

Solomiya Kharchuk  
University of Wrocław  
solomiya.kharchuk@gmail.com  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2746-0897>

## **The „Pariah” State, Nukes & the U.S. Diplomacy: Nuclear Talks with North Korea Which Failed (2009-2019)**

**Abstract:** The proliferation of nuclear weapons is one of the major challenges of the modern world. It is also a challenge for the United States of America, which focuses its counterproliferation efforts on its adversaries' nuclear programmes. Washington has gone to great lengths to curb Pyongyang's nuclear programme during the last decade, albeit without achieving the desired result - the complete denuclearisation of North Korea. The purpose of this article is to identify the reason for this failure and, specifically, why the negotiations with North Korea failed. Used in this research are the historical analysis and content analysis methods. Content analysis was conducted using official documents, speeches, and press statements, which proved to be a valuable resource. The research was conducted in the light of offensive realism, and confirmed that the lack of trust between parties, which derives from the anarchical international system, made the complete denuclearisation of North Korea impossible.

**Keywords:** nuclear proliferation, nuclear diplomacy, North Korea, The United States, Obama, Trump.

## **„Parias”, broń atomowa oraz amerykańska dyplomacja: nieudane rozmowy z Koreą Północną (2009–2019)**

**Abstrakt:** Rozprzestrzenianie się broni atomowej stanowi jedno z kluczowych wyzwań współczesnego świata. Proliferacja jest także jednym z kluczowych problemów, z którym zderzyły się Stany Zjednoczone Ameryki. USA podejmują szczególne działania przeciw rozwojowi programów atomowych swoich przeciwników. W ciągu ostatniej dekady Waszyngton dążył do zahamowania północnokoreańskiego programu atomowego, jednak nie osiągnął pożądanego rezultatu: całkowitej denuklearyzacji Korei Północnej. Celem artykułu jest znalezienie przyczyn porażki Waszyngtonu, a mianowicie powodu, który sprawił, że negocjacje z Koreą Północną nie przyniosły zamierzonych skutków. W badaniach zastosowane zostały metoda historyczna oraz analiza treści, która została wykorzystana w odniesieniu do oficjalnych dokumentów, przemówień oraz oświadczeń prasowych. Okazały się one cennym źródłem informacji. Badania zostały

przeprowadzone przez pryzmat realizmu ofensywnego i pozwalają potwierdzić, że brak zaufania między stronami, wynikający z anarchicznej struktury systemu międzynarodowego, uniemożliwił całkowitą denuklearyzację Korei Północnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** proliferacja broni atomowej, dyplomacja atomowa, Korea Północna, Stany Zjednoczone, Obama, Trump.

*Negotiating with North Korea is all about contradictions. What can be important one day becomes unimportant the next. A position they hold stubbornly for weeks and months can suddenly disappear...*

(Cha, 2009, p. 120).

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The proliferation and the very existence of nuclear weapons have always been one of humanity's most significant problems – for they have unprecedented destructive power. While proliferation is a problem on its own as it means that more nuclear weapons are being produced (vertical proliferation) or more countries develop nuclear weapons (horizontal proliferation), as George Schultz nicely observed, „proliferation begets proliferation”. He means that as one state develops its nuclear arsenal, it will drive its rival's nuclear ambitions, and the rival will be likely to follow the same path (Shultz, 1984, p. 18 as cited in Sagan, 1996, p. 57). Furthermore, in the last few decades following the end of the Cold War, nuclear weapons have posed even higher risks, as terrorism becomes a global problem, and members of terrorist groups might obtain the weapons. It is also a challenge for the United States of America, one of the major powers of the Post-Cold-War era, yet, it focuses its counterproliferation efforts on its adversaries' nuclear programmes, as they are perceived as a threat to national security.

As a result, the U.S. has gone to great lengths to curb the North Korean nuclear programme. Washington supports the „orthodox” treaty-based regimes, such as the NPT<sup>2</sup>, non-treaty based international methods (e.g., United Nations Security

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank her friend Amy Griffin for the comments she made on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which was signed in 1968 in order to prevent the further proliferation of nuclear weapons, constitutes the foundation of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. However, the NPT Treaty is being criticised for being “fundamentally unfair”, as it recognises the five nuclear states (The United States, The Soviet Union/Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom) and does not put enough pressure on them with regard to actual disarmament and, therefore, freezes the nuclear status quo (Chestnut Greitens, 2014, p. 382).

Council Resolutions, which establish multilateral sanctions). Still, Washington uses *ad hoc*, non-traditional, non-institutional methods (Waheguru, 2008, pp. 371–373), for example, high-level talks with Pyongyang and unilateral sanctions. During the last decade, Obama's and Trump's administrations have been using what might be called *ad hoc* nuclear diplomacy<sup>3</sup> with regard to North Korea. Nonetheless, the nuclear talks with Pyongyang, which were held in the last ten years, did not lead to the ultimate resolution of the crisis. The questions arise: Why did both presidents fail to achieve the goal of North Korea's denuclearisation? Why did diplomacy fail?

A fair amount of research has been conducted in regards to the North Korean nuclear programme. „No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security” by J. D. Pollack (2011) is one of the most important books related to the issue. The Obama administration's policy has been analysed by Dongsoo Kim (2016) and Jong Kun Choi (2016). The significant articles on the Trump administration's North Korea policy have been recently written by Liegl (2018) and Sigal (2020). Kim Hyun (2017) has conducted a comparative analysis of Obama's and Trump's policies with regard to Pyongyang. The present article, however, focuses on how the U.S. was using diplomacy, and specifically negotiations, with the purpose of achieving the denuclearisation of North Korea (from 2009 to 2019). Subsequently, this article aims to identify the root causes of its failure.

Used in this research are the historical analysis and content analysis methods. Content analysis was conducted using official documents, speeches, and press statements. The research was conducted in the light of offensive realism, an international relations theory created by John Mearsheimer, and the assumptions of the theory have been tested during this research. The article includes four sections. In the first and second sections, the offensive realist insight of nuclear weapons and the brief history of the North Korean nuclear programme are to be

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<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, the term “diplomacy” is used to describe the actions of a state that tries “to influence the behaviour of other actors by bargaining, negotiating, taking specific action or refraining from such an action (...)” (Mingst, McKibben & Arreguin-Toft, 2019, p. 157). Julian Sutor (1996, pp. 28–29) states that the word “diplomacy” might be defined in three different ways. Firstly, diplomacy can be understood as the measures implemented by the State authorities with the purpose of safeguarding the state's interests. Secondly, one can define diplomacy as the set of measures based on scientific assumptions, which might be used to pursue certain goals. Finally, a group of people, which function within the specific organisational structure and pursue the foreign policy objectives, might be called “diplomacy”. The author defines diplomacy as the actions taken by the State authorities, which use a specific set of tools, including negotiations, bargaining, economic pressure and incentives, as well as the threat to use the force, with the purpose of pursuing the *raison d'état*.

briefly presented, respectively. In the third section, the Obama administration's „strategic patience” is to be analysed. In the fourth section, the Trump administration's North Korea policy is to be examined.

### **Nuclear weapons through the looking glass of offensive realism**

The theory of offensive realism is based on five fundamental assumptions. First and foremost, the international system is anarchic, for there is no central authority above the states, which exist within the system. Secondly, great powers have the capability to harm each other and are potentially dangerous to each other because they possess offensive military capabilities that may be utilised against their rivals. Furthermore, states can never be sure that other countries do not have offensive intentions. Moreover, survival is understood as the preservation of its „territorial integrity and the autonomy of [its] political order” and is the primary goal of a state. Finally, it is assumed that states are rational actors (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 30–32). As states function under these circumstances, they fear each other, do not trust other states, and constantly anticipate danger. As Kenneth Waltz has observed, „the state among states (...) conducts its affairs in the brooding shadow of violence” (1979, p. 102). Additionally, the “911” problem posits that the central authority does not exist in the anarchic international system; subsequently, there is no one who might help the state if it becomes a victim of aggression. Therefore, „in international politics, God helps those who help themselves”: states can only rely on themselves with regard to their own security and seek to guarantee their own survival. Consequently, states realise that the best way to achieve their primary and ultimate goal – survival – is to become the hegemon, the mightiest state of the system. As a result, states make efforts to maximise their relative power by employing diplomatic, military, and even economic means to „shift the balance of power in their favour”. As all states are driven by the logic of power maximisation, they function in a „world of constant security competition, where states are willing to lie, cheat, and use brute force if it helps them gain advantage over their rivals” (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 32–35).

When the „Atomic Era” began in 1945 after the explosion in a New Mexico desert, which demonstrated the unprecedented destructive power of the new „ultimate weapon” (Chestnut Greitens, 2014, pp. 373–374), every mighty state began not only to seek to obtain nuclear weapons but to achieve nuclear superiority. They sought after the capability to turn their adversaries into

a „smoking, radiating ruin” yet to face hardly any negative consequences of their actions. In other words, nuclear superiority is the ability to demolish rival states as political entities without fear of equivalent retaliation. If any state achieves a nuclear monopoly, it will become the hegemon of the international system and, consequently, it will achieve „the absolute security” and the ultimate guarantee of its survival. The most desirable way for a great power to achieve nuclear superiority is by acquiring nuclear weapons - and then ensuring no other state duplicates the feat. In a world in which few nuclear states exist, nuclear superiority might be achieved by developing the capability to neutralise the nuclear weapons of its adversaries or by acquiring the capability to protect itself from the rival’s nuclear attack (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 128–130)<sup>4</sup>.

During the Cold War, each superpower was keen on becoming the nuclear hegemon, although after the USSR tested a nuclear device in 1949, they were forced to accept the fact that if the nuclear war were initiated, both political entities would have been unacceptably damaged. The destructiveness of nuclear weapons created the „stalemate”, which is known as „the mutually assured destruction” (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 130). In the MAD world, the deterrence was based „on the capability of each side to destroy each other” (Kissinger, 1994, p. 750). Paradoxically, nuclear weapons constituted the foundation of peace and stability during the Cold War (Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu, 2008, p. 362) however, the nuclear peace was based on the possibility of „mutual suicide”. The strategic stability could have been defined as an equilibrium in which neither superpower would use its nuclear weapons because the rival was able to eliminate the former functioning political entity in retaliation. Consequently, the national security of each great power was based on its capability to unacceptably damaging its adversary (Kissinger, 2014, pp. 332–336).

As the Cold War has ended, the ideas of both „nuclear deterrence” and „nuclear peace” begun to be challenged. George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn argue that nuclear weapons were indeed crucial for maintaining peace and stability during the Cold War, but the collapse of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of a new, dangerous nuclear era, in which reliance on nuclear weapons for ensuring peace becomes „increasingly hazardous and decreasingly effective”

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<sup>4</sup> Mearsheimer’s approach to nuclear weapons is consistent with Sagan’s security model of proliferation, according to which states seek to obtain nuclear weapons in order to ensure their security (Sagan, 1996, pp. 57–59).

(2007). The authors observe that „we face a very real possibility that the deadliest weapons ever invented could fall into dangerous hands” (Perry, Shultz, Kissinger & Nunn, 2008) and claim that the risk of a nuclear terrorist attack is constantly increasing. They also mention the issue of nuclear proliferation as one of the most significant security challenges of the modern world (Shultz, Perry, Kissinger & Nunn, 2007). It is worth mentioning that the proliferation of nuclear weapons is connected with a „classic nuclear dilemma” in which more states possessing nuclear weapons lowers the probability of war; however, where the mechanism of „mutual deterrence” fails, the ferocity of such a war would be tremendously magnified. Furthermore, the spread of nuclear weapons creates more possibilities for the actual use of those weapons and becomes the incentive for non-nuclear states to follow the same path (Kissinger, 2014, pp. 338, 340).

John Mearsheimer argues that nuclear weapons do not effectively eliminate the security competition between states because nuclear powers do not feel as if they have enough security and are thus still engaged in security competition (2001, pp. 132–133). Mearsheimer and Kissinger might agree on one specific issue: a world with nuclear weapons is not a more secure world, for it is still a world of intense security competition. However, it is important to add that Kenneth Waltz (the founding father of structural realism, on which Mearsheimer bases his theory) presents different views on the issue of nuclear weapons and their impact on the security competition between great powers. He argues that nuclear weapons have the potential to stabilise the regions, which are characterised by a high level of political tension. This is due to the fact that if the state achieves the second-strike capability, it will be secure because attacking this state would have apocalyptic consequences for the attacker. Consequently, the state would not have the incentive to further improve its level of security and engage in security competition (Krieger & Roth, pp. 370–372).

Finally, the offensive realist approach to nuclear weapons is based on the security model of proliferation: states seek nuclear weapons in order to guarantee their own survival; simultaneously, they go to great lengths to ensure that others do not follow the same path. As a result, a dangerous world of security competition, *inter alia* for nuclear weapons, exists.

### **North Korean nuclear programme: the origins**

Following the Korean War, the founder of DPRK, Kim Il-Sung, might have considered the potential usefulness of nuclear weapons, as the regime was driven by

security concerns since „the birth of the nation”, the „disastrous” war (1950–1953) did not provide the ultimate resolution, and, most importantly, during the course of the Korean War, the U.S. considered the use of nuclear weapons<sup>5</sup> (Hecker, 2010, p. 48). However, the post-war devastation of North Korea made the reconstruction of the country, along with economic recovery, the regime’s priority. Nevertheless, as the United States started to introduce tactical nuclear weapons and longer-range missiles in South Korea in the late 1950s, Pyongyang was becoming more aware of nuclear technology<sup>6</sup> (Pollack, 2011, pp. 45–46). Cuban missile crisis, which took place in the 1960s, became a powerful incentive for North Korea to pursue nuclear weapons in the long-term, for, in the eyes of Pyongyang, the USSR failed to ensure the security of a similar, small, and distant state; subsequently, North Korea had to rely on itself for its own strategic interests. Beijing’s opening to the United States and the dramatic change in relations between Washington and Beijing in the 1970s was seen as dangerous by Pyongyang. Finally, in Pyongyang’s opinion, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s „placed North Korea’s well being at unprecedented risk” (Pollack, 2011, p. 98). Moreover, North Korea lost its financial aid from the former „Soviet Empire”, while South Korea had been rising economically and militarily (Hecker, 2010, p. 49).

The above-mentioned events were driving the North Korean nuclear programme since its inception in the early 1950s when the programme was focused primarily on the „peaceful atom”. North Korea had to build its nuclear power technology from scratch; therefore, the support of the Soviet Union (on whom the whole socialist camp depended with regard to nuclear expertise) was essential. The leader of the USSR at that time, Nikita Krushchev, saw the exchange of nuclear scientists as an opportunity to strengthen the solidarity within the

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<sup>5</sup> As William J. Perry has observed, “During the Korean War (...) there were three distinct instances when the use of nuclear weapons was threatened: at the war’s beginning, when the Chinese entered the war, and just prior to the beginning of talks (...) Nuclear weapons were the dog that barked but did not bite” (Perry, 2006, p. 80).

<sup>6</sup> In 1972 the number of nuclear weapons on the peninsula peaked at 763, though the number of weapons was constantly being reduced in the following years until it reached about 100 warheads in 1991, when President Bush announced the decision to unilaterally withdraw all tactical nuclear weapons, which were deployed in South Korea (Pollack, 2011, pp. 45–46). As Peter Hayes observed, “North Korea’s experience with nuclear weapons is unique among small states. No other state has faced four decades of continuous nuclear threat – virtually the entire period of North Korea’s independent existence – without a countervailing nuclear retaliatory capability of its own or allied nuclear deployments in its own territory” (1990, p. 123).

socialist camp, which „opened the door to the training of scientific personnel in the Soviet Union, and Pyongyang was eager to walk through it”. In the 1950s, cooperative agreements between Moscow and Pyongyang were signed. They included provisions on future nuclear activities at Yongbyon, where a few decades later, North Korea would build facilities needed for the development of nuclear weapons. In the 1960s, the Yongbyon facility was referred to as the „Furniture Factory”, which suggested that some highly restricted activities were being carried out there. In the early 1960s, the Atomic Energy Research Centre was established there, and an IRT-2000 2 MWt reactor was transferred to Yongbyon from the USSR (Pollack, 2011, pp. 48–51).

The precise date when the North Korean regime decided to transform its civilian nuclear programme into the quest for nuclear weapons remains unknown. As Pollack has mentioned, „No document attests to Kim’s nuclear decision” (2011, p. 98), though, it came to fruition in the form of a covert plutonium production programme, which was discovered by U.S. intelligence in 1986. This, in turn, led to the crisis, for in 1985, North Korea became a state party to the Nuclear-Non Proliferation Treaty (under the USSR pressure), and therefore did not comply with its obligation to declare its nuclear facilities to the International Atomic Energy Agency. In the early 1990s, the regime initially declared its nuclear facilities to the IAEA, but when in 1993 the Agency called for the inspection of two nuclear facilities, which were suspected of being used for the storage of nuclear waste, Pyongyang rejected the demand and announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT. During the following year, talks were held between North Korea, the U.S., and the Agency; simultaneously, the Clinton administration seriously considered a preemptive surgical strike on the nuclear facilities in North Korea. According to then-Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, the „coercive policy” was pursued by the administration in which talks were „backed with a very credible threat of military force” (Chanlett-Avery, Manyin, Nikitin, Campbell & Mackey, 2018, p. 10; Nikitin, Chanlett-Avery & Manyin, 2017, p. 3; Perry, 2006, pp. 81–82).

The crisis was resolved in 1994 after former U.S. President Jimmy Carter visited Pyongyang in 1993 to negotiate the framework of a new agreement, and a transition of power took place in Pyongyang (as Kim Jong-il became a new leader of DPRK): the Agreed Framework was signed. According to the document, North Korea was obliged to remain a party to the NPT, freeze the production of plutonium, and eventually dismantle the plutonium production



programs. Furthermore, Pyongyang accepted terms of international inspection and monitoring of its nuclear facilities. On the other hand, the U.S. committed to organise the international consortium in order to provide the DPRK with two light-water reactors (LWRs), as well as with the alternative energy in the form of 500,000 metric tons of heavy fuel oil annually. Additionally, the U.S. was obliged to „provide formal assurances to the D.P.R.K. against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the U.S.” (Nikitin et al., pp. 4–5; Agreed Framework, 1994)<sup>7</sup>. As the document was strongly criticised in the U.S. Congress, in 1996, the administration initiated a new series of negotiations regarding Pyongyang’s missile programme and its exports of missiles. In turn, this led to North Korea’s self-imposed moratorium on long-range missiles, which was declared in 1999 and followed by the state visit of then-Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, in Pyongyang in 2000. According to William J. Perry, „the United States was within a few months of getting the desired agreement from North Korea” (2006, pp. 82–83). If the agreement had been signed, North Korea would have committed to ending its ballistic missile programme and missile exports; however, President Clinton decided against the trip to Pyongyang as his term in office was coming to an end (Chanlett-Avery et al., 2018, p. 11; Nikitin et al., 2017, pp. 5–6).

In 2001, George W. Bush was sworn in as the President of the United States and declared that the U.S. would have a different approach to North Korea. Just a few months later, the Bush administration announced its intention to pursue „comprehensive negotiations” with North Korea. Following the 9/11 attacks, Bush described North Korea as a part of the „axis of evil”. Simultaneously, the 1994 Agreed Framework was being implemented, though the promised LWR reactor could not have been completed before IAEA finished the verification of North Korea’s declarations. In 2002, a new crisis began after U.S. Department of State official James Kelly informed the regime of evidence of North Korea’s covert highly-enriched uranium production (HEU) programme, and the allegations were confirmed by Pyongyang<sup>8</sup>. As a result, the international consortium, which was formed under the 1994 Agreed Framework,

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<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, the consortium, the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation (KEDO), was established in 1995, with the United States, Japan and the Republic of Korea as its founding members. In the following decade, North Korea received \$1.5 billion of the financial support from South Korea, \$500 million - from Japan, \$400 million - from the U.S. and \$120 million - from another states, who joined the KEDO after its establishment in 1995 (The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization, n.d.).

<sup>8</sup> Both plutonium and highly enriched uranium (HEU) are fissile materials that might be used to build a nuclear bomb.

stopped the shipments of the heavy oil, after which North Korea accused the U.S. of failing to meet its obligations (arising from the 1994 Agreed Framework) and withdrew from the NPT in 2003 (Nikitin *et al.*, 2017, pp. 5–7).

According to Chinese diplomat Fu Ying, the U.S. was keen on holding multilateral talks between the U.S., China, and North Korea, which were organised by Beijing at the request of Washington. The first and only round of three-party talks was held in April 2003, later the talks were expanded and, starting in August 2003, when the first round of six-party talks took place, South Korea, Japan, and Russia were included as well (2017, pp. 9–11). Even though the negotiations were „mired in distrust and accusations” (Hecker, 2010, p. 50), outwardly, it seemed that a significant step toward denuclearisation was taken in September 2005 when the Joint Statement was issued. According to the document, North Korea „committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing programs and returning, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards”. On the other hand, the subject of the LWR was to be discussed „at an appropriate time” and energy assistance was to be provided for North Korea. Furthermore, in the statement, the United States reaffirmed that it had „no intention to attack or invade the DPRK with nuclear or conventional weapons” (*Joint Statement*, 2005). However, a few weeks later, the U.S. Department of Treasury designated Bank Delta Asia, located in Chinese Macau, as a „financial institution of primary money laundry concern” (because there were suspicions of counterfeiting); subsequently, 25 million U.S. dollars held by Pyongyang were frozen. The BDA issue had a negative impact on the Six-Party talks: North Korea demanded a resolution before implementing the Joint Statement, and the talks reached an impasse (Nikitin *et al.*, 2017, p. 8; Jayshree Bajoria & Beina Xu, 2013).

On October 9, 2006, Pyongyang conducted its first nuclear test. The explosion was immediately condemned by the United States, which called for punitive multilateral sanctions, leading to UNSC Resolution 1718, which *inter alia* imposed a partial arms embargo on North Korea, as well as freezing assets on entities involved in Pyongyang’s WMD programs (Chanlett-Avery & Squassoni, 2006, p. 1; Heintz, Shurkin & Mallory, 2019, p. 14; Arms Control Association, 2018). Eventually, North Korea ceased boycotting the multilateral talks, and a new series of negotiations came to fruition: in February 2007, the parties agreed on „Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement”, under which during the „initial phase” North Korea committed to freezing its Yongbyon nuclear facility

and allowing the IAEA inspections; in exchange the U.S. promised to begin the process of removing North Korea from the list of countries designated as sponsors of terrorism. However, in December 2008, negotiations hit a roadblock, for there was no consensus with regard to verification measures (Initial Actions, 2007; Nikitin *et al.*, 2017, p. 8-9; Jayshree Bajoria & Beina Xu, 2013).

As North Korea became a nuclear state in 2006, it is worth mentioning that China, Pyongyang's „most important partner and donor country” (Ying, 2017, p. 10) views North Korea as a useful, though problematic „buffer” against the United States (Cumings, 2020, p. 84), and is more afraid of the regime collapse (as a result of U.S. actions) than it is afraid of nuclear North Korea. As a result, even though China does officially declare its support of North Korea's peaceful denuclearisation (and strongly opposes the military option), Beijing „will not support sanctions that will bring Pyongyang to its knees” (Hecker, 2010, p. 53) and only Beijing has the capability to do so. Meanwhile, North Korea will not give up its nuclear weapons voluntarily as it is the „ultimate deterrent” and the guarantee of regime's survival, and, according to Siegfried Hecker, in 2006, Pyongyang started to consider North Korea as a „nuclear power” and since then does not have the desire to denuclearise, but rather to hold the arms control talks with the United States (2010, p. 50). In the opinion of Victor D. Cha, what North Korea really desires is the type of deal similar to the one made between the U.S. and India: Pyongyang wants to have some of their facilities left outside of international inspection. Moreover, Pyongyang wants to receive energy, as well as economic assistance, in exchange for the acceptance of any international inspections; „they want the rules of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (...) regime essentially rewritten for them as they were for India, who never signed the NPT” (Cha, 2009, pp. 123–124).

Finally, both the Obama's and Trump's administrations were challenged with an insurmountable problem of North Korean denuclearisation while being trapped in the „security dilemma”, along with Beijing and Pyongyang.

### **Obama's „strategic patience”**

After Barack Obama was sworn in as the President of the United States of America, he announced his intention to improve relations with America's „traditional” adversaries by stating that Washington would „extend a hand” to those who „are willing to unclench [their] fist” (Phillips, 2009). However, North Korea responded with what experts (Cha, 2009, p. 121; Dongsoo Kim, 2016, p.

33) call provocations: the second nuclear test took place in May 2009, the regime launched ballistic missiles in April and May of 2009. Victor D. Cha (2009, p. 121) mentions that North Korean actions had been often rationalised as „cries for help and attention”. However, provocations could no longer be interpreted this way, as President Obama signalled his interest in engagement with Pyongyang.

In response to North Korean actions, the administration formed the North Korea policy, which is described as „strategic patience”. According to this new approach, the U.S. was not supposed to „move first” unless North Korea did introduce concrete measures toward complete denuclearisation. If these steps were to be taken by the regime, DPRK would have received the economic aid, as well as normalisation of relations with the U.S. Moreover, the „strategic patience” entailed some other components: the U.S. should have been calling for North Korea’s denuclearisation, encouraging China to exert pressure on North Korea, and applying pressure on North Korea through sanctions (Dongsoo Kim, 2016, p. 33). As a result, during President Obama’s first term, the U.S. began introducing a „two-track approach” with regard to North Korea: the economic sanctions were being imposed<sup>9</sup>, yet high-level talks were being held - and Obama was a supporter of contacts between the American and North Korean officials (Kim Hyun, 2017, pp. 51–53; Cha, 2009, p. 121).

In 2009, Ambassador Stephen Bosworth was appointed as a United States Special Representative for North Korea. In December, Stephen Bosworth was sent on a mission to Pyongyang in order to achieve two key objectives. First, to persuade North Korea to give up boycotting the Six-Party Talks (which it did since April 2009) and return to the negotiation table. Second, to encourage the regime to promise the implementation of the September 2005 Joint Statement. However, the two-day mission did not bring the results the Obama administration desired. Regardless of that, according to Bosworth, both parties acknowledged the importance of the multilateral talks; North Korea preferred the bilateral talks with the United States and did not agree to attend the Six-Party talks. During the negotiations, North Korea’s position remains unknown, though the South Korean Foreign Minister stated that North Korea demanded the end of the sanctions. Moreover, according to South Korean sources (as well as Jack Pritchard, Director of the Korean Economic Institute), North Korea tried to combine the peace

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<sup>9</sup> See: Heintz *et al.*, 2019.

treaty negotiations and denuclearisation talks, as in the eyes of Pyongyang, the peace treaty would have indicated that the United States did not have any „hostile” intentions towards North Korea. However, the North Korean demands contradicted the principles of „strategic patience” (Niksch, 2010, pp. 1–2). In 2010, North Korea attacked U.S. ally South Korea twice, which deteriorated the atmosphere for high-level talks (Nikitin *et al.*, 2017, p. 10): in March, North Korea attacked and sank South Korean Navy corvette *Cheonan*, which led to the death of more than forty sailors (Mizokami, 2018); in November the regime fired dozens of artillery shells at Yeonpyeong island (Marcus, 2010).

Nevertheless, the Obama administration’s goal was to persuade North Korea to return to Six-Party Talks; therefore, secret talks between Washington and Pyongyang were being held throughout 2011. After Kim Jong-Un became the leader of a country, the talks led to the „Leap Day Deal”: on February 29, 2012, the U.S. and North Korea made two separate announcements *apropos* North Korean nuclear programme (Nikitin *et al.*, 2017, p. 11). North Korea pledged to „implement a moratorium on long-range missile tests, nuclear tests, and nuclear activities at Yongbyon, including uranium enrichment activities”. Furthermore, the regime declared that IAEA inspectors’ return to North Korea, as well as verification and monitoring of uranium enrichment activities at Yongbyon, were to be allowed. The United States committed to holding a bilateral meeting with the DPRK in order to finalise an agreement on nutritional assistance. The program was supposed to initially consist of 240,000 metric tons of food aid, though there was a prospect of additional assistance, which depended on North Korean citizens’ needs. Additionally, the details of monitoring procedures (with regard to the delivery of the food aid) were to be discussed (U.S. Department of State, 2012a).

The agreement was reached, albeit, in March 2012, Pyongyang announced its intention to launch a satellite the following month. As ballistic missiles and space vehicle technology are similar in many areas, the U.S. perceived the launch as a way for Pyongyang to improve its capability to launch ballistic missiles (Crail, 2012). Subsequently, the spokesperson of the U.S. Department of State reacted promptly with the following statement: „the launch of this kind, which would abrogate our agreement, would call into question the credibility of all the commitments the DPRK has made for us, is making in general ...” The spokesperson added that if the satellite were to be launched, that would also call into question the monitoring

of food aid delivery (under the „Leap Day Deal”), meaning that the nutritional assistance might have eventually been delivered to the „regime elites”, instead of „needy folks” (U.S. Department of State, 2012b). The Korean Central News Agency responded straightforwardly: „the launch of the working satellite is an issue fundamentally different from that of a long-range missile”, and in mid-April, a three-stage Uhna-3 rocket was fired, but then failed and eventually exploded. Nonetheless, the Leap Day Deal was „killed” and halted nutritional assistance (Duyeon Kim, 2012).

During Obama’s second term, the U.S. was focused on imposing multilateral sanctions through UNSC resolutions; subsequently, the U.S. and North Korea were trapped in a „vicious cycle” of ballistic missile tests, as well as nuclear tests, and UN punitive sanctions (Kim Hyun, 2017, pp. 51-53). Jong Kun Choi strongly criticises the Administration’s approach to the North Korean nuclear programme and argues that the Obama administration believed in the inevitable collapse of the North Korean regime as a result of consistent sanctions; therefore, the policy with regard to Pyongyang was not responsive enough: „passive”, and not effective. In other words, the Administration was waiting for the regime to collapse instead of actively engaging in negotiations with North Korea, as well as developing the appropriate strategy (Jong Kun Choi, 2016, pp. 57–61). Bruce Cumings also observes that „the Obama administration was the first since the Cold War ended to pay little or no attention to nuclear-armed North Korea” and mentions that this approach was probably based on the words of Colin Powell: „you can’t eat plutonium. You can’t eat enriched uranium”. According to Cumings, the Obama administration decided not to help Pyongyang with food or economic assistance unless the regime ceased its nuclear activities (2020, p. 80). However, it is most likely that the Obama administration came to the same conclusion that Victor D. Cha did: the simplest explanation of North Korean behaviour (and the right one as well) is that the regime seeks to improve their nuclear weapons and delivery systems „and there is no substitute for learning that doing” (Cha, 2009, pp. 122–123).

### **Trump’s „maximum pressure”**

After Donald J. Trump became the President of the United States, he straightforwardly announced that „the era of strategic patience is over” (The White House, 2017). As the U.S. Secretary of Defense Mattis and Secretary of State Tillerson wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, the previous administration’s

approach was replaced with a new policy of „strategic accountability”. The Trump administration set the same goal as the Obama administration did: „the complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation” of North Korea by peaceful means, and announced that the United States did not seek to change the regime, to accelerate the reunification of Korea as well as to find an excuse to send its troops to North Korea (2017). Other components of the „strategic accountability” include „maximum pressure”, which entails imposing punitive economic sanctions on North Korea<sup>10</sup> that are meant to persuade the regime to return to the negotiation table, a strong alliance with Japan and South Korea, and encouraging China to use its influence over Pyongyang in order to change its behaviour. Finally, while exercising „maximum pressure”, Washington seeks engagement with Pyongyang, provided that North Korea refrains from provocations, which is to say nuclear and ballistic missiles tests (Kim Hyun, 2017, pp. 59–66). Kim Hyun mentions that „strategic patience” and „strategic accountability” are similar in some aspects while different in others, and Markus Liegl argues that the new policy builds on the Obama administration’s policy. He also mentions that the new administration’s approach is much more dangerous as „now all options are on the table for countering Pyongyang’s nuclear capabilities”; therefore, the crisis on the Korean Peninsula might escalate (2018, p. 370, 373). The situation seemed to escalate throughout 2017, when the „war of words” was fought between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, for example, when the U.S. President declared that North Korea would be met with „fire and fury” if it put the United States at risk (following the U.S. intelligence report, which confirmed Pyongyang’s achievements with regard to nuclear weapons miniaturisation) and, in response, North Korea threatened to hit Guam, an island where the American Air Force base is located (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.; BBC News, 2017; Baker & Choe Sang-Hun, 2017).

However, the 2018 Pyeochang Olympic Games, in which the North Korean delegation participated (while the event took place in South Korea), enabled the reduction of tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the „resurrection” of inter-Korean dialogue, and, most importantly, paved the road to the historic U.S. - DPRK summit (Snyder, 2018; Davenport 2018a). The self-imposed North Korean moratorium on nuclear and missile testing, which was announced in April 2018, as well as the dismantlement of Pyongyang’s (Punggye-ri) nuclear site in May 2018, might have

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<sup>10</sup> See: Heintz et al., 2019.

been perceived in Washington as the sign of a new North Korea's approach<sup>11</sup>.

The Singapore summit took place on June 12, 2018, and became an unprecedented event as Donald Trump became the first sitting U.S. President to meet the leader of North Korea. The meeting resulted in the Joint Statement, according to which North Korea reaffirmed its commitment „to work toward complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula” (The White House, 2018a). Bruce Cumings observed that North Korea's commitment was „vague”, and even though the regime did dismantle some missile and testing facilities after the summit, numerous missile sites remained undeclared by Pyongyang (2020, pp. 88–89). In exchange, however, President Trump temporarily suspended joint military exercises with South Korea – even adopting the Pyongyang term of „war games” (Davenport, 2018b) when announcing his decision: „We will be stopping the war games, which will save us a tremendous amount of money, unless and until we see the future negotiation is not going along like it should” (The White House, 2018b). Ultimately, Washington's concession was conditional: the military exercises were suspended, but, as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo mentioned: „good-faith negotiations” had to be held in exchange (U.S. Department of State, 2018). Finally, the United States and North Korea also pledged to „establish new U.S. - DPRK relations” and „join their efforts to build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula” (The White House, 2018a).

Before the second U.S.-DPRK summit took place, secret talks were held between North Korean and American diplomats. The U.S. dropped its „all-or-nothing approach” and replaced it with the goal to make a „limited first-stage deal”, meaning that Washington was ready to downsize its joint military exercises with South Korea, begin the „normalisation” of relations with Pyongyang by exchanging of liaison offices, and partially relax UNSC sanctions. Furthermore, Washington narrowed its short-term goal: all fissile material production facilities had to be verifiably suspended (Sigal, 2020, pp. 166–167). Nevertheless, the Hanoi Summit, which took place on February 27-28, 2019, ended abruptly and did not lead to an agreement. According to President Trump, the summit ended because North Korea demanded: „the sanctions lifted in their entirety”. He also added: „They [North Koreans] were willing to de-nuke a large portion of the areas that

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<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, experts observed that the nuclear site was unusable (BBC News, 2018a, 2018b), and the moratorium might have been imposed due to Pyongyang's desire to get temporary concessions from the United States and eventually end the moratorium like it did in 2006 (Panda, 2018).



we wanted, but we couldn't give up all of the sanctions for that (...) We had to walk away from that" (The White House, 2019), although North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho declared that North Korea only asked for „partial” lifting of sanctions (Davenport, 2019). Reportedly, during the course of negotiations, North Korean representatives did not make it clear whether all facilities at Yongbyon were to be included in the potential agreement (Sigal, 2020, p. 167), though when Kim Jong Un eventually agreed to include all the facilities, the U.S. delegation decided to leave – for, according to Donald Trump, Washington decided that what Pyongyang offered was not enough for a potential deal: „I felt that that particular... facility, while very big, it wasn't enough to do what we're doing” (Kyodo News, 2019).

Following the Hanoi summit „collapse” on March 3, 2019, the U.S. and South Korea announced that the joint military exercises known as Foal Eagle and Key Resolve were going to be replaced with smaller exercises in order to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula; subsequently, the downsized Deng Maeng exercise was to be held in the following days (Starr & Crawford, 2019; Panda, 2019). As a result, a new „vicious cycle” of joint U.S.-ROK military exercises and Pyongyang's ballistic missile tests began, as each side tried to enhance the „deterrence” against its adversary (Sigal, 2020, p. 168). Simultaneously, the North Korean regime decided to remind Washington about the above-mentioned self-imposed moratorium on nuclear as well as ICBM testing. While delivering a speech to the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK, in April 2019, Kim Jong Un highlighted that whereas North Korea „voluntarily” took this measure, the United States was „stirring up hostility to us day after day”. The North Korean leader mentioned that Washington was „resorting to all conceivable schemes in trying to prolong the economic sanctions, with the aim of preventing us from following the path of our own choice”. Most importantly, he stated that the demands of the United States (which had to be met in order to achieve North Korea's goal: the lifting of sanctions) „run counter to the fundamental interests of our State”. Kim Jong Un also highlighted that the joint U.S.-ROK military exercises were resumed contrary to President Trump's commitment, and, finally, stated that The United States had to adopt a „new way of calculation” with regard to Pyongyang, and the regime would only wait for this change of policy „till the end of this year” (Kim Jong Un, 2019). Ultimately, the leader of North Korea set a deadline for Washington by trying to use the self-imposed moratorium as

leverage in order to obtain concessions from the United States while still pursuing the nuclear programme.

The Hanoi „collapse” seemed to mark the fall of the engagement between the United States and North Korea. Even though the third meeting between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, which took place in June 2019 (following the exchange of letters between leaders), reportedly led to the resumption of working-level talks, the October 2019 talks, which were taking place in Stockholm, hit a roadblock (Sigal, 2020, pp. 172–174). According to DPRK’s top negotiator, the talks did not lead to any positive outcomes due to Washington’s „hackneyed position and attitude”. Ambassador Kim Myong Gil acknowledged that „the complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula is possible only when all obstacles threatening our security and undermining our development are removed wholly, and without room for doubt”, and mentioned sanctions and the U.S.-ROK joint military exercises (NK News, 2019), which proves that Pyongyang rejected to take any further steps towards denuclearisation unless it received a „reward” from Washington in response to self-imposed North Korea’s moratorium. It is worth mentioning that on December 31, 2019, Kim Jong Un hinted that the nuclear as well as ICBM tests, might be no longer suspended (Sigal, 2020, p. 179). What is more important, however, is the fact that North Korea’s nuclear capabilities are being constantly improved, and, reportedly, Pyongyang’s miniaturisation efforts came to fruition, as, according to the U.N. confidential report, it is believed that North Korea has “probably developed miniaturised nuclear devices to fit into the warheads of its ballistic missiles” (Albert, 2019; Klingner, 2020; Nichols 2020).

### **Conclusion**

To summarise, the mutual lack of trust between the United States of America and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea made any denuclearisation deal impossible, as Pyongyang desired to keep its nuclear arsenal at any price, for it is the regime’s ultimate deterrent. Washington, on the other hand, was eager to achieve its goal of complete denuclearisation, as every nuclear state tries to make sure that other states do not follow its path, but also due to the fact that North Korea is a threat for its allies in the region. Even though the North Korean nuclear programme does drive the security competition in the region and might „beget” even more proliferation, China does not allow anyone to exercise the real pressure on Pyongyang as it is concerned about the regime’s survival, for North Korea is its

buffer. Ultimately, in the dangerous anarchical world of security competition, the United States, North Korea, and China became the „prisoners of geopolitics” and are trapped together in the security dilemma, enabling North Korea to pursue its nuclear programme further. Simultaneously, the lack of trust between Washington and Pyongyang does not allow the countries even to make the so-called „first stage deal”, as none of the parties believe that the others will keep their promises. Finally, Washington’s failure to achieve North Korea’s denuclearisation through negotiations confirms the fundamental assumptions of offensive realism theory.

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