The North Korean Security Threat: An Historical Context and Current Policy Options[1]

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Abstract: *Predictably, North Korea's shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010 following its admission it had built a new nuclear facility, created a great deal of consternation among the international community. Much of the commentary in the aftermath of these events, as with the sinking of the* Cheonan *in March 2010 and North Korea's nuclear tests in May 2009 and October 2006, focussed on the security threat posed by Pyongyang and its potentially destabilising impact, especially in the Northeast Asian region. Since the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1994, commentaries on the security threat from Pyongyang have, understandably, almost solely concentrated on the regime's pursuit of a nuclear capability. This article analyses the actual nature of the overall North Korean security threat, emphasising its multifaceted components –conventional, terrorist and nuclear – and argues that the danger from Pyongyang is problematic. The article also appraises the historical context of the North Korean security threat and the viability of some of the policy options available to the international community in dealing with North Korea. The article argues that there are no good or easy options in dealing with Pyongyang. All of the possibilities discussed here involve serious risks and none guarantee success. Nevertheless, the article argues that the international community must continue attempts to engage Pyongyang and cannot dismiss the option of accepting a nuclear North Korea. This may offer the best prospect of breaking the intractability that has characterised most of the historical dealings between the regime and the key powers whose interests converge on the Korean peninsula – the US, China, South Korea, Russia and Japan.*

North Korea's shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010 in the wake of the revelation that Pyongyang had built a new nuclear facility, understandably caused considerable alarm in the international community. The international response to these events and to the sinking of the *Cheonan* in March 2010 and North Korea's

nuclear tests in October 2006 and May 2009, illustrate the difficulties in dealing with this country, which is situated at the epicentre of the strategically and economically important Northeast Asian region. It is here, on the Korean peninsula, that the interests of the US, China, Russia, Japan, and North and South Korea converge. Much has been said about the security threat posed by North Korea's determination to acquire nuclear weapons. There has been less focus on the broader nature of the security threat posed by North Korea, and little discourse regarding the merits of the policy options that can be pursued by the international community in dealing with the regime. This article appraises the overall nature of the North Korean security threat, of which the nuclear component is only one of multiple elements. It examines the historical context of the conventional, terror, and nuclear security threat posed by North Korea, and analyses the viability of some policy options available to the international community in relation to the North Korean security challenge.

Given North Korea's belligerent nature, the purpose here is to emphasise the difficulties in dealing with this regime. Although the focus on the antagonism between North Korea and the US is understandable, it is important to remember that even the regime's key sponsors, the Soviet Union and China, had ongoing difficulties in their relations with Pyongyang during the Cold War. Even today, the leverage China and Russia have over North Korea is, at best, problematic. There are no good or easy options available to the international community in dealing with North Korea. None guarantee success, especially if the goal is a nuclear free North Korea, and all the options canvassed here involve serious risks. Thus, regardless of whether or not Pyongyang retains its nuclear capacity and although North Korea has proven to be intractable throughout its history, sustained efforts must be made to address,

manage and reduce, indeed, possibly resolve, the North Korean security threat. The failure to continue making attempts at diffusing the tensions on the Korean peninsula could have potentially devastating consequences for Northeast Asia and the international community.

North Korea as a Security Threat: An Historical Context

The North Korean regime came to power in the aftermath of World War II following the division of the Korean peninsula by the US and Soviet Union. The Soviets installed Korean communists, led by Kim Il-sung, in power and remained one of North Korea's key sponsors until the USSR itself collapsed in 1991. North Korea's other key ally, China, prevented the destruction of North Korea during the 1950-53 Korean War which was instigated by North Korea when it invaded South Korea in June 1950, in an attempt to unify the peninsula by force. The Korean War was the pivotal event in the modern history of the two Koreas and a very significant event in the history of the Cold War but, despite growing scholarly attention, it remains a little known conflict among policy makers and the broader community.[2] North Korea's attempt to conquer South Korea failed because of the intervention of the US and its UN allies. An understanding of the causes, course and consequences of the Korean War is essential for comprehending the subsequent political evolution and security issues concerning the two Koreas, and the nature of their interaction with each other and their respective allies since 1945. Following the Korean War, the North Korean regime has maintained its grip on power by repressing its people and isolating them from the rest of the world. In addition, political propaganda, centred on a macabre cult of personality that lauds the supposed achievements of North Korea's founder Kim Il-sung and his son Kim Jong-il, was used to indoctrinate the people against

outside influence. In turn, Kim Jong-il is now using this ongoing process of national indoctrination in an attempt to boost the leadership credentials of his son and chosen successor, Kim Jong-eun.[3]

The extent of the conventional security threat posed by North Korea is problematic. As the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island and the sinking of the *Cheonan* demonstrate, even without nuclear weapons, North Korea has the capacity to threaten the Northeast Asian region because of its conventional missile armoury and technology which it largely acquired from the Soviet Union. Seoul and Tokyo are well within the range of North Korea's missile arsenal. North Korea has sold missiles and missile technology to Iran and Pakistan in exchange for fuel and nuclear technology, and it has also sold missiles to Egypt, Syria and Libya. However, although North Korea possesses a significant missile arsenal, Pyongyang is unlikely to contemplate launching full scale strikes against anyone, given the conservative nature of the regime which fears for its own survival, and the inevitable scale of US retaliation which would almost certainly result in the destruction of North Korea. The same reality applies to North Korea's million plus army, which despite been among the largest in the world, is devoid of any real sustainable offensive capacity. Even in the unlikely scenario that the regime considers launching an invasion of South Korea, North Korea simply lacks the most basic resources that would be needed to mount an aggressive military campaign. Conversely, the South Koreans and the US have the personnel and technology, especially air supremacy, to quickly neutralise any North Korean offensive strike.[4]

Despite North Korea's conventional armoury and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island

and the sinking of the *Cheonan*, Pyongyang's behaviour is not as unpredictable as it appears if viewed in its historical context. Although the North Korean regime has adopted a belligerent posture towards the US, South Korea and Japan throughout its existence, often expressed in vehement language in official statements and broadcasts, with few exceptions, its rhetoric has been much more aggressive than its calculating but cautious approach to its foreign relations. The deadly Yeonpyeong and *Cheonan* incidents are the latest in a series of violent clashes between the two Koreas both before and after the devastating Korean War. The North Koreans are fully aware of their own weakness regarding the military balance of power on the Korean peninsula, and since 1953, this has deterred them from launching a second Korean War. North Korea's conventional forces have the capacity to cause widespread destruction, but compared to the US and South Korean forces arrayed against them, lack the resources and capacity to sustain a military campaign.[5] Thus, the possibility that a security threat in Northeast Asia will materialise because of North Korea's deliberate deployment of its conventional military muscle is remote. However, the danger of miscalculation, of a border incident unintentionally escalating out of control, can never be ignored. South Korea and the US have demonstrated that they will respond with restraint to contained incidents such as Yeonpyeong and *Cheonan* but their response to an unintentional escalation resulting from a North Korean provocation would be overwhelming. Hence, the inherent risk that an unintended large scale conflict on the Korean peninsula could breakout, as a result of a border incident that spirals out of control, can never be discounted.[6]

Although the terrorist threat from North Korea is remote, it cannot be wholly dismissed. With the focus on North Korea as a potential nuclear threat,

considerations regarding the danger posed by North Korea's capacity and willingness to resort to terrorist activities have attracted less attention from Korean commentators. This is despite the work of Korean scholars and observers who have detailed the regime's recourse to terrorist activities directed against South Korea. In January 1968, North Korean commandos almost succeeded in an attempt to assassinate the then South Korean President, Park Chung Hee. Then in October 1983, North Korean operatives succeeded in detonating a bomb in Rangoon, Burma, which killed seven senior South Korean government officials, including four Cabinet ministers, and narrowly missing President Chun Doo Hwan. The last known North Korean terrorist act was in November 1987, when two of its operatives succeeded in bombing KAL flight 858, killing all 115 people on board. Both of these operations were likely ordered by Kim Jong-il who was then Kim Il-sung's anointed successor, and in charge of North Korea's foreign clandestine activities.[7] Thus, although improbable, should North Korea decide to aggressively target South Korea, Japan and the US, it is much more likely to resort to terror rather than a conventional military strike because the North Koreans could sustain terrorist operations for much longer than any conventional conflict. Furthermore, they may gamble that an American response to a terrorist attack would not be as devastating as for a full scale conventional strike, and therefore the regime would survive. However, recent history suggests that such an action is unlikely given that Pyongyang has not engaged in terrorist activities since 1987 and because the US would almost certainly retaliate with a full scale strike in response to an act of terror by North Korea. Also, Pyongyang is extremely unlikely to have forgotten the American response to the 11 September, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon. In addition, unlike during the Cold War, the North Korean regime cannot be guaranteed unconditional

support from China and/or Russia in a confrontation with the US. In a clear indication that it now considers any terrorist threat from the regime to be extremely remote, the US removed North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism in 2008 in an effort to facilitate diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang.

The security threat posed by North Korea's nuclear capacity, similar to the threat posed by its conventional forces and terrorist potential, is also problematic. North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons began in the early 1960s when it first asked its two sponsors, the Soviet Union and China, for such weapons. Determined to prevent nuclear proliferation and having experienced their own difficulties in dealing with North Korea, both the Soviets and Chinese rejected the request, saying they would guarantee North Korea's security. Nevertheless, the Soviets provided North Korea with a small nuclear reactor in the early 1960s for civilian uses and insisted it be placed under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection to prevent diverting material to weapons development. In 1985, North Korea signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in exchange for continued Soviet nuclear assistance. However, North Korea surreptitiously continued to seek a nuclear weapons capacity and its increasing determination to achieve this objective has paralleled its ever growing isolation. Pyongyang's international ostracism coincided with the beginning of its economic decline in the early 1970s and its virtual economic collapse following the fall of the USSR and China's pursuit of its own economic and strategic interests since the early 1990s.[8]

At the beginning of the Clinton Administration, the US and North Korea narrowly averted a military confrontation during the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1993-

94. However, in the aftermath of this crisis, relations between Washington and Pyongyang appeared to steadily improve. Under the terms of the 1994 Agreed Framework, the US would supply North Korea with light water reactors and fuel aid, and North Korea would suspend its nuclear program, and fully comply with IAEA inspection provisions.[9] In 2000, a genuine thaw in the relationship between the US and North Korea appeared to be a real possibility. Following the June 2000 summit in Pyongyang between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong-il, the first such meeting between the heads of state of the two Koreas, in October Madeleine Albright, the US Secretary of State, went to Pyongyang becoming the highest ranking US official to go to North Korea. Moreover, President Clinton himself planned to go to North Korea.[10]

However, the incoming Bush Administration adopted a much more rigid attitude towards North Korea and this, along with the international repercussions of the 11 September, 2001 terrorist attacks, resulted in a rapid deterioration of US-North Korean relations. By 2002, North Korea's posture was again belligerent. In October 2002, the regime admitted it was pursuing a nuclear weapons program and in January 2003 it withdrew from the NPT. In October 2006 Pyongyang detonated a nuclear device, and in May 2009 it exploded a more powerful one. Nevertheless, although the regime has successfully tested nuclear devices, the extent to which this nuclear capacity has been or can be converted into a deployable weapons system or arsenal remains unknown. The acquisition of a nuclear capacity does not automatically equate to the capability to manufacture and deploy nuclear weapons. Throughout this period, the North Koreans have test fired a series of medium and long range missiles, causing alarm in both the US and in the Northeast Asian region.

The sporadic Six Party Talks between North Korea, South Korea, the US, China, Russia and Japan have produced no tangible results to date, and are unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future. As Yoichi Funabashi notes, the North Koreans seem intent on, and are adept at, stonewalling negotiations and appear to have no intention of reaching any agreement that would require them to verifiably abandon their nuclear weapons program.[11]

The North Koreans have long stated that they want to engage in bi-lateral talks with the US, with the objective of normalising diplomatic relations between the two nations and securing a peace treaty guaranteeing that the Americans will not attack North Korea.[12] However, in February 2009 the North Korean response to the clear messages from the Obama Administration that the US was willing to fully pursue diplomatic options with Pyongyang in exchange for North Korea's abandonment of its nuclear program, was to proceed with a second nuclear detonation in May 2009 and its latest round of missile tests.[13] Furthermore, in response to international condemnation and attempts to impose sanctions on Pyongyang following its nuclear test, North Korea threatened to no longer abide by the 1953 armistice that ended the Korean War. This statement was, however, consistent with the obfuscatory nature of the rhetoric that frequently emanates from Pyongyang and, despite the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong incidents, North Korea is extremely unlikely to launch a large scale strike against South Korea. South Korea never signed the 1953 armistice; nor has a peace treaty been signed, meaning the two Koreas are still technically at war.

The dividing line between North and South Korea, the so called De-Militarized Zone (DMZ), has seen many violent incidents in the 57 years since the end of the Korean

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War with deaths, including US personnel, on both sides. Of these confrontations, two clashes could have precipitated a wider conflict. The North Korean seizure of the *USS Pueblo* in January 1968 – the American crew were released after being held for eleven months – and the tree cutting incident in the DMZ in August 1976, which resulted in the killing of two US officers by North Korean soldiers. The sinking of the South Korean ship, *Cheonan*, by North Korea in March 2010 and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010, are the latest deadly incidents in the post-Korean War history of the peninsula. Nevertheless, both sides, fully aware of the devastating consequences, have managed to avoid the outbreak of another full scale conflict on the Korean peninsula to date. The highest concentration of military power on the globe today is situated at the DMZ, a sobering reminder to political leaders, policy makers, and commentators, of the on-going intractable repercussions of both the division of Korea in 1945 and the subsequent Korean War of 1950-53.[14]

Although North Korea's acquisition of a nuclear capability certainly has the potential to pose a very real security risk, should it succeed in enhancing its nuclear capacity to produce a deployable arsenal of weapons, it is unlikely that Pyongyang would consider a nuclear strike against anyone, given that the inevitable retribution from such an act would result in its complete destruction. While literature analysing North Korea's determination to acquire nuclear weapons abounds, the purpose here is to address the question of how to deal with the security threat Pyongyang poses at present. Whatever the regime's reasons for wanting to acquire nuclear weapons, North Korea now has a nuclear capacity, and although it remains unknown whether this capability has been or can be developed to produce nuclear weapons, the reasons why the world failed to prevent North Korea from acquiring a nuclear

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capability must be established. Nevertheless, such exercises should not be at the expense of developing viable and sustainable policies on how to deal with a nuclear North Korea. The authoritarian nature of the North Korean regime, the regimentation of its society, the tight controls on the lives of its people, and the parlous economic state of the nation, are well documented and must be factored into any policy making. Pyongyang does not provide for even the most basic needs of its people, yet uses its meagre resources to sustain its conventional military forces and develop its nuclear program.

Despite the intransigence of the North Korean regime throughout its history, the international community has no alternative but to continue to deal with Pyongyang even if rational argument deems the security threat – whether nuclear, conventional or terror-based – to be low. The international community has four broad options in dealing with the regime. It can seek to eliminate North Korea's nuclear capacity through diplomacy; it can attempt to contain Pyongyang by using economic and political means; it can use military force against the regime, accepting the inherent risks such action would entail; or it can accept North Korea as a nuclear state. How the international community responds will depend on which combination of these alternatives it decides to pursue.

Dealing with North Korea: Some Policy Options

In order to maximise the opportunity for any productive and sustainable results in its dealings with North Korea, the clarity of the policy objectives of the international community need to be paramount. If the goal of the international community is solely to ensure Pyongyang denuclearises, this will not eliminate the security threat posed

by the regime from terror or conventional means. Furthermore, although denuclearisation would lessen tensions on the Korean peninsula, it may be unattainable for at least two reasons. First, even if North Korea's nuclear sites are decommissioned, the regime would retain the nuclear research and knowledge it has acquired, meaning it could restart a nuclear program at any moment with little difficulty. Second, Pyongyang's nuclear capability is its only real bargaining card in its attempt to engage with its neighbours and the wider international community, both to secure the survival of the regime and to attract the international attention it wants and needs to break out of its largely self imposed isolation. Therefore, it is highly unlikely the regime will willingly surrender its nuclear capacity. As Carl Ungerer and Simon Smith have noted, 'Pyongyang, isolated, autarkic, paranoid and penniless, has just one trump card left in its hand—its nuclear and ballistic missile program. Giving it away would be strategic suicide—and the North Koreans aren't going to do that.'[15]

A non-nuclear North Korea would be relatively simple for the international community to ignore. Although the North Korean regime perceives the rest of the world as a threat to its survival, it can only break its isolation and secure the large scale economic aid it needs to improve the living standards of its people by engaging with the international community. This outlook could explain the regime's determination to possess a nuclear capacity, which is not necessary if its sole aim is to isolate itself from (and be left alone by) the international community. Pyongyang is undoubtedly aware of similar authoritarian and militaristic regimes in Africa, the Middle East and Asia such as Zimbabwe, Sudan and Burma, in which, similar to North Korea, the basic needs of people are ignored or can not be provided for, but that continue to be

largely ignored by the international community because they are not regarded as posing a security threat. While North Korea does not want its people to be connected with the global community because the inevitable flow of information would threaten the regime's survival by undermining its grip on the population, Pyongyang desperately needs foreign economic aid. Part of the rationale behind the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010, similar to its efforts to become a nuclear state, is that the regime wanted to bring North Korea's economic plight to the attention of the international community and to force it to engage with Pyongyang diplomatically.[16]

Contrary to the stereotypes frequently and broadly painted by the daily media, North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-il, and the ruling elite, are not demented individuals determined to launch nuclear Armageddon. Rather, North Korea's leadership is calculating and extremely ruthless, and fully cognizant of the precarious state of their country. Having enslaved its own people and isolated them from the rest of the world, this reactionary, Stalinist and nationalist regime has been unwilling and unable to adapt to an ever changing world, and now fears for its very survival. In addition during the 1990s, North Korea suffered a series of natural disasters, most notably the July 1995 flood, which largely destroyed its agricultural produce, further exacerbating the food shortages endured by its population. This compounded the dire economic situation brought about by decades of failed government policy. Thus, Pyongyang has neither the resources nor the will to embark on an expansionist foreign policy.[17]

The leadership question in Pyongyang, inextricably linked with Kim Jong-il's health,

has been a focal point of much of the commentary on North Korea. Whatever the reality about this may be, the international community will still have to deal with North Korea, irrespective of the identity of its leader. North Korea, after the Kim Jong-il era, will still possess a nuclear capacity and require large scale aid from the international community. Therefore, while attention focussed on Kim Jong-il and what might happen under his designated successor, Kim Jong-eun, is appropriate, it should not disproportionately distract the international community from addressing the intractability of the current issues in dealing with Pyongyang, which are unlikely to dramatically alter, at least in the short to medium term. For the moment, the international community will have to continue dealing with Kim Jong-il who, in an almost complete inverse of how the media caricatures generally depict him, has proven to be an elusive, shrewd and pragmatic operator.[18]

Similarly, the international community needs to continue trying to engage with the regime diplomatically. North Korea says it wants international legitimacy and this gives the regime's neighbours and the rest of the world some diplomatic room to manoeuvre. As noted, the regime also desperately needs large scale aid and considers its nuclear capacity to be its bargaining chip. The international community could test the sincerity of Pyongyang's claim by offering North Korea either a peace treaty and/or diplomatic recognition by the US, and humanitarian aid, in exchange for surrendering its nuclear program. Any aid would be conditional on delivery by international relief agencies that would be given access to the country so aid could be delivered directly to the people who need it, and would not end up in the hands of the regime. This is what happened with the international relief effort in the wake of the July 1995 flood, where Pyongyang allowed international relief agencies to have

direct access to the North Korean people. Drawing on the historical precedent, North Korea could also be offered energy and fuel aid similar to the terms of the 1994 Agreed Framework.[19]

Another diplomatic route to possibly lessening the security threat posed by North Korea could be for the US to consider abandoning its insistence on negotiating with North Korea through the Six Party format, which has yet to produce tangible results. For example, in exchange for North Korean concessions regarding their nuclear program, the US could offer the regime the direct bi-lateral talks that Pyongyang claims it wants. This option risks alienating South Korea and Japan, arousing the suspicions of China and Russia, and gives North Korea the flexibility of driving a wedge between its powerful neighbours and the Americans. Thus, even if the US abandons the Six Party formula, for bi-lateral talks to be successful future negotiations between the North Koreans and the Americans would likely have to involve South Korea and China at some level, while Russia and Japan would need to be kept fully briefed on proceedings. Regardless of the actual method employed, any such successful diplomatic offensive would require the US, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan to act in unison because Pyongyang will exploit any divisions among these powers, thus potentially derailing the process.[20]

By taking the diplomatic initiative, the international community would place the onus to respond positively firmly on North Korea. Yet even if Pyongyang responds positively, any attempt to persuade North Korea to relinquish its nuclear capacity through negotiation, is fraught with the difficulty of a lack of trust. Given North Korea's past behaviour, the international community has little reason to believe that

Pyongyang will honour any agreements it makes. Thus the risk that the situation could ultimately be exacerbated rather than relieved by any such agreement must be considered. Should North Korea violate any commitments by enhancing its nuclear capacity, any possibility for future negotiations would be severely compromised, and tensions on the Korean peninsula would escalate, thereby significantly increasing the probability of a military confrontation.

Another way of dealing with the North Korean security threat is for the US, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan to work in unison to enforce a punitive solution. Largely because of its isolation and economic state, North Korea has been virtually immune to normal international diplomatic and economic pressures. However, the containment of North Korea through diplomatic isolation, economic sanctions, and naval blockade is plausible and, with these nations working together, could result in real pressure being placed on the regime. Withholding all forms of aid to North Korea, and suspending diplomatic contact with Pyongyang until it verifiably dismantles its nuclear program, are two measures that could be implemented. However, the failure of any of these nations to work together would make it impossible to successfully implement a policy of containment.

Nevertheless, even if these powers succeed in working together, the viability and sustainability of such a policy regarding North Korea will still be tenuous. Given the demonstrated resilience of the regime, containment would have to be a long term strategy and even then, the probability of success is remote. The problem with such a strategy is that, confronted with containment, Pyongyang is not only unlikely to yield, but will become even more belligerent, and given the means at its disposal,

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could resort to terror against any targets it can reach. Whether the US, China, South Korea, Russia and Japan can agree to sustain a lengthy containment of North Korea, especially given the likely intransigence from Pyongyang, is also highly problematic. As Ungerer and Smith have stated: 'The reality of the Korean peninsula, and the principal reason why progress on both denuclearisation and reunification is unlikely, is that the status quo suits the strategic interests of all the major players.'[21]

Another disadvantage to the international community adopting a policy of containment is that it risks triggering a monumental humanitarian disaster among the already destitute North Korean people, and any prospect of resolving the nuclear dilemma would evaporate because Pyongyang would never negotiate under such circumstances. China and South Korea, especially, would be unlikely to accept such an outcome, given that they would have to bear most of the economic and humanitarian repercussions. Another great risk with adopting a policy of containment is that North Korea could collapse, and the resulting anarchy would have serious political and security, as well as humanitarian consequences for both the region and the wider world.[22]

A naval blockade of North Korea aimed at preventing the carriage of nuclear technology also comes with associated issues and risks. Questions about whether a blockade would apply only to ships leaving North Korea, or include ships importing goods into the country would also need to be resolved, while forcible searches of flagged North Korean ships suspected of carrying dubious cargoes could trigger violent clashes which could escalate into a larger military conflict. Furthermore, there are no guarantees that a naval blockade could enforce a total embargo on the export

ERAS

or import of nuclear technology. Thus, strategies of containment come with no guaranteed results and involve the acceptance of high levels of risk. The likelihood of extracting any concessions from Pyongyang through containment is remote, while risking a humanitarian catastrophe, and the increased likelihood of provocative incidents, any one of which could escalate into a major military confrontation.[23]

Any military attempt to deal with the North Korean nuclear threat would wreak such social and economic devastation in Northeast Asia that the international consequences of such action would reverberate for decades to come. Even so called 'surgical strikes' targeting suspected nuclear sites will likely solicit a North Korean response against South Korea and Japan, which will result in a full scale military conflict. Thus, while military action could destroy both North Korea and its nuclear program, the world would then have to deal with the consequences of massive social and economic devastation and dislocation. However, despite its aggressive language, the North Korean regime is fearful of provoking an armed conflict because, notwithstanding its formidable appearance, North Korea's military power is dwarfed by the American, South Korean and Japanese military muscle arrayed against it. The regime, which is primarily concerned with its own survival, is fully aware that any conflict with South Korea and Japan will also involve the US, and that such a scenario will result in the destruction of the North Korean state, no matter how much damage it manages to inflict on its neighbours.[24] Even if North Korea succeeds in enhancing its nuclear capacity and is able to build and deploy a nuclear arsenal, it can never use these weapons without precipitating its own destruction. For North Korea, its *potential* nuclear (and conventional) threat is much more powerful than its *actual* threat can ever be. North Korea's intransigence regarding its

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nuclear program may, in part, be based on a calculation that South Korea, Japan and, in particular, the US, will ultimately not resort to using military force to compel North Korea to yield because they do not want to provoke a potentially destructive conflict in North East Asia that would have global repercussions. North Korea is fully aware of its weakness *vis-a-vis* the US, South Korea and Japan, and it is therefore extremely unlikely that it will launch a full scale military strike against anyone. Similarly, any attempt by the international community to resolve the nuclear dilemma through military means, could result in such widespread destruction in North East Asia that it would have devastating long-term economic and social consequences worldwide.

Diplomacy offers the best possibility of minimising or perhaps resolving the North Korean security threat. To this end, the US, China, South Korea, Russia and Japan could offer to accept a nuclear North Korea and allow the regime to retain its nuclear capacity for civilian purposes, provided it agrees not to export its nuclear technology, halts attempts to weaponise its nuclear capacity, agrees to rejoin the NPT, and allows unrestricted IAEA inspections of its nuclear program to safeguard against diverting nuclear material for weapons production. The North Koreans could be given a non-negotiable deadline by which to respond to such an offer. North Korea may indeed aim to sell nuclear technology or weapons to other pariah states and terrorist organisations. However, the possibility that the regime may be opposed to nuclear proliferation on the grounds that an increase in the number of nuclear armed states and organisations would weaken Pyongyang’s nuclear bargaining card, cannot be discounted. In return for an affirmative response, North Korea could be offered ongoing humanitarian aid conditional to continued compliance with IAEA inspections.

The two key problems with this option, similar to diplomatic efforts, are the necessity for the US, China, South Korea, Russia and Japan to work in unison, and the issue of trust already discussed. Should Pyongyang violate any agreement it makes, the willingness of the international community to deal with the regime would be diminished, while the probability of a military confrontation would increase.

Accepting a nuclear North Korea may also open up the possibility of both South Korea and Japan going nuclear. Political elements in both countries pursuing this goal would use any move by the international community to accept a nuclear North Korea, no matter what the safeguards, as a justification for launching their own nuclear programs. Internal opposition to such a move in both countries combined with external pressure from the US, China and Russia would most likely prevent such an outcome, but the potential for South Korea and Japan going nuclear cannot be dismissed outright. Although not a perfect solution, continued diplomatic engagement with North Korea, based on accepting the regime's nuclear capacity under the conditions outlined above, may offer the best possibility of achieving sustainable stability on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia, while minimising the risk of a military confrontation.

The North Koreans have been masters at playing the great powers off against one another to extract what they want, as they did with the Soviets and Chinese during the Cold War, and, since the early 1990s, continue to do so with their powerful neighbours and the US.[25] According to Bob Woodward, a *Washington Post* Associate Editor, and author, in a briefing to then President-elect Barack Obama in November 2008, the then US Director of National Intelligence, Vice Admiral Michael

McConnell, gave the following assessment on dealing with North Korea: 'Attempts to negotiate with the regime would likely repeat the Bush administration's experience. It would be "negotiate, prevaricate, escalate and renegotiate" … The North Koreans would talk, they would lie, they would escalate and threaten to walk away, and then they would try to renegotiate.'[26] The sinking of the *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong in March and November 2010, respectively, and the diplomatic positioning of both sides in the aftermath of both these deadly incidents, reflect this conundrum. North Korea's attempt to seek talks with the US and South Korea in the wake of its shelling of Yeonpyeong, illustrates both McConnell's assessment of the repetitive pattern of Pyongyang's behaviour, and the frustrations and difficulties experienced by the great powers in their attempts to engage with the regime.[27]

Despite the ongoing tensions and frustrations emanating from the Korean peninsula, all sides recognise that diplomacy is essential for continued engagement and for any potential resolutions to the impasse regarding North Korea. Although the current South Korean President, Lee Myung-bak, has adopted a harder line than his two predecessors towards North Korea, South Korea has nevertheless continued to persist with its 'Sunshine Policy' of directly engaging with Pyongyang, which began over a decade ago under President Kim Dae Jung and was adhered to under President Roh Moo-hyun. South Korea has also continued to give economic aid to North Korea, and the two Koreas have allowed some reunions of families divided by the Korean War, the latest taking place *after* the sinking of the *Cheonan*. The US, China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea, have all continued to support the Six Party Talks format for negotiating with North Korea. If the intransigence that has characterized North Korea's relations with its powerful neighbours and the US

throughout its history is to be overcome, the great powers must forge a united and concerted effort in dealing with Pyongyang and deny the regime the option of profiting from the divisions among them.

The historical record strongly indicates there will be no rapid solution to the North Korean problem. An overall continuation of the status quo is the most plausible scenario regarding at least the immediate and medium term future on the Korean peninsula. Given the Korean peninsula is the one place on the globe where the interests of the US, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea converge, North Korea, with or without a nuclear capability, will remain a key strategic and security issue in international affairs for the foreseeable future. Each of the policy scenarios presented here are problematic and not very palatable because there are no good or easy options in dealing with North Korea.[28] Unless the US, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan are willing to co-operate closely, and North Korea is prepared to make some concessions and fully honour any agreements it makes, it is unlikely that North Korea will be disarmed of its nuclear capacity. Instead, as the history of the Korean peninsula since its division in 1945 strongly indicates, North Korea is in all probability, likely to remain an interminable and intractable problem for the foreseeable future.

Although North Korea's behaviour is totally contrary to its stated aim of wishing to normalise relations with the US and become a member of the international community, the hope and possibility that the security threat from Pyongyang can be minimised or resolved, remains. Given its largely self imposed economic predicament and isolation, the nuclear card is the regime's only bargaining tool.

North Korea is desperate for aid on a massive scale and is using fear of its nuclear program to attract attention and receive aid through coercion.[29] Despite its history of belligerence and intransigence, its use of terror, the size of its conventional armed forces, and its nuclear capacity, the current nature of the North Korean security threat is very limited. However, the options for removing the threat completely are also very narrow. Although military action could possibly neutralise North Korea's nuclear capability, this option would likely result in widespread devastation and have serious repercussions for decades. Attempts to contain the regime through diplomatic isolation, economic sanctions, and a naval blockade, are also unlikely to result in a non nuclear North Korea. A policy of containment would be very difficult to sustain, would largely impact on the already desperate economic plight of the North Korean people, would not result in a nuclear free regime, and would heighten the risk of a military confrontation. Although the US, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea have a mutual interest in pacifying tensions regarding North Korea, they have different strategic interests, making the level of co-operation necessary to ensure containment works difficult to attain.[30] The best hope for a peaceful and sustainable solution is for the international community, especially North Korea's neighbours, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan, along with the US, to make a concerted and ongoing effort to diplomatically engage with Pyongyang, even if it means accepting a nuclear North Korea, provided the regime is prepared to unconditionally comply with IAEA stipulations. Although not ideal, this may be the best option for engaging with North Korea and minimising the possibility of a military confrontation.

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[2] Max Hastings, *The Korean War*, Michael Joseph, London, 1987, is a good military history of the war, and William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995, provides an excellent international political and diplomatic history of the war. Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*, Norton & Company, New York & London, 1997, is a detailed history of modern Korea.

[3] Charles Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2003; Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty*, Thomas Dunne Books, New York, 2006; Willy Lam, 'Beijing won't rein in reckless neighbour', *Asia Times*, December 9, 2010, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/printN.html

[4] Carl Ungerer and Simon Smith, 'Australia and South Korea: Middle power cooperation and Asian security', Strategic Insights, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, October 2010, p. 8; Joseph Bermudez, *The Armed Forces of North Korea*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2001.

[5] Carl Ungerer and Simon Smith, 'Australia and South Korea: Middle power cooperation and Asian security', p. 8.

[6] Andray Abrahamian, 'Pyongyang stretches deterrence limits', *Asia Times*, December 8, 2010, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/printN.html; Donald Kirk, 'North Korean shells aim to shock', *Asia Times*, November 24, 2010, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/printN.html

[7] Joseph Bermudez, *Terrorism: The North Korean Connection*, Taylor & Francis, New York, 1990; Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, Warner Books, London, 1999.

[8] Balazs Szalontai and Sergey Radchenko, 'North Korea's Efforts to Acquire Nuclear Technology and Nuclear Weapons: Evidence from Russian and Hungarian Archives', *Cold War International History Project*, Working Paper 53, 2006, www.cwihp.org; Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*.

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[10] Tim Beal, *North Korea: The Struggle Against American Power*, Pluto Press, London, 2005; Yoichi Funabashi, *The Peninsula Question: A Chronicle of the Second Korean Nuclear Crisis*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, 2007.

[11] Yoichi Funabashi, *The Peninsula Question*.

[12] Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 2004; Selig Harrison, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2003.

[13] Hillary Clinton, 'U.S. – Asia Relations: Indispensable to Our Future', Remarks at the Asia Society, New York, February 13, 2009, www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/02/117333.htm.

[14] Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*.

[15] Carl Ungerer and Simon Smith, 'Australia and South Korea: Middle power cooperation and Asian security', p. 11.

[16] Peter Lee, 'Dear Leader's designs on Uncle Sam', *Asia Times*, December 4, 2010, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/printN.html; Willy Lam, 'Beijing won't rein in reckless neighbour'; Donald Kirk, 'North Korean shells aim to shock'; Adrian Buzo, *The Guerrilla Dynasty: Politics and Leadership in North Korea*, Allen and Unwin, St. Leonards, 1999; Andrei Lankov, 'Changing North Korea: An Information Campaign Can Beat the Regime', *Foreign Affairs*, 88, 6, November/December 2009, pp. 95-105.

[17] Adrian Buzo, *The Guerrilla Dynasty*; Bruce Cumings, *North Korea*; Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*; Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*.

[18] Bruce Cumings, *North Korea*; Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*.

[19] The US and North Korea negotiated and signed the 1994 Agreed Framework in the wake of the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1993-94. Under the terms of the Agreed Framework, the US, South Korea and Japan agreed to supply energy and fuel aid to North Korea. In turn, Pyongyang agreed to freeze its nuclear program and to allow IAEA inspections of its nuclear facilities. Neither side fully abided by the terms of the agreement which ended in October 2002 when the North Koreans confirmed they had surreptitiously continued with their nuclear program and would no longer allow IAEA inspections. This precipitated the second North Korean nuclear crisis.

[20] Given the strategic importance of the Korean peninsula to the US, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan, it is extremely unlikely any tangible settlement regarding North Korea could be reached

without the involvement of all these powers, irrespective of how many (or few) may be sitting at a negotiating table in the future. See Carl Ungerer and Simon Smith, 'Australia and South Korea: Middle power cooperation and Asian security', pp. 10-11; Peter Lee, 'Dear Leader's designs on Uncle Sam'.

[21] Carl Ungerer and Simon Smith, 'Australia and South Korea: Middle power cooperation and Asian security', p. 11.

[22] Andray Abrahamian, 'Pyongyang stretches deterrence limits'; Carl Ungerer and Simon Smith, 'Australia and South Korea: Middle power cooperation and Asian security', pp. 10-11.

[23] Andray Abrahamian, 'Pyongyang stretches deterrence limits'; Carl Ungerer and Simon Smith, 'Australia and South Korea: Middle power cooperation and Asian security', pp. 10-11.

[24] Willy Lam, 'Beijing won't rein in reckless neighbour'; Peter Lee, 'Dear Leader's designs on Uncle Sam'.

[25] Bruce Cumings, *North Korea*; Selig Harrison, *Korean Endgame*.

[26] Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2010, p. 9.

[27] Sunny Lee, 'Bang! Now let's talk', *Asia Times*, November 24, 2010, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/printN.html; Donald Kirk, 'North Korean shells aim to shock'.

[28] Rod Lyon, 'North Korea: The Reverberations of 25 May', *Policy Analysis, Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 2009, www.aspi.com.au; Rod Lyon and Keah Molomby, 'North Korea: Sliding Towards the Abyss', *Strategic Insights*, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 2009, www.aspi.com.au; Andrei Lankov, 'Changing North Korea: An Information Campaign Can Beat the Regime'.

[29] Carl Ungerer and Simon Smith, 'Australia and South Korea: Middle power cooperation and Asian security', p. 11; Peter Lee, 'Dear Leader's designs on Uncle Sam'; Willy Lam, 'Beijing won't rein in reckless neighbour'.

[30] Carl Ungerer and Simon Smith, 'Australia and South Korea: Middle power cooperation and Asian security', p. 11.