

## **North Korea Nuclear Proliferation in the Context of the Realist Theory: A Review**

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### **Abstract**

By the year 1964, all the five emerging champions of the WWII had become Nuclear Weapon States (NWS). However, a bid to avert the ominous risk which nuclear proliferation might portend to world security led to the establishment of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which was signed by many countries. North Korea which was one of the NPT signatories later opted out to embark on a brazen development and testing of nuclear weapons in defiance of all nuclear weapon regulatory bodies. This research discovered that North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons programme was absolutely in conformity with the proposition of the realist theory. But given the fact that the country's belligerent attitude has made it a pariah state and produced adverse effects on its economic growth as well as the welfare of its citizens, the research suggested that North Korea should play down on 'hard power' which subjects it to international odium and explore the option of 'soft power' which states also use to their own advantage. Descriptive research design method was used.

**Keywords:** Belligerence, Nuclear Weapon, Power, Proliferation, Realist-theory, Security.

### **Introduction**

The European state system evolved balance of power mechanism which imposed a sort of check on the adventurous objectives of states. This, coupled with the constraints of the available means of warfare curtailed the destructive tendencies of war up until the close of the era (Waltz, 1981). But the transition from the European state system to a global international system came with the revolution and transformation in the art of warfare. The advancement in economic and technological prowess brought about the development of lethal military weaponry. The United States of America was the first country to develop and use atomic bomb on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1945. The nuclear monopoly enjoyed by the USA was

short-lived as the Soviet Union successfully developed and tested its own atomic device on 29<sup>th</sup> August, 1949. The achievements of the USA and the Soviet Union marked the commencement of nuclear race among the powerful nations of the world. Other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council struggled to acquire their own nuclear weapons. The United Kingdom tested its first nuclear weapon on 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 1952, France did the same on 13<sup>th</sup> February, 1960 and China on 16<sup>th</sup> October, 1964. Hence, these five emerging champions of the Second World War became or were being referred to as Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) (Magstadt,2009).

Nonetheless, the fear that loose proliferation of nuclear weapons may increase the possibility of targeting civilian population, infringe upon the national sovereignty of states, de-stabilize international or regional peaceful relations, and increase the security risk of the entire globe due to likelihood of nuclear war, led to the establishment of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 (Waxman, 2017). The NPT is an agreement (between the five nuclear weapon states and other states that are equally interested in nuclear technology) which stipulates that only the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council have the right to own nuclear bombs and nuclear technology. (Winnefeld & Morell 2017)

The main objectives of the treaty include:-

- a) To halt any further spread of nuclear weapons,
- b) To provide security for non-nuclear weapon states which have surrendered nuclear option,
- c) To encourage international co-operation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and
- d) To pursue negotiations in good faith towards nuclear disarmament. This, it was hoped, would lead to the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons. (World Nuclear Association, 2017)

Over 180 states have signed the treaty since it came into force. The frontline states that have not signed it are India, Israel, and Pakistan. North Korea signed the agreement but opted out in 2003 to pursue a gargantuan quest to acquire nuclear weapon. The country has not only acquired sophisticated nuclear arsenal, it has also repeatedly violated the international norms against nuclear testing by carrying out nuclear tests in 2006, 2009, 2013, twice in 2016 and in 2017 (Winnefeld and Morell, 2017).

The United Nations Security Council has passed several resolutions to denounce North Korea nuclear activities and these have led to series of harsh sanctions slammed on the military and the economy of North Korea. Not unexpectedly, the sanctions have inflicted untold hardship on the citizens of the country. Unfortunately, neither the plight of its citizens nor the several diplomatic moves made by the United States and other countries have succeeded in deterring North Korea from pursuing nuclear weapon programme. The nation has always anchored its actions on the exigency of national security and the security of the Korean Peninsula. As far as the leadership of the country is concerned, the military/ national security of North Korea takes priority over any other consideration and it could not be left at the mercy of any other state. Hence, none of the state's resources have been spared in pursuing this objective.

The actions of the Korean leaders can be understood from the perspective of political realism which states that nations should act on the basis of interest rather than ideals. According to the theory, 'survival is the basic goal of national policy and the best way to ensure survival is to enhance the nations' power. Morgenthau, one of the earliest proponents of realism, opined that "Whatever the ultimate aim of a nation might be, the immediate aim is always power....It is in the best interest of every nation to seek power first and pursue other objectives later. These other objectives are worth being pursued only if they enhance national power, prestige and the like" (Magstadt, 2009). The pursuit of this idea by North Korea has led to the ostracism of the nation which consigned it into the limbo of pariah status. This research examines the belligerence of North Korea and the extent to which 'Prudence' (weighing the consequences of political action), is taken into consideration in its quest for power.

## **Realist Theory**

The Realist theory or Realism is a school of thought which holds the view that international politics is nothing but power politics (Kegley and Blanton, 2011) The theory posits that the nature of the international system reflects emphasis on power because power is the currency of international politics. The theory identifies ‘the State’ as the most important actor on the world stage. It views the world of sovereign states as being anarchic, where there is no central or overarching government or an ultimate arbiter. Since the state is not answerable to any higher political authority and since there is no night watchman who can guarantee that one state would not attack another or rescue states if they are threatened by other countries, any state that wants to survive has no choice other than to suspect the worst about the intentions of other states and to compete for power with them. This, according to the realists, is the tragedy of great power politics. Given this precarious situation, the reasonable and realistic thing for any state to do is to equip itself by acquiring enough power to protect itself, deter any belligerence and advance its interest so as to secure its survival.

## **The Reasons for North Korea’s Nuclear Weapon’s Drive**

North Korea’s voracious pursuit of nuclear weapon programme can be attributed to some reasons. First, the Soviet Union which provided security shield to North Korea disintegrated into several states. Consequently, North Korea which felt left in the lurch saw the need to work for its own survival. Second, the demographic superiority and the economic ascendancy of the neighboring South Korea created a sense of intimidation to North Korea. Burdened by the dramatic level of poverty, with a starving population, lack of natural resources, infrastructure deficit, inadequate capital for investments, isolation from international trade and limited military capability, North Korea could only rely on the nuclear issue to enhance its national security level and gain international attention. Thus, the later decided to do something that would still guarantee its relevance in the Korea peninsula. Third, North Korea was not comfortable with the post-Cold War dominance of the U.S. military in the Korea Peninsula. This, to North Korea was an ominous signal. The popular belief in North Korea was that the U.S would not hesitate to use its dominance in the Korea Peninsula to overthrow any government in the region that was not in its good books. The combination of all these imposed an aura of insecurity on North Korea. The leadership of the country felt that something must be done urgently in order to ensure the survival of their country. This spurred the nation into actions that would make it to entrench its relevance in power equation in the Korean peninsula and also give it a bargaining strength in world politics (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2010).

The strategy has proved successful to some extent. Apart from the fact that nuclear issue has assisted the country to survive and maintain its regime, it has also launched the country into a system of multilateral negotiations which may be a tool for reduction or cancellation of sanction regime and getting international aid. So by and large the nuclear issue has been an instrument of foreign policy for North Korea. This made Abrahamian to say that North Korea’s foreign policy is premised on survival and respect.

While sharing his view on North Korea’s defiance on nuclear technology advancement, a professor of international relations; Daniel Pinkston stated that “They want to be recognized as a peer nuclear power and to have the level of prestige and respect that they believe is commensurate with that. They also want the sanctions regime to be lifted (Ryall, 2017). The professor of international relations said further that North Korea wants to rewrite the current security architecture, including Washington’s alliance in the region, and eventually remove the US military presence from North-East Asia.

## **A Review of North Korea’s Nuclear Weapon History**

The origin of North Korea’s nuclear weapon programme can be traced to the Cold War era when Kim Il Sung (who ruled Korea from 1948-1994) made a failed attempt to unite the two Korean states. The belief that the re-unification effort on communist terms was frustrated by the United States of America,

whose intervention reversed their initial success in the war, made Sung to be determined to protect his state from the U.S. His decision was buoyed by the support he received from the allied Soviet Union leader, Stalin (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2009). During the Korean War, Stalin allegedly told the North Korean leader that “If you are short of arms, we will give them to you to strike the southerners in the teeth”

In the 1950s, Kim Il Sung began the process of amassing an arsenal that would rival what the U.S possessed and be potent enough to deter a dreaded U.S. attack. As the armistice commenced, the Soviet Union lent its support in the research that would help North Korea achieve its objective of possessing nuclear capability (Waxman, 2017). One may say therefore that North Korea’s experience during the war was a harbinger to its nuclear weapon programme. During the period between 1960s and early 1980s, not much was known of North Korea Nuclear weapon programme until late 1980s.

North Korea signed the Nuclear Non –Proliferation Treaty in December, 1985. By this act, the country joined the dozens of states that committed themselves to halting the spread of nuclear weapon and technology and promoting peaceful cooperation on nuclear energy. In January 1992, the governments of both North and South Korea reached an agreement not to manufacture, produce, possess, store, deploy or test nuclear weapons in the Korean Peninsula. Contrary to its agreement, North Korea rejected the inspection of nuclear sites by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1993 and announced its intention to quit NPT. But the withdrawal threat was suspended after a talk with the U.S. diplomats. In 2004, Jimmy Carter, the former U.S. President, visited North Korea. The visit paved the way for an Agreed Framework in which North Korea made a commitment to freeze its illicit plutonium weapons programme and put a stop to the construction of nuclear reactor. The United States in turn pledged to provide sanction relief aid, oil and two light reactors for civilian use in North Korea.

George W. Bush assumed the office of the United States President in 2001 and accused North Korea of insincerity in the agreement it signed earlier. He pursued a harder line towards North Korea by categorizing the state with Iran, Iraq and describing them as states sponsoring terrorism. New sanctions were imposed on North Korea by the U.S. In 2002, Pyongyang admitted that it had a secret uranium enrichment programme to power nuclear weapons. This undoubtedly was a clear violation of the Agreed Framework between the U.S and North Korea, the agreement between North Korea and South Korea and NPT. About a month later, precisely in January 10, 2003, North Korea withdrew from NPT after disallowing International Atomic Energy (IAEA) inspectors and expelling them. In September 2005, the six party talks (which comprised North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the United States) at their fourth round of discussion, reached an agreement in which North Korea committed itself to abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons and to implement the terms of NPT and IAEA safeguard. However, North Korea shocked the whole world on October 9, 2006 when it carried out its first nuclear test and reported it as being successful. Some countries admitted this claim but agreed that the test produced much smaller result than the first successful tests of other powers (Goldstein and Pevehouse,

On September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017, North Korea detonated another nuclear bomb which caused a magnitude of 6.1 tremor. In reacting to this, the United States threatened that it may be compelled to resort to military options if new sanctions fail to deter North Korea from further testing its nuclear weapons (Borger, 2017).

On June 12 2018, Donald Trump of the U.S and Kim Jong un of North Korea came together on a round table in a historic meeting held in Singapore to sign an agreement that would lead to gradual denuclearization of North Korea. There have been many other talks thereafter between the two leaders which border on North Korea’s denuclearization. However, given the antecedent of North Korea with regard to flagrant disregard of terms of agreement only time will tell whether Pyongyang would abide by the content of the new agreement.

## **Explaining North Korea's Actions in the Context of Realist Theory**

The numerous attempts made by some world powers and the UN Security Council (both persuasion and coercion) to beat North Korea back to (or in) line have not yielded the intended result. The belligerent actions of the nation can be understood from the perspective of the realist theory. Realism posits that states coexist in a condition of anarchy, therefore, self-help is the principle of action in an anarchic order. States can help themselves by providing for their own security. (Waltz, 1981) The leadership of North Korea has embraced this in order to preserve their country's territorial and national integrity. The nation is not looking up to any international organization to help preserve its interests. The realists have established the fact that the duty of every sovereign state is to survive and only the fittest can indeed survive. They state further that survival does not happen through mere wishful thinking. Rather, nations should plot out their own survival. The need to survive coupled with the need to achieve some set objectives and protect certain interests may drive even well-meaning states to practice self-help. This explains the reason why offensive realists argue that states should always look for opportunities to gain more power with the ultimate goal of achieving hegemony, because that is the best way to guarantee survival.

The leadership of North Korea pursues this belief with tenacity. Thus, all their efforts have been dedicated to beefing up the military strength of the country rather than trusting in any world power which may prove untrustworthy and end up disappointing them. While explaining the reason for the failure of the successive administrations in the U.S., from Clinton to Bush to Obama and then to Trump, to curb North Korea's military goals, Winnefield and Morell observe that "A succession of paranoid and isolated regimes in the North, incorrectly believing the U.S. intends to overthrow them, have seen deliverable nuclear weapons as their principal deterrent to such action. They have decided that bearing the cost of possessing such weapons is well worth their efficacy in ensuring regime survival" (Winnefield and Morell, 2017).

North Korea has always felt threatened by the United States of America since the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Therefore, if North Korea's leaders are convinced that the only way they can guarantee their nation's survival and deter the threat posed by the perceived enemy of the state is by increasing their military strength through acquisition of nuclear weapons, they may be acting in the best interest of the nation.

Similarly, North Korea quest for nuclear capability may have been given a boost by the words of the former French President, Charles de Gaulle who said that "Without an independent nuclear capability, France could not command its own destiny". In the same vein, a British official, Aneurin Bevan remarked in 1960 that "Without the bomb, Britain would go naked into the council chamber of the world" (Kegley and Blanton, 2011). These sentiments continue to reflect the aspiration of emerging nuclear powers like North Korea. Realism opines that military power confers political stature and the big and powerful states understand it that way. They believe that possession of nuclear weapon provides a seal of approval. That is why a country like North Korea would see Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as nothing but cheer hypocrisy. If possession of nuclear weapons by the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France is acceptable for the purpose of deterrence, political influence and prestige, North Korea believes that it should be granted as much respect and deterrence by the U.S and others in the nuclear club. After all what is good for the geese should also be good for the gander.

Suffice it to say that issues such as agricultural revolution, quality education, good health-care system and tangible economic reforms have not received much attention from the 'military-obsessed' North Korean leader. His actions imply that military advancement trumps any other consideration in the state and it should be pursued with all the strength of the state so as to deter potential threats. This is in consonance with the realist view which states that, while it is expedient for states to pursue other goals such as economic prosperity, welfarism and human rights protection, the pursuit must be subsumed under the quest for survival because if a state finds it difficult to survive, it will certainly find it uneasy to pursue or achieve these other essential goals.

The refusal of North Korea to desist from testing nuclear weapons especially close to the territories of other countries could also be explained from the realist point of view. The realist theory opines that ethical preferences are not relevant in the pursuance of state goals and objectives. A state's philosophical or ethical preferences are neither good nor bad. What matters is whether they serve the state's self-interest or not. The primary obligation of every state is to promote its national interest and it can employ any means to achieve this. What should be important to states is whether the end justifies the means adopted to achieve it. The implication of this is that if testing of missiles is germane to the advancement of North Korea's nuclear strategy, which apparently is the state's core objective, the means employed in achieving the objective matter less. After all, North Korea, in the realist view, is not answerable to any higher actor as it possesses equal sovereignty with the complaining countries. Conceding to their demands at the detriment of advancing its nuclear technology would only have a weak reflection on the state.

Realist scholars maintain that it makes good strategic sense for states to acquire as much power as possible and to pursue hegemony as well, if the circumstances are right. Although, their contention is not that conquest or domination is good in itself, rather, their argument is that having overwhelming power is the best way to ensure one's own survival. True to this, many actions of North Korea point to the fact that the nation is willing to go to a great length to be recognized as the only legitimate *de facto* power in the Korean peninsula. Its inordinate quest to achieve hegemonic position cannot be mistaken when one considers how it undermines the interest of its neighbouring states.

### **The Extremism of North Korea Ambition**

There is common knowledge that power exist in different forms. There is 'Hard Power' as well as 'Soft Power' The emphasis of the realist theory is on hard power and this is the type of power being pursued by North Korea. It is however important to emphasize the fact that states possess other capabilities or resources (Soft Power) which can be deployed to achieve influence over others apart from hard power. 'Soft Power' is a non-military and non-coercive subtle method through which a state can make others do what it wants. It is described as the capacity of a country to command global influence simply because the country's culture, ideas and institutions are valued and respected by most other countries (Nye, 2005).

Although, military and economic capabilities are still considered important in assessing national security and international power today. Yet, more attention is shifting to other factors such as technology, external respect or reputation, education, political culture, environmental protection, human development, national morale and internal solidarity. As a matter of fact, these other factors are the major reason why the USA is a desired country of destination to many people around the globe. Despite the fact that the country possesses the capacity to use hard power, it has excelled in projecting soft power with the help of its companies, foundations, universities, churches, and other institutions of civil society. The U.S. culture, ideals, and values have been playing significant roles in helping Washington to attract partners and supporters as well as influence and recognition with other countries. Similarly, the efforts of the Soviet Union to woo other states, through economic incentives and persuasion, into the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War is another example of the influence of soft power. Similarly, France's vast diplomatic network, its cultural richness as well as policy on cooperation and integration have contributed to making France a leading country in the ranking of countries deployment of soft power. This has significantly increased the influence of the country on other nations (Nye, 2005). Moreover, States like China, are being given recognition based on their population and their share of global wealth.

The former US. Secretary of State, Condolezza Rice observed that "Power is nothing unless you can turn it to influence" (Kegley and Blanton, 2011) Soft power possesses the capacity to command global influence more than hard power. This is attributed to its elements such as persuasion instead of force, less coercion with the use of economic incentives as an alternative to sanctions, carrot diplomacy rather than stick diplomacy and dialogue cum negotiation as a substitute to military

intervention. It is not aggressive and confrontational but convincing and co-operative (Nye, 2004). This diplomatic strategy is perhaps a more useful tool in a country's pursuance of its goals and objectives.

The confrontational approach adopted by North Korea through the vigorous pursuit of hard power has earned it the status of a pariah state and this has resulted in the increased isolation of its economy and low quality of life for its citizens. The present government of North Korea which, initially promised to focus on educational, agricultural and economic reforms of the country is preoccupied with military reforms at the expense of improved and quality life for the nation's citizenry. Reports have it that about one quarter of North Korea's population rely on food aid while famine is reported to have killed more than two million people in the country. Unfortunately, forging economic cooperation with other countries with the aim of alleviating the people's suffering seems not to be a priority to the Pyongyang government.

Furthermore, the pursuit of nuclear weapons capability by North Korea is being done at the expense of the country's foreign relations. Jim Hoare, the former British Charge D'Affaires to North Korea had this to say about Pyongyang "Even when they are friendly with other countries they are suspicious of them....I mean basically no international relations are of major importance to North Korea." (Westcott, 2016). He went further to explain that although about 80 per cent of North Korea's imports come from China, yet, no one can say that a serious friendly relations exist between North Korea and China. The country is stuck to China because its attempts to shift its attention to Russia has not worked out (Zhang, 2015). The country feels no burden at all sacrificing her allies, citizens and economy for security and military power. As a matter of fact, Kim Jong-un has not embarked on diplomatic visits to many countries of the world as other world leaders do. Fostering friendly relations with other states and taking full advantage of this to ensure the well-being of its citizens is not a priority to the North Korean government. One wonders the type of objective which national security seeks to achieve when the welfare of the citizens for which the government exists is undermined.

It is noted too that North Korea has no affiliation with most international financial institutions and trade organizations which could assist its economy to grow. It is not a participatory member of organizations such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank or Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, World Trade Organization, World Customs Organization and the International Labor Organization (Sang-hyun, 2009). This clearly shows the premium which North Korea places on International trade in comparison to military advancement. In the perception of Pyongyang, trade and affiliations will not solve its problems of nuclear advancement, therefore its leadership gives trade less attention- an action which undoubtedly inhibits the economic growth of North Korea. This posture is nothing but an extreme application of the realist theory.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed how the realist theory provides justification for the reason North Korea put the possession of nuclear weapon at the center of its policy. Acting in tandem with the proposition of the realist theory which postulates that every state should take its destiny in its own hands, North Korea has brazenly engaged in arms race for the possession of nuclear weapon, not minding the disapproval of its action by the international community and the biting effects of the attendant sanctions on the nation's economic growth and the welfare of its citizenry. However, the discussion in this paper has made it clear that acquisition of military weapon is not the only means by which states can gain power and recognition. A country's values, cultures, economic wealth and skillful application of carrot diplomacy also confer great influence on nations and engenders socio-economic development. That is why this research would conclude by making a strong recommendation to the leadership of North Korea to play down on its pursuit of hard power and explore the advantages inherent in the use of soft power in the interest of its citizens who are wallowing in abject poverty. Other nations of the world thrive on the use of soft power which guarantees cooperation and economic prosperity. Similarly,

many states have employed soft power through persuasion to gain allies and sell their ideologies. Arms race would only create a potentially explosive global environment.

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