The Resilience of Pyongyang's Nuclear Weapons: A Structural Perspective

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Abstract

The DPRK has been able to hold on to its militarized nuclear program despite the unanimous criticism of other regional actors in Northeast Asia. This is especially relevant when it comes to the US and China, two giants that constitute DPRK's main foe and ally, respectively. This essay explains why, despite their vastly superior structural positions, the United States and China have not been able to put an end to Pyongyang's nuclear program, a goal shared by both countries. It is suggested that in the ongoing scenario of structurally-induced competition, both Washington and Beijing have not been able to produce promises and threats that are credible enough to lead to disarmament. The resilience of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons comes down to the fact that, due to that lack of credible promises and threats, the expected payoff for North Korean leadership in terms of political survival is higher if it retains its nuclear weapons.

Resumo

A Resilência das Armas Nucleares de Pyongyang: Uma Perspetiva Estrutural

A Coreia do Norte tem prosseguido o seu programa nuclear militar apesar de unânimes críticas feitas por outros atores regionais no Nordeste Asiático. Tal torna-se especialmente relevante quando encontramos duas grandes potências, como os Estados Unidos da América (EUA) e a China, nesse grupo de atores, respetivamente o principal adversário e aliado norte-coreano. Este artigo explica o porquê, apesar das suas posições estruturais superiores, da incapacidade dos EUA e a China em cessar o programa nuclear norte-coreano, um objetivo partilhado por ambos. É sugerido que no corrente cenário de competição estruturalmente induzido, Washington e Pequim, ainda não foram capazes de emitir promessas e ameaças que sejam suficientemente credíveis para levar ao desarmamento. A resiliência das armas nucleares de Pyongyang deve-se ao facto de, devido à ausência de promessas e ameaças credíveis, o retorno esperado pela liderança da Coreia do Norte em termos de sobrevivência política é maior caso esta mantenha armamento nuclear.

Introduction

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) Pyongyang has been a strategic headache for regional actors in Northeast Asia due to its militarized nuclear program. It is estimated that Pyongyang possesses between 6 and 10 plutonium-based weapons with a limited capability of miniaturization and long-range deployment (Nikitin, 2013; FAS, 2014). Step by step the regime has been able to develop a military nuclear program which at least is solid enough to cast the deterring shadow of doubt over the governments of other states. Regardless of actually being a paper tiger or the real deal, the DPRK is able to politically use its program against other states and moreover it constitutes one more damaging exception for the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Hypothetically, this denuclearization could be achieved due to the pressure of domestic actors or due to the constraint by international actors. The scenario of domestic-driven denuclearization in the DPRK is highly improbable because of the control exerted by the regime, so the most feasible scenario of denuclearization is the one where the Pyongyang is constrained by more powerful states. In this structural context, North Korean denuclearization should supposedly have been achieved ages ago due to the fact that the most powerful unit in the international system – the United States – and the most important ally of the DPRK – China – are seeking that outcome. However that was not the case. Hence, perhaps the major puzzle regarding the nuclear game of the Korean peninsula is Pyongyang's ability to build and sustain a nuclear program in a context of extreme structural weakness in regard to the world's greatest power and to the most formidable rising one.

The United States is DPRK's most threatening foe and possesses the world's greatest material capabilities, whereas China is Pyongyang's fundamental ally and the strongest native actor in East Asia. In this sense, the question one must ask is how a struggling small player like the DPRK could develop a nuclear program against a foe with vastly superior coercive power and against an ally whose aid is essential for its survival. This brief essay addresses such structural puzzle, thus solely examining the effects of power distribution and leaving aside the domestic dimension of North Korean politics as well as non-structural international factors. The essay does not examine the full dynamics of Pyongyang's denuclearization conundrum, it does not present new empirical evidence, and it is far from being a description of the evolution of Pyongyang's nuclear program. Rather, the essay focuses solely on a structural analysis that shows precisely why power distribution is a determinant condition in explaining why the DPRK has been able to retain its military nuclear program. It is argued that the DPRK has been able to develop nuclear weapons because, due to structural incentives that have fostered a regional rivalry, the United States and China cannot woo nor coerce it into disarmament. On the one hand, the United States is not willing to formally

guarantee the survival of Pyongyang's regime and China is not powerful enough to do it. On the other hand, Pyongyang is aware that the United States is not willing to fully impose disarmament and that China is not ready to let the regime fall for the sake of disarmament. All in all, the resilience of the DPRK as a nuclear actor may be explained as a problem of lack of credible promises and threats.

Northeast Asian Structure of Power after the Cold War

Power, treated here as the set of military and economic capabilities of a state, is a determinant factor in explaining the relations between the main units in the international system. This means that the structure of power – the distribution of capabilities among systemic units (Waltz, 1979) – continues to play a fundamental role, whether a driving or at least a permissive role in regard to international outcomes. The end of the Cold War meant that the United States became unarguably the most powerful actor in Northeast Asia but by no means a hegemon – a state powerful enough to fully impose its preferred outcomes. North American supremacy in the region, at both military and economic levels, was challenged by the fact that Russia has remained a nuclear competitor and, especially, due to China's rise.[1]

There are many perceptions in the literature about the type of polarity in the current international system, perhaps because the old lack of agreement on what constitutes power and on how to measure the number of poles (Mansfield, 1993: 108) still persists. Some literature suggests that the system has been unipolar since the collapse of the Soviet Union, simply because the United States is the unit in the system that possesses an incomparably overwhelming set of military and economic capabilities (Monteiro, 2011/2012: 9). Others talk about bipolarity, mostly in terms of the dyad United States-China and with alternatives such as the dyad United States-European Union (Dempsey, 2012; McCormick, 2007). Lastly, some literature suggests that the international system is multipolar, mostly due to the continuous relevance of Russia and the rise of countries such as China and India (Peral, 2009). I will not dive into that conceptual discussion in the literature and instead I will simply assume that Northeast Asia's system is a multipolar one skewed towards unipolarity. There are three main powers present in the system – China, Russia, and the United States – and the latter possesses evidently superior capabilities.

Russia is evidently a player in the region but due to its weak economy and focus on Europe it loses regional relevance when compared to China and the United States, obviously including its relevance in solving the North Korean nuclear puzzle despite the efforts of Vladimir Putin to woo Pyongyang (The Guardian, 2014). The United States is not a unit native to the system but it is present due to

1 See military data in IISS and economic data in IMF (1989-2013).

the alliances with Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK), signaling its commitment with a robust military presence in those countries. Hence, though not possessing territories in Northeast Asia, the United States is a regional actor and surely the most powerful one. The United States possesses the strongest military forces in the world and remains by far the country with the highest nominal GDP. China is a unit totally "native" to Northeast Asia – with its central territory located there – with a strong military deterrence capability that is incrementally being improved. Moreover, it possesses the largest population in the globe and a growing economy that became on par with the American one in terms of Gross Domestic Product – Purchasing Power Parity (GDP - PPP). China faces strong domestic challenges and as a result there is uncertainty about its ability to continue rising in the future, but what one knows for sure is that Beijing's current power capabilities are vastly superior to those of other native units in Northeast Asia. Therefore, the most powerful actors in Northeast Asia are an external unit that remains on top of power rankings and a rising native unit that has achieved enormous material progress in the last decades.

In this context, the United States has not been able to control political outcomes in the region as a hegemon would supposedly do. For example, the political regimes in Russia, China, and North Korea remain abhorrent in the eyes of Washington, to a greater or lesser extent; regional economic organization is not the one preferred by Americans; and, of course, the DPRK has become a nuclear proliferator that poses a direct security challenge and contests an international regime that suits the foreign policy goals of the United States. Hence, rather than a hegemon, Washington is merely an offshore balancer with the fundamental goal of containing China through the bilateral military alliances with Japan and the ROK (Mearsheimer, 2006).

In this context of regional multipolarity skewed towards unipolarity, the position of the DPRK became one of extreme weakness. The implosion of the Soviet Union implied the end of military protection, political support, and economic assistance. Moreover, the combination of communism's loss of legitimacy, the death of Kim Il-Sung, crumbling economic structures, and extreme famine, increased the probabilities of regime implosion in the mid-1990s. An alternative to the Soviet Union would provide a structural cushion to Pyongyang that permitted to avoid such collapse. However, that alternative did not seem to exist in the 1990s because China was occupied with its own regime's problems. It was this scenario that made the development of nuclear weapons so essential for North Korean leadership.

The Benefits of North Korea's Nuclear Program

The basic interest of any political leader is to remain in office – regardless of other material or ideational interests she or he may be interested in pursuing – and

foreign policy choices – such as the development of nuclear weapons – are made primarily in the pursuit of that political survival, with such choices being affected by international and domestic incentives (Lake and Powell, 1999; Bueno de Mesquita *et al*., 2003). In this essay I examine precisely the fundamental role of one type of incentive – the structure of power. Given the assumption of political survival, the benefits of foreign policy actions should be essentially assessed in regard to that goal, not other interests such as *raison d'*État, political ideology, or morality. In this sense, the development of a military nuclear program by the DPRK results from the strategic calculation of costs and benefits for its leadership in a context where its survival has been threatened (Kim, Roehrig and Seliger, 2011). In a nutshell, all North Korean leaders – Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un – have been holding on to their nuclear program because it is a very useful tool to maintain their regime alive.

Pyongyang incurred in high costs by developing its nuclear weapons, both in terms of trade-offs between domestic allocation of resources and international sanctions. Firstly, though the creation of a nuclear force ultimately permits a decrease of defense costs in states that seek to keep essentially a defensive posture – operational nuclear weapons permit a decrease of costs with conventional forces – the development of a nuclear program implies a transitional period in which extra expenses with a nuclear program co-exist with regular expenses with conventional forces. Hence, while it does not possess a fully operation nuclear force, the DPRK needs to increase military expenditure and, consequently, decrease the amount of resources available to satisfy domestic groups that are essential to keep the regime away from implosion. Secondly, the development of nuclear weapons against the non-proliferation regime implied international sanctions against Pyongyang, which have damaged the country's already weak economy. Under the current context of international politics the DPRK could not hope for a tacit support or a bilateral acknowledgment from the United States – as Israel and India, respectively – and China is a rising power more interested in stability than in openly revising one of the main tenets of international order. Since domestic trade-offs and international sanctions were virtually inevitable, Pyongyang obviously developed nuclear weapons because the expected benefits of those weapons outweighed those two types of costs. To be specific, there have been three main types of benefits: military deterrence, economic-political blackmail, and domestic leverage.

In the first place, nuclear forces offer an obvious capability of deterrence to the DPRK. By deterrence I mean the potential ability to inflict costs that are higher than the benefits of attacking the DPRK. Even if in the current international context there is no threat of invasion by the ROK and the United States, the possession of nuclear weapons is an assurance that such invasion will not occur in case those circumstances change. Pyongyang's conventional forces surely offer a strong deterrence

against the ROK and the United States, given the potential damage they could cause in the South and to American forces stationed there. However, there are circumstances under which those conventional forces could hypothetically become unable to serve as deterrence tool. Namely, material could deteriorate; enemy forces could become technologically able to prevent Pyongyang's retaliation; or the political decisions of Pyongyang could simply be considered intolerable and prompt a military intervention by the United States-ROK, despite the retaliation costs of Northern conventional forces. Consequently, the logical step for Pyongyang was to build up its deterrence capability by developing nuclear weapons. North Korean ability to deploy strategic or tactical nuclear weapons obviously changes the calculations of Seoul and Washington by heavily increasing the costs of an invasion (Ham and Lee, 2013).

If pure strategic calculation were not enough to strongly convince North Korean leaders about the utility of nuclear weapons for regime survival, the examples of Iraq, Libya, and Ukraine provided evidence of such utility. All these countries were associated with nuclear programs that for different reasons ended up disappearing and their regimes were ultimately damaged by such disappearance. The cases of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya must have been particularly frightening for the Kims, but Ukraine also offers a valuable lesson in terms of military deterrence. Russia invaded its borders and blatantly supports separatists, a behavior that would be unlikely to occur in case Ukraine had kept its nuclear weapons.

Secondly, nuclear weapons also provide benefits in terms of economic-political blackmail of countries interested in disarmament. Economic blackmail became necessary due to the DPRK's structural economic shortcomings, besides ending up compensating for the domestic budgetary trade-offs and for the costs imposed by international sanctions. North Korean economy is obsolete, with an estimated GDP of 14.4 billion USD and a nominal GDP per capita of 583 USD (UN, 2012). The problem for Pyongyang is that it is risky to opt for a Chinese-style type of reform, reconciling political authoritarianism with economic openness. The risk derives from the fact that, contrarily to China, there is no strong national identity in the DPRK and an informed North Korean society might demand Korean reunification under Seoul due to socio-economic incentives. Though the lives of the majority of North Koreans would surely not be easy in Southern cities, their expectations of well-being would be clearly superior in a reunified Korea than in the current situation, where only the elite minority in the *Songbun* system may be said to be minimally satisfied. Therefore, rather than implementing the necessary economic reforms, Pyongyang has been attempting surgical measures of openness that have not produced the necessary effects in terms of economic recovery. Under economic despair, illegal activities and economically blackmailing other countries become

tempting mechanisms to obtain international revenues. Nuclear weapons increase the capability to use the latter mechanism. Since the early 1990s North Koreans have been using a cyclical strategy of crisis-reconciliation in order to extract economic concessions from its neighbors and the United States without actually dismantling the nuclear program. The bilateral negotiations with the United States and the multilateral Six Party Talks serve as evidence. Despite the fact that its negotiating partners have not always been behaving accordingly to the agreements, the DPRK has been actively pursuing a strategy that is supposedly not dependent on how the other parties behave. Firstly, a crisis is necessarily generated by progress in the nuclear program; secondly, Pyongyang opts for a reconciliatory tone and bilateral or multilateral negotiations are conducted in order to extract concessions in exchange for the end of the program; thirdly, refusing to dismantle the program, North Koreans end up partially or totally defecting in regard to their commitments, preferably after extracting some or all economic concessions negotiated in the agreements.

As for political blackmail, it may range from getting support in international forums up to a bargaining chip in a scenarios of potential regime change. Let us exemplify those ranges in the continuum of political blackmail. In regard to international forums, for example nuclear weapons can be used to push Beijing to support decisions that favor Pyongyang, even if intertwined with punishing decisions designed to mildly pressure the regime to denuclearize. In respect to a bargaining chip in regime transition, one may ask to what extent nuclear weapons can decrease the probabilities of regime change driven by domestic factors. Nuclear weapons cannot ultimate stop a process of regime change driven by a coup or a revolution but they can prevent international incentives for such scenarios and ultimately promote a personal bargain for leaders in case of regime change. For instance, the United States or the ROK could subsidize an alternative leadership or promote covert operations designed to incite popular rebellion but DPRK's nuclear weapons decrease the probabilities of doing so. Specifically, nuclear weapons increase the risks involved in such scenarios, since the desperate leadership of a collapsing regime – especially if leaders are feeling hopelessly trapped – may decide to use those weapons against the ones that are perceived to promote that collapse.

The third benefit refers to domestic political leverage, in which the Kims and their entourage have sought to consolidate domestic power by wooing both elites and masses with their ability to develop a sophisticated military program inserted in a policy of military primacy – *Songun* (Magalhães, 2013). Though usually examined as a monolithic regime, Pyongyang has its own elite power struggles and leaders' office is not taken for granted. Both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il had to deal with competition during their tenures. Moreover, as one may infer from existing information about the executions of top officials such as Jang Sung-taek, Kim Jong-un's

grip on power is not flawless because purges are still required to consolidate it. In this sense, leaders in Pyongyang need to demonstrate to politico-military elites at the Workers' Party of Korea and the Korean People's Army that they are the best solution to provide the private goods essential to them and, consequently, that an alternative leader will not fare as well in keeping elites satisfied. To develop a military nuclear program against global opposition is surely a demonstration of political endurance and astute application of resources, allowing leaders to convince elites that without them the latter's well-being will likely decrease.

Concerning the masses, the Kims have been using a strategy of control that combines a mythological narrative of political legitimacy with adamant repression. The development of nuclear weapons surely fits into the traditional North Korean narrative of wise leaders that diligently strive to equip the country with the tools to resist foreign imperialism. In the case of repression, the successful development of nuclear weapons contributes to the image of North Korean leaders as powerful actors that are also able to successfully deal with any popular attempts of contestation, hence decreasing the expected utility of potential revolutionaries.

In sum, in a context of structural inferiority, economic-political weakness, and necessity to prevent domestic challenges to its authority, leadership in Pyongyang found it beneficial to develop nuclear weapons, despite the costs it implied. The United States and China have been seeking to dismantle the North Korean nuclear program by imposing political and economic costs to the regime with the goal of outweighing the benefits of nuclear weapons. These attempts must be examined in light of the preferences of Washington and Beijing in regard to the political status of the DPRK.

The US and the Rogue Hermit

American policy towards Northeast Asia in general and the DPRK in particular has certainly suffered alterations across the administrations of George Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama (Cha and Kang, 2003; Pardo, 2014). However, I assume that the main preferences of Washington have not been affected by leadership change: there may be nuances but the fundamental policy tenets remain unaltered. Namely, the presence of the US in Northeast Asia is intended to promote three fundamental goals interests. Firstly, the United States aims to prevent the rise of a regional hegemon. Secondly, Washington seeks to politically and economically influence its allies. Thirdly, the United States seeks to promote the political and economic transformation of states whose institutions are not normatively close to the American ones and as a result extend its alliance network. It is in this context that the policy of the US towards the DPRK is analyzed here.

The United States would ideally prefer that the DPRK vanished, but in a gradual manner. A gradually unified Korea would simultaneously mean the disappearance

of a rogue hermit regime that posed challenges to the United States and the strengthening of a valuable ally. To be specific, the optimal scenario in respect to the DPRK would be a gradual absorption by the South that resulted in the military, political, and economic expansion of American interests in the region. In this ideal scenario, Washington would witness the disappearance of North Korean nuclear weapons and be able to deploy its forces up to the borders of China and Russia; the disappearance of a formally communist regime would politically delegitimize the Chinese political model; and a gradual absorption would imply a minimization of reunification costs along with investment opportunities in the Northern part of the peninsula, both in terms of material and human resources.

The existence of a rogue North Korean regime is not totally negative for the US, since it helps Washington to legitimize its military presence in the region and, consequently, to promote its regional goals. This strategic usefulness, along with the short term costs of a Korean reunification, was enough to surpass the benefits of Pyongyang's sudden collapse. However, the development of nuclear weapons has certainly increased the benefits of regime collapse and opinions favoring such scenario have increased (Terry, 2014; Haass, 2014). The North Korean regime is obviously not a necessary condition to justify American presence in Northeast Asia, in the same sense that NATO remained present in Europe despite the fall of the Soviet Union. All in all, the DPRK is still tolerable and Washington continues to prefer a scenario of gradual absorption of the North by the South, but a sudden collapse would not be a disaster for American interests in the region. This means that the highest valued preference of the US is a scenario of DPRK's gradual absorption by Seoul, followed by sudden regime collapse, status quo, and pro-Pyongyang reunification.

The fact that absorption is the highest valued preference does not mean that the United States is going to actively pursue it. In fact, the current policy of the United States – "strategic patience" – may be said to be one that favors political *status quo* more than gradual absorption or sudden collapse. Gradual absorption would be achieved by actively stimulating or forcing political, social, and economic openness, whereas sudden collapse would be promoted through military interventions, covert actions, or imposed isolation. In practice, Obama's strategic patience is not actively contributing to any of the two scenarios above. This may be explained by the simple fact that, due to the expected behavior of other actors, to actively promote gradual absorption is a risky move that is not likely to work and, on the other hand, to promote a sudden collapse implies much more costs than benefits. Gradual absorption is risky because the fall of Pyongyang always implies the possibility of a conventional or even nuclear last act of desperation in case the process does not go according to the program. A peaceful German-type process of absorption – I do not consider it a collapse due to the incremental links between the two German

states before 1989 – is likely to fail in Korea. Moreover, it would probably not work due to China's support and North Korean ability to survive in quasi-isolationism. As for sudden collapse, the risks of military retaliation would be enormous, involving not only great costs for American forces in the Korean peninsula but also unthinkable human and material costs to the ROK – which explains why Seoul is obviously not willing to pursue such strategy of collapse. In case the United States opted for pursuing such strategy the negative backlash would be enormous not only in terms of direct human and material losses but also in regard to the reactions of foes and allies. In effect, China and Russia would surely react negatively, whereas the ROK and Japan would surely seek to find an alternative to their alliances with the United States. For all these motives, the United States has opted for a discreet policy that seems more in accordance to regime *status quo* rather than pro-Seoul absorption or regime change, since Washington is putting pressure on Pyongyang to disarm without actually threatening its existence. The same weapons that Washington is seeking to destroy are the ones preventing it from having a more active role in promoting absorption or collapse.

China and the Inconvenient Ally

As in the case of the United States, China's ultimate political goals in Northeast Asia translate into specific preferences about the political status of North Korea. I suggest that such preferences also remained the same across the different post-Cold War leaders – Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping – though the country's policy towards North Korea has suffered alterations dictated by strategic adaptation to domestic and international conditions (Duchâtel and Schell, 2013; Rui and Xiaoke, 2013). The main regional goal of China is hegemony but its leaders have been aware that its hegemonic potential is not yet translated into concrete power capabilities and, as a result, China's rise must remain discreet and regional stability must be a priority. In this context, I claim that China's most valued outcome would be the absorption of North Korea[2], Korean reunification led by Pyongyang, *status quo*, gradual absorption by Seoul, and sudden collapse leading to pro-Seoul reunification. Unfortunately for China, the pursuit of the first outcome would encompass prohibitive costs for Beijing and the second is extremely unlikely. Hence, Beijing must focus on maintaining the *status quo* rather than gradual absorption and collapse, even if current relations between the allies is one of cold suspicion. It is based upon this premise that China has been dealing with North Korea's nuclear program.

The relation between China and North Korea has been fluctuant. Despite the statement that they are "close as lips and teeth", these countries have not always

2 That absorption would be based upon Chinese historical claims over the kingdom of Koguryo, a fundamental polity in the Korean peninsula from centuries 1st BC to 7th AD (Chen, 2012).

been in the best of terms, as the current relations between Xi and Kim Jong-un illustrate. Beijing played a fundamental role in keeping North Korea alive during the Korean War but the following decades witnessed a deterioration of their relationship. Most importantly, during the 1990s China was far from being the supportive ally that Pyongyang required. Beijing was busy dealing with its own political, social, and economic challenges and the salvation of Pyongyang was not the priority. With the consolidation of its hybrid regime that reconciled political communism and economic capitalism, China became able to protect a regime that had managed to survive.

Beijing became the essential ally of Pyongyang, providing military protection, political support, economic partnership, and material aid. At military level China and the DPRK are bound to support each other due to the Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty of 1961. Politically, Beijing has played an important supporting role on behalf of Pyongyang. That role has been illustrated by the majority of Chinese positions at the UNSC. Though China acquiesced in sanctions and has vehemently opposed certain policy choices of Pyongyang at bilateral level, the bulk of its positions remain pro-DPRK. For example, Beijing has played an essential role in blocking increased sanctions and in preventing other damaging dynamics from hitting the DPRK. A case in point of the latter case is the recent protective behavior of Beijing at the UN regarding human rights violations in the DPRK (Sengupta, 2014). Concerning the economy, China is the largest partner of the DPRK due to its overwhelming weight at the level of trade and investment (Duchâtel and Schell, 2013: 17-40). Lastly, Beijing is essential in providing material aid to Pyongyang. There are is no official data that may quantify that aid with precision but it has been widely estimated that the Chinese play a fundamental role in keeping North Korean economy afloat, especially at the level of energy and food. Whether one is talking about direct transfers or subsidized exports, China's material support seems to be fundamental for, at least, regime stability.

In this context, China could in theory produce a fatal blow to Pyongyang's regime, but to do so would be irrational, regarding the preferences of Beijing. Hence, when politicians, diplomats, and observers refer that the leverage of the Chinese over the North Koreans is limited, it seems more a matter of strategic constraint forced upon Beijing rather than its actual capability to coerce Pyongyang. Beijing is simply seeking to maintain status quo, not its preferred outcome but surely the one with highest possible payoffs.

Unable to Disarm: Non-Credible Promises and Threats

Having examined power distribution in Northeast Asia and the positions of the DPRK, the United States, and China, it is now possible to pinpoint why two giants have not been able to prevent or reverse the nuclearization of such a weak actor.

Given the preferences and strategies of Washington and Beijing, Pyongyang has chosen a policy of nuclearization because its payoffs are superior to those associated with accepting their promises or backing down due to their threats. I suggest that such calculations are based upon the fact that the promises and threats of the United States and China are not credible. On the one hand Pyongyang is aware that Washington and Beijing have strong incentives to defect in regard to their promises, while on the other hand North Koreans are also aware that both countries have strong incentives not to implement the punitive measures with which they explicitly or implicitly threaten the DPRK. This means that the DPRK does not trust the promises and is not afraid of the threats.

Let us start with the promises. There are two main promises made explicitly or implicitly by the United States and China. The first is that Washington will fulfil its part of a denuclearization bargain, while the second is that China is willing to militarily protect North Koreans if they choose to denuclearize. The first promise is not credible because it is not in Washington's interests to fully keep it, while the second one lacks credibility because China is not likely to be able to fulfil it.

In the case of Washington it is simply not profitable to keep all promises included in a grand denuclearization bargaining. As soon as Pyongyang denuclearized and its ability to re-nuclearize became compromised, the United States would lose the incentive to make all the political or economic concessions present in a bargain. Denuclearization by North Koreans would necessarily be perceived by Americans as a sign of weakness and, as a result, would propel the latter to a strategy of promotion of a gradual absorption of the North by Seoul. It would not likely be an explicit defection but rather an implementation of promises impaired by second tier details or delays, like the implementation of the Agreed Framework of 1994 illustrates. Moreover, clean concessions would not only reward a regime that misbehaved but they would also be an invitation for violations of the non-proliferation regime by blackmailing countries. On the other hand a clean defection would also be negative, since it would decrease the credibility of the United States as a negotiating partner in processes of denuclearization.

In the case of China it falls short of its promise to offer security guarantees to Pyongyang, despite the treaty that binds them. Pyongyang is certainly a useful ally and China is interested in deterring an American attack against the DPRK. However, Pyongyang is likely to have extreme doubts about that commitment. China is not strong enough to survive a full-blown military conflict with the United States, though it would be able to inflict heavy costs to the Americans. In this sense, Beijing is only likely to use its military resources against the United States in case an essential national interest is at stake. Notwithstanding the relevance of Pyongyang, it does not feature in the list of top Chinese national interests. During the Cold War West Germans had similar doubts about the nature of American commitment in

regard to a hypothetic invasion of West Berlin by the Soviet Union, which was basically an understandable but flawed fear due to the credibility of Washington's commitment in Europe. China is not a military peer of the United States as the Soviet Union was and Pyongyang's survival is not as relevant for Beijing as the survival of West Germany was for Americans. Therefore North Koreans are surely right to fear a lack of commitment from the Chinese, whose ability to protect Pyongyang from an American military attack is highly limited.

Concerning threats, the United States and China are explicitly and implicitly threatening North Korea with regime collapse as a result of nuclearization. Washington signals such threat through the coordination of an international attempt to isolate the DPRK and, given its capabilities, the United States actually constitutes a permanent threat due to its ability to militarily defeat Pyongyang and to support covert operations – which could range from assassination of leaders to less drastic measures such as the recent supposed interference with the North Korean access to the internet (Cheng and Nam, 2014). As for Beijing, it has reportedly been trying to put Pyongyang under pressure by playing the "end-of-support card", reminding North Koreans that China plays a fundamental role in their economy. Both threats lack credibility.

Starting with American threats, the one lacking more credibility is the implicit threat of a military attack. The United States obviously has the ability to impose a military defeat to Pyongyang as a consequence for nuclearization but it would not do so due to the abovementioned overwhelming human, material, and political costs. Hence, the intention of the United States is clearly not to militarily attack Pyongyang as long as certain red lines – such as deployment or transfer of nuclear weapons – are not crossed. Secondly, the threat of collapse through international pressure lacks credibility due to the closed nature of North Korean economy and the protection given by China. The United States claims that the DPRK needs to be integrated in the international community in order to survive, since the consequences of international isolation could be devastating for its social-economic fabric. However, current sanctions or similar ones are simply not punishing enough to drive North Koreans to a socio-economic crisis serious enough to threaten the regime. Lastly, the implicit threat of covert operations leading to regime change is also not credible due to the lack of political will. As previously mentioned the United States is not willing to risk regime collapse in a scenario including North Korean nuclear weapons.

As for China, it prefers a nuclear North Korea to a collapsed one, which means that Pyongyang is aware that fundamental aid cannot be interrupted. Consequently, though Beijing may criticize Pyongyang and even punish it occasionally, North Koreans seem to suppose that the Chinese will not push them off the cliff. There have been rumors about a temporary interruption of aid after a nuclear test but the

likelihood that China will end up playing a game of chicken with the DPRK is low. This explains why Chinese are risk-averse in regard to North Korea, whereas Americans are relatively risk-taking when it comes to punishing Pyongyang for its nuclear program.

Why are those promises and threats not credible? I suggest that the lack of credibility is fundamentally justified by the competitive Sino-American dynamics generated by power distribution. The existence of an offshore balancer and a potential hegemon implies a grand competition in which the mischievous behavior of smaller states may be tolerated for the sake of higher rewards. Washington and Beijing are more concerned about their main regional goals – balancing and hegemony, respectively – than with the denuclearization of the DPRK. Regional stability ends up being even more valued by the United States and China due to a context of high economic interdependence, which means that regime collapse is even less valued by both countries. In sum, Pyongyang has been able to walk between raindrops due to the strategic space created by Sino-American competition in a context of interdependence that begs for regional stability.

Conclusion

The DPRK's power is vastly inferior to the United States and China but it has been able to develop a nuclear program against their will. The role of nuclear weapons in the survival of Pyongyang's regime cannot be emphasized enough, in terms of security, economy, and domestic politics. Since Pyongyang is not able to be internationally accepted as a nuclear actor, its basic options would either be to disarm and be mildly rewarded or to keep the nuclear weapons, be mildly punished, and promote regime sustainability in the medium-term. The United States and China are not able to produce positive and negative incentives that are strong enough to make disarmament more profitable for the DPRK. This means that Washington and Beijing are not able to produce credible promises that decrease the sense of fragility of Pyongyang's leadership nor to produce credible threats that make Pyongyang feel that keeping the nuclear arms puts the leadership at stake. Consequently, North Korean leaders have opted for developing nuclear weapons.

In this context, assuming that the regime of Pyongyang stays in the current state of cohesion and that power distribution remains unaltered in Northeast Asia, one should conclude that the likelihood of disarmament is low. Unless an unlikely scenario of domestic threat to the regime forces Pyongyang to reach for a grand disarmament bargain with its American foe, its Chinese ally, or both, North Koreans are not likely to get rid of their nuclear weapons. Obviously, in this case one can suggest that Pyongyang may not disarm because ultimately both the United States and, especially, China are not interested in allowing regime collapse and thus they would end up intervening even without disarmament. Nevertheless rationality is

bounded and, in this scenario of extreme political distress for Pyongyang, the probabilities for disarmament seem to increase even if that decision would not actually be substantially rational, considering particularly the risk-averse position of China and resulting propensity to protect the regime's stability. In fact, in a scenario where leaders face imminent demise but have the opportunity to trade short-term costs for long-term ones, one may suppose that their risk propensity increases and a bargain will seem a better option. Assuming that Washington or Beijing could have a relevant impact in solving the imagined regime crisis, a North Korean leader that faces an imminent economic implosion, an internal coup, or even a popular rebellion is more likely to opt for a bargain rather than risk waiting for favorable foreign decisions that may come late or not come at all, since miscalculations may also occur on the other side. However, those three types of scenarios seem unlikely. North Korean economy seems to be growing incrementally, there are no evident leadership alternatives to Kim Jong-un, and political control over masses continues solid.

Therefore the conditions for a grand bargaining seem absent and consequently one should expect Kim Jong-un to continue developing the country's military nuclear program. Such development will continue to focus on nuclear material and deployment systems, which implies further testing. Hence, further nuclear or missile testing should not come as a surprise, especially in a period where the regime has not been able to go back to bilateral or multilateral negotiation tables and is under pressure due to human rights violations. On the contrary, those tests are the logical corollary of the DPRK's strategy and solely reflect the inability of international actors to successfully disarm it, particularly the United States and China.

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