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The North Korean nuclear programme: The prosecution of war by other means?

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Abstract

The North Korean nuclear crisis constitutes one of the most challenging issues of all time. At the very basis of Pyongyang's choice to become nuclear, there are both motivations internal to the regime, like its quasi-totalitarian configuration, the Juche ideology and the accent put on military matters, and reasons relating to North Korea's position within the global stage, most importantly, its isolationist attitude and the existential need to repel a potential attack from the USA. This research analyses the long past of subservience that characterised Pyongyang's historical background, from the Japanese occupation to the still up-to-date consequences of the Korean War, which forcibly divided the peninsula into two separate entities and did not end with the signature of a peace treaty. The controversial relationship with China is also one of the leading factors for Pyongyang's concerns: as its main economic partner, the PRC progressively changed attitude towards the DPRK, passing from "lips and teeth" to a "normal bilateral relationship", aiming to protect its own economic interests in light of the trade war with the US. The mismanagement of the North Korean crisis on the part of the subsequent US administrations contributed to the eruption of the current impasse: at the root of Pyongyang's nuclear project, we can eventually find defensive and political reasons, linked to the need to guarantee the continued existence of the regime and stand on an equal footing with major powers.

Table of contents

Introduction.....	4
Literature review.....	8
CHAPTER 1: A neglected past.....	11
1.1 The Korean War: an armistice without peace.....	12
1.2 The “Juche” and the structure of the society.....	13
1.3 “Military first” (<i>songun</i>) and the humanitarian crisis.....	15
1.4 A new war.....	17
CHAPTER 2: The “China Factor” and Northeast Asian stability.....	24
2.1 A false friendship.....	26
2.2 The “two Koreas” policy and the Six Party Talks.....	28
2.3 “Denuclearisation, Peace and Stability”.....	29
CHAPTER 3: “Impunity” and tensions: The US-North Korean relationships.....	33
3.1 The inter-Korean dialogue (1910-2002).....	34
3.2 The “Axis of Evil” and the renewed tensions.....	37
3.3 The Trump administration: High hopes.....	39
Conclusion.....	43
Bibliography.....	45
Riassunto.....	51

Introduction

North Korea's nuclear programme has been the subject of study of much research on arms control and states' military strategies, but evidence on Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities is limited and extremely difficult to find. If North Korea were an island, the world configuration would probably be completely different from what we know: Pyongyang would not have menaced Washington of a "nuclear apocalypse" and, probably, Kim would not have felt the necessity to develop the bomb. However, geographically speaking, North Korea indirectly shares a border with the USA (because of the American soldiers protecting the Southern border over the 38th parallel), it physically borders with China and Russia and it suffers the Nipponese hegemony on the other side of the Sea of Japan. It goes without saying that, starting from its geopolitical configuration, the DPRK is encircled by the maximum content of great powers in the minimum space, each of them defending its own interests and strategic assets¹.

The DPRK's nuclear crisis has recently acquired a certain relevance because of Kim Jong-un's threat to the security of the United States, where the verbal escalation between North Korea's leader and Donald Trump have reached a point of impasse, in which the attempt to organise opportunities of bilateral talk is not working as well as expected. The latest controversies linked to the two summits in Singapore and Hanoi have clearly showed the difficulties in finding a meeting point between the counterparts' purposes. On the one hand, the US' aims to North Korean full denuclearisation, while, on the other, Kim demands for more security guarantees on the survival of his regime and the beginning of a peaceful cooperation with the neighbouring South.

Existential threats are those dangers that are capable of undermining the political and economic survival of a given state: nuclear existential threats are different from those linked to conventional military force, since nuclear weapons allow for the total annihilation of their targets. Nuclear weapons are the ultimate weapons of deterrence, as they enable their possessors to threaten their enemies with enormous costs if they pursue a strategy the former do not agree with.

The acquisition of a nuclear arsenal is thus the concretisation of a security dilemma: the double dimension of security and identity makes it extremely difficult for Kim's regime to abandon those weapons, the latter perfectly embedded into Pyongyang's strategy of survival, both at the internal and external level. Internally, Kim wants to demonstrate to the elites and the military that, despite the faltering economy and the conditions of extreme poverty stemming from the UN sanctions, he is the legitimate guide for the country, about to build a powerful state, which justifies the sacrifices made by the population and reinforce the internal cohesion, stimulating nationalist sentiments. Externally, together with the possibility to deter foreign military attacks, the North Korean regime aims at the recognition of its status as nuclear power *de facto*, in order to gain a bargaining advantage towards the USA, its principal enemy, and the American allies in Northeast Asia,

¹ "Venti di guerra in Corea", *Limes, rivista italiana di geopolitica*, n. 9/2017 (settembre) ISSN 2465-1494, www.limesonline.com,

mainly South Korea and Japan². North Korea also recorded India's "peaceful" nuclear explosion of 1974. India's example showed how even poorer nations could develop nuclear weapons with materials of different origin (in India's case, a Canadian reactor). After this event, India officially became a full-fledged nuclear power: North Korea wanted to do likewise³.

At present (May 2019), Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities have developed far beyond the initial nuclear programme which triggered the first UN sanctions in the 1990s. After more than ten years since the first nuclear test in October 2006, Pyongyang's subsequent military improvement have made it easy to understand that North Korean nuclear menace is growing at unknown rate, constituting both a regional and international matter of concern.

Mindful of the fate of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq and the "Libya model" under Gaddafi, where a US-led military intervention brought to those governments' overthrow, Kim realised that relying on Washington's promises of economic assistance in exchange for nuclear disarmament was not the right solution for his regime. Since the Korean War on, the DPRK has assisted to a long history of exploitation and subjection to greater powers, which has steadily led to an increasing willingness on the part of North Korea to emerge as an independent, economically self-sufficient and militarily strong state, which clearly arises as the core of the *Juche* national ideology. Basing on those principles, Pyongyang's isolationism and impunity in pursuing nuclear development became the regime's main strategy to obtain, on the one hand, economic aid and assistance from foreign powers and, on the other, the guarantee to be able to defend itself autonomously from a potential external attack.

To develop its nuclear arsenal, North Korea has received assistance from various countries around the world, starting from its allies in the communist bloc in the Cold War era. First among them, the USSR and China gave an important contribution providing the necessary technology and energy aid, followed suit by the supposed cooperation between the DPRK and the Pakistani scientist A.Q. Khan, who most probably enlightened Kim on nuclear energy and provided North Korean scientists with expertise and equipment. As the international community guided by the United States started to enact economic sanctions on the DPRK and its illicit enrichment activities, the North Korean regime found itself more and more isolated in the international scene, with a faltering economy and a population on the edge of starvation.

Within this context, the DPRK's increasing nuclear capabilities can be described as *the prosecution of war by other means*⁴, that is, the following stage in a series of hostilities that persisted since the Korean War, ending up with an armistice that never actually closed the tensions between the North and the South. As such, Kim aims at making his demands be heard, and establish a new peace regime on the peninsula that does not threaten its very existence.

² Lorenzo Mariani, "Assessing North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programmes: Implications for Seoul and Washington", IAI Working Papers 17/11, March 14, 2017. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiwp1711.pdf>

³ Walter C. Clemens, "North Korea's Quest for Nuclear Weapons: New Historical Evidence", *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10, no. 1 (2010): 127-54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23418882>

⁴ Gastone Breccia, *Corea, la Guerra dimenticata* (Bologna: Società editrice il Mulino, 2019), 297

Hence, in Pyongyang's point of view, the nuclear programme is not meant to be used as an operational tool in wartime, but it rather aims at the avoidance of a potential conflict that could threaten the survival of the regime. Its objective is both strategic and political, considered as a safety guarantee and a pretext to obtain economic assistance for an economy on the brink of the abyss due to international sanctions.

This research aims at analysing the North Korean nuclear crisis from an alternative perspective, focusing on political and diplomatic factors that led to the development of Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities, and how those events shaped the great powers around the DPRK's strategic choices. The pursuit of nuclear weapons by a state does not respond to momentary needs, but it reflects a long-term commitment, and it implies a large-scale mobilisation of scientific, technological and material resources. The development of nuclear capabilities implies also the breach of mutually agreed international norms, which becomes particularly challenging for the international community if the actor concerned is a small, isolated, and quasi-totalitarian regime. This dissertation explores the topic retracing the elements in the North Korean history that led to the nuclear breakout, analysing both the elements internal to Pyongyang's idiosyncratic rule, its leaders and institutions, and the regime's external relations to the outside world, that is, the Republic of Korea, China, Japan and Russia, but, most importantly, the United States of America.

The first chapter deals with the long history of occupation and submission that characterised the Korean peninsula using a historical perspective. Particular relevance is given to the Korean War (1950-1953), underlining the devastating impact of the intervention of the great powers' interests in the peninsula's internal affairs and the debatable armistice, which, *de facto*, did not put an end to the hostilities. A strong influence was also exercised by the regime's internal structure, with an ideology based on a fervent nationalism and self-sufficiency that put an accent on military expenditure, the subsequent humanitarian crisis and Kim's growing awareness that nuclear capabilities were the only available solution to preserve his regime.

Chapter 2 deepens the difficult relation of the DPRK with China, exposing the ambiguities and controversies of Beijing's strategic alliance with Pyongyang, the former eventually aiming at the preservation of stability in the region and the pursuit of its economic expansion. Being North Korea's main economic partner, China is one step ahead of the United States, acting as a mediator between the conflicting interests of the two counterparts. However, increased claims on the part of Pyongyang have made China opt for a moderated attitude, continuing to subscribe the UN sanctions but never applying them utterly, in conjunction with the same ambiguity that makes North Korea fear for its regime survival.

Lastly, Chapter 3 analyses the influence of the invasive US policies on Pyongyang's adversarial attitude, as well as their impact within the context of the inter-Korean attempts of rapprochement. From the official division of Korea on, the United States have interfered in the peninsula's internal affairs making their economic and strategic interests prevail on North Korean demands, the latter being a pawn into the Cold War power play. Through an examination of the highlights in the successive US administrations, we will illustrate the weight of Washington's hostile and ambiguous approach, and eventually demonstrate how the constant

perception of being a target of the greatest world power can make a small and isolated state run for cover, and develop the *ultimate deterrence* as the last resort for its survival.

Literature review

Because of the huge interests at stake that revolve around Pyongyang's nuclear development, the North Korean nuclear crisis constitutes a challenge of ever-growing importance within the international stage. Especially over the past few years, the issue has acquired major relevance due to the continuous threatening, on the part of Kim Jong-un, to annihilate the neighbouring South Korea, or, even worse, to reach Washington with one of his long-range ballistic missiles, and directly attack the United States of America. However, not much attention has been paid to the very reasons at the basis of North Korea's nuclear exploit, underestimating also the influence of the larger states' power plays in affairs internal to the peninsula. The core ideas we can extract from the news belong to the United States and their allies, which emphasise the intolerability of a potential nuclear attack from a small, quasi-totalitarian state ruled by a crazy *rocket man*. As long as Pyongyang did not threaten directly the security of the US and its allies, the events that took place on the Korean peninsula from its official division were not given much relevance by the international community, where the main targets in the crosshairs of the United States were, at the time, Iraq and Libya. Indeed, the Korean War has often been called the "forgotten war"⁵, as its disastrous implications on the global stage were only taken into consideration with Kim Jong-un's rise to power.

When conducting this research, one of the most relevant problems was adapting to the lack of sources coming from the DPRK, in line with the censorship and the prohibition for any information to leave the country. With a scarce possibility to analyse the actual internal conditions of North Korea, it was difficult to find an opportunity to display the point of view of the other side of the coin. As mentioned earlier, the most of the documents relating to the topic come from US and South Korea, while the only information coming from the Northern part of the peninsula rests in some testimonies of dissidents who succeeded in escaping the country. In addition to this lack of available sources to document both counterparts' standpoints, the examination of the North Korean nuclear crisis has been largely hindered by the language barrier, since a large proportion of the South Korean and Chinese literature on this topic has been produced respectively in Korean and Chinese languages. Fortunately, the possibility to rely on translated documents surely helped to have a picture as full as possible of the actual situation, but the missed understanding of both Chinese and Korean limited the range of available sources to include in the research. Most of the material used for this dissertation comes thus from, mainly, American, British, French and Italian sources, which were more accessible but, at the same time, not completely exhaustive to outline all the protagonists' perspectives.

To analyse the historical framework turning around North Korea's nuclear development, discussed in the first part of the dissertation, much importance was given to the impact of the Korean War on the subsequent perception of the configuration of the peninsula. Within this context, the work of Professor Gastone Breccia provided a complete explanation of the background international interests behind the outbreak of the conflict,

⁵ Breccia

considered as a wrong, *semi-world war*⁶, and analysing data and records belonging to the South Korean government. Indeed, Professor Breccia's study was a precious source in supplying for the first time a concrete input on North Korean perspective, always set aside in favour of the US' ideological predominance. As stated above, in absence of available sources on the actual internal situation of North Korea, the investigation of Ben Habib and Andrew O'Neil was particularly useful in providing an analysis of Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions starting from its "military first" economic strategy, that resulted in poor economic conditions even worsened by the strict UN sanctioning system. Together with the study of the official texts of the various resolutions and agreements, the abovementioned works proved extremely helpful to assess critically the UN's, but mostly the US' responsibility towards Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. As this research deals with a difficult and still ongoing topic, we found objective struggles in dealing with the actual trends of the development of Pyongyang's arsenal, along with the impossibility to assess exactly who provided what to the regime. However, through the analysis of subsequently released journal articles it was nonetheless possible to estimate, by and large, the international actors who engaged in illicit trade to North Korea violating the UN directives, helping us understand their strategic incentives in getting involved in the matter.

As the second and the third part of the dissertation cope with an analysis of North Korea's bilateral relations with, respectively, the People's Republic of China and the United States of America, much attention is paid to the study of the evolution of Pyongyang's position in international relations. Concerning the ambiguous relationship with China, our thesis was strongly supported by more recent documents, written by both Chinese and Western (mainly American) authors, in the attempt to provide a picture as complete as possible of a linkage that moved from "lips and teeth" to a normal state-to-state relationship. Most of the sources we chose for this research were supportive in trying to create a full framework of the different political strategies of the two, despite of their common ideology, so as to explain, through the various vicissitudes that saw Beijing and Pyongyang as the protagonists, the very aspects that contributed to North Korea's nuclear evolution. In this regard, Fei Su and Lora Saalman's work on China's engagement to the DPRK provided us with a deep understanding of the economic relationship between the two and the importance for Pyongyang to maintain this linkage, in order to avoid stricter sanctions to cause ulterior difficulties to the regime. Also, Sun Ru's study on the progressive deterioration of the Sino-North Korean relationship helped unveiling important details over the Chinese perception of Pyongyang's adversarial behaviour in light of its international duty to mediate between the DPRK and the US.

Regarding the US-North Korean relationship, the documentation we examined remains centred on the American perception of Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities as a threat to national security and the one of its allies. Within this context, the work of Antonio Fiori and Axel Berkofsky enlightens the permanent hostilities between the US and the DPRK, underlining the impact of the impunity on the part of Kim Jong-il and, subsequently, Kim Jong-un, on the escalating tension we are witnessing these days. As regards the role played

⁶ Breccia

by the various US administrations, Ramon P. Pardo's study provided a useful insight into Washington's policies towards Pyongyang, helping us retrace the highlights that made Kim opt for challenging the international community. Moreover, the most recent sources helped us having an overview of how far North Korea's strategy is going, revealing the intrinsic instability of a system based on the impossibility to negotiate. The attentive analysis of the abovementioned resources showed the recent impasse as the absence of compromise with regards to the DPRK's and US interests, where the possibility of increased North Korean nuclear capabilities risks to oblige the United States to respond with even more hostilities, triggering another, unworkable, world conflict.

This dissertation aims thus at providing a more extensive framework of the historical reasons at the basis of North Korea's nuclear development. For this purpose, emphasis is placed on both the factors internal to the regime, like its totalitarian setting, nationalist ideology and the focus on military expense, but also the external factors, most notably the ambiguity in the Sino-North Korean relations and the constant hostilities with the United States of America. The main intention is to try to present the North Korean nuclear crisis from a different perspective, in order to provide the reader with a key for interpreting which also takes into consideration the historical facts and Pyongyang's perception of threat. Indeed, since the available documentation severely punishes Kim's attitude and how this apparently mad leader can jeopardise international security, the reasons behind this impasse have been set aside in favour of the promulgation of the US sanctioning approach, seen as the rightest strategy to deal with the crisis and eventually solve it. Within this context, it is objectively difficult to differentiate the victim from the perpetrator, but, in order to get a whole picture of the problem and respond to the lack of information on the North Korean regime, it is important to try to analyse as critically as possible the sources we have at disposal. In this respect, the work of Jonathan Pollack has been particularly important to provide a more broad-based vision of the whole context, in particular because of the importance given to the historical factors preceding a state's decision to pursue nuclear capabilities. Pollack describes the development of nuclear weapons as a purposive commitment that implies the mobilisation of large-scale resources and the violation of international norms, claiming that it cannot but depend on the events that took place in the course of a country's history.

Once again, when dealing with the most recent debates on the topic, the language and censorship barriers have restricted the possibility to deepen further the public opinion on the subject from the parties involved. Nevertheless, from the look of the latest updates, the dispute over North Korea's nuclear arsenal is soon going to unfold, in response to the compelling necessity to find a way to open eventually a real dialogue that takes into account the demands from both counterparts and put a stop to hostilities.

CHAPTER 1

A neglected past

From the end of the 19th century, the Korean peninsula has been the victim of regional power plays and conflicts between great powers.

The history of occupation starts with the Japanese colonisation: after the Russo-Japanese war, Japan installed its protectorate on the peninsula and eventually annexed it to its territory in 1910⁷. In order to object to the oppressive Japanese occupation, nationalist movements asked for foreign help, calling for the involvement of Chinese, American and Far Eastern communist states. During the Cairo conference in November 1943, China, Great Britain and the USA engaged in the fight for the Korean independence; this purpose was renewed during the Potsdam conference in 1945, which implied also the participation of the USSR⁸. In August 1945, the Soviet forces entered the Northern area of the Korean peninsula during the war against Japan and they stopped at the level of the 38th parallel, while the US forces sent their troops in the South. It was only after the bombing on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in 1945, that the Korean peninsula could eventually start hoping to become a free and independent state⁹.

However, this hope would not last long: at the end of the Yalta conference, the great powers opted for the division of the peninsula in two occupation zones along the 38th parallel, where the North was assigned to the Soviet supervision, while the Southern area was occupied by the American troops. In order to find a solution to the Korean challenge, the United States decided to submit the destiny of the peninsula to the UN General Assembly, which suggested to create an independent and sovereign Korean state and to organise general elections for the constitution of a unified government. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union impeded the UN to supervise the electoral process in the North, so that in the end elections took place only in the South on May 10th 1948, leading to the creation of the Republic of Korea¹⁰. As the only legally recognised government, the Republic of Korea was also the only institution to be authorised to represent the whole peninsula in the UN General Assembly. As a consequence, in September 1948, the new leader of the North Korean regime Kim Il-sung created in the North the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), which, by contrast, did not get the official recognition by the occupants. In the context of the policy of *containment* of the communist expansion, the United States conceived the newly born republic as a Trojan horse of the USSR, and the entire Korean peninsula was destined to be the first victim of this strategy¹¹. As a matter of fact, Korea ended up

⁷ Toyokichi Iyenaga, "Japan's Annexation of Korea", *The Journal of Race Development*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Oct., 1912), 201-223, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29737953>

⁸ Isabelle Moullet, « La crise dans la péninsule coréenne et ses répercussions internes et internationales », *Annuaire français de droit international*, volume 56, 2010, 79-99. https://www.persee.fr/doc/afdi_0066-3085_2010_num_56_1_4603

⁹ Breccia, 19-21

¹⁰ Liam Stack, "Korean War, a 'Forgotten' Conflict That Shaped the Modern World", *The New York Times*, January 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/01/world/asia/korean-war-history.html>

¹¹ Breccia, 21

formally divided into two entities representing political, ideological and military enemies, each of the two claiming to represent the nation as a whole¹². After militating against the Japanese enemies in Manchuria, Kim Il-sung failed to accept the Korean occupation by the “puppet” capitalist forces, claiming that a regime resting on the Nipponese inheritance had an intrinsic weakness from birth, and that, if properly attacked, it could be easily defeated¹³. It is within this framework that, in 1950, the first, tragic, direct confrontation of the Cold War broke out¹⁴.

1.1 The Korean War: an armistice without peace

Kaesong, Republic of Korea, June 25th 1950. After getting the green light from Stalin and Mao, necessary to make sure to receive military assistance where conditions required, Kim Il-sung opted for the invasion of the 38th parallel to chase the government of the American occupants in the South, with the aim to lead to the reunification of Korea into a single entity under the control of Pyongyang. On the one hand, there was the Communist camp, including the DPRK, the Soviet Union and China, while on the other there were the capitalist forces of the ROK, the US and the UN forces and Japan. Stalin’s project was clear: what mattered was to strengthen the communist influence in the Far East. By contrast, Mao aimed at securing the Yalu border from a possible Western invasion, which was of extreme importance to safeguard the Chinese economic interests in the area¹⁵.

In Resolution 82/1950, the Security Council qualified the North Korean attack as a “rupture of peace”, claiming for the end of the hostilities and the retreat of the DPRK’s forces on the 38th parallel. The Resolution also invited the UN member states not to provide any form of assistance to Pyongyang, but, on the contrary, to cooperate with the international forces in accomplishing the task¹⁶.

In contrast to what both Kim and the US forces predicted before the conflict, the war suddenly revealed to be more demanding than expected, implying the entry on the battlefield of both the US forces and, as a consequence, the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army, in support of Pyongyang¹⁷. On September 15th, American troops guided by General MacArthur, South Korean troops and the UN reinforces arrived at Inchon, regaining Seoul on September 28th. They crossed the 38th parallel and suddenly took Pyongyang, until arriving at the Chinese border. At that point, the war changed perspective, and the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army took the field. Pyongyang was regained on December 4th, while Seoul was retaken on January 4th, 1951. However, at the end of January the communist offensive was eventually stopped, and General MacArthur’s successor, General Matthew Ridgway, opted for a counter-offensive which permitted to regain once again Seoul on

¹² “Key points in developments in East Asia, Korea as a colony of Japan, 1910-1945”, Columbia University, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_koreaimperialism.htm

¹³ Breccia, 39

¹⁴ Moulier, 79-99

¹⁵ Breccia, 50

¹⁶ Security Council Resolution 82 of 1950

¹⁷ Gastone Breccia, “Il risveglio del drago”, in *Corea, la Guerra dimenticata* (Bologna: Società editrice il Mulino, 2019), 171-215

March 14th and to get closer to the 38th parallel at the beginning of April. Even if the negotiations opened by the Soviets started in the summer of 1951, two more years of talks and conflicts were necessary in order to get to a ceasefire¹⁸.

The war ended with the signing of an armistice between, on the one hand, the chief commander of the United Nations and, on the other, the supreme commander of the Korean People's Army and the commander of the Chinese People's Volunteers, on July 27th in Panmunjon¹⁹. The armistice proclaimed the establishment of a demilitarised zone 4 km wide and 249 km long, eventually leading to the comeback to the *status quo ante bellum* on the 38th parallel.

An armistice is “an agreement concluded between warring parties to suspend the hostilities and wait for the definitive re-establishment of peace”; it actually puts an end to the military operations in the concerned area, but it does not definitely close the conflict alike²⁰. It is more than a truce but less than peace: it is permanent, but it is just the beginning of a process which, through a common will, could eventually lead to a durable peace²¹. Despite of the initial intentions, a peace treaty was never concluded, leaving the Korean peninsula in a conflict which is, *de facto*, still ongoing²².

1.2 The “*Juche*” and the structure of the society

*“Establishing Juche means, in a nutshell, being the master of revolution and reconstruction in one’s own country. This means holding fast to an independent position, rejecting dependence on others, using one’s own brains, believing in one’s own strength, displaying the revolutionary spirit of self-reliance, and thus solving one’s own problems for oneself on one’s own responsibility under all circumstances.”*²³

The *Juche* doctrine became the official ideology of the DPRK in 1972²⁴ and it still influences any activity of the party; it stems from an application of the essence of Marxism and Leninism to the North Korean style of socialism and political reality (*woori-sik sahoe-joo-eui*). Article 3 of the Constitution of the DPRK describes *Juche* as follows: “The DPRK makes *Juche* ideology, a revolutionary ideology with a people-centred view that aims towards the independence of the masses, the guiding principle of its actions”²⁵.

National dignity, independence and sovereignty are the root principles on which the regime rests: dating back to 5 thousand years of national history, the *Juche* perpetuates an identity claim based on a visceral

¹⁸ Moulrier, 79-99

¹⁹ “Armistice agreement, volume I, text of agreement”, UN Peacemaker, accessed March 24, 2019, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KP%2BKRR_530727_AgreementConcerningMilitaryArmistice.pdf

²⁰ Moulrier, 79-99

²¹ Breccia, 293

²² Moulrier, 79-99

²³ Grace Lee, “The Political Philosophy of *Juche*”, *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 2003, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/berkeley-center/030101LeePoliticalPhilosophyJuche.pdf>

²⁴ Philippe Pons, « Corée du Nord : une impasse, fruit d’une histoire négligée », *Le Débat*, 2018/1 n° 198 | p. 103-111, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-le-debat-2018-1-page-103.htm>

²⁵ Kim Pan Suk, “Will North Korea Blink?: Matters of Grave Danger”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Mar., 1994), pp. 258-272, University of California Press, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2644984>

patriotism, which places North Korea at the same level of great powers such as China or the United States. Starting from a harsh criticism of the “mentality of dependence” from the powerful, the historian Shin Chae-ho (1880-1936) calls to an affirmation of a spirit of self-sufficiency in order to emphasise a still faltering national identity²⁶, and also to justify the policies of self-reliance in facing the economic stagnation and famine in North Korea.

Juche is about political, economic and military independence. Political independence is one of the fundamental principles of the North Korean ideology: within the context of international relations, the *Juche* stresses the necessity to reach a condition of complete equality and mutual respect among countries. Since we are dealing with a small and weak country, always feeling menaced of occupation or destruction by greater powers, North Korea’s obsession for survival and security eventually finds an explanation in the ideological framework. However, as *Juche* insists on the impossibility to reach national sovereignty if depending on outside powers, such political orientation has contributed to an increasing isolationism on the part of the DPRK. Concerning internal politics, Kim was convinced of the fact that, in order to achieve domestic independence, it was necessary to absolutely reinforce internal political forces, so as to make people rally around the party and justify the personalisation of his power. If a country is economically self-sufficient, then it possesses the bases for political and military independence also. This economy would consist of a base of heavy industry, independent sources of raw materials and fuels, but putting also an accent on food production, of great significance to provide people with stabilised living conditions, and giving them the opportunity to support themselves independently. Despite of this, Kim recognised also the importance of foreign help for North Korea’s survival, and he always took care of distinguishing between self-reliance and isolationism, even if in practice it was more complicated than this²⁷.

In order to get to build up a socialist country, the *Juche* ideology served the purpose of indoctrination of the population, promoting an attitude according to which the Korean population could solve any problem by their own capabilities. The Kim Il-sung regime promoted the *Juche* through a parallelism with human anatomy: the Great Leader is the brain, who makes decisions and issues orders, the Party is the nervous system that channels information, and the people are the bones and muscles that execute the orders²⁸.

The North Korean regime is based on the transmission of power from father to son in long dynasties, installing a familial monarchy. The nation is conceived as a single entity. At the top, there is the benevolent father, respected like a demigod; North Koreans are educated to his cult since childhood on. Concerning the social structure, it is heavily influenced by the caste-based tradition, distinguishing the 25.000 subjects among those who are loyal to the regime (and who are consequently advantaged) and those who are not, more disadvantaged than the first group. Dissidents cannot be counted, but foreign secret services estimated that, in

²⁶ Pons, 103-111

²⁷ Lee

²⁸ Ibid.

2017, those who escaped from Pyongyang are around 30.000 people²⁹. The structure's inherent nepotism serves the purpose of minimising the possibilities for conspiracy, assuring the protection of the regime³⁰. The political system itself reflects the priority given to the state survival: in order to preserve the regime, applying the ideology and being loyal to the leader constitutes the most important fact³¹. Within this context, the figure of Kim Jong-un represents the ultimate factor of preservation of the dictatorial structure of the North Korean system, putting an accent on military expenses and the idea of the nuclear programme as the only means capable of regenerating the intrinsically totalitarian order³².

1.3 “Military first” (songun) and the humanitarian crisis

Despite of its name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is all but a democracy. It is a state which has no choice but to depend on foreign powers, in decline because of famine, economic recession and the impossibility to handle natural catastrophes, together with the systematic political repression perpetuated unto ages by the Kim dynasty³³.

Straight after the Korean War, the North was less populous but had more unused productive capacities. However, once those resources ended, no economic stimuli helped the North Korean economy improve³⁴. The immediate effects of the Korean War can be examined in the destruction of industrial facilities and consequent disruption of productive activities, hyper inflation and distortion of possible reform policies. Destruction in the North was in fact more severe than in the South: 25 million people between North Koreans and Chinese died, and the total economic damage was estimated as about 420 billion won, which was equivalent to approximately four times the North Korea's GNP at the end of the conflict³⁵.

Things got even worse with the collapse of the USSR, the primary economic-ally for North Korea, in 1991. The North's economy stagnated, giving priority to the support of the centralised political system rather than on the needs of the population. Moreover, the difficult environmental conditions also played their role, since floods and drought led to a devastating famine that killed an estimated two million people. In the DPRK, food is rationed, with the best goods distributed to a small elite group linked to the government³⁶.

²⁹ “Venti di guerra in Corea”, Limes

³⁰ Pan Suk, 258-272

³¹ Tara O, “Understanding the Nature of the North Korean Regime: A Foundation to Engagement and Coercion Discussions”, *International Journal of Korean Studies*, Spring 2015, http://icks.org/n/data/ijks/1482467975_add_file_2.pdf

³² Ben Habib, Andrew O'Neil, “North Korea's emergence as a nuclear weapons state and the end of the disarmament paradigm”, *Global Change Peace & Security*, October 2009, 21: 3, 377 — 387, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14781150903169059>

³³ Eric Ip, Sara R. Jordan, « Démystifier le royaume ermite : la Constitution et l'Administration Publique en Corée du Nord », *Revue Internationale des Sciences Administratives*, 2013/3 Vol. 79 | p. 585-603, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-des-sciencesadministratives-2013-3-page-585.htm>

³⁴ Axel Berkofsky, Antonio Fiori, *Enigma Corea del Nord: Storia e segreti di una nuova Potenza atomica* (Milano: ISPI, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, 2017), 47

³⁵ Jong Won Lee, “The Impact of the Korean War on the Korean Economy”, *International Journal of Korean Studies*, Spring/Summer 2001, p 103, http://icks.org/data/ijks/1482456154_add_file_6.pdf

³⁶ Motoko Rich, Choe Sang-hun, Audrey Carlsen and Megan Specia, “How South Korea left the North behind”, *The New York Times*, February 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/06/world/asia/korea-history.html>

Prior to 1991, the North Korean economy had all the characteristics of a Soviet-style command economy. Instead of restructuring the system in order to increase efficiency, the regime responded supercharging it with even more inputs of resources and labour, triggering a process of reliance on imported energy supplies, agricultural resources and manufactured goods from the communist bloc³⁷. As the Soviet Union collapsed, North Korea stopped receiving material and economic assistance from the Soviet allies, which made the former suffer a sort of instantaneous enormous sanction that blocked any form of trade with foreign countries. Because of the subsequent productive crisis, Pyongyang was not able anymore to import raw materials such as fuel and oil-based fertilisers, both of them of extreme importance for the functioning of electricity and irrigation, which was in its turn fundamental for agriculture³⁸. Moreover, the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994 left the country poor and isolated, with the only aim of surviving in an international system where it had no credibility³⁹. Following these degenerative trends, the economic transformation has triggered an erosion of the political system, undermining the preservation of the institutions characterising the old order⁴⁰. As a result, in order to protect the old totalitarian order, the regime made a progressive shift towards a huge military economy.

Thus, the slogans “military first” (*songun*) and “a powerful and prosperous nation” (*kangsong taeguk*) appeared for the first time⁴¹: Kim’s leadership became thus focused on national pride, the exaltation of North Korea’s self-sufficiency and the political action as the prosecution of the conflict with other means⁴². The peculiar configuration of the regime makes it impossible to solve the internal contradictions which block the opening to a real market economy, making North Korea be obliged to choose between the Great Leader and *mammona*, the economic system⁴³. If the economy opened to the outside world, the centralised North Korean system and all the actors involved in it would face an existential threat that would make the society escape the control of the elites⁴⁴. The rifle barrel was the only means of survival for the North Korean regime, since, following the *songun* ideology “economic cycles pass, soldiers don’t”⁴⁵.

Even if North Korea’s soil is rich in minerals, concerning food resources the DPRK depends entirely on foreign powers. Because of the continuation of nuclear tests by North Korea, food aid and technical assistance from the international community were suddenly reduced or stopped. The situation was even worsened by the poor infrastructure and the corruption characterising the public administration, leading to obstacles in providing food aid to those actually necessitating it⁴⁶. Nowadays, the most of the population in

³⁷ Habib, O’Neil, 377-387

³⁸ Berkofsky, Fiori, 49

³⁹ Breccia, 307

⁴⁰ Habib, O’Neil, 377-387

⁴¹ Jonathan D. Pollack, *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security* (London: IISS, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011), 127

⁴² Breccia, 301

⁴³ Berkofsky, Fiori, 41

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁵ “Venti di guerra in Corea”, 14

⁴⁶ Utpal Vyas, Ching-Chang Chen, Denny Roy, *The North Korea Crisis and Regional Responses* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2015), 40

the DPRK lives in poverty, with an estimated GNP of 40 million US dollars (2017), comparable to countries like Honduras, Laos, Senegal and Mali. The North Korean economy is not diversified at all: internally, it serves the political system and the military expenses, externally, it is focused on the export of raw materials and textile products⁴⁷. According to the North Korean 2017 estimated budget, the regime has openly declared that 8.5% of the national budget is used for the sectors of science and technology, considered as the guiding sectors to make the DPRK a great country⁴⁸. Jo (2016, p.81) demanded that "In order to strengthen our economic power in an environment where the imperialist states' sanctions on the export of high-tech equipment are becoming more ruthless, we must ultimately realize the domestic production of raw materials, fuel and equipment." In doing so, he added that "We must first locally procure raw materials and fuel in key industries that serve as the pillars and lifeline of a strong economy"⁴⁹.

However, the most difficult aspect of finding data about a planned economy is the reliability of available data, since the most of the statistical sources are outdated, except for the daily and monthly prices of certain products. In a context where good economic performances are a measure of loyalty to the system, the tendency to distort them increases, making it hard to find data on North Korea and, even more difficult, from North Korea⁵⁰.

The point about economic recovery in North Korea (in the form of opening up to market economy) is that aid and assistance from the West will only come about when Pyongyang demonstrates a strong commitment to build peace with the Republic of Korea and it decides to abandon its nuclear programme⁵¹. However, the nuclear power stays a powerful bargaining tool to receive assistance for the weak economy, being a symbol of self-reliance and prestige in the regime propaganda⁵².

1.4 A new war

Since the creation of the DPRK in 1948, the primary aim of the regime has been its own survival and the reunification with the South under Pyongyang's control. One of the most important means to achieve such objectives has been the progressive militarisation of the regime, which gave an absolute centrality to military forces in the country.

The regime needs to obtain enough humanitarian assistance to stop its people from revolting against it, while at the same time keeping out any form of foreign influence, in order to show the legitimacy of the North Korean socialist regime, which is seen as the best possible solution for the state survival⁵³. In

⁴⁷ Berkofsky, Fiori, 45

⁴⁸ Ibid., 52

⁴⁹ Suk Lee, 2016, *The DPRK Economic Outlook* (South Korea: Korea Development Institute), 23

⁵⁰ Berkofsky, Fiori, 49

⁵¹ Pan Suk, 258-272

⁵² Habib, O'Neil, 377-387

⁵³ Utpal Vyas, Ching-Chang Chen, Denny Roy, 46

Pyongyang's eyes, the nuclear programme is the only means of exchange to stop its isolationist attitude and obtain sufficient assistance to face its economic and energetic crisis⁵⁴.

According to some experts, nowadays North Korea disposes of about twenty nuclear warheads, while CIA has provided estimates three times higher. In July and August 2017, North Korean armed forces have successfully experimented intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) capable of carrying powerful nuclear warheads: Pyongyang has claimed that the new carrier Hwasong-15 has reached an altitude of 4.475 km, and it has flown for more than 1.000 km before sinking in Japanese waters. Basing on these data, it was possible to conclude that the range of the missile could reach 13.000 km, approximately the distance between the Korean peninsula and New York⁵⁵. On 3 September 2017, North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test at the Punggye-ri underground test site, in the northeast of the country. After the explosion, the North Korean Nuclear Weapons Institute announced that the event was a successful test of a hydrogen bomb that could be delivered by an ICBM. However, some experts noted that, in the absence of the detection of leaked radioactive debris characteristic of a thermonuclear explosion, it was possible to claim that North Korea had tested another type of weapon, such as a boosted composite device or a large fission-only device. Before the last one, North Korea had conducted previous nuclear tests in October 2006, May 2009, February 2013, and January 2016, in which the estimated yields (explosive energy) of the tests have progressively increased⁵⁶.

There are claims from South Korean sources that Kim Il-sung launched research for nuclear weapons in 1950, but no documentary evidence has been found to support this assertion⁵⁷. In any case, there were initial investments for the nuclear programme during the Korean War: in 1952, the DPRK National Academy of Sciences was created for uranium exploration, training of nuclear scientists and basic research in nuclear physics. This project was followed suit by the creation of other nuclear research institutes aiming at exploring how to relate nuclear application to the DPRK's economic system, in addition to a ten-year plan launched in 1957, which called for a survey on North Korea's natural resources in relation to atomic energy, mainly uranium. The DPRK had to build its nuclear capabilities from scratch, and the ties of some North Korean scientists to Japanese expertise, together with the material assistance from the USSR, were of extreme importance as initial contribution to these efforts⁵⁸.

By that time, Khrushchev saw the nuclear cooperation with North Korea as a means to strengthen solidarity in the communist bloc, in response to Eisenhower's "atoms for peace" initiative, which aimed to provide assistance to prospective nuclear states in research and training for scientists⁵⁹. In 1956, the Soviet Union and the DPRK signed two agreements on research collaboration in nuclear matters, followed suit by a

⁵⁴ Sandro Sideri, "La sfida nucleare nordcoreana e il sistema di relazioni regionali", Osservatorio ISPI-Bocconi sulle Opportunità Globali, no. 34 (Marzo 2004), 15

⁵⁵ Breccia, 309

⁵⁶ John Batho, Frank Esparraga, Andrew Mash, Annika Salisbury, *SIPRI Yearbook 2018* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 280-281

⁵⁷ Pollack, 48

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ilya Dyachkow et al., "Nuclear Weapons and Russian-North Korean Relations", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 2017, p 41, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/NuclearWeaponsRussiaDPRK.pdf>

third protocol, in 1959, which enabled joint nuclear undertakings in the newly-born Joint Institute for Nuclear Research in Dubna⁶⁰, including also the institution of nuclear activities in Yongbyon, 90 km north-east of Pyongyang⁶¹. Some years later, presumably in 1963, the Soviet Union supplied the DPRK with the first reactor, an IRT-2000 2MW, a radiochemical laboratory for isotope separation and waste storage sites, a K-60000 cobalt machine, a B-25 betatron and built the facilities aiming at housing such equipment. Through subsequent efforts, the capacity of the reactor was increased to 8MW⁶². In terms of human resources, North Korean scientists were not only educated in the USSR, but also in Japan, Bulgaria, Poland⁶³, Germany, and the US. However, none of these universities dealt explicitly with nuclear-weapon making⁶⁴.

There is no clear evidence of a North Korean military programme in archival materials in the 1960s, but some documents reveal persistent inquiries about nuclear weapons. Among Pyongyang's greatest concerns there was the ROK's early pursuit of nuclear power, which suddenly made the DPRK begin to signal a certain interest towards military nuclear development⁶⁵. In 1974, the DPRK joined the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), enabling it to monitor its activities and the provision of fuel at the research reactor⁶⁶. The programme most probably turned to the production of nuclear weapons at the beginning of the 1980s, when North Korea started the production of a second, more powerful nuclear reactor⁶⁷.

In the 1980s, the DPRK continued to ask East-European countries like Hungary and Czechoslovakia to accept North Korean postgraduates to study nuclear energy and other related topics; however, authorities in Budapest and Prague rejected these requests because the information asked was "confidential"⁶⁸.

In order to receive the Soviet assistance for the production of the new nuclear power plant, North Korea accepted the compromise imposed by Gorbachev to enter the NPT in 1985. At the very basis, there was the fact that the USSR could not afford the international criticism it would have had to face if it provided with advanced nuclear technology a state that refused to join the NPT and repeatedly expressed its desire to develop nuclear weapons. Second, adherence to the treaty implied the maintenance of effective political control over Pyongyang's actions. For this reason, the Soviets were interested in creating a situation in which Kim Il-sung's hands were tied by as many international agreements as possible⁶⁹. Nevertheless, the project of building a nuclear plant was straight after abandoned because of Pyongyang's inability to pay, signing the end of the Soviet-North Korean cooperation in the nuclear field⁷⁰.

⁶⁰ Sergey Radchenko, Balazs Szalontai, "North Korea's Efforts to Acquire Nuclear Technology and Nuclear Weapons: Evidence from Russian and Hungarian Archives", *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, August 2009, 3, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/WP53_web_final.pdf

⁶¹ Pollack, 50

⁶² Dyachkow et al., 41

⁶³ Radchenko, Szalontai, 8

⁶⁴ Dyachkow et al., 42

⁶⁵ Pollack, 54

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51

⁶⁷ Berkofsky, Fiori, 124

⁶⁸ Clemens, 127-154

⁶⁹ Radchenko, Szalontai, 21

⁷⁰ Dyachkow et al., 43

For the first time in its history, the DPRK adhered to a non-proliferation regime, but it followed this path under pressure, and its readiness to comply with the clauses included in the treaty remained uncertain⁷¹. North Korean assurances about the nuclear programme had already been rendered moot by its controversial behaviour: at the end of the 1970s, it started modelling a 5MWe graphite-moderated reactor basing on the design of a Calder-Hall power plant built in the UK, with the aim to provide the fissile material for nuclear weapons⁷². This new reactor utilised natural uranium for fuel and graphite as the moderator, both of them readily available in the territory of the DPRK, which made it easier to complete the project in little more than half a decade, without asking for the help of the Soviet knowledge or involvement⁷³.

The Kremlin's suspicions of Kim Il-Sung's belligerent intentions played a major role in its consistent rejection of Pyongyang's requests for nuclear assistance. Moreover, the progressive distancing on the part of Moscow that followed the normalisation of the Sino-Soviet relations and a move towards South Korea made Pyongyang feel more and more isolated, increasing the threat represented by the absence of allies to pursue its strategic interests. Even if North Korea continued to divide its civil programme from the nuclear one, to the Soviet Union they were intrinsically connected, and this factor made it more sceptical about providing additional assistance to Pyongyang⁷⁴. For this reason, after the recognition of South Korea on the part of the Soviet Union, Kim Il-sung started searching for Chinese assistance for the North Korean nuclear programme. North Korea's economy was already on the edge of collapse and China constituted the only potential source of assistance outside the capitalist world⁷⁵. However, despite of Kim's visit to Deng Xiaoping in 1994, the Chinese assistance to the DPRK only increased in 1998, when the North Korean population was in the depths of famine⁷⁶. With China's economic reforms and opening to the outside world, the divergences with the DPRK increased, leading to the Chinese project to initiate full relations with Seoul, in line with Beijing's "two Koreas" policy⁷⁷. In such conditions of permanent insecurity, Kim's nuclear reckoning became inevitable.

At the end of January 1992, Pyongyang signed an agreement with the IAEA, with which the DPRK committed itself to provide an initial declaration on the nuclear sites and materials, providing the agency with the possibility to make inspections in order to verify the correctness of the info. However, as soon as the inspections started, they revealed several discrepancies with the documents supplied by Pyongyang, increasing the fears for possible secret experiments conducted by the regime⁷⁸. When the IAEA asked North Korea to enter two suspicious sites, Pyongyang declared them off-limits because they were military sites, claiming that IAEA's demands constituted an unacceptable violation of its sovereignty⁷⁹. UN Security Council responded

⁷¹ Pollack, 94

⁷² Robert A. Wampler, "North Korea and Nuclear Weapons: The Declassified U.S. Record", *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing*, Book No. 87, April 25, 2003, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB87/>

⁷³ Pollack, 96

⁷⁴ Radchenko, Szalontai, 67-70

⁷⁵ Pollack, 121

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 105

⁷⁸ Antonio Fiori, *Il nido del falco. Mondo e potere in Corea del Nord* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2016), 95

⁷⁹ Pollack, 109

with Resolution 825, asking North Korea to cooperate with the IAEA and abandon nuclear energy for offensive purposes, as declared in the Joint Declaration of the Denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula with South Korea⁸⁰, which provoked the menace on the part of Pyongyang to leave the NPT. The subsequent crisis led to the signature of the Agreed Framework (1994) between Washington and Pyongyang, in order to work together for the dismantlement of the North Korean programme and the facilities associated with the 5MWe reactor at Yongbyon, in exchange for two 1000MWe light water reactors⁸¹. The Agreed Framework was of extreme importance because it was Pyongyang, and not Washington, who proposed the accord, bearing Kim Il-sung's personal imprimatur. However, the US and North Korea disagreed on various milestones of the treaty, which made it lose much of its credibility. In the summer of 2002, US intelligence accused the DPRK of having violated the Framework, having acquired equipment and material for a uranium-enrichment programme; consequently, Pyongyang reactivated its suspended plutonium programme and withdrew from the NPT⁸². Despite the various multilateral attempts to bring North Korea to the negotiation table, the DPRK continued to reaffirm its willingness to negotiate directly with the United States, and the situation continued to deteriorate until October 9th 2006, when Pyongyang conducted its first nuclear test⁸³.

After the nuclear and ballistic tests, the UN Security Council imposed various sanctions on North Korea, together with smaller ones introduced by single countries, in conformity with the UN Resolutions. Over time, the measures have expanded to bans on the trade of arms and military equipment, dual-use technologies, vehicles, industrial machinery and metals, bans on the export of electrical equipment, coal, minerals, seafood and other food and agricultural products and freezes on the assets of individuals involved in the nuclear programme, together with other restrictions on imports and exports. Moreover, supplemental economic restrictions have been imposed also by the United States, which has inflicted unilateral sanctions on economic activities and a list of individuals involved in businesses with the DPRK, together with the European Union, South Korea and Japan⁸⁴. Over the decades, North Korea received help from dozens of countries around the world, developing a procurement network that purchased needed technology and equipment, either through front companies or on the black market⁸⁵, defying the UN sanctions. Among them, China is the principal source of illicit materials that sustain Kim Jong-un's nuclear programme, together with the production of ballistic missiles⁸⁶. Also, the linkage with the Pakistani scientist Abdul Q. Khan was of extreme importance for North Korea's enriching pursuits: in the 1990s, Khan transferred few dozen gas centrifuges to

⁸⁰ UN Security Council Resolution 825 of 1993

⁸¹ Agreed Framework of October 21, 1994 between the United States of America and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, IAEA, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/infcircs/1994/infcirc457.pdf>

⁸² Pollack, 132

⁸³ Berkofsky, Fiori, 127

⁸⁴ Eleanor Albert, "What to know about sanctions on North Korea", CFR, Council on Foreign Relations, February 25, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-know-about-sanctions-north-korea>

⁸⁵ Julie Vitkovskaya, Joby Warrick, "North Korea's nuclear weapons: What you need to know", *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/03/06/5-things-to-know-about-north-koreas-nuclear-weapons/?utm_term=.cd2b1642b995

⁸⁶ Berkofsky, Fiori, 132

the DPRK, helping Pyongyang's acquisition of materials and equipment and providing training to its scientists⁸⁷. In 2011, Khan asserted that the North Korean regime bribed top military officials in Islamabad to obtain access to nuclear technologies in the late 1990s, releasing a copy of a North Korean official's letter to him, which contained the details of the illicit deal. Some Western intelligence officials have declared the authenticity of the document, while Pakistani officials have called the letter a fake, leaving the question open on corruption related to nuclear weapons⁸⁸. The case has remained controversial, since Khan's duplicity and Islamabad's refusal to provide the US or the IAEA direct access to the scientist make it difficult to either prove or disprove his claims. By all accounts, nuclear transactions between the DPRK and Pakistan have subsequently been extensively documented, and they also involve directly the then Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto⁸⁹.

The UN Security Council Resolution 1874 of 2009 prohibits the purchase of all arms and related material, as well as technical training, advice, services or assistance related to the provision, manufacture, maintenance or use of such arms or materiel from North Korea⁹⁰. Nevertheless, such activities go on despite of the international ban: a 2017 report of the UN Panel of Experts on North Korea Sanctions described investigations on illicit trade with African states, including Mozambique, Angola, Sri Lanka, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Namibia and Uganda. Malaysia had links with Pyongyang that came under the spotlight in February 2017, when Kim Jong-un's half-brother Kim Jong-nam was assassinated at Kuala Lumpur Airport. Malaysia expelled the North Korean ambassador after the event, and also cracked down on two North Korean front companies that had been selling military-grade communications equipment to the pariah nation⁹¹.

Thus, at the very basis of North Korea's nuclearisation there are *defensive* reasons, instead of *offensive* ones: Kim's regime feels threatened by the military superiority of both the United States and the neighbouring South Korea, and it sees the possession of nuclear capabilities as the only means to preserve the North Korean nation. The adoption of a deterrence strategy acquires particular relevance with regards to the United States: a potential first strike from the US could trigger a military escalation able to pose at risk the American military bases in South Korea or Japan, implying, among others, the launch of missiles⁹². "The mission of the nuclear forces of the DPRK is to deter and repel aggression and attack against the country and the nation, until the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula and the world is realised"⁹³. As Pyongyang continues to exercise

⁸⁷ Suzanne Goldenberg, "Pakistan helped North Korea make bomb", *The Guardian*, October 19, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/oct/19/pakistan.northkorea>

⁸⁸ R. Jeffrey Smith, "Pakistan 's nuclear-bomb maker says North Korea paid bribes for know-how", *The Washington Post*, July 6, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pakistans-nuclear-bomb-maker-says-north-korea-paid-bribes-for-know-how/2010/11/12/gIQAZ1kH1H_story.html

⁸⁹ Pollack, 135

⁹⁰ UN Security Council Resolution 1874 of 2009

⁹¹ Mark Fitzpatrick, Hannah Schwartz, "North Korea's illicit trade: every little bit hurts", IISS, International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 24, 2017, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2017/05/north-korea-illicit-trade>

⁹² Berkofsky, Fiori, 130

⁹³ Pollack, 180

pressure on the international community, China's strategic importance becomes crucial. Since it is the major guarantor of the North Korean system and contributor to its sustainment, Beijing is basically the only mediator between the DPRK and the United States. Nevertheless, controversial strategic choices in the history of Sino-North Korean relations have progressively showed an extremely cautious attitude (unwelcome from Pyongyang's perspective) on the part of the Chinese, aiming *in primis* at the stabilisation of its regional security.

CHAPTER 2

The “China Factor” and Northeast Asian stability

Within the context of North Korea’s project to become a nuclear power, China has always showed a *two-track diplomacy*, which has often attracted criticism for the potential consequences of such attitude on the economic sanctions imposed on Pyongyang. In fact, Beijing constitutes an important support to the enforcement of the Security Council’s Resolutions against North Korea’s nuclear programme, but it also keeps maintaining its economic relations with the isolated state, in order to preserve the regime stability and be able to pursue its own regional strategic objectives⁹⁴.

The relationship between China and DPRK dates back to the 8th century BCE, when Korean kingdoms served the role of tributary states of Chinese dynasties. This suzerain relationship suddenly evolved into an “*interdependence of two neighbouring states*”, in the shared fight against the Japanese common enemy. It was during the difficult phase of the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula (1910-1945) and of China (1931-1945) that the rise of communism occurred in parallel in the two countries, cementing a bond based on a shared history and a common ideology⁹⁵.

However, from the outbreak of the Korean War between 1950 and 1953, during which the Chinese forces joined the North Korean army against the US-led coalition, the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang started being “*waxed and waned*”, which often made it difficult to build a powerful bond of trust between the two. Before opting for the intervention in the war, President Zhou Enlai had been extremely vague in the definition of Chinese strategic objectives in North Korea: he had declared to the Indian ambassador his willingness to intervene militarily in case the USA attacked the North Korean comrades, but he did not deliver his opinion concerning the *red line*⁹⁶. At the very basis of such ambiguity, there was a background divergence on the strategies to apply in the conflict and, in North Korean leaders’ opinion, the continuous Chinese interference in the DPRK’s affairs constituted a factor of alarm to be avoided⁹⁷.

In order to understand the reasons behind China’s choice to intervene in the Korean War, it is important to consider the impact of the *revolutionary nationalism* following the Chinese Communist revolution in 1949. The revolution in China was linked to Mao’s ethnocentrism, leading to the belief in the emergence of a “new world” where China occupied the position of “central kingdom”. When the United States decided to get involved in the Korean War, Mao’s resolution was influenced by two factors: first, he was worried by the

⁹⁴ Fei Su, Lora Saalman, “China’s engagement of North Korea: Challenges and Opportunities for Europe”, *SIPRI, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2017, 2, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Chinas-engagement-North-Korea.pdf>

⁹⁵ Russell Maddalena, “Why does the People’s Republic of China continue to support the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea?”, *Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies (CDSS), Australian Defence College*, June 2014, <http://www.defence.gov.au/ADC/Publications/IndoPac/Maddalena.pdf>

⁹⁶ Breccia, 171-172

⁹⁷ Bernd Schäfer, “Weathering the Sino-Soviet Conflict: the GRD and North Korea, 1949-1989”, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 14/15, Wilson Center, July 7, 2011, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHP_Bulletin14_15.pdf

potential consequences on China's security and strategic interests in case the United States were able to reach the Yalu River⁹⁸. According to a study report of CIA, China wanted to secure the Manchurian border, a strategic buffer zone extremely important for the presence of the Suiho hydroelectric system. The latter, possessing generators located on the Korean side of the Yalu River, ensures the flow of electric power to the Chinese industries in Manchuria: if the UN forces took possession of the area, then it would directly put China's economic interests at stake. More specifically, the port of Antung in Manchuria constitutes a unique economic entity with Korea, since it includes the Korean city of Sinuiju across the river, and an alteration of such a settlement would severely affect trade and the economic activities in the area. Moreover, in China's plans, the area of North Korea that borders on Manchuria is particularly suitable for the creation of a base of Communist military and guerrilla operations, and for this reason it had to be protected by the Western invaders' attack⁹⁹. In the second place, Mao's commitment to enter the war can be explained by the revolutionary ideal according to which China was responsible to protect a neighbouring communist state by the American aggression in the name of the Communist cause¹⁰⁰. In the eyes of the Chinese regime, the loss of a satellite state in Korea would have implied an important decline of prestige both in Asia and in the world as a whole, affecting in a negative way the image of international Communism. Together with this, the establishment of a US-led regime on the south bank of the Yalu River represented for both China and USSR a potential threat to the security of the Communist regimes: the USA were in fact perceived as a hostile entity, aiming with every means at the overthrow of Communism¹⁰¹.

The intervention in the Korean War represented thus a unique opportunity for China to pursue its strategic objectives: Mao's aim was in fact to negotiate an agreement to the Korean crisis that took into account also China's economic interests and its security concerns. Moreover, the rejection of American and South Korean forces near the 38th parallel provided Chinese troops with the opportunity to acquire valuable military experience, which made them more confident and less fearful about the American threat. After facing the United States on the battlefield, the People's Republic of China showed to the world its political and military capabilities, eventually affirming its independence from the USSR: walking out of the Korean War with its head held high, communist China earned a place among the greatest world powers¹⁰².

However, after the Chinese intervention, the Korean War suddenly turned into a Sino-American conflict, based on the opposing ideals of communism versus imperialism. North Korean interests were thus relegated to a marginal role; quoting the words of a North Korean general, "China put Kim Il-sung in the bunker and told him to keep quiet". The perceived subordination to the interests of larger powers made Kim start developing the same "*never again*" convictions that subsequently influenced his attitude in international

⁹⁸ Jian Chen, "China's Changing Aims during the Korean War, 1950—1951", *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (SPRING 1992), pp. 8-41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23613365>

⁹⁹ "Study of CIA reporting on Chinese communist intervention in the Korean War, September-December 1950", CIA, Central Intelligence Agency, 1955, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000608161.pdf

¹⁰⁰ Chen, 8-41

¹⁰¹ "Study of CIA reporting on Chinese communist intervention in the Korean War, September-December 1950", CIA, 1955.

¹⁰² Breccia, 295

relations and his nuclear ambitions. At the end of the war, South Korea had suffered much less the damages of the war, and soon after the signing of the armistice Seoul was already in a process of reconstruction. On the contrary, Pyongyang had been destroyed both at the level of its infrastructures and of its economic apparatus¹⁰³. Kim Il-sung found himself governing in a devastated scenario: except opening to the market economy, implying the getting in relation with Seoul and its American allies, reliance on China and the USSR was the only available means of survival for the regime, the same allies towards which Pyongyang addressed all its export of raw materials after 1953¹⁰⁴.

2.1 A false friendship

However, even if the war had been interrupted, the economy in the DPRK remained centred on military expenses: Kim chose to found his power on the fear of external powers, perceived as enemies, and a strong nationalism, based on a (false) perceived North Korean self-sufficiency. In this scenario, the relationship with China became more and more ambiguous, as Beijing was considered both as a threat and an indispensable ally for the survival of the regime.

In 1961, the Chinese and DPRK Governments signed in Beijing the so-called “Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance between the People’s Republic of China and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”. The Treaty was created following the Marxist-Leninist communist principles, and it was based on the values of the respect of state sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in the other’s internal affairs¹⁰⁵. Despite of this, the treaty is controversial concerning military assistance in case one of the two actors is subject to armed attacks. The clause stipulates that Beijing is obliged to intervene in case of unprovoked aggression, but the provision does not imply China’s obligation to provide support where the conflict is triggered by Pyongyang, increasing Beijing’s ambiguity on its supposed initial alliance with the DPRK regime¹⁰⁶.

Things got even more complex during China’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, launched in 1966. The DPRK shares with China a border of roughly 1.500 km, but, despite of the geographic proximity, North Korea does not share all the political choices that China makes, and the period of the Cultural Revolution constituted one of the greatest divergences among the two¹⁰⁷. Within this context of mounting tension, good relation with the PRC proved difficult to be maintained: as China started spreading the principles of the Cultural Revolution across Asia, the kinds of communisms promoted by the two countries suddenly became

¹⁰³ Pollack, 33

¹⁰⁴ Breccia, 301

¹⁰⁵ Maddalena

¹⁰⁶ Sun Ru, “Beijing and Pyongyang: “A special friendship” facing the final curtain”, *ISPI, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale*, Analysis No. 297, May 2016, https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analisi297_sun_ru_05.05.2016_0.pdf

¹⁰⁷ Bernd Schaefer, “North Korean “Adventurism” and China’s Long Shadow, 1966-1972”, Cold War International History Project, *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, Working Paper #44, October 2004, p 4, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Working_Paper_442.pdf

rivals. The Chinese wanted to maintain the ideological supremacy by all means, which was clearly proved with their intervention in factional conflicts within the Japanese Communist Party and among citizens of North Korean origin, still in Japan. In addition to this, China curtailed food assistance and industrial equipment to North Korea, which were of vital interest to the regime's subsistence, making the DPRK turn to Moscow to get economic assistance¹⁰⁸.

The PRC was posing a real threat not only to the political image of Kim Il-sung, but also to the survival of the entire country: the presence of Chinese troops on the Tumen and Yalu rivers reopened the past disputes on the border demarcation with Pyongyang¹⁰⁹. Kim defined the Cultural Revolution as "incredible madness", criticising China for "big power chauvinism, dogmatism, and 'left' opportunism"¹¹⁰, reaffirming, by contrast, the integrity of the North Korean cultural heritage. In 1969, the Sino-Korean relationship reached the lowest point, and the increased Chinese military provocations along the border of the Ussuri triggered the process that ended with the Sino-American rapprochement in 1971¹¹¹. At the end of the Chinese Revolution, a process of party-to-party normalisation with North Korea was opened through an official meeting between the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai and Kim Il-sung, in 1970¹¹². The following change on the international stage eventually paved the way for a progressive restoration of the Sino-North Korean relations, but the preceding years of agitation and violence made North Korea's paranoia more evident, because of the constant risk of being crushed by larger powers.

The normalisation of the Sino-American relations in the 1970s sharply altered North Korea's strategic choices, resulting in the first significant confrontation between the two Koreas since their official separation. In 1972, China and the United States signed the Shanghai Communiqué, which stated that both powers strived for the normalization of relations, through an expansion of "people-to-people contacts" and trade opportunities¹¹³. As sole mediator between the DPRK and the United States, China was willing to use its newly acquired seat in the Security Council to act on behalf on North Korean interests promoting them in the UN¹¹⁴. In order to reassure Kim on its support to North Korean interests when dealing with the US, China intensified the military cooperation with the DPRK, increasing the training for North Korean officers sent in China and providing assistance in the form of military hardware¹¹⁵. Assessing such developments, the DPRK had become China's most important ally in Asia, the latter constituting Pyongyang's primary guide. The issue of the Korean peninsula was the most important topic treated during the meeting between Zhou Enlai and President Nixon in 1972. Within this context, Zhou underlined the importance of promoting an inter-Korean dialogue,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 6

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p.9

¹¹⁰ Pollack, 68

¹¹¹ Schaefer, "North Korean "Adventurism" and China's Long Shadow, 1966-1972", 16

¹¹² Pollack, 69

¹¹³ Alex Tallarida, "The Shanghai Communiqué", *Richard Nixon Foundation*, April 8, 2010, <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2010/04/shanghai-communication/>

¹¹⁴ Schaefer, "North Korean "Adventurism" and China's Long Shadow, 1966-1972", 36

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

progressively reducing the role of great powers in the peninsula, in the first place, the UN arrangements strongly opposed by North Korea¹¹⁶. Kim's primary strategic objective was to make a proper use of Chinese assistance, so as to ascertain the withdrawal of American troops from the South Korean territory and proceed to the reunification of the peninsula, putting a strain on deeply held nationalistic sentiments¹¹⁷. As the PRC seated for the first time at the UN in 1971, it started supporting the revoke of the Security Council Resolution which legitimised the presence of US troops on the 38th parallel¹¹⁸.

Despite of the tightening of the Sino-North Korean alliance taking place in the 1970s, in 1992 China showed once again a great ambiguity towards Pyongyang, opting for the formal establishment of diplomatic relations with South Korea. Such statement was of extreme importance to China, since it provided Beijing with the power to play the role of intermediary between the two rival governments on the Korean peninsula¹¹⁹. At the basis of this choice there were two interests of vital concern to China, the first one, of geopolitical nature, aiming at pushing Seoul away from the American imperialism; in the second place, such a new agreement was a means to sustain the Chinese rate of growth through the expansion of economic cooperation with the South¹²⁰.

2.2 The “two Koreas” policy and the Six Party Talks

Over the past two decades, China has thus opted for an explicit “two Koreas” policy, enabling it to develop separate ties with either with Seoul and Pyongyang that largely exceed those of any other external power with both entities, on the basis of “their respective merits” for the Chinese strategic targets¹²¹.

On October 5, 2002, Pyongyang revealed to U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly that it had a secret nuclear weapons program, based on highly enriched uranium (HEU), in contrast to North Korea's pre-1995 nuclear program based on plutonium reprocessing. Tensions with the US rose with the Bush Administration's decision to end oil shipments to North Korea, which violated the Agreed Framework of 1994, ending up in Kim's decision to withdraw from the NPT in 2003¹²². In line with its two-track diplomacy, China showed a deep commitment to the North Korean denuclearisation cause, and it intervened as intermediary inviting the representatives of the United States and the DPRK to a tripartite conference in Beijing on April 21, 2003. At the basis of China's strategy, there was the aim of reassuring the US on the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, but at the same time also to exclude to North Korea the possibility of an American

¹¹⁶ Pollack, 75

¹¹⁷ Schaefer, “North Korean “Adventurism” and China's Long Shadow, 1966-1972”, 36

¹¹⁸ Pollack, 76

¹¹⁹ Nicholas D. Kristof, “Chinese and South Koreans Formally Establish Relations”, *The New York Times*, August 24, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/24/world/chinese-and-south-koreans-formally-establish-relations.html>

¹²⁰ Xiaoxiong Yi, “Ten years of China-South Korea relations and Beijing's view on Korean reunification”, *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2002), pp. 315-351, Institute for National Security Strategy, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23257252>

¹²¹ Pollack, 203

¹²² Larry A. Nicksch, “North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program”, *Congressional Research Service*, The Library of Congress, March 25, 2006, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20050325_IB91141_d8f9316c3087ad357e5ee0251b8eca28c5edd9ae.pdf

attack on its soil, using the principle of equality among the parts to lay the foundations for a larger conference¹²³. Despite of the failure of the tripartite conference, caused by an excessive North Korean rigidity on the matter, in the same year the Chinese government engaged in the promotion of the Six Party Talks. It was the first occasion of dialogue on the necessity of a multilateral security cooperation mechanism in Northeast Asia, which included the USA, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Russia. Since the inception of the SPT, the Chinese government has made enormous efforts in the initiative, making it a matter of China's foreign policy and diplomatic strategies success or failure. There are various reasons behind this initiative and deep commitment in the North Korean crisis: first, the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia are China's neighbouring areas, where it has interests to be safeguarded. Second, China's growth is progressively implying an international responsibility towards economic development and stability in the surrounding areas, mainly Asia. The third reason refers to the improvement in the Sino-American relations: since the US have acted several times in favour of Chinese interests, Beijing felt the need to reciprocate, taking action in the Korean impasse¹²⁴. Even the effort of the Six Party Talks did not work as expected, and they ended up being mere *pourparlers*, not being able to avoid North Korea's nuclear development and the first nuclear test in 2006. The circumstance of the SPT revealed Beijing's cautious attitude towards Pyongyang, at times favouring a bilateral approach and at other times multilateral, so as to maintain good relations with North Korea and preserve the stability in the region, of vital importance to Chinese interests¹²⁵. Undoubtedly, Beijing's efforts in the project of the Six Party Talks express a great interest towards a multilateral solution to the Korean crisis, but it was always accompanied by bilateral diplomatic relations, working on North Korean denuclearisation and the maintenance of normal relations with both the US and the ROK. Above all, Beijing aims at maintaining good relations with the DPRK so as to increase trade, investments and infrastructure in the region, also because it sees in such economic exchanges the possibility to advance the development of Chinese north-eastern provinces¹²⁶.

2.3 “Denuclearisation, Peace and Stability”¹²⁷

In recent years, China has put a lot of effort into the improvement of its global scope both at the economic and ideological level, strengthening its soft power through the promotion of an image of reasonable and benevolent power. At the international level, China has implemented various diplomatic initiatives aiming at the promotion of trade, aid and investment in developing countries, which successfully increased its global

¹²³ Young S. Kim, « La position stratégique de la Chine dans la Mer Jaune et la compétition Sino-Américaine contemporaine dans la péninsule coréenne », *Presses Universitaires de France* | « Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains », 2010/3 n° 239 | pages 77 à 106. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-guerres-mondiales-et-conflitscontemporains-2010-3-page-77.htm>

¹²⁴ Chu Shulong, Lin Xinzhu, “The Six Party Talks: A Chinese Perspective”, *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 32, No. 4, Special issue on North Korea and Regional Security (2008), 29-43. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42704652>

¹²⁵ Pollack, 203

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Su, Saalman, 8

reach. However, North Korean regime's unique configuration makes it particularly challenging to engage with it: as an isolationist state ruled by a patriarchal dynasty, the relationship with Pyongyang runs the risk of damaging China's international image¹²⁸. Despite the aid from Beijing, the DPRK has not shown much respect for the PRC's national interests. As a matter of fact, it walked out of the Six Party Talks and conducted nuclear tests, regardless of China's objection, taking advantage of Chinese fears of domestic instability and strategic mistrust of the United States to push and pull China to serve its objectives¹²⁹.

China's national interests regarding the North Korean issue respond to the principles of "*Peace, stability and denuclearisation*", which, basically, summarise the Chinese attitude towards the DPRK. Essentially, any factor that can alter the stability of the Korean peninsula comes to interfere with Beijing's concerns, and Pyongyang's project to become a nuclear state obviously constitutes the primary issue for the PRC for various reasons. First, if North Korea succeeds in developing functioning nuclear weapons it will come to constitute a valuable threat for China's national security: following the logic of realism, there is no state willing to have neighbours possessing nuclear power. This same idea could even cause a domino effect, so that other countries in the region may desire to develop nuclear power to defend from the North Korean threat, once again increasing the tensions in the area. Moreover, if political instability in North Korea continues to increase, then there will be a greater risk to lose control on nuclear resources and a crisis may arise. Secondly, North Korean nuclear tests and the possible use of nuclear weapons can provoke disastrous environmental consequences on the Chinese territory: earthquakes were reported in Chinese border areas after the nuclear tests conducted in 2009 and 2013, together with the risks of nuclear radiations. In addition, nuclear activities can solicit the dormant volcano Changbai Mountain to erupt, and this could represent a real threat to a large portion of the Chinese population. Third, the possession of the nuclear power by the DPRK and its unpredictability regarding a possible use pose a threat on China's image at the international level. China is a founding member of the UN, a part of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and a signatory country of the NPT: for this reason, it is seen as the power in charge of the maintenance of both international security and the stability of Northeast Asian region. If China does not succeed in managing the North Korean crisis placing its region and the world under threat, its image of responsible power could risk to be damaged¹³⁰.

Because of the interference between national interests and the claims for global security by the international community, China lies in a vicious cycle according to which, even if risky, a strategic relationship with the challenging DPRK is the very basis of the maintenance of regional and international security. Providing support to Pyongyang is a threat for China's credibility, but a failure to improve its internal stability and introduce it to the outside world could bring even worse consequences for Chinese strategic interest¹³¹,

¹²⁸ Zhu Zhigun, "The Sinking of the Cheonan, the Shelling of Yeonpyeong and China-North Korea Relations", *East Asian Policy*, Vol 2 No 4, 2010, http://www.eai.nus.edu.sg/publications/files/Vol2No4_ZhuZhigun.pdf

¹²⁹ Ru

¹³⁰ Utpal Vyas, Ching-Chang Chen, Denny Roy, 101-103

¹³¹ Zhigun

primarily the unsustainable issue of North Korean refugees moving to China, which is a potential factor of instability for its already poor Northeastern provinces¹³².

Thus, the main aim of China's policies towards North Korean crisis is essentially the maintenance of the *status quo* in the region. The perspective of reunification is not even covered by the PRC: the DPRK constitutes an important buffer zone between China and the pro-American South Korea, and a Korean reunification would imply the seizure of predominance by the richer South, meaning the presence of the United States at the Chinese border¹³³. Moreover, a united Korea could represent a potential rival for dominance in Northeast Asia, denying China also the access to minerals and ports in North Korea, up to now a fundamental advantage of the economic relationship between the two states¹³⁴. The Sino-American rapprochement and China's leading role as a mediator between Washington and Pyongyang created the conditions for Beijing to exert pressures on the United States advancing its own interests and imposing its conditions, above all within the context of the trade war between the two economic giants¹³⁵.

Nevertheless, China possesses the means of pressure on North Korea, but it also knows the limits of such power. The Chinese interests differ much from the American ones: while the US points to reduce the DPRK's possibilities for manoeuvre by any means to drive it into a corner, China attached a greater priority to its regional stabilisation and economic expansion, continuing to provide assistance to Pyongyang and keeping its diplomatic relations with North Korea¹³⁶. In order to avoid a larger crisis, China knew that the only possible solution was a moderated attitude, stating that a coercive approach risked to trigger even more severe consequences¹³⁷. After North Korea's nuclear breakout, China has several times insisted to soften the UN sanctions on Pyongyang in order to avoid its economic collapse: as a matter of fact, over 90% of North Korean trade volume with the external world is with the PRC¹³⁸. The PRC is aware of the fact that it is the only external power maintaining a privileged relationship with the DPRK and it does not want to lose this link, but it has also realised that, if it seeks stability and denuclearisation at the same time, one can eventually undermine the other. Nuclear weapons development is the DPRK's main interest, and China knows that making it renounce is not possible¹³⁹: after the first nuclear test in 2006, Beijing supported the UN Security Council Resolution 1718 imposing sanctions on Pyongyang, which signalled a shift in Beijing's attitude, from diplomacy to punishment. Moreover, the PRC strongly opposed North Korea's latest missile launch in November 2017, and it called Pyongyang to stop increasing tensions on the peninsula. However, China's punitive steps are restrained in light of its economic ties with Pyongyang, concentrating on sustaining limited measures to weaken its neighbour economically and increase its dependence from Beijing. For example, in 2017 coal

¹³² Berkofsky, 69

¹³³ Moulrier, 79-99

¹³⁴ Zhigun

¹³⁵ Keith Bradsher, Choe Sang-Hun, "With Kim's Visit, China Shows U.S. It Has Leverage on Trade", *The New York Times*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/business/china-north-korea-kim-trade.html>

¹³⁶ Pollack, 174

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 168

¹³⁸ Berkofsky, Fiori, 74

¹³⁹ Su, Saalman, 34

imports and fuel sales to North Korea were restricted, with the excuse that it would not have been able to pay the supplying Chinese companies¹⁴⁰. China believes that the peaceful way of dialogue and negotiations represents the “Pareto optimal” choice: even if it does not favour the preferences of the parties involved, in the end it could bring the best output with a minimisation of the costs¹⁴¹.

Despite of China’s diplomatic efforts to reduce the North Korean nuclear menace, Pyongyang continues not to trust Beijing at all, fearing the possibility of betrayal of the regime by the Chinese politicians¹⁴². First, though China continues to favour a stable relationship with Pyongyang, it is also increased its ties with Seoul: in fact, in 2017 China constituted the main economic partner for South Korea¹⁴³. Second, entering the 21st century, China progressively redefined its bilateral relationship with North Korea from an alliance to a “normal state-to-state” relationship. During his annual press conference, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that China and the DPRK “enjoy a normal state-to-state relationship built on a deep tradition of friendship”; “China both values friendship and stands on principle”; “we have an unwavering commitment to the denuclearization of the Peninsula and we will not accommodate the DPRK’s pursuit of nuclear and missile programs”¹⁴⁴. Moreover, concerning denuclearisation, the US and China share the same interests, but differences on the two methods to achieve such denuclearisation are growing. On the one hand, the United States put “all options on the table” to denuclearise North Korea, being even ready to use preventive military strikes¹⁴⁵. By contrast, China does not want to run the risk of a collapse of the regime, and continues prioritising stabilisation over denuclearisation.

Even if China signals it will toughen its approach, there is mounting scepticism that China alone will be able to exercise sufficient pressure to alter Pyongyang’s behaviour. The escalation of the tension shows that the core North Korean nuclear crisis is the contrast between the United States and the DPRK, where Washington goes on putting the blame on Beijing for the failure of North Korean denuclearisation in order to hit China in the trade war¹⁴⁶.

¹⁴⁰ Eleanor Albert, “The China-North Korea relationship”, CFR, Council on Foreign Relations, March 28, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-north-korea-relationship>

¹⁴¹ Fu Ying, “The Korean Nuclear Issue: Past, Present, and Future – A Chinese Perspective”, *John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings*, Strategy Paper 3, May 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/north-korean-nuclear-issue-fu-ying.pdf>

¹⁴² Andrei Lankov, “Kim Jong-un is a survivor, not a madman”, *Foreign Policy*, April 26, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/26/kim-jong-un-is-a-survivor-not-a-madman/>.

¹⁴³ Eleanor Albert, “The China-North Korea relationship”

¹⁴⁴ Ru

¹⁴⁵ E. Albert, “The China-North Korea relationship”

¹⁴⁶ “Venti di guerra in Corea”, 115

CHAPTER 3

“Impunity” and tensions: The US-North Korean relationships

Since the very beginning of their relations, North Korea went in the US’s crosshairs because of its mere existence: it is located in a strategic region for trading, it is characterised by a significant US military presence and it is involved in the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), especially nuclear materials and ICBM. In addition, the DPRK’s capability to reject any condition offer for engagement and resist pressure (both economic and diplomatic) from the USA and the international community make it globally relevant, due to its uncontrollable behaviour within the international stage¹⁴⁷.

The enmity triggered by the Korean War and the inconclusive end to the conflict, together with the Cold War framework, had negative consequences on the US-DPRK relations, making it necessary for the DPRK to develop a means of deterrence against the possibility of an attack from Washington, which was, among other things, the main supporter of South Korea¹⁴⁸. It was in the 1990s that problems started arising between the USA and the DPRK: in the post-Cold War context, Pyongyang found itself in complete isolation, thus exposed to the risk of Washington’s intention to change the regime, leading to a first nuclear crisis in 1993¹⁴⁹. The Clinton administration was convinced that, in order to obtain an about-turn on Pyongyang’s behaviour, the only possible solution was the use of *fewer sticks and more carrots*, offering concessions including fuels, food aid and reduced sanctions¹⁵⁰. In 1994, tensions over the North Korean nuclear programme grew considerably, due to Pyongyang’s refusal to allow inspections by the IAEA and the subsequent US pressure on the Security Council to implement more sanctions against the DPRK¹⁵¹. To avoid a war between the two countries, in the same year they signed the Agreed Framework, which froze the North Korean nuclear activity in its known installations and allowed for IAEA inspections, in exchange for the provision of heavy-fuel oil and two light-water reactors. Moreover, the agreement claimed the necessity for a normalisation of the bilateral relationship between the two countries, reopening also a dialogue between the two Koreas¹⁵².

Nevertheless, the complexity of the North Korean crisis contributed to the contradictions characterising the Clinton administration’s policies¹⁵³, obliging Kim to opt for the use of the tactic of brinkmanship, mainly the nuclear one, so as to bring Washington to the negotiating table and obtain concessions from the US¹⁵⁴. In

¹⁴⁷ Ramon Pacheco Pardo, *North Korea-US Relations under Kim Jong-il – The quest for normalisation?* (London, New York: Routledge, 2014), 1

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18

¹⁴⁹ Barthélemy Courmont, « La stratégie du flou de Pyongyang », Armand Colin | *Revue internationale et stratégique*, 2005/4 N°60 | pages 9 à 18, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-et-strategique-2005-4-page-9.htm>

¹⁵⁰ Robert M. Hathaway, Jordan Tama, “The US Congress and North Korea during the Clinton Years – Talk tough, carry a small stick”, *Asian Survey*, A Bimonthly Review of Contemporary Asian Affairs, Vol. XLIV, No. 5, (September/October 2004): 715, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/440505.pdf>

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 717

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 718-719

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 716

¹⁵⁴ Pardo, 37

fact, the US perception of the North Korean nuclear crisis put a special accent on the necessity of implementing counter-proliferation efforts in order to control Pyongyang's nuclear programme, which was in clear contrast with North Korean main commitment to the normalisation of bilateral relations. In order to respond to Pyongyang's brinkmanship tactic, the Clinton administration favoured a much more moderate line, also implementing the first real easing of sanctions on the DPRK since 1953. However, the beginning of the Bush administration showed that, even if North Korean risky attitude had succeeded in bringing the two contenders into bilateral talks, it had in any case failed in achieving normalisation, which led to the creation of a never-ending competency trap that accompanied the bilateral relationship between Washington and Pyongyang over the years¹⁵⁵.

An important factor of continuity in the hostile linkage between the USA and North Korea is the apparent impunity on the part of the latter when crises arise, not taking into account the clear asymmetry of power between the two countries. This hostility has contributed to a continued worsening of the rival relationship between the two Koreas, also because of the renewed American support to the South Korean ally¹⁵⁶.

3.1 The inter-Korean dialogue (1910-2002)

The inter-Korean relationship has been among the most important factors influencing the process of development of North Korean nuclear ambitions. The Republic of Korea has long viewed the DPRK as a primary adversary in a so-called "existential antagonism": each of the two considered the very existence of the other as a threat to its own survival¹⁵⁷. Basically, the destiny of the peninsula was substantially defined by the outbreak of hostilities between the United States of America and the Soviet Union¹⁵⁸. Despite the geographic linkage and the common cultural and linguistic identity, the deep ideological and military divisions characterising the Cold War period made it extremely difficult to establish a connection between the two Koreas, living in two separated worlds sustained by their respective benefactors¹⁵⁹. From the time the two Koreas were founded in 1948, they have competed with each other to obtain the legitimate representation of the entire Korean population and reunify the peninsula under their control, which was strongly intensified by the outbreak of the Korean War. Since such division was based on Great Power politics within the Cold War context, the subsequent attempts to reconciliation were mainly the result of the changing dynamics in those power relations, which were especially driven by a South Korean initiative in promoting cooperation¹⁶⁰.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Berkofsky, Fiori, 85

¹⁵⁷ Charles K. Armstrong, "Inter-Korean Relations in Historical Perspective", *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2005): 4

¹⁵⁸ Berkofsky, Fiori, 103

¹⁵⁹ Pollack, 195

¹⁶⁰ Armstrong, 2

At the very beginning of the 1970s, the inter-Korean relations underwent a dramatic change following the post-Cold War scenario, which favoured the opening to dialogue and led to the signing of the Joint Communiqué in 1972. Even if it did not bring dramatic change, the Communiqué was of extreme importance because, for the first time in their history, the two Koreas accepted to move from a total antagonism to a somehow more peaceful coexistence, establishing the rules for the reconciliation and eventual reunification of the peninsula¹⁶¹. However, some differences arose in the interpretation of the document: above all, the North Korean regime aimed mainly at the creation of favourable conditions to a complete withdrawal of American troops from the peninsula, leveraging the principle of independence from external powers quoted in the Communiqué¹⁶².

Meanwhile, the global scenario continued to change: despite the normalisation of the Sino-American relations, the election of Ronald Reagan in the US marked the reopening of tensions with the Soviet Union, leading to a so-called “second Cold War”¹⁶³. The growing South Korean economic strength became increasingly problematic for the North, which, by contrast, was confronted with rising economic difficulties. Within this context of “competitive coexistence”¹⁶⁴, in 1973 North Korea proposed the creation of a “Confederal Republic of Koryo”. The idea at the very basis of this project was a union of the systems of the two countries; however, in the end the proposal allowed a certain flexibility to the two “regional governments” in achieving the by then “end-goal” of reunification¹⁶⁵. The plan was a clear evidence of the North Korean primary interest in the withdrawal of US troops from the soil of the peninsula, in the name of national independence and neutrality, which obviously was not agreed by the South. However, this project had a great symbolic significance, and it had a positive impact on the subsequent projects of rapprochement proposed by the ROK¹⁶⁶.

At the end of the 1980s, South Korea turned into a stable democracy, which created also the prerequisites for a different approach towards the North, putting the latter regime existence once again at risk. Such conditions constituted the prerequisites of the South Korean *Nordpolitik*, which stressed the importance of improving relationships with neighbouring states so as to guarantee the ROK’s economic growth and international prestige¹⁶⁷. Those objectives suddenly found expression in the Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, Exchanges and Cooperation, the so-called Basic Agreement, the most important declaration following the 1972 Communiqué, which was signed in 1991¹⁶⁸. The two agreements shared the same founding principles, focusing on the necessity on the part of the two Koreas to avoid reciprocal interferences in the internal affairs of the other, focusing on a reopening of dialogue and cooperation for a subsequent national

¹⁶¹ Berkofsky, Fiori, 107

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War*, (London, New York: Verso Books, 1983)

¹⁶⁴ Berkofsky, Fiori, 108

¹⁶⁵ Armstrong, 6

¹⁶⁶ Berkofsky, Fiori, 109

¹⁶⁷ Armstrong, 6

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 7

reconciliation, which was also followed by a joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula¹⁶⁹.

With the collapse of the USSR, North Korea lost an important ally and one of its greatest trade partners, but mostly the only superpower capable of protecting it from an external attack from the US. The threat to the DPRK's existence in the 1990s was stronger than at any time since the Korean War; within this context, Kim put the emphasis on the creation of an autonomous nuclear arsenal, constituting the only defensive attempt in a hostile international environment¹⁷⁰. In addition to the rising tensions linked to the nuclear crisis, the newly established South Korean government guided by Kim Young-sam was not able to implement a coherent policy towards the neighbouring North, limiting itself to respond to Pyongyang's provocations¹⁷¹.

However, despite of the standstill characterising the 1990s, the Korean desire for dialogue has not disappeared. The new South Korean president Kim Dae-jung made the *constructive engagement* with the North one of its priorities, in the so-called Sunshine Policy. Kim mainly focused on dividing the economic sphere from the political one, so as to encourage a greater development in the North and internal reforms¹⁷². The Sunshine Policy implied major South Korean economic assistance to the DPRK, which was of crucial importance to avoid the North Korean economic collapse in a moment where its already precarious economic situation turned into a full-scale famine¹⁷³. In practice, this policy implied the possibility to better control Pyongyang's provocations and to contrast them, without stopping cooperative relationships in other fields¹⁷⁴. In addition, such rapprochement attitude led to a historical meeting and summit talks between President Kim Dae-jung of the Republic of Korea and Kim Jong-Il, chairman of the National Defence Commission of the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea, which took place in Pyongyang in June 2000. The summit was one of the most significant achievements of the Sunshine Policy in promoting mutual understanding and developing peaceful North-South relations¹⁷⁵.

Nevertheless, the influence of external forces continued to constrain efforts of further integration, mainly the US-North Korean nuclear opposition¹⁷⁶. The last months of the Kim Dae-jung presidency saw beginning of several criticalities in the South Korean approach towards the North, mainly due to the heightened tensions linked to naval engagements picked by the latter¹⁷⁷. Moreover, the new George W. Bush administration, in a reversal of his predecessor's trend, had favoured a much harder line, which also made US-North Korean relations take a decided turn for the worse¹⁷⁸.

¹⁶⁹ Berkofsky, Fiori, 111

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 112

¹⁷² Armstrong, 10

¹⁷³ Pollack, 196

¹⁷⁴ Berkofsky, Fiori, 113

¹⁷⁵ The Associated Press, "In words of the Pact: To work Together", *The New York Times*, June 15, 2000, accessed May 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/15/world/in-words-of-the-pact-to-work-together.html>

¹⁷⁶ Armstrong, 2

¹⁷⁷ Berkofsky, Fiori, 114

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 12

3.2 The “Axis of Evil” and the renewed tensions

George W. Bush became president of the United States of America in January 2001. After the terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda on September 11, Muslim terrorism became a central concern to the US and the Western community, affecting American policies in the Middle East and in East Asia. With regards to North Korea, Pyongyang’s activities towards Middle Eastern countries like Libya and Iran, which were perceived to be supportive of terrorism, became a key focus of US policies to avoid the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in countries where they could fall in the hands of terrorist groups¹⁷⁹.

For this reason, on 29 January 2002 George W. Bush included North Korea into the list of “rogue states” of the so-called “axis of evil”, that is to say those states supporting terrorism and being in possession of WMD. At the very essence of the American ideology, there is the tendency to pull the enemy out of the space-time of the course of history, so as to pin it on his intrinsically evil nature and eventually strike it. However, refusing to understand the opponent’s motivations does not appear to be the best way to produce a successful strategy¹⁸⁰. It was from Al-Qaeda’s terrorism that the American administration started fixating on the conviction that any menace to the United States was also a global threat. Moreover, it was a political choice to make any menace to the allies or, simply put, to their economic interests a threat to the United States, and a sufficient reason to trigger an armed response. Within this context, North Korea found itself obliged to face the USA both as supporters of South Korea and strong opponents to the reunification of the peninsula, increasing the perception of threat and the necessity to find a means of deterrence to protect the regime¹⁸¹.

The “Bush doctrine” was explained in the National Security Strategy, announced in September 2002, and it focused on a clear division between those supporting the US in its “war on terror” and those opposing it. Even worse for North Korea, the Bush doctrine claimed the possibility to use pre-emptive strikes on those states posing security threats to Washington¹⁸². In the same year, Pyongyang admitted the possession of a highly enriched uranium (HEU) programme, which resulted in the outbreak of a second nuclear crisis: as for the USA, North Korea’s declaration was sufficient to end the Agreed Framework regime. However, Kim Jong-il never renounced to his goal of diplomatic normalisation with Washington, and even when Washington claimed the possibility of a military attack, he stressed his willingness to open bilateral talks with the Bush administration¹⁸³. The perceived hostility on the part of the latter made Pyongyang opt for changing its behaviour, going for a high-intensity brinkmanship in response to the US adversarial approach¹⁸⁴: as the Bush administration refused to negotiate with Kim, North Korea asked the IAEA inspectors to leave the country,

¹⁷⁹ Pardo, 40-41

¹⁸⁰ “Venti di guerra in Corea”, 10

¹⁸¹ Fabio Mini, “La possibilità di una guerra impossibile”, in: “Venti di guerra in Corea”, *Limes, rivista italiana di geopolitica*, n. 9/2017 (settembre) ISSN 2465-1494, www.limesonline.com, 42

¹⁸² Pardo, 43

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 48-49

¹⁸⁴ North Korean Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Sok-ju declared that the development of a HEU programme was basically the consequence of an intrinsic hostility of the Bush administration towards his country, denouncing a perceived threat on the DPRK’s survival, *Ibid.*, 50

and it definitely withdrew from the NPT in 2003¹⁸⁵. Therefore, George W. Bush halted energy assistance to Pyongyang putting an end to the KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization), and it only resumed it in 2007¹⁸⁶. The collapse of the Agreed Framework was accompanied by increased tensions between Washington and Pyongyang, but the USA decided anyways to engage in the Six Party Talks, multilateral negotiations promoted by China in 2003, in order to convince the DPRK to renounce to its nuclear programme. However, the agreement collapsed in 2008, when Pyongyang proceeded with the attempt to place a satellite into orbit and a second underground nuclear test¹⁸⁷. During the Kim Il-sung regime, North Korea proceeded with the launch of two long-range ballistic missiles, implying the imposition of the UN Security Council Resolutions 1695, 1718 and 1874 of 2006 and 2009¹⁸⁸. Despite the international condemnation and the rising economic difficulties, the North Korean regime did not change its direction, and continued instead conducting its nuclear exercises.

The year 2010 was crucial for the rising tensions on the peninsula and, consequently, the already faltering US-North Korean relations. Two North Korean provocations contributed to the worsening of the situation, that is to say, the sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan and the bombardment of the island Yeonpyeong. Concerning the first case, the ROKS Cheonan was sunk as the result of an external underwater explosion triggered by a torpedo made in North Korea, which caused 46 victims¹⁸⁹. However, evidence on such assertions was found by an international inquiry financed by the South Korean government, with many sources contesting the results¹⁹⁰. As the ROK decided to end cooperation with the North through the “May 24 measures”, Pyongyang responded with the bombing of the South Korean island Yeonpyeong, located along the maritime border. The accident caused four deaths, and it was the first direct attack against South Korea since the signature of the armistice which ended up the Korean War in 1953¹⁹¹. In an immediate response to the artillery barrage, South Korea scrambled F-16 fighter jets to the Western sea and returned fire¹⁹²; however, the accident favoured the opening of a complex debate about the options to respond to the attack, most of all the case in which the ROK had to take into consideration any military retaliation against North Korean targets. The reminiscences of the USS Pueblo incident played their part: in 1968, in full Cold War context, the naval and air forces of the DPRK attacked the Pueblo, an American intelligence gathering ship, which was operating off North Korea’s eastern shore. At the time, the Johnson administration rejected the military option in order to avoid the possibility of an escalation and a new Korean War, but he subsequently used this incident to

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 51

¹⁸⁶ Mark E. Manyin, Mary Beth D. Nikitin, “Foreign Assistance to North Korea”, *Congressional Research Service*, 7-5700, R40095, April 2, 2014, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40095.pdf>

¹⁸⁷ Berkofsky, Fiori, 116

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 92

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 116

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Park Jung-eon, “North Korea fires artillery shells toward Yeonpyeong island, killing two marines”, *Hankyoreh Online*, November 23, 2010. http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/450182.html

¹⁹² Tania Branigan, Ewen MacAskill, “North Korea: a deadly attack, a counter-strike – now Koreans hold their breath”, *The Guardian*, November 23, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/23/north-south-korea-crisis-conflict>

further increase US military and intelligence capabilities, which made him able to negotiate for the release of the crew¹⁹³. The incident of the USS Pueblo created an extraordinary precedent on the US limits to seriously take into consideration the use of force against North Korea in fear of a military escalation. In the same way, after the bombing of Yeonpyeong, US diplomats and analysts warned that there was a high probability that the peninsula could get involved into an accidental war; even if Washington publicly acknowledged the violation of the 1953 armistice agreement, president Obama said he would defend his South Korean ally, but without mentioning any military options¹⁹⁴.

Once again, North Korea demonstrated to be capable of using the tactic of brinkmanship without making the USA or the ROK be able to punish it: concerning the North Korean nuclear programme, the following Obama administration has asserted its fundamental policy objective with Pyongyang is a “definite and comprehensive resolution of the nuclear issue”. However, the Obama administration merely put an accent on the necessity to protect the US interests in Northeast Asia but also its national security, mainly threatened by the DPRK’s ballistic-missile system¹⁹⁵. The main elements of this action line implied convincing Pyongyang to commit steps towards denuclearization (as promised in the Six-Party Talks) in coordination with Japan and South Korea, attempting to convince China to take a tougher line on North Korea and pressuring Pyongyang through restrictions and sanctions¹⁹⁶. In the Obama administration’s view, this attitude could help maintaining the integrity of the non-proliferation regime the US has always promoted, confiding in the good chances “strategic patience” could bring¹⁹⁷.

Conversely, the Trump administration has followed the opposite approach, treating the North Korean nuclear crisis as if the US and the world’s future was on the line and about to be engulfed in a major crisis¹⁹⁸.

3.3 The Trump administration: High hopes

“North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the “Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.” Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!”¹⁹⁹

¹⁹³ Sergey S. Radchenko, “The Soviet Union and the North Korean Seizure of the USS Pueblo: Evidence from Russian Archives”, Cold War International History Project, *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, July 7, 2011, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHP_WP_47.pdf

¹⁹⁴ Branigan, MacAskill

¹⁹⁵ Pollack, 204-205

¹⁹⁶ Emma Chanlett-Avery et al. “North Korea: U.S. Relations, Nuclear Diplomacy, and Internal Situation”, *Congressional Research Service*, July 27, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R41259.pdf>

¹⁹⁷ Pollack, 204-205

¹⁹⁸ Doug Bandow, “Armare Tokyo e Seul è l’opzione più sensata”, in: “Venti di guerra in Corea”, *Limes, rivista italiana di geopolitica*, n. 9/2017 (settembre) ISSN 2465-1494, www.limesonline.com, p. 74

¹⁹⁹ Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), “North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the “Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.” Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!”, Twitter, January 2, 2018, https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/94835557022420992?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Cwterm%5E94835557022420992&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.repubblica.it%2Festeri%2F2018%2F01%2F03%2Fnews%2Fcorea_kim_ordina_di_aprire_subito_il_confine_accelerata_nella_trattativa_per_le_olimpiadi-185700471%2F

Since its very establishment, US President Donald Trump has operated a revision of his foreign policy towards North Korea, in order to evaluate all the possible options to bring Pyongyang down, including the military ones²⁰⁰. After Trump's arrival to the White House, Kim Jong-un has launched for the first time mid-range ballistic missiles and ICBMs (*Hwasong-12* and *Hwasong-14*), it set off a nuclear engine of at least 100 kilotons in 2017 and menaced to realise the first atmospheric nuclear test in the Pacific. In light of such declarations, Trump responded triggering a verbal escalation on social networks, making use of declarations often controversial and undiplomatic, which could be intended as implying the possibility of a US military intervention where conditions so demanded. Harshly criticising Obama's strategy, Donald Trump stated that any previous action line aiming at a complete, irreversible and verifiable North Korean denuclearisation had failed, claiming his aim to follow a much tougher stance than his predecessor. At the very essence, Trump's strategy aims at imposing a maximum pressure on the North Korean regime²⁰¹, in order to bring Kim to the negotiating table and show the world he was the first US President capable of making an important diplomatic gesture to solve the North Korean nuclear crisis, avoiding the risk of a direct confrontation²⁰².

After decades of collapsing diplomatic initiatives aiming at reopening a dialogue between the DPRK and the US, a new historical chance took root, which, at least in theory, created an opportunity to finally bring peace in the Korean peninsula: the June 25, 2018 Singapore Summit between Trump and Kim Jong-un. Before this important attainment, the leaders of the two Koreas had met on the demilitarised zone on the 38th parallel to pave the way to the June summit, and Kim Jong-un had claimed the possibility for a denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula in exchange for a security guarantee on the part of the United States. The most important point that came out of the meeting was the "complete denuclearisation of Korea": mindful of the "Libyan model", Kim was still too scared by the possibility to accept promises that could be disappointed, and put at vital risk the survival of his regime²⁰³.

Vagueness and disillusionment were the key words for the Singapore Summit: the Joint Statement that came out was basically a declaration of intent which had great potential to establish a diplomatic solution, but the generality of its terms renewed frustrations for a once again missing progress. On the one hand, the Trump administration reaffirmed the importance of the North Korean denuclearisation as the first condition of the negotiations, while, by contrast, Kim's functionaries' expectations were centred on the possibility to create a common path to pick the right track and eventually solve the crisis²⁰⁴. Most importantly, giving priority to the US conditions implied a continuous disregard for the North Korean demand for a new peace regime replacing

²⁰⁰ Berkofsky, Fiori, 97

²⁰¹ Antoine Bondaz, « Corée du Nord-États-Unis : Jusqu'où ira la confrontation ? », *Institut français des relations internationales* | « Politique étrangère », 2017/4 Hiver | pages 103 à 114. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-etrangere-2017-4-page-103.htm>

²⁰² Pierre Haski, "Kim Jong-un, premio Nobel per la strategia", *Internazionale*, September 18, 2018. <https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/pierre-haski/2018/09/18/kim-jong-un-strategia>

²⁰³ Filippo Santelli, "Moon: "Kim Jong-un pronto a denuclearizzazione completa. Riparte il dialogo con Usa, ma restano nodi da sciogliere", *la Repubblica*, May 27, 2018. https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2018/05/27/news/corea_kim_moon_trump-197459595/

²⁰⁴ Bernt Berger, "The US and North Korea, beyond the Singapore Summit", ISPI Online, October 25, 2018, accessed May 16, 2019. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/us-and-north-korea-beyond-singapore-summit-21490>

the 1953 Armistice, which could constitute a first real guarantee to make Kim collaborate to pave the way forward. The Singapore Summit had an undeniable symbolic value, but the contractor who took the greatest advantages from it was Kim Jong-un. The latter proved a great strategic intuition, taking advantage of Trump's ego and his aim of proving to be better than his predecessor, of South Korea's openness towards normalisation with the North and showing an accommodating attitude towards PRC, determined to obstruct Trump in the trade war²⁰⁵. Without making any official concession, the North Korean leader achieved the goal his father had defended with no success, sitting at the negotiating table with the leader of the greatest world power and being treated with the same status, where Pyongyang was basically welcomed in the "nuclear club"²⁰⁶. The Singapore Summit undeniably produced some significant results: on the North Korean side, it achieved the opening of a *liason office* in Kaesong (North Korea) and the dismantlement of some nuclear facilities in Punggye-ri and in the launch site Tongchang-ri. On the other hand, Washington suspended military drills with South Korea, which has often been considered as a threat by the DPRK²⁰⁷. However, throughout the negotiations, none of the two counterparts achieved major progress towards North Korean denuclearisation, the possibility to soften sanctions or establish a new peace regime on the peninsula.

The subsequent Hanoi Summit released high hopes to take the first steps towards at least one of the long-term objectives listed thereon, but the talks failed due to the impossibility to find a compromise on the removal of endorsements, the Trump administration deeming Pyongyang's offer of partial dismantlement insufficient to revoke the sanctioning regime²⁰⁸. Reached that point, it remained clear that Kim and Trump did not succeed in finding an agreement concerning North Korean denuclearisation: the US wants it to be "complete, verifiable and irreversible" to soften sanctions, while the DPRK needs a reduction of the American "nuclear umbrella" on its neighbouring allies to deprive the regime of the nuclear deterrence²⁰⁹. Washington considers denuclearisation as the starting point of negotiations, whereas for Pyongyang it could be, at the very least, the arriving point²¹⁰. Assuming the *bona fides* of the two, the creation of a mutual path to creating the necessary guarantees for reciprocal trust should instead be the real place to start.

Within this context, Beijing always deserves a special mention, constituting about 90% of Pyongyang's foreign trade and being a fundamental actor in the implementation of resolutions against the DPRK²¹¹. The mediating role played by Xi Jinping to avoid a military escalation in 2017 continues to be a crucial bargaining chip in the Chinese trade war with the USA. On the other hand, Trump's persisting request for China to intervene is clearly a trick to affect economically the PRC in case of failure: Kim does not fully trust Xi

²⁰⁵ Haski, "Kim Jong-un, premio Nobel per la strategia"

²⁰⁶ Junko Terao, "Un summit storico per Kim Jong-un", *Internazionale*, June 12, 2018, accessed May 16, 2019, <https://www.internazionale.it/bloc-notes/junko-terao/2018/06/12/incontro-trump-kim-jong-un>

²⁰⁷ "Trump-Kim: atto secondo", ISPI, accessed May 17, 2019, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/node/22374>

²⁰⁸ Francesca Frassinetti, "Vertice Kim-Trump: nessun accordo è meglio di un pessimo accordo", ISPI Online, February 28, 2019, accessed May 17, 2019, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/vertice-kim-trump-nessun-accordo-e-meglio-di-un-pessimo-accordo-22404>

²⁰⁹ "Trump-Kim: atto secondo"

²¹⁰ Santelli, "Moon: "Kim Jong-un pronto a denuclearizzazione completa. Riparte il dialogo con Usa, ma restano nodi da sciogliere"

²¹¹ Frassinetti, "Vertice Kim-Trump: nessun accordo è meglio di un pessimo accordo"

Jinping, and despite of their commercial relations, China cannot but merely suggest North Korea to avoid excessive provocations, but not to definitely abandon its nuclear arsenal²¹².

On May 9, 2019, North Korea launched short-range ballistic missiles (probably imported from Russia) for the second time in the same week, the test aiming at proving the capability to strike Seoul or Washington, or perhaps both. In addition, the US Justice Department seized a North Korean cargo vessel in the Pacific for violating international sanctions, explicitly reopening the hostilities with Pyongyang. Concerning the North Korean ultimate test, some analysts have noted that Kim's decision to launch short-range projectiles demonstrates that Pyongyang did not renounce to the possibility to restart negotiations with Washington: on this point, also Donald Trump has repeatedly stressed Kim's interruption of nuclear and long-range missile tests as an incentive to continue the talks with the North²¹³. Despite the possible assumptions one can make on the current strategy pursued by Pyongyang, it is straightforward to understand that any perspective for future developments linked to North Korea's growing nuclear capabilities and adversarial attitude imply a huge risk of military escalation. Instead of opening the possibility for a *détente* in the US-DPRK relations, the absence of reliable information on the evolution of the DPRK's nuclear arsenal increases the US' adversarial approach towards Kim's regime, which risks triggering an even more hostile response on the part of Washington in order to make Pyongyang come to terms with its actions.

²¹² Bandow, "Armare Tokyo e Seul è l'opzione più sensata", in: "Venti di guerra in Corea", 78

²¹³ William J. Broad, Choe Sang-hun, David E. Sanger, Eileen Sullivan, "New North Korea Concerns Flare as Trump's Signature Diplomacy Wilts", *The New York Times*, May 9, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/09/world/asia/north-korea-missile.html>

Conclusion

After the collapse of the Hanoi summit, a new meeting was organised between Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin in Vladivostok, Russia, with the aim to discuss Pyongyang's nuclear programme and find a solution to the current standoff. In North Korea's eyes, Russia represents an interesting option to provide the DPRK with diplomatic assistance, and help it not being annihilated by UN sanctions. On the other hand, according to Putin, a meeting with Kim constitutes an opportunity to involve Russia in the US-DPRK crisis and show its presence in the region. Anyway, Kim remains an unreliable partner and Russia is still bound by the UN Security Council sanctions, which also causes problems to its own economy: most probably, Putin will not be keen on spending money for an unreliable state and an irrelevant export market. In all likelihood, Russia will merely represent another voice aiming at a de-escalation of tensions, where North Korea hopes for the meeting to help it reopen negotiations with the USA, increasing further the insecurities towards Pyongyang's nuclear impasse²¹⁴.

What clearly emerged from this research is that, at the very basis of North Korea's choice to become nuclear, there are mainly political and strategic reasons. As the means of negotiation were often violent and not so diplomatic, it is extremely difficult to determine who is the victim and who the perpetrator, where none of the major actors is ready to assume responsibility for its past and present actions. However, what is certain is that the long history of exploitation and submission to more powerful countries encouraged Pyongyang's choice to challenge the international community, and start developing its own nuclear arsenal. Thereafter, due to North Korea's isolationist attitude and the deterioration of its relations with both China, its first economic partner, and the United States, its number one threat, tensions continued to increase leading to the current (apparently) unsolvable stalemate.

The North Korean nuclear crisis is a concrete representation of the degenerating impact of the Cold war framework over smaller states. As it happened with the Vietnam War, Kim Il-sung hoped that the development of nuclear capabilities could help him reunifying the peninsula under Pyongyang's control. In practice, contrary to his expectations, the consequences of a never finished conflict and the pressure exercised by the sanctioning system imposed by the international community put North Korea in knee, making it fear for a foreign attack, especially on the part of the United States. The survival of the system remains thus Kim Jong-un's only imperative, where military and security needs are the priority in the regime configuration. North Korea claims that, being a *de facto* nuclear state, the only missing piece needed to complete its transformation into a fully-fledged major power is economic development, therefore searching for increasing economic ties with external power in order to receive assistance, first among them China.

China's perspective on the issue remains mainly based on considerations of strategic and economic nature. Despite of the negative impact of North Korean impunity over Beijing's international reputation, China

²¹⁴ Andreas Illmer, "Kim-Putin: North Korean and Russian leaders to meet for first time", *BBC News*, April 24, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47972954>

did not show a clear intention to reassess its policy agenda and detach from the responsibility to mediate between Pyongyang's requests and the sanctioning system promoted by the international community. As North Korea's main partner, at the basis of China's strategy there is its leaders' willingness to buy time and avoid a larger crisis: the containment of Pyongyang's extreme behaviour could indeed serve to prevent a US intervention and eventually benefit Beijing in the trade war against Washington.

In the perspective of the United States, instead, a North Korean complete, irreversible and verifiable denuclearisation remains the ultimate goal to put an end to the current impasse. To achieve a full renounce on the part of Pyongyang of its nuclear capabilities, the United States put an accent on the necessity to trigger a regime change, so as to create a new type of system whose leaders do not deem nuclear power as the only possibility to guarantee the regime survival. This factor explains KWP Secretary Kim Ki-nam's assertion on the US conduct, described as "the most barbaric, murderous war unprecedented in history", and deeming Washington responsible for "inflicting intolerable misfortunes and agony on our nation while continuing its occupation of South Korea and atrociously implementing its hostile policy towards the DPRK"²¹⁵. Within this context, the weight of a long past of subservience contributes to the distress to find a compromise and exit the stalemate, where Kim Jong-un does not accept to bow down once again to foreign occupiers for the purpose of defending his regime regardless of the cost.

Hence, readjusting Carl von Clausewitz's quote in "On War", the North Korean impasse constitutes *the prosecution of war by other means*²¹⁶: it is the continuation of a never concluded conflict between two opposing ideologies, which began with the Korean War and could only culminate in a threat of mutual annihilation. Pyongyang's nuclear weapons represent a *defensive* tool and a life assurance for the regime: as it secures North Korea's independence, being an instrument to protect the country from a potential threatening attack, it will be difficult to make Kim renounce to it. Pyongyang possesses relatively modest nuclear capabilities, but it is located in a core area for both trade and international politics, and North Korea's strategic choices directly have an impact on the whole Northeast Asian region, implying also the risk of a spread of nuclear technology to other potential "rogue states". The past is not sufficient to provide an answer the North Korean nuclear crisis: a substantive solution to the stalemate should work on Pyongyang's internal development and insist on the necessity of a decisive diplomatic intervention on the part of both China and South Korea, but, most importantly, a genuine negotiating effort on the part of the United States²¹⁷.

²¹⁵ Pollack, 208

²¹⁶ Breccia, 299

²¹⁷ Pollack, 188

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Il programma nucleare nordcoreano: La prosecuzione della Guerra con altri mezzi?

Il programma nucleare nordcoreano costituisce un importante oggetto di studio da parte di ricerche sul controllo degli armamenti e sulle diverse strategie militari messe in atto dagli stati, tuttavia non disponiamo di alcuna chiara notizia riguardo le effettive capacità nucleari di Pyongyang, e ancor meno per quanto concerne gli stati coinvolti nella fornitura illecita di materiali e *know-how*.

Geograficamente parlando, la Corea del Nord si trova a confinare indirettamente con gli Stati Uniti (a causa della presenza di soldati americani sul 38° parallelo), confina direttamente con la Russia e la Cina e subisce da tempo l'influenza nipponica dal lato opposto del Mar del Giappone: è quindi evidente come, partendo dalla sua stessa configurazione geopolitica, la Corea del Nord si trovi ad affrontare un gran numero di grandi potenze in uno spazio ristretto, dove ciascuna persegue ostinatamente i propri interessi geostrategici.

Partendo da un'analisi dei fattori storici sia interni al paese, sia in riferimento alla posizione del regime nordcoreano nel contesto internazionale, questa tesi ha il principale obiettivo di cercare di dimostrare l'importanza del peso di un passato di sopraffazione sulla volontà, da parte di un regime totalitario di piccola taglia ed isolato dal sistema globale, di mettere a punto la costruzione del maggiore deterrente di difesa ultima a garanzia della sua sopravvivenza.

L'acquisizione di armi nucleari costituisce dunque la concretizzazione di un dilemma di sicurezza: da un lato, Kim Jong-un vuole dimostrare alle élite e alle milizie del suo paese che, nonostante la precarietà economica risultante dalle sanzioni onusiane, la sua figura resta la più appropriata per guidare il regime, giustificando i sacrifici da parte della popolazione con il progetto di costruire una grande nazione, rafforzando la coesione interna e i sentimenti nazionalistici. Per quanto riguarda il versante esterno, insieme all'importanza della possibilità di respingere attacchi militari, il possesso dell'arma nucleare permette alla Corea del Nord di acquisire lo status di grande potenza, al fine di guadagnare punti rispetto al suo nemico giurato, gli Stati Uniti d'America.

Al giorno d'oggi (maggio 2019), è stato stimato che la Corea del Nord abbia notevolmente ampliato le sue capacità nucleari rispetto al programma che inizialmente scatenò la reazione dell'ONU negli anni novanta arrivando a possedere circa venti testate nucleari, mentre la CIA ha fornito stime tre volte superiori. Nel 2017, le forze armate nordcoreane hanno sperimentato missili balistici intercontinentali capaci di trasportare imponenti testate nucleari, con un raggio d'azione – secondo le stime fornite da Pyongyang – di circa 13.000 km, approssimativamente la distanza tra la penisola coreana e New York. Il 3 settembre 2017 la Corea del Nord ha inoltre condotto il suo sesto test nucleare dopo la prima esplosione del 2006, in seguito a una serie di test la cui stimata energia esplosiva si sarebbe progressivamente accresciuta.

La scarsità di documentazione accademica sull'argomento, in particolare di provenienza nordcoreana, ha costituito il maggiore ostacolo per lo svolgimento della presente ricerca. Bisogna infatti tenere in

considerazione che la prevalenza di fonti di matrice statunitense, sudcoreana e cinese impedisce al lettore la possibilità di sviluppare una visione più articolata del problema, comprendente una valutazione a tutto tondo delle ragioni alla base dello sviluppo nucleare di Pyongyang. Inoltre, la mancata conoscenza della lingua cinese e coreana ha limitato la quantità di documentazione analizzabile ai fini della ricerca, costringendo all'utilizzo di documenti tradotti o direttamente redatti in lingua inglese, francese o italiana. Il fattore più rilevante resta in ogni caso l'assenza pressoché totale di fonti di matrice nordcoreana a causa delle innumerevoli restrizioni interne al regime: in questo contesto, nonostante le numerose difficoltà ad individuare la vittima e il carnefice, questa tesi si pone come obiettivo di fornire un'analisi quanto più completa possibile del processo che ha portato un piccolo stato di stampo totalitario, guidato da un leader internazionalmente reputato come pazzo, ad entrare di diritto nella cerchia delle potenze dotate di armi nucleari.

La crisi nucleare nordcoreana ha recentemente acquisito maggiore rilevanza mediatica a causa dell'escalation verbale tra il presidente americano Donald Trump e il dittatore Kim Jong-un: nonostante i tentativi di aprire un processo negoziale, rappresentati dai summit di Singapore e Hanoi, la sfida nordcoreana ha raggiunto una situazione di stallo dove, da un lato, gli Stati Uniti non vogliono rinunciare alla denuclearizzazione totale della Corea del Nord, mentre quest'ultima continua a richiedere maggiori garanzie sulla sopravvivenza del suo regime e l'inizio di una cooperazione pacifica col vicino Sud.

Sin dalla fine del diciannovesimo secolo, la penisola coreana è stata la vittima di giochi di potere sia a livello regionale sia internazionale. A seguito dell'occupazione giapponese, la conferenza di Potsdam del 1945 e, successivamente, la conferenza di Yalta hanno portato alla divisione della penisola in due zone di occupazione lungo il 38° parallelo, dove il Nord è stato assegnato alla supervisione dell'URSS, e il Sud è stato occupato dalle forze statunitensi. Al fine di trovare una soluzione alla divisione della penisola, gli Stati Uniti hanno proposto di sottomettere la questione all'autorità delle Nazioni Unite, le quali hanno optato per l'organizzazione di elezioni generali ed una successiva riunificazione della penisola. Tuttavia, l'Unione Sovietica ha impedito all'ONU di monitorare le elezioni al Nord, facendo sì che queste ultime avessero luogo solo in Corea del Sud, la quale venne proclamata, il 10 maggio 1948, Repubblica di Corea, nonché l'unica porzione della penisola legalmente riconosciuta dall'ONU. In risposta a questo affronto, il nuovo leader del regime nordcoreano Kim Il-sung ha proclamato, nel settembre dello stesso anno, la nascita della Repubblica Popolare Democratica di Corea: nel contesto della guerra fredda, gli Stati Uniti percepivano il regime del Nord come il cavallo di Troia dell'Unione Sovietica, e l'intera penisola ne avrebbe successivamente pagato le conseguenze.

Nel 1950, la Corea del Nord ha invaso il 38° parallelo, provocando uno dei conflitti più devastanti del periodo successivo alla seconda guerra mondiale. Nonostante sia stata spesso definita una "guerra dimenticata", la guerra di Corea ha avuto delle importantissime ripercussioni sull'assetto geopolitico attuale, a cominciare dalla sua mancata effettiva conclusione, segnata dalla firma di un armistizio dopo tre anni di atroci combattimenti. L'armistizio ha implicato la creazione di una zona demilitarizzata lungo il 38° parallelo, con l'obiettivo di riportare la penisola allo *status quo ante bellum*, mettendo fine alle ostilità ma non, di fatto, al conflitto.

Tra i fattori interni al regime che hanno maggiormente contribuito alle ambizioni nucleari di Pyongyang c'è senz'altro la struttura stessa della società nordcoreana: fondata sull'ideologia *Juche*, la Costituzione nordcoreana mette l'accento sulla necessità di raggiungere l'indipendenza a livello politico, economico e militare, al fine di discostarsi dalla "mentalità di dipendenza" dai potenti oppressori. L'ideologia *Juche* promuove quindi un'affermazione identitaria fondata su un estremo nazionalismo, contribuendo all'indottrinamento della popolazione attraverso il parallelismo tra la struttura gerarchica del regime e il corpo umano: il Grande Leader rappresenta il cervello, il Partito è il sistema nervoso che acquisisce le informazioni, ed il popolo sono le ossa e i muscoli che eseguono gli ordini. La nazione è concepita come un'entità unica, il cui capo eredita il potere su base dinastica, al fine di evitare il più possibile il rischio di cospirazione. È la configurazione stessa del regime che rappresenta la priorità data da quest'ultimo alla sopravvivenza: la figura di Kim Jong-un costituisce infatti il fattore ultimo di preservazione della società nordcoreana, con la sua esasperazione della capacità militare come principale elemento per evitare il collasso del regime.

Nonostante le premesse, dopo la guerra di Corea il regime nordcoreano è sprofondato nel declino a causa di carestie, catastrofi naturali, ed un'imponente recessione economica dovuta all'eccessivo peso dato alle spese militari. Con il collasso dell'Unione Sovietica, la Corea del Nord ha smesso di ricevere assistenza dal suo maggiore alleato, provocando una grave crisi produttiva che ha lasciato l'investimento in ambito militare come sola opzione per la sopravvivenza della struttura totalitaria del regime, attraverso un'esasperata esaltazione dell'orgoglio nazionale. A causa della continuazione dei test nucleari da parte di Pyongyang, la comunità internazionale ha iniziato ad interrompere i finanziamenti alla Corea del Nord, imponendo pesanti sanzioni che hanno reso catastrofiche le condizioni economiche del regime. Tuttavia, un altro problema dei dati riguardanti le economie pianificate è l'impossibilità di avere la certezza dell'affidabilità dei dati a disposizione: in un contesto dove buone performance economiche sono un sinonimo di lealtà al sistema, la possibilità di distorcerli è molto elevata, rendendo più complessa la ricerca di fonti attendibili a riguardo.

Non è ancora chiaro il momento preciso dell'inizio della ricerca nucleare di Pyongyang, ma è molto probabile che si aggiri attorno agli anni '60, periodo in cui l'allora presidente Kim Il-sung comprese che domandare l'assistenza dei paesi alleati del blocco comunista fosse l'unica opzione per salvaguardare il regime. Dopo l'uscita di Kim dal TNP ed i primi test nucleari, il Consiglio di Sicurezza delle Nazioni Unite ha iniziato ad emanare delle sanzioni che hanno notevolmente limitato il numero di fornitori di materiali per lo sviluppo di armi nucleari a Pyongyang; tuttavia, diversi paesi sono stati scoperti essere coinvolti in traffici illeciti con la Corea del Nord, tra cui diversi paesi africani, il Pakistan, notevolmente importante per la formazione offerta dallo scienziato Khan agli studiosi nordcoreani, ma soprattutto la Cina.

Nel quadro della crisi nordcoreana, l'importanza strategica della Cina è cruciale: non solo quest'ultima costituisce il maggiore sostenitore economico della Corea del Nord, ma rappresenta anche la figura mediatrice tra Pyongyang e Washington, in particolare nell'ambito dell'implementazione delle risoluzioni onusiane volte a sanzionare il comportamento di Kim. Tuttavia, nonostante il legame economico, la Cina ha progressivamente mostrato una certa ambiguità nella relazione con il regime nordcoreano, antepo-
nendo al sostentamento di

quest'ultimo la necessità di preservare la stabilità nella regione e non creare ostacoli ai propri obiettivi strategici.

A partire dalla guerra di Corea, le relazioni sino-nordcoreane hanno iniziato ad avere un andamento sempre più altalenante. Alla base dell'intervento cinese nel conflitto c'era infatti la necessità da parte di Mao di mettere in sicurezza il confine con il fiume Yalu, sede di bacini idroelettrici incaricati di fornire energia alle industrie cinesi in Manciuria; se le forze onusiane si fossero appropriate della zona, l'economia cinese avrebbe potuto subire delle gravi perdite. Inoltre, grazie alla partecipazione nella guerra di Corea, la Cina ha potuto finalmente accaparrarsi un posto tra le maggiori potenze mondiali, rilegando la Corea del Nord ad un ruolo marginale e contribuendo alle sue successive ambizioni nucleari. Nonostante la firma del Trattato sino-nordcoreano di mutua cooperazione e aiuto nel 1961, il documento non si esprimeva chiaramente circa l'obbligazione da parte della Cina di intervenire in caso fosse la Corea del Nord a scatenare l'attacco, aumentando l'ambiguità di Pechino sulla presunta alleanza con Pyongyang. Gli anni della Rivoluzione Culturale in Cina hanno inoltre contribuito al progressivo inasprirsi delle relazioni sino-nordcoreane, periodo in cui la Cina ha messo a repentaglio l'esistenza della Corea del Nord e tagliato l'assistenza economica, costringendo Kim a fare affidamento sull'Unione Sovietica. Negli anni '70 seguì comunque una normalizzazione delle relazioni sino-nordcoreane; inoltre, in quanto unico mediatore tra Pyongyang e Washington, la Cina ha iniziato ad usare il posto acquisito nel Consiglio di Sicurezza per fare le veci della Corea del Nord, revocando le pesanti sanzioni sul regime e facendo pressione sugli Stati Uniti. Dall'altro lato, Pyongyang sperava nel ritiro delle truppe americane dalla Corea del Sud, credendo di poter finalmente procedere con la riunificazione della penisola. Tuttavia, nel 1992 la Cina ha riaperto le relazioni con la Corea del Sud scatenando l'ennesimo timore nel Nord, prevalentemente per due motivi: in primo luogo, Pechino voleva allontanare Seul dall'ala protettiva statunitense aumentando la crescita economica della Cina con un ampliamento dei commerci verso la Repubblica di Corea, in secondo luogo, in tal modo Pechino sarebbe diventato il mediatore tra le due porzioni rivali della penisola coreana.

Negli ultimi anni, la Cina ha mostrato un notevole impegno nel tentativo di stabilizzare le relazioni sia intercoreane sia tra gli Stati Uniti e il regime del Nord, ma nonostante ciò, la Corea del Nord ha spesso voltato le spalle all'alleato cinese uscendo dai Six Party Talks e continuando i test nucleari nonostante l'obiezione di Pechino. In questo contesto, gli obiettivi principali della Cina sono "pace, stabilità e denuclearizzazione": lo sviluppo nucleare di Pyongyang costituisce un notevole fattore di alterazione dell'equilibrio regionale, andando ad interferire con gli interessi cinesi. In caso di fallimento della strategia contenitiva della Cina, quest'ultima rischia di perdere notevolmente credibilità agli occhi della comunità internazionale, mostrandosi incapace di garantire la sicurezza internazionale; l'obiettivo resta quindi il mantenimento dello status quo, sia all'interno della Corea del Nord sia, di conseguenza, nell'intero Nordest asiatico. Essendo l'unico mediatore tra la Corea del Nord e gli Stati Uniti, la Cina ha colto più volte l'occasione per esercitare pressioni sugli Stati Uniti, soprattutto nell'ambito della guerra commerciale tra i due.

Ad ogni modo, Pyongyang continua a non fidarsi affatto di Pechino, temendo fortemente la possibilità di un tradimento da parte di quest'ultima: in primo luogo, la Cina si è fortemente riavvicinata alla Corea del Sud, costituendo il suo primo partner economico nel 2017; in secondo luogo, Pechino ha progressivamente ridefinito il suo rapporto bilaterale con Pyongyang in una normale relazione tra stati. Inoltre, per quanto riguarda la denuclearizzazione, la Cina continua a prioritizzare un approccio più morbido, dando sempre la precedenza alla stabilità nella regione, mentre gli Stati Uniti si fanno promotori di una linea dura, dicendosi anche disposti all'utilizzo della forza. L'aumento delle tensioni riguardo il nucleare nordcoreano ha mostrato che il vero problema è dato dalla relazione USA-Corea del Nord, dove Washington continua ad incolpare Pechino per il fallimento della denuclearizzazione nordcoreana con il fine di colpire economicamente la Cina. Dalla divisione ufficiale della penisola in poi, gli Stati Uniti hanno interferito nelle questioni interne alla Corea, facendo prevalere i propri interessi economici e strategici sulle richieste della Corea del Nord, la quale si è ritrovata ad essere una semplice pedina nello scacchiere della guerra fredda. Allo stesso modo, nel contesto del dialogo inter-coreano, l'ingerenza americana ha spesso costituito un ostacolo al riavvicinamento delle due Coree a causa delle ostilità che intercorrevano tra gli Stati Uniti e la Corea del Nord. La relazione tra i due è stata particolarmente tesa sotto l'amministrazione Bush, il quale ha inserito Pyongyang ne "l'asse del male" degli stati finanziatori del terrorismo. La situazione è poi degenerata con gli incidenti diplomatici del 2010, dove le provocazioni della Corea del Nord hanno portato ad un vertiginoso aumento delle tensioni sulla penisola, senza però scatenare una risposta militare degli Stati Uniti.

L'arrivo alla Casa Bianca di Donald Trump ha portato a una revisione totale dell'approccio da seguire nei confronti di Pyongyang, dichiarando che "tutte le opzioni sono sul tavolo" per quanto riguarda la risoluzione del problema nordcoreano. Ai lanci missilistici di Kim, Trump ha risposto scatenando un'escalation verbale sui social network utilizzando espressioni spesso non molto diplomatiche, lasciando intendere l'eventualità di un intervento militare americano in caso di necessità. Criticando fortemente la linea più morbida adottata dal predecessore Obama, la strategia di Trump mira ad esercitare la massima pressione su Pyongyang, al fine di convincere Kim ad iniziare a negoziare e mostrare al mondo di esser stato l'unico presidente americano capace di affrontare l'impasse nordcoreana, evitando così il rischio di un confronto diretto. I summit di Singapore (giugno 2018) e Hanoi (febbraio 2019) hanno dimostrato l'estrema difficoltà nel trovare un punto di incontro tra gli interessi dei contraenti: da un lato, Trump mira alla denuclearizzazione completa, verificabile e irreversibile della Corea del Nord al fine di procedere con la riduzione delle sanzioni, mentre dall'altro, Kim ha bisogno di maggiori garanzie da parte degli Stati Uniti, in primis una diminuzione della presenza statunitense in Corea del Sud. Alla luce della ripresa dei test missilistici da parte di Pyongyang (maggio 2019), appare evidente come, in assenza di informazioni affidabili sulla crescita delle capacità nucleari nordcoreane, la minaccia di un'escalation militare resti comunque il rischio maggiore.

In conclusione, questo studio mette l'accento sul modo in cui la percezione costante di essere nel mirino della maggiore potenza mondiale possa far sì che uno stato di piccola taglia, isolato sul piano internazionale, possa sentire il bisogno di correre ai ripari, e sviluppare l'arma di difesa ultima come possibilità estrema per la sua

sopravvivenza. In seguito al collasso del summit di Hanoi, Kim Jong-un ha cercato assistenza diplomatica nella Russia di Vladimir Putin, al fine di trovare un nuovo alleato per resistere alle sanzioni onusiane. Tuttavia, nonostante il meeting con Kim offrisse alla Russia la possibilità di avere voce in capitolo nell'impasse nordcoreana, Putin continua a considerare la Corea del Nord un paese inaffidabile per investirvi economicamente, mentre Kim mira all'obiettivo di riaprire le negoziazioni con gli USA aumentando le incertezze riguardo le strategie da perseguire.

Da questo studio emerge l'importanza delle ragioni politiche e strategiche alla base della decisione della Corea del Nord di convertirsi al nucleare. La nuclearizzazione di Pyongyang potrebbe dunque essere definita come "la prosecuzione della guerra con altri mezzi"²¹⁸, rappresentando il seguito di un conflitto mai concluso tra due ideologie opposte, iniziato con la guerra di Corea e sfociato nella minaccia di reciproca distruzione. Il nucleare nordcoreano costituisce quindi un'arma difensiva, e non offensiva, consentendo di evitare attacchi da parte delle forze nemiche e garantendo l'indipendenza del regime, opportunità a cui Kim non intende rinunciare. Nonostante la modesta portata dell'arsenale di Pyongyang, le sue scelte strategiche hanno un'influenza diretta sull'intero Nordest asiatico, centro nevralgico economico e politico, implicando, tra le altre cose, il rischio di diffondere la tecnologia nucleare ad altri potenziali "stati canaglia" nella regione. Tuttavia, il passato non è sufficiente per trovare risposta alla crisi nucleare nordcoreana. Una soluzione sostanziale all'attuale stallo potrebbe essere una promozione dello sviluppo interno di Pyongyang, insistendo sulla necessità di un intervento diplomatico decisivo della Corea del Sud e della Cina, ma, in particolare, un concreto sforzo di aprire i negoziati da parte degli Stati Uniti.

²¹⁸ Breccia, 297.