korea since the 1990s. Kim Jong-min, an ex-North Korean one-star General speaking in an interview given less than a year prior to Kim Jong-il's succession, sheds some light on how the DPRK saw its nuclear programme at the time:

[North Koreans] think the U.S. is here for aggression, especially an attack on the North. ...the number of people [in the army] isn't what's most important. Most important in winning a war are [nuclear] weapons. They will pursue that principle forever. All this is in a way a defensive move. ...To stick with socialist ideology they must have something to back them up...¹²

Even by 1994, therefore, North Korea appeared to prioritise the possession of some nuclear weapons above a large standing army. Under power preponderance theory, nuclear capabilities give small states 'a means of resisting American will', so that they can 'define for themselves whether they believe that the US is managing the international system to their liking, rather than having to accept the American version'.¹³ The DPRK did not regard nuclear weapons as a method by which to counterbalance against America's power, let alone to maximise its own power. Furthermore, there is no reason why it should have regarded the utility of nuclear weapons in such a way.

When North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in 2006, this yielded less than 1 kiloton (kT) of TNT equivalent, whereas America's attack on Hiroshima over 60 years before yielded 12.5kT.¹⁴ Bearing in mind this disparity, and the possibility that the DPRK had produced between one and eight nuclear

⁸ 'International' here is used in the Western-centric sense to represent the opinions of the US, primarily, and its allies around the world.

⁹ Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, 'International Relations Theory and the Case against Unilateralism', *Perspectives on Politics* (Vol.3, No.3, 2005), pp. 509-524: 511-512.

¹¹ Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007 [1959]): 171.

¹² Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006): 450.

¹³ Campbell Craig, 'American power preponderance and the nuclear revolution', *Review of International Studies* (Vol.35, No.1, 2009), pp. 27-44: 44.

¹⁴ Joseph Bermudez Jr, 'North Korea claims nuclear test', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 9 October 2006 [accessed 9 June 2013], available from: http://web.archive.org/web/20061016163754/http://www.janes.com/security/international_security/news/jdw/jdw061009_2_n.shtml.

fission weapons by 1994 compared to America's grand total of 2,375,300kT of weaponry by that year,¹⁵ there was no conceivable way North Korea could ever have hoped to counterbalance America's nuclear capabilities. This validates Brooks and Wohlforth's claim that American preponderance will militate against counterbalancing.¹⁶ Instead, Pyongyang developed nuclear weapons to make itself an impossible target for the US to confront. It should be emphasised that it was the *possibility* that North Korea possessed or could soon acquire nuclear weapons that was required to deter the US, not an actual show of force.

Conventional war between North Korea and South Korea is highly unlikely

Regardless of its nuclear development, North Korea evidently did not have a mechanism in 1994 by which to carry nuclear warheads overseas.¹⁷ However, it still posed a significant threat to South Korea, by virtue of their shared borders,¹⁸ a fact that North Korea appeared to be aware of¹⁹ and that the US could not risk.²⁰ By posing a threat to Washington's ally, and a territory in which US troops were housed, the DPRK threatened America's interests. The fact that it had no confirmed delivery mechanisms for its nuclear warheads at the time was not the issue; balancing was not necessary, as preparing the way to obtain a nuclear arsenal was enough to deter the US.²¹ It is worth noting at this stage, though, that it is highly doubtful that North Korea would ever use these nuclear weapons against South Korea. Nor do these weapons make it more likely that North Korea would attack the South by means of conventional force.

When considering the chances of North Korea attacking its southern neighbour, it is important to consider the power imbalance between the two states, as well as the nature of nuclear weapons. First of all, nuclear weapons have *no offensive utility*. This might seem obvious, but it is too often forgotten. Brodie explains that a state's ability to use these weapons to hit their nuclear-armed rival first (pre-emptive war) 'depends on [their] having excellent intelligence and being highly responsive to it—which... [they] ought not to count upon'.²² Given that the US is nuclear-armed and has interests in protecting South Korea, a nuclear strike would be an illogical move for the DPRK to take, as this would near enough guarantee North Korea's own destruction. Secondly, nuclear weapons do not improve North Korea's prospects for an invasion of the South. Certainly, nuclear weapons, when carried by great powers such as the US or the UK, serve to enhance the offensive spectacle of those states' conventional military forces. But these great powers differ from North Korea insofar as they have prosperous economies and well-equipped, highly trained militaries. A strong conventional military is not something the DPRK can claim to have. The sheer size of its conventional forces (1.1million active personnel and 4.7million reservists,²³ with at least as many again available for call-up²⁴) is initially daunting. However, one has to consider that the majority of these 15million eligible for service are probably not fit to do so; defectors' reports indicate that soldiers in the DPRK are often as malnourished as the rest of the population, resorting to stealing food by night.²⁵

¹⁵ Bluth, *Korea*: 150-151; Daryl Kimball and Kelsey Davenport, 'Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy', *Arms Control Association*, April 2012 [accessed 9 June 2013], available from: <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron>; US Department of Defense and Department of Energy, 'Summary of Declassified Nuclear Stockpile Information', *US Department of Energy OpenNet*, 30 May 2012 [accessed 24 August 2012], available from: <https://www.osti.gov/opennet/forms.jsp?url=documents/press/pc26tab1.html>.

¹⁶ Brooks and Wohlforth, 'International Relations Theory and the Case against Unilateralism': 511-512.

¹⁷ Bluth, *Korea*: 167.

¹⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003 [2001]): 114.

¹⁹ Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*: 456.

²⁰ Craig, 'American power preponderance and the nuclear revolution': 37.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 35-36.

²² Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*: viii.

²³ Christoph Bluth, *Crisis on the Korean Peninsula* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2011): 22.

²⁴ These are 2010 CIA estimates. See: CIA, 'Korea, North', *The World Factbook*, 5 June 2013 [accessed 12 June 2013], available from: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kn.html>.

²⁵ Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Real Lives in North Korea* (London: Granta Books, 2010): 188.

Furthermore, the North Korean military's technology is severely outdated—much of it dating from the 1950s and 1960s—and 'lacks the essential target acquisition, precision guidance and space reconnaissance of its opponents'.²⁶ This makes it effectively obsolete against US and South Korean weaponry, which includes advanced air and maritime power²⁷ that could launch devastating attacks against the North Korean military and industrial centres. Indeed, North Korea has always avoided direct military confrontations with both the US and South Korea.

In March 2010, with the use of a submarine torpedo, North Korea sank a South Korean military vessel, the *Cheonan*, killing a number of South Korean sailors. Later that year, in November, it shelled the South Korean islands of *Yeonpyeong*, killing not only military personnel, but also, for the first time since the armistice, civilians. However, neither of these can be taken to be an act of war. For one, the *Cheonan* sinking has always been denied by North Korea. Then, when it comes to the shelling of *Yeonpyeong*, this was explained by North Korea as an act of retaliation to a shell fired into its waters by the US-South Korean joint military exercises taking place at the time. Here, it is important to look at North Korea's actions logically. If it had wanted to engage in all-out war, it surely would have shelled not *Yeonpyeong*, an island with a population of 1,200, but instead attacked South Korea's major military bases, artillery batteries, and the capital, *Seoul*.²⁸ Instead, the DPRK has chosen smaller, less strategically important targets and has backed-down at a later date, calling for concessions—look, for example, at its most recent actions in 2012-13, which have led once again to a return to the negotiating table with South Korea (although those talks are already experiencing technical difficulties).²⁹ While the DPRK often initiates these talks and then stalls them at a later date, this is part of its strategy to gain concessions from its opponents, and a strategy that is exercised more often when it is not getting the economic support (and, vitally, assurances of peace) it so desperately needs from surrounding regional actors.³⁰ North Korea has not shown any evidence that it could or would consider a real war, conventional or nuclear, and therefore certainly would not consider an invasion of South Korea. North Korea's nuclear weapons programme is defensive in its utility, and neither the US nor any other state seems capable of persuading the DPRK to disarm.

North Korea's nuclear weapons are defensive measures, and they are here to stay

The Agreed Framework was largely revered as a triumph for US foreign policy during the 1990s,³¹ and this did not change following the agreement's collapse, after which arguments surfaced proclaiming that, had the Framework never been in place, the DPRK would have been able to produce many more nuclear weapons during the 1990s than it had been able to under the conditions of the agreement.³² However, the very fact that the success was a slow-down and not a halt highlighted the fact that the US was unable to put a permanent stop to the DPRK's nuclear programme.

²⁶ Bluth, *Korea*: 140; see also: Bluth, *Crisis on the Korean Peninsula*: 23-24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 142-146.

²⁸ For an expanded version of this argument, see: Gilberto J. Algar-Faria, 'How Does North Korea Signal to Other Regional Actors?', *POLIS Journal* (Vol.6, 2011/12), pp. 1-42: 22-28.

²⁹ BBC, 'North and South Korean government-level talks on hold', *BBC News*, 11 June 2013 [accessed 12 June 2013], available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-22857329>.

³⁰ It is not possible to have a full discussion of this issue here, but for more information on North Korea's negotiating techniques, including crisis diplomacy and brinkmanship, see: C. Turner Joy, *How Communists Negotiate* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955); Scott Snyder, *Negotiating on the Edge: North Korean Negotiating Behavior* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002); see also: Gilberto J. Algar-Faria, 'Bargaining for Survival: The Rationale Behind North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Programme', *algarfaria.com*, 17 May 2013 [accessed 13 June 2013], available from: <http://wp.me/p3vp0t-B>.

³¹ Wesley M. Bagby, *America's International Relations Since World War I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 397.

³² Michael K. Connors, Rémy Davison and Jörn Dosch, *The New Global Politics of the Asia-Pacific* (Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2006): 137-138.

Power preponderance theory distinguishes itself from defensive realism³³ insofar as it stipulates that states will not attempt to balance the US because this task is too difficult—America’s power is so great that it stands unchallengeable by other powers.³⁴ Given America’s position in, and influence over the international system, North Korea has no incentive to challenge America’s power.³⁵ As has been discussed, in neither period did it seem possible that Pyongyang could realistically ‘balance’ America’s nuclear capabilities in the way Soviet Russia was able to during the Cold War. In the 1990s, North Korea was only in the initial stages of developing a military nuclear programme, and even after it broke the Agreed Framework by test-firing a ballistic missile in 1998,³⁶ it was to take a further eight years before it would detonate its first nuclear test device. This type of progress would be hard to describe as balancing.

Simply because North Korea’s weapons deterred the US did not mean that Pyongyang was moving towards balancing America’s nuclear capabilities. As Brooks and Wohlforth note, the US has the freedom to unilaterally make revisions to the international system without sparking counterbalancing.³⁷ If the US attacked North Korea, there would be no ‘mutually assured destruction’ that there might well have been had Washington attacked Soviet Russia during the Cold War. The same was true by 2013: Pyongyang’s ballistic missile launches and nuclear tests did not demonstrate a challenge to America’s preponderance. While North Korea could not balance America’s power, it could make America’s option to attack the DPRK so unfavourable that Washington would almost certainly decide against such an action. This is not the same as counterbalancing America’s power.

Policy implications for the United States of America

The implications of the conclusions of this analysis may be difficult for US policymakers to accept. The DPRK is a completely unique regime: it is an incredibly poor state, with a government that is seen as utterly unacceptable to the US, as it sports all the hallmarks of what some might term an ‘evil’ entity.³⁸ Added to this, North Korea has an abysmal human rights record. Furthermore, Pyongyang possesses nuclear weapons, which it has tested three times, with no indication that it intends to halt such proliferation. The US has intervened in other states for less—Iraq and Libya being the most obvious examples. Washington has also supported regimes within these states, before later toppling them.³⁹ Why, then, has the US not intervened in or supported North Korea under the Kim regime?

While stopping the spread of nuclear weapons has been a high priority for the US, Kenneth Waltz argues, it appears not to have been the highest.⁴⁰ Whereas neither Iraq nor Libya actually ever had a functioning nuclear weapons programme,⁴¹ North Korea does, and this, as power preponderance theory predicts, deters the US from intervening. The opportunity to intervene came and went a long time ago, when the DPRK posed no credible nuclear threat to the outside world. For the US, the risk of intervening is simply too high. Trying to tempt the DPRK to disarm is a comfy short-term

³³ Defensive realism is a strand of neorealism within International Relations theory. It stipulates that states will attempt to counterbalance one another’s military capabilities in order to achieve stability. For more information, see: Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2010 [1979]).

³⁴ Brooks and Wohlforth, ‘International Relations Theory and the Case against Unilateralism’: 511-512.

³⁵ Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*: 138.

³⁶ Daryl Kimball and Kelsey Davenport, ‘The U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework at a Glance’, *Arms Control Association*, August 2004 [accessed 9 June 2013], available from: <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/agreedframework>.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 217.

³⁸ See: Hazel Smith, ‘Bad, mad, sad or rational actor? Why the ‘securitization’ paradigm makes for poor policy analysis of north Korea’, *International Affairs* (Vol.76, No.3, 2000), pp. 593-617: 597-602.

³⁹ Bruce W. Jentleson and Christopher A. Whytock, ‘Who “Won” Libya?: The Force-Diplomacy Debate and Its Implications for Theory and Policy’, *International Security* (Vol.30, No.3, 2006), pp. 47-86.

⁴⁰ Kenneth N. Waltz, ‘The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better’, *Adelphi Papers* (Vol.21, No.171, 1981), pp. 1-32: 8-9.

⁴¹ See: Jentleson and Whytock, ‘Who “Won” Libya?: 67-68, 83-84.

alternative for policymakers: it prevents the US from having to explicitly recognise that it cannot control North Korea (by suggesting that there is a way forward for US-DPRK relations, beginning with North Korea's complete denuclearisation). However, it is highly doubtful that North Korea would willingly give up its nuclear weapons. The resultant option for the US is an unpopular one: if America seeks to positively transform the security situation on the Korean Peninsula, the only way to do so is to accept that the DPRK possesses nuclear weapons and that there is nothing that can be done to reverse that.⁴² From here, the logical action is to assist North Korea to move away from its dire economic situation. This would first involve lifting sanctions and to stop withholding food aid from North Korea on strategic grounds.⁴³ As Waltz found in the case of Iran, such sanctions only serve to damage the lives of ordinary citizens.⁴⁴

The standard argument against giving North Korea any aid uses the justification that the majority of this aid is channelled to the military.⁴⁵ However, this argument means very little once one accepts that there is no point in withholding the aid in the first place. North Korea has continued to develop nuclear and ballistic technologies despite the efforts of the US. Furthermore, given that North Korea now possesses nuclear weapons, it makes far more strategic sense to normalise ties with the DPRK than it does to isolate and destabilise the state. Adopting an isolationist policy—as the US has done for many years—is an illogical and frankly irresponsible decision to take.

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⁴² Note that, although Libya was persuaded to disarm and give up its nuclear programme, it had not by this time created any working nuclear weapons, whereas North Korea has done.

⁴³ Humanitarian aid, in theory, is not meant to be linked to military strategy. Yet, in March 2012, following the DPRK's announcement of a missile test, the US withdrew food aid. See: BBC, 'US confirms it has suspended North Korea food aid plans', *BBC News*, 28 March 2012 [accessed 12 June 2013], available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17542436>.

⁴⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability', *Foreign Affairs* (Vol.91, No.4, 2012), pp. 2-5: 5.

⁴⁵ See: Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007): 2.