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NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND MISSILES PROGRAMME: A THORNY ISSUE IN UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY

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ABSTRACT: *North Korea, a diminutive state geographically located in the North East Asian (NEA) sub-region, has for decades been secretly developing its nuclear weapons and missiles programme which began during the Cold War era. Constituting a threat to regional/international peace and stability, the United States over the years has pursued a foreign policy aimed at getting Pyongyang to freeze or dismantle its nuclear and missile programmes. But isolated North Korea, in defiance to international sanctions and pressure, has conducted several nuclear weapon and ballistic missile tests, thus escalating tension on the Korean Peninsula in particular and the NEA sub-region at large. This paper critically examines North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles programme from 1956 to 2019 and how such a programme has been a thorny issue in U.S. foreign policy. For this study, the historical approach was adopted and the qualitative method of secondary data collection. This paper concluded that time is not on the side of America. If the U.S. eventually fails in the nearest future to diplomatically resolve the problematic nuclear and missile programmes of North Korea, it will be left with no other choice than to recognise North Korea as a de facto nuclear-armed state in a world where the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) ought to be enforced, especially by the U.S.*

KEYWORDS: Nuclear Weapons, Missiles, Launch, Summit, Earthquake, Yongbyon Nuclear Complex, Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site

INTRODUCTION

On August 06 and 09, 1945, the United States dropped the atomic bomb 'Little Boy' and 'Fat Man' on the Japanese cities – Hiroshima and Nagasaki respectively as the Second World War gradually came to a close. After the horrendous Second World War (1939-1945) ended, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) strove to end the U.S. monopoly of the said weapon which it did when it tested its first atomic bomb on August 29, 1949, during the Cold War (see Ogunnoiki and Ekpo, 2019:60). The powers – the United Kingdom, France, China and India also did likewise in 1952, 1960, 1964, and 1974 respectively. Aside these six aforementioned nuclear-armed countries, another polity attained this nuclear feat after the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This country is none other than the South Asian state, Pakistan, which conducted its first nuclear weapon test on May 28, 1998. Since the acquiescence of Pakistan in the international community as a nuclear weapons state, several ambitious countries have attempted to join the exclusive club of nuclear-armed countries, one of which is the Lilliputian, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) or simply North Korea.

In recent years, North Korea's nuclear devices and missiles development pose a great security threat in the North East Asian (NEA) sub-region and the wider world. Its small, intermediate, and medium-range missiles can strike neighbouring South Korea (which it threatened to turn into a "sea of fire"), Japan or the U.S. Pacific island of Guam where the U.S. have military bases and assets. The U.S. (which it threatened to turn into "a heap of ashes") in far away North America is not out of its strike range should Pyongyang decide to use its long-range missiles which can deliver the small but powerful nuclear warhead against targeted parts of U.S. mainland e.g. Alaska, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York etc. or against the homeland of countries in distant regions e.g. Europe. Thus, the Trump administration has for some years now been pursuing a foreign policy aimed at getting Pyongyang to relinquish its nuclear and missile programmes but, very little progress has been recorded thus far in this regard as the case was for previous administrations in the White House that attempted to get North Korea to freeze or dismantle its nuclear weapons and missiles programme by using the foreign policy instruments: diplomacy and economic sanctions or the incentive: economic aid.

To have compounded the problematic nuclear and missile programmes of North Korea is its stockpile of other Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) – biological and chemical weapons. North Korea is believed to have "an arsenal of chemical weapons, including sulfur mustard, chlorine, phosgene, sarin, and VX nerve agents" (Albert, 2019). It reportedly demonstrated its chemical weapons capability when the face of Kim Jong-un's estranged half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, was smeared with the deadly VX nerve agent in Kuala Lumpur Airport, Malaysia, in February 2017 by a Vietnamese and Indonesian woman (Allard et al., 2017; Bowden, 2017; Klingner, 2018; Corcoran, 2019). Until his death, Kim Jong-nam was a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) informant which made him a traitor to the third generation of the Kim dynasty (Strobel, 2019). North Korea is also believed to have biological weapons despite becoming a party to the Biological Weapons Convention on March 13, 1987, and acceding to the Geneva Protocol in 1988. The pathogens include: anthrax, botulism, hemorrhagic fever, plague, smallpox, typhoid, and yellow fever (Bowden, 2017; Albert, 2019). Furthermore, there are fears in some quarters that North Korea, with a history of missile sales and nuclear technology sharing with countries such as Egypt, Iran, Libya, Myanmar, Pakistan, Syria, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Vietnam, and Yemen, may resort to selling more nuclear materials and technical know-how to raise the much needed funds for its nuclear and missile programmes (Robertson, 2003; Albert, 2019).

To critically examine North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles programme as a thorny issue in U.S. foreign policy after this introduction, this paper has been compartmentalised with the following sub-headings: the historical background to North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles programme: the nature, justification and challenges, United States foreign policy and North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, conclusion and lastly, recommendations.

The Historical Background to North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programmes

On September 09, 1948, North Korea was declared and led by the communist, Kim Il-sung. In 1950, the Republic of Korea (ROK) or South Korea for short, proclaimed its independence. Hence, North Korea, supported by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. This marked the beginning of the Korean War between both Koreas on the Korean Peninsula. The proxy war (North Korea supported by the PRC and USSR while South Korea by the U.S. and

UN) 'ended' following a Korean Armistice Agreement that was signed in Panmunjom "– by U.S. Army Lt. Gen. William K. Harrison Jr., of the United Nations Command Delegation and North Korean General Nam Il, who represented China – on July 27, 1953,…" (Waxman, 2018).

North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes started few years after the Korean War (1950-1953) 'ended'. During the Cold War between ideological rivals – communist USSR and capitalist U.S. on the international plane, Kim Il-sung's interest in nuclear energy (as opposed to weapons) piqued for primarily national economic and energy needs as well as for the prestige attached to this new technology. Thus, he solicited the assistance of North Korea's ally, the Soviet Union, in training North Korean scientists and in building the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Centre which began in 1960 after both countries signed a nuclear cooperation agreement in 1956 and 1959 respectively (Robertson, 2003; Sanders IV, 2017; Standifer, 2017; Leveringhaus, 2018, Wertz, 2018).

After China tested its first nuclear weapon on October 16, 1964, Pyongyang approached Beijing for nuclear assistance, but got none. It went as far as seeking nuclear assistance from Czechoslovakia, East Germany, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia but, none of them were willing to help (Leveringhaus, 2018; Solingen 2007 as cited in Miller & Narang, 2018:60). Hence, Kim Il-sung resorted to self-help and, the construction of a 5 megawatt (MWe) experimental nuclear reactor at the Yongbyon Centre began in 1979 which became operational in 1986 (IAEA, 2009; RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2017; Ogunnoiki, 2018; Wertz, 2019). At this juncture, it is imperative to mention that North Korea joined the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1974 only to withdraw from the Vienna-based nuclear watchdog on June 13, 1994, thus making it the only country ever to do and, acceded to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on 12 December 1985, only to pull out from the agreement on January 10, 2003, thus making it the first and only country to date to make such a move (IAEA, 2009; Hilpert & Meier, 2018).

Between 1976 and 1981, Egypt reportedly provided North Korea with Soviet Union's Scud-B type missiles which North Korea locally produced and tested its own version in the early 1980s (NDRC, 2003; McLaughlin, 2017; Sanders IV, 2017). From the early 1980s to date, North Korea has failed/succeeded in its submarine as well as short, intermediate, medium and long-range missile tests. The missiles it has test-fired thus are: Hwasong-5 (Scud-B variant) in 1984 and 2014, Hwasong-6 (Scud-C variant) tested intermittently from 1986 to 2016, No-Dong infrequently launched from 1990 to 2016, Pukkuksong-1 from 2014 to 2016, Musudan in 2016, Hwasong-7 (Scud-D variant) in 2017, Pukkuksong-2 in 2017 and, Hwasong-12 also in 2017. Other missiles include: the Taepodong-1, tested on August 31, 1998, and Taepodong-2 (Unha-2) on April 05, 2009 (MDAA, 2019).

At its underground Punggye-ri site, North Korea has exploded six nuclear devices in the year 2006 (1), 2009 (1), 2013 (1), 2016 (2) and, 2017 (1). The details of these tests can be found in the 'United States Foreign Policy and North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programmes' sub-section of this paper.

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North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missiles Programme: The Nature, Justification and Challenges

North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes are to a large extent a secret one in the reclusive state. "Without disclosures and inspections, it's impossible to know exactly what weapons North Korea possesses" (Herskovitz & Lee, 2019), the exact amount of fissile material it has produced, the number of nuclear warheads, nuclear and missile facilities it has let alone the level it has attained in its nuclear technology advancement (Pappas, 2019). But there are ways of monitoring North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes without international inspectors (not currently permitted by Pyongyang to its nuclear sites and facilities) on ground e.g. seismic data, radioxenon isotopes in the atmosphere, satellite imagery etc. But these methods can only provide limited data. For example, the satellite imagery can only provide information on overt nuclear and missiles activities in North Korea but, "[m]any of the country's nuclear facilities are camouflaged, tucked away in mountains or hidden underground" (Kim, 2019a). However, based on intelligence gathered by the U.S. as well as nuclear experts' assessment, North Korea should have between 20/30 to 60 nuclear weapons (Klingner, 2018; Kristensen & Norris, 2018; Albert, 2019; Herskovitz & Lee, 2019; Kim, 2019a; Rogers-Martinez, 2019; The Straits Times, 2019; Zeballos-Roig, 2019).

What are the rationales behind North Korea's infrequent nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles test? is a germane question that will be answered here. There are several reasons why Kim Jong-un (who has tested 4 nuclear devices and over 60 ballistic missiles compared to his father and grandfather respectively or combined (The New York Times as cited in Stanek, 2017; Albert, 2019; Macias, 2019)) is obsessed with it. North Korea has an historical perception of existential threat from outside which began with Japanese colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945. After the Korean War (1950-1953), the threat perception was based on the stationing of tactical U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea from 1958 to 1991, the joint U.S.-South Korean military drills that have taken place (almost) annually since 1976, and not to forget the presence of U.S. troops in East Asia (Ballbach, 2018).

Secondly is, the collapse of the USSR. Since the creation of North Korea, the USSR was its ally and sponsor. The Soviet Union provided North Korea with huge amounts of economic aid and security assistance, propping up the country. As a superpower patron, the Soviet Union also provided North Korea with diplomatic and military support (Beauchamp, 2016a). But when nuclear-armed Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the protection it enjoyed for years ended, exposing it to external threats, especially from the West. Thus, the leadership of North Korea saw the need to continue its covert nuclear weapons and missiles programme.

Thirdly, Kim Jong-un believes that his regime survival among other things is inextricably linked to nuclear weapons. Why he strongly believes so is not far-fetched. North Korea claims that the U.S., a nuclear-armed country, has a "hostile policy" towards it (Washington Post as cited in Hamilton, 2016; Klingner, 2018). Hence for deterrence sake, the regime security of the Kim Jong-un, the defense of its territory, political independence and sovereignty (and not for first strike purposes as some fear) in the post-Cold War era, North Korea continues to develop its nuclear and missile programmes in order to attain the goal of placing the U.S. homeland and that of its sub-regional allies – Japan and South Korea within its ballistic missiles strike range. Aside the perceived U.S. anti-North Korea policy, North Korea shares a border with two gigantic nuclear-armed states – China and Russia which

though are its ally now, can overnight become its foe. The possibility of this brings to mind Lord Palmerston's paraphrased dictum that, there are no permanent friends or enemies in international relations but, permanent interests.

The fourth reason is that the midget country desires the prestige that comes with possessing nuclear weapons (Leveringhaus, 2018). Fifthly, it could be that Pyongyang wants to extract "concessions out of its enemies: North Korea occasionally heightens military tensions with South Korea and then demands increases in aid from international actors in exchange for backing down" (Beauchamp, 2016b).

Sixthly, as Bruce Bennett, a defense analyst at the RAND Corporation mentioned, it could be due to domestic politics. North Korea is a country "where the leadership culture demands a powerful leader, one capable of achieving great accomplishments,". "So it is not surprising that [ruler Kim Jong Un] needs to periodically demonstrate his power. His claim that he has achieved a major advance in nuclear weaponry could be just such a demonstration, focused significantly on his internal audience" (Beauchamp, 2016b).

Lastly, the hermit country does carryout nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles test to mark special days or to insult/warn its enemies on their special days. This has been done over the years before, on, or after a special day e.g. America's Independence/Thanksgiving Day, Victory Day, Kim Il-sung centenary and, Kim Jong-un's birthday. It has also been done to register North Korea's displeasure at the provocative U.S.-South Korea large-scale military drills: Foal Eagle and Key Resolve which are held annually.

Presently, calls have been made in the international community for North Korea to halt all nuclear and missile tests and more importantly to commence the denuclearisation process. But Kim Jong-un is unwilling to terminate the decades-old nuclear and missile programmes or hand out an inventory of North Korea's clandestine nuclear and missile facilities. He is a 'student of history' no doubt. He has learnt a thing or two from other countries experience in recent past. In 2003, the U.S.-led invasion, based on faulty intelligence that Iraq had Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), toppled Saddam Hussein's government. Ever since then, the oil-rich Iraqi State has not remained the same (see Ogunnoiki, 2018:51-52). In December 2003, Col. Muammar Gaddafi relinquished his nuclear weapons programme in exchange for sanction relief (this later became known as the "Libya Model', a model former Trump's National Security Adviser, Mr John Bolton, recommended for the denuclearisation of North Korea) only for NATO, under the guise of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), to intervene in the 2011 Libyan crisis that led not only to a regime change in the oil-rich country but the controversial death of Col. Gaddafi (see Ogunnoiki and Ekpo, 2019:62-63, 68).

Ukraine is another example. It gave up the defunct USSR nuclear weapons on its soil in exchange for security assurances that the United States of America, the Russian Federation, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland shall refrain "from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine,…" in the Budapest Memorandum signed on December 05, 1994 (Pircenter, 2019). But in post-nuclear Ukraine, Russia, the successor state of the Soviet Union, annexed its territory – the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014. Last but not least is Syria. After the last batch of Syria's declared chemical weapons stockpile was shipped out of the country for destruction on June 23, 2014, (Bendavid, 2014), Bashar al-Assad would have been dislodged by foreign forces if Russia and Iran had not supported his government on the battlefield in war-torn Syria.

As at now, North Korea is not close to perfection yet *vis-à-vis* its nuclear and missile technology. It is still faced with some surmountable challenges one of which is miniaturising a nuclear warhead that can be inserted into the nose cone of a ballistic missile. Much as this is true, a leaked U.S. intelligence assessment on August 08, 2017, and Japan (reportedly in its 2019 Defence White Paper) stated that North Korea may have achieved this technology capability in making a small nuclear warhead that can be placed inside a missile (BBC News 2017a; Albert, 2019; McCurry, 2019, Reuters, 2019). Secondly, North Korea "has not yet demonstrated a fully functional reentry vehicle, which carries the warhead atop the ICBM, capable of surviving the searing heat, pressure and vibration of falling from space back to Earth" (Hennigan, 2019). But North Korea is gradually making significant progress in overcoming the said problems. The nuclear and missile tests conducted thus far show that it is closer to its technological breakthrough than before.

United States Foreign Policy and North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programmes

In September 1991, the U.S. announced it will be withdrawing roughly one hundred nuclear weapons from South Korea because of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) between President George H. W. Bush Sr and the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, which limits the deployment of offensive nuclear weapons abroad (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019; Masterton, 2019). On January 30, 1992, North Korea concluded the Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA which it ratified on April 09, 1992. In the month of May 1992, North Korea submitted its nuclear material declaration to the IAEA stating among other things to have some 90 grams of plutonium. To verify its claim, the nuclear watchdog inspectors were on ground for inspection only to be denied access to two nuclear waste sites. While the IAEA pushed for the 'special inspection' of the nuclear waste sites, Pyongyang on March 12, 1993, announced its intention to withdraw from the IAEA (which it did on June 13, 1994) (Masterton, 2019). To resolve the nuclear crisis, Mr Jimmy Carter, a former president of the U.S. met with Kim Il-sung in North Korea in the month of June 1994, thus becoming the first ex-president of the U.S. to visit the country. Carter's trip to North Korea was a productive one as its paved way for a bilateral deal months later between the U.S. and North Korea (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019).

After holding talks, on October 21, 1994, Clinton's administration signed the 'Agreed Framework' with the government of Kim Jong-il (Kim Il-sung's son who succeeded him after he died from a heart attack on July 08, 1994) in Geneva, Switzerland. Based on the Agreement, North Korea will freeze its nuclear weapons programme in exchange for the shipments of heavy fuel oil and two light-water reactors (LWRs) to be built at Kumho by the Korea Energy Development Organisation (KEDO) – an international consortium made up of the U.S, Japan and, South Korea (Wit, 2001; Liou, 2004; Poneman, 2007; Matray, 2013, Ogunnoiki, 2018, Council on Foreign Relations, 2019; Hennigan, 2019).

On January 20, 2001, the Republican, George W. Bush Jr was inaugurated as the 43rd U.S. president. On the 29th of January, 2002, Bush Jr in his State of Union address, demonised Iran, Iraq and North Korea, calling them an "Axis of Evil" because they seek WMD (Pauly, 2009). Quoting him verbatim:

> *"States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic"* (CNN.com, 2002).

Despite Bush Jr rhetoric on how the 'Axis of Evil' pursuit of WMD posed a threat to U.S. security and that of its allies – Japan, South Korea, Israel etc., he did not adopt an offensive military strategy against Iran and North Korea, like he did for Afghanistan and Iraq. Rather, Bush Jr. adopted multilateral diplomacy (Ogunnoiki, 2018).

On January 10, 2003, North Korea announced that it is withdrawing from the NPT. Prior to North Korea's withdrawal, the Bush administration on October 16, 2002, stated that North Korea admitted to secretly running a Highly-Enriched Uranium (HEU) programme for nuclear weapons production. Hence, the U.S. Japan and South Korea suspended heavy fuel oil shipments to North Korea in November, 2002. By the end of 2002, North Korea ordered IAEA inspectors out of the country (Robertson, 2003; IAEA, 2009; Matray, 2013; RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2017; Boghani, 2019; Rogers-Martinez, 2019). However, for the purpose of negotiating the denuclearisation of North Korea, the U.S joined Russia, China, South Korea, North Korea and, Japan to form the Six-Party Talks which had its first round of negotiations in Beijing, China, from August 27-29, 2003 (Ogunnoiki, 2018).

In 2005, Kim Jong-il's government admitted that North Korea had nuclear weapons (Stanek, 2017; Pappas, 2019). On July 04, 2006 (America's 230th Independence Day), North Korea launched several missiles, including a Taepodong-2 (Lewis, 2016) and on October 09, 2006, it tested its first nuclear weapon with an estimated explosive yield of 05-1 kiloton of Trinitrotoluene (TNT) (CSIS as cited in Harris, et al., 2017) at the Punggye-ri site which caused a 4.3 magnitude tremor on the Korean Peninsula according to the United States Geological Survey (UNGS) data (Pearson, 2016). Though many nuclear experts considered the test an unsuccessful one (Pappas, 2019; Rogers-Martinez, 2019), it did not stop the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) from unanimously adopting resolution 1718 on October 14, 2006, that prohibits further nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles test by North Korea.

On February 13, 2007, North Korea reached an agreement with the other Six-Party Talks countries. Same year, it shut down and sealed Yongbyon nuclear reactor which the IAEA confirmed in July 2017. Also, worth mentioning is that it began disabling Yongbyon nuclear facilities in the Q4 of 2007. On June 26, 2008, North Korea submitted an inventory of its atomic programme and the following day, symbolically blew up the 60-foot cooling tower of the Yongbyon nuclear reactor (a major nuclear facility for the production of plutonium) that is 60 miles North of Pyongyang. In return, the Bush administration announced on June 26, 2008, that North Korea will be removed after 45 days from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, which North Korea has been on since 1988. But the removal did not happen until October 11, 2008. Also, Washington lifted some sanctions on North Korea under the Trading with the Enemy Act (Choe, 2008; Herskovitz, 2008; Walker et al., 2008; Liang, 2018; Ogunnoiki, 2018).

On January 20, 2009, the Democrat, Barack Obama was sworn-in as the 44th president and first Black American to rule the U.S. "On April, 5, 2009, despite the international community's repeated warnings and attempts to persuade it to do otherwise, North Korea chose the path of a rogue state and launched a long-range ballistic missile" (Park, 2009). Owing to the UNSC presidential statement on its failed Unha-2 launch on April 13, 2009, North Korea announced the following day its withdrawal from the Six-Party Talks (Liang, 2018). Over a month later, precisely on May 25, 2009, it conducted the second nuclear weapon test at the Punggye-ri site which triggered a man-made earthquake with a 4.7 magnitude on the Richter scale (USGS, 2009 as cited in NTI, 2018). Like the first, the test was seen as a failure according to Jeffrey Park, a Geophysicist at Yale University (Pappas, 2019). Consequently, the UNSC passed Resolution 1874 on June 12, 2009, which increased the sanctions imposed on North Korea.

For the Obama administration, the strategy adopted at addressing North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles programme was 'strategic patience' in which the U.S. and its partners ratcheted up sanctions in hopes that Kim's regime will return to the negotiating table (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). Kim Jong-un, the son of Kim Jong-il came to power at the age of 27 after his father suffered a heart attack and passed away on December 17, 2011. Since he inherited power like his father did from his grandfather, Kim has dramatically increased the speed and scope of North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles programme in line with his *byungjin* policy, a policy with the aim of simultaneously developing nuclear weapons and improving the country's economy (Harris et al., 2017; Ballbach, 2018). On February 29, 2012, Washington and Pyongyang reached an agreement called the 'Leap Day Agreement'. According to the deal, a missile test moratorium was placed on North Korea in exchange for U.S. food aid. But the deal fell apart when Pyongyang tried to launch a rocket into space on April 12, 2012, as they celebrated the late Kim Il-sung centenary but, the test failed (Pollack 2012; Lewis, 2016; BBC News, 2017b; Boghani, 2019). On December 12, 2012, North Korea successfully launched a long-range rocket that carried the satellite (Unha-3) into orbit (Khazan, 2012; Boghani, 2019) which led to the UNSC adopting Resolution 2087 on January 22, 2013, which tightened the existing sanctions on North Korea "by issuing travel bans and asset freezes on Korean individuals and companies involved in the space launch work" (de Selding, 2013).

In defiance to the UNSC resolutions, North Korea on February 12, 2013, detonated the third nuclear weapon at the Punggye-ri site which caused an artificial earthquake with a 5.1 magnitude. The fourth and fifth nuclear weapon were also fulminated at the Punggye-ri site on January 06 (two days before Kim Jong-un's birthday) and September 09, 2016 (the day the country marked the 68th anniversary of its founding), which caused a 5.1 and 5.3 magnitude earthquake respectively near the said site. The Pariah State claims that the successful January test was its first miniaturised hydrogen bomb (a bomb massively more powerful than atomic bombs, using fusion - the merging of atoms - rather than fission to unleash enormous amounts of energy) which many nuclear experts doubt considering the earthquake magnitude which is the same as the last nuclear test in February 2013, and the fact that the explosive yield was between 7-10 kilotons of TNT, which is not even close to an H-bomb explosive yield that is measured in megatons. What nuclear experts believe is that North Korea detonated a 'boosted' bomb which is a two-stage bomb, first the fission stage which at the second stage, the explosive yield is 'boosted' by some fusion. In 2016 alone, North Korea tested more than 20 ballistic missiles in violation of the UNSC resolutions

which drew international condemnation (McAteer, 2016; Pearson, 2016; BBC News, 2017a; Harris et al., 2017; Mosher, 2017; Boghani, 2019).

To have succeeded Barack Obama as the 45th president of the U.S. on January 20, 2017, was the Republican, Donald Trump, who on August 08, 2017, threatened to unleash "fire and fury" on North Korea should it not abandon its threats against the U.S. (BBC News, 2017b; Ward, 2017). He later shelved his threat of military action for his 'maximum pressure' campaign through economic sanctions and, his leader-to-leader diplomacy which he hopes will get Kim Jong-un to take concrete and verifiable steps at denuclearisation. But the enforcement of international sanctions (e.g. coal, iron ore, textiles, arms export embargo and, luxury goods and limited oil import) on North Korea has not been effective because China, a major trading partner of isolated North Korea is not willing to exert too much economic pressure on North Korea for fear of the collapse of Kim's regime, which if such happens, would be an ideological victory for the U.S. and the West thus endangering its own Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-led government. It would also lead to a humanitarian crisis along China-North Korea border which as at December 2017, a leaked unverified document stated that China, considering the escalated tension on the Korean Peninsula, plans to construct five refugee camps in Changbai County to accommodate asylum seekers fleeing a possible armed conflict on the Peninsula (Perlez, 2017). Aside the China factor, international sanctions are not yielding the desired result of denying North Korea the much-needed funds to continue its nuclear and missile programmes because, Pyongyang has been able to circumvent them through e.g. cyber theft. There is evidence that North Korea had a hand in the cyber theft of $81 million from the Bangladeshi Central Bank account at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York in February 2016 and, around $13.5 million from India's Cosmos Bank in August 2018 (Albert, 2019).

The sabre-rattling of North Korea continued in 2017, with Pyongyang upticking the pace of ballistic missile tests and unveiling new, advanced weapons. On July 04, 2017 (the U.S. 241th independence anniversary), North Korea launched its first Hwasong-14 Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), a long-range missile capable of delivering a nuclear warhead that can destroy a target far away from the launch site (Harris et al., 2017; Smith, 2017). This ICBM launch according to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) was described by Kim as a gift for the "American bastards" (McCurry, 2017). Again, it launched surprisingly in the dead of the night unlike many of its previous tests, the second Hwasong-14 ICBM on July 28, 2017 (a day after the 64th anniversary of the Korean War armistice which North Korea calls 'Victory Day') which performed better than the first (CBS News, 2017; Smith, 2017). On September 03, 2017, North Korea successfully tested the sixth nuclear weapon with a 100 kilotons explosive yield at the Punggye-ri site which caused a 6.3 magnitude tremor. North Korea, again, claims that the nuclear weapon was its first thermonuclear bomb (BBC, 2019a, Sample, 2017; Ward, 2017). North Korea did not stop at this in 2017. On November 29, 2017, it tested the new Hwasong-15 ICBM in the middle of the night which performed better than the last Hwasong-14 ICBM (Smith, 2017). As a consequence, for its action, the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 2397 on December 22, 2017, which further slapped North Korea with sanctions. In total, North Korea fired over 20 missiles in 2017 (Berlinger, 2017).

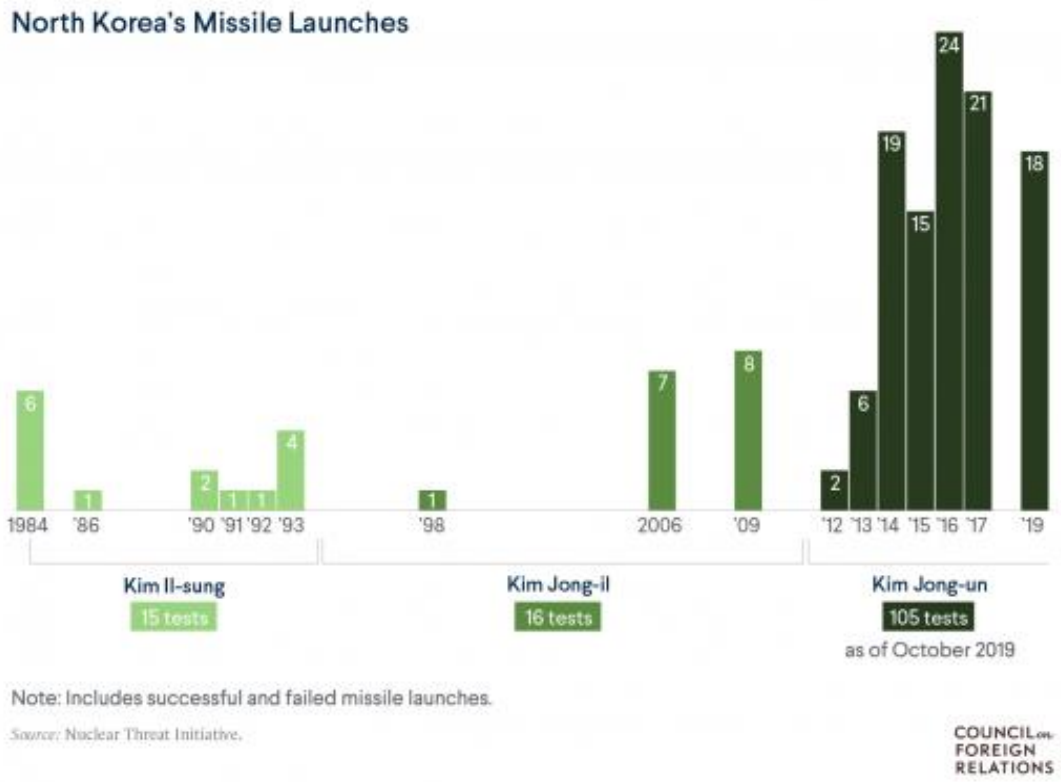
During the April 27, 2018, Inter-Korean Summit between Kim Jong-un and the president of South Korea, Moon Jae-in, Kim promised to dismantle the Punggye-ri site. On May 24, 2018, North Korea blew up some of the tunnels of the Punggye-ri site which foreign journalists observed afar off. Sadly, international inspectors were not allowed to verify the 'dismantled'

nuclear test site (Brumfiel & Hu, 2018; BBC News, 2019a). Also, in 2018, Kim said that North Korea will not conduct further nuclear test or launch ICBM, which thus far he has kept to his word (BBC News, 2019b).

Since President Donald Trump assumed power in 2017, there has been three US-North Korea Summits on North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes. The first Summit between President Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un, the "rocket man" (as Trump called him during the war of words between both leaders in 2017 (Boghani, 2019)), held in Singapore on June 12, 2018. Both leaders signed a joint statement which, in line with the Panmunjom Declaration (a declaration signed by Kim Jong-un and South Korean president, Moon Jae-in on April 27, 2018), North Korea made a commitment to work towards the "complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula". The word "denuclearisation" in the declaration was used in a vague manner. While Washington D.C. sees denuclearisation as the Complete, Verifiable, Irreversible, Denuclearisation (CVID) of North Korea, that of Pyongyang may include in a broader definition, the removal of all U.S. troops from South Korea (Taylor, 2019). Historically, the Singapore Summit made Trump the first sitting U.S. president to meet with the leader of North Korea. At his meeting with Chairman Kim, President Trump called for the suspension of U.S. provocative and expensive "war games" with South Korea i.e. the annually joint military exercises between both countries (Lee, 2019).

After the diplomatic opening in Singapore, Trump and Kim met in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, for their second Summit from February 27 to 28, 2019. In the Summit according to Trump, Kim insisted that all sanctions be lifted from North Korea's choked economy in exchange for the dismantling of his prized Yongbyon nuclear complex. Contrary to Trump's statement is North Korean officials' version of the story that they only demanded for partial sanctions relief (Boghani, 2019; Council on Foreign Relations, 2019; Doubek, 2019). Kim Jong-un's offer was turned down by Trump, who knows full well that North Korea has other undisclosed nuclear and missile facilities that must be included in the decnuclearisation process. Owing to the impasse, President Trump walked away, cutting short the Summit that obviously yielded no deal. After the talks fell apart, the future of U.S.-North Korea negotiations became uncertain especially when North Korea for the first time since its ICBM launch in 2017, fired several projectiles on May 04 according to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and two suspected short-range missiles on May 09, 2019, in violation of UNSC resolutions that barred it from testing ballistic missiles (BBC News, 2019b; Chappell, 2019; Doubek, 2019; DW, 2019a).

On June 30, 2019, President Donald Trump met Chairman Kim Jong-un for their third Summit at the Panmunjom truce village, located in the 250 kilometres-long Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) separating North and South Korea. At Panmunjom, Trump made history again by becoming the first sitting president of the U.S. to step foot on North Korean soil to shake hands with Kim. In their one-on-one discussion, both leaders agreed to restart working-level talks that stalled in February 2019 (Doubek, 2019). Nevertheless, North Korea launched two short-range missiles on July 25, 2019, into the Sea of Japan (also called the East Sea). Again it fired two short-range missiles which landed in the Sea of Japan on July 31, 2019 according to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Prior to this, North Korea showed off its new submarine which is capable of carrying some ballistic missiles (BBC News, 2019b).



Source: Nuclear Threat Initiative, extracted from Albert, E. (2019). North Korea's Military Capabilities, Council on Foreign Relations.

On August 02, 2019, North Korea launched two unidentified projectiles into the Sea of Japan (Blair, 2019). Four days after, it test-fired two new-type tactical guided missiles to register its displeasure at the scaled-down U.S.-South Korea joint military drills called Dong Maeng (Korean: meaning 'alliance') which started on August 05, 2019. To Pyongyang, these provocative drills are nothing but a rehearsal to invade North Korea (Lee, 2019). President Trump, who believes so much in his personal diplomacy with Kim, on August 09, 2019, downplayed the missile launches after he received a "very beautiful letter" (prior to this, Trump said on June 11, 2019, that he received a "beautiful" letter (VOA News, 2019a)) from Kim Jong-un on August 08, who offered in the missive a "small apology" for the missile tests some weeks ago (DW, 2019b; Johnson, 2019). In Trump's words, "[t]here have been no nuclear tests. The missile tests have all been short-range, no ballistic missile tests, no long-range missiles," (Finnegan & McLaughlin, 2019).

President Donald Trump's shrug off of North Korea's missile tests may have emboldened Kim to continue doing so, so far as he is not testing nuclear weapons or ICBM that America frown at. Thus, on August 10, 2019, defence officials in Seoul said North Korea launched what appeared to be two short-range missiles which splashed down in the sea between the Korean Peninsula and Japan (AFP as cited in France24, 2019). Six days later, South Korea's military said that North Korea launched two short-range missiles which was a "perfect" test according to North Korea's news agency, KCNA (Browne, 2019; Hotham, 2019). Again, North Korea, despite Kim informing Trump in his letter that the missile tests will stop after

the U.S.-South Korea military drills were over, launched two apparent ballistic missiles on August 24, 2019, that splashed down outside Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) according to the Japanese Defense Ministry. These launches were carried out two days after Seoul announced that it will scrap the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), an intelligence-sharing pact, with Tokyo (Gallo, 2019a; Johnson, 2019). On September 10, 2019, North Korea fired two short-range projectiles in what is seen as a move to ramp up pressure on the U.S. and strengthen its bargaining position ahead of new talks (Choon, 2019).

On October 02, 2019, North Korea launched what appears to be a submarine-launched ballistic missile (Ward, 2019). Three days after, the U.S. and North Korea's negotiators met in Stockholm, Sweden, to restart working-level talks after over a seven-month old deadlock but, the weekend negotiations broke down. North Korea called the talks "sickening" and accused the U.S. of maintaining its "old stance and attitude" (Associated Press (AP) as cited in CNBC, 2019; Associated Press (AP) as cited in Kim, 2019b). The host country, Sweden, invited both countries to follow-up on their talks in two weeks time but, North Korea rejected the invite (Harstedt as cited in Gallo, 2019b).

On October 16, 2019, North Korea state-run media made it known that Kim Jong-un, who symbolically rode astride a white horse on the snow-covered Mt. Paektu, plans "…to strike the world with wonder" (BBC News, 2019c). This was not the first time he was on the mountain. In 2017, Chairman Kim was spotted on the sacred mountain. On October 31, 2019, North Korea test-fired the new "super-large" multiple rocket launcher for the third time. The first was in August and the second in September. Kim said he would wait patiently until the end of the year for the U.S. "to come up with a courageous decision" (Associated Press (AP) as cited in CNBC, 2019; Associated Press (AP) as cited in Kim, 2019b). While patiently waiting for the U.S., North Korea on November 28, 2019 (Thanksgiving Day in the U.S.), fired two short-range projectiles into the sea off its east coast in a fourth test of its new "super-large multiple-rocket launcher" according to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) (Shin & Smith, 2019).

The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on December 07, 2019, reported that North Korea has conducted a "very important test" of "great significance" at the Sohae satellite launching site. Again, on December 14, 2019, it announced that North Korea successfully conducted another "crucial test" at the said launching site on December 13. The latest test according to the state-run news agency is aimed at "restraining and overpowering the nuclear threat of the U.S." (van Diepen, 2019; Yang & Smith, 2019). No doubt, these tests served as a reminder to President Donald Trump of Kim's end-of-year deadline. But Trump's attention at the time was not on North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes but, on the politics in the U.S. Congress.

On December 18, 2019, President Trump was impeached by the Democrat-dominated U.S. House of Representatives for allegedly abusing the power of the presidency for political gains. He was also accused for obstructing the Congress from investigating his actions. Hopefully, he will be acquitted in 2020 after standing trial in the Senate where the Republicans are the majority (VOA News, 2019b). Pending his trial, Trump on December 24, 2019, jokingly said he hopes that North Korea gives the U.S. a "beautiful vase" as Christmas gift and not missile test (France-presse, 2019). What will happen in the year 2020 after Kim's December 31st deadline has expired, only time will tell.

CONCLUSION

Time is definitely running out for the U.S. to figure out how best to diplomatically bring about the desired denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula without resorting to the 'military options' still on the table. Though, North Korea denuclearisation process will not be a smooth one, the said process cannot begin without the U.S. having a feasible strategy that will not only guarantee security for Kim's regime but make him abandon completely his nuclear and missile programmes which international inspectors can verify. Should Washington fail in this in coming years, then the U.S. will be left with no other choice than to recognise North Korea as a *de facto* nuclear-armed state in a world where the nuclear non-proliferation regime ought to be enforced, especially by America.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings in this paper, the following are strongly recommended:

i) The denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula can only be achieved on the long run. Hence, the U.S. should adopt a gradual approach rather than trying to expedite the termination of the decades-old nuclear and missile programmes of North Korea on the short run;

ii) As a starter, the U.S. should limit North Korea's plutonium production by offering sanctions relief that commensurate Kim Jong-un's offer for the dismantling the Yongbyon nuclear complex. Ones the complex is out of the way, the U.S. should subsequently demand the full disclosure of its nuclear weapons stockpile and a verifiable shutdown of all covert nuclear weapons and missiles site/facility in exchange for more sanction relief;

iii) North Korea, after the denuclearisation process has begun, should permit IAEA inspectors to visit its nuclear and missile sites/facilities in order to monitor and verify compliance;

iv) For the sake of de-escalating tension on the Korean Peninsula, the U.S. should reconsider the July 2017 Sino-Russia 'double freeze' or 'freeze-for-freeze' proposal i.e. the U.S. should suspend the annual joint military exercises with South Korea in exchange for the halt in nuclear devices and ballistic missiles test in North Korea;

v) China, in its own national interest, needs to do more in persuading its ally, North Korea, to desist from escalating tension on the Korean Peninsula which if not properly managed, may lead to a peninsular war and consequently, a nuclear fallout and the possible 'nuclear winter';

vi) The multilateral Six-Party Talks should be resuscitated which will bring to the negotiating table the six countries with security concerns: U.S. China, Russia, Japan, North Korea and, South Korea;

vii) Ones the denucleariston process of North Korea is over, the U.S. should normalise diplomatic relations with North Korea, initiate a peace treaty between North and South Korea that are technically still at war after the Korean War (1950-1953) and lastly, support efforts at the peaceful unification of North and South Korea.

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