Reconceptualising North Korea as a Threat to Global Peace and Security

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Nationalistic music booms as countless missiles streak through the thin air in rapid-fire sequence and blow up along the skyline, hurling huge plumes of blinding smoke into the air. A United Nations mission team probably called United Nations Mission in North Korea (UNAMINK) finds its way into Pyongyang, while brave American soldiers try to secure points to attack North Korea. A caption from The Daily Sun reads, “North Korea has succeeded in attacking the mainland United States.” Is the above even possible? Is North Korea a threat to global peace and security? Should we be worried about the mass production of propaganda on the relations between North Korea and the ‘rest of the world’. Is the North Korean conflict a case of sub-regional muscle flexing? Or is it the nascent stages of a realignment of global power strategies? This paper argues that though The Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Korea (DPRK) withdrew from the Non-proliferation Treaty in 1993, developed its nuclear capabilities and even carried out hydrogen bomb/ thermonuclear bomb tests, it is a perceived and not a real threat to global peace and security. It comes from a merger of a security dilemma and power politics between two nuclear powers United States and DPRK, and from geo-political and nation state interests. These have been key determinants in escalating the perception of DPRK as posing a threat to the global order. This is argued using critical studies, by considering asymmetrical information on media platforms whose agenda/narrative is to either support or weaken other representations. We assess the dominant narrative and the informing agenda and the entities, institutions and States advancing them. We conclude that trying to assess DPRK’s nuclear program as a single, isolated block may be of little use especially because it is intertwined with wider problems internally and externally.

The United Nations (UN) and United States of America (US) have raised a myriad of questions concerning DPRK and its long-term strategy of nuclearization, overlooking the fact that it was the US that shaped the current belligerent environment even with recent negotiations with South Korea. From 1958 to 1991 the US stockpiled nuclear weapons in South Korea for possible use against North Korea. Trump has been blowing his own trumpet about his role in the diplomatic rapprochement between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un, undermining Moon Jae-in’s sunshine policy and the diplomatic gestures by South Korea. From the perspective of critical studies, DPRK is persistently presented in mainstream media as a combative, undemocratic, despotic country with leaders’ incapable of relating with the international community, and whose citizens are gradually dying from the ill will of selfish leaders. DPRK is considered the “other,” the “adversary,” and the personification of an “axis of evil,” not to mention a country that is so extra-terrestrial and weird that its late leader, Kim Jong Il, was featured as a satirical character in the film Team America. This essentially depicted how the wider media and nation states wanted him to be perceived. The West has been very successful in constructing and disseminating a certain narrative, to advance and validate its own foreign policy decisions. The themes and narratives being progressed have been dominated by the more traditional security alarms that see Pyongyang as a threat to the global system that needs to be eliminated. A majority of these narratives are dispensed through social media and through Twitter in particular. Currently the visual representations undoubtedly address power fights. Before the talks between Trump and Kim Jong Un, there were weeks of dramatic soap opera scenes of intimidations and abuses (fire and fury), emotional sessions (Winter Olympics where both North Korea and South Korea marched and played together), tensions (nuclear and missile tests conducted by Pyongyang) and ‘love scenes’ (meetings between the two Korean
Presidents, the handshake and crossing over from the Demilitarized Zone).

However, since the Korean War (1951-53) the regime's main goal has been survival and not the domination of the Korean Peninsula. For example, due to the conventional power of South Korea, enhanced presence of the US in South Korea (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense and high-profile military exercises) and the second-strike nuclear artillery provided by the US, the Kim regime has sensibly and strategically restrained from intentionally reigniting the Korean War, a war that could likely result in its obliteration. Additionally, Pyongyang’s usage of nuclear weapons offensively or as a strategic shield behind which to engage in a more limited conventional conflict would unavoidably threaten to produce reactive actions or spiral into a state of general war (Kim’s decision not to attack Guam in August 2017), thus endangering the security of the Kim Jong-un regime. DPRK sees the US as an aggressor, a state that wants to control the world. He is afraid of external powers invading North Korea to bring about regime transformation, given the way the West toppled the governments in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya since they were controlled by tyrannical regimes and endangered the West. Therefore, DPRK’s existential external threat compels it to cling to its nuclear capabilities contrary to popular fears of the instigation of a suicidal war, short on rational calculation.

Moreover, any efforts to analyse the current DPRK situation must consider the internal and external stimuli that motivate the decisions to nuclearize, to threaten to attack and, recently, to negotiate. One reason Kim Jong-un has pursued and clung onto his nuclear and ballistic missiles program is grounded on the Songun (Military First) domestic policy. Songun provided enormous prestige and power to the armed forces by emphasizing the expansion, development and prioritization of the DPRK military over the Korean population. But fearing that the military could threaten his rule as a young leader, Kim replaced Songun with Byungjin (Parallel Development) which is a two-prong policy emphasizing the development of the national economy and nuclear program. In January 2018, Kim Jong-Un said that DPRK’s pursuit for nuclear weapons is "complete" and it "no longer needs" to assess its weapons capability. Kim Jong-Un is now focussed on economic growth and enhancing North Korea’s national economy. This further seems to suggest that DPRK is willing to “come out of the cold” once its security and sovereignty is guaranteed.

In conclusion, in spite of the narrative of the Trump administration claiming that no concessions were made to organise the summit, the assembly of the leaders is itself a concession from the US side and twisted victory for the DPRK. By accepting Pyongyang’s invitation, the United States is granting the DPRK government the status of a nuclear power that other state powers must negotiate with. This is a classical realism balance of powers argument, the notion that one country should not rise to dominance in a given region or the world by extension. Moreover, protagonists in this case, China, South Korea and United States, all have tactical reasons for keeping Kim Jong-un’s regime in power, although without a nuclear weapons capability. South Koreans believe in the reunification of both Koreas, albeit reluctantly due to poverty and backwardness prevalent in the North Korean economy. China, on the other hand, fears regime change and the possible reunification of both Koreas, as they fear having democracy move close to their border, stimulating liberalism in the Chinese state. The US having learnt from the situation in Libya is recalcitrant to overthrow Kim Jong-un, as they are aware that any re-stabilization efforts after regime change would cost trillions of dollars. The US is also cautious not to create a horrible precedent by ‘sweet talking’ a hostile nation into completely halting its nuclear programs by offering aid, food and technology. In the past the US has made efforts to trade technology and food to DPRK in exchange
for an end to its nuclear program. However, this was not successful as DPRK reneged on every
denuclearization agreement it had ever signed and continued to develop its weapons. If re-
attempted, the same results are likely and a bad precedent would be established giving states the
leeway to extort similar benefits. Thus we conclude that the politics behind the denuclearization
of the Korean Peninsula is complicated and tastefully camouflaged as a peace and security threat.
The fundamental question then becomes: what constitutes a threat to nation states and how it
becomes a global threat.