

RESEARCH REPORT*

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North Korea and the nuclear crisis escalation – mixing carrots with sticks?

After the Iraq war and its consequent regime change, the United States now faces a serious problem that has been wrongly dealt, to the extent that Washington and the current Bush administration has demanded more and offered less: The North Korea imbroglio is for sure not a similar case if strictly and directly compared with the Iraqi one. When it comes to bring about a debate about the concerns of nuclear proliferation and possible nuclear smuggling to rogue nations, it should be noted that the Bush administration has delivered a blow to the notion of nuclear non-proliferation and the compliance with the nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty of 1968. It is now acknowledged that Pyongyang possesses at least two nuclear devices for military purposes, and the North Korean military nuclear programme is thought to be quite on an advanced stage. If the process of plutonium and uranium enrichment continues unaltered, North Korea will be able to produce and deploy many more nuclear bombs annually. Further, the ballistic missile programme, namely the *No Dong* and *Taepo Dong* missiles have been already tested and have a flight range of over 1,000 kilometres, capable of reaching any area of Japan.¹

For a negotiation to be successful, Washington needs to engage on an approach with the People's Republic of China, Russia, South Korea and Japan who are clearly opposed to the former's strategy of demanding an up-front disarmament. The latter's

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¹ Cf. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2003-2004*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 145.

clearly favour a more gradual approach, based on concessions on a reciprocal manner, thus bearing in mind the conditions of acknowledging culture and language, its negotiation techniques and developing various channels of information, so as to built constructively a foundation that can lead to a real development of a cultural awareness needed to uncover the foreign policy intentions and prescriptions of certain countries (here North Korea, an isolated country, the last outpost of a strange mixture of grotesque Stalinism and Chinese exported Confucianism) ². When speaking of Culture, and defining this word, it is extremely important to resort to this theme if a negotiation over such a complex issue as the Korean nuclear crisis is to become successful and not redound on failure. Moreover, if failure is the outcome, then conflict is inevitable. The North Korean case illustrates this point quite clearly, as Washington feels it is being blackmailed by Pyongyang over incentives, such as exports of energy supplies, in exchange for bilateral talks, a conditions that the US rejects, favouring instead a multilateral diplomatic approach.

There are hundreds of definitions of the word culture, according to Avruch and on the basis of conflict resolution and mediation.³ If one takes into account that in international politics what really counts is perception and that there is no neutral information about countries, people, personalities and leaders, then the notion that Asians are reserved and careful because of their ancestral cultural roots and heritage can cast some confusion and biased views to western civilizations, not used to the habits and cultural constraints of the former. The rise of stereotypes is common when a negotiation is being built, sometimes creating barriers and prejudices to achieve a settlement or an understanding. Culture takes the form of a set of beliefs and principles not necessarily in conjunction with other beliefs and procedures, both at the negotiation and mediation levels. Furthermore, culture (as also religion) can create extremely difficult obstacles in dealing with crisis escalation like the North Korean that has been increasing for the past

² On this issue see the accounts of Daniel Pinkston and Philip Saunders, "Seeing North Korea clearly", *Survival*, vol. 45, no. 3, Autumn 2003, pp. 79-103; Gary Samore, "The Korean Nuclear Crisis", *Survival*, vol. 45, no. 1, Spring 2003, pp. 7-24.

³ See Kevin Avruch, *Culture and Conflict Resolution*, Washington D.C., United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998. A good definition is: "Culture as consisting of the derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including those images or encodement and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves." Idem, p.17, quoted by Mohammed Abu-Nimer, "Conflict Resolution, Culture, and Religion: toward a training model of interreligious peacebuilding", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 38, no. 6, November 2001, p. 687.

two years,⁴ giving a rise not only to regional tensions but also disrupting major concerns from the international community.

To avert the escalation of conflict in the Korean Peninsula, it seems that China and possibly the regime of Kim Yong Il are betting in conflict resolution and victory without having to fight – to achieve victory without fighting, thus aiming at the outlook for peace beyond the interest of military victory. This Chinese strategy of the twenty first century somehow resembles the strategy and the policy prescriptions used some millenniums ago by Hsun Tzu on his strategy writings: to walk away from the military strategy and to lean on politics, where crisis (and its consequent escalations) occur and are to be negotiated and mediated. That does not mean that China will only conduct a peaceful approach towards the North Korean imbroglio, by convincing the other regional players to engage on a framework of understanding that may ultimately lead to a successful dialogue between both Koreas and the US. China surely will be capable of exerting influence over Pyongyang to comply with the Agreed Framework of 1994, and will most likely continue its shipments and supplies of energy that North Korea desperately needs, if it wants to survive. One thing is sure: China does not want close military presence of the US military (there are already nearly 40,000 US troops stationed in South Korea⁵) near its borders. It had to acquiesce the deployment and presence of US troops on its western borders, namely in Kyrgyzstan, which borders the Xinjiang Autonomous Province. So, it is quite possible that Beijing might adopt a policy of “knocking” the opponent on its weak postures and attack it whenever he is distracted. The example is illustrative, to the extent that China maintains North Korea by supplying its energy and coal demands, creating a condition of stalemate, whereby Washington must refrain from acting unilaterally, as it did in the Middle East with the Iraq war. There, no weapons of mass destruction were found (till now, at least), whereas with the North Korean case, things can start to slip even if the US, Russia, South Korea and Japan apply a posture of containment of Pyongyang and wait for the regime to crumble and disintegrate from within; China would have a say in this scenario.

The strategy that Washington is pursuing, combining carrots with sticks, that is, promising help and energy supplies if North Korea renounces to the expansion of its

⁴ IISS, “North Korean nuclear tensions – limited options for a solution”, *Strategic Comments*, vol. 8, no. 9, November 2002, pp. 1-2.

⁵ The US servicemen in South Korea number 37,000 and are deployed on 40 military bases. Cf. A. Torkunov, “The Korean Issue”, *International Affairs – Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy and International Relations*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2003, p. 39.

nuclear military programme, and then including it on the “axis of evil”, the speech President George W. Bush delivered on January 2002, does not help to pacify this issue, because of the constant changes observed in the last years by the various US administrations towards Pyongyang.⁶ Moreover, the discourse of January 2002 made it clear that North Korea was included in the “axis of evil” and that the US would not permit these kind of regimes to threaten world security with Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).⁷

Now that the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein has been put out of the way,⁸ the US will face a much greater challenge than the former intervention, for this contest is not to be dealt by brute force, and where military and political options seem clearly more limited and the opponent has the advantage of not only possessing a nuclear deterrent factor but also doesn't have anything to lose. A country that has the fifth largest army in the world and the first in terms of population proportionality (over 1.3 million troops, excluding reserves, out of a population of some 23 million people) will surely pose a serious threat to the lonely superpower. Furthermore, the Korean Peninsula, which has a combined population of some 70 million people, is a highly concentrated area of armies and weapons, totalling more than 1.7 million people under arms, excluding armed forces reservists. Regarding Beijing, the Chinese regime will continue its policy with North Korea based on proximity and cultural and religious affinities. Ultimately, this will allow Beijing to play its cards in the global geopolitical game, thus creating barriers to Washington.

Meanwhile, Russia is trying to engage on a “special” relationship with Pyongyang, to the extent that Moscow wants to pacify the North Korean regime. Moscow developed a close relationship with Pyongyang after the arrival to power of Vladimir Putin in late 1999, which agreed to forge a new treaty of friendship and close cooperation with North Korea, a treaty that came into force in the autumn of 2000.⁹ Moreover, the intentions of this tie is, on the perspective of Russia, to foster a western oriented foreign policy that stresses power politics and puts Russian national interest in the logic of the deployment

⁶ Cf. Samore, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24. Neither the debate of sticks or carrots is adequate, as the North Korean regime is keen on bilateral negotiations, something that Washington has for the time being not fully acknowledged, favouring negotiations on a multilateral basis, which, on the other hand, have not convinced the other major actors in this struggle.

⁷ Quoted in International Institute of Strategic Studies, “Dealing with the ‘axis of evil’”, *Strategic Comments*, vol. 8, issue 5, June 2002.

⁸ Nonetheless, the country seems to be on the brink of sinking into some sort of civil war between the three main ethnoreligious groups.

⁹ Cf. Seung Ho – Joo, “The new friendship treaty between Moscow and Pyongyang”, *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 20, no. 5, 2001, pp. 467-481, here p. 472.

of military power and influence, e.g. weapons transfers, as well as geostrategic and national security issues.¹⁰ This same relationship is quite complex: on the one hand Russia criticizes Pyongyang for being an erratic, backward regime, but on the other hand it can suit as a useful if arguably troublesome Russian ally,¹¹ so as to counter US moves on the region. Russia looks also to bolster close economic ties with China and Japan, despite affirming that North Korea stands as an important partner in the region of Asia-Pacific. It looks like the primary aim of Moscow is to continue backing the North Korean regime so as to gain an important ally and leverage, while keeping some equidistance towards the other major and regional powers, namely China, Japan, South Korea and of course the US, in the initiatives Moscow is pursuing; thus, the Russian influence over Pyongyang should not be underestimated, as it increased dramatically since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

On the other hand, the initiatives of Washington have been flawed and misunderstood, and do not lead necessarily to the wishes it pursues: the collapse of the regime under its current conditions. And this can be explained by the efforts of South Korea in supporting a non-coercive plan. If Seoul would be acting on the opposite way, that is, using its resources to strangle the North economically and stating open support for this scheme, it would disrupt a reason for China, and eventually Russia, to defect from diplomatic and dialogue approaches in what concerns the negotiation issue.¹²

North Korea is a threat and an execrable regime, but downsizing it may prove to be an extremely painful error, as it can (and will, if provoked) exert a role of an actor capable of executing a nuclear revenge or even transform itself into a potential menace with the resources of implementing a truly nuclear strategy, jeopardizing global peace and security. The Korean issue should instead be handled on the basis of a comprehensive approach, based on bilateral inter-Korean dialogue combined with close international cooperation. The aim of utmost importance is then to achieve a settlement process and thus put an end to more than half a century of crisis and division of a people, an issue that indeed still legitimises the logic of Cold War in the Korean Peninsula.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 479.

¹¹ Cf. Mark Galeotti, "Russia's role in North Korea", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, February 2004, pp. 56.

¹² See for example Marcus Nolland, "How Bush risks losing Korea", *Financial Times*, 23 January 2004, p. 17.