



# The University of Bradford Institutional Repository

<http://bradscholars.brad.ac.uk>

This work is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our Policy Document available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this work please visit the publisher's website. Access to the published online version may require a subscription.

**Citation:** Bluth C (2017) The Paradox of North Korea's nuclear diplomacy: Insights from conflict transformation theory. *North Korean Review*. 13(1): 45-62.

**Copyright statement:** © 2017 Yonsei Institute of North Korean Studies. Full-text reproduced with publisher permission.

**"The trajectory of the North Korean nuclear programme and the risks of "strategic patience" vs. arms control".**

**Author: Christoph Bluth, Professor of International Relations and Security, Division of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, Bradford BD7 1 DP, United Kingdom, email [c.bluth@bradford.ac.uk](mailto:c.bluth@bradford.ac.uk), tel.+44-1274-236845**

**Abstract:**

*Purpose:* This is a research paper that develops a novel approach to understand North Korea's nuclear policy on the basis of conflict transformation theory.

*Design, Methodology, Approach:* By conceptualising the situation on the Korean peninsula as a protracted conflict (either between the DPRK and the Republic of Korea or North Korea and the United States), new insights into the nature of the protracted cycle of engagement and conflict with North Korea can be developed. In this context, the role and trajectory of the nuclear programme can be analysed and both the failure of and the need for arms control negotiations understood.

*Findings:* The paper shows that using conflict transformation theory provides an analytically coherent explanation of North Korean security policy and foreign policy behaviour that fits the empirical evidence more closely than alternative approaches.

*Practical Implications:* The paper assesses the current policy of "strategic patience" vis-à-vis North Korea and demonstrates how it is based on false assumptions and involves risks that need to be addressed by the United States and the international community.

*Originality. Value:* This paper presents a novel approach to analysing the puzzle of North Korean foreign policy behaviour with important implications for understanding the nature of the conflict and possible conditions for its resolution

Since the end of the Cold War, the North Korean regime has faced extraordinary challenges as the economy of the country collapsed, it experienced a major famine in which well over one million of its citizens perished and it has been in a major confrontation with the world's only superpower over its nuclear weapons program. Contrary to the expectations, the North Korean regime has survived in power, recently passing on the mantle of leadership to the third generation. Nevertheless, the expectation that this cannot continue forever persists, and recently President Obama declared his belief in the inevitability of North Korea's collapse.<sup>1</sup>

North Korea has been at the nexus of North East Asian security for over six decades. Since the end of the Cold War, this has focussed on three distinct but interrelated regional security issues: (1) North Korea as a source of regional instability in view of the military confrontation on the Korean peninsula, (2) North Korea's nuclear programme and its activities as a proliferator of nuclear and ballistic missile technology at a time when nuclear proliferation is increasingly seen as one of the key global security issues, (3) the role of the Korean peninsula in the emerging geopolitics of North East Asia.

This paper approaches the subject from the point of view of theoretical approaches to protracted conflicts. By conceptualising the situation on the Korean peninsula as a protracted conflict (either between the DPRK and the Republic of Korea or North Korea and the United States), new insights into the nature of the protracted cycle of engagement and conflict with North Korea can be developed. In this context, the role and trajectory of the nuclear programme can be analysed and both the failure of and the need for arms control negotiations understood. The paper will assess the current policy of "strategic patience" vis-à-vis North

Korea and demonstrate how it is based on false assumptions and involves risks that need to be addressed by the United States and the international community.

### **Understanding North Korea's diplomacy**

North Korean foreign policy has seemed confusing and Pyongyang's intentions have been subject to controversy and different interpretations.<sup>2</sup> But contrary to the impression of strange and erratic behaviour, given the situation they find themselves in, there is a clear logic in the policies they pursue.<sup>3</sup> During the Cold War period, the confrontation on the Korean peninsula was embedded in the East-West confrontation. Both Koreas were kept secure and at the same time restrained by their respective superpower allies. For North Korea the geopolitical situation was somewhat more complex than for the South, because Kim Il-sung did not accept Soviet dominance such as was exercised in parts of Eastern Europe. Consequently he pursued a policy of equidistance between China and the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> At the same time he gradually built up North Korea's military capabilities with a view to achieving unification under his leadership when the time would be ripe. Since the end of the Cold War and the loss of economic support and reliable security guarantees from its erstwhile sponsors, the top priority for North Korea has been regime survival. The Kim regime feels threatened by the changed geopolitical environment and in particular what it calls the 'hostile policy' of the United States, and its severe economic difficulties.

The US concern with North Korea's nuclear programme provided Pyongyang with the opportunity to engage the United States.<sup>5</sup> This engagement came to be perceived in Pyongyang as the key for addressing the external security concerns and the economic

predicament of the DPRK. Essentially North Korea wants the US to accept the legitimacy of the regime, normalize diplomatic relations, take concrete steps to end the military threat to North Korea, such as sign a non-aggression pact, and remove economic sanctions. It is important to not only understand the motivations that drive North Korean foreign policy, but also the tactics. Just as the United States uses coercive measures (such as unilateral and multilateral sanctions and UN Security Council resolutions) as well as incentives (the provision of fuel, the lifting of sanctions, diplomatic visits), North Korea uses its own form of pressure tactics (developing and demonstrating military capabilities, refusing to attend talks, issuing verbal threats, abandoning previous agreements) alongside cooperative gestures (permitting inspections, implementing parts of previous agreements, attending talks, entering into new agreements).

The concepts of national autonomy and sovereignty play a key role in North Korean diplomacy.<sup>6</sup> The application of international law, external inspections or the verification of agreements are seen as being in fundamental contradiction to these principles. The launch of a *Taepodong-2* rocket on 5 April 2009 to put a satellite into orbit is a good example. It was clearly designed to demonstrate North Korea's missile capabilities and defiance of UNSCR 1718. It was a way for the Kim regime to demonstrate that it was standing up for its sovereign rights and was not cowed by international reaction.<sup>7</sup> The same principles apply to the two launches of the *Unha-3* in 2012. It is clear from the history of US-DPRK negotiations that diplomats are often under pressure to prove that they are standing up to the demands of the United States. This can mean that they become too inflexible and lose sight of the larger objectives and fail to obtain the results that they are seeking. The experience of dealing with North Korea also leads to the conclusion that the demands of the military can thwart negotiations which otherwise would have resulted in favourable agreements.<sup>8</sup> The so-called

“leap day” agreement of 29 February 2012, according to which the DPRK would suspend uranium enrichment and nuclear testing as well as permit IAEA inspectors to monitor activities at the Yongbyon nuclear facilities in return for food aid and improved relations with the US failed because the military leadership insisted on a missile launch to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung.<sup>9</sup> This decision was taken even though the Americans made it clear that this launch would result in the cancellation of the Leap Day Agreement.

The decision to produce a nuclear device and conduct a nuclear test was taken in 2003 after the 11<sup>th</sup> round of the Supreme People’s Assembly in September 2003. A decisive factor was the Iraq war, which seemed to demonstrate the need for a capacity to deter a US attack.<sup>10</sup> The belief of the North Korean elite that the nuclear programme enhances the status of the DPRK, provides deterrence against external aggression and facilitates a security dialogue with the United States that enables North Korea also to obtain much needed economic support is deeply engrained. North Korea has been willing to freeze and limit its nuclear programme, but the leaders in Pyongyang have never yet reached the point where they will finally give it up, and it is difficult to conceive any circumstances under which this might happen. Even if the various demands were met and the US established diplomatic relations, signed a non-aggression pact and followed through with other promises about ‘changing its hostile policy’, this would not be enough to permanently guarantee North Korea’s security.

On the other hand the external threat to North Korea is primarily created by the nuclear programme in the first place. There is a curious paradox that underlies North Korean foreign policy, which is that it is fundamentally predicated on making North Korea appear dangerous to the international community. This motivates the United States and other countries to

engage with North Korea in order to mitigate the threat, but in order for this to be sustained the threat has to be periodically revived. This creates the seemingly inescapable cycle of conflict and cooperation. It also accounts for North Korea's diplomacy which to outsiders sometimes appears erratic and even irrational.

### **Conceptualising North-South relations as persistent conflict**

International relations scholars have developed several approaches to conceptualize and explain persistent and protracted conflicts. Sophisticated approaches have been developed to understand enduring rivalries. These are called the punctuated equilibrium and the evolutionary model. The punctuated equilibrium model considers disputes and wars in the long-range context of the relationship and discerns three phases in the development of a rivalry. The first is the on-set phase which is initiated by a political shock, a dramatic change such as regime change or a large-scale shift in the international system. The model does not elaborate on very specific conditions that bring about the onset of protracted rivalries. The conflict becomes protracted if patterns of hostility are locked in which occurs if disputes are not resolved relatively quickly. The lock-in phase is followed by "stasis" which is characterised by regular and consistent hostile interactions between the protagonists. Relations between the two protagonists will fluctuate around a "basic rivalry level" (BRL). Phases of crisis or détente are variations around the BRL. The model allows for quite large fluctuations from the equilibrium level (BRL) including wars or lesser crises. A necessary (but not always sufficient) condition for this to change and for a protracted rivalry to end is another exogenous political shock that causes an abrupt end to the adversarial relationship. In the case of North and South Korea, the initial endogenous shock that initiated the rivalry was the creation of two Korean states after World War II. These events established a very high

“basic rivalry level”, but unlike in other cases where the rivalry was quickly resolved by a war this did not happen in this case because of the Korean War. The research by Stinnett and Diehl indicates that the likelihood of a dyad of states to develop an enduring rivalry is higher if the first confrontation is over a territorial dispute. According to Tir and Diehl’s work, 81 per cent of enduring rivalries involve territorial disputes.<sup>11</sup> Since 1947 Pakistan and India have clashed 44 times, with 86 per cent of the clashes relating to territory. Territorial disputes are often hard to resolve because they are zero-sum games and their visibility means that it is hard for political leaders to defend any compromise. This is especially the case when the territory is linked with the identity of the state. The absence of a solution that falls within the “win set” of both parties is a recipe for long-term, militarized competition.

Evolutionary conceptions of protracted conflicts likewise focus on the initial confrontations as a critical factor for the development of the enduring rivalry. If a confrontation ends in a negotiated compromise, this could alter the environment of the relationship and enable a satisfactory resolution. A stalemate or unclear outcome on the other hand is considered to increase distrust and hostility between the two protagonists as the central issues remain unresolved. A decisive defeat of one side by the other tends to reduce conflict levels, at least in the immediate aftermath. The defeated side will need to recover. It is not necessarily the end of conflict because the defeated side might take time to resume the confrontation at a more propitious time.

Protracted conflicts can be said to have a certain life-cycle that involves four distinct phases: The origin of the conflict, intensification (or escalation), de-escalation (relaxation of tension) and termination. An extended conflict can go through phases of escalation and de-escalation repeatedly before it finally terminates. The intensification can involve crises and even wars. The end of a war or the end of a crisis does not necessarily mean de-escalation of

the conflict itself. The escalation phase can involve various forms of arms races, diplomatic confrontations and efforts to build alliances with like-minded states. Scholars make a distinction between high, medium or low intensification of protracted conflict. A high degree of intensification is characterised by persistent serious crises and confrontations including wars. A medium degree of intensification involves crises of lower intensity and medium level military action short of a major war. A low degree of intensification is characterised by low level military actions such as border skirmishes, bombings, efforts to reduce tension by de-escalating or terminating crises.

Protracted conflicts have been identified as the most common source of interstate armed conflict. They are different from ordinary security dilemmas in so far as they are not a consequence of anarchy in the international system or fluctuations in the distribution of power, but more permanent factors related either to unresolved territorial disputes, cultural and religious rivalries or ideological factors that question the legitimacy of one of the parties. Scholars like Vasquez who have studied protracted conflicts have identified territorial conflicts as the most difficult to resolve and the most likely to result in the outbreak of interstate wars. As Vasquez stated: "According to the territorial explanation of war, what makes territorial disputes so intractable is that concrete tangible territorial stakes, like pieces of land, that are in principle divisible, become infused with "symbolic" and even "transcendent" qualities that make them intangible, perceived in zero-sum, and hence difficult to divide."<sup>12</sup> Territorial disputes which are not resolved even by armed conflict therefore tend to recur and in the case of India and Pakistan the first Kashmir was essentially a typical territorial war, and all the subsequent military clashes or confrontations have been to a significant part about territory as the revisionist power has been unprepared to accept a stalemate or the status quo. In the Korean case, the Korean was inconclusive because it ended with the status quo ante

more or less, without resolving the Korean issue. According to Vasquez, the “steps to war explanation posits that territorial disputes are so salient that they will continue to fester unless they are resolved either through an overwhelming victory or through a mutually accepted settlement that recognizes the border as legal. The India-Pakistan conflict is so disputatious because neither side has been able to attain that overwhelming victory ...” A persistent conflict that does not move towards resolution but instead is characterised by a cycle of escalation, confrontation, crises and de-escalation that does not lead to a resolution but to another on-set of escalation according to Khan leads to deterrence becoming the favoured approach to containing the conflict and preventing the outbreak of war.<sup>13</sup> But conventional deterrence is generally considered to be unreliable and for this reason according to Khan dyads of countries in a persistent dispute are liable to acquire nuclear weapons. The US-Soviet relationship, the North Korea – South Korea relationship and South Asia are all prominent examples. But there is caveat in so far as in all of these cases the nuclear factor was introduced with reference to the persistent conflict. The United States was a nuclear power even before the creation of the DPRK and the Republic Korea, the US nuclear programme was not initiated because of a conflict with the Soviet Union and India acquired nuclear weapons without reference to a threat from Pakistan. In all of the cases it was the other side that acquired nuclear weapons at least partially in response to facing a nuclear armed adversary.

The analytical approach to the study of protracted conflict distinguishes low, medium or high intensification phases of the conflict. This is related to the level of hostility and violence. In particular if a war breaks the conflict is clearly in a state of high intensification. The core of Khan’s argument is that “wars, which represent the high intensification phase, ending with winners and losers, may terminate a conflict.”<sup>14</sup>

If we accept the principle that nuclear weapons prevent wars, then this route to de-escalation and the termination of a conflict may be closed off. In principle, a conventional war that results in the destruction of an opposing army could force the termination of a conflict. The same does not apply to a nuclear war if both sides have nuclear weapons as the level of destruction would be too great for either society to continue to function. In order to avoid the devastation of nuclear war it is unlikely to be initiated, according to the principles of nuclear deterrence discussed in the previous chapter. As a result the two opposing powers have fallen into a trap whereby one of the key instruments of conflict termination has become useless. Moreover, a key mechanism to perpetuate the conflict has also become dysfunctional and therefore attitudes among the leadership of both sides remain in their previous state, pursuing the same zero sum strategy in terms of previously existing objectives even as the means of achieving them in the shorter term have been curtailed.

. It is useful to look at the impact of the nuclearisation on the conflict on the Korean peninsula. The acquisition of nuclear weapons confirmed the existing world view and illusions of the political elite in North Korea. For the Kim regime the nuclear tests were the final step in defying the international nuclear order imposed by the major powers through the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). North Korea now had to opportunity to demonstrate that it had a nuclear capability of its own that could deter the United States and redress the imbalance with respect to the Republic of Korea. By relying on the nuclear arsenal as an equalizer, the illusion of North Korea as a great regional power, while not having any currency outside the DPRK, could be used for internal legitimation.

If nuclear weapons render war dysfunctional as a political instrument, then that evidently raises the question of whether this would be the end of the persistent conflict or

whether the opposite might be true, that the persistent conflict endures because there is no means to resolve it. Saria Khan asserts:

“This study argues that all wars – nuclear, conventional and limited-aims – will be avoided when states in conflict acquire nuclear weapons...”<sup>15</sup>

Those seeking to explain the risk-taking behaviour in South Asia have used Snyder’s concept of the stability/instability paradox according to which a balance at the strategic nuclear level means that an imbalance at the conventional level can give rise to instability, which then manifests itself in low level armed conflicts or crises. Khan claims that “nuclear weapons acquisition generates more crises in the conflict setting because escalation to war is unlikely, as the stability/instability theorists believe. The frequent eruption of serious crises in the nuclear period in the India-Pakistan conflict demonstrates the value of this line of reasoning.”<sup>16</sup>

The application of conflict transformation theory to nuclear states in a persistent conflict posits that while the two protagonists no longer go to war with each other, the conflict manifests itself in crises. The conflict effectively becomes frozen and the crises never reach a point where they induce a resolution of the conflict or the conflict can progress through its life-cycle to de-escalation. Instead the competitive development of conventional and nuclear capabilities continues in the form of quantitative and technological arms races, which in themselves exacerbate the conflict. Direct confrontations continue to occur and the protagonists seek to strengthen their position with recourse to war. The confrontations assume the form of proxy attacks, terrorism and insurgencies. These are strategies pursued by the weaker of the protagonists. The state dissatisfied with the status quo in particular will seek to provoke crises in order to advance its strategic objectives.

The theoretical approach developed by Khan on the basis of the conflict transformation literature fits the pattern of North Korea and South Korea, where only one party (North Korea) has nuclear weapons but the other side is allied with a nuclear weapons state. This is a good example because relations between the DPRK and the Republic of Korea are marked by a fundamental and persistent conflict that is based on the irreconcilable claim of each state that it represents the Korean nation and that the other state must be destroyed and its territory occupied. The strategic situation is stable not only because the DPRK is a nuclear state and the ROK is protected by a much more powerful nuclear state, but because all parties are fully aware of the unacceptable destruction likely to be caused by a major conventional war. In a conventional war North Korea could not prevail and the regime would have to expect to be destroyed, but given the short distance from the demilitarized zone to the South Korean capital Seoul it has the capacity to cause massive casualties with its artillery systems and ballistic missiles. As the weaker side, North Korea has continuously provoked very serious military crises (short of war) in order to support its diplomatic objectives and in particular to extract economic and political concessions from the other parties involved (China, Japan, the United States and South Korea). The conflict cannot advance in the cycle because a war is not an option. Both North Korea and the United States have used the North Korean nuclear weapons programme as a means to move towards de-escalation and achieve a status quo in which the security threats would be mitigated on the basis of non-aggression and peaceful co-existence. While the conflict moved through a process of de-escalation for a number of years while a so-called "Agreed Framework" was negotiated, a cessation of the conflict remained out of reach and the agreements reached were abandoned in a new cycle of intensification of the conflict that resulted in nuclear tests and the acquisition of nuclear devices by North Korea. Although Khan does not actually discuss this example except in relation to the problem of non-proliferation, it fits the paradigm quite well and it is one way

to account for the continuous cycle of confrontation and engagement (or lowering and raising the level of intensity of the confrontation).

### **Dealing with North Korea: What is to be done?**

The theory of protracted conflicts suggests that as the conflict cannot progress through its natural cycle and is essentially frozen as the strategic situation makes war prohibitive, that only a major shock would enable a resolution of the situation. Although all the principal actors are pinning their hopes on a gradual evolution, the internal and external constraints have inhibited such a development. There are several possible scenarios:

The first is that the internal contradictions of the regime precipitate its collapse. If Kim Jong-un were to be seriously challenged in an internal power struggle or even killed, this could result in the loss of central authority as different factions in the elite turn on each other. The sudden collapse of the North Korean state has potentially catastrophic consequences. Millions of refugees may stream into China or South Korea, many of them heavily armed. There is also the prospect of severe fighting between various military factions in the event of the collapse of central control. It is in the interests of all countries in the region to prevent this from happening. Despite President Obama's recent statements regarding a collapse of North Korea, it is not clear that such a development is likely in the near or medium future. The very intense challenges that the regime had to overcome in the 1990s has demonstrated its robustness. The ruthlessness with which the third Kim consolidated his leadership has emphasized continuity with the previous directions of policy. It is really hard to conceive how the North Korean leadership could extract itself from its predicament if it wanted to. In other words, it is really hard to conceive how there can be a soft landing. A collapse is not likely in the near future, although it cannot be ruled out.

Exogenous shocks are another possibility. If China decided to end its support for the Kim regime, such as it is, that would be such a profound shock to the North Korean system that it might be compelled to seek a strategic accommodation, although in such a scenario again some form of collapse is a distinct possibility. At the present time such a development is highly unlikely and as relations between Russia and the West are deteriorating the possibility arises that Russia might take China's place if it comes to that. While this is unlikely in the near term, it cannot be precluded in the longer term as China's foreign policy evolves and if there is no significant change in a North Korea that becomes an increasing threat to international security with growing nuclear capabilities. The United States and South Korea could facilitate such a development by deepening their relations with China and providing reassurances to China about the role of a united Korea in the geopolitics in Northeast Asia.

In the light of these realities, it is important to map out the key objectives in diplomacy with North Korea.

The first priority must be to prevent the outbreak of war on the Korean peninsula. In principle strategic deterrence in Korea is stable. The problem is that the North Korean state is not stable and its leaders indulge in military provocations in order to compel changes in US/ROK policy or extort economic concessions. Such brinkmanship is associated with a risk of while at the same time refusing to be intimidated by threats of war. Two events in 2010 resulted in a shift of policy in the Republic of Korea that signals an increased risk of escalation in the event of further provocations by the North. After the sinking of the South Korea frigate *Cheonan* on 26 March 2010 and the subsequent investigation which concluded it was sunk by North Korean torpedoes and the shelling of the island of Yeonpyeong on 23 November 2010 the Lee Myung-bak government resolved to counter future such

provocations with more significant military counterstrikes which could include targets in Pyongyang.<sup>17</sup> As a result the risk of uncontrolled escalation in this highly militarised environment has increased very significantly, to the extent that policymakers in Washington have become fearful of being entrapped in a conflict on the Korean peninsula.

Although a sudden collapse of the Pyongyang regime is in nobody's interest, it must be a foreign policy goal to weaken the hold of the regime over its people in the long run and promote Korean unification. Focussing economic support for North Korea on the needs of the population rather than the regime (i.e. food aid in particular) and finding ways of allowing more information about the outside world to seep into North Korea will be elements of such a strategy.

### **The trajectory of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs**

After the failure of two major arms control agreements with North Korea, the Obama administration has followed a policy based on "strategic patience". It is based on the principle that the US will not engage in arms control with North Korea unless the DPRK returns to the 13 February agreement (2007) with a view to work towards total nuclear disarmament. While the disappointments of previous efforts to engage North Korea might make this policy look attractive, there are significant dangers associated with it. First of all there are no longer any constraints on the nuclear program and the development of ballistic missiles. If North Korea restores the facilities at Yongbyon (as it now appears to have done) and completes the construction of the 50 MW(e) and the 200 MW(e) reactors, it will be able to produce significant stockpiles of plutonium. At the same time North Korea is known to have built at least one facility for enriching uranium. There is a widespread belief among policymakers

and analysts that North Korea has the capacity to build uranium-based nuclear devices. The common expectation that the nuclear test that was carried out on 12 February 2013 would be of a device based on HEU could not be confirmed by an analysis of the measurements performed. The North Koreans themselves did not confirm either way, but claimed that the test used a “miniaturized lighter nuclear device with greater explosive force”, a statement that played right into American and South Korean concerns but again was not verified.<sup>18</sup> The same applies to the nuclear test carried out on 7 February 2016 which North Korea claimed was a hydrogen bomb test without any evidence, a claim that met with universal scepticism among experts.<sup>19</sup> All of the available evidence suggests that despite its rhetoric North Korea’s progress in the development of nuclear devices and the accumulation of fissile material since 2008 has been quite modest. But the longer there is no progress in arms control, the greater is the likelihood that this will change quite dramatically and North Korea will make both the engineering breakthroughs and accumulate sufficient fissile material for a significant operational force of nuclear weapons.

Moreover, there is a possibility that North Korea will develop a ballistic missile of true intercontinental range, capable of reaching the continental United States. As with nuclear devices, the extent of North Korean capabilities is ambiguous. By 1991 the entire Korean peninsula was within the range of North Korean missiles based on Soviet *Scud* technology, but the efforts to extend the range of the *Scud* had reached their limits. In the late 1980s North Korea began the development of a medium range that would have the capability to target Japan, with a range of 1,000 – 1,300 km and a payload of 700-1000 kg. This missile called the *Rodong* was based on a design that required different engines and guidance systems to achieve the required performance characteristics. The concept design for it was developed by the Makeyev OKB in the Soviet Union (a design bureau that specializes in

submarine launched missiles) and consequently this missile bears some resemblance to the early designs of the SS-N-4 (R-13) and SS-N-5 (R21). The engine for the Nodong seems to be of similar design as the Isayev S-2.713M engine incorporated in the SS-N-4 and the missile itself an intermediate design between the SS-N-4 and SS-N-5. Although the contribution of ex-Soviet missile engineers cannot be positively determined, it is known that 60 engineers from the Makeyev OKB were prevented from flying to North Korea in October 1992. Some reports say eventually some Russian engineers made it to the DPRK and others collaborated with North Korean engineers by email.<sup>20</sup> The scale of the North Korean missile program which developed different missile types within a comparatively short time frame makes it appear implausible that North Korea could have achieved such a feat which would have strained the capacity of countries which a far more highly developed industrial base without a substantial transfer of technology. A North Korean defector claimed that 90% of the components of a factory producing missile guidance and control systems were imported from Japan.<sup>21</sup> While the DPRK may now have become self-sufficient in the capacity to produce airframes, tanks and other important missile components, it may still be reliant on imports for advanced electronic components. Some analysts have become convinced that North Korea's missile programme is not really indigenous or self-sufficient in any sense, but is more accurately described as procurement. Thus Daniel A. Pinkston from Troy University and Robert Schmucker, a former UNSCOM (United Nations Special Commission) inspector in Iraq have pointed out that the DPRK missile programme is characterized by short development timelines, few flight tests and early production schedules.<sup>22</sup> North Korea also has a medium-range missile called the *Musudan* (also *Hwasong-10*). It is suggested that it is based on the engine of an SS-N-6 (R-27) with a *Rodong* re-entry vehicle and interstage element, thus resulting in a missile body with a diameter of 1.5 m (equal to that of the SS-N-6) but somewhat greater length than the original Soviet missile (12 m as opposed to 9.65

m).<sup>23</sup> If the estimates for the range of the missile are correct, then it could target American bases in Okinawa and Guam. The development of the *Musudan* began in 1992 when the general designer of the Makeyev Design Bureaux, Igor Velichko, signed a \$3 million contract with the Korea Yeongwang Trading Company. The contract was for Russian professors to teach in North Korea, but in fact was said to have involved the development of a space vehicle designated 'Zyb' (a reference to the R-27/SS-N-6).<sup>24</sup> The *Musudan* was tested several times in 2016 and North Korea claimed that it could target Guam although experts believe that would require a low weight warhead, precluding a nuclear payload.<sup>25</sup> The other missile of note is the *KN-02* which is based on the SS-21 (*Tochka*) and which was first publicly displayed on 25 April 2007. It is believed that the SS-21 was procured from Syria together with solid propellant. The missiles which Syria originally acquired from the Soviet Union were shipped from Syria to North Korea in August 1996.<sup>26</sup>

North Korea's long-range missiles are based on the *Taepodong/Paektusan* series. The *Taepodong I* was a three-stage missile intended to launch a satellite into orbit in 1998. It failed but as the trajectory of the missile passed over Japan the launch created considerable tension. Current efforts to develop space launch vehicles and intercontinental range missiles focus on the follow-on system, the *Taepodong 2/Paektusan 2*. The Unha series of space launch vehicles is believed to be a further development of that system. The first launch of the *Taepodong 2* in 2006 was a complete failure. On 5 April 2009 the Unha-2 failed to launch the satellite but demonstrated the viability of the first two stages. In response to the launch the UN Security Council, with China's support, passed resolution 1874 reprimanding North Korea for the nuclear and missile tests.<sup>27</sup> It imposed new sanctions, expands arms embargos, and authorized ship searches on the high seas, thus breathing new life into the Proliferation Security Initiative as South Korea finally decided to join.<sup>28</sup> On 13 April 2012 a launch of an

Unha-3 failed, but another launch on 12 December 2012 succeeded in launching a satellite into orbit. Analysts believe that the Unha-3's first stage is a cluster Nodong engines, and the second stage is a Nodong engine with additional fuel tanks. The third stage is believed to be a modified version of the second stage of the Iranian Safir missile, suitable for launching a satellite but not adequate as the third stage of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). North Korea has displayed a missile known as the KN-08 on parades but there is no evidence that it is anything more than a mock-up. There is a consensus among experts that North Korea is working to develop an ICBM, and that it has not yet mastered this technology.<sup>29</sup> In particular, there is no evidence that North Korea has been able to develop more advanced rocket engines for this purpose. Quite to the contrary, some experts believe that all the engines used for the Nodong and other missiles using these engines are not manufactured North Korea at all, but imported from Russia. If this is the case then there are severe constraints on the further development of North Korean missile capabilities. However, given the steady progress North Korea has made over the decades, the prospects that eventually North Korea will acquire a true intercontinental ballistic missile capability cannot be excluded.

### **Ending the crisis on the Korean peninsula**

Presidents Obama and Lee Myung-bak at their summit in Washington on 16 June 2009 emphasized the threat posed by North Korean's nuclear programme and Obama vowed to break the cycle of allowing North Korea to create a crisis to reap further rewards. But it is unclear what means are proposed to deal with North Korea from now on. Not only is there no clear concept of how North Korea's nuclear arsenal is to be eliminated, but the focus remains

on the nuclear question rather than the regime itself, thus perpetuating the contradictions of previous policies.

In 2011 Park Geun-hye, who was elected to the presidency in December 2012, decided to formally lay out her vision for the future of the Korean peninsula and her plan of how to deal with North Korea in an article published in the September issue of the American journal *Foreign Affairs*.<sup>30</sup> Her analysis of the situation was stark and she pulled no punches about North Korea's aggressive behaviour in the past. At the same time she put forward a bold plan to address the situation by embarking on a process building trust among the states of the Northeast Asian regions, involving slowing the growth of military build-ups and greater economic cooperation. Coining the new phrase "trustpolitik", she outlined a new mechanism to bring "Pyongyang into the fold". Park considered that the efforts to engage North Korea by means of a "sunshine policy" have failed to mitigate North Korea's aggressive behaviour. By way of an indirect criticism of the incumbent President Lee Myung-bak, she stated that the policies of conditional engagement and deterrence have likewise failed to modify North Korea's "bellicose strategy towards the South" in a meaningful way. She acknowledged that the strategy of conditional engagement that involved the promise of very significant levels of economic support in return for North Korean "good behaviour" and in particular a resolution of the nuclear issue has failed. In place of the existing policy towards North Korea, Park proposed an "alignment policy" that combines toughness with flexibility in inner-Korean relations, which should be designed to build trust in alignment with international efforts to strengthen security and cooperation. Alongside a vigorous posture of deterrence against North Korean provocations, South Korea should offer Pyongyang a new beginning, with joint projects of enhanced co-operation, humanitarian assistance and new trade and investment opportunities.

The efforts by President Park to put her ideas into practice were stymied from the beginning due to the provocative behavior by North Korea which consisted of an escalation of tension resulting in the temporary closure of the Gaesong Industrial Complex. Considerable diplomatic energy was expended in managing the reduction in tension and no major initiatives to reorient North-South relations was undertaken, partly because the political space was lacking as the Kim regime went through internal turmoil as manifested in the purge and execution of Jang Song-thaek. The most significant diplomatic efforts by the Park administration were directed at consolidating relations with the United States and China. There was also the articulation of a new policy on Korea unification. With the slogan “unification bonanza”, the Park administration sought to address domestic anxieties about the potential costs of Korean unification. But the effect was to alienate itself even further from the North Korean regime because the clear assumption was that unification would not be possible as long as the current regime was in power in North Korea. As the Park administration approaches its lame duck period, “trustpolitik” has been all but abandoned. The final closure of the Gaesong Industrial Complex in 2016 marked a shift towards containment was the dominant mode of South Korean policy towards the North.

## **Conclusion**

Using theoretical approaches to the study of persistent conflicts, it becomes apparent that the strategy of patience, like previous approaches to dealing with the nuclear program, is based on false assumptions. North Korea’s nuclear capabilities have become fundamental to its pursuit of the persistent conflict. Until there is a fundamental change in relations between North Korea and South Korea, this conflict remains frozen in its current cycle. This does not mean it is not possible to engage in period partial de-escalation. More importantly, while

arms control cannot under current circumstances eliminate the nuclear program, it could constrain developments that would fundamentally alter the strategic situation. This is why the United States and South Korea should continue to engage with North Korea and consider ways of returning to arms control negotiations.

---

<sup>1</sup>Aidan Foster-Carter, “Obama Comes out As A North Korea Collapsist”, *The Diplomat*, 30 January 2015

<sup>2</sup>See for example Victor Cha, *The Impossible State*, London: The Bodley Head 2012; Leon Segal, *Disarming Strangers*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998; Hazel Smith (ed.), *Reconstituting Korean Security: a policy primer*, New York, NY: UNU 2007

<sup>3</sup>Scott Snyder , *Negotiating on The Edge – North Korean Negotiating Behavior*, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002

<sup>4</sup>Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il-sung: The Formation of North Korea 1945-60*, London: Hurst& Company, 2002

<sup>5</sup>Samuel S. Kim, *The Two Koreas and the Great Powers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006

<sup>6</sup>B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, Brooklyn, NY: Melville House 2010

<sup>7</sup>Jae-soon Chang and Kelly Olsen, "Analysts: Rocket Gives North Korea New Bargaining Chip," *Associated Press*, 6 April 2009; see International Crisis Group, *North Korea's Missile Launch: The Risks of Overreaction*, Asia Briefing No.91, Seoul 31 March 2009

<sup>8</sup>Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Red Box*, New, NY: Columbia University Press 2010

<sup>9</sup>Victoria Nuland, “US-DPRk Bilateral Discussions”, US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/02/184869.htm>, accessed 31 January 2012

---

<sup>10</sup>Based on conversations with Prof. Lim Eul-chul, Kyungnam University, Seoul about his various discussions with North Korean foreign ministry officials in Seoul 2008/2009; see also Chosun Central News Agency, 16 October 2003

<sup>11</sup>John A. Vasquez, "The India-Pakistan conflict in light of general theories of war, rivalry and deterrence", in T.V.Paul (ed.), *The India-Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry*, CUP 2005 for details and sources.

<sup>12</sup>John A. Vasquez, op.cit.

<sup>13</sup>Saira Khan, *Nuclear Weapons and Conflict Transformation*, Abingdon, Routledge 2007

<sup>14</sup>Khan, op.cit. p.41

<sup>15</sup>Khan, op.cit, p. 50

<sup>16</sup>Khan, op.cit., p.50

<sup>17</sup>Interviews in Washington and Seoul in 2011

<sup>18</sup>David E. Sanger and Choe Sang-hun, "North Korea Confirms It Conducted 3rd Nuclear Test," *New York Times*, February 12, 2013

<sup>19</sup>Larry Greenmeier, "Nuclear Confusion: The Data Suggest North Korea's "H-Bomb" Isn't", *Scientific American*, 6 January 2016

<sup>20</sup>Evgeni Tkachenko, "Korea Tried to Employ Russians to Modernise Its Missiles," ITAR-TASS, February 10, 1993; Yonhap News Agency, April 23, 1994, in "Russian Scientists Assisting DPRK in Nuclear Program," JPRS-TND-94-011, May 16, 1994, pp. 51-52; Warren Strobel, "N. Korea Shops for Nuke Technology in Russia," *The Washington Times*, July 5, 1994, pp. A1

<sup>21</sup>Testimony of Bok Koo Lee (alias), Former North Korean Missile Scientist, before the Subcommittee on Financial management, the Budget , and an International Security

---

Committee on Governmental Affairs, United States Senate, 20 May 2003. See also Pinkston, *The North Korean Ballistic Missile Program*, p.21

<sup>22</sup>Pinkston, *The North Korean Ballistic Missile Program*, p.22

<sup>23</sup>Yu Yong-won, 'North Deploys New 4,000 km-Range Missiles', *Chosun Ilbo*, 4 May 2004. (The dimensions of the missile cited here differ from those reported by the IISS where a diameter of 1.65 m and a length of just under 10 m is given. IISS, *North Korea's Weapons Programmes*, p.81).

<sup>24</sup>David C. Isby, 'North Korea Has Deployed Intermediate-Range Missiles', *Jane's Missiles and Rockets*, 1 September 2004; Pinkston, *The North Korean Ballistic Missile Program*, p.35

<sup>25</sup>Michael Elleman "North Korea's *Musudan* missile effort advances", IISS Voices, 27 June 2016

<sup>26</sup><http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/dprk/kn-2.htm>

<sup>27</sup>Edith M. Lederer, "UN Imposes Tough New Sanctions on North Korea," Associated Press, June 12, 2009, in Lexis Nexis, [www.lexis-nexis.com](http://www.lexis-nexis.com)

<sup>28</sup>'Seoul must work out responses to N.Korean provocations,' *Chosun Ilbo*, 28 May 2009

<sup>29</sup>Michael Elleman, "Prelude to an ICBM? Putting North Korea's Unha-3 Launch Into Context, *Arms Control Today*, 28 February 2013; David Wright, "Markus Schiller's Analysis of North Korea's Unha-3 launcher", Union of Concerned Scientists, 22 February 2013

<sup>30</sup>Park Geun-hye, 'A New Korea', *Foreign Affairs*, September 2011