

THE US COERCIVE DIPLOMACY AND NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR CHALLENGE

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Abstract

Coercive diplomacy is a useful tool employed by powerful states against the weaker actors for ensuring the latter's compliance in matters related to maintaining the status-quo in International system. The US has increasingly used this instrument, particularly with regards to curtailing the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). However, North Korea has turned out to be an anomaly in this regard, where US efforts to coerce the DPRK into a nuclear roll-back have not only backfired so far, but have also weakened the probability of compliance on the US-preferred terms. North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes have expanded ever since they were first developed, viewed today as an ever-larger threat for US homeland security and American allies. These dynamics are suggestive of the fact that US approach towards North Korea needs some modification. It is imperative for the US to diversify the tools employed within this coercive diplomacy framework such that the element of 'coerciveness' gets contained while that of 'diplomacy' gets reinforced. It is high time that US learns from earlier policy failures regarding the Korean peninsula and brings flexibility in its response if ensuring regional and global peace is the ultimate end being sought.

Key Words: US, Coercive Diplomacy, Korean Peninsula, Nuclear and Missile Development

Introduction

Proliferation of nuclear weapons is a major concern for international community in general and the US in particular. Controlling the current and potential proliferation activities appears to be a pressing issue for the United States, especially with respect to North Korea. In the late 1950s, North Korea was constantly involved in researching, developing and testing nuclear technology in order to counter US hegemony in the region. Despite major efforts to make North Korea roll

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back its nuclear program, the country has achieved several milestones in the field, including nuclear and missile testing. The US adopted several measures including tools of coercive diplomacy to dissuade North Korea from following the nuclear path, but to no avail. This paper focuses on the concept of coercive diplomacy, applied to the case of North Korea, which is fast developing and expanding its nuclear credentials. It also analyzes how Donald Trump can modify the US strategy of using military power against North Korea to that of a 'less coercive diplomacy' where the main focus is on diplomatic persuasion instead of a military blow.

Theoretical Framework

In international politics, the interplay of power and military prowess is greatly relevant, but diplomacy remains the main tool of interaction between states. Through bargaining, states seek outcomes which might not be completely favourable but to some extent can benefit both parties. History seems to be replete with cases where conflicts were resolved through striking diplomatic bargains backed by the threat of using force.

In order to get rid of traditional warfare mechanisms and to make states aware of the possible destructive consequences of wars, coercive diplomacy has become a powerful tool in managing crises or as an alternative to warfare and military exchange.¹ Coercive diplomacy has been utilized throughout history as an instrument of policy to resolve crisis in a relatively more peaceful manner and to minimize the chances of escalation to war.

According to Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, coercion can be defined as a threat of use of force or communicating a threatened use of force for inducing the enemy to change its behaviour.² It is the force employed to make the adversary fulfil certain demands without even trying to persuade the enemy.³ Alexander George elaborated the term as "a strategy that is sometimes utilized by the policymakers in order to settle a dispute or for securing a peaceful resolution to an issue."⁴ Various scholars have tried to explain the very idea of coercive diplomacy as one "used to

¹ Sayde-Hope Crystal, "Coercive Diplomacy: A Theoretical and Practical Evaluation," *Glendon Journal of International Studies* 8 (2015): 1-2.

² Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, "Confronting Iraq: US Policy and the Use of Force Since the Gulf War," *RAND Report*, 2000.

³ Polad Muradli, "What is Coercive Diplomacy?" *The Politicon*, June 16, 2016.

⁴ Alexander L. George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War*, (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997).

promote peace by collaborating these efforts with those of strategic guidelines.”⁵

The general meaning of coercive diplomacy can be taken as a tool used to convince the adversary to surrender to one’s demands with the threat of punishment in case there is non-compliance to the demands. Coercive diplomacy, so far has been proved to be an attractive strategy as it offers the possibility to achieve ones objectives without bloodshed or with less chance of escalation when compared to the cost of employing the traditional military strategy.

Thus, the very concept of coercive diplomacy revolves around four major variables: the coercer’s demands, means being used for creating urgency, punishment in case of noncompliance, the possible use of incentives for persuading the adversary and securing the acceptance and fulfilment of demands. Accordingly, when a policy maker comes up with different features while constructing a certain strategy, different variants may overwhelm that particular strategy. These basic types of diplomacy or variants in coercive diplomacy are known as “ultimatum” or tacit ultimatum, the “try-and-see” approach, the “gradual turning of the screw” approach and lastly, the “carrot and stick approach”. The ‘ultimatum’ employs threats and also imposes a time limit for compliance in order to enhance the adversary’s urgency. The ‘try and see’ approach focuses on the use of mild coercion. If the demands are not met in a limited timeframe then more threats are brought up into focus. The coercive force is increased in order to compel the adversary for taking certain action or fulfilling the demands. The ‘gradual turning of the screw’ is somewhat different from the ‘try and see’ approach as the former focuses more on the increased use of force and pressure rather than on time constraints which is the domain of the latter. Finally, there is the ‘carrot and stick’ approach, which focuses on assurances. The coercer must assure the adversary or the target that there will be no further demands and the coercer will also offer some incentives as carrots to the targets along with the stick of threat and punishment.⁶

Historical Analysis

The US foreign policy was traditionally dominated by the use of military force and use of power in order to deter the Soviets from challenging US dominance and threatening its allies. In the post-Cold War era and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a more difficult challenge came forth: to manage the internal conflict situation, terrorism and to pre-empt the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by rogue states and non-state actors. Since then, coercive diplomacy has become a

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

more proactive approach of dealing with international actors to make them behave in a certain way. There are almost 37 cases of the application of coercive diplomacy during 1990-2005, in order to stop the military exchange and the spread of WMDs and terrorism, but only a few of them were successfully operational.⁷

In the US history, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Iraq War, the Contras-affair, and Libya are key examples where peace was achieved by the adoption of coercive diplomacy. The Ukraine Crisis is another successful example of coercive diplomacy. The world saw great turbulence as the bipolar power struggle precipitated. In the 1960s, the US and the Soviet Union did not only see each other in a power tussle but were also struggling not to drag the world into another massive war.

When the Soviet President Khrushchev decided to put the Soviet missiles in Cuba, it was done out of the fear that USSR is falling behind in the arms race and that its missile capabilities are not adequate to instil fear in the US military. The US policy was then moulded under John F. Kennedy who decided to bombard the sea in order to stop the Soviet fleet from bringing missiles. Knowing the decision was taken under Kennedy, whose personality dictated not to fall back from his position; Khrushchev decided to pull back the fleet. Kennedy used the tactic of threatening to bombard the fleet, which successfully turned the game and made the Soviets turn back in order to avoid the chances of dragging the conflict into something much bigger and dangerous.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Reagan administration was dealing with the threat of Contra Rebels in Central America; the Contras were against the government of the Nicaraguan President. Reagan was very much in support of the rebels because he was not in favour of the formation of Communist or Socialist blocs in South America. In accordance with the Reagan doctrine, the rebels were significantly funded by the US government. He endorsed this funding by claiming that it is an unusual threat to the national security of the country. At last, Reagan applied certain strategies comprising of policy options as a means of coercive diplomacy. The government of Nicaragua was made to take democratic reforms and start negotiations. This move in fact, made him successful in achieving what he had desired.⁸

In 1993, when George Bush was told that Saddam Hussein was hesitant to allow the UN inspection team to do their job. Bush immediately asked the UN Security Council for assistance to halt these movements and activities by Iraq and as a result sanctions were imposed on Iraq. In

⁷ Peter Viggo Jakobsen, "Coercive Diplomacy: Frequently Used, Seldom Successful," *Kungliga Krigsvetenskapsakademien Handlingar och Tidskrift Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, Documents and Magazine*, (University of Copenhagen) 4, 2007.

⁸ Ibid.

reaction, Iraq started to move its missiles in the No Fly Zone, which was established by the US-led forces, following which Bush, along with his allied forces, launched a missile strike in Iraq, which eventually made Saddam agree to the cease-fire. The attacks were minimal with no casualties and the tools of coercive diplomacy were intelligently manipulated by Bush. This also demonstrated that with minimal use of force certain demands can also be met.⁹

Another case is that of Muammar Qaddafi who ruled Libya for more than 40 years. The use of coercive policies in Libya led to the elimination of WMDs from Libya in 2003 and then the actual demise of Qaddafi in 2011. Libya, during the early 1990s, was found to be involved in terrorist activities and was clearly but covertly developing its nuclear capability. With the change in US administration, the situation in Libya turned despondent. The Bush administration imposed economic sanctions, which brought Libya's economic decline leading to abandonment of its nuclear program. With the outbreak of 'Arab Spring' in 2011, the US and NATO decided to overthrow the Qaddafi regime. Thus, coercive diplomacy was used to make a country disarm successfully with certain inducements and incentives.¹⁰

History shows that the use of this strategy, together with its benefits and remunerations, has proved quite successful while maintaining state-to-state relations, and preventing and resolving conflicts. Therefore, there is a need to focus more on balanced and tactful coercion of the adversary rather than using military power and leading the world towards war.

Development of North Korea's Nuclear Program

The Korean nuclear program and its development dates back to the post World War II era when the unconditional support and provision of US security assurances to South Korea against North Korea raised concerns for the latter. Today, the North Korean nuclear and missile program has become a source of concern not only for the Korean Peninsula's security but also for the international community at large. Despite years of constant international condemnation and pressure, the country has been successful in developing its own nuclear weapons program and delivery mechanisms. Till now, North Korea has reportedly succeeded in conducting several nuclear tests, from nuclear devices to hydrogen bombs. It would be quite difficult to actually estimate the level of technical sophistication of Korea but several experts are confident about

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Alexander George, "The General Theory and Logic of Coercive Diplomacy," in *USIP Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1991): 3-14.

the fact that Korea has developed a miniature sized nuclear warhead which can be paired up with a missile to destroy its targets.

Since the country's first nuclear test, which was conducted back in October 2006, the military developments in 2016 are enough to prove that Pyongyang poses a threat not only to the regional players but also to the US sovereignty. Since the end of the Korean War, the country seems to be improving both in the nuclear and missile domain on all technological fronts. The nuclear and missile development by North Korea seems to be paralleling South Korea, which not only allowed the country to develop its military program but also led the country to recover its economy after the 1990 famine - which had devastatingly engulfed the country.¹¹

Plutonium Based Program

The nuclear ambitions of North Korea were also reinforced by the Soviet Union as it provided the country with technical expertise and technology in the form of a research reactor. The reactor was operationalized in 1966 and was capable of enriching uranium. Along with this enrichment facility, there were speculations about the clandestine enrichment facility of North Korea, which is unknown in scale and can help the country in developing its nuclear weapons. North Korea's nuclear weapons program is supported and operated under both plutonium and uranium based routes.

In 1986, North Korea's Gas Graphite reactor of 5MWe started operating and was declared as the centrepiece of Pyongyang's Plutonium production house. Somewhere before the 1990s, North Korea planned to separate its plutonium spent fuel in order to produce up to 10 kg plutonium. By 1990, North Korea started to construct two large scale gas graphite reactors nearby Taechcon. In 1994 under the Agreed Framework, the plutonium production was halted along with the construction of larger research reactors. Nevertheless, North Korea restarted the processing on the plutonium plant when the Agreed Framework collapsed in 2003.

After being operational for several years, the 5MWe reactor collapsed and was disabled in 2006 as a result of Six Party talks. However, the appetite and intentions of the state to develop its weapons program never toned down. North Korea again started to construct its light water reactors in conjunction with a uranium plant, which could produce plutonium later. There were speculations regarding the light water reactors but North Korea denied all of these and claimed that these were for civilian use. There had been speculations that if these reactors were able to produce weapon grade plutonium then North Korea could actually

¹¹ Lorenzo Mariani, "Assessing North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programmes: Implications for Seoul and Washington," Working Paper of Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Italy March 14, 2017.

get 20 kg of plutonium per year. Siegfried Hecker, the former director of Los Alamos Laboratory, estimated that once Korea has conducted its second nuclear test, the country actually owned 24-48 kg of plutonium as each of the first two tests carried 6 kg of plutonium.¹²

Uranium Based Program

During the 1990s, North Korea was believed to have received technical expertise and capabilities from the AQ Khan network. The US suspected this and decided to inquire from the Korean regime regarding the issue in a meeting held at Pyongyang in 2002. After the confrontation, the US started propagating that North Korea possibly got technical expertise and equipment from the AQ Khan network. There were traces of highly enriched uranium but DPRK constantly denied and refused to acknowledge the existence of uranium facilities. Following the nuclear test in 2009, DPRK announced that the country was in fact developing a uranium facility, which later could produce fuel in order to make the light water reactors workable. A US delegation visited the facility in order to watch over the very processing unit, which was quite modern and efficient compared to other Korean facilities.¹³

With reference to Korea's efforts in developing its nuclear program along with the procurement from the Khan network, China was never in favour of a nuclear North Korea. Initially, China had been supportive of North Korea and helped the country sustain its economy, which had collapsed after the Korean War. China had also intended to be the closest ally, the largest provider of fuel, food and industrial machinery to North Korea but the relations started to turn sour when North Korea first tested its nuclear weapon. The Chinese core interests of pursuing peace and stability in the Korean peninsula became largely focused on the de-nuclearization of North Korea. Obviously, with a nuclear Korea, Chinese influence would begin to decline while posing threats to its regional interests.¹⁴

Nuclear Weapons' Tests

Since the inception of North Korean nuclear weapons program, the country is believed to have tested a total of six nuclear weapons devices.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ David Albright and Paul Branan, "Taking Stock: North Korea's Uranium Enrichment Program," *The Institute of Science and International Security*, October 8, 2010, <http://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/taking-stock-north-koreas-uranium-enrichment-program/>.

¹⁴ Bonnie S. Glaser, "China Policy in the Wake of Second DPRK Nuclear Test," *Journal of China Security* 5 no. 2 (July, 2009), <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/GlaserChinaSecurity2.pdf>.

North Korea tested its first nuclear device in 2006 when the US spy satellites were very much active in monitoring the activities regarding military developments on the Korean Peninsula. The test was considered to be a nuclear fizzle rather than a fully effective blast.¹⁵ The second test was conducted on May 25, 2009; according to international experts, there was no leakage of radiations. This in fact gave the state capability to contain the nuclear test, which is a big step and advancement in Korea's nuclear weapons program.

On February 12, 2013, an unusual seismic activity was noted which was later claimed to be a successful test of a uranium device. It was a major development in the nuclear program of North Korea since the country had sufficient plutonium reserves but lacked in uranium reserves. North Korea successfully conducted its fifth nuclear test in September 2016. The bomb weighed 20 kilotons, which actually was much higher than the bomb used in attacking Hiroshima, which weighed almost 15 Kilotons. North Korea claimed the test to be a major advancement as it could strike the US if fit-up with some missile warhead. The first indication of the nuclear test carried out on 6 January 2016, was an earthquake. It was a hydrogen bomb test, which actually is more powerful than the atomic bomb and is the result of the fusion reaction. On September 3, 2017, North Korea claimed to have successfully tested a miniaturized hydrogen bomb, capable of being loaded on to a long-range missile. This development actually made the international community worried about the intentions of the 'rogue state.' Their local media portrayed the test as a meaningful step in completing the national nuclear program which alarmed the international media.

Missile Program

In order to predict the future of North Korea in the nuclear domain, the role of delivery mechanisms and systems is a key factor. The development and the basics of the missile program of DPRK are based on the old Soviet technology, which can reach regional targets. In order to tackle the Western threats, North Korea is pursuing efforts to develop a more sophisticated, long range and enduring missile technology. Over the years, North Korea's missile industry has developed and manufactured a variety of missiles. They were developed and upgraded partly by reverse engineering of the Russian technology with foreign assistance, and partly by their own technical expertise. Since Kim Jong Un's coming into power, considerable numbers of missiles have been launched compared to before.

¹⁵ "North Korea Nuclear Tests: What Did They Achieve?" *BBC News*, September 3, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17823706>.

The missile family includes Hwasong, Scud, Musudan, Taepedong-Unha, and their variants.¹⁶

The year 2017 turned out to be productive and was marked by rapid progress for North Korea. They successfully announced the test of Hwasong-15 missile in late November, 2017. The country has fired 23 missiles during 16 tests since February this year. The tests are in fact a depiction of the country's efficiency in missile technology. The advancement and range of missiles depicts that North Korea has achieved technological capabilities over the years. The development of North Korea's missile program is to deter the US from a direct attack and perhaps confrontation. The missile development can also lead to an arms race between Pyongyang and Washington and between other regional states too.¹⁷

US Strategies and Implications

North Korea's nuclear weapons program and its military developments are exacerbating the already turmoil-ridden situation on the Korean Peninsula; it has further deteriorated the relations between North Korea and the Western powers. DPRK's nuclear ambitions have reached a point from where it can now launch an attack on the US mainland, which raises concerns within the US government and policy makers. The US, along with its allies, has formulated and adopted a variety of policy options, some of which were seemingly successful but failed. One successful policy option adopted against North Korea was the Agreed Framework of 1994, where the country was asked to halt the work on its plutonium facility. Afterwards, for a certain time-period, there was neither nuclear development nor missile expansion. Failure of the US/Western powers to implement the Agreed Framework led to the withdrawal of DPRK from NPT (Non-proliferation treaty) and from the Six Party talks reflecting a lack of trust, misperception and absence of mutual understanding between the two.

Since the arrival of Trump administration in the US, there seems to be a change in the US foreign policy. Trump's remarks on the development of North Korean military program are still to be analyzed. The US administration needs to review its policy options in order to achieve its high priority objective - denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Trump administration is still contemplating on how to deal with North Korea's nuclear crisis or it may continue its predecessors' path of wait and see

¹⁶ "The CNS North Korea Missile Tests Database," *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, www.nti.org, (accessed March 30, 2017).

¹⁷ Alo Levkowitz, "North Korea's Missile Program," *The Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies*, Perspective Paper 680, December 10, 2017, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/north-korea-missile-program/>.

approach. Given the vitality of the Korean regime and its nuclear ambitions, the Trump administration with its wait and see approach seems hardly efficacious.¹⁸

The US and the world at large must accept the reality that North Korea is now a nuclear power and that its nuclear program is meant to deter the US aggression and to demilitarize the Korean Peninsula. The coercive diplomacy has failed to deter DPRK from further developing nuclear and military programs. Donald Trump's 'do it alone' policy has led South Korea to work on its own and has compelled both Koreas to start working together. Kim Jong Un had also expressed to the US President his readiness to meet and discuss the Korean security. Kim's visit to China in March 2017 was also to harness its support against the US. Therefore, the US needs to reconsider its policy regarding the DPRK to bring it in accordance with international norms and laws if it wishes to dissuade North Korea from furthering its nuclear arsenal/military modernization.

The first workable option is to support the North Korea-South Korea diplomacy to help reach a mutual agreement on a comprehensive regional security arrangement including declaring the Korean peninsula as a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone. The reason behind it is that South and North Korea are now on the same page. For these two states, the immediate concern happens to be the need of stability in their zone of influence and immediate neighbourhood. This shows that for the sake of regional security, the two arch-rivals have agreed to sit together and this initiative – involving the US – nullifies the need for coercive diplomacy and pushes forth the notion of simple diplomacy. The recent developments in the North Korean nuclear program are a source of concern for US security. The US efforts to coerce North Korea into a nuclear roll back have not been productive. Thereby, the Trump administration needs to re-assess and better strategize policy options, so to re-calibrate their tactics in order to fulfil its ambitions regarding DPRK's nuclear weapons.¹⁹

China has remained North Korea's long-standing and closest ally; in fact, it has become N. Korea's lifeline since it provides Pyongyang with economic, military, technical, food, and energy assistance. The US must seek the option to take China on board as this option might address certain concerns and security issues. Trump, since coming into power is in favour of a military strike on the nuclear program and missile facilities of North Korea.

¹⁸ Markus Liegl, "The End of Illusions Trump's North Korea Options," *Security Policy Working Paper 5*, Berlin-Germany: Federal Academy for Security Policy, 2017, <https://www.baks.bund.de/newsletter/archive/view/962>.

¹⁹ Joel S. Wit, "The Way Ahead: North Korea Policy Recommendations for the Trump Administration," *US-Korea Institute at the SAIS*, John Hopkins University, December 2016, https://www.38north.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016-12-Policy_Wit.pdf.

Another less coercive option could be to seek some kind of peace treaty, which can partially negotiate the concerns of both the parties. As part of the peace treaty the removal of all nuclear devices verified by a rigorous monitoring regime might be sought while agreeing to uplift all economic sanctions in return. Lastly, there can be the option of re-entering into the negotiations phase. This option, like the previous one, would also seek diplomacy and forceful negotiations in order to resolve the issue. The international community can play a major role by aligning with the US and bringing North Korea to the negotiating table; incentivizing the latter rather than coercing it, however, has to be the mainstay of all such efforts.²⁰

For North Korea, its national security is of prime importance. It must be acknowledged that United States' provision of security assurances to South Korea and presence of the its forces in the Korean Peninsula are a source of continued threat to North Korea. This threat consequently justifies and legitimizes its utilization of all available means (at North Korea's disposal) for ensuring its survival and territorial integrity. Therefore instead of adopting a futile coercive path, an incremental but consistent approach involving a framework of successive policy measures, which aims at engaging North Korea diplomatically, needs to be adopted at international level.

Conclusion

Use of coercive diplomacy for denuclearizing North Korea seems to have failed, despite that the current US administration led by Donald Trump is continuing with this policy. The sending of US aircraft carriers to strike targets in the Western Pacific hints at the administration's consideration of the North Korean nuclear assets, hence, they choose the option of displaying force and power.

The Trump policy of coercive diplomacy is four-fold, including: sanctions, pressurizing North Korea to stop nuclear and missile testing, incentivizing to China to impose hard economic sanctions on North Korea, and avoid the risk of a full-blown military clash between Korea and the West. Until now this hasn't worked effectively as a policy, and has only fuelled the North Korean leadership to further the nuclear program. For US and North Korea there is no channel of direct communication. To make both states sit on the table, China, Japan, Russia and South Korea can play an important role.

The status of North Korea as a nuclear weapons capable state is a reality. Asking it to roll back its nuclear program without a plausible

²⁰ John Deutch and Gary Samore, "How America can Thwart North Korea's Nuclear Threat," *The National Interest*, May 31, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-america-can-thwart-north-koreas-nuclear-threat-20934>

bargain would be too irrational an expectation/goal. There is a need for diplomatic efforts rather than display of military power as a sole component of the US strategy. In this regard, the European Union can help open a direct channel of communication between the two states. To stop North Korea from further developing its missile and nuclear weapons, some assurances of significance to the country, must be offered by the EU and the US. These might include an assurance of EU will oppose any kind of interference in the country's domestic affairs; that regime change is not an option; similarly military confrontation and invasion is off the list; and that there will be complete lifting of economic sanctions if North Korea agrees to a missile and nuclear testing moratorium. Lastly, security guarantees must be provided to North Korea in exchange for its commitment to give up its Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (IBM), Sea and Land based missile programs.

Military modernization and nuclear proliferation have already made the world unsafe; the use of means other than diplomacy has failed. Therefore, in order to create regional peace and stability leading to a less-conflictual global environment, diplomacy must be given a chance and the agreed principles must be seriously implemented, since national security and sovereignty are paramount for each state.

