



THE EVOLUTION OF THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM: FROM SURVIVAL STRATEGY TO IDEOLOGICAL LEGITIMIZATION

By Marco Milani

Abstract

In recent years the North Korean nuclear program has increasingly become a major concern for East Asian security. Pyongyang has repeatedly demonstrated its advancements in both missile and nuclear technology, with the final goal of acquiring a credible nuclear deterrent. To achieve this goal, the regime has committed a vast amount of state resources and has jeopardized relations with neighboring countries and major powers. This dangerous situation has created instability in the region and has hindered the possibilities of inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation.

The traditional interpretation of the North Korean nuclear program focuses on the survival of the regime and emphasizes the military aspect of security. While these factors play a significant role, over the last twenty-five years new roles have emerged for the nuclear program. Survival remains the priority, but in addition to the military level of nuclear deterrence this paper introduces two different aspects directly connected to the security of the regime: economic security and domestic ideological legitimization. The development of nuclear weapons has been repeatedly used by Pyongyang as leverage in negotiations and to strengthen its political legitimacy. Understanding the complexity and the different factors behind this strategy is crucial to design and implement a viable and effective strategy aimed at limiting or eliminating the North Korean nuclear threat.

Key Words: *North Korea, nuclear and missile programs, Kim Jong-un, US-North Korea relations, non-traditional security*

Introduction

During the last twenty-five years, the North Korean nuclear program has been one of the most major concerns for the United States and the international community. Since the end of the

Cold War, the North Korean regime has invested an incredible amount of resources with the goal of developing a reliable and independent nuclear deterrent. This path has gone through several phases of intensity, but it has remained a constant feature of North Korea's security policy, starting from the last years of Kim Il-sung, covering the entire period of Kim Jong-il's leadership, and through the rise to power of the current leader Kim Jong-un. Over this period, the international community, led by the United States, has tried to address this major concern in different ways: using diplomacy—in both bilateral or multilateral talks—threats of force, economic engagement, and even hostile indifference.¹ All these efforts have produced mixed results, but failed to eliminate the nuclear threat from the Korean Peninsula. In recent years, Kim Jong-un's regime has demonstrated a clear commitment to pursuing and achieving a reliable nuclear deterrent—consisting not only of nuclear warheads, but also of a delivery system in the form of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM)—with nuclear and missile tests that dwarf those of his predecessors.

The current situation has jeopardized the security equilibrium of the region, relations between North Korea and the United States, and every other issue related to North Korea, such as inter-Korean relations and human security.² To design and implement a successful strategy to address this issue, it is crucial to analyze and understand the reasons behind North Korea's nuclear program.

The traditional interpretation of North Korea's nuclear program emphasizes the military security aspect, considered as a guarantee for regime survival from external attacks. The end of the Cold War left Pyongyang in a very precarious situation in terms of regime survival. The Soviet Union was not only a major

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trading partner and provider of economic and energy assistance to North Korea, but the nuclear deterrence equilibrium between the two superpowers and Pyongyang's close ties with Moscow represented a crucial guarantee against the threat of an external attack. After the end of the Cold War, the only remaining superpower, the United States, was still formally at war with North Korea. With the disappearance of its main guarantor of its survival, the North Korean regime focused on developing a nuclear deterrent that could replace the Soviet's and deter any possible military attack or destabilization attempt from the outside. From this perspective, the North Korean nuclear program can be regarded as a defensive instrument to oppose hostility coming from outside forces. This security concern still represents a key lens through which to analyze the North Korean nuclear program and is still a priority today.

Over the last two decades other aspects have gained crucial importance in the hierarchy of the country's national interests in maintaining a nuclear deterrent. The increased emphasis on the nuclear program and the results achieved after the first nuclear test of 2006 have given Pyongyang the ability to use it in other aspects of non-traditional security that are equally important for the stability of the regime. The nuclear program has become leverage in negotiations with the United States and the international community to obtain aid and assistance, particularly concessions related to energy and food security. Similarly, the program has become a key component of the very identity of the regime. This third feature has been formally acknowledged with the launch of Kim Jong-un's policy line of *byungjin* and with the inclusion of the definition of the country as a nuclear power in the Constitution in 2012. These non-traditional aspects of security today represent priorities for the survival of the regime and must be considered in dealing with the North Korean nuclear program. From this perspective, it is crucial to analyze the different sectors of security that contribute to ensuring the survival and stability of the North Korean regime, and the evolution of this concept over the last few decades.

Non-traditional Security and Regime Survival in North Korea

The concept of security in international politics has been significantly redefined in the last three decades. The relatively peaceful end of the Cold War reshaped the entire structure of the international system, with the disappearance of one of the two competing superpowers—both in terms of material capabilities and ideological legitimation—that dominated the bipolar world

order. This systemic change had profound consequences on several other actors across the globe—including North Korea—but it also helped to redefine the essence and the meaning of security for states. Security is ultimately about survival: a security threat is an existential threat to a referent object, typically the state, in which the risks that the threat implies justify the use of extraordinary measures, usually in military terms, but more generally in terms of special powers and allocation of state resources.³ From this perspective, every threat that may endanger the survival of a state as a sovereign entity can be considered as a security threat.

The focus of security traditionally has been on military attacks from outside. This perspective makes the process of identifying what constitutes a security threat relatively straightforward. This view dominated the years of the Cold War, during which the very existence of the two superpowers and their allies were constantly under an existential threat from the other side. However, if we consider as a security priority every threat that can endanger the survival of a state the discourse cannot be limited to military threat. Potentially, many issues can put the security and stability of a state in danger.

After the end of the Cold War, and with the consolidating trends of globalization that rendered the world of international politics much more economically and technologically interdependent, these new threats started to emerge and to widen the traditional concept of military security. Issues related to economic development, migration, human rights protection, the environment, drug trafficking, and national identity started to become central to international and domestic politics.⁴ This process led to a widening and deepening of the concept of security, and even more of what states consider as security.⁵

This widening and broadening of security has been largely influenced by the liberal world order that emerged as the dominant system after the collapse of the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence. New non-state and transnational actors started to erode the centrality of the state regarding security, and new referent objects started to be considered as important as the state in terms of survival: societies, human collectives, non-material aspects such as collective identities or ideologies⁶, and even individuals as in the case of human security.

The revolution of the concept of security also affected other countries that were not integrated into the post-Cold War liberal world order, such as North Korea. Military security remained crucial to guarantee the survival and independence of the regime,



but other sectors started to play a significant role as well. The main difference between the revolution of security in the liberal world order and that of countries that remained in the margins of this system—often labelled pariah states—lies in the fact that the broadening of the concept did not lead to the emergence of new relevant referent objects other than state, or rather the regime in power. The broadening of security in this case was limited to the issues that represented existential threats, but the centrality of the state remains unaffected. The survival of the regime is still the main priority, and it must be protected not only from external attacks, but also from other sources of potentially lethal instability, related to material aspects (food and energy supplies for example), and non-material ones (threats to ideologies and collective identities).

These non-traditional threats also threaten the stability of the North Korean regime. Without Soviet assistance, Pyongyang became virtually isolated and its economic dependence from China grew exponentially. North Korea's economic problems were exacerbated by a series of natural disasters from 1994 to 1997 that caused a devastating famine in which millions of North Koreans died of hunger. The inability to provide food and other necessities to the population, also created problems for the legitimacy of the regime, already weakened by the collapse of the communist regimes around the world and by the process of reforming and opening in others. The systemic crisis that erupted with the end of the Cold War forced the North Korean leadership to find a way to survive in a hostile international environment and to restructure its domestic system. When the regime decided to invest heavily in the nuclear program, in the early 1990s, the main priority was the replacement of the Soviet nuclear deterrent, to defend the state from external attacks, but the roots of other non-traditional security threats were already in place and acquired a growing centrality over the years.

The Evolution of the North Korean Nuclear Program

To cope with the new threats after the Cold War and secure the survival of the regime from external interventions, North Korea focused on the development of an autonomous nuclear deterrent to replace the Soviet nuclear umbrella. In accordance with the theoretical framework of traditional military security, the regime allocated massive amounts of state resources to reach this goal. However, the North Korean nuclear program did not start at the end of the Cold War; it can be traced back to the second half of the 1950s.

In the early stages of its development, Pyongyang's nuclear program benefited from scientific cooperation with the Soviet Union for what was intended only for peaceful use.⁷ The role of Moscow was crucial for the beginning of the program, but it also served as an important check on Pyongyang to develop a nuclear program for military purposes: on one hand, the Soviet Union was providing the protection of its nuclear umbrella, and on the other it had an interest in avoiding uncontrolled nuclear proliferation on the peninsula, as made clear by its pressure on Pyongyang to ratify the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985.⁸

For North Korea, the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union represented the loss of its security guarantee and also the limitation on its nuclear ambitions. This pushed the country toward the development of a nuclear program as a military security policy tool for the survival of the regime. A clear example of this situation can be found in the first nuclear crisis that erupted in 1993 when Pyongyang threatened to withdraw from the NPT. The dangerous nuclear stand-off was resolved through direct bilateral negotiations between North Korea and what the regime considered as the most dangerous threat for its own survival: the United States. The Agreed Framework of 1994, which temporarily addressed the problem, contained explicit security guarantees for North Korea, as well as different forms of energy assistance. In exchange, Pyongyang agreed to freeze and dismantle its nuclear facilities in Yongbyon.⁹

The development of the first nuclear crisis was highly influenced by the characteristics of the post-Cold War security order in Northeast Asia. The United States was the only superpower in a unipolar world, and the prevention of nuclear proliferation was one of its highest priorities. At the same time, North Korea considered the U.S. as the main threat for its survival and used the nuclear program to negotiate a formal reassurance of non-aggression, with a clear focus on military security.

When a second nuclear crisis erupted in 2002-2003, the different characteristics of the relations among the main powers in the region and the changes in the domestic situation in North Korea led to a different framework to address the situation. North Korea had overcome the deep crisis immediately following the end of the Cold War: the worst years of the famine were over and the economic situation was slightly recovering; the imminent collapse, that had been predicted after the fall of the Soviet Union, had not materialized, and the new leader Kim Jong-il had consolidated his control over the country and strengthened the



legitimacy of his position. From the perspective of ideology, the new leader introduced *seongun*—military-first policy—with the aim of consolidating his grip on power during the difficult years of the 1990s. Kim Jong-il prioritized the army in the affairs of state and allocated national resources to bolster the military as the first priority. The new political doctrine was an institutional power shift from the party to the military. The National Defense Commission, of which Kim Jong-il was appointed chairman in 1993, became the highest political decision-making body in the regime, and the scope of its power was expanded from national security and defense to every aspect of political, economic and social life. Similarly, the role of the Korean People’s Army was expanded from the traditional mission of national defense as the party’s army to other non-military tasks. The final goal of the new leader’s political line was to safeguard his own leadership from domestic threats—popular uprisings from the higher ranks of the regime—as well as foreign security challenges.¹⁰

At the international level, the unipolar era of the United States was already waning, especially in East Asia. The new emphasis on the “war on terror” rebalanced the priorities of the American security policy toward the Middle East and Central Asia. China was emerging as a critical actor in the regional balance of power, and its influence on North Korea was growing dramatically due to the increasing dependency of the Kim regime on its powerful neighbor for trade and assistance. In addition, the George W. Bush administration was not eager to open a bilateral dialogue with Pyongyang due to its confrontational posture *vis-à-vis* the North Korean nuclear program. These factors led to the creation of a multilateral framework to address and potentially solve the second nuclear crisis: the Six Party Talks, which included the two Koreas, the United States, China, Japan and Russia. Within this framework, the non-traditional aspects of security for North Korea started to emerge. This was made clear with the September 2005 Joint Statement and the document on the initial steps to implement the statement agreed to in February 2007.

The first two points of the Joint Statement focused on military security aspects: the verifiable dismantling of the nuclear program and the return to the NPT and to IAEA safeguards, a security guarantee from U.S. attacks, and a process of rapprochement between North Korea and the U.S. and Japan. The third point focused on aspects related to economic and energy security with a commitment to provide energy assistance and also an explicit reference to the promotion of other sectors of North Korea’s economy: “The Six Parties undertook to promote economic cooperation in the fields of energy, trade and

investment, bilaterally and/or multilaterally.”¹¹ Lastly, the fifth point affirmed the principle of “commitment for commitment, action for action,” in order to create a phased process and build trust between the parties, especially North Korea and the United States. The February 2007 document reiterated these points, adding a specific amount of economic, energy and humanitarian assistance and the creation of a specific Working Group within the Six Party Talks on “Economy and Energy Cooperation.”¹²

These references to non-military security indicated that the regime started to use the nuclear program as a bargaining chip to obtain benefits in areas related to the economic development of the country. In this process two factors played a significant role. The first was the flourishing of inter-Korean cooperation under the presidencies of Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) in South Korea. During these years, North Korea obtained a growing amount of assistance and aid from the South and started inter-Korean economic projects, such as the tourist project on Mount Kumgang and the industrial complex in Kaesong. This new trend of cooperation introduced Pyongyang to the possibility of developing its economy using international cooperation in a controlled way, without undermining the stability of the regime. The professed abandonment of the nuclear program could thus be used to convince other partners to operate in the same way, providing economic assistance and cooperation under the strict control of the regime.

The second factor was the first underground nuclear test, performed in October 2006. After the test, North Korea showed the world its nuclear capabilities and reinforced its negotiating power. At the same time, after the test, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) approved a set of economic sanctions, through the Resolution 1718, that inaugurated a long series of UNSC sanctions that followed nuclear and long-range missiles tests. The introduction of a sanctions regime against North Korea, which became increasingly tougher with every successive resolution, introduced a new threat to the country’s economic security. Lifting the sanctions to allow the national economy to grow became a priority for the regime and a new level of complexity for negotiations related to the nuclear program.

The two non-traditional security concerns that emerged after the second nuclear crisis during Kim Jong-il’s regime became crucial under the new leader Kim Jong-un, who took power after the death of his father in December 2011. In terms of economic security, the international sanctions regime against North Korea was further tightened after the second nuclear test



in 2009 and again in 2013, while cooperation with South Korea was vastly reduced under President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) and in particular after the approval of the May 24 measures.¹³ Concerning domestic legitimacy, Kim Jong-un was relatively inexperienced and unknown in the country before 2009 and had only a few years to build a power base with the support of his father.¹⁴ From the very beginning of his leadership, Kim Jong-un focused on the nuclear program as a means to consolidate his power domestically.

In April 2012, a revision of the Constitution proclaimed North Korea as a nuclear-armed state. The following year, in his address to the Party's Central Committee Plenum, Kim called for the adoption of the *byungjin* policy, the parallel development of the nuclear program and the country's economy, which became the regime's new official policy line.¹⁵ According to this line, the development of nuclear weapons and could also strengthen national defense without increasing the defense budget.¹⁶ On April 1st, the Supreme People Assembly approved a law on the possession of nuclear weapons for self-defense, the regime's first nuclear policy, emphasizing the defensive character of the program and trying to establish North Korea as a responsible nuclear power.¹⁷ This institutionalization of North Korea's nuclear status was aimed at consolidating the legitimacy of the new leadership.¹⁸

The new leader also took practical steps to pursue a new political line. In December 2012, North Korea successfully launched a satellite into orbit, and in February 2013 it tested a nuclear device for the third time. During 2016 and 2017, the regime showed its commitment to developing a reliable nuclear deterrent with a series of nuclear and missiles tests as never seen before, culminated with its most powerful nuclear explosion in September 2017 and three launches of ICBMs in July and November of the same year. In addition to these extraordinary results in military terms, North Korea's nuclear actions served domestic political purposes by promoting national pride and patriotism among key elites, as well as ordinary people, and using threats of external attacks to mute any domestic political opposition. In this respect, the intended audience for the nuclear and missiles tests was not just the international community, but also North Korea's elites and population. These aspects started to emerge under Kim Jong-il's regime, and subsequently played a major role under the leadership of Kim Jong-un. The survival of the regime was not merely connected to the defense against

external military attacks, but also to the domestic stability of the leadership, based on the ideological grip on the population, on the loyalty of the elites, and on the growing economy.

A Comprehensive Approach to the North Korean Nuclear Program

The North Korean nuclear program has clearly evolved to serve a variety of purposes for the regime. While the main goal of Pyongyang's nuclear program remains the survival of the regime, threats to its stability have evolved over the years, encompassing non-traditional security concerns, related to economic and ideological strength, in addition to military threats. Considering all of these different aspects becomes crucial in a negotiation process aimed at eliminating—or limiting—the North Korean nuclear threat.

After the third, and most powerful, long range missile test, in November 2017, the North Korean regime officially stated that the country had achieved the status of nuclear power. The same claim was reiterated by Kim Jong-un in his 2018 New Year's Day address. In the same speech, the North Korean leader expressed his willingness to open a dialogue with South Korea. This has been followed by major diplomatic outreach efforts, first toward South Korea and later the United States.

North Korea participated in the Pyeongchang Olympic Games in February 2018, sending a high-level delegation at the opening and closing ceremony, and expressed the willingness of its leader to meet with South Korean President Moon Jae-in and also with U.S. President Donald Trump. In the following months, the diplomatic offensive of Pyongyang continued, reaching one of its highest points with the third inter-Korean meeting on April 27, in Panmunjom. During these weeks of dialogue, the North Korean leadership conveyed the possibility of negotiating the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as expressed in the Panmunjom inter-Korean Declaration. In April, the regime declared its intention to stop nuclear and missile tests and to close its nuclear testing site in Punggye-ri.¹⁹ These signals, albeit more symbolic than substantial, have been interpreted as trust-building steps toward a process that can lead to the denuclearization of the peninsula. To achieve this goal, North Korea and the United States have agreed to start a high-level dialogue that can culminate with a summit between the leaders of the two countries.



As has been demonstrated, the nuclear program has evolved from its first phase in the early 1990s, when the first nuclear crisis erupted, both in terms of the actual nuclear capabilities of North Korea and the role that it plays in the stability of regime. These developments have made the situation more complicated with new key factors that come into play. To design and implement an effective strategy aimed at eliminating—or freezing—the North Korean nuclear program, taking these factors into account becomes a priority.

Traditional military security remains at the center of this process. The threat of an external attack was the first reason for the nuclear program, and it remains a crucial point today. The development of a credible and reliable nuclear deterrent is the most cost-effective means to prevent other major powers from pursuing a regime-change strategy or to destabilize the regime. This priority has been reiterated by the North Korean leadership since the very beginning of its nuclear development, emphasizing the defensive character of the program, and it is reflected in every agreement and declaration regarding this issue.

For this reason, a formal reassurance regarding conventional and nuclear attacks from the United States must be a cornerstone of every diplomatic effort aimed at the North Korean nuclear program. This formal reassurance should be substantiated by practical steps with the goal of creating trust between the parties. In the past, North Korea had asked for radical changes in the military security balance on the peninsula, such as the cancellation of U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises, the end of the alliance and the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea. Recent developments have shown that the leadership has lowered its expectations in this regard, not having preconditions to open a dialogue to include the nuclear program. Nevertheless, a process of trust-building is necessary between U.S. and North Korea. It is crucial to undertake confidence building measures from both sides. A reduction in the number and extent of the joint military exercises between South Korea and the United States can be considered as a positive signal in this sense, without undermining the security alliance between Seoul and Washington. A further step in this direction can also be the beginning of a process toward the establishment of a peace regime on the peninsula, turning the 1953 armistice into a formal peace treaty. This provision has been included also in the Panmunjom Declaration between the two Koreas. The final goal of this process should be the normalization of the relations between the U.S. and North Korea.

In addition to military security, North Korea's economic security gained from its nuclear program should also be considered in any negotiation. According to the policy line launched by Kim Jong-un, economic development is a priority for the regime at the same level as the development of a nuclear deterrent. It is worth noting that North Korea has used nuclear negotiations mainly to obtain aid and assistance from the international community and, although the economic situation of the country has improved in recent years, sanctions have severely damaged the possibility of sustained economic growth. For this reason, negotiations should address existing threats to North Korea's economic security. These needs can be addressed through the provision of assistance and aid, especially in fields such as food security and energy security, as a first step.

However, economic security can only be gained by international trade and economic cooperation. Economic cooperation can lead to an inflow of investments and technological know-how toward the country, which can sustain higher rates of economic growth. This is only possible through the alleviation of sanctions currently in place. In this perspective, the logic to address economic security should change from a quid-pro-quo idea of concessions, to a framework of gradual cooperation and integration of North Korea into the regional and international system. This process cannot result in a sudden opening of the borders to foreign investments because it might undermine the internal stability of the regime with the effect of creating a new threat to its own survival. Inter-Korean cooperation projects under the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, especially the joint industrial park in Kaesong, represent important and successful examples.

The process of lifting sanctions can be gradual and it can correspond to the advancements in the process of denuclearization and in the broader framework of US-North Korea negotiations. However, given the relevance of economic security in this process, posing the complete dismantlement of the North Korean nuclear program as a pre-condition for starting the process of reducing sanctions and encouraging cooperation might be highly detrimental for the overall strategy. As in the case of military security, building trust between the parties is a crucial point and promoting economic exchanges and cooperation can represent an important tool in this perspective. Just like military security guarantees can reduce the role of the nuclear deterrent, establishing economic cooperation can reduce the role of the nuclear program as a bargaining chip. The regime has declared



the achievement of the first goal of the *byungjin* policy, becoming a nuclear power, and it appears to focus on the second pillar: making the country prosperous through economic development.

The issue of economic security is also closely related to the last aspect of the nuclear program: domestic legitimacy. In recent years, the North Korean leadership has used the nuclear and missile programs as a fundamental means to strengthen its legitimacy in front of the regime's elite and the population at large. Becoming a nuclear power has become a primary goal for the regime, part of the official ideology, and has been institutionalized with its inclusion in the Constitution. The domestic legitimacy has been underpinned by the capability of the regime to protect the country from external aggression, and the nuclear program has represented the best cost-effective strategy to achieve this.

If the regime commits to denuclearization, it would be necessary to find a functional equivalent in terms of ideology and domestic legitimacy to replace the goal of becoming a nuclear power. This step would be crucial in order to ensure the stability of the regime and of the current leadership in power. One approach would be to focus on freezing North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities at the current status, preventing the regime from producing more weapons and from proliferating nuclear technology and materials to other actors, instead of requesting an immediate and complete denuclearization. In this way, it would be possible to give the leadership more time and breathing room to reinforce its domestic position and re-focus its ideological framework

toward different objectives. *Byungjin* provides an alternative with its second pillar that emphasizes economic development. If the regime achieves sustained economic growth because of negotiations, it can base its domestic legitimacy solely on economic growth and distance itself from protecting of the country from external aggressions. In a less hostile international environment, the emphasis on national defense loses its centrality, while the well-being of the population and the wealth of the country can be cultivated. This process of ideological shift has been successfully undertaken by other authoritarian regimes in the region—namely China and Vietnam—and might represent a viable option for the North Korean regime. The key point remains the necessity to ensure the stability of the regime. Thus, any kind of economic cooperation, modernization or reform, must be undertaken and controlled by the regime itself and not imposed by an external actor.

The complexity of the North Korean nuclear program, requires a comprehensive strategy, which addresses the different aspects of the issue and the different roles the program currently plays for the stability of the regime, and also a high level of flexibility, in order to give the regime the time it needs to adjust its domestic situation accordingly. The emphasis on military security, and the related security guarantees, must remain a fundamental feature of the negotiation process, but it must be combined with viable approaches to deal with the domestic imperatives of economic development and ideological grip.



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