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NORTH KOREAN'S NUCLEARIZATION AND THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE KOREAN PENINSULA: DETERRENCE, BARGAINING AND GREAT POWER RIVALRY

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ABSTRACT
Since 2006, North Korea has transitioned from a potential to an actual nuclear-armed state, following the successful detonation of multiple nuclear tests and a series of ballistic missile launches. These developments have demonstrated its growing capability to strike adversaries' homelands as well as those of their allies within and beyond the Korean Peninsula. The United States has consistently maintained that North Korea's nuclear programme constitutes a serious threat to its immediate neighbors', the United States itself, and global security at large. Despite the rapid advancement of North Korea's nuclear capabilities, there remains considerable debate as to whether the programme is primarily intended for offensive aggression or serves strategic purposes aimed at altering the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula and compelling the United States to engage in negotiations through which North Korea seeks economic, political, and security concessions. Against this backdrop, this paper analyses North Korea's nuclear programme and its implications for global security. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, relying on documentary analysis of secondary sources, and is anchored in Deterrence Theory. The paper finds that North Korea's nuclear programme functions principally as a strategic bargaining instrument and a mechanism for achieving a favorable balance of power on the Korean Peninsula, while simultaneously deterring potential aggression, particularly from the United States and its allies. It further argues that sustained United States pressure on North Korea reflects, to a significant extent, broader strategic competition with China, positioning the Korean Peninsula as a critical arena in contemporary global power politics**.**
KEYWORDS: Balance of Power, Deterrence Theory, Global Security, North Korea, Nuclear Proliferation

INTRODUCTION

Global security constitutes a fundamental concern of the international community, as any action by a state, group of states, or non-state actors that poses a threat to global peace and stability inevitably generates both scholarly debate and policy responses. The development and proliferation of nuclear weapons have been regulated through numerous international agreements, reflecting the recognition that their unchecked use or spread would have profound and destabilizing consequences for the international system, creating widespread

fear and uncertainty. Nuclear weapons represent the most destructive instruments of military power known to humankind.

Historically, the first practical deployment of nuclear weapons occurred in 1945, when the United States targeted the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic bombs, marking a decisive and transformative moment in modern warfare (Goldstein, & Pevehouse, 2011). This unprecedented event intensified global security tensions, catalyzed a competitive arms build-up, and contributed to the horizontal proliferation of nuclear capabilities as other states sought to acquire similar capacities to safeguard their national interests (Edward, & John, 2010).

In this context, the development of North Korea's nuclear programme represents a significant shift in global politics, with far-reaching implications for regional stability, international security, and the strategic calculus of major powers. As Clausewitz observed:

> The position we have reached is one where stability depends on something that is more than antithesis of strategy than its apotheosis; as threats that things will get out of hand, that we might act irrationally, that possibly through inadvertence we could set in motion a process that in its development and conclusion would be beyond human control and comprehension" (Clausewitz in Gray, 1999:321).

It is beyond reasonable doubt that nuclear weapons constitute not only a profound danger but also the most existential threat to human civilization on Earth. Their destructive potential is independent of the quantity possessed or the technological sophistication; even a single nuclear warhead poses a far greater risk to humanity than natural disasters such as famine, earthquakes, tsunamis, or the cumulative effects of climate change (Roberts, 2022; Machael, 2022). Nuclear weapons threaten the collective good of humankind and the shared values upheld by the international community, including human survival, health, dignity, environmental sustainability, development, and international peace and security. Their deployment can precipitate catastrophic devastation within a remarkably short period, inflicting unimaginable human suffering and generating aftermaths that are exceedingly difficult to contain (SIPRI, 2021). For these reasons, nuclear weapons are widely regarded as repugnant to the conscience of humanity.

Accordingly, Bae (2019), Kwak (2021), Mustafa, Bashir, & Liaqat (2019) stressed that despite the incontrovertible destructive capability of nuclear weapons, states continue to pursue, maintain, and enhance their nuclear arsenals, particularly the established nuclear powers such as the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, France, and China. Additionally, several states not formally recognized as nuclear-weapon states by the United Nations Security Council, including India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea, have developed nuclear capabilities, raising concerns over proliferation (Taylor, 2022). Advocates of nuclear proliferation argue that a wider distribution of nuclear weapons may contribute to the maintenance of an international balance of power, potentially preventing large-scale conflicts such as a third world war, and thereby promoting global peace and security (Nicholas, 2024). Conversely, critics contend that nuclear proliferation exacerbates the existing threats to international stability, particularly if such weapons fall into the hands of radical leaders, rogue states, fundamentalists, or terrorist organizations, who may seek to deploy them against strategic targets (Molly, 2021).

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on the nuclear programme in the Korean Peninsula, with particular emphasis on North Korea, to assess its implications for international security. The study employs Deterrence Theory as the primary theoretical lens

to examine the rationale behind states' acquisition and retention of nuclear capabilities. Methodologically, the research relies on secondary sources, including published and unpublished books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and credible online materials, to provide a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter.

THE CONCEPT OF NUCLEARIZATION

In essence, nuclearization refers to the acquisition of nuclear weapons by a state or group of states within a particular region (Zab-Un-Nisa, & Ghulam, 2021). This process is generally pursued as a means of enhancing states military capabilities to ensure survival, maintain strategic positioning, or assert influence at the regional or global level (Smith, & Wesley, 2021). It has been argued that the anarchic nature of the international system pushed states to compel to enhance their military capabilities as a reliable form of self-defense and as a deterrent against potential aggressors (Khan, 2019). Put it differently, Hayes (2019) stresses that states must acquire sufficient power to secure their survival and safeguard themselves against other states seeking hegemonic dominance or unchallenged influence within the international order.

Consequently, the pursuit of nuclear weapons is often driven by perceived threats and insecurity, particularly among middle-power states (Purboodji, 2025). For these states, nuclear capabilities serve not only as instruments of security but also as leverage in economic, political, and diplomatic negotiations, particularly in interactions with global superpowers (Purboodji, 2025; Ardhani & Alfian, 2023; Roberts, 2020). Within this analytical framework, North Korea's nuclear programme can be situated as a strategic instrument of deterrence. It functions as a stabilizing factor within the power dynamics of the Korean Peninsula, especially considering that the United States provides extended security guarantees to its regional allies, Japan and South Korea. Thus, North Korea's nuclearization is both a manifestation of its pursuit of national security and a tool for influencing regional power relations (Hayes, 2019).

GREAT POWER RIVALRY

Great power rivalry can be described as an intense competition between power states to maintain influence in global politics (Tomatoka, 2022). It is a completion especially economic and military struggle intends to strengthen states capabilities (Michael, 2022). Meanwhile, in contemporary global politics, this completion involves development of nuclear program. For Southeast Asia's perspective, great power rivalry is undoubtedly military and economic influence in the region mostly by the United State of America and China (Tomatoka, 2022). Hence, from this notion, it can be deduce that power rivalry is simply the use of military and economic powers to influence the behavior and decision of states at regional and global contexts. Moreover, analysts on power rivalry and nuclear risk such as Lewis (2022), Roberts (2022), and Zhao (2022) among others were of the view that great power rivalry brings with it and increased mutual suspicion as well as reduce of willingness to cooperate. But, rivalry also brings with it an increased risk of conflict, including major regional wars with a potential nuclear dimension that creates new incentives to cooperate to avoid conflicts and the under wanted escalation they involve (Machael, 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Deterrence as a theory is rooted in the political theory of realism, which has a very long philosophical and historical tradition, though its application in the field of international relations began after the World War II. Essentially, deterrence is a particular kind of political relationship in which one party tries to influence the behavior of another in a desired direction. It involves a particular distinctive kind of influence that rests directly and openly

upon the threat of sanctions or deprivations. It is an attempt by party "A" to prevent party "B" from undertaking a course of action which "A" regards as undesirable, by threatening to inflict unacceptable consequences upon "B" in the event, and only in the event that the prohibited action is taken (Patrick Morgan cited in Dougherty & Pfattzgraf, 1981).

Deterrence is basically a psychological phenomenon which does not involve any physical obstruction, and that the intending aggressor is prevented from doing what he is planning or contemplating, by being made to believe that to refrain from the planned action is in his best interest, and by refraining, he will not suffer any unwanted consequences. Deterrence is based on the assumption of rationality and making cost-benefit calculations. An enemy will not attack if costs outweigh any benefits" (Roskin & Berry, 2019:194).

Therefore, deterrence involves only threat rather than physically inflicting any damage. Deterrence, which is a variant of realist approach in the study of international politics, is based on the perception of the individual as primarily selfish, weak insatiable power-seeker. This refers to those individuals that collectively form the state which often acts in a unitary manner in the pursuit of its national interests as against the national interests of other states. This unavoidably makes the world system characteristically anarchic, as it is devoid of any supra-national authority with the power to make and enforce international law that must be obeyed akin to the metropolitan state system. This anarchic condition necessarily compels states to rely only on themselves by seeking to acquire, maintain and demonstrate power by all means, including alliances and counter alliances. Because, the most important issues at the top of the list of priorities of states concerns in the international system is to effectively manage their respective national security. For this reason, states largely rely on the system of balance of power and deterrence to keep the international system secured without any credible threat to their survival, and sustainability (Jiddere, 2013).

Essentially, it is in the philosophical thinking of Thucydides in his "History of the Peloponnesian War that we found rooted in the idea of realism as a theory of international relations. There are basically four main assumptions in Thucydides' thinking, first that the state (Athens or Sparta) is the principal actor in politics, though, generally, realists have recognized the existence of other non-state actors particularly international institutions but argued that they are less significant since most of their memberships consist of the same states. Secondly, that the state is unitary, whatever are the differences between policy and decision-makers, at the end of it the state always acts with one voice. Thirdly, decision-makers in the state are assumed to be rational beings capable of choosing among alternatives, the best way for the state. Fourthly, that the states are primarily concerned with security issues, that of protecting themselves from aggressors both internally and externally. As such, to ensure adequate security, states enhance their domestic capabilities such as strong economy, heavy and sophisticated military capability, technological advancement, internal cohesion, political stability and tranquility as well as go into alliance with other states. (Viottiand & Kauppi; 2018:28).

The Italian political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli, argued in 'The Prince' that a leader must always be mindful of his personal security and the security of his state. Like other realist philosophers before him, Machiavelli accepted all the assumptions of political realism and the anarchic character of the international system (The Prince, 2003). He argued that the prince must keep power in his own hands, and must never be the cause of another becoming more powerful than him. Here Machiavelli is essentially concerned about the power of the king as well as the power position of his state among the community of other states. How the state become powerful is less important. In other words, the desired end of being powerful

justifies the means. That the prince should make his subjects fear and love him. However, ″it is better to be feared than loved if not to be both" (Machiavelli, 2003: 54*).* He further stated that the prince must always act both as a Fox and a Lion. So, as a prince, he is forced to know how to act like a beast. He must learn from the fox and the lion; because the lion is defenseless against wolves. Therefore, one must be a fox in order to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten off wolves. Those who simply act like lions are stupid. (Machiavelli, 2003:56-57).

Earlier, before Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes argued that just like the individuals in the state of nature have the sole responsibility of defending themselves, so is the state, in the anarchic international system. Hobbes depicts a state of international anarchy, where the norm for states is "having their weapons pointing and their eyes fixed on one another" (Hobbes, 1951:331).

In the post World-War II, Hans Morgenthau, wrote on realism as a framework of understanding and explaining international politics. It is important to note here that it is only after World War II that deterrence as a theory was developed in the wake of the nuclear balance of power between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact, in general and between the US and the then USSR, in particular. Like his predecessors, Morgenthau posits that international politics is basically the struggle for power among states: This struggle can be explained at three levels (1) The flawed individual in the state of nature struggle for self-preservation (2) the autonomous and unitary state is constantly involved in power struggle, balancing power with power and reacting to pressure what is in their national interest and (3) because the international system is anarchic there is no higher power to put the competition to an end, the struggle is continuous.(Morgenthau, 1985).

Essentially, therefore, states acquire dangerous Weapons including Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) such as chemical, biological and nuclear weapons for survival, deterrence and self-preservation in the anarchic world system. History has shown that states such as Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Panama, and Libya, among others, were attacked by the super powers, notably the USA and the then USSR because they are not nuclear weapon states. Had North Korea not possessed nuclear weapons or the capacity to inflict significant consequences on the United States and its allies, the latter might have launched a military intervention, as was the case in Vietnam, Panama, Iraq, and Libya under the auspices of NATO. Accordingly, the acquisition of nuclear weapons can serve as a strategic guarantee of security against external military aggression. In this regard, Jiddere (2013) observes that "the feeling of insecurity and domination by others leads weaker states to aspire to increase their defensive capabilities to deter external aggression.

From the foregoing, Deterrence Theory provides a robust framework for understanding the driving forces behind North Korea's nuclear weapons programme. While South Korea and Japan are not only allies of the United States but also benefit from US extended deterrence, this effectively positions them as nuclear-armed actors by proxy. However, it is important to recognize that alliances and counter-alliances are neither permanent nor do they guarantee absolute security under all circumstances, given the uncertainties inherent in international politics.

Deterrence is effective only when three essential conditions are satisfied. First, communication: the adversary must be made aware, in clear and unambiguous terms, of the specific prohibited actions to avoid misinterpretation or misperception. Second, capability: the deterring actor must demonstrate, beyond reasonable doubt, the ability to inflict the

promised unacceptable and adverse consequences should the prohibited action occur. Third, credibility: the deterrer must possess a verifiable record and established credentials demonstrating the ability and willingness to carry out threats. Nonetheless, deterrence can fail if the adversary disregards the potential consequences and proceeds with the intended act of aggression, or in situations of miscalculation by either party. Moreover, accidental nuclear strikes remain a critical risk, potentially rendering deterrence ineffective.

STATES' MOTIVATIONS FOR ACQUIRING NUCLEAR WEAPONS

In general, there are four fundamental factors that motivate states to acquire nuclear weapons. Firstly, it is used as means of power and balance of power. Regional power states such as Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea see nuclear weapons as means of self defence, security and survival, as well as a means of achieving global stability through the system of balance of terror. This is what characterizes the post-cold war international order. Secondly, it serves as a means for political bargain (Roehrig, 2018; Rozman 2019). If the weaker states seek to acquire nuclear capabilities, the tendency of the advanced countries to adopt a policy of rapprochement towards them is very likely. The case of Iran and the US under President Obama (the Iranian Nuclear Dea1) suffices to justify this. Though President Trump has withdrawn the US from the deal and reinstated the various regimes of sanctions against Iran, and USA and North Korea under Donald Trump are good examples. It further revels that states acquires nuclear because it serves as a means of promoting the prestige of a state, for political reasons some states choose to acquire nuclear capability in order to promote their prestige among the community of other states. Additionally, the pursuit of nuclear power could be due to its technological prowess, this is a salient factor that drives states to acquire nuclear technology in order to demonstrate to the world their level of scientific and technological advancement and their arrival into the nuclear club (Roehrig, 2018; Rozman 2019). Consequently, North Korea specifically, has primarily four driving factors for nuclear strategies in the Korean Peninsula, in addition as deterring any possible US, in particular, and NATO's, in general, attack. Narang, citing Smith (2015) has identified these four factors as follows:

> (1) A strategy aimed at extracting international political or diplomatic concessions; (2) a strategy aimed at internationalizing crises on the Korean Peninsula in a way that triggers US and/or Chinese intermediation; (3) a retaliatory strategy to deter regime threatening attacks; and (4) a nuclear war fighting strategy to offset conventional weaknesses vis-à-vis South Korean and the United States.

On the other side of the argument for or against nuclear ambition are those who maintained that the proliferation of nuclear weapons would only create a situation of tension and instability in the international community (Jiddere, 2013). "They fear that, with more and more nuclear actors, miscalculation or accident (misunderstanding) or fanatical terrorism could lead to the use of weapons of mass destruction on a scale unseen since 1945 (Paul et al cited in Goldstein & Paverhouse, 2006:238). The fear of increased proliferation and threat to international peace and security is echoed by Rourke who maintained that "Nuclear proliferation is dangerous. The more nuclear countries and nuclear weapons there are, the greater is the chances of a nuclear weapons accident, to terrorists seizing or been given a weapon, and of an unstable leader having a nuclear to use" (Rourke 2019:510).

Furthermore, with the expansion, fast and easy means of transfer of knowledge globally; it is increasingly impossible to prevent any interested state the basic knowledge of nuclear technology as exemplified by the Abdulqadeer Khan's nuclear bazaar or network (Molly, 2018). And once a state acquires the knowledge then it will nearly impossible to stop it from achieving its nuclear objectives. Be that as it may be, while it is easy to have more and more

nuclear weapons proliferation in the international system, their use by any rational thinking leader, especially among the middle power states, is quite unlikely (Purboadji 2025). In addition, the sophistication of nuclear weapon would equally make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for non-state actors, especially terrorists, to acquire it, and to acquire the means of or capacity to deliver it. More importantly, the middle-power states know axiomatically that any nuclear weapon state will retaliate any nuclear attack by nuclear weapon (Khan, 2018). As such, it is highly unlikely that North Korea will attack the US or her allies in NATO under the extended deterrence. In fact, North Korea's highest nuclear detonation was only 100Kt while that of the US is 15,000kt (Aljazeera News Network, 2019). This clearly shows that the cost of attacking the US will, by several faults, outweigh its benefits. In other words, the consequences of nuclear retaliation by the United States would be overwhelmingly unacceptable to North Korea. North Korea will never dare a nuclear war with the US and of course, with the NATO. The US/North Korea nuclear crisis is a proxy conflict between China and the US.

NUCLEAR THREAT IN THE KOREAN PENINSULA

The existence of nuclear weapons has provided ambivalent values to countries in Northeast Asia (Emmers, 2016; Hayes, 2019; Han, 2019). Nuclear weapons have served as a stabilizing factor. As allies of the United States in the Peninsula, Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) have been assured security under the US, extended deterrence vis-à-vis aggression by potential adversaries (O'Neil, 2018). For China, its minimum deterrence nuclear capability vis-à-vis other nuclear weapons states such as the United States and Russia has guaranteed its sense of security (Belld, 2019). For the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), its nuclear programme is considered indispensable to securing its regime’s survival and getting more concessions from the United States, DPRK, and Japan in economic assistance negotiations (Taylor, 2018; Akiyama, 2019:33-34).

There are notably three states in the Korean Peninsula with nuclear programmes; Japan, South Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). These three states have created regional tension, misperception and mistrust in the Korean Peninsula (Santoro, 2019). Each of these states has maintained a high level of suspicion of one another. This has made North Korea unwilling to give up its nuclear programme thereby aggravating the fears of the other two states in the Korean Peninsula and beyond. These include, especially the United States, Israel and their allies (Kwak, 2016). In addition, North Korea has been accusing Japan of pursuing nuclear weapons through its plutonium programmes."This accusation was first made by the DPRK at an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors' meeting in the fall of 1991. The DPRK has pointed to Japan’s surplus of plutonium as indication of a bomb programme" (Khan, 2018:170). This accusation was further made public by the North Korean authorities through the DPRK's Central Broadcasting Network:

> If the plutonium Japan has brought in is for peaceful use, as the Japanese ruling circles claim, the quantity they stockpile is too large, and they need not bring it in such secrecy, hiding it from people's eyes. Japan is scheming to stockpile enormous quantities of plutonium to produce nuclear weapons massively at any time it chooses. (Khan, 2018:170).

The North Korean press also cited the Japanese fast breeder reactor with the capability to produce weapon grade plutonium as well as the shipments of plutonium from Europe as additional proof that the latter has a secret nuclear weapon programme. (Leventhal & Dolley, 2016; Han, 2019). Although Japan has halted its plutonium programmes, North Korea still sees Japan as an enemy, and as a potential adversary going by the former's close relations and

ally with the US (Han, 2019).. In response to North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, Japanese are equally worried and had outrightly expressed concerns over the DPKR's nuclear programme. Japan has also indicated the possibility of withdrawing from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in the event that North Korea successfully acquired nuclear devices. The former Japanese Foreign Minister, Kabun Moto stated in July 1993 that: "There is a cause in the NPT allowing withdrawal from the treaty. If North Korea develops nuclear weapons and that becomes a threat to Japan, if it comes down to a crunch, possessing the will that 'we can do it is important" (Leventhal & Dolley, 2016). However, Japan is yet to act in this direction of withdrawing from the NPT despite series of successful nuclear tests by the DPRK over the Guam Island in the Japanese territory.

Thus, it can be posit that with advancement of North Korea's nuclear development, it is obvious that the Korean Peninsula is likely to experience a speedy rate of proliferation of nuclear weapons to the level of the possibility of the escalation of conventional war. For instance, if a nuclear facility is attacked with a conventional weapon or miscalculation or a signal is misperceived, such can lead to an all-out nuclear confrontation. At the moment, North Korea presents immediate and real danger in the whole Northeastern Asia. South Korea and Japan may not continue depending on the US extended deterrence when the DPRK remains an existential threat to their national security. It should be noted that South Korea had a secret nuclear programme in the 1970s, and her nuclear energy programme could be converted into substantial nuclear weapons programme in few years, at most (Kristensen, 2019). It is further reveal that in 2004, during an inspection by the IAEA, it discovered that there was evidence of experiments involving separating some small amount of plutonium for the enrichment of uranium in South Korea which had not been reported by the South Korean authorities as part of their obligations in the NPT Additional Protocol. The authorities denied any knowledge of that (Kristensen, 2019). Even though it was later confirmed that it was carried out by an individual scientist, this has added to the North Korea's suspicion of a secret nuclear programme in South Korea, (Hayes, 2019). Hayes further elaborated that the situation has already created hostilities, regional arms race and instability in the Korean Peninsula. It has also marked the beginning of unraveling of the NPT regime. The DPRK in particular has violated its NPT obligation and all the treaties banning nuclear and missile tests, whatever may be its justification for that.

Beyond the Korean Peninsula, the United States of America is much more concerned with the North Korean nuclear weapons more so as North Korea demonstrated its capability to deliver nuclear weapons with intercontinental ballistic missiles into the US homelands. In addition, the US forces in the Northeastern region, particularly in the Guam Island, must take into account the DPRK's nuclear capabilities (Jasanoff, 2019; Manyin, 2021) With this actual threat, the US may be forced to take all available options in containing the North Korean nuclear threat. It has been stated that "While we may continue to rely on deterrence to dissuade any nuclear usage against our forces, (in the Korean peninsula). Circumstances could emerge where we will be limited in our options because of the nuclear threat, particularly in scenarios where the regime of these states believe their survival is threatened and thus fail to see our retaliation as unacceptable" (Gallucci, 2019:24). The US concern over nuclear proliferation, especially in the Middle East and in the Northeastern Asia, was echoed by the former US President George W. Bush. On June 1st, 2002, while making his remarks at West Point Academy, Bush stated:

> The greatest danger to freedom is at the perilous crossroads of radicalism and technology. With the spread of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, along with ballistic missiles technology when that occurs, even weak states and small groups could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations *(*Cited in Hutcheson, 2008:2).

The fear of nuclear weapon proliferation in the Korean Peninsula has made the US to call for the establishment of a nuclear free zone in the Korean Peninsula. In November 1991, the then US Secretary of State, James Baker, established the need for striking a deal among the states in the Peninsula prohibiting nuclear weapons as well as uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing facilities, in the Peninsula. Consequently, the North and South Korea signed a bilateral agreement to that effect. This agreement is yet to come into effect, due to the fact that because the negotiations on its implementation and verification have became entangled with broader talks on North-South Korean relations which still remain hostile (Leventhal & Dolley, 2016:164). However, recent developments have indicated improvement in their relations as exemplified with the joined parade of the two Korean states under one flag in the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea as well as the attendance of the Olympics by the biological sister of the North Korean supreme leader.

More importantly, the supreme leader of North Korea, Kim Jung Un, boldly paid a visit to South Korea and crossed the dividing line separating the two Korea's making him the first North Korean President to visit South Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953. He has pledged to end his nuclear test as well as stop missile launching. This has constituted in diplomatic relations a very strong confidence building that the overheated nuclearization in the Korean Peninsula will be negotiated with a view to finding a more peaceful deal that will guarantee collective security in the Peninsula, if successfully pursued (Hayes, 2019).

All efforts by the US and her allies to stop North Korea from acquiring nuclear capability enough to pose existential threat have failed. The US Secretary of State met President Kim Jung Un as a preparatory stage for a direct high-level talk between the US and the DPRK. Such a high-level personal diplomacy could pave way for a renewed talk on the denuclearization process in the Korean peninsula. The success of this will highly depend on tangible economic bargain and guarantee of non-hostile relationship from the US as well as the ending of US extended deterrence to Japan and South Korea. What would not likely be possible is for the DPRK to give up its nuclear weapons in the near future and without commensurate economic benefits in return.

THE DOUBLE STANDARDS IN GLOBAL NUCLEAR POLICY

Nuclear double standard is seen with serious contempt as any attempt by other non-nuclear states to acquire nuclear weapons and missile systems capable of threatening their individual and collective security interests, they continue to retain and upgrade their arsenals and maintain a conspiracy of silence over nuclear ambitions of their allies (Molly, 2016; Christopher, 2025). For instance, Israel which is reputed to be a nuclear weapon state and has for that purpose refused to join the NPT. The US, in particular, and NATO, in general, have failed to compel Israel to formally declare its nuclear status or even join the NPT and sign the nuclear free zone in the Middle East. These have made it unavoidable for other middle power states such as Iran and North Korea to seek to acquire nuclear capabilities as a means of balancing of power in their respective regions as well as a means of deterrence from any would-be aggressor (Jiddere, 2016). In addition, Glosserman, (2018) argued that the US assured extended deterrence to Japan and South Korea has been particularly responsible for North Koreas refusal to denuclearize. Instead, it has achieved full nuclear weapon status and has demonstrated its capabilities of having both offensive and defensive weapons (Rozman, 2019).

The nuclear double standard of the superpowers is much more pronounced in the case of Israel. The first public revelation of Israel's nuclear weapon programme came in the London

based Sunday Times on 5th October 1986 which published information provided by Mordechai Vanunu, formerly an employee at the Israel Negev Nuclear Research Center. The second revelation was made by the former Israel Prime Minister Shimon Peres in 1998 when he said "Israel built a nuclear option, not to have a Hiroshima but an Oslo" (US Defense Intelligence Agency, 2023). According to Moore, shortly after the Gulf War in 1991, Germany sold to Israel two of its diesel-powered dolphin class sub-marines and Israel promised to purchase a third at a subsidized price. (Moore, 2016).

Despite all these high-level revelations, "and about its own well-known but officially unacknowledged nuclear arsenal" (Elbaradei, 2011:222), Israel to date has refused to make public, at least officially, its nuclear status. To further complicate the issue, Israel has to date refused to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty essentially to avoid international pressure and that of International Atomic Energy Agency (I.A.E.A) to denuclearize. Nevertheless, Israel is always in the fore in mounting pressure on Iran and North Korea to give up their nuclear programmes. In fact, it was Israel, in a claimed preemptive attack which bombed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor on July 1st 1981. Israel has joined the US and her Western allies (France and United Kingdom), in particular, in calling on Iran to give up her nuclear programme (Roberts, 2019). The US has gone beyond pressure to reporting the Islamic State of Iran to the IAEA. And the IAEA under Muhammad El-Barrdai tabled the Iranian matter before the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This represents not only a clear-cut case of double standard, but also a serious conspiracy of silence over the Israel nuclear weapon programme by the western powers. The danger of Israel's consistent refusal to join the NPT regime is that many sophisticated terrorist groups, and of course, some states in the Middle East would strive to acquire nuclear weapons (though for terrorist groups, it would be extremely difficult, however, not out rightly impossible). If this happens, even the nuclear deterrence of the super power states would be rendered ineffective and, perhaps, outrightly useless.

On the path of the nuclear weapon states, while they keep pressuring other states with nuclear ambition, such as Iran and North Korea, to give up their nuclear weapon programmes, they refused to comply with the demand of the NPT to comply with their obligation to disarm. The first principle of NPT is that of disarmament, followed by then peaceful use of nuclear technology for civil purpose, then by non-proliferation as the third principle of the NPT. Specifically, Article VI of the NPT categorically states: "Each of the parties to the treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control". Instead of engaging in negotiations and take the lead in nuclear disarmament, the super power states are more concerned on upgrading and retaining their nuclear weapons for deterrence purpose (USA Department of Energy, 2018). It has been observed that:

> The most fundamental problem with the nuclear nonproliferation regime is, in itself, a double standard; the inherent asymmetry, or inequality, between the nuclear haves and have-nots, exacerbated by the continuing reliance by the nuclear weapon states on nuclear weapons and their lack of progress on nuclear disarmament. Worse, rather than moving to fulfill their commitment to disarm, most have modernized their arsenals and continue to develop new types of weapons. For countries that do not have such weapons and do not fall under a nuclear umbrella protection arrangement (extended deterrence) such as NATO, this reinforces the perception that the acquisition of nuclear weapons is sure path to power and prestige, an insurance policy against attack (SIPRI, 2019:236).

For instance, the United Kingdom insists on retaining its nuclear capability. The former UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, said "as an essential part of our assurance against the uncertainties and risks of the future, the UK must continue to retain its independent nuclear deterrence capability"(Blair in USA Department of Energy, 2018:9). On the part of the US, its nuclear arsenals have served to defend not only the US but also its allies in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. President Obama echoed this when he said:

> I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. This goal will not be reached quickly-perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence. But we must ignore the voices who tell us that the world cannot change. As long as these weapons exist the US will maintain a safe, secure, and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies. (Obama Cited in Bernstein, 2015:20).

Nuclear weapons play an important deterrence posture, and continue to remain an essential instrument of the non-proliferation strategy of the US by reducing the incentives of many of its allies to acquire nuclear weapons of their own by way of extended deterrence. Countries of that nature within NATO are South Korea, Japan and Australia. To the US, nuclear weapons will continue to be a unique attribute that offers a special contribution to its national defence and security. (USDE, 2018). It is, therefore, very clear that the US will continue to possess nuclear capability until such a time that it is convinced that no any other country in the world can threaten its national security with any kind of nuclear weapons. Indeed, the US is likely to be the last country to give up its nuclear weapons as it is the first to have produced it. President Obama's statement above is a clear testimony to this.

Consequently, the Beijin victory parade on 3th September, 2025 has provided North Korea the opportunity to demonstrate her strong alliance with China and Russia. It was the first time such alliance was openly presented. The Chinese President Xi Zin Pin invited Vladmir Putin of Russia and Kin Fung Un of North Korea to witness the parade (Bae, 2017; Kydd, 2018; Mustafa, Bashir, & Liaqat, 2018). Thus, this event appears to all critical analyst and observers of global power politics as a warning to the West and in particular to the US, that global power relation is now titled to their alliance. Xin Jin Pin categorically stated that "states can now choose between peace and war" hence, to North Korea, is significant moment in its regional balance of power especially in the Korea Peninsula, it shows additional military preponderance in favor of North Korea and created possible extended nuclear deterrence from China and Russia and also a serious warning to the US and indeed NATO.

Meanwhile, at the moment, China is the fastest among the super powers in modernizing and upgrading its nuclear capability. This is largely due to the likelihood of an escalated war in Taiwan Strait which would certainly attract US involvement and the possible use of nuclear weapons. In recent times, China has, in both qualitative and quantitative, terms been modernizing its nuclear forces, developing and deploying new classes of missiles, upgrading older missile systems and developing methods to counter ballistic missile defenses. (USDE, 2018). The recent victory parade in Beijing is a testimony to this objective reality of China's intensified of upgrade of her nuclear arsenals (Bell, 2019). Likewise, other super powers, namely Russia, the United Kingdom and France are all modernizing and upgrading their nuclear capabilities. Nuclear remains a strategic component for National Defense and Security to the super powers and this will continue to be so for so many decades to come (Roberts, 2019). This is because total, complete and comprehensive nuclear disarmament is not possible at least in a foreseeable future. This is exemplified by the clear refusal of the two world nuclear giants (USA and Russia) to take the lead in the disarmament processes. Elbaradei once stated that:

> Both the US and Russia being the most heavily armed states with various kinds of the most destructive nuclear weapons, such as Plutonium bomb, have the greatest responsibility to show leadership example in their disarmament obligation under the NPT. The two states together account for more than 95 percent of the entire nuclear warheads currently existing in the world (Elbaradei, 2011:123).

The current crisis between the US and DPRK is the continuation of US imperialistic tendency globally, in the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and in the Balkans. With the collapse of the former USSR, and the dismemberment of the Warsaw pact which marked the end of the Cold War literally, the US come up with a policy of a "New World Order" implying that the US would, henceforth not allow the emergence of any potential future global power competitor, however small it may be. The doctrine of pre-emptive attack used by President Bush as a pretext for the invasion of Iraq, was reinforced by President Obama when he stated that "any threat to American values and interest is sufficient cause for the US to militarily attack another country"(World Socialist Website, 2019).

In the same vein, President Trump is viciously engaged in all forms of propaganda to demonize the North Korean leader as an existential threat to global peace and security and must be stopped at all costs, not ruling out the possibility of a military option. This conflict is not just between the US, which is the world most heavily armed state and an economically poor and impoverished North Korea (Tidwell & Wallis, 2021). Consequently, it is basically an indirect challenge to China which the US now considers as its potential global challenger, economically and militarily. Any attack on the DPRK would certainly attract Chinese involvement as the DPRK and China still maintain a mutual defence treaty particularly that China would not tolerate US domination of the Korean Peninsula, an area directly neighboring the northern part of China. It is not in doubt that North Korea is not interested in developing nuclear weapons purely for the purpose of attacking any other state, rather as a means of tilting the balance of power in the Korean Peninsula in its favour (Tidwell & Wallis, 2021). North Korea sees with contempt the extensive plutonium program of Japan which is being supported by the US (although under full IAEA safeguards).

In April 2018, the supreme leader of North Korea has indicated his interest to have direct talks with the US President Donald Trump with the hope of finding a mutual solution to the Korean peninsula's nuclear crisis. The success of their negotiation will likely set in motion possible future power relations in the Peninsula as well as bringing to an end the various regimes of sanctions imposed on North Korea by the United Nations Security Council and the US, In exchange for some negotiated disarmament (Bong, 2019). Hence, for this talk to be successful, the US must underscore the military option in the crisis. A US unilateral attack on the DPRK may be legitimate, but certainly would not meet the legal standard for a pre-emptive strike. As stated earlier, the decision-makers in the DPRK are not irrational to dare nuclear confrontation with the US. In fact, even if the war will be confined to conventional weapons, the devastation would run into millions and by far surpass the experience of the Korean war of 1950-53. And in the event that other super powers, such as Russia and/or China, are drawn into the war, the consequences would be global and immeasurable. Indeed, that may mark the beginning of the World War III. And if the war escalates into all out nuclear war, then humanity and its civilization would certainly be wiped off the surface of the globe.

CONCLUSION

The Korean Peninsula remains a site of protracted nuclear tension, highlighted by North Korea's successful development and detonation of nuclear weapons, including sophisticated

plutonium-based intercontinental ballistic missiles. While Japan and South Korea benefit from the United States extended nuclear deterrence, Japan also maintains a safeguarded nuclear programme under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This regional nuclear dynamic is further complicated by perceived inconsistencies in U.S. global nuclear policy, particularly in regions such as the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and the Balkans. Fundamentally, the nuclear standoff on the Korean Peninsula can be understood as a proxy confrontation with China, given the U.S.'s strategic concern over China's potential regional and global influence.

North Korea's accession to the club of nuclear-armed states has significantly enhanced its diplomatic leverage, enabling more assertive negotiations with the United States and its allies in Europe and East Asia. Central to North Korea's strategy are the objectives of national survival and securing economic and political concessions, including the potential lifting of international sanctions and removal from lists of states sponsoring terrorism. High-level diplomatic engagements, such as the meetings between Kim Jong Un, U.S. officials, and South Korean leadership, underscore the strategic role of nuclear capability in consolidating North Korea's bargaining position. Consequently, North Korea has effectively achieved a more favorable balance of power on the Peninsula, shaping regional security dynamics and recalibrating the strategic calculations of the United States and its allies.

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