

# Nuclear North Korea: How Will It Behave?

ROBERT CARLIN  
ROBERT JERVIS

OCTOBER 2015



NORTH KOREA'S  
NUCLEAR FUTURES SERIES

US-KOREA INSTITUTE AT SAIS

**Robert Carlin** is a Visiting Scholar at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University, and served as chief of the Northeast Asia Division in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, US Department of State from 1989-2002. During much of that period, he also served as Senior Policy Advisor to the Special Ambassador for talks with North Korea, and took part in all phases of US-DPRK negotiations from 1992-2000. From both in and out of government, he has been following North Korea since 1974 and has made over 30 trips there. He recently revised and updated Don Oberdorfer's classic contemporary history *The Two Koreas*.

**Robert Jervis** is the Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics and has been a member of the Columbia political science department since 1980. He has also held professorial appointments at the University of California at Los Angeles (1974-1980) and Harvard University (1968-1974). In 2000-2001, he served as President of the American Political Science Association. Professor Jervis is co-editor of the "Cornell Studies in Security Affairs," a series published by Cornell University Press, and a member of numerous editorial review boards for scholarly journals. His publications include *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era*, and *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Fall of the Shah and Iraqi WMD*, and several edited volumes and numerous articles in scholarly journals. He received his Ph.D. from California at Berkeley in 1968.

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## NUCLEAR NORTH KOREA: HOW WILL IT BEHAVE?

### Introduction

Much of the academic literature and, so it seems, policy thinking about proliferation makes the simple distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear states. Indeed, this distinction is enshrined in the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). But, of course, it is clear that while there is a nuclear threshold, not all states that have crossed it are equal, and it is hardly counterintuitive to suggest that the quantity and quality of states' arsenals (and such vital accoutrements as reliability of delivery systems, warning systems, command and control arrangements, second-strike survivability, and final release authority) are likely to affect their behavior or the behavior of others toward them.

North Korea may already have 10 to 16 nuclear weapons and delivery systems, putting all of South Korea and much of Japan within range. It may have had something close to that capability since at least 2010. In that case, it is worthwhile to begin this paper by asking whether we have seen any changes since then in North Korea's posture or actions that may stem from having this arsenal.

At this point, the short answer is no. Apart from bolder rhetoric and more threatening propaganda, there has been very little in the way of unusual or enhanced aggressive action over the past five years. What have been labeled "provocations" consist almost entirely of North Korean test launches, possibly improving capabilities but by themselves posing no immediate threat nor necessitating a military response.<sup>1</sup> A nuclear test in 2013—the North's third, and widely considered its most successful to date—was an unwelcome development, but even that was not in itself a provocation or an act of aggression.

The one exception during this period is the Korean People's Army (KPA) shelling of a South Korean-held island in Korea's West Sea in November 2010. This might be seen as a risky probe to gauge the US-ROK response to a new situation in which the North possessed nuclear weapons. Given that North Korea quickly backed away in classic style from the confrontation it set off, however, it is difficult to attribute this highly unusual DPRK military action against the South solely or even in part to the possession of nuclear weapons. It seems more likely that it

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<sup>1</sup> "Provocation" would seem to mean something one side has done to goad the other side to react—most likely even overreact. But in the North Korean context, this is not usually what is meant, but rather that the action is typical of a "rogue" state in that it is: a) beyond the scope of normal state behavior and a violation of norms and law; and/or b) doesn't seem to make a lot of sense to us because it does not appear to contribute to reaching the goals we attribute to them.

was connected with internal North Korean dynamics at the time, possibly a move by Kim Jong Un—at that point his father’s chosen successor—to prove himself tough and capable.

The DPRK’s nuclear arsenal will almost certainly grow over the next five years, and delivery capabilities are likely to improve. What concerns most observers is the possibility of increasingly reckless North Korean behavior—i.e., dangerous action as opposed to simply heightened rhetoric. The implicit assumption driving this concern seems to be that the North has been a coiled snake waiting for its opportunity to strike.

There are reasonable estimates that by 2020 the North could have anywhere from 20 to 100 nuclear weapons, almost certainly with short-range delivery systems, possibly with medium-range capability, and, in the worst case, with intercontinental capability.

- Low scenario—20 weapons (mostly short- and medium-range)
- Medium scenario—50 weapons (tactical and strategic)
- Large scenario—100 weapons (tactical and strategic, some intercontinental ballistic missiles and intermediate-range ballistic missiles)

It seems to us that none of these scenarios are likely to change North Korea’s strategic vision. The regime does not have regional ambitions, and possession of nuclear weapons in any number is unlikely to change that. Comparisons between North Korea and Hitler’s Germany in this respect have always been wide of the mark. The most likely scenario over the next five years, in our view, is for Pyongyang to remain tightly focused on its domestic situation, especially on its economy, and on ways to loosen or blunt the pressures from its neighbors and the United States.

That still leaves a core concern that the North could launch an effort to achieve the country’s reunification, similar to what it did in June 1950. Feeding such concerns is that under Kim Jong Un there has been a revival of long-dormant, provocative rhetoric about “the great revolutionary event of national reunification,” language that reinforces the widespread perception by outside observers that Kim is erratic if not irrational. Nevertheless, so far the preponderance of evidence is that the practical changes to the North’s approach to reunification that began in the 1980s, including a change in the definition of reunification to allow for the existence of two Korean governments, remain in place. Circumstances could unleash a decision (on either side) to lunge for solution of the unification question, and recent ROK statements making it clear that Seoul is aiming at a one-state solution may enhance concerns in Pyongyang that its back is closer to the wall in a crisis than it actually is. In that case, we could well enter the danger zone of North Korean fatalism, in which a decision to use nuclear weapons, especially against Japan—the historic enemy—would rise on the list of “patriotic” options. Similarly, if things go wrong (serious domestic disruption, grave economic downturn, pressing external threats to the regime), it will be time to worry that the leadership might become (as Koreans are wont to do) fatalistic and decide that death with “glory” is preferable to defeat.



### Insights—or Arguments—from Other Cases

North Korea's behavior, of course, may be unusual, if not unique, but looking to theory and the history of nuclear deterrence to get questions, if not answers, is still worthwhile. Of course neither the theory nor the history, especially of the Cold War, is undisputed, and the relationship between the two is unclear. If the theory is valid, it presumably tracks with historical experience. But both have enough wiggle room to make such a comparison difficult. Furthermore, to the extent that the two converge, it is at least possible that theory has influenced history as well as been influenced by it. That is, most of the American work on deterrence is based on arguments pioneered by Thomas Schelling. But even if his theories describe much of American behavior in the last 30 years of the Cold War, it is possible that they do so because American leaders were influenced by Schelling's writings, directly in the case of John F. Kennedy (who read Schelling's memos) or indirectly in the case of Richard Nixon (who espoused what he called his "mad man theory," which is a crude name for Schelling's "rationality of irrationality").

Nevertheless, it is worth reminding ourselves of some of the basic claims made and questions raised by deterrence theory. Perhaps the most basic one is whether nuclear weapons can do more than protect the homeland. Put differently, how much of a shadow do nuclear weapons cast? Can nuclear weapons provide an umbrella over allies—what is called "extended deterrence"? If so, how is this possible? What conditions enable it, and what policies does it require? These questions were central to American policy in the Cold War, and it is at least arguable that the United States fought in Korea and Vietnam not because this was required by either their intrinsic importance or by the imperatives of domestic politics, but because it was believed that failing to do so would badly undercut the American threat to fight if the Soviet Union invaded Western Europe.

Another question was whether a forthright policy of deterrence actually made things worse by leading to unnecessary spirals of hostility and arms buildups. Much of this argument, which at first glance seems to be between two competing general theories, in fact turns on diagnosis of the adversary's motives and intentions—i.e., whether the other is driven primarily by a desire for security or whether it is willing to run significant risks to expand.<sup>2</sup> As we will see later, this question is relevant for how we might expect North Korea to behave as its nuclear arsenal increases.

Much of deterrence theory is built on game theory, at least in general terms. What is particularly interesting in the context of US-DRPK relations is that game theory assumes that both sides (and of course interactions involving North Korea involve more than two parties since the whole region is involved) share many expectations and beliefs about how the world works, or at least have a well-grounded understanding of how the other will respond. During the Cold War (and not only during that period) the United States believed its view was objectively correct, and at many points, most strikingly during the 1967 Glassboro Summit and during the first phases of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) negotiations, spent considerable effort to persuade the Soviet Union of the validity of American deterrence theory.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), Chapter 3.

It is unclear, to say the least, whether North Korea and the United States understand deterrence in the same way. As is frequently the case, the North Koreans may understand more about US thinking than the other way around. DPRK propaganda generally makes it look as if North Koreans have a completely distorted sense of events, and no connection with what is considered a “normal” understanding of the world. Yet experience has shown that certainly at the working level in the party and at least some of the ministries, North Korean officials read and study much more than just the daily propaganda or the works of their leadership. They are expected to understand their field and, when applicable, the enemy’s thinking. In that case, it would be surprising if key working-level officials were not familiar with US deterrence theory. How far up the chain such understanding reaches is another matter. Figuring out ways to feed into internal discussions ideas that may not fit with the views of senior leadership is a constant problem in the North Korean system.

### **Basic Questions about North Korea’s Future Behavior**

There are three key questions to consider in examining how Pyongyang might behave with a growing arsenal of nuclear weapons.

- Will possession of a larger arsenal of deliverable nuclear weapons change the North’s propensity to engage in behaviors that could trigger a confrontation?
- Will possession of a larger arsenal of deliverable nuclear weapons change the North’s behavior during a confrontation, whatever its origins?
- Will possession of such a capability cause the North to reexamine and change its overall strategy and goals, i.e., will deterrence theory as understood by the United States and others become central to Pyongyang’s thinking, or will it discard such concepts entirely for a new, dangerous, and essentially destabilizing approach?

Although there are points at which these issues overlap, in fact they are separate problems—the first having to do with a possible change in Pyongyang’s mindset, the second one with tactical decisions in the midst of an evolving confrontation, and the final one with strategic planning. What ties these questions together is that lurking underneath all of them are the bad dreams of nuclear planners: Will possession of a credible arsenal (say 20 or more weapons) lead to an adversary’s increased self-confidence? Overconfidence? Miscalculation?

As for the more tactical, behavioral issues, there is some limited evidence that countries behave more recklessly soon after they acquire nuclear weapons but after a while settle down to less obstreperous behavior.<sup>3</sup> For example, shortly after the Soviet Union first tested a nuclear weapon in 1949, Stalin authorized Kim Il Sung to attack South Korea. For the Australian scholar Michael Cohen, the crucial mechanism is learning from the first major crisis that such states face, often brought about by their initial overestimate of how much nuclear weapons can get them and how

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Horowitz, “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons and International Conflict: Does Experience Matter?” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 2, April 2009: 234–57; Michael Cohen, *The Psychology of Nuclear Crises: When Proliferation Causes Peace*, forthcoming.

easy nuclear crises will be to control. In this model, the fear generated by a confrontation is a sharp and powerful learning experience.

For Michael Horowitz, the mechanisms are more general and more gradual, and can include the accumulation of experience and internal thinking about the role of nuclear weapons. Neither of these investigations focuses directly on changes in the states' arsenals, however. Furthermore, both are subject to dispute (this is hardly surprising). Consider, for instance, Pakistan's dangerous adventure in challenging India in the Kargil region of Kashmir in 1999, which brought the countries to the brink of major war. Did that experience make Pakistan (or India) more cautious?<sup>4</sup>

It is also not clear how applicable Horowitz's observation is to North Korea. Over several decades the North has been through numerous sharp confrontations with the United States and in the process has seemingly perfected the art of carefully navigating these situations. In fact, the North's most sustained reckless phase (1966–70) was well before it possessed nuclear weapons and still believed itself highly vulnerable to a nuclear strike by the United States. The North's aggressive posture in those years was based on leadership decisions made in context of the Sino-Soviet split, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and deepening US involvement in the Vietnam War. The best-known consequences were the Blue House raid and the USS *Pueblo* incident (1968), the EC-121 shootdown (1969), and numerous artillery battles along the military demarcation line throughout that period. These were highly destabilizing actions, and the fact that such provocative, overt risk taking was sustained over a period of several years made the situation extremely volatile. This sort of behavior on the part of Pyongyang has not been the norm, however, and in fact has been quite rare over the past 40 years.

Recently, as noted above, the only really “reckless” act in the past five years was the Yeonpyeong Island incident (November 2010), which was a direct, open and carefully planned attack on ROK soil. Going back further, there have been number of smaller confrontations (such as the August 1976 ax incident) or off-peninsula terrorist actions (as in Rangoon in October 1983 and Korean Air flight 858, November 1987), but it is difficult to see how possession of nuclear weapons would have significantly changed either the North's initial acts or its subsequent behavior in these episodes.

A number of North-South naval clashes in the West Sea have occurred (1999, 2002 and 2009) but these were, in effect, tactically bounded and, again, the first two of these clashes occurred without reference to possession of nuclear weapons. Similarly, the North's sinking of a South Korean naval vessel (March 2010) was carried out clandestinely and meant to be deniable. It had no larger strategic purpose and is probably best explained as an extension of the long-running inter-Korean dispute in the West Sea. As such, there is no reason to believe that possession of nuclear weapons had any bearing on the decision to undertake that operation. Similarly, the North's cyberattack on Sony Pictures in late 2014 would appear to have everything to do with the perceived need to take revenge against a movie that depicted the assassination of Kim Jong Un. The Sony hack was a function of the North's cyberwarfare capabilities rather than its nuclear arsenal.

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<sup>4</sup> For a good treatment, see Peter Lavoy, ed., *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

The reason for this brief review of the clashes and confrontations over the past several decades is to make the point—one that many North Korea analysts accept—that the DPRK does not behave irrationally but rather with cold, meticulous calculation. In that regard, and to reiterate a key assertion, the North Koreans already have considerable experience dancing on the edge of crisis. Their longstanding practice is to take things only so far before stepping back. That approach was well illustrated in the most recent 2015 crisis, as an exchange of artillery fire and readiness levels increased dramatically on the front lines of both sides along the demilitarized zone. After the crisis, Kim Jong Un claimed that the North's possession of nuclear weapons is what helped bring the situation to a peaceful resolution, but in fact there was no reference at all to the nuclear arsenal during the crisis and no evidence that either Pyongyang or Seoul considered it in play.

The immediate question to ask, therefore, is not whether possession of nuclear weapons will intensify what has been labeled by many as reckless moves (perhaps not so reckless in the North's eyes since it has inevitably emerged from them relatively unscathed), but will it cause Pyongyang to recalculate where the margins are, and thus entice the leadership to imagine it can afford to resist more firmly or push harder against a US or ROK response. In other words, will the North believe that a larger arsenal provides a nuclear shield that will enable it to act more boldly because its adversaries will be deterred from responding strongly? During the Cold War, analysts talked about the “stability-instability paradox” whereby a mutual second-strike capability was posited to permit the state with local conventional advantages to act with impunity. Needless to say, this argument was rejected by many experts and indeed was a major fault line dividing the schools of thought about American nuclear posture in the 1970s and 1980s. It will probably be a similar source of contention in discussions about the Korean situation.

Perhaps the most likely next confrontation between the two Koreas will take place between their navies in the West Sea. Such a clash could conceivably escalate into something more serious, up to and including North Korean threats to use nuclear weapons if the ROK were to launch retaliatory strikes at targets on the North Korean mainland. However, the long history of the North's behavior in confrontations suggests that a break in the normal pattern is unlikely except in the most unusual (and so far, untraveled) circumstances. It is important to bear in mind that the devastation and casualties the North suffered during the Korean War are still part of the country's collective memory, and while there is always the danger of leadership miscalculation, we doubt the specter of another decade or more of emerging from the rubble of war will be easily dismissed, even by a young leader who himself has experienced none of that.

It is hard to imagine North Korea's leaders using nuclear weapons unless they felt that the regime itself was in grave danger of being ousted, most obviously by a conventional war being waged by the United States and South Korea. This highlights a point that was made by Schelling more than 50 years ago but that too often has been lost sight of: that deterrence and the broader policy of coercion can work only if threats are paired with credible promises to refrain from taking particular actions if the other side complies. Much theory and most policy discussion focus on making threats credible, but in the event of fighting on the Korean peninsula it would be vital for the United States to convince the North that it was not seeking regime change. How to make such a promise credible is a very great challenge, to say the least, especially given that

both Seoul and Washington in recent years have made little attempt to hide the idea that regime change would, indeed, be their goal.

A separate but still major concern is whether possession of a sizable arsenal of nuclear weapons might change North Korea's overall goals, and if so, how. Perhaps that question needs to be refined—how might possession of nuclear weapons change its goals/posture/approach not overall but in particular ways toward particular countries?

Pyongyang's estimates of what the traffic can bear—and what it might accomplish—has historically differed depending on the target. One can imagine that such a differential calculus would remain true and that Pyongyang would judge that it had more ability to maneuver with Japan or even the ROK once it has a larger nuclear arsenal even while still seeking to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States. In other words, Pyongyang could adopt a tougher posture vis-à-vis Seoul and Tokyo, believing that the US nuclear umbrella had become less credible in those capitals, and thus the psychological space for North Korean threats to be effective had expanded. On the one hand, the North may decide against pushing too hard for fear that it might drive Japan into going nuclear. On the other hand, Pyongyang might also calculate that signs of Japan going nuclear would put tremendous strains on the US-Japan alliance and would cause China to stiffen even more its posture against Tokyo. The North could also calculate that a nuclear-armed Japan would raise a considerable outcry in South Korea and might make the North's nuclear capabilities seem more like the “Korean” bomb it has been trying to portray.

Outsiders have never done a good job understanding the interplay among the domestic political, economic and security considerations in Pyongyang's calculations. From 1994 to 2001, the North froze its production facilities at Yongbyon, in effect putting a major component of the weapons program on hold, and even allowed the condition of those facilities to seriously deteriorate. Kim Jong Il, instead, concentrated on his central strategic goal—improving relations with the United States—and, beginning in 2000, on improving the economy. There is some evidence that Kim Jong Un may be as concerned with improving the economy as he is with achieving credible status as a nuclear weapons state, and that his strategy and calculations may be as focused as much on the former as the latter.

### **Effects of a Larger Arsenal**

A larger arsenal with more types of delivery systems will inevitably lead to an expansion of perceived military options—not only (or even necessarily) for aggressive action but rather to defend in case of attack. Will that make the North more assured and thus less hostile? This equation never completely worked with the USSR, nor does it work with China today. Possession of an assured retaliatory capability does seem to provide time and space for more rational planning and decision making. Even so, there were a few close calls in the US-Soviet context, and in view of the extreme suspicion that fogs thinking in both Pyongyang and Washington about the other, misperception on the US side combined with imperfect command and control on the North Korean side could be a disastrous mix. It is worth noting that there were far fewer Soviet-American confrontations after the USSR attained secure second-strike capability than was true in the earlier period, although there are vigorous debates about whether this was a cause-and-effect relationship. We should also note that even a large arsenal does not automatically produce

a secure second-strike capability—the weapons have to be able to survive a first strike and to be accompanied by survivable delivery vehicles and command and control systems.

The North Koreans see themselves as small, weak and put upon. They may talk big, but that is largely a function of how embattled they perceive themselves to be. They are, as one ROK official who had long experience dealing with them said, poor but proud. They are also intensely pragmatic and non-ideological, certainly when it comes to foreign and security policies. They are not driven by a need to adhere to (or even to be seen as adhering to) ideological principles. None of the organizing principles of recent years—*juche* (self-reliance), *songun* (military first) or even Kimilsungism (the ideology and system of power propagated by Kim Il Sung, grandfather of the current leader)—is an overarching ideological system against which all action must be measured all the time. The dynamics of the North Korean system lead to many of the excesses that we see, but there is also an internal policy process—one we don't see but of which we have had more than glimpses over the years—that acts to keep foreign and security policy on relatively realistic and consistent footing.

It would be folly at this point to dismiss the possibility that possession of an arsenal of nuclear weapons could lead to a decisive break with the past or a roll of the dice on Pyongyang's part. But this paper is not an exercise in mind reading. We do not think it is beside the point to note that of the eight countries that have developed nuclear arsenals, none has so far decisively altered its fundamental calculations or stepped beyond the bounds of rational action. As noted, there is a long track record that suggests there are normal limits in North Korean actions and risk taking, and we do not believe there is any reason at this point to expect that North Korea would be the exception to the example set by other nuclear states.

So far, no country that has acquired nuclear weapons has become truly reckless. Nevertheless, possession of nuclear weapons has a deterrent effect and provides for an expanded list of options in situations that are perceived as threatening a state's core interests. The Soviet Union could move into Hungary and Czechoslovakia in part because it had some confidence that the United States would recognize the dangers of intervening. Having nuclear weapons did not change the imperative to deal with those developments, but it did give Moscow greater confidence that it was less likely to be risking a major American response. It is not too much to assume that when Pyongyang perceives its core national security interests are at risk, it will similarly move to protect them—not because it has nuclear weapons but because it can do so probably with a measure of greater confidence that any American response will be tempered.

Most countries that acquire nuclear weapons increase their forces fairly rapidly. A contrasting case is China, which until recently held to a small arsenal. This was contrary to what most experts expected. An interesting kind of counterfactual would be to imagine that China's arsenal had increased, but its behavior had remained the same and ask whether we would attribute any of China's behavior over the past 40 years or so to a growing arsenal. That is, because a state's nuclear posture is so salient to us, we may attribute its behavior to this even when other causes are at work. We cannot rule out that Pyongyang also has a Goldilocks number in mind for the right size of its nuclear arsenal. That number may be relatively small, i.e., well below the large, truly worst-case projections of 100 weapons by 2020. The ultimate size of the arsenal will help

shape the North's options and, presumably, signal something about Pyongyang's understanding of the utility of its nuclear force.

It is true that changes in both behavior and the stockpile could reflect national ambitions and power. That is, an obvious reason for a country to increase its arsenal is that it wants to throw its weight around. The implication of this is that limiting growth in arsenal sizes may be difficult without being able to make fundamental changes in the others' motives and capabilities. As Siegfried Hecker recently stated, "The more they [the North Koreans] believe they have a fully functional nuclear arsenal and deterrent, the more difficult it's going to be to walk them back from that."<sup>5</sup>

This does not tell us how North Korean behavior will change, but it is probably correct that an increasing stockpile both indicates a strong commitment to remain a nuclear power and builds bureaucratic and domestic interests that are likely to maintain a program, and indeed move it further to the forefront. In the extreme, of course, this observation is reflected in the argument that the only way to end North Korea's nuclear program is to change the regime, a view that looks more accurate the longer the North possesses nuclear weapons and the larger its arsenal grows. Whether or not this is a sensible goal is a separate question.

However, focusing too tightly on the size of the North's nuclear arsenal may be somewhat dangerous in its own right. The problem of mistaking capacity for intent is an old one and has reared its head in many places. For example, often overlooked is that the North has explicitly linked its nuclear weapons program to efforts at reviving the economy. That should raise questions about whether there is a subtle trade-off in the leadership's mind between the two goals—building a nuclear arsenal and enabling economic success. Our own concentration on the North's nuclear arsenal may cause us to imagine that Pyongyang is equally focused. The result could be that we might miss the possibility that the possession of nuclear weapons will not be the sole (or even the dominant) variable shaping Pyongyang's strategic decisions even after its arsenal grows. This problem with our misperceptions triggering a reaction we hope to avoid is unfortunately too common in dealings with North Korea. If we think the nuclear component has become the most dominant factor in the North's behavior and act to counter it, our actions may, in turn, spark a response from the North that we otherwise would not see. Mitigating against such a negative action-reaction spiral, the United States has considerable experience dealing with the psychological dangers arising in situations in which both parties are armed with nuclear weapons.

Even if we can associate growing nuclear capability with changes in behavior, the causation involved may be more complex. This probably matters more for academic analysis than for policy reasons. Still, it would be interesting (if very difficult) to try to separate changes stemming from internal impulses from those generated by the changed environment, especially changes in the behavior of others, including those stemming from their beliefs about the changes in the state's stockpile.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Jeremy Page and Jay Solomon, "China Warns North Korean Nuclear Threat Is Rising," *Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 2015.

There is also the question of personal style. Kim Jong Un's style is quite different from his father's, though it is not yet clear (three and a half years into his reign) that this has translated into significant differences in North Korean behavior. Kim Jong Un is to some extent less subtle (or supple) in his reaction to perceived slights and challenges. If the ROK (or US) president says something Kim considers provocative or insulting, he makes sure to order a response in kind. He does not turn the other cheek, but so far it does not appear that he lets these episodes throw him completely off track.

It is also possible that in some cases an arsenal grows more or less by inertia or through bureaucratic desires (e.g., the cases of the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s) and that despite the lack of strong international political motives, changes in behavior still follow. In other words, once an arsenal grows, decision makers find political uses for it. There is clearly no reason to rule out this dynamic in the case of North Korea, just as, at this point, there is no reason to rule out the possibility that Pyongyang already has in mind a Goldilocks number of weapons.

At minimum, the capacity to increase the arsenal could well lead to a form of bootstrapping in terms of requirements for target coverage that we saw in the US case. The demand for greater target coverage leads to building more weapons, but then at some point the arsenal grows even larger and eager military planners are quick to find new targets and kinds of targets that should be covered. This, in turn, leads to "requirements" for even more weapons. Whether this prompts changes in foreign policy behavior, however, is less clear.

These processes complicate our attempt to answer the question of what the increase in a state's arsenal tells us about its plans, motives and views of the world. For example, although most of us find the pace of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program alarming, it is hard to determine what this tells us about Pakistan and its political objectives. To turn this around, it is hard to infer how North Korean behavior will change from the fact that it is increasing its stockpile.

Indeed, it remains possible that Pyongyang's foreign policy will become more aggressive, or at least more assertive. Yet a larger and more secure arsenal can also increase the state's security and lead it to behave in a more restrained way. Weak powers sometimes behave most obstreperously when they feel weakest and most subject to external pressure, and Jervis has argued in the context of Soviet-American relations that if countries are driven by fear they may behave better when they have retaliatory forces that allow them to feel more secure.<sup>6</sup>

### **Spillover Onto Diplomacy**

Thinking about North Korean behavior naturally gravitates to questions of when or whether the DPRK will decide to use nuclear weapons, either physically or as a means of coercion. We would add another possibility: that possession of a nuclear arsenal will, in more subtle ways, affect Pyongyang's approach to negotiations—both in deciding what should be on the table, and how it should be discussed. Given the North's view of its perilous place in the world, we doubt that the end result will be Pyongyang believing its nuclear arsenal gives it direct leverage to pry

<sup>6</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War* (Norton, 2006); Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, Chapter 3.



out solutions it would not otherwise achieve in talks. Rather, we think it more likely that the brittleness of what up to now has been the North Korean style and approach to talks—that is, highly defensive and reactive—will be replaced by something with more ballast, in other words, something along the lines of increased self-confidence that was previously noted as a by-product of having nuclear weapons.

So far there is little to examine to see what course this self-confidence might take in the diplomatic arena. Since February 2011, there has been essentially no real engagement with the North by either the US or South Korea. One could argue that Pyongyang's failure to engage is a function of newfound confidence and that now, with possession of nuclear weapons, it can afford to play hard to get. A careful look at the situation as it has evolved over the past four years supports such a conclusion. There is no doubt those in Pyongyang gladly use the time without negotiations to further develop the numbers, sophistication and delivery means for the nuclear arsenal. We cannot know if we are in a rapidly diminishing period of opportunity, when North Korean attachment to nuclear weapons is not yet set in stone, whatever its public posture.

In early 2013, the North suggested that the question of its nuclear weapons program was off the table. In June of that same year, however, it reversed itself and signaled that the nuclear question was up for discussion, though exactly what was meant by that remained to be seen. Since then, despite frequent reiteration of the propaganda line that nuclear weapons are not a bargaining chip, Pyongyang has kept the door open to discussions on the issue of its nuclear weapons.

The issue of international concerns about the state of human rights in North Korea provides an interesting case in point. Rather than being more threatening or even more obdurate, when the human rights issue blew up earlier this year, the DPRK position was to offer to talk about it and hint broadly at the possibility of concessions. Whether these were real or imagined is not the point, nor is the likelihood that these were tactical measures in hopes of diffusing the situation. The point is, possession of nuclear weapons did not alter normal patterns of DPRK diplomatic behavior.

Similarly, in January 2015, Pyongyang put an offer on the table that symbolically laid out terms of trade for steps potentially limiting its nuclear program. Specifically, Pyongyang offered to trade a temporary halt to US-ROK joint military exercises in return for a freeze on nuclear testing. Again, this position was not tougher or even more provocative. Quite the opposite, it was one that, at least on the surface, appeared to open the door to exploring ways to address the nuclear problem. A skeptic could argue that Pyongyang might consider its nuclear program still too vulnerable and is therefore working to keep the situation relatively calm while using the time to develop the capacities it has threatened it already has—smaller, better, more accurate weapons more easily delivered over longer ranges.

For now, even several years into its growing nuclear arsenal, there has not been anything North Korea has done that is markedly at variance with its traditional patterns of behavior. To date, nothing suggests we are edging into the red zone. There are still no clues as to how, or whether, the possession of nuclear weapons will alter North Korean diplomacy or security policy. If the North's behavior—either in the diplomatic arena or on the military front—is to change as a result of its nuclear arsenal, we have yet to see signs of what those changes will be.





US·KOREA  
INSTITUTE AT SAIS

US-Korea Institute at SAIS  
Johns Hopkins University  
1717 Massachusetts Avenue NW, 6th Fl  
Washington, DC 20036  
[www.uskoreainstitute.org](http://www.uskoreainstitute.org)