

DOI: 10.46340/eppd.2020.7.5.2

Valeriia Gergiieva, Research Fellow

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1658-3189>

Odesa Center for Nonproliferation,

Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University, Ukraine

NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM: FROM NONPROLIFERATION ISSUE TO DETERRENCE

The article provides an understanding of North Korea's nuclear program and its path to it. There is a range of reasons that explain why after the breakdown of the USSR, North Korea chose such a strategy and why the South didn't. The U.S. policy on the Korean Peninsula has a significant influence on these countries. Thereby the Bush Administration's policy is viewed as the last chance to speak about North Korea as a challenge for the Nonproliferation regime. Nowadays, after six nuclear tests and numerous ballistic missiles tests (including long-range ballistic missiles since 2017), North Korea is more about Deterrence, as it is already a nuclear state. Crises of 2017 and 2020 show the necessity to build a new strategy for the U.S. and the whole international community. The further dialogue with North Korea is unpredictable and depends on the U.S. elections, consequences of Covid-19, and Kim's readiness to cooperate.

Keywords: North Korea, the U.S., South Korea, China, Nonproliferation, nuclear weapons program, ballistic missiles, crisis, Covid-19.

Introduction

When we speak about Proliferation of nuclear weapons, we should always keep in mind such questions, as – “What motivations have non-nuclear countries to possess nuclear weapons?” and “What could nuclear weapons states or international organizations do to change their intentions?”

Political scientist Scott Sagan spoke about three basic reasons for states, which have intentions to obtain nuclear weapons.¹ The first one – competitive security environments and desire to deter external aggression; the second – domestic political lobbies, which can encourage states for different reasons; and the third – international norms of prestige associated with nuclear weapons. Sagan concludes that none of these causes is dominant, but that they are in interdependence of each other. If we look at all recent countries, who were trying to produce nuclear weapons, we will see common features – fear and feeling of insecurity, desire to deter from any international aggression. Such unstable countries, as North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Libya and Syria demand more careful policy and when they feel that declared and real policy differs, they could act quite harshly. This article is focused on North Korean nuclear background and nowadays challenges and nuclear achievements. It is focused on the US policy in the region and how it influences.

After the Korean War, not only Korean peninsula was divided at the 38th parallel but the spheres of interest as well: North Korea (DPRK – Democratic People's Republic of Korea) – was under the sphere of the USSR, South Korea (ROK – Republic of Korea) – under the USA. One of the most crucial reasons why one Korea has chosen 'nuclear way' and another not -is obviously “nuclear umbrella”. For sure, positive security assurances helped to keep South Korea on the pass of nuclear restraint. Considering the fact, that the U.S.-ROK alliance has lasted since the signing of Mutual Defense Treaty in October 1953², it gives confidence, as such long cooperation would not stop in one second, it shows stability despite the fact that not everything is smooth in their relations. No need to create own nuclear weapons if you have the U.S. ones in case of necessity.

Another situation was with North Korea, its nuclear way is a result of such factors, as feeling of injustice, food shortages in 1990-ies and one the crucial – breakdown of the USSR. North Korea has lost its

¹ Rauchhaus, R., Kroenig, M., Gartzke, E. (2013). *Causes and consequences of Nuclear Proliferation*. New York: Routledge Global Security Studies, 62-63.

² Snyder, S., Lee, J. (2012). *Infusing Commitment with Credibility: The Role of Security Assurances in Cementing the US-ROK Alliance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 162-189.

ally, its “nuclear ally”, what was the sign for them to worry about. Next sign was – normalization of China and Russia relations with South Korea in 1991, especially due to the fact the highest percentage of North Korea’s trade is with China. Of course such changed balance on the Korean Peninsula was painful for such unstable country, as North Korea and as we see it usually acts quite impulsive, as a beast at a dead end.

Nuclear background after the Korean War until 2003

North Korean nuclear (peaceful) way started in 1959 with signing a civil nuclear agreement with the USSR and received assistance in building Yongbyon research reactor. Such cooperation was aimed to develop peaceful nuclear energy, which is according to the NPT (Nonproliferation Treaty) is not prohibited, but even affirmed in the article IV of the NPT Treaty. But in 1979 North Korea began construction of a bigger secret reactor at Yongbyon¹. After it was noticed in 1984, the US pressured the Soviet Union to force North Korea to sign the NPT², as they didn’t do it previously, though the signing was opened since 1968. Afterwards North Korea signed the NPT in 1985, but still did not allow IAEA inspectors to its nuclear facilities.

The next period was quite peaceful. Two Koreas became members of the UN in 1991. Historically relations between North and South Korea were complicated, but still not totally lost. But negotiations between 1989 and 1992 made a great progress. In December 1991 they signed the Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression and Exchange and Cooperation, which entered into force in February 1992. As well as in January 1992, North Korea signed a nuclear safeguard agreement with IAEA, which inspected nuclear facilities six times between May 1992 and January 1993. It seemed that things were going well. But then cooperation slowed down because of a range of other reasons: 1) broke down of the USSR, North Korean nuclear ally; 2) conduction of the U.S. and South Korean forces Team Spirit 1993 war exercises; 4) awful famine in the country; 5) period of suspension in violating the NPT by North Korea. Famine was so important reason because number of deaths from food shortages and related diseases ranged from 1 million to 3 million in the 1990s. So all these reasons had one result – North Korea announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT in March 1994 and rejected IAEA inspections of its military sites, thereby provoking deep international crisis.

In June 1994 president Bill Clinton was ready for military actions against North Korea, but former President Jimmy Carter resolved the crisis peacefully. He went to Pyongyang on June 15, 1994 and conducted negotiations. North Korea agreed to freeze its nuclear program and permit IAEA inspectors. Jimmy Carter even received a Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 for his contribution for world peace.

After negotiations, the U.S. and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework in October 1994. Under this agreement, North Korea was supposed to stop its nuclear program. In exchange, the U.S. agreed to offer North Korea two light –water reactors and deliveries of oil³. That time such economic carrots were a crucial and it was possible to influence North Korea in such a way. So again, North Korea shut down its main Yongbyon reactor and the reprocessing facility, allowed IAEA site visits.

Later in 1996, the US and South Korea proposed four-party talks – the US, China North and South Korea – in order to solve issues between the two Koreas. Though this four-party meeting were supposed to be a great step forward, they went nowhere. Only after food aid was promised in 1998, North Korea agreed to attend the first formal meeting held in Geneva in December 1999. Again method of carrots was successful.

During 1998-2003 North and South Korea were in flowering relations. South Korea allowed its NGOs and private citizens to have contacts across the demilitarized zone and increased food aid to the North, which was trying to recover from famine. They had their first presidential meeting between South and North Korean president and leader in Pyongyang since the division of Korea in June 2000.

But at the same time US-DPRK relations worsened during that period. P.16 They had the first high level meeting in October 2002 in Pyongyang after two-year break, but they failed to reach any agreement.

Afterwards, North Korea offered talks with the US to resolve concerns connected with its nuclear program. However, the Bush Administration rejected that initiative, as Administration was too busy with the war in Iraq, no time for building any dialogue. After the following suspending North Korea in violating

¹ Wertz, D., McGrath, M., LaFoy S. North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons Program. *Washington D. C. National Committee on North Korea*. <<https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/DPRK-Nuclear-Weapons-Issue-Brief.pdf>>. (2020, September, 05).

² Kim, S.H., Chan, S. (2007). *Economic Sanctions Against a Nuclear North Korea: An Analysis of United States and United Nations Actions Since 1950*. North. McFarland: McFarland and Company Inc., 13.

³ Kim, S.H., Chan, S. (2007). *Economic Sanctions Against a Nuclear North Korea: An Analysis of United States and United Nations Actions Since 1950*. North. McFarland: McFarland and Company Inc., 14.

the NPT, the Agreed Framework collapsed in October 2002 and North Korea rejected IAEA inspectors and restarted its main nuclear weapons complex. Then the US stopped shipments to North Korea in November 2002 and North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003.

The Six –Party Talks and first nuclear tests

Such chapter as the Six – Party Talks was a significant step toward building the dialogue between all parties. Negotiations were between North Korea, China, Japan, South Korea, Russia and the United States, they were aimed to dismantle North Korean nuclear program by establishing a dialogue¹. There were six rounds of talks from 2003 until 2009, but there wasn't any significant success at the end.

The parties succeeded to come to some agreement only at the fourth round of talks in September 2005, North Korea agreed to give up its nuclear programs in exchange for aid and security guarantees.

Between the first rounds, North Korea even conducted multiple missile tests in July 2006 and the first small nuclear device on October 9, 2006. This first nuclear test wasn't considered too serious because of its small power. So negotiations continued. Those days even North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Il said, that "North Korea has been left with no other choice but to possess nuclear weapons as a self-defense deterrent".

At the fifth round in February and October 2007, the parties signed two important temporary agreements toward complete dismantlement of the Yongbyon facility. The further dialogue didn't appear and North Korea declared that it would no longer participate in the six-party talks in April 2009 and be under the previous agreements reached in the discussions.

In May 2009, the North Korea conducted the second underground nuclear test, thereby strengthening credibility of de facto nuclear state². First two tests used plutonium-based devices and were under 1 kiloton and 2-7 kilotons, for example the plutonium bomb dropped on Nagasaki in 1945 was 21 kilotons³. So it wasn't enough powerful to perceive it too seriously by other states.

In 2012 North Korea declared itself 'a nuclear state' in its constitution. North Korea supposed that it would cause negotiations with U.S. on more equal terms⁴.

The third nuclear test was in 2013, it was more powerful – between 5-15 kilotons. In 2016 North Korea conducted two nuclear tests – in January at about 6 kilotons and in September between 15-20 kilotons. Because of the definite skepticism according the first test in 2016, North Korea obviously decided to prove its credibility and this nuclear warhead was design for using on ballistic missiles, so we see that North Korean strategic culture doesn't tolerate mocking⁵.

2017 crisis⁶ and current situation

The issue with North Korea is not only about its nuclear warheads, as just warhead itself not such a threat, as warheads along with ballistic missiles, which give opportunity to launch those nuclear warheads for long distances. Tests which were conducted near Japan's coast during April-May 2017 and twice in July 2017, were Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (which can overcome distance from 5500 km), so they demonstrated a potential capability to hit the U.S. territory. It provoked a new wave of crisis.

The sixth North Korea's nuclear test was conducted in September 2017 and it deepened tensions between countries. It was the largest North Korean test, it was estimated from 120 to 250 kilotons. The Trump administration implemented a maximum pressure campaign on North Korea and was trying to influence China to make more pressure on it as well. This campaign "maximum pressure 1.0" included strong UN sanctions as well.

¹ Liang, X. The Six-Party Talks at a Glance: Fact Sheets and Briefs. *Washington D. C. Arms Control Association*. <<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/6partytalks>>. (2020, September, 09).

² Fedchenko, V. North Korea's nuclear test explosion, 2009. Sweden. *SIPRI Fact Sheet*. <<https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/FS/SIPRIFS0912.pdf>> (2020, September, 11).

³ Wertz, D., McGrath, M., LaFoy, S. North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program. *Washington D. C. National Committee on North Korea*. <<https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/DPRK-Nuclear-Weapons-Issue-Brief.pdf>>. (2020, September, 05).

⁴ Woo, K.C., Puri, S. Beyond the 2017 North Korea Crisis: Deterrence and Containment. Seoul. *Asan Institute for Policy Studies*. <<http://en.asaninst.org/contents/beyond-the-2017-north-korea-crisis-deterrence-and-containment/>>. (2020, September, 13).

⁵ Warden, J.K. North Korea's Nuclear Posture: an evolving challenge for U. S. Deterrence. *Proliferation Papers 58. IFRI Security Studies Center*. <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/warden_north_korea_nuclear_posture_2017.pdf>. (2020, September, 06).

⁶ Kim, Jong Un's 2018 New Year's Address. *The National Committee on North Korea*. <<https://www.ncnk.org/node/1427>>. (2020, September, 15).

In 2018 situation began to change, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un made a speech on a New Year's Day. He talked about possibilities to work together, to ease the acute military tensions between the north and the south, and create a peaceful environment on the Korean peninsula¹. Afterwards Kim received an invitation from South Korean President – Moon Jae-in to participate in the upcoming Winter Olympics in South Korea. Obviously, it was a great occasion for both.

Improvement of the relations with the US was also obvious. After announcement of the plans to suspend further nuclear tests, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and U.S. President Donald Trump met in Singapore in June 2018 to discuss the North Korean nuclear program, it was quiet a historical moment, as it was the first talks held between a North Korean leader and an acting U.S. President.

Soon South Korea, North Korea and the U.S. initiated discussions that led to three summits between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un and a summit in Singapore between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un. The third summit between Moon and Kim, led to Panmunjom and Pyongyang Declarations. Summit was aimed on tensions reduction and confidence-building measures at reducing the potential for military confrontation along the Demilitarized Zone. North and South Korea formulated these measures in a Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) in September 2018.

The beginning of 2019 was positive for U.S.-North Korean relations as well. A North Korean delegation visited the White House and pointed a second Trump-Kim summit. They met again in Hanoi in February 2019 for the further talks. However, the Hanoi Summit ended abruptly without any deal. At the summit, Kim demanded the removal of all sanctions imposed since March 2016, in return for closing North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear facility. Such demand was unacceptable for Trump and he left the negotiations. Such end of the dialogue led to revitalizing of activities. North Korea conducted 12 missile tests between May and October 2019therebystrengthening its missile complex.

Year 2020 became a challenge for the whole international community; North Korea is not an exception. The Covid-19 pandemic led North Korea to seal its borders in January 2020, which caused huge drops in imports and exports with China, which is almost the only country's external trade. Additionally heavy rains have caused damage across the country: buildings have been flooded, nearly 100,000 acres of crops damaged, infrastructure destroyed. Such situation is disastrous for the country, which suffers from food shortages even during normal times².

Kim's reaction for the crisis are not reforms or dialogues, he announced, that a new Party Congress will hold and decide on a five-year plan to develop North Korean economy, not the Workers' Party of Korea. The last congress meeting was in 2016 and the result of it was the first economic plan since the 1980s, which was a sign that economy is still at such low level, that finally it is high time to improve situation in the country. But in 2020 Kim didn't mention the National Economic Development Strategy for 2016-2020³. Because of it we could conclude, that this plan didn't have success and there is no need for him to speak about something, that he didn't manage to do.

Instead of a new five-year plan, Kim proposed 10 long-term objectives on developing economy. But how does these objectives relate to the earlier economic development strategy is unclear and what is the percentage of any success without external help.

There is an assume that if government consulted with the United Nations and its member states about real reforms and accepted emergency food assistance, situation would start to improve, but such situation is hardly remains possible.

Conclusions

Since 2006 North Korea has conducted six nuclear tests, numerous tests of strategic missiles and began testing long-range ballistic missiles. It is used to speak about North Korean nuclear program as about worldwide Nonproliferation challenge, which is very beneficial to the U.S., but nowadays North Korea is a deterrent issue. As Scott Sagan mentioned – as North Korea has already had nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles, which can reach the United States, it is no longer Nonproliferation threat.

¹ Kim, Jong Un's 2018 New Year's Address. *The National Committee on North Korea*. <<https://www.ncnk.org/node/1427>>. (2020, September, 15).

² Sifton, J. Unprecedented Glimpse of Crisis in North Korea Kim Jong Un Announces Rare Workers' Party Congress. *New York. Human Rights Watch*. <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/21/unprecedented-glimpse-crisis-north-korea>>. (2020, September, 18).

³ North Korea announces congress on five-year economic plan. *News*. <<https://www.dw.com/en/north-korea-announces-congress-on-five-year-economic-plan/a-54628882>>. (2020, September, 18).

It seems that North Korea feels itself more secure and confident, so it is ready for an equal dialogue, where they can dictate their rules as well. We can see such signs in the last meetings with the US President, summits, some arrangements, which were nonsense to think about before. As well as warming situation with South Korea, mutual meetings and visits. Nevertheless, their relations seem to be unsteady, it is a big step forward for North Korea.

Nowadays 2020 crisis could influence North Korea and its international policy quite significant and unpredictable, so the further Kim's decisions and reactions depend on a range of issues.

As the country is totally totalitarian, poor and under the sanctions, which too much influence on North Korean economy, especially 2016 sanctions. Covid-19 crisis and weather difficulties, which influenced crops gatherings, complicated the situation to a critical level. Further American elections and Kim's and new president's reaction and readiness for the dialogue could change the situation drastically, as for a better side as for a worse one.

However, policy of sanctions was ineffective in stopping the country from developing weapons. Counting this fact and the fact that North Korea is already a nuclear state, isn't it better to accept this fact and to develop a new strategy of communication along with the whole international community.

References:

1. Fedchenko, V. North Korea's nuclear test explosion, 2009. Sweden. *SIPRI Fact Sheet*. <<https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/FS/SIPRIFS0912.pdf>>. (2020, September, 11). [in English].
2. Kim Jong Un's 2018 New Year's Address. *The National Committee on North Korea*. <<https://www.ncnk.org/node/1427>>. (2020, September, 15). [in English].
3. Kim, S.H., Chan, S. (2007). *Economic Sanctions Against a Nuclear North Korea: An Analysis of United States and United Nations Actions Since 1950*. North. McFarland: McFarland and Company Inc. [in English].
4. Liang, X. The Six-Party Talks at a Glance: Fact Sheets and Briefs. *Washington D.C. Arms Control Association*. <<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/6partytalks>>. (2020, September, 09). [in English].
5. North Korea announces congress on five-year economic plan. *News*. <<https://www.dw.com/en/north-korea-announces-congress-on-five-year-economic-plan/a-54628882>>. (2020, September, 18). [in English].
6. Rauchhaus, R., Kroenig M., Gartzke, E. (2013). *Causes and consequences of Nuclear Proliferation*. New York: Routledge Global Security Studies. [in English].
7. Sifton, J. Unprecedented Glimpse of Crisis in North Korea Kim Jong Un Announces Rare Workers' Party Congress. New York. *Human Rights Watch*. <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/21/unprecedented-glimpse-crisis-north-korea>>. (2020, September, 18). [in English].
8. Snyder, S., Lee, J. (2012). *Infusing Commitment with Credibility: The Role of Security Assurances in Cementing the US-ROK Alliance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. [in English].
9. Warden, J.K. North Korea's Nuclear Posture: an evolving challenge for U. S. Deterrence. *Proliferation Papers 58. IFRI Security Studies Center*. <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/warden_north_korea_nuclear_posture_2017.pdf>. (2020, September, 6). [in English].
10. Wertz, D., McGrath, M., LaFoy, S. North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program. *Washington D. C. National Committee on North Korea*. <<https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/DPRK-Nuclear-Weapons-Issue-Brief.pdf>>. (2020, September, 05). [in English].
11. Woo, K.C., Puri, S. Beyond the 2017 North Korea Crisis: Deterrence and Containment. Seoul. *Asan Institute for Policy Studies*. <<http://en.asaninst.org/contents/beyond-the-2017-north-korea-crisis-deterrence-and-containment/>>. (2020, September, 13). [in English].