

The Nuclear Posture Review: Not a Credible Game-Changer for Nuclear North Korea

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The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) emphasis two realities, first the challenge of nuclear terrorism and proliferation; and second, it affirms the end of the Cold War rivalries. But the “resetting” of relationship with Moscow had created an enemy vacuum for the U.S. To fill this gap, North Korea has been constructed as an enemy which justifies the continuity of the “nuclear umbrella” in the Northeast Asian region. But as an asymmetrical, surrogate enemy it is actually the pretext to maintain ‘critical bases’ in Northeast Asia which functions as hubs for U.S. global military power projection. The U.S. interprets its security in terms of its primacy and any perceptible shift from this position makes it feel insecure. This ontological security seeking of the U.S. makes the existence of security dilemma de rigueur in Northeast Asia and prods the U.S. to take a hard line approach towards North Korea.

The U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) released on April 6, 2010, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) signed by presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev in Prague on April 8, 2010, and the Nuclear Summit convened on April 12-13, 2010 under the aegis of the U.S. leadership in Washington-collectively constitute an integrated trilogy of events focused equally on forging consensus on the global insecurity from nuclear weapons and the need to effectively move towards nuclear disarmament. The events reinforced one another in a remarkably coordinated manner and each has come to signify a core value related to the issue of nuclear threat in global security. These values are first, to lend credibility and give thrust to actualize the nuclear disarmament vision of “global zero” of the U.S. President Obama conveyed in his April 5, 2009 Prague speech, second, strengthen the nonproliferation regime by inching towards honoring the Article VI commitment of Nuclear Weapons State (NWS) in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) especially in view of the 2010 NPT Review Conference (3-28 May) which followed these events and third, to forge worldwide “collective leadership” on preventing nuclear terrorism by securing loose nuclear material within four years.

These events signify advancement towards creating identifiable global norms on nuclear issues, primarily aimed at building a strong global nuclear non-proliferation regime, providing a roadmap for reducing nuclear risks and pursuing long-term nuclear disarmament. But reservations remain as to their universal

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acceptability and ability to alter national security strategy. This is especially true of the permanent members (P5) of the UNSC reserving the right to be NWS for themselves within the framework of the NPT, and of states outside the NPT as well. Though this trilogy has been keenly followed by the whole world and impinges upon all the nations in different ways, of these three the unveiling of the NPR by the U.S. Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates is of particular importance. It is an official statement of the U.S. national security strategy and it is the first unclassified NPR of the U.S. Defence Department,¹ unprecedented in its transparency which retreats from the long-standing policy of “calculated ambiguity”²

North Korea and the Élan Vital of NPR

The NPR has placed the “prevention of nuclear terrorism and proliferation at the top of the U.S. policy agenda”.³ The NPR also identifies the global nuclear non-proliferation regime as one of the key element to prevent nuclear proliferation.⁴ North Korea has been pinpointed as the state responsible for nuclear proliferation

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and illicit nuclear trade and in non-compliance with the NPT. The NPR says that North Korea’s “provocative behavior” and its “potential for regional aggression”⁵ is the threat for which the U.S. employs its extended deterrence in N.E. Asia in order to reassure its allies that it is committed to their security in the same way as it was “in the face of Soviet threats”.⁶ More significantly, it has excluded North Korea from its negative security assurance, which implies the possibility of the U.S. preemptive nuclear strike against it. This makes the U.S. the primary external threat for North Korea.

In view of the overwhelming threat from the U.S., the objective of “reversing the nuclear ambitions of North Korea”⁷ seems to be an unattainable aim.

John Loretz writes that the “continued adherence to deterrence doctrine fuels proliferation and undermines alternative pathways to security”.⁸ The fact that the NPR “makes clear that the U.S. will reserve the right to use nuclear weapons first or in response to an attack even if that attack does not involve nuclear weapons”⁹ does not make the NPR document, the credible game-changer for North Korea but provokes it to retain and increase the stockpile of nuclear weapons.

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the premise that the 2010 U.S. NPR primarily targets two asymmetrical enemies i.e. terrorists and North Korea which essentially requires two strategies of “strengthened intelligence” and bilateral/multilateral approach respectively. Following from this premise, this article makes two contentions. The first contention is that the since North Korea has been addressed as an adversary in the NPR, it divests the U.S. from the motivation to adopt such measures towards North Korea which could help in reorienting

the disparate security relationships in the region. The second contention and the main argument is that the security approach of the U.S in N.E. Asia springs

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from its explicit intention to maintain its enduring role in the region in a manner which ensures its military preeminence and its unipolar superpower status. The whole infrastructure of extended deterrence in N.E. Asia serves this purpose and the threat from North Korea serves the function of keeping such infrastructure in place. The U.S. believes that its security flows from a “position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence”. Any perceptible tilt away from this position and image makes it insecure. The ontological security¹⁰ seeking of the U.S. makes the existence of security dilemma¹¹ de rigueur in Northeast Asia.

The security dilemma is in operation in the region since the Korean War¹². The armistice agreed upon with North Korea after the Korean War technically suggests that U.S. and North Korea are still at war with each other. From January 1958 onwards the U.S. had deployed nuclear weapons in South Korea and by 1967 they were as many as 950 warheads. Though by December 1991 the U.S had withdrawn its last nuclear weapons from S. Korea, but after the 2006 nuclear test by North Korea, a new revised CONPLAN 5029 (Operation Plan in Concept form) had created additional preemptive conventional nuclear strike options against North Korean weapons of mass destruction activities. In the recent spiraling of regional conflict over the March 26, 2010 sinking of the South Korean 1,200 ton navy ship PCC-772 Cheonan in the Yellow Sea, allegedly by a North Korean torpedo, the U.S. hardline has exacerbated tensions in Northeast Asia.¹³ The major concern in the Cheonan crisis is that heightened military readiness could lead to a clash that could quickly escalate and lead to the ‘tragedy’ of security dilemma. Though neither side wants war, citing the situation on the Korean Peninsula, Hazel Smith opines that “Wars sometimes happen by accident, or because you have escalation and no one can control it. It’s a very dangerous position that everyone is in”.¹⁴

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President Lee Myung-bak wants to take the issue to the U.N. Security Council and in this effort; he is being unequivocally supported by the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton for an international response to condemn the “unacceptable provocation” by North Korea. North Korea has warned that any retaliation over the sinking of a South Korean ship will trigger

an “all-out war of justice”. What could have been resolved primarily as an inter-Korean issue is being turned into an international question of peace by the U.S. About the Obama administration, Leon V. Sigal says that it is “raising the stakes by supporting South Korea’s efforts to punish North Korea with more sanctions and to adopt “proactive deterrence”.¹⁵ These actions have raised uncertainty in the region which adds more value to U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea

The immediate effect of this tension is already visible in this region. First, President Myung-bak is considering delaying the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) of its troops from the U.S., originally scheduled for April 17, 2012. Second, in Japan Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio resigned on June 2, 2010. In his resignation speech, Hatoyama said that “we must sustain trust between Japan and the United States”. Citing the sinking of the South Korean warship, he said that it shows “security has not been secured in Northeast Asia.”

The end of the Cold War and the “resetting” of relationship with Moscow had created a strategic vacuum for the U.S., with no organizing principle for national security thinking. With the implosion of erstwhile Soviet Union, there was a need for the U.S. to alter the focus of the alliances with Japan and South Korea. In order to foster shared security perceptions, just at a time when the Soviet empire was retrenching, the specter of North Korea as a threat was being built by the U.S. for being a challenge to the non-proliferation regime and as a formidable threat to the regional and global security. Being non-nuclear powers, the U.S. provides nuclear security to both these nations against any probable nuclear strike from North Korea. In turn, the U.S. bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea act as its own “security anchors” and assure its hegemonic presence in N.E. Asia.

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These bilateral alliances provides the U.S. with military bases presently undergoing a three-dimensional consolidation of transformation, realignment and restructuring to facilitate the “strategic flexibility” of the U.S. forces.¹⁶ This reorientation fulfils the larger interest of the U.S. to maintain its ‘critical bases’ in Northeast Asia which functions as “hubs for power projection” envisioning a global military posture for the U.S. which combines flexibility, speed, and efficiency on a global scale. J.J. Suh calls it “neoliberal globalization applied to security” which enables the U.S. to deploy “modular forces throughout the world, globally source them and deliver them in time.”¹⁷

This article has three parts. Part I will first recapitulate the key points of the 2010 NPR. Part II would expand on the implications of “negative security assurance”, stated in the NPR for North Korea, and how it affects its threat perceptions. Part

III will briefly put forward the conceptual framework of 'ontological security' and how it explains the U.S. motives in keeping the security dilemma as a constant

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in N.E. Asia as it serves its interests to maintain its military footprint in N.E. Asia. The logic of 'ontological security' explains why a definite breakthrough has not been achieved in U.S. relations with the 'pariah state'. This analytical framework provides reasons why asymmetric North Korea is important as an enemy to the U.S. focusing on its geo-strategic location in Northeast Asia wherein it serves the role of a surrogate enemy for the U.S. As a threat to regional stability, North Korea justifies the continuity of the "nuclear umbrella" in the

Northeast Asian region and keeps the logic of extended deterrence in place.

Part I – 2010 NPR: Brief Review

Objective

The Nuclear Posture Review is a legislatively-mandated review that establishes U.S. nuclear policy, strategy, capabilities and force posture for the next five to ten years. There are four dimensions which lend understanding to the overall U.S. approach set in the NPR- (i.) security objective (ii.) strengthening of 'negative security assurance' which lays out the rationale for nuclear use (iii.) security commitments to allies and (iv.) actual security interests. These four dimensions operate in an international security environment which has fundamentally changed at two levels. First, the peaceful implosion of the erstwhile Soviet Union made the global nuclear threat an anachronism thereby, easing the Cold War rivalries. The NPR recognizes that the strict numerical parity between the two is "less compelling as it was during the Cold War", but nevertheless still relevant to ensure strategic stability.

Two, the NPR claims the emergence of the U.S. preeminence as the unrivaled one in the conventional military capabilities and missile defences, enabling it to fulfill its security objectives "at lower nuclear force levels", consequently enabling it to meet its "NPT Article VI obligation to make progress toward nuclear disarmament." This also resonates with its main security objective to diminish U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons by refusal to build "new" nuclear weapons; by "reducing the number of nuclear weapons and their role in U.S. national security strategy"¹⁸ in deterring non-nuclear threats.

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Qualified Negative Security Assurance: Role of Nuclear Weapons

The NPR also, for the first time, puts down the conditions under which the U.S. would use or threaten to use nuclear weapons in response to attack. The NPR explicitly pledges that the “United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations” even if they use Chemical and Biological Weapons (CBW) against U.S. or its allies but would face the prospect of “a devastating conventional military response.” However, this “negative security assurance” has been nuanced by stating that the U.S. reserves the right to readjust this commitment if the biological threat intensifies with the advancement in bio-technological expertise. The NPR pronounces that the “fundamental role” of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attacks on the U.S. and its allies and it has refrained from adopting the “no first use” policy;

The major point *implied* by the report is that the negative security assurance is applicable only to states that are party to the NPT and in compliance with their NPT obligations. The exceptions to this narrower focus would be that non-nuclear attacks by any nuclear-armed state, or states that the U.S. deems to be in violation of the NPT, and Iran and North Korea have been singled out as potential targets. They both are accused to have continuously defied international norms and agreements. After being sanctioned for non-compliance with the NPT, North Korea withdrew from it in 2003, carried out two successful nuclear weapons test, in October 2006 and May 2009.¹⁹ The NPR unequivocally avers that “states that violate their obligations must not be able to escape the consequences of their non-compliance by withdrawing from the NPT.”

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The U.S. Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates made the targeting of these two countries explicit, telling a Pentagon press conference: “There is a message for Iran and North Korea here...if you’re not going to play by the rules, if you’re going to be a proliferator, then all options are on the table in terms of how we deal with you.” The signal being given to Iran and North Korea is that by not complying with the NPT and pursuing nuclear weapons, they are less safe.²⁰

Part II

2010 NPR and Threat perceptions of North Korea

The NPR has kept in place the notion of “nuclear ambiguity” for North Korea. The ambiguity arises since the “extreme circumstances” has not been defined

which exhorts the intention of nuclear use. The U.S. Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, Ellen Tauscher has most overtly spelt out the actual implication of the negative security assurance. He says that “The updated Negative Security Assurance does not alter our current policy on the use of nuclear weapons toward nuclear armed states or non-nuclear weapon states not in compliance with the NPT and their nuclear nonproliferation obligations, such as North Korea and Iran. In other words, for this group of states, we have retained calculated ambiguity.”²¹

North Korea and Iran are designated as “outliers” by the Obama administration. In Ellen Tauscher’s understanding, 2010 NPR is a benign nuclear posture, offering “incentives” to non-nuclear states not to seek or acquire nuclear weapons because “non-nuclear weapon states party to the NPT who comply with their nuclear nonproliferation obligations do not have to fear a U.S. nuclear attack.”²² The NPR has blurred the line of distinction between ‘incentive’ and ‘threat’.

Counter-Productive

The confrontational aspect of the NPR is counterproductive and provocative and would only invite more aggressive reaction rather than any conciliatory overtures from North Korea. North Korea’s first stated reaction to the NPR was

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the reaffirmation of its nuclear deterrent. The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported an official of the Foreign Ministry of North Korea as saying that “As long as the U.S. nuclear threat persists, the DPRK will increase and update various type of nuclear weapons as its deterrent in such a manner as it deems necessary in the days ahead”²³. There will be no settlement in the North Korean nuclear issue unless the U.S. abandons its policy of possible nuclear attack on North Korea. The above mentioned KCNA report also aired the same ethos that “What is most urgent is for the U.S. to roll back

its hostile policy towards the DPRK in practice, not with an empty talk, and take a confidence-building measure.”

In fact, the NPR gives North Korea additional incentive to retain its nuclear deterrent. According to North Korea, it “manufactured nukes, not prompted by any nuclear ambition. It produced them for the purpose of deterring the U.S. attack and defending its sovereignty and right to existence because the latter posed substantial nuclear threat to it after singling it out as “a target of preemptive nuclear attack.””²⁴ The emphasis on the unrivaled U.S. conventional military capabilities and missile defences actually feeds the fears of states to acquire nuclear capability for its merit to be an equalizer by asymmetrically offsetting the conventional military advantage of the dominant state. In the totality of war, North Korea is not

capable of delivering total damage and this limited ability makes it vulnerable to the alliance structure built by the U.S. in Northeast Asia.

The missile defence encourages the target states to expand their stockpile, delivery systems, and motivates them to find other delivery methods. Russia has drawn attention to the fact that it is the conventional military superiority of the U.S. which discourages any meaningful reduction on nuclear weapons. The U.S. “nuclear umbrella” is cited as the reason that the nuclear threshold states in N.E. Asia have refrained from acquiring nuclear weapons. On the other hand, perpetual, extended nuclear deterrence would inhibit progress on deep irreversible cuts in nuclear arsenals, precluding the achievement of a nuclear free world.

North Korea’s fears about its regime survival have been shaped by U.S. attacks on Iraq, Afghanistan and Yugoslavia, all countries without nuclear weapons. The apathetic refusal of the U.S. for normal bilateral relations with North Korea thwarts the ‘pariah’ state’s need to be a respected member of the international community. It encourages North Korea’s hostile and irrational behavior also interpreted as “calculated adventurism”²⁵ to draw the attention of the U.S. towards the fact that such neglect could prove to be costly to the U.S. and its allies in the region i.e. South Korea and Japan. By resorting to such behavior, North Korea attempts to assert its self-importance and implicitly suggests that it cannot be ignored.

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For N.E. Asia, the NPR reinforces the Cold War–era regional security posture of the U.S. characterized by the hub-and-spoke system of bilateral military alliances and its forward-deployed military forces to enhance its military interoperability. At the same time, the U.S. military presence is to check the geographic ascent of challengers to its position in Asia i.e. rising China and the resurgent Russia described by academicians Larson and Shevchenko as “status seekers”²⁶ This U.S. strategy has had a “routinizing” effect on security dilemma, thus ensuring a pivotal role of the U.S. as a security guarantor.

Robert Horvath opines the new “Russian imperialism”²⁷ has become a fact of life”. The rising of tensions between Russia and the U.S. are evident from the fact though in September 2009, the U.S. President Barack Obama had announced the cancellation of the installation of anti-missile shield system in Poland and the Czech Republic, the unveiling of the first battery of U.S. surface-to-air Patriot-type missiles on May 26, 2010 to be stationed in Poland, has raised concerns. Russia has said that the deployment of the missiles jeopardizes stability in the region and does not help bilateral ties. Both China and Russia have resisted U.S. aim of regime change in North Korea and would seek to find a solution to the North Korean

nuclear problem in a manner which would reinforce North Korea as a buffer to the increasing military superiority of the U.S.

Asymmetric Enemy in the NPR

The post-Cold War order alludes to the improbability of large-scale, interstate wars of the kind witnessed last in 1945. The NPR categorically states that the “deterrence challenge is fundamentally different”²⁸. The era of the “fourth generation wars”²⁹ had dawned; the dominant threats emerged from the non-state actors, insurgent-terrorist in character and asymmetric in warfare as epitomized by 9/11. The availability of the sensitive equipment and technologies in the nuclear black market makes this threat even more real. Apart from terrorism, this fundamentally different deterrence challenge has also coalesced into a ‘network’, more specifically the kind of A.Q. Khan ‘network’ which directly threatens the non-proliferation regime. North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, Syria are some of the identifiable elements of this ‘network’.³⁰

But the strengthening of the conventional deterrent is not the mechanism to deal either with the elusive non-state actors who want to acquire nuclear weapons or those states “at odds” with the U.S. who have come together to form the ‘network’ of proliferation. On the contrary, terrorism requires the strengthening of the mechanism of “manhunting operations”³¹ and “intelligence”. According to Barry Posen, in the “war on terror,” Al Qaeda must be addressed as “an intelligence problem”.

The U.S. is unwilling to ‘reward’ North Korea with full bilateral diplomatic relations for its nuclear programme which should not have been commenced in the first

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place. The North Korean communist regime had been an anathema to Bush but even Obama has shown a nuanced dislike towards North Korea. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech on December 10, 2009, Obama said that “I know that engagement with repressive regimes lacks the satisfying purity of indignation.” A formal non-aggression treaty would act in bridging the gap in the distrust between the U.S. and North Korea. This first step is the key to the solution of the intractable hostility in the N.E. Asian region.

North Korea-Asymmetric Challenger/Target

According to the February 2007 estimation of the nuclear expert David Albright, North Korea had a stockpile of reprocessed plutonium of 28-50 kilograms, enough to make about 5-12 nuclear weapons.³² This limited nuclear arsenal of North Korea without an effective delivery system, is not a threat to the security of the U.S. in

view of its unsurpassed conventional military capabilities and strong missile defences. North Korea has conducted two dismal nuclear tests while the U.S. has tested nuclear weapons 1030 times (plus another 24 joint tests with Great Britain).³³ The United States had 5,113 warheads in its nuclear weapons stockpile as of Sept. 30, 2009.³⁴ After ratifying the New START, the U.S. deployed strategic warheads would be limited to 1,550; 800 deployed and non-deployed launchers, and 700 deployed ICBMs, SLBMs and nuclear capable heavy bombers, as told by Rose Gottemoeller, U.S. Assistant Secretary, Bureau of verification, compliance & implementation.

According to Jonathan Granoff, President of Global Security Institute, the U.S. has spent \$5.7 trillion on the nuclear arsenal so far and about 50 billion dollars last year.³⁵ The 2010 NPR has earmarked \$5 billion for the modernization plan to sustain its nuclear infrastructure. North Korea cannot hope to measure up to this value in any significant comparative proportion. The GDP of the U.S. is \$13.8 trillion and its defence spending amounts to \$692 billion. North Korean GDP is limited to mere \$28.2 billion while statistics about its military expenditure is not available. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) in a 2009 report on defence acquisitions reveals that the Missile Defence Agency (MDA) of the U.S. has spent about \$56 billion since 2002 and will spend about \$50 billion more through 2013 to develop Ballistic Missile Defence System (BMDS).³⁶ Even though North Korean army with 1.2 million soldiers is the fourth largest army in the world, capable of inflicting devastating damage to Seoul, North Korea would not risk any limited operation aimed at seizing Seoul or to reunify the Korean Peninsula by full-scale military campaign because that would be at its own peril of complete obliteration.

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North Korea is a low-tech, poor country dependent on food aid from other countries for its survival. A threat is the combination of capabilities and intentions, and the absence of either does not constitute a threat. The nuclear threat emerging from North Korea in terms of capabilities is overestimated. The hostile intention of North Korea towards the U.S. is contingent to the conclusion of the peace treaty between the U.S. and North Korea and normalization of relations.

Part III-Ontological Security

Jennifer Mitzen³⁷ says that “Ontological security-seeking suggests that states may not want to escape dilemmatic conflict. Because even dangerous routines provide ontological security, rational security-seekers could become attached to conflict”. Mitzen defines ontological security as the security of the self i.e. “the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice”.

The ontological security policy of the U.S. towards North Korea has wider ramifications for the whole of Northeast Asian region which consists of China,

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Japan, the Korean peninsula and Taiwan. The U.S. interprets its security as the safety provided by its global hegemony and military superiority, and the unresolved conflict in the Korean Peninsula provides an opportunity to the U.S. to drive the security policies of states in Northeast Asia in a manner which makes their defensive postures frozen in their mutual antagonism. It prevents the regional integration to go beyond the economic interdependence of the Northeast Asian region. Mitzen explains that “states might actually come to prefer their ongoing, certain conflict to the unsettling condition of deep uncertainty as to the other’s and one’s own identity”.³⁸ Mitzen’s assumption of “uncertainty” causing identity-insecurity is derived from the sociological discipline and relies on Anthony Giddens’s understanding of how individuals, in order to act coherently, in their capacity as rational actors “need to bring uncertainty within tolerable limits, to feel confident that their environment will be predictably reproduced.” The centrality of interpersonal relationships for the development of self identity is well understood in cognitive psychology. Identity-insecurity is resolved

through routines developed in these relationships. Therefore, “ontological security-seeking is the drive to minimize hard uncertainty,” brought about by routinization³⁹ which serves the cognitive function of providing individuals with ways of knowing the world and how to act, giving them a felt certainty that enables purposive choice.” Since routinized social relations stabilizes identity, attachment to those routines also occur which are violent in nature.

This logic is extrapolated to state behaviour by Mitzen. Mitzen specifies a “source of conflict persistence that is located ‘in-between’ states, i.e. at the third image and endogenous to the logic of competition itself”. She says that “ontological security” provides structural explanations for the apparent irrationality of conflicts among

security-seekers that persist for long periods of time and become ‘enduring rivalries’, where “conflict persists and comes to fulfill identity needs”. This article takes Metzlin’s postulation ahead and argues that the ‘enduring rivalry’ between the U.S. and North Korea is based on the practice of “ontological security” and it provides the explanation of the security behaviour of the U.S.

The U.S. needs to obviate uncertainty or disruption caused to its stature by China’s rapidly growing global presence and Russia’s rising influence. The U.S. fear that the loss of any decreased American presence in the region would be a direct gain in the political influence for China and Russia, motivates the U.S. to sustain the operation of security dilemmas in Northeast Asia which ensures the indispensability of its military presence in the region. Since losing its “distinctiveness” is not acceptable to the U.S., the identity of the U.S. both as a global power and as the security guarantor is, hence secured and is representative of its ontological security. Mitzen’s postulation that inter-state routines help maintain identity coherence for each group and that “states project self-images to which their members will be attached in complicated ways” fits well with the situation in Northeast Asia. The NPR with its emphasis on the role of the U.S. extended deterrence for its allies is a reflection of its essential want which covets primacy. According to Mitzen, the “ontological security micro-foundational assumption” for states helps in formulating an “overarching analytical framework” capable of explaining certain macro-level patterns. Thus, despite personality differences, George Herbert Walker Bush (1989-1993), Bill Clinton (1993-2001), George Bush (2001-2009) and the ongoing presidency of Barack Hussein Obama (since January 20, 2009) have reacted to North Korea in a similar distrustful manner, reproducing the same mistrust as a “consistent macro-level outcome” over time.

Since losing its “distinctiveness” is not acceptable to the U.S., the identity of the U.S. both as a global power and as the security guarantor is, hence secured and is representative of its ontological security.

Nearly for two decades after the Korean War, North Korea was “persona non grata” for the U.S., and relations with it were marked by sporadic skirmishes at the DMZ.

Korea remains divided at the 38th parallel. Nearly for two decades after the Korean War, North Korea was “persona non grata” for the U.S., and relations with it were marked by sporadic skirmishes at the DMZ. But in 1970’s, North Korea repeatedly proposed the need to replace the armistice agreement with a peace treaty. On March 25, 1974, the Third Session of the Fifth Supreme People’s Assembly of North Korea proposed to the U.S. Congress to conclude a peace treaty. Again in 1977, Kim Il Sung sent messages to President Jimmy Carter to improve bilateral relations. Since the early 1990s

and throughout the first nuclear crisis, the U.S. has ostensibly rejected the North Korean calls for bilateral talks concerning a non-aggression pact.

In the 1970's, notwithstanding the ideological differences with China, the U.S. felt no qualms in surging ahead with the transformational Sino-U.S. rapprochement which continued beyond the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989, to the effect that today China is currently the single largest creditor of the U.S. and holds U.S. Treasury bonds worth \$900 billion. Equally, the U.S. political elite suitably acclimatized themselves to a working relationship with the communist Soviets without challenging its legitimacy, even though ultimately hailing victory over it in 1989. More so, the U.S. incorporates Pakistan as an ally in its war against Afghanistan despite proven record of the network of the Pakistani A. Q. Khan helping North Korea with its nuclear programme. Only the needs of 'strategy' can explain such anomalous U.S. political relationships.

The North Korean aggressive behaviour which is defined by its spate of missile tests since 1998 and two nuclear tests of 2006 and 2009 can be explained in view of the fact that during the Korean War, North Korea had faced the U.S. dilemma of using the bomb against it. Since then the country's leaders has endeavored to turn their country "into an eternal invincible fortress" which now, no "formidable enemy dare not invade as we possess powerful war deterrent able to reliably ensure regional peace and security."⁴⁰

North Korea acclaimed the success of 2006 nuclear testing as a historic event which transformed the country into a "Kangsong Taeguk" of Juche (self-reliance) i.e. a great country with a powerful military and economy. The people were fed with the aphorisms alluding to the celestial greatness of the Gen. Kim Jong-il, "who has established a world-class nuclear power!" The North Korea, in turn, now insists upon being treated as an equal by demanding that the Six-Party Talks be converted into negotiations over mutual arms reductions that would include the reduction of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Leadership Role

The leadership role, in general, projects three images, one-the image of a leader cum bully; two-the image of a leader cum counselor; and three-leader cum pragmatic strategist. A bully resorts to aggression, punishment and threats (typified by the U.S. reaction against Iraq in 2003) a counselor accommodates, engages, nurtures and gives incentives which produces significantly altered national strategies as was observed in the Clinton Administration's Counter proliferation Policy Initiative in the Nunn Lugar cooperative threat reduction strategies and institutional development. The pragmatic strategist employs both the tools of the previous two images in such a balance which favors the self-interest of the leader while projecting the image of an engager; in short, effectively it is a "faux-diplomacy"⁴¹. The U.S. leadership is unique in the fact of its ability to don

these different identities according to its reckoning. Unfortunately, the U.S. has chosen the third image of the pragmatic strategist for North Korea, vacillating between coercive diplomacy of top-down bilateral relationship and choosing assertive/offensive multilateralism and deftly yet imprudently, choosing to exclude the accommodating element. The Six-Party Talks (SPT) with North Korea failed because the U.S. was working on the unilateralist assumptions while adopting a multilateralist approach rejecting a bottom-up functionalist process⁴² in the SPT despite the fact that the SPT was essentially an issue-based forum for North Korea's albeit, non-negotiable Complete Verifiable Irreversible Disarmament (CVID).

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The "payoffs" for North Korean capitulation to CVID were made conditional i.e. the commitment to normalize political and economic relations with North Korea were to follow only after it commits to and implements CVID. Previously, distrust had arisen from the North Korean test of a nuclear-capable TaepoDong-1 missile on August 31, 1998 which was claimed to have deployed the KwangmyOngsOng satellite.

The established discourse in the U.S. that real security threats in the region derive from the North Korean military threat has overlooked the more substantive instability to the region "from generalized human insecurities generated by the breakdown of economic structures within the DPRK and the resulting transborder spillover effects."

The U.S. suspicion that the satellite launch was to test ICBM, had slowed down the construction of two light-water nuclear plants promised by the U.S. to be delivered by 2002 in exchange for the freezing of plutonium production program at Yongbyon. The three-stage TaepoDong rocket launch was a failure but suspicions eventually led to the breakdown of the October 12, 1998 Agreed Framework. The rocket that puts a satellite into orbit is almost identical from a long-range missile. For its April 2009, satellite launch, North Korea had signed the appropriate international protocols governing satellites and given the proper notification.⁴³ Following the destabilizing U.S. military exercises around the peninsula, 69 reputed scholars and academicians had urged "all the governments in the region to remain calm and turn to dialogue and diplomacy to stop the peninsula from degenerating into a conflict".⁴⁴

The Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's policy of "strategic patience" towards North Korea is based on the assumption that the "more Pyongyang is plagued by political instability, food shortages and a declining economy, the more likely it will yield to American demands." However, Joel S. Wit warns that

“We should not delude ourselves into thinking that Kim Jong-il will soon give up his nuclear arsenal, even for financial rewards; it is too important to his vision of a strong North Korea.”⁴⁵ The fear of risk to the Northeast Asian region by unilateral U.S. military intervention in North Korea is strong. With reference to the increased tension on the Korean Peninsula connected to the Cheonan sinking, he further emphasizes that “In the 16 years I have worked with North Korea, I have made 18 trips there, and I remain convinced that sustained diplomatic engagement is the only way to encourage the North to moderate its threatening behavior.”⁴⁶ The established discourse in the U.S. that real security threats in the region derive from the North Korean military threat has overlooked the more substantive instability to the region “from generalized human insecurities generated by the breakdown of economic structures within the DPRK and the resulting transborder spillover effects.” Hazel Smith says that “Unless and until the DPRK government secures the means to rebuild its economy, and at the same time considers itself secure from external attack, it will continue to follow an isolationist policy that cannot deliver human security for its people or regional security for its neighbors.”⁴⁷ The U.S strategy to keep North Korea isolated and weak through sanctions and waiting for it to collapse would only lead it towards the path of defiance. It would continue to consider nuclear weapons vital to its security.

Conclusion

The release of the NPR with its stated hostility against North Korea has weakened the possibility of the resumption of the SPT, the only framework dedicated to North Korea’s denuclearization. The denuclearization of South Africa in 1990 was made possible not by sanctions but due to the elimination of security threats emanating within the region marked by the then Soviet support of Cuban involvement in Angola’s civil war and the threat of Cuban aggression against the intervention of South Africa in the civil war. The implosion of Soviet Union and a ceasefire in the civil war steered South Africa to give up nuclear weapons. In the case of Ukraine, NWS

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signed Memorandum on Security Assurances in the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) Summit talks at Budapest in December 1994 by which the resolution on accession to the NPT adopted by Ukraine, also entered into force.⁴⁸ How the U.S. deals with North Korea and its nuclear capability will have ramifications for both regional and global stability. However, in view of the fact that extended deterrence in N.E. Asia is relevant to the U.S. to maintain nuclear strategic stability


against Russia and China, normalization with North Korea will be secondary to its larger interests of continuing to underwrite security around the world through its military. The projection and sustenance of its image as superpower is bound to its self-perceptions embedded in ontological security.

According to William Walker the contemporary US interest in nuclear disarmament is tied to judgments of “strategic advantage” and the notion of extended deterrence works on this presumption. He says that the “US military sees its ability to exert influence abroad and protect America’s allies being increasingly constrained by the possession of nuclear weapons by states that would otherwise have little leverage (North Korea being a prime example). Predictably, it wishes to minimize the ability of other states to hamper exploitation of its vast superiority in conventional weapons through the possession of even small nuclear arsenals.”⁴⁹ It appears that the U.S. policy of nuclear disarmament is a means to prevent nuclear proliferation rather than an end in itself.

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President Obama has not been able to resolve the most fundamental contradiction in the NPR i.e. while embracing the constructivist notions of a vision of a world without nuclear weapons in his agenda, the “concrete steps” laid out in the NPR to achieve this are rooted in the old assumptions of deterrence. The NPR claims

The Obama administration has to substantially change the presumptions on which its nuclear posture is based in order to achieve a semblance of an effective international nuclear order.

that the U.S. has assumed leadership “to move toward a world free of nuclear weapons”⁵⁰ but by making political ideals to be in the service of political objectives, these ideals are unlikely to be fulfilled. If the leadership mantle is dictated by the “need to restore U.S. moral authority in the world, recommit the U.S. to upholding and extending the rule of law”⁵¹ then the whole premise of normative leadership in terms of global nuclear agenda becomes suspect in view of its political objectives. The Obama administration has to substantially change the presumptions on which its nuclear posture is based in order to achieve a semblance of an effective international nuclear order. 

Notes:

- 1 Two previous Reviews conducted by the Clinton and Bush Administrations in 1994 and 2001 were classified and were not meant to be made public.
- 2 David J. Trachtenberg, Assessing the NPR: A Closer Look, Centre for Defence Studies. The “calculated ambiguity” implies that the U.S. chooses not to specify what responses it would undertake in reaction to a chemical and biological weapon (CBW) assault upon the U.S. and its allies.<http://www.defencestudies.org/?p=2274#more-2274>
- 3 2010 Nuclear Posture Review Report, p. i.

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- 6 *ibid.*
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- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 Realists argue that states want to escape security dilemmas but uncertainty prevents them. Ontological security-seeking suggests that states may not want to escape dilemmatic conflict. Because even dangerous routines provide ontological security, rational security-seekers could become attached to conflict. Ontological security-seeking renders understanding on long-drawn conflicts. See Jennifer Mitzen (2006). "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma".
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