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The Korean Nuclear Conundrum: 'Fire and Fury' Signifies Nothing?

The evolving strategic crisis in the Korean peninsula is arguably the most critical of its kind that the contemporary international system confronts. This has ramifications, in one way or another, for every region in the world. It appears that the acquisition of nuclear weapons by the Democratic Republic of Korea, better known as North Korea, has already become an inexorable, and indeed inescapable, reality. The international effort now should be to contain the consequences in a way that a nuclear Armageddon is avoided. This paper explores some possibilities of how this goal can be best pursued.

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The Nuclear Tests

On 3 September 2017, while many Americans and perhaps even United States (US) President Donald Trump were asleep, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) detonated underground its sixth and largest-to-date nuclear device. It was a thermonuclear or hydrogen bomb said to be 10 times more powerful than the country's fifth device that was tested earlier. Already, Pyongyang had demonstrated its capability with regard to intercontinental

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ballistic missiles. These, still in theory, can reach pre-determined targets in the US mainland, fitted with a nuclear warhead, and inflict an unacceptable level of damage on the American mainland.

The DPRK's nuclear-weapon-and-delivery capacity may not have been, as some argue, perfected as yet. However, there is perhaps sufficient ambiguity about this capacity that does not encourage the US to attempt a pre-emptive strike without the fear of a horrendous retaliation from Pyongyang. In any case, it is a matter of time before there is certainty about the commencement of a US-North Korean deterrence equation. In a technical sense, such a nuclear par (or nuclear equilibrium) might 'stabilise' the situation, and the DPRK's logic would be to expect that the time to begin negotiations for a peace treaty on the Korean peninsula had indeed come. In consonance with the received wisdom in strategic theory, the balance in DPRK-US relations will come about when Pyongyang and Washington begin to perceive that a nuclear exchange between them would kill millions of Koreans and Americans in and around the theatre of such an exchange. This, in theory, will deter either of them from initiating such a conflict in the first place.²

Since his assumption of office in January 2017, Trump has sought a significantly perceptible change in his country's foreign policy. Unlike in most governance systems in advanced political milieu, the denigration of predecessors-in-office appears to have become a norm in the US. Trump has not deviated from this practice. In fact, he seems to have pursued it with great gusto, sometimes to the dismay of some of his original backers. In narrow political terms, Trump's predilections have resonated with his support base, which is not particularly large but fervently committed to him. On the flip side of the coin, the change of course from the previous presidential dispensations has severely eroded America's credibility vis-à-vis the rest of the world. This is a primary factor that intensified the perception about America's current decline. A second factor is that the flip-flop manner of Trump's apparent governance style has damaged the international perception about his gravitas and seriousness. Third, since Charlottesville and other similar domestic events in America have worsened the worldwide perception that he is almost without empathy for the races of colour, this has deepened the non-white Asia's antipathy towards him as a person, which, as an

² Explaining the 'deterrence theory', one of its early proponents Bernard Brodie argued that a credible nuclear deterrent can only be established when adversaries are at the ready with such weapons, but need never actually use them. See, Bernard Brodie, "*Strategy in the Missile Age*", Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959, pp 264-304.

understandable corollary, has put the rest of his administration too in poor light abroad. Fourth, his ‘America First’ policy has been carried out at the expense of an earlier view that American values, both the real and perceived ones, were worthy of wider emulation. Now, every country or society may feel tempted to see the unrestrained pursuit of its own interests as a desirable and acceptable objective, provided, of course it has the power to do so. This, in turn, may legitimise the supreme goal of national acquisition of a requisite military arsenal.

There is another element that exacerbates the notion of the decline of America, or, at any rate, of its global influence. Its political system is so fashioned that at the stroke of every four or eight years significant unelected actors, some with little experience of public policy-making, enter its executive arm of government. This branch, arrogating to itself the decision to wage war and peace which the founding fathers of the US had reserved for exercise by the elected Congress, has accumulated immeasurable power over time. This has seriously strained the golden rule of ‘checks and balance’ as the cornerstone of American democracy. At present, the executive branch of the US government is headed by a president who has a majority, not in terms of national vote, but only in the Electoral College. His key advisers are unelected, mostly uninitiated in governance – they are, by and large, corporate heads or uniformed officers from the military. This situation conveys the impression that a “deep State” is in control, more symptomatic perhaps of Latin America in the 1960s than North America in the 2010s. This seriously erodes the perception about America as a sufficiently pluralist democracy and diminishes the moral plane from which American policy decisions are made. Not only that! These unelected officials often speak on behalf of the American people at home and abroad. For reasons of lack of experience and subtlety, they are seen and construed as being hegemonistic. As Henry Kissinger has warned, “A deliberate quest for hegemony is the surest way to destroy the values that made the United States great”.³ The American system was originally designed to reconcile polarisation (which is not new to American polity whether it be on slavery, or gun-control, or abortion) to produce outcomes representing the largest possible acceptability in the community. Such a positive propensity is not apparent in current times. This can be deeply upsetting.⁴

³ Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?: Towards a Diplomacy for the 21st Century*, New York /London: Simon & Schuster, 2002, p 288.

⁴ Francis Fukuyama points to the devastating result that can follow when polarisation confronts the checks and balance system, in his excellent analyses in, Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, p 490.

The current conundrum in the Korean peninsula is centred on the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's desire to achieve a sense of military parity with his, and the DPRK's perceived foe, the US. He has said that his goal "is to establish the equilibrium of real force with the US and make the US rulers dare not talk about a military option" against North Korea.⁵ Naturally, Kim cannot match America's vast military armoury. What he can do is to demonstrate that he has missiles that can drop nuclear warheads on American cities or territories and inflict an unacceptable level of damage on the US if forced to do so. This is in line with classic deterrence theory. This is a strategy to prevent an adversarial nuclear-military action by showing the capacity for a sufficiently horrendous retaliation. The concept dates back to Bernard Brodie in 1959 who had suggested that nuclear weapons must be at the ready, even though never really to be used.⁶ Kim needed to test his new-found capabilities for three reasons: First, to announce to his opponent and to the world that he possesses the weapons so as to deter the enemy; second, to actually test them to demonstrate their kill-power, reliability, precision, deliverability and survival; and finally to seek prestige and recognition as a higher power than seen to-date.⁷

Principles of Proliferation

There are two broad types of nuclear proliferation. The acquisition of capability by the hitherto-non-nuclear states or a transfer from one state to another state (or, for that matter, from a state to non-state actors) is known as 'horizontal proliferation'. The improvement of existing nuclear arsenals, such as for greater precision or lethality, undertaken by the nuclear-weapon states is known as 'vertical proliferation'. The earlier generation of nuclear powers sees the former as more destabilising, while others argue, with a modicum of rationality as well, that the latter is also both immoral and dangerous, as it enhances the propensity to use (for instance, by appearing to be better able to limit collateral damage through a greater power of precision in a nuclear attack, thus enabling the hitting of specific targets). Logically,

⁵ "Kim Jong-un of North Korea Vows 'Equilibrium' With US Military", *New York Times*, 16 September 2017.

⁶ See Bernard Brodie, "*The Anatomy of Deterrence*", as found in *Strategy in the Missile Age*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959, pp 264-304.

⁷ Advanced nuclear-weapon states, particularly the US, have developed a capability to check the reliability and maintenance of nuclear arsenals without testing, known as 'Stockpile Stewardship'. This was rendered easier, as no new weapons were built since 1992. This was improved upon, during the second Bush Administration by a programme known as 'Reliable Replacement Warhead' which sought to develop newer weapons, but without physical testing and instead using computer simulations.

imprecision in a state's capabilities for launching a nuclear attack will necessitate the selection of 'soft' or 'counter-value' targets like cities and civilian populations. On the other hand, precision capabilities will facilitate the selection of 'hard' or 'counter-force' target options such as the weapon silos and military installations of the adversary. Both, however, would lead to nuclear war. The DPRK's latest capability will count as horizontal proliferation, just as were the case with India, Pakistan and Israel, and even earlier with the US, Russia, France, the United Kingdom and China.

More than 2,000 nuclear tests have been conducted, in the atmosphere, underground, and under water. In the past, radioactive elements from the tests had not only polluted the atmosphere, but also caused direct casualties. Following the death of all crew members of a Japanese vessel, ironically called 'Lucky Boat' in 1954 from the fallout in the Pacific, India's then-Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru proposed a "standstill agreement".⁸ This eventually led to the adoption of the Partial Test Ban Treaty, with an agreement reached on banning the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere, under water and in the outer space. Its principal flaw was that it allowed underground tests to continue. This state of affairs lasted decades. However, it appeared to address the issue of only 'horizontal proliferation', in accord with the predilections of the big powers. Eventually, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), the result of a 'package deal' connected with the indefinite extension in 1995 of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), was enacted and opened for signature in 1996.⁹ The CTBT was meant to complement the NPT by promoting a global norm that would prohibit all modes of testing nuclear weapons. This laboriously-negotiated treaty has not come into force for want of the requisite number of ratifications.¹⁰ The US and Iran are among the countries which have not ratified the CTBT. The DPRK, India and Pakistan have not signed it at all, although Pakistan had voted for the CTBT in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. Furthermore, on 10 January 2003, the DPRK announced its withdrawal from the NPT, effective 11 January 2003. Neither treaty, therefore, constitutes a factor of restraint on the DPRK's aspirations for nuclear testing or weaponisation.

⁸ Keith A. Hansen, *The Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty: An Insider's Perspective*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, California, 2006, p 5.

⁹ The author was involved in the relevant negotiations as the Permanent Representative and the Ambassador of Bangladesh to the Geneva based Conference on Disarmament, the sole multilateral negotiating forum dedicated to this purpose, and thereafter as Vice Chairman from the Middle East and South Asia Group of the first ever Bureau at the CTBT headquarters in Vienna, of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization.

¹⁰ For an understanding of the treaties from an insider's perspective, see Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, *Towards A World Without Nuclear Arms: Can 2010 Be a Year of Hope?* ISAS Insights No. 86, 9 December 2009.

The Korean War had ended in 1953 with an armistice accord but without a peace treaty, which remains a goal of the Pyongyang regime. It has always felt that, in the absence of such a peace treaty bringing the war to a formal close, the US remains an enemy “posing nuclear threats to the DPRK”.¹¹ According to the Arms Control Association experts, the DPRK is producing highly enriched uranium, and based on its rate of stockpile growth and technological improvements, it may have anywhere between 20 warheads and 100 warheads by 2020.¹² The DPRK first detonated a plutonium device on 8 October 2006, and it eventually claimed on 3 September 2017 the successful test of a thermonuclear or hydrogen bomb, with a yield estimated to be 250 kilotons (based on a study of the relevant seismic data).¹³ That is many times more powerful than the US atom bombs that almost obliterated the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. There is no doubt that the North Koreans have developed a weapon that could inflict an unacceptable level of damage on an adversary.

North Korean Capabilities

Now to look at the DPRK’s capacity to deliver, and whether at this point in time, it has an effective deterrent against the US. This would require an intercontinental ballistic missile capability. In July 2017, the DPRK tested two missiles. On 4 July 2017, coinciding with the US Independence Day, the North Koreans tested their *Hwasong-14* missile that flew 930 kilometres, lasting 37-39 minutes in a lofted trajectory. According to the US Pacific Command, it could have, in a standard trajectory, reached 6,690 kilometres, a distance that could have allowed the missile to reach and cover all of Alaska. On 28 July 2017, Pyongyang test-fired another missile with a range of 1000 additional kilometres, which, according to analysts, was capable of reaching the continental US.¹⁴ The fact of the matter is that, while analysts may debate the actual capability, the North Koreans must be assumed to possess, even if there be some ambiguity, the capability to deal a severe blow to the US mainland should a conflict break out. With each passing day, the North Koreans are probably

¹¹ ‘To React to Nuclear Weapons in Kind is DPRK’s Mode of Counteraction’, *Korean Central News Agency*, 11 January 2016.

¹² ArmsControlAssociation.:<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat...26/9/2017>.

¹³ ‘North Korea’s latest nuclear test was so powerful that it reshaped the mountain above it’, *Washington Post*, 4 September 2017.

¹⁴ Zachary Cohen and Barbara Starr: *CNN*, 28 July 2017.

improving on the range, precision and capacity for damage infliction. According to a reputed western journal, even if North Korea “is not quite there yet...it is getting very close”.¹⁵

As is to be expected, the DPRK is also readily developing its ‘second strike capability’, which, in theory, implies the ability to survive an enemy’s ‘first strike’ or ‘pre-emptive strike’, while retaining the power to retaliate as massively as possible. This capability is made possible by the concealment of weaponry. The objective is to ensure that not all nuclear warheads and missiles of the DPRK are vulnerable to a first attack from an adversary on the country’s deep and dispersed hardened silos. This also requires the acquisition of the ‘triad’ capability, that is, the ability to launch nuclear-capable missiles from land, air and sea. This is achievable by shifting to solid-fuel propulsion from liquid-fuel, as that renders the firing of the missiles easier while actually requiring fewer support vehicles and accessories. The basic objective in doing this is to reduce the power of the enemy to detect these missiles. An example is the Pukkuksong-1, which is a submarine-launched ballistic missile, tested by North Korea on 24 August 2016.

Submarines as targets are more difficult to detect and destroy; the silent submarines are better at avoiding detection. However, of the nearly 70 submarines that the North Koreans are reported to possess, most are noisy and leave a ‘signature’ which can be detected by an adversary’s ships and radars. In the received wisdom of strategic literature, both a ‘second strike capability’ and nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered submarines which help provide this capability, are stabilising factors, as they are likely to pose an effective deterrent to the initiation of a nuclear strike by the adversary, the reason being the targeted country’s inevitable ability to retaliate upon receiving the ‘first strike’. However, if America’s rationality gives way to hubris, hype and hectoring, this stabilising role can be diminished. An adversary would tend to focus on intercepting capabilities, which the US is doing vis-à-vis the DPRK. It is reported that 36 interceptors are already in place in Alaska and California, and the number is expected to rise to 44 soon.¹⁶ Ironically, constructive defence mechanisms were seen by some analysts, at one time and even now, as destabilising factors, because such devices reduce the probability of “mutually assured destruction” (MAD) between the adversaries. MAD was said to have kept the peace during the Cold War between the US and

¹⁵ *Economist*, 9-15 September 2017.

¹⁶ Jeff Daniels, *Defense*, 12 April 2017.

the-then Soviet Union. The strategy was seen as a form of *Nash equilibrium* in ‘game-theory’ – once armed, neither side has an incentive to initiate a conflict or even to disarm.¹⁷

The various tests by the DPRK have been seen as posing a threat to the US and its regional allies, mainly the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan. The DPRK, on the other hand, has expressed similar concerns over the ‘live’ military exercises often conducted by these allies in its vicinity. However, the US and its allies have been able to marshal support within the UN Security Council (UNSC) resulting in the adoption of a number of sanctions against the DPRK. Russia and China, which have shown a greater empathy for Pyongyang have played along and joined the often-US-led sanctions consensus. No matter how nonchalant the DPRK may seek to show itself to be, the sanctions will soon start to bite. These might also point to the DPRK that their window of opportunity for getting a favourable deal from the US is getting smaller. A logical corollary which the DPRK might draw is that, should it seek to return to the stalled negotiations on Korean denuclearisation, now as an equal– which one assumes is its goal, then the timeline at hand for Pyongyang to perfect its deterrent capability against the US is getting narrower.

Recurrent Rhetoric and the Need for Restraint

Till now the mutual threats exchanged between the US and the DPRK, or rather between Trump and Kim, which have become relentlessly recurrent, have remained verbal, rather than military, though the first set is related to the second. Some North Korean tests followed Trump’s warnings that Pyongyang’s threats would be met with “fire and fury, and frankly power the world has never seen before”. The North Koreans perhaps saw in it the need to demonstrate publicly, in Shakespearean parlance, that the threats from the US “signified nothing” in terms of any constraints upon Pyongyang. However, privately the DPRK perhaps treated these American words as an effective reminder to get on even more quickly with the task of sharpening and honing its nuclear armoury. The same can be said about the colourful use of language by both these parties, which hurled insults at each other at the UN in

¹⁷ For a detailed understanding of the concept, see the classic study by J Neuman and O Morgenstern, Princeton University: Princeton, 1944.

September.¹⁸ While these were going on, it was safely assumed that the North Koreans were progressing in improving their capacity to inflict nuclear damage on American shores, if only to prevent the Americans from doing so on theirs. The Russian leader Vladimir Putin appears to have been very perceptive, when, while criticising the North Korean nuclear tests, he remarked that North Korea might “eat grass but will not give up the [nuclear] program if they don’t feel safe”.¹⁹

Putin joined Chinese leader Xi Jinping to propose a “dual freeze” plan for adoption by the US and the DPRK. According to it, the DPRK could freeze its ballistic-missile and nuclear-testing. In return, the US and South Korea could end their conventional military exercises.²⁰ But the problem with the idea is that it falls critically short of the strategic aspirations of both sides. Trump is absolutely persuaded that the DPRK should scale down in a manner that it can no longer strike at the US, and the DPRK is convinced it cannot be safe until it has a nuclear deterrent (just a peace treaty would be an insufficient protection, as Trump’s commitment to agreements are seen by Kim to be brittle, particularly after Trump’s threats to cancel the nuclear deal with Iran).

While cool calculations, mathematical balance, strategic considerations and rational assessments are the ideal components for evolving appropriate war-fighting and war-avoiding strategies, unforeseen circumstances and unpredictable scenarios often determine the outcomes. The current situation in the Korean peninsula is extremely volatile. Even if space is allowed to accommodate a certain degree of harsh political exchanges, the fact that the militaries are in a heightened state of readiness can lead to a very rapid path towards an actual conflict. The Americans speak of the possibility of resorting to a range of military options, which they indeed possess. The North Koreans, however, have only one option, at least with regard to the US. They are fully aware that any military action short of the solitary option, such as shooting down a patrolling US bomber with their KN-O6 surface-to-air missiles (technically possible),²¹ would invite a disastrous retaliation from the Americans. Even if

¹⁸ Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, somewhat mockingly, likened the war of words between Trump and Kim to a kindergarten fight between two children, stating that a “pause was needed to calm down the hotheads”, *BBC News*, 22 September, 2017.

¹⁹ “Putin: North Korea will ‘eat grass’ before giving up nukes”, *Associated Press*, 6 September 2017.

²⁰ Ankit Panda, ‘Russia and China have common line on Resolving the North Korean problem’, *Diplomat*. 6 July 2017.

²¹ The KN-06 has a range of around 90 miles, it has been estimated by security scholars. The US says that recently its bombers have stayed within the international space which begins from around 12 nautical miles from the North Korean coast. The danger is the North Koreans are claiming the right to shoot down US

such US reaction is conventional, they would be faced with Hobson's choice, in all likelihood, the launching of a nuclear strike against the US. However, in a different scenario, a pre-emptive American nuclear strike will also lead to horrendous results. Much of the Korean peninsula would be destroyed. This would include the ROK, and possibly parts of China, inviting a Chinese response as well. The DPRK would also strike back with its entire surviving arsenal. It is possible that soft targets like Seattle or Los Angeles would be hit with immeasurable consequences.

Non-inevitability of a Nuclear Conflict

None of this should actually happen. It cannot redound to the interest of any of the parties. For the ideals of non-proliferation, the experiences of the US-led Western invasions of Iraq and Libya in recent times have encouraged some countries to seek protection through the acquisition of nuclear-weapon capability, especially if they are able to do so. The DPRK – in particular the Kim regime – is one such country. Perhaps, it is too late to stop such countries in their nuclear-armament tracks. It is the rivalry with the US, and not so much with ROK or Japan, that has caused Pyongyang to seek this option. Ironically, the current situation in the Korean peninsula has not evolved in consonance with Trump's initial predilections. Those were to withdraw from what were seen as America's unnecessary global involvements and, instead, revamp the existing global institutions and also Washington's relations with powers such as Japan and China. Trump had wanted to give up commitments that were seen to be undermining the perceived US national self-interest in economic and other terms. This is not to say that Trump was ignoring the DPRK's burgeoning strength. However, he has now become involved in this Korean imbroglio almost unwittingly. At the same time, it seems to have helped close his strategic gap with China to some degree. Naturally not keen to actually carry out his threats to light the conflagration of a calamitous kind, he has been appreciative of China's support for the UNSC resolution, for which he has praised Xi Jinping. Trump has also toned down his earlier aggressive posture, stating that military action was not his "preferred option".²²

aircraft beyond their airspace as they consider Trump's utterances to be a 'declaration of war'. See, Alistair Gate, "North Korea Threat to US Bombers Rise", *Wall Street Journal*, 27 September 2017.

²² "Trump thanks Xi as he dials down North Korea Rhetoric", *Straits Times*, 28 September 2017.

As a consequence of some of Trump's remarks, he is not seen as championing any kind of universal values, except for those that can narrowly be defined as being 'Western' in scope. This does not go down well with the Asians. In his speech in Warsaw in Poland in July this year, he tended to define the 'West' in racial and religious terms (neither of these are shared by the Asians), pointing to the danger that the 'West' is appearing to be confronting from the 'South' and the 'East'.²³ By saying all that, he was only distancing himself from the Asians, whether Chinese, Koreans or Japanese, fuelling a sentiment, rightly or wrongly, that their lives matter less to him than those of the Americans, and that when matters were to come to a crunch, he might be far less willing to sacrifice Seattle than Seoul. Indeed, in the public demonstrations against Trump's warlike rhetoric in Seoul, which should have been his foremost ally, banners in the Korean script read, "If war breaks out, only those on the Korean peninsula will die", and [war] will totally destroy North Korea".²⁴

A good example where deterrence has been able to lower the prospects of conflict is perhaps South Asia. India and Pakistan have periodically been locked in battle situations since both states came into existence in 1947. Each appears to consider the other an existential threat. Both went nuclear in 1998. Since then, the prospects of a major war between them seem to have receded. Stephen Cohen has observed that a "cap, roll-back, and eliminate" approach to denuclearise South Asia is not a realistic option. Instead, the focus should be on how to "reduce the risk of accidental or inadvertent use of nuclear weapons' through both technical and political means."²⁵ When the debate on the India-Pakistan testing reached its zenith in Geneva in 1998, at the headquarters of the Conference on Disarmament and at Vienna, the seat of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), a dim view was taken by many non-Western states regarding the implied idea that nuclear weapons were safe only in the Western cultural ambience. Indeed, a resolution critical of the India-Pakistan nuclear tests, moved by Australia and New Zealand at the IAEA, was finally toned down through repeated amendments by the mainly non-Western and non-aligned states. The final version was so unlike the original draft that the two co-sponsors, Australia and New Zealand, actually withdrew their support.²⁶ Eventually, all the Western powers, including the US and its key allies, had to acquiesce in the nuclear-weapon acquisition by India and Pakistan. Moreover,

²³ "The Racial and Religious Paranoia of Trump's Warsaw Speech", *Atlantic*, 6 July 2017.

²⁴ *Straits Times*, 28 September, 2017, op. cit.

²⁵ Stephen Philip Cohen, *Emerging Power: India*, Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2001, p 313.

²⁶ The author was present at the meetings as the head of his country's delegation.

strategic compulsions rendered all sanctions imposed on these two South Asian powers to fall by the way-side.

The acquisition of nuclear capability now appears an inexorable process with regards to the DPRK. In its immediate region, the strategic reality is undergoing a fundamental change. Professor Yan Xuetong, a Chinese scholar, has said, “It is not only true that China changed the status quo by getting strong, but also America and Japan changed the status quo by getting weaker”.²⁷ War is hardly ever inevitable. Despite the seemingly structural conflict between the US and China, this is also true with regards to them. This has been brilliantly argued by Graham Allison in his latest book.²⁸

The future scenarios indicate three main possibilities. One is, of course, a nuclear war. This is, as of now, unlikely, as Trump seems to have dialled down on his threats, and the North Korean belligerence, if not cool, appears to be reactive at this time (to Trump’s words). There are, of course, heightened states of nervous tensions when Trump sometimes contradicts his own senior surrogates, just as when he suggested that US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that he was merely wasting his energy in exploring possibilities of “talking” to the DPRK.²⁹ The second scenario is the US’ acceptance of the DPRK as a nuclear power, just as in the case of India, Pakistan and Israel. What must follow is an arrangement as to how the DPRK must be persuaded to obey the ‘club rules’ of the existing nuclear powers. (The same should apply to India, Pakistan and Israel.) A third scenario would be to redesign the global disarmament and non-proliferation structure in such a way that the perception of nuclear neo-imperialism by the existing major nuclear powers will disappear. Examples of Iraq and Libya, and invasions with impunity, will only render further proliferation inevitable.

The energies of the international community should perhaps be better deployed in ensuring that the DPRK never finds it necessary to use its new-found capability. So, dialogue is the only answer. The format of the earlier six-party talks can be rearranged to inspire greater commitment to the protagonists, in particular, the most threatened one, which is perhaps North Korea. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres can and should play a greater role in

²⁷ “Dangers of a US drawdown in Asia”, Richard McGregor, *Straits Times*, 27 September 2017.

²⁸ Graham Ellison, *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?*, Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017. Ellison’s answer is ‘yes’.

²⁹ “Trump contradicts Secretary of State Tillerson on North Korea and ‘Little Rocket Man’”, Sonan Seth, *Business Insider*, 1 October 2017.

this. The talks can resume under his direct aegis. The six parties are the US, the DPRK, China, as the host so far, Russia, South Korea and Japan. He may buttress the six parties by the induction of perhaps an equal number of 'eminent persons' drawn from countries other than the six involved to assist the deliberations in their personal capacities. They could function in a purely advisory and mediatory capacity, while the substantive talks would still be among the six UN state-members. For progress to be achieved, there is a critical need for 'out of the box' thinking, since traditional methods have not worked. The avoidance of a nuclear war is not an option but a necessity. With regard to this issue, it is the only rational choice.

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