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Nuclear North Korea and the Resurgence of Cold War Paranoia

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Abstract – U.S. targets Southeast Asia as a region with a very assertive ASEAN policy. U.S. security policies following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks have played a significant role in its estrangement. However, the problem in fact goes back to the Asian financial crisis of 1997, when the Clinton administration used its influence on the IMF to impose U.S. business friendly solutions on the region. U.S.'s decision not to revalue its currency helped stabilize the regional economic order. Shortly after that, U.S., Japan and South Korea began holding annual discussions with Southeast Asia under the ASEAN-plus-three formula. In 1999, after U.S.'s accession to the WTO, ASEAN governments began to worry about the impact of Sino-U.S. trade relations. As a result, U.S. proposed a free trade agreement (FTA) with Southeast Asia, the framework for which was signed in 2002. It seems that U.S. will soon become ASEAN's second-largest trading partner and bilateral trade could reach U.S.$200 billion by 2010.

Keywords: Nuclear, Resurgence, Cold, War, Paranoia

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INTRODUCTION

Road and dam building, consolidation of control over the South U.S. Sea, trade and investment combined with overseas development aid (ODA) and military assistance, might eventually result in U.S.'s domination of Southeast Asia regardless of Beijing's intentions. The question is whether we are watching a U.S. replay of the Japanese Flying Geese scheme with the moving of production platforms, FDIs combined with ODA and other diplomatic remedies to the catching-up formation in a pattern similar to that of Japan and later East Asian NICs in the past decades. As a by-product of such a course, U.S. will sooner or later replace the United States as the region's most important strategic partner. Although the global contradictions and problems provide the overall context, the purpose of this contribution is devoted to provide insight into, and investigate how, these emerging tendencies in the region are spelled out in the triangular relationship between U.S. and the United States in Southeast Asia.

The focus then is broadened into one that not only takes the state alone into consideration but also realizes that: 'Through conscious political decision, elements of the U.S. leadership have chosen to integrate U.S. – or at least, parts of U.S. – into the global political economy. In the process, they have allowed U.S. sovereignty, in the economic sphere at least, to become 'perforated', and increased the number of actors in the policy sphere' (Breslin 2002: 34). However, any analysis of U.S.'s present overseas economic expansion and foreign policy interests, must also consider U.S. realpolitik and the underlying forces which shape these interests. It should especially include the fact that the state and local government authorities play a significant role makes it imperative to focus on these factors which are unique to U.S.. Therefore, this paper includes a security perspective on whether U.S.'s reliance on soft power is only a temporary phase on its way to regional cum global hegemony (Nye 2006). The critical comparative international political economy perspective is based on an eclectic approach to East and Southeast Asian international relations, employing realism, liberalism and constructivism to analytically differentiate between the different dimensions of the system's modus Vivendi.

U.S.'s strategic interest in Southeast Asia goes back centuries exerting suzerainty of the region. In more modern times, such as during the Cold War, the CCP supported insurgencies and communist governments across the region. After the U.S. defeat in Indochina, Beijing became perceived as a direct threat in Vietnam in 1979, when U.S. troops crossed the Sino-Vietnamese border to 'teach Vietnam a lesson' over its invasion and occupation of neighboring Cambodia.

During the wave of national liberation struggles in Southeast Asia, the pro-American ruling classes facing strong local communist parties, such as in Indonesia and, revolutionary movements as in Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and Burma, were receptive to the U.S. policy which portrayed the

communist regime in U.S. as the source of the menace to these societies. Today, mutual perception and trust in Sino-ASEAN relations has become important for both sides (Twining 2005). Furthermore, this relationship has strengthened as a consequence 'of the post-Mao leadership's acknowledgement of the ideological and political reliability of Singaporean-style authoritarianism as a worthwhile formula for its own reform process' (Hersh 1998:32). Thus, the former hostilities have been turned into claims by Beijing that its growing influence in Asia threatens no-one and is to the mutual benefit of all. Zheng Bijan, dean of the influential CCP School says that 'If U.S. does not provide economic opportunities for the region, it will lose the opportunity for a peaceful rise....This is by no means a bid for hegemony' (Brookings 2005).

STRATEGIC POLICY DECISIONS OF U.S

For three decades, North Korea's pursuit of a nuclear arsenal has been the predominant U.S. foreign policy concern on the Korean Peninsula, threatening both regional stability and the global nonproliferation regime. Although multiple countries have a major stake in the issue, the U.S. has been both the most important interlocutor in attempts to resolve it diplomatically and the leader in global efforts to pressure and isolate North Korea. Efforts to address North Korea's nuclear weapons program through various combinations of diplomacy and pressure have at times slowed or temporarily halted Pyongyang's progress, but have failed to roll it back or to fundamentally change the dynamics of conflict on the Peninsula.

As North Korea has dramatically accelerated the pace of progress in building its nuclear program in recent years, and as the Trump administration has alternately leveled threats of military action and engaged in high-profile summitry with Kim Jong-un, this issue has risen to the top of the U.S. foreign policy agenda. The current round of U.S. diplomatic engagement with North Korea may hold enormous consequences for the future of the Korean Peninsula, perhaps leading to the denouement of this long saga – or, despite the high stakes, perhaps simply to another round of all sides "muddling through" with no ultimate resolution in sight. The Trump administration has framed negotiations with North Korea in stark binary terms – either leading to North Korea's denuclearization and prosperity, or to a more intensified confrontation and conflict – but few experts expect North Korea to give up its nuclear arsenal any time soon.

This Issue Brief will review the history of U.S. nuclear negotiations with North Korea, taking a close look at past efforts to realize the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. It will also examine the persistent questions and themes surrounding how the U.S. has approached the issue of negotiating with Pyongyang, and how foreign analysts have perceived the motivations behind North Korea's nuclear program.

Proponents of engagement strategies have argued that North Korea's sense of insecurity has driven it to develop nuclear weapons, and that providing Pyongyang with security assurances and opportunities to reform and integrate into the international system will ultimately break the cycle of tensions and threats on the Korean Peninsula. Some human rights advocates have made the case that diplomacy aimed at the nuclear program has led the U.S. and other countries to deprioritize efforts to address systematic human rights abuses in the country, and have helped legitimize a brutal and untrustworthy regime.

Many analysts – echoing what appears to be a consensus within the U.S. intelligence community – believe that the North Korean regime will never consent to relinquishing its nuclear weapons, calling into question the viability of the goal of complete denuclearization as pursued by the U.S. and enshrined by multiple UN Security Council resolutions. To hardline critics, the history shows that negotiating with North Korea is of little or no value and that U.S. policy should be aimed at bringing about regime collapse or capitulation. However, more moderate voices argue that negotiating with North Korea has merit even if it doesn't lead to denuclearization, as diplomacy could help to slow or halt technical advances in North Korea's nuclear arsenal, and reduce the prospects of conflict or provocations.

Nonetheless, each U.S. administration for the past thirty years has maintained the stated goal of achieving the denuclearization of North Korea through diplomatic means and has tried to varying degrees to engage in talks with Pyongyang over its nuclear program. The potential human cost of a full-scale military conflict with North Korea – where projections of casualties range in the hundreds of thousands, or in the millions if nuclear weapons are involved – has cast a heavy shadow over the option of using military force to destroy the country's nuclear infrastructure. Policies aimed at regime change through non-military means would have to accept the risks of instigating the collapse of a nuclear-armed state, and to reckon with the difficult fact – as the famine of the 1990s demonstrated – that the North Korean regime is willing to impose a high level of pain on its population to stay in power. Recognition or *de facto* acceptance of North Korea's nuclear-armed status, on the other hand, would represent an embarrassing retreat from decades of U.S. policy and a blow to the global nonproliferation regime, without any guarantee that it would lead to a more peaceful or stable Korean Peninsula.

Within the context of negotiations, a consistent challenge has been coordinating the U.S. position

on North Korea policy with that of other key regional actors. Although China has opposed North Korea's nuclear buildup and voted in favor of multiple UN sanctions resolutions, Beijing has generally prioritized stability on the Korean Peninsula over denuclearization, and – particularly before 2017 – did little to enforce sanctions. South Korea's approach to North Korea has fluctuated as pro-engagement progressives and more hawkish conservatives have alternated in power, and the policy preferences of Seoul and Washington have been out of sync at several crucial periods. The direction of Japanese policy toward North Korea has generally been more consistent with that of the U.S., but Tokyo's focus on addressing the decades-old abduction of its nationals by North Korea has sometimes conflicted with Washington's prioritization of nuclear matters. Russia has had less of a direct stake in the politics of the Korean Peninsula than other parties, but has sought to keep a seat at the table and has threatened at times to play a spoiler role in international efforts to pressure North Korea over its nuclear program. Tied to the management of these relationships has been the question of whether nuclear negotiations with North Korea should be a bilateral U.S.-DPRK affair, or a multilateral one.

THE FUTURE, THE CHOICES AND THE FORESEEN IMPLICATIONS

Many analysts, skeptical of North Korea's willingness to disarm, have argued that North Korea seeks *de facto* recognition of its status and legitimacy as a nuclear-armed state, akin to other nuclear-armed states outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty such as Pakistan. Over the years, North Korea has expressed its support for "the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," but this term may have a very different interpretation in Pyongyang than it does abroad. The "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," as a North Korea official described it in 2013, means "totally remov[ing] the U.S. nuclear threat to the DPRK," with eventual North Korean nuclear disarmament coming in the context of global efforts "to achieve denuclearization of the world."[1]

Additionally, many analysts assume that the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula is a key North Korean objective, reflecting the country's long-standing rhetoric and propaganda. However, at key points in diplomatic negotiations – the first high-level U.S.-DPRK talks in 1992, the 2000 inter-Korean summit, and as renewed engagement with South Korea and the U.S. began in 2018 – North Korea's leaders privately indicated their willingness to accept a long-term U.S. military presence on the Peninsula.

Although much of the U.S. media discourse about North Korea portrays the country's leadership and its pursuit of nuclear arms as bizarre and illogical, the vast majority of specialists see the North Korean regime as rational and calculating (if ruthless) in the pursuit of self-preservation. In assessing the motivations behind North Korea's nuclear program and the history of its diplomatic engagement with the United States, however, expert analysis diverges sharply and could be broadly categorized into three general frames:

North Korea as an Isolated State: One line of analysis interprets the motivations behind North Korea's nuclear program and many of its adversarial actions and negotiating tactics as springing from a deep sense of insecurity and nationalist pride, amidst a world of unreliable allies and of perceived antagonists in Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington who seek the regime's dissolution. This combination of insecurity, nationalism, and commitment to continued rule by the Kim family drives North Korea's domestic political system, as well as its approach to foreign relations.

According to this view, North Korea has long sought to normalize relations with the U.S. in order to guarantee its security and to avoid dependence on China as a patron. In its early years, North Korea's nuclear program was primarily useful as a bargaining chip for Pyongyang to achieve this objective, but missed opportunities and wrongheaded actions by Washington – particularly the decision to jettison the Agreed Framework in 2002 – seem to have convinced North Korea to pursue a more robust nuclear deterrent. Subsequent U.S. policies based on sanctions and shows of military force have been misguided, deepening Pyongyang's sense of external threat while triggering North Korea's proclivity to escalate in response to pressure. However, Kim Jong Un's apparent commitment to economic development and modernization, paired with his high-level outreach to South Korea, China, and the U.S., may have opened the door for a meaningful new opportunity for negotiations.[2]

North Korea as a Hyper-Realist State: An alternative hypothesis posits that North Korea's leaders view military power – not alliances or embeddedness in the international order – as the only meaningful guarantee of security, and nuclear weapons as the ultimate currency of power. In past nuclear negotiations, Pyongyang may have made tactical concessions to ward off pressure, gain temporary benefits, and divide its adversaries; however, North Korea has ultimately relied on strategic deception to gradually build up its nuclear capabilities. The North Korean regime sees its nuclear arsenal as a deterrent against foreign military intervention, and is determined to avoid the kind of example set by Libya, where Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown and killed in a U.S.-supported uprising eight years after surrendering his country's nascent nuclear program.

Nuclear deterrence, combined with a strong tolerance for risk, also provides Pyongyang with the freedom of action to pursue its interests as it

sees fit and to violate international norms of state behavior with relative impunity. Additionally, the country's nuclear program and the sense of external threat it has engendered serve as sources of regime legitimacy and national cohesion; North Korea's leaders recognize that economic openness and tranquil relations with neighbors would ultimately pose a major threat to their survival. Viewed from this perspective, nuclear negotiations with North Korea may act as a form of crisis management, but will not lead to disarmament absent fundamental changes in the country's sociopolitical institutions.[3]

North Korea as a Revisionist State: This view argues that North Korea has pursued a nuclear arsenal primarily for coercive purposes rather than for deterrence, and seeks to decouple the U.S. from its alliance with Seoul and to ultimately subjugate South Korea. Many analysts have dismissed North Korea's post-Cold War rhetoric about unification as hollow propaganda, given the vast economic disparities between North and South Korea and the seeming-impossibility of North Korea absorbing the open, democratic society south of the DMZ. In contrast, proponents of this hypothesis argue that Pyongyang is driven by a deep ideological commitment to unification under its terms. Kim Jong Un's rhetoric emphasizing "final victory" demonstrates North Korea's intention to unify the Peninsula under its aegis, while the country's development of nuclear-armed missiles would provide it with the means to coerce or defeat a conventionally-armed South Korea and deter a U.S. intervention.

CONCLUSION

U.S. investors come to Thailand 'to use the country as a gateway to the ASEAN market,' says BOI Secretary-General Somphong Wanapha (Vatikiotis 2004a). FDI flows also create problems. While the growth of U.S. hypothetically can be a boon to the rest of the world in the long run, it can also be a cause for concern to Southeast Asia in the short and middle terms. When one considers the fact that U.S. is now expected to capture 6.5 percent of the total FDI for the next five years, the fight for the leftovers is even more severe. 'That is to say, 10 Southeast Asian countries have to compete for the remaining 23.5 percent of the FDI left by U.S. - an average of little more than 2 percent for each country.

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