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North Korean Nuclearization Enigma: Examining Security Dilemma, Leadership Response and International Politics

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Abstract

This research endeavors to invigorate the establishment and development of nuclear program of North Korea in three different political dynasties since 1950s. It has been argued that the country finds to go for nuclearization as a consequence of *fear dilemma*. Owing to this dilemma, survival of the political regime was become a primary concern for the political leadership of the state. That is why, for acquiring security deterrence, the leaders of North Korea developed the nuclear arsenals, in three different phases. This research paper establishes a framework under three different political regimes of North Korea, in which nuclear program was steadily developed on strategic line and consequently become a self-proclaimed nuclear power in 2006 by detonating nuclear test. The agreements under different regimes for promoting uranium enrichment is also part of this paper. In addition to this, this study also finds a track where the leadership did not only face regional and international pressure but also equally establish its own policy to retreat from that pressure. By concluding the research, it has been argued that growing security competition in East Asia, provides a momentum to North Korea, to launch its domestic program.

Key Words: North Korea, Nuclear Program, Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Un.

Introduction

North Korean nuclearization is ingenuously built with little support often proclaimed by its leadership from Russia. This program was slowly in progress since 1960s and three leaders of the state such as Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong-Il and Kim Jong Un struggled through decades under revolutionary practices such as kimilsungism, kimjongilism, kimjongunsim, *Juche* and *Songun* ideologies. Regional and

international attention was raised in 2003, when Pyongyang abruptly withdrew its formal membership from Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (Mansourov, 1995). By considering the role of Kim family in developing the nuclear program of North Korea, it is evident that three political leaders of the country proclaimed to develop the nuclear technology as a deterrence for protecting the political regime as well as establishing regional hegemony and security competition with USA and the neighboring states of South Korea and Japan (Faisal and Eijaz, 2019). The state has developed significant advancement in developing nuclear weapons under the leadership of three Kim Il Sung (1950-1994), Kim Jong Il (1992-2011) and Kim Jong Un (2010-present).

There is publicly less information available on the formulation of nuclear strategy of these three key figures of North Korea. That is why, the information is usually based on the perceptions, studies and analysis of different sources which are usually have western/US narratives. So, publicly available studies are the part to understand nuclear development journey of the leadership of North Korea. The state is in process of further improving its nuclear program by developing more advance weapon delivery system (Kristensen, H.M and Korda, M., 2021).

Every leader of North Korea proclaimed a unique and substantive ideology to protect the sovereignty of the state/regime and parallel line of defense, establish deep rooted nuclear development program as a mean of establishing deterrence on Korean Peninsula (Faisal, 2024). Kim Il Sung Procalimed *Juche* in 1955 for accelerating the self-sufficiency in economy and military capability. Kim Jong Il tries for *Songun* in 1995 being defense as the top most priority while Kim Jong Un also established *Byungjin* in 2012 for simultaneously adopting development of nuclear weapons and economy.

This research paper has established a parameter that how and why the nuclear program of North Korea has been developed during three political regimes and what is the role that they played for booming this program. Various factors such as development of the nuclear program, agreements, struggling environment, international and regional pressure and strategies of these leaders is also part of this study. The research concludes that volatile strategic environment and strategic dilemma pushed North Korea to go for nuclear arsenals.

Insecurity versus Fear Dilemma and North Korean Leadership

Diplomatic relations of North Korea have never been established with Japan, South Korea and USA. However, it has developed cordial relations with Russia and China over the specific time frame. Since the beginning of 1950s, a sense of insecurity has been preserved in the mind of North Korean leadership that they emphasized on developing indigenous system to safeguard the sovereignty and security of the regime. The arising insecurity over the time developed a fear dilemma in the stakeholders of the North Korea which vociferously advocated dynamic security and safety measures. Steps to develop indigenous security arsenals includes the nuclear weapons development program, cyber security drones and missile modernization (Yeo, A., 2024).

A consistent threat to the security of North Korea established a strategic fear in the leadership of North Korea which then proclaimed to acquire nuclear weapons as mean to establish deterrence against USA and the neighboring states. The sole reason is that North Korea do not have the capacity to challenge the threat trigger

by USA or the neighboring states such as South Korea and Japan. That is why, as a mean to minimize insecurity, North Korea leadership opted to go for nuclear weapons (Yanagisawa, K., 2019).

Insecurity in the regional and international context and the fear dilemma simultaneously are affecting the security decisions in the domain of absolute strategic paradigm. That is why, the leadership of North Korea often behaved as a solitary state in international community having indigenous security narrative and approach to resolve that fear and insecurity. The leadership often portray self-proclaimed triggering context to defend their own domestic security narratives (Shetler-Jones, P., 2017).

Contextualizing the nuclear program of North Korea

In 1953, a regional competition between former USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republic) and US political administration was emerged in promoting and developing civil nuclear technology in their respective allied states. The first beginning in this direction was made by USSR which established the foundation of nuclear program of China in March 1953 by signing a treaty followed by the Britain nuclear detonation tests. The US government too established its own "*Atoms for peace*" project and expanded it towards non-European allied states such as Israel, Iraq, Iran, South Korea, South Africa and Taiwan. It has been argued that China's ambition for nuclear technology gave a path to US administration for developing such nuclear system in Taiwan. In the same way, North Korea found the domain to explore their own nuclear technology and power in response to the building of such technology in their surrounding i-e in Taiwan and South Korea (Szalontai, B & Radchenko, S., 2006).

Following the establishment of formal nuclear agreement with Taiwan, USA also signed a same agreement with South Korea in February 1956, USSR expanded the intra-bloc nuclear assistance and upon the request from North Korea; a formal agreement was concluded in March 1956. This was a major development for promoting on such a large scale civil nuclear technology in any region which rightly impacted on the regional strategic equilibrium of South East Asian region. Consequently, North Korea evolved a fear dilemma to compete strategically with their immediate counterparts of South Korea and Japan. It is evident that North Korea acquired inspiration from its trilateral counterparts such as South Korea, China and Taiwan for developing its own nuclear program (Bermudez Jr., J.S., 2015).

The USSR-US nuclear sponsorship competition in East Asia and North Korea's strategic aloneness develop such circumstances that Pyongyang elites strategically set their mind to administering nuclear development for the survival of their political regime. That is why the foundation of nuclear program was established in early 1960s while the relevant infrastructure was planned in 1970-1980 and finally the strategic planning raised in 1990s. This nuclear development context is a result of regional insecurity, fear dilemma, and Pyongyang elite strategy to cope with the simultaneous raising threats from USA, Japan, South Korea and other regional states.

Phases of Development of Nuclear Program of North Korea

There are three important phases of nuclear development program of North Korea. These phases have been transformed into reality under three significant North Korean leaders. Every leader struggled and managed to work in their own domain for establishing, developing and modernizing the nuclear program. The steady growth of this nuclear program indicated that the leadership has taken concrete steps with the passage of time. The detail about each of the phase is described as following;

i. Kim Il Sung and the Planning of Nuclear Program

The first formal leader of North Korea was Kim Il Sung who formally laid the foundation of north Korea as a separate state in the post Japanese aggression phase of 1945 by separating from South Korean elites usually having western strategic orientation. Il Sung was aware about the post 1945 developments in Japan through the North Korean people who migrated from Hiroshima and Nagasaki after US nuclear attack. He also aware about the importance of the nuclear weapons for establishing the survival of the political regime in regional strategic threats. That is why initial planning for nuclear technology was drive on in early 1950s (Bermudez Jr., J.S., 2015).

For developing nuclear science infrastructure, nuclear science related curriculum was designed for Kim Il Sung University and Kim Chaek College of Science and Technology in post 1945 period. Furthermore, North Academy of Sciences was developed under which various scientists sent to USSR for training in nuclear sciences. These two important developments were made by Kim Il Sung only as a mean to plan the futuristic nuclear program of the country so that deterrence can be established in Korean Peninsula against the rival forces of USA, Japan and South Korea. The third development which is also meaningful to analyzed, was the establishment of ABC chemical defense units. The important function of these units was to perform mock practices for preparing themselves to defend from the nuclear attacks. The North Korean elites practically established atomic warfare exercises in early 1950s (Bermudez Jr., J.S., 2015).

At the most advancement phase, Kim Il Sung proposed a strategic vision under "*Four Military Lines*" also known as *Songun*. This vision was declared in 1962. Under the vision it was called; a) military training for the general public of whole North Korea b) adjusting barracks in every corner of the country c) advance military weaponization and training of the soldiers and d) modernization of military equipment. That means even go for the nuclear technology in case of dire need (Lutz, T., 2015).

During 1961-1967, two important atomic research centers were established at Pakchon and Yongbyon. These research centers were funded under first 7-year economic plan of North Korea which was launched in 1961. The USSR provided the technical assistance for establishing these nuclear research center under an agreement which was signed in 1956 and renewed in 1962. The establishment of second economic committee and Academy of Defense Sciences laid the organization support for the practical working of that nuclear program. It is believed that USSR also provided assistance to North Korea in designing the Nuclear, Biological and Chemical training for advancing the defense system in early 1970s.

Throughout 1970s and 1980s, additional nuclear infrastructure was planned by Kim Il Sung and his cabinet under Korean Working Party (KWP). During this phase nuclear reactors were constructed at various places, radiochemical plants were installed as well as additional nuclear research centers and host of supporting nuclear program were executed. For nuclear weapons delivery system, a domestic ballistic missile production infrastructure was also initiated (Congressional Research Services Report, 2023).

It has been observed that, North Korea planned the nuclear program under the administration of Kim Il Sung. Bilateral agreements were concluded between USSR and North Korea. Basic infrastructure was constituted. Several research centers were established. Scientists and the technician were being trained with the assistance of USSR and China. The administrative hierarchy was also established. Critical decisions and policies were adopted to stabilize the nuclear program of North Korea by Kim Il Sung.

ii. Advancement of Nuclear Program under Kim Jong Il

Before the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, Kim Jong Il already had proclaimed the power of North Korea's political fore figure. Upon assuming the role as head of the state, he constituted a new constitution and empowered himself in the same way as his father. Like his predecessor, he also established a strong military role for the defense of the regime and the country as well (Adiningsih, A.P & Nte, N.D., 2022). During the last decade of the Kim Il Sung regime, international community started putting political pressure for roll backing its nuclear program. Due to that pressure, North Korea accepted some of the important proposals and finally signed Nuclear Safeguards Agreement with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1992. This agreement proposes some international inspection of the nuclear sites of North Korea and Kim Jong Il administration was asked to cooperate and political assistance to IAEA delegates. Upon concluding the agreement, Pyongyang gave assent for the inspection.

Under nuclear safeguards agreement, IAEA paid six consecutive visits to North Korea during 1992 to 1994. This was the first and the last chance that atomic agency inspected the nuclear program of North Korea. Every time during the visit, the agency found non-compliance of North Korea with international protocols and standards and created suspicion. Prior to this suspicions, the nuclear program was accelerated in concealed way. Finally, the strategic intention of Pyongyang elites lime lighted at the global level. Consequently, USA administration for the first time pay heed to the nuclear development on Korean Peninsula (Mansourov, A.Y., 1995).

The US administration also initiated negotiation process with North Korea to halt its nuclear program. Two rounds of negotiations were held during the last year of Kim Il Sung administration. The third round talks resumed in Geneva in August 1994 during the regime of Kim Jong Il. Another rounds of negotiations in October 1994 and finally signed the Comprehensive Agreed Framework on nuclear program on the nuclear issue. This agreement was signed between USA and North Korea. Under this agreement, North Korea suspended its nuclear program in exchange of limited financial arrangements and facilities from Washington stakeholders (Mansourov, A.Y., 1995). This agreement was remained intact until 2003.

Under comprehensive agreed framework on nuclear program between US administration and North Korea, it was assured by the US government for providing some economic assistance in terms of crude oil and atomic reactors as a way to compensate Pyongyang elites. That program was finally halted in 2002. Other promises for establishing trade relations were also not fulfilled by Washington. As a tacit strategic pressure, North Korea under the leadership of Kim Jong Il announced to withdraw from Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003. He also expelled IAEA monitoring delegate from North Korea and abandoned further negotiation with US government (Litwak, R.S., 2018).

Following three years remained extremely important for North Korea, as it speedily established nuclear technology on strategic line and finally tested its first nuclear arsenal in 2006. It is evident from the fact that, the nuclear detonation by North Korea was a resulting factor of its preparedness in the strategic direction during 1980s and 1990s. Several sanctions were imposed on North Korea following the nuclear test. As a consequence, the state emerged as more hostile towards its counterparts from the region and for USA. Although significant development was seen in improving the critical relations between North Korea and US administration, however, this phase did not prolong further owing to bitterness in the strategic domain of Korean Peninsula. The Kim Jon Il administration did not only advance the nuclear program of the country but it also specifically breaks out the fear dilemma of the political regime and provided the regime a standing strategic dignity in regional and international strategic environment.

iii. Modernization and establishing of Nuclear Doctrine under Kim Jong Un

Kim Jong Un assumed the administration of North Korea in 2009 owing to the deteriorated health of his father Kim Jong Il who finally died in 2011. He firmly stood for the defense of regime and decided to further modernize the nuclear regime of his country. He framed more hostile strategic decisions and policies than his predecessors. He decided to double down of the nuclear and missile posture of his regime. Although, the sanctions regime was imposed by the UN agencies, however, they did not force Pyongyang to roll back or minimize the efforts for uranium enrichment. It is evident that Kim Jong Un was the leader who associated the stability of his regime with the advancement of nuclear weapons. That is why, modernization of nuclear weapons and warheads was the sole objective of his regime. That is why, he is still focusing on the advancement of nuclear weapons (Pollack, J.D., 2018).

Kim Jong Un calculated the strategic potential of North Korea and compare it with the development of nuclear weapons on the latest technology. He also advocating that the survival of North Korea is linked with the modernization of nuclear weapons. He also advocates that nuclear technology is an essential element for protecting the nation from any form of external aggression. That is, Pyongyang elites term nuclear weapons as “absolute weapons”. They also argue that, the survival of political regime is not possible without these weapons.

In 2013, North Korea under the leadership of Kim Jong Un adopted *byungjin* strategy. That means parallel development for nuclear weapons and economy of the state. He advocated under this policy that nuclear weapons are as essential as the economic development. Both are essential and extremely important for the nation. He also put an agenda for advancing the nuclear technology for acquiring more

advance nuclear weapons. He has the argument that, North Korea wants to keep something that give absolute guarantee for the survival in the regional security affairs (Pollack, J.D., 2018).

During 2012 to 2017, North Korea developed the nuclear and missile program at the advance level. Finally, in 2016 and 2017, it tested the thermonuclear tests and intercontinental ballistic missile. Upon testing these two detonation, North Korea proclaimed to acquire the absolute defense system. For the leadership of Pyongyang, nuclear program is as essential as the survival of their political regime. They are binding with nuclear program and strictly adhering the required means and their implementation.

It was evident that nuclear arming of North Korea implications for the regional security. To halt the nuclear struggle of the state. International community strive for the negotiation with Pyongyang elites. It has been argued that nuclear arming of North Korea created strategic friction in Korean Peninsula during Kim Jong Un regime (Sigal, L.V., 2018). For minimizing the strategic friction US and North Korean leaders met in Singapore on June 12, 2018. However, the summit did not establish any framework for advancing cooperation between the two sides. Following the summit, North Korea projected more advance strategic behavior in Korean Peninsula. Subsequently, the North Korean leadership tested intensified the missile tests and uranium enrichment in post Singapore summit phase (Tanaka, H., 2018).

Contemporary Phase of Nuclear Program of North Korea

For the first time, North Korea declared its nuclear weapons in 2003. It was the time, when North Korea declared that, it has nuclear material and it was trying to maintain nuclear weapons from the fissile material. After a gap of three years, the state detonated its first nuclear device in 2006. Further devices were tested in 2009, 2011 and 2016 respectively. The objective of these nuclear tests was to establish a regional nuclear deterrence against USA, and its regional allied states Japan and South Korea. After 2017 developments, Kim Jong Un is focusing on the enhancement of quality rather than quantity of nuclear weapons and missile program. The state is continuously improving the missile development since 2019. The negotiation of North Korea with US, Japan and South Korea during 2018 to 2020, even did not roll back the nuclear and missile development program of North Korea (Cheung, T.M & Haggard, S., 2021).

Since the last decade, Pyongyang elites are developing Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for cyber and nuclear security. This development will further enhance the strategic power of the state. These AI tools are becoming an important enabler for the survival of the political regime. In 2020, Ministry of Defense of Japan reported that, North Korea is implying and administering large scale cyber units as an integral part of asymmetric military capabilities. The state is also fostering specialists and continuing research and development in AI (Harold, S.W., Beauchamp-Mustaga, N., Jun, J., Myers, D & Grossman, D., 2022).

The present stockpile of North Korean nuclear weapons is slightly higher than 50. This exponential growth of weapons has been increased since the last two decades. Furthermore, the leadership is also propagating new research for the advancement

of this program. On the other hand, intensity of regional strategic conundrum is also instable. The comprehensive dialogue of North Korea with its regional counterparts and USA have not taken any composite conclusion for the any future progress for halting the nuclear program of North Korea. Three regimes of North Korea set highly ambitious and consistent nuclear goals.

North Korean Nuclear Crisis, Regional Military Concerns and International Politics

It has been widely argued in the international strategic discussions and dialogues that an impoverished small state having aspiration for nuclear strategic technology can instigate its presence in the global strategic environment by portraying herself as dangerous and troublemaker (Dujarric, 2004). This argument is truly relevant in case of North Korea, where the Pyongyang elites wanted to establish military deterrence on Korean Peninsula by implying nuclear arsenals. They have achieved some important advantages at least in creating a military combat against Japan and South Korea (Faisal, 2020).

It has been widely argued that the nuclear program of North Korea is a critical threat to the regional and international peace and strategic stability. Many diplomatic efforts have been made to minimize this threat in the past such as the first ever summit between US president Donald Trump and Kim Jong-Un in June 2018 at Singapore which established new US-Korean relations. However, this development remained unfulfilled as the two sides disagreed on finding relatively adopted bilateral working proposals. Another such bilateral political engagement was hold between South Korea and North Korea in 2018. Again it was failed due to diplomatic inefficiency (USIP, 2022).

It is evident that Nuclear crisis on Korean Peninsula has become bleaker not only for regional states such as Japan, Taiwan, China and South Korea but it equally considered a military threat for instigating regional issues on international platforms. The global political players such as G7, EU and China are equally have concerns on nuclear aspirations of Pyongyang and wanted to resolve it so that regional peace and military stability can be created. The successive and steady expansion of the nuclear program by North Korean leaders since 1960s has negative deliberations for international community, regional states and the potential actors struggling to create security stability, political equilibrium and regional peace on the Korean Peninsula. The realistic choice for the negotiating actors has not been established until now. That is why, it has become a complex issue not only for East Asia but is equally vulnerable for global peace and stability. The regional states, international political actors and various organizations working for peace and stability have asked to the leadership of North Korea for taking measures to shift the nuclear program into peaceful purposes, but it did not result into fruitful acceptance (Dr. Zab-Un-Nisa, Sattar and Mustafa, 2021).

In the present scenario, it is evident that strategic tensions are growing in East Asia as North Korea visualizing the expansion of its nuclear program into more complex and dangerous strategic domain since 2017. Not only the US but Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are also worried about this new expansion strategy of Pyongyang. It has been argued that security dilemma is central in the expansion of the nuclear enigma of North Korea that needs to address immediately so that regional strategic

instability can be resolved through composite dialogue involving regional and international stakeholders and organizations such as IAEA and UN.

Conclusion

The primary focus of three North Korean regimes was to establish sustainability of political regime in Pyongyang. For developing this sustainability, three leaders of the state considered the reinstatement of nuclear weapons development program as a mean for their survival. As a consequence, the regional states of South Korea, Japan and Taiwan considered this nuclear program as a threat to the regional strategic inequality. Hence, they also started developing strategic relations with US administration to counter the security threats of North Korea.

Nuclear program of North Korea has been developed under three key political leaders such as Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un. This program consequently explored, developed, advanced and modernized during different phases. Until the beginning of 2000s, the nuclear program was remained concealed and unannounced. However, in 2003, the North Korean leadership for the first time exposed their strategic nuclear program and consequently experiencing different kind of diplomatic, political and economic sanctions from the major powers especially from USA, EU and UN.

Since the assumption of power by Kim Jong Un in 2011, the nuclear program has been modernized and upgraded. Now the state is utilizing the AI tools for further improving the capacity and capability of its nuclear program. The incumbent government of North Korea under the leadership of Kim Jong Un has adopted the *byungjin* strategy which means parallel development of economy and the nuclear program of the state. This is evident from this research that the regime will prevail advance and ambitious strategies for further expansion of its nuclear program.

Conflict of Interest

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