

Academic approaches to the analysis of the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula

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The academic literature on the Korean nuclear issue is very extensive. It has also undergone considerable evolution; its historiography in part reflects optimistic or pessimistic assessments of the prospects for the resolution of the problems concerned. Much positive analysis (often of an 'institutionalist' character) was forthcoming in the middle 1990s, less positive analysis (usually 'realist') became more common after the US-DPRK confrontation of late 2002 and the subsequent declaration by Pyongyang, in 2005, that it had acquired a nuclear deterrent. For this necessarily brief overview, three different approaches will be contrasted. All social science analysis is based upon simplifying models of complex reality, and multi-causal models are often developed. However, for the purpose of classification, the approaches chosen have been outlined according to which single feature is most salient: the structure of the Northeast Asian regional system, the particular characteristics of the DPRK polity, or the place of the DPRK in relation to evolving non-proliferation norms. Policies intended to deal with the issue which are founded in one or other of these analyses are also contrasted. One notable aspect of this literature is that few of its contributors are of the view that there is no way forward, although it is also accurate to say that there are many disagreements on what would constitute real progress (let alone a 'comprehensive' settlement). The most important question currently is to decide whether to accept the DPRK as, in some sense, a nuclear player and to manage matters accordingly, or whether there is still real scope to bring Pyongyang back to full compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and if so what inducements might have that effect. This often becomes a debate on the degree of policy flexibility of which Pyongyang is capable, a point considered by way of conclusion.

Structure of Northeast Asian security

There is considerable credibility in a regional approach to the issue. There can be little dispute that Northeast Asia suffers from a dual and unfortunate historical inheritance. On the one hand, as the site of the first open conflict of the Cold War era, the Korean peninsula

experienced all the destruction and consequent bitterness that warfare engenders. Korea was divided and that national division has remained. In addition, that conflict stimulated separate and antagonistic economic, ideological, and security identities which have come to be deeply rooted in the countries of the region. Even despite the many changes of the last decades, notably the movement to reform in China, the globalisation of the ROK economy, and the spread of prosperity through much of Asia, sources of antagonism remain. The DPRK is very poorly integrated into the regional economy, and other trans-national linkages remain weak. Pyongyang still has no formal diplomatic relations with the United States or Japan. The Cold War alliance systems have proved remarkably durable. Though the formal security treaty between the DPRK and Russia was abrogated after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US-ROK, US-Japan and China-DPRK treaties remain in being. The United States continues to base significant military assets in both Japan and the ROK. Though, as a result of the implementation of the provisions of the Shanghai Communiqué, the US has no formal alliance role in relation to Taiwan, with the passage of the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 an informal security relationship remains.

It is common in academic writing to refer to the existence of a region-wide 'security architecture'. It is certainly the case that a multilateralism of sorts has come into existence. The ASEAN Regional Forum includes all the relevant parties as well as some extra-regional states. Its specific focus is security and in the past it has indeed adopted motions critical of the destabilising effects of the DPRK nuclear weapons program and has also supported such progress as has been achieved through multilateral negotiation. However, the ARF is at best a weak security structure. No effective mechanisms exist to implement policies on which the members are agreed. Indeed, aside from occasional ad hoc procedures (for example, on disaster relief), the ARF only makes its position on any question known through the modality of the statement from the chair which is presented at the conclusion of the annual meeting. As the chairs are ASEAN states by rotation, their independent diplomatic leverage is small. According to long-standing ASEAN procedures, all such statements are consensus documents which, typically, prescribe no sanctions or restrictive measures if milestones or goals are not met. The best that can be expected of the ARF is that it can impart some diplomatic momentum to the solution of regional problems, or engage in preventive diplomacy on emerging issues. And it should be recognised that once the DPRK became a

member of the group (in 2000), provided sufficiently senior representatives from Pyongyang were dispatched to attend, the meetings did provide the occasion for some useful bilateral exchanges on the sidelines. In addition to the ARF, other institutional arrangements including APEC and ASEAN Plus Three also perform security functions.

The 'regional security architecture' also embraces, however, those very alliance arrangements the origins of which can be traced to the Cold War era. Thus the bilateral alliances already noted, and the various security arrangements that exist between the United States and the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and also Australia (and New Zealand) are major security features. From one point of view, this system contributes stability and predictability to a complex and growing region, but from another it is a continual reminder of those divisions that were the product of the former era.

Shifting the focus of analysis from structure to process, a further proposition commonly informs analyses of the region. Though the regional architecture contains some remarkably durable features it is currently experiencing unprecedented strains. Even before the global financial crisis, power relativities were in a state of flux; the crisis has imparted further impetus to these trends. The continued rise of China, the erosion of United States capacity, the demographic and economic stasis of Japan, the emerging sub-regional role of India, are all imposing unusual pressures on the architecture. Acquiescence in US hegemony was formerly the default position in regional security. With the war in Afghanistan, whatever its outcome, likely to be the last land war the United States wages in Asia, a renegotiation of regional fundamentals is inevitable. Already China has become the most important player in regional multilateralism. The academic literature holds that at times of major power shifts, miscalculations and uncertainties are difficult to avoid. In Northeast Asia, where the interests of China and the US intersect directly, there is considerable scope for uncertainty.

How is the Korean nuclear issue to be evaluated in this context? Perhaps the most striking problem has been the absence of an institutional vehicle in which the interests of all the parties can be brought to bear. Analysts who adopt a regional approach therefore stress the continuance of Cold War divisions and the associated lack of effective and inclusive institutions. In short, the isolation and insecurity of the DPRK are traced to these regional characteristics. The remedy suggested by this approach is institution construction, which in

time is expected to generate concomitant confidence building processes that, in turn, will influence the calculations of the state actors.

From this perspective, the Six Party Process was adopted largely to overcome the regional institutional deficit. Though at different times both the United States and the DPRK had sought bilateral solutions to the nuclear and related problems, Six Party was designed to bring all of the major stake holders together, with China acting as chair in recognition of Beijing's influence and of the centrality of the Korean peninsula for China's security concerns. The fortunes of Six Party are a reminder that process is not result. Since its inception, Six Party has laboured under the difficulty that the parties have not taken a consistent position on its agenda and dynamics. The denuclearisation of the peninsula has always been a primary objective, as was indicated in the agreement of 19 September 2005. The extent to which steps also should be taken to integrate the DPRK into the regional economy, either as an end in itself or as a means, has been in dispute. The requirements of what is often described as a 'peace regime' on the peninsula have also been debated. For some parties a formal end to the Korean War is essential; others see the revision or abrogation of the treaty systems that emerged at the time of and as a response to the War (notably the US-ROK and China-DPRK security treaties) as desirable if not a requirement. And it has been the DPRK position that once Washington has revoked the security treaty with Seoul, there could be no further justification for the basing of US troops.

Other issues have also been raised at Six Party, in recognition of the fact that as the DPRK has yet to attain normal relations with three of the parties, it is one of the few arenas where such questions can be discussed and where the DPRK might be expected to enjoy some leverage. Until the first DPRK nuclear test, one of the fundamental objectives of the process was the anticipated return of the DPRK to the NPT and thus the reaffirmation of global nuclear norms. In particular, steps towards fully declaring, abandoning and verifying the DPRK nuclear program(s) have been the subject of many sessions. Now that Pyongyang has affirmed its status as a 'nuclear power', and indeed has specifically sought negotiations with the US on this basis, Six Party will need to adopt a revised mandate if it is to remain central to regional diplomacy. None of the other parties have yet to indicate that there would be no objection to the DPRK remaining a nuclear power, let alone be permitted to re-enter the NPT as such a power.

According to the regional approach, then, Six Party, though a promising start, is not (or not yet) a solution to the institutional deficit nor does it overcome those inherited regional divisions noted above. It follows that either the process must return to a renegotiation of its fundamentals, or some other vehicle must be found to deal with the nuclear issue.

Meanwhile, the regional system of alliances must be managed consistent with these steps. There are also some who contend that even with institutions still in formation, associated confidence building might provide an appropriate impetus. In this context, the US decision to publicise the withdrawal of all nuclear weapons from the Korean peninsula in 1991 is seen as a relevant precedent.

Nature of the DPRK political and social system

The nuclear issue is often traced to the domestic characteristics of the political system. Academic analysts of the DPRK polity are in general agreement on two points. First, the behaviour of the DPRK, especially in connection with the nuclear issue, has deep roots in the decidedly idiosyncratic nature of the political system. Second, the origins of that political system are to be sought in the Stalinist model imported from the Soviet Union and manifest in the earliest characteristics of the republic upon its formation in 1948. They differ, however, on the degree to which they consider the DPRK can still be understood as a Stalinist system, some holding that the DPRK's unique historical experience has been formative.

On the Stalinist origins, the evidence is clear. The DPRK adopted the Stalinist pattern in its entirety: the absence of title to private property, the dominance of the party-state, ideological rigidity, a foreign policy aligned with congener states and, quite early, the elevation of the leader to a unique position. Just as the former socialist states were often suspicious of external engagement which their leaderships therefore sought to manage carefully, so the DPRK behaves to this day. According to some views, however, these factors provide merely a framework and that the full dynamics of the DPRK can only be appreciated through historical analysis.

There can be little argument that the DPRK's historical experience has been quite particular. The trauma of the Korean War still resonates; fatalities constituted more than 10% of the entire population touching every family, and almost every structure in the country was

destroyed or severely damaged. Following the War the DPRK committed itself to 'socialist construction' in a bid to demonstrate the superiority and genuine patriotism of its own system. After a promising beginning the contest was decisively lost, with the parlous state of the economy one of the causes of the devastating famine of 1996-97. This was an event unprecedented in an industrialised and urbanised state, and forced Pyongyang to appeal for international aid upon which the country is still, to some extent, reliant. The leadership system in the DPRK has also taken on the most unusual features. Hereditary leaderships are not uncommon, but their adoption in a polity founded on socialist principles involved the most strained of rationalisations. The official ideology of the DPRK also took on special characteristics. Though Marxism was not entirely repudiated, for most purposes local conceptions and especially the *juche* (self-reliance) idea replaced standard Leninist formulations, and DPRK spokespersons even suggested that this idea had not only supplanted Marxism but had also provided the most advanced model of thinking for the entire globe. In the last decade a further innovation has transformed – some analysts would say, reversed – the ideological basis of the political system. Formerly the state was ruled by a party and administered by a bureaucratic machine in the name of the people, or at least the most important classes, the proletariat and the peasantry. Now the state, under the *songun* (military first) doctrine, is ruled by and for the military. Such has been the case in practice in former 'socialist' systems, but never was theory so openly amended to positively acknowledge the primacy of the agents of force.

As an indicator of the degree of system transformation that has occurred, it should be pointed out that regular and mandated party processes have ceased to function, with the ruling party failing to convene a full conference since 1980 though required to do so under its rules every decade. Neither are full plenums of the Central Committee convened. Further, many decisions are now taken in the name of the Central Military Committee, a body appointed on obscure principles. The military now appear to be in charge of much of the economy. On some views DPRK practice has so far diverged from the socialist original that a new conception is required for its understanding.

Most analysts of the DPRK would agree, at least, that it possesses a most idiosyncratic political and social system. However, there are sharp differences on the way in which that idiosyncrasy should be considered in the framing of policy on the nuclear issue. Given the

special challenges of maintaining a socialist hereditary system, a concept that is sometimes employed is the notion of 'regime security'. Where other systems seek principally to protect their territory and population, the security of the DPRK is primarily conceived as the security of its inner leadership. Other analysts hold that in seeking to understand DPRK state behaviour a more conventional notion of security remains applicable.

On the choice by the DPRK to adopt nuclear arms, though that decision is ascribed by some to the evident superiority of the DPRK's potential antagonists, an influential view finds regime dynamics to be an essential factor. As has been noted, the commitment of Pyongyang to the military first strategy would seem to entail the possession of the most advanced armaments possible. Nuclear weapons also serve, in effect, as validation of the regime's characterisation of its environment as threatening and uncertain, with enemies committed to the extinction of the distinctive ideology upheld by the leadership.

Finally, there is a major academic debate on the extent to which the DPRK seeks external engagement or, indeed, could assimilate extensive external linkages. Mindful of the experience of Eastern Europe, some analysts contend that opening will undermine what influence the leadership still possesses over the population. How far that leadership understands this logic is not clear. Other analysts note the evident study that DPRK cadres have made of economic reforms in China and Vietnam, and believe that if the circumstances were favourable, Pyongyang would follow suit. This issue is crucial for the shaping of policy towards the nuclear question. If the leadership is contemplating some measure of reform, then, as part of a package including limitations on or the abandonment of the nuclear program, inducements might be framed to encourage and facilitate such steps. These might include the entry of the DPRK into global financial institutions, loans oriented to encouraging external commerce and inward investment, and relevant personnel training. These are all measures with positive confidence building potential. If, however, reform is not contemplated, then such inducements are bound to be wasted or will be diverted. Changing external DPRK behaviour cannot rest upon an engagement strategy, as the regime is not principally concerned with the prosperity of its citizenry. Rather, an appeal must be made directly to the self-interest of the inner leadership. The extreme version of this position finds the current DPRK to be largely incorrigible; the failure of the 'axis of evil' approach suggests that on that assumption external actors have little leverage. However, as

the DPRK continues to experience a major human security crisis, how much reciprocity should be expected for aid and assistance rendered for humanitarian objectives irrespective of the outcome of the nuclear issue is a matter of continuing controversy.

Evolution of the non-proliferation regime

Much analysis of the Korean nuclear issue traces its difficulties and complexities to proliferation as a global issue. It is not necessary to rehearse here the development of global non-proliferation norms. Suffice it to say that four developments have had an important bearing on the behaviour of the major actors. There is never an extended analysis of proliferation questions which does not raise, sometimes at length, the Korean case.

First, the NPT regime was never complete. With the emergence of Israel, India and Pakistan outside of the remit of the Treaty and all in receipt of assistance, at one time or another, by major powers themselves either at the time or subsequently NPT members, its lack of universality rendered more and more arbitrary the consideration of sanctions against non-compliance. If states always outside the Treaty who have never adopted any transparency measures are tolerated or even rewarded, the justification for pressure on partly compliant states is weakened. Further, DPRK cooperation, at various times, with Syria, Libya and Iran, though unfortunate, could be interpreted as little different from US cooperation with Israel. Second, the manifest imbalance between the obligations of nuclear powers as opposed to non-nuclear states has never been sufficiently addressed. When a nuclear power seeks to exert leverage over a non-nuclear state, actors such as the DPRK have been quick to point out the inequities involved. Security guarantees, such as were offered by the DPRK by the Clinton administration, though some mitigation of this tension have not proved sufficient.

The third development has had an immense impact on the Korean case. The events of September 11 have led to a much more stringent approach to proliferation by the United States and its close allies. The possibility of linkage between proliferation and the activities of terrorist groups stimulated a shift from non-proliferation to 'counter-proliferation'. The Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) is an exemplar of this strategy. However, without a satisfactory normative base either in international law or in the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, counter-proliferation generated great uncertainties regarding its legitimacy. Moreover, the statements of some members of the George W Bush

administration made it plain that the DPRK was especially targeted by the PSI. Again, DPRK policies can be interpreted as a response both to these uncertainties and to the national isolation that might flow from a rigorous implementation of the PSI. Fourth, developments inside the NPT, especially in relation to the Iran, have had an immediate effect on the Korean case. The extent to which some powers have been prepared to accept and even legitimise aspects of the Iranian nuclear program that are in contradiction to Iran's transparency and self-limitation obligations under the NPT have undoubtedly encouraged the DPRK to argue for at least equal treatment.

The record of the DPRK in relation to its membership of the NPT is often adduced as illustrative of the extent to which Pyongyang can be expected to observe its agreements. This behaviour admits, however, of several interpretations. For some analysts a pattern can be discerned in the failure to observe the original obligations of membership, to keep the terms of the Agreed Framework as they related to the NPT (and especially steps taken by the DPRK to break the continuity of IAEA safeguards, rendering a complete account of the nuclear program extremely difficult to reconstruct), to suspend its membership for a second time, and then to become an affirmed nuclear power in contravention of the Six Party agreements of 2005 and then 2007. Other analysts find this narrative decidedly incomplete. At each point, it is argued, the policy choices of other state actors had a bearing, presenting incentives for continued evasion of NPT responsibilities. The most notable example that is adduced is the decision by the Bush administration to include the DPRK within the 'axis of evil', though the failure of the Clinton administration to move to full diplomatic recognition between 1994 and 2000 is also cited.

Finally, the fact that the recent nuclear and related activities of the DPRK have been the subject of three United Nations Security Council Resolutions (#1695, #1718 and #1874) has rendered the nuclear issue a global concern even beyond its implications for the maintenance of the NPT. Correspondingly, as a result of its nuclear program, the DPRK faces the unique requirement of adopting positive measures of reassurance if those resolutions are ever to be withdrawn. It must also agree to negotiate new IAEA protocols, which will be an immensely demanding task as their requirements will be without precedent.

Conclusion: the role of political leadership

So far, in presenting three types or approaches in academic analysis, the role of historical, structural and functional elements has been emphasised. How far these elements account for the key policy choices of the nations of the region is an open question. It is evident that at certain turning points, political leaders have made choices or taken initiatives that have shaped events. In 1994, for example, had former President Jimmy Carter not undertaken his visit to the DPRK to meet President Kim Il Sung, who was prompted then to state terms for a resolution of the crisis, tensions over the nuclear issue may have escalated. According to the testimony of members of the Clinton administration, a military strike on DPRK nuclear facilities was an option under active consideration. Instead, in the later 1990s there seemed real prospects of a resolution of the issue. Similarly, there have been clear instances of the DPRK evidently experimenting with policies which, had they been consistently implemented, would have had major consequences for the issue. One example, often cited by analysts, is the decision to experiment with export oriented commerce in the free trade zone located in Rajin-Sonbong. Until 1996 a model was being trialled with some success which might have led to the progressive opening of other locations to foreign investment, reducing DPRK isolation and generating confidence on the part of the regime that such a process could be managed. Instead, the experimented was quarantined and then restricted, and has consequently had only local results.

This is not to suggest, however, that the policies available to state actors are necessarily widely various. In the Korean case, two examples of what is often termed, in the academic literature, 'path-dependence' can be detected. First is the DPRK decision to become a self-proclaimed nuclear power. This step has closed many options, or at least rendered a policy reversal extremely costly. Second is the decision, perhaps related, to re-found the DPRK regime upon the *songun* principle. The credibility of peaceful intent from a 'military-first' actor is difficult to sustain. And in the DPRK case, as has been suggested, path dependence is a particularly applicable characteristic. In political systems based upon electoral procedures, administrations come and go, and often succeed electorally by repudiating the policies of their predecessors. The leaders of the DPRK can enjoy no such luxury – open repudiation of the past is an admission of error.