

# **North Korea: Shaping relations with the US through stronger bargaining possibilities**

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## **Abstract**

In the past few years, there has been an increasing recognition that the discipline of International Relations, when studying individual states, cannot confine its research to superpowers and great powers. Given that the majority of states can be defined as weak powers, their study is an essential part of the discipline. This piece contributes to the literature on Weak Power Foreign Policy Analysis by examining the case study of North Korea's foreign policy towards the United States during the George W. Bush Administration period. The paper suggests that, through an effective use of four key weak power bargaining tools, namely focus on a limited number of foreign policy goals, bandwagoning, the possibility of engaging in risky behaviour, and the use of international institutions to gather support for its position, North Korea has been able to adapt to changes in its regional environment and successfully bargain with the Bush Administration. This has allowed the Kim Jong Il regime to obtain one of its main foreign policy goals, the holding of bilateral normalization talks with the US.

Initially, this paper discusses why the study of weak powers is necessary and argues for the categorization of North Korea in this group. This is followed by a brief summary of the key points on the foreign policy of weak states that the author later examines in ensuing sections. Afterwards, the regional environment in which Pyongyang found itself after the “Axis of Evil” speech is described, with a depiction of relations between North Korea and China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea. Then, the paper describes the changes in this environment over the past few years, focusing on the improvement of relations between North Korea and China, Russia, and South Korea, the creation and progress of the Six-Party Talks, and the development of Pyongyang’s nuclear programme. The paper then explains how North Korea has used these changes to effectively bargain with the Bush Administration to achieve one of its main foreign policy goals, the holding of bilateral talks with the US, by strengthening its own position and weakening that of the US. The paper follows by discussing why North Korea has been able to successfully bargaining with Washington to realize its long-term goal of holding bilateral talks with the US. A short conclusion summarizes the findings of the paper.

## 1. North Korea as a weak power

Throughout the history of International Relations (IR) as an academic discipline, most mainstream applied research, when using states as case studies, has concentrated on what are known as superpowers and great powers. Throughout the Cold War, the United States (US) and the Soviet Union attracted most of the interest of IR scholars. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US, as the sole remaining superpower, has concentrated a large proportion of attention from IR scholars. Lately, China, an emerging superpower, and the EU, a could-be superpower, have also attracted significant attention. Great powers such as India, Japan and Russia are a main focus of IR scholars’ attention as well.

Even though arguably it makes sense to study superpowers and great powers, there is a growing recognition that weak powers are an essential part of the international system. Weak powers have normally been defined in relation to other actors, essentially middle and great powers, and in some cases also in contrast to micro-states.<sup>1</sup> One definition that encompasses most others is Väyrynen’s. He constructs a definition of weak powers based on three properties that most of them share. These are: (1) low rank, whether objective and/or perceived in its environment; (2) distinct behaviour to that shown by great and middle powers; (3) different interests to those of great powers. Therefore, Väyrynen argues that behaviour is not the only characteristic that defines weak powers, but rather it is subdued to their rank and role.<sup>2</sup>

This definition bodes well to determine North Korea’s status as a weak power.<sup>3</sup> On the first characteristic advanced by Väyrynen, low objective and/or perceived rank, North Korea’s economic woes have been well documented. If we compare North Korea’s poor economic performance with that of its neighbours, China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia, the situation is even direr. According to the World Bank, these four countries are regularly in the top fifteen of any list of countries by Gross Domestic Product.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile North Korea has been incapable of feeding its own population for over ten years now, and depends on foreign aid to maintain its economy running.

Some could argue that North Korea is nevertheless a strong military power. Certainly, possession of nuclear capabilities, a vast conventional and non-conventional weapons arsenal, and one of the largest standing armies in the world, confer North Korea impressive military strength. In fact, these

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Barston, R P, *Introduction*, in Barston, R P (ed), *The other powers: Studies in the foreign policies of small states* (George Allen & Unwind, London, 1973); Handel, M I, *Weak states in the international system* (Frank Cass, London, 1990); Mathisen, T, *The functions of small states in the strategies of the great powers* (Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 1971); Neumann, I B and Gstohl, S, *Introduction*, in Ingebritsen, C et al. (eds.), *Small states in international relations* (University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Väyrynen, R, *On the definition and measurement of small power status*, in *Cooperation and conflict: Nordic journal of international politics* 6:2, 1971, p. 91-102.

<sup>3</sup> North Korea’s official name is the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). However, the term North Korea will be used throughout this paper.

<sup>4</sup> World Bank, *Total GDP 2006*, accessed at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GDP.pdf> on July 25, 2007.

capabilities would probably make North Korea the strongest state in military terms in almost any region of the world. However, that is not the case in Northeast Asia.

This region is home to two nuclear powers, China and Russia, and two states with the capacity to develop nuclear weapons in a short period of time, Japan and South Korea. All these four countries also possess impressive conventional and non-conventional weapons capabilities, and have standing armies that rank them in the top six in the list of countries by size of armed forces. In fact, the four countries are in the top eleven in the list of countries by total annual military expenditure. South Korea, which ranks lower than the other three in this list, more than quadruples North Korea's military expenditure. If we take into account that the greatest existing military power, the US, has its troops stationed in Japan and South Korea, plus a US Navy base in Japan, it is clear that North Korea's military capabilities are relatively weak. In fact, no serious analyst believes that North Korea has the potential, or even the desire, to attack South Korea, as it did in 1950.<sup>5</sup>

As for the second characteristic in Väyrynen's definition, a distinct behaviour to that displayed by great and middle powers, North Korea has indeed not followed the path of increasing economic integration of its Northeast Asian neighbours. Even though attempts to open up its economy and attract foreign investment are going on, these have not been as strong as those of China, Japan, South Korea, or Russia's Far East. Furthermore, North Korea has not participated in regional initiatives encompassing East Asian countries, such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) or ASEAN Plus Three, with the enthusiasm shown by its neighbours.

Finally, with regards to the third characteristic established by Väyrynen, differing interests from those of great powers, North Korea has undoubtedly deviated from the goal of China and Japan, the great powers in Northeast Asian affairs. Even though a group of students in the region argue that China and Japan are engaged in a competition to dominate Northeast Asian, East Asian or even Asian affairs, undoubtedly these two countries seek peace and stability in Northeast Asia, with the goal of achieving maximum prosperity. However, North Korea's main interest seems to be primarily the survival of the current leadership, even if it brings instability to the region.

## 2. The foreign policy of weak powers

Several authors have strived to identify how weak powers are able to bargain with great powers. Starting with Baker Fox's pioneering study of weak powers' behaviour, most scholars agree that one of the main reasons that confers weak powers significant bargaining strength when dealing with great powers is their focus on defending a limited number of issues.<sup>6</sup> Weak power foreign policy does not concentrate on systemic goals, but rather on regional issues, thus allowing weak powers to focus bargaining efforts on a limited agenda.<sup>7</sup>

A second element that strengthens weak powers' bargaining position when dealing with great powers is the possibility of bandwagoning to obtain the support of another great power. This is especially true if the weak power has strategic consideration for one or more great powers, whether because of its geographical location, its resources, or some other aspect. In these cases, the great power will be committed to the defence of the weak powers against another great power.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2007* (Routledge, Abingdon, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Baker Fox, A, *The power of small states* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1959); Habeeb, W M, *Power and tactics in international negotiation: How weak nations bargain with strong nations* (The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1988); Lindel, U and Persson, S, *The paradox of weak state power: A research and literature overview*, *Cooperation and conflict: Nordic Journal of International Politics* 21:2, 1986, p. 79-97; Vital, D, *The survival of small states: Studies in small power/great power conflict* (Oxford University Press, London, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> Hey, J A K, *Refining our understanding of small state foreign policy*, in Hey, J A K, *Small states in world politics* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 2003), p. 194; Papadakis, M and Starr, H, *Opportunity, willingness, and small states: The relationship between environment and foreign policy*, in Herman, C F, Kegley Jr., C W, and Rosenau, J N (eds.), *New directions in the study of foreign policy* (Allen & Unwin, Boston, 1987), p. 428-429.

<sup>8</sup> Barston, p. 22-24; Jensen, L, *Explaining foreign policy* (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1982), p. 228-229; Vital, p. 123-129.

A third bargaining tool used by weak powers when confronting great powers is the possibility of engaging in riskier behaviour than a great power can display. Since a weak power has much less to lose from a possible confrontation than a great power, its leaders can pursue venues that great powers' leaders may consider inappropriate or bound to fail. Also, because of its position in the system, a great power might not be able to display certain behaviour that could be considered threatening by other great powers, a problem not faced by weak powers.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Papadakis and Starr disagree on this point. They consider that weak powers avert behaviour that might alienate great powers because of threat of military confrontation.<sup>10</sup>

A fourth and final bargaining possibility open for weak powers is the use of international institutions to serve their purposes. Weak powers' actions tend to focus on getting the attention of institutions, with the aim of gathering international support for its goals, even though this support may only be in word.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Lindell and Persson concluded that, whenever strong international institutions exist, weak power bargaining muscle is strengthened.<sup>12</sup>

Summing up, research shows that weak powers have four main bargaining tools when dealing with great powers. These are a focus on a limited number of foreign policy goals, bandwagoning options, the possibility of engaging in risky behaviour, and the use of international institutions to gather support for foreign policy goals. This paper will use Weak Power theory findings to analyse how North Korea has been able to successfully bargain with the Bush Administration to effectively satisfy one of its main foreign policy goals: the holding of bilateral normalization talks with the US. The author considers that, because Weak Power theory was developed and tested mainly during the bipolar system characteristic of the Cold War era, it is necessary to establish whether it also applies to the current unipolar system.

Once briefly described the main characteristics of weak powers and their foreign policy, and after having argued for North Korea's inclusion in this group, the following section will describe North Korea's regional environment from the end of the Cold War and until the early years of the Twenty-first century.

### **3. North Korea's regional environment before the outbreak of the Second nuclear crisis**

In the last few months of President Bill Clinton's Presidency, relations between North Korea and the US were rapidly improving. Perhaps no event signals this better than then-US Secretary of State's Madeleine Albright's visit to Pyongyang, which included a meeting with North Korea's Chairman, Kim Jong Il. After the meeting, there were talks of a possible summit between President Clinton and Chairman Kim, but a decision against such a move was taken because George W. Bush had already been elected as the new American President.<sup>13</sup>

Once the Bush Administration was officially inaugurated, the situation changed dramatically. Not only did the Bush Administration refused to follow the path opened by the previous Administration, but on January 22, 2002, President Bush included North Korea in the now-famous "Axis of Evil". North Korea was therefore considered by the Bush Administration as part of a triumvirate of states sponsors of terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction, along with Iran and Iraq.<sup>14</sup> This way, the door opened by the Clinton Administration was closed, and North Korea was publicly ostracized by the US.

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<sup>9</sup> Jensen, p. 228-229.

<sup>10</sup> Papadakis, M and Starr, H, *Opportunity, willingness, and small states: The relationship between environment and foreign policy*, in Herman, C F, Kegley Jr., C W, and Rosenau, J N (eds.), New directions in the study of foreign policy (Allen & Unwin, Boston, 1987), p. 428-429.

<sup>11</sup> Barston, p. 22-24; East, M E, *Size and foreign policy behavior: A test of two models*, World Politics 25:4, 1973, p. 556-576; Hey, p. 193-194.

<sup>12</sup> Lindel and Persson, p. 79-97.

<sup>13</sup> Kim, S S, The two Koreas and the great powers (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006), p. 249-253; Lee, C-J, A troubled peace: U.S. policy and the two Koreas (The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2006), ch. 5 and 6.

<sup>14</sup> Bush G W, *State of the Union Address 2002*, accessed at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html> on July 30, 2007.

After the first year of his presidency, in which relations with North Korea had been almost halted, President Bush publicly stated his personal dislike of the Kim Jong Il-led North Korea.<sup>15</sup> Then-Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James A. Kelly's visit to Pyongyang in October 2002 further deteriorated relations between both countries after North Korean officials allegedly admitted the existence of an uranium enrichment programme, in breach of the October 1994 Agreed Framework between the United States of America and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.<sup>16</sup> The Agreed Framework had promised North Korea energy-producing light water reactor plans in exchange for North Korea's closing of all its nuclear weapons facilities.<sup>17</sup>

Kelly's visit was followed by a quick succession of escalating hostilities. The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), in charge of developing the aforementioned light water reactors, halted oil shipments to North Korea in November and suspended work one month later. Meanwhile, North Korea expelled International Atomic Energy Agency officials in December 2002, announced withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in January 2003, resumed the reprocessing of extracting plutonium from spent fuel for military purposes, and effectively quit the NPT in April. Relations between North Korea and the US were broken, and, perhaps more worryingly for North Korea, the Kim Jong Il regime was seen as a non-reliable partner that had breached previous commitments.<sup>18</sup> At this point, North Korea's long-term goal of holding bilateral normalization talks with the US seemed further away than at any point since the first North Korean nuclear crisis of 1993-94.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, even though relations with the US probably could not be any direr, North Korea's relations with other Northeast Asian powers had improved when compared to the situation in the 1990s, hence preventing Pyongyang's complete isolation. Relations between China and North Korea had suffered a setback when China and South Korea established relations in 1992. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, China had emerged as North Korea's lone strong ally, and North Korean leaders saw the establishment of relations with Pyongyang's antagonist as a betrayal. In addition, trade, energy transfers and economic aid from China made North Korea dependent on its neighbour to continue running its malfunctioning economy, but this dependence was resented by the Kim Jong Il regime.<sup>20</sup>

The situation started to change in the late 1990s, as China's international policy increasingly sought a peaceful regional environment in which to sustain its impressive economic growth. In the case of Beijing's foreign policy towards the Korean Peninsula, this policy translated on two points: closer links to South Korea to prevent Seoul from leaning towards the US, and the stabilization of North Korea's economy, as a first step towards future economic reform. The later point purported to avoid the sudden collapse of North Korea and the subsequent flow of refugees and political instability that would follow. Therefore, when the crisis between North Korea and the US exploded, Beijing's criticism towards Pyongyang was mild at best, and economic transfers did not suffer any significant slowdown.

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<sup>15</sup> The Guardian, December 20, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> There are two contradicting versions on the content of the meeting between then-Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kelly and North Korean officials. According to Kelly, North Koreans explicitly recognized the existence of a uranium enrichment programme. According to North Korean officials, they merely stated their right as a sovereign state to have such a programme (Interview with the British Charge d'Affaires, Pyongyang 2001-2002, London, June 13, 2007, 2pm).

<sup>17</sup> The text of the Agreed Framework between the United States of America and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea can be found at <http://www.kedo.org/pdfs/AgreedFramework.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Kim, p. 256-261; Lee, p. 223-226.

<sup>19</sup> Academics and practitioners alike argue that one of North Korea's long-term main foreign policy goals is normalization of relations with the US, which can only be achieved through bilateral talks between Pyongyang and Washington. Normalization of relations with the US would provide North Korea with regime security and access to funds from international organizations. For a discussion of this goal from an academic point of view see, for example, Kim, p. 242-255. From a practitioner's point of view, a good example can be found on Quinones, C K, *The U.S.-DPRK quest for normal relations in a changing Northeast Asia*, in *Korea Policy Review* 3:5, 2007, p. 38-41.

<sup>20</sup> Chung, J H, *Korea and China in Northeast Asia: From stable bifurcation to complicated interdependence*, in Armstrong, C K et al. (eds.), *Korea at the center: Dynamics of regionalism in Northeast Asia* (M. E. Sharpe, Armonk, 2006), p. 2006-210; Kim, p. 52-63.

Furthermore, shortly after North Korea announced its intention of withdrawing from the NPT, China increased its diplomatic efforts to facilitate a rapprochement between Pyongyang and Washington.<sup>21</sup>

Relations between North Korea and Japan were almost non-existent throughout the 1990s. Several rounds of bilateral talks in 1991 and 1992 failed to produce any agreement because of big differences on which issues to tackle and how to deal with them. Therefore, in subsequent years the only relation between both countries came from the provision of funds from Japan to KEDO, as well as from economic and food aid from Tokyo to Pyongyang. North Korea's launch of a Taepodong-1 missile over Japan in August 1998 further distanced both countries, and turned the Japanese public hostile towards Pyongyang's regime. Only American and South Korean pressure prevented Japan from halting all economic support to North Korea, but the test allowed Tokyo to justify an increase in nationalism.<sup>22</sup>

The inauguration of Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's government in 2001 changed the situation. The Japanese sinking of a North Korean spy ship in December 2001 did not prevent relations between Pyongyang and Tokyo from significantly improving in 2002. In fact, September 2002 witnessed the first ever summit between both countries, with Koizumi visiting Pyongyang to meet with Kim Jong Il. Both countries softened their demands, North Korea by asking for economic *assistance* instead of economic reparations for Japanese colonial past, and Japan by accepting North Korea's apologies for the abduction of Japanese nationals in the 1970s and 1980s. However, relations immediately derailed as soon as the Japanese public opinion refused to accept North Korea's apology and demanded a stronger stance from its government. Relations completely broke in late 2002, and by the time the North Korean nuclear issue exploded, Tokyo had neither little incentive nor much pressure to get involved in its resolution. Not surprisingly, Japan joined the US in its criticism of the North Korean position.<sup>23</sup>

North Korean-Russian relations froze abruptly when the Soviet Union and South Korea normalized diplomatic relations in September 1990. North Korea denounced normalization as treason, while the Soviet Union, and later Russia, sought to distance themselves from North Korea and other former Communist allies. As a result, Russia announced in 1992 that it would not renew the 1961 Treaty of Mutual Defence and Cooperation with North Korea, which was due to expire in 1996. However, following the first North Korea-US crisis of 1993, Russia found itself sidelined from any project to solve the conflict. As it had drifted very far away from North Korea, Russia had lost any significant role in the Korean Peninsula, a situation that then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin tried to reverse in the late 1990s.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, it was the inauguration of Vladimir Putin's Presidency in Russia that quickly led to renormalization of North Korean-Russian relations. In February 2000, within months of Putin's investiture, both countries signed a Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation. Three months later, Putin became the first foreign leader to visit Pyongyang to meet with Kim Jong Il, a visit reciprocated by Kim in August 2001. North Korea and Russia also drew closer thanks to the growing distance between Moscow and Washington on different issues, including the inclusion of North Korea in the "Axis of Evil". As a result, when North Korea announced that it would withdraw from the NPT, Pyongyang and Moscow were closer than at any point since the end of the Cold War, and the latter was eager not to be excluded from the resolution of any crisis in the Korean Peninsula.<sup>25</sup>

In the case of inter-Korean relations, the situation throughout most of the 1990s did not change significantly compared to previous decades: contacts were almost non-existent and in any case were low key. However, the situation shifted dramatically in 1998, after the election of Kim Dae Jung as

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<sup>21</sup> Chung, p. 210-213; Kim, p. 63-73.

<sup>22</sup> Akaha, T *Japan's multilevel approach towards the Korean Peninsula after the Cold War*, in Armstrong, C K et al. (eds.), *Korea at the center: Dynamics of regionalism in Northeast Asia* (M. E. Sharpe, Armonk, 2006), p. 188-191; Kim, p. 174-181.

<sup>23</sup> Akaha, p. 192-195; Kim, p. 182-186.

<sup>24</sup> Bazhanov, E V, *Korea in Russia's Post-Cold War Regional Political Context*, in Armstrong, C K et al. (eds.), *Korea at the center: Dynamics of regionalism in Northeast Asia* (M. E. Sharpe, Armonk, 2006), p. 218-221; Kim, p. 123-126.

<sup>25</sup> Bazhanov, p. 221-226; Kim, p. 127-134.

South Korean president. Kim, a long-term opposition leader, immediately launched the so-called Sunshine Policy, with the goal of peaceful cooperation between both Koreas as a first step towards eventual reunification. Following the historic June 2000 summit between the leaders of both Koreas, cooperation in the economic, diplomatic, and cultural fields expanded rapidly. However, given South Korea's vast economic superiority over its northern neighbour, economic relations between both Koreas resembled aid from Seoul to Pyongyang instead of actual cooperation.<sup>26</sup>

The Sunshine Policy continued with little changes after the inauguration of South Korea's President Roh Moo-hyun in February 2003. In fact, President Roh had reached power on an overtly anti-American platform. Even though Roh swiftly moderated its anti-American stance once in power, he nevertheless maintained the principles of the Sunshine Policy, disdained by the Bush Administration. Hence, when relations between North Korea and the US rapidly deteriorated in late 2002 and early 2003, South Korea was ambiguous in its support for one or the other party. Most notably, Seoul refrained from openly condemning Pyongyang, which would have been unthinkable before 1998. However, despite the deterioration of relations with the US because of their diverging approach to the North Korean issue, South Korea tried to act as a mediator between Pyongyang and Washington.<sup>27</sup>

In brief, when the so-called Second North Korean nuclear crisis commenced, North Korea was not completely isolated. In spite of an overtly hostile position from the Bush Administration, China, Russia, and South Korea did not immediately sidelined with the US and criticized North Korea, but rather tried to find a middle position, especially in the case of China and South Korea. Japan was the only country that clearly sidelined with the US in its criticism of North Korea, therefore reinforcing its long-term alliance with Washington. Nevertheless, the non-unfavourable regional environment was not enough for North Korea to continue the rapprochement process initiated in the later stages of the Clinton Presidency, as the first Bush Administration was clearly determined to antagonize the North Korean regime.

The next section will determine the changes that have taken place in Northeast Asia in relation to the North Korean nuclear crisis. These changes will be explained in detail, before another section describes how they were used by North Korea to reverse the policy of the Bush Administration.

#### **4. Changing environment and use by North Korea to successfully bargain with the US**

As we have seen, once North Korea made effective its withdrawal from the NPT, China, Russia, and South Korea took a middle position in the North Korea-US confrontation, while Japan sidelined with the US. Even though at first it seemed that North Korea would not be able to strive towards the foreign policy goal of holding bilateral talks with the US until the end of the Bush Administration, these talks have in fact taken place. Despite staunch opposition from the Administration's most hawkish officials, a first round of open-agenda talks took place in March 2007, while a second round is scheduled for September. The author contends that North Korea has achieved this goal by successfully using its bargaining tools, which have been three primarily: (1) An improvement of relations with China, Russia, and South Korea; (2) an effective use of the Six-Party Talks; and (3) the successful development of a nuclear programme.

With regards to the first point, an improvement of relations with China, Russia, and South Korea, the process described in the previous section has continued throughout the second nuclear crisis. Notwithstanding the increasing level of interaction between China and South Korea, especially in the economic sector, Beijing has repeatedly reassured Pyongyang that its economic support will continue, while military relations are still formally in place. With regards to the first issue, China has not abandoned the Cold War-era support system. Beijing also continues to be North Korea's main trading

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<sup>26</sup> Rozman, G, *Regionalism in Northeast Asia: Korea's return to center stage*, in Armstrong, C K et al. (eds.), *Korea at the center: Dynamics of regionalism in Northeast Asia* (M. E. Sharpe, Armonk, 2006), p. 153-159; Snyder, S, *Inter-Korean relations: A South Korean Perspective*, in Kim, S S (ed.), *Inter-Korean relations: Problems and prospects* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004), p. 23-28.

<sup>27</sup> Rozman, p. 159-164; Snyder, p. 28-34.

partner, with an increase in trade from US\$554 million in 1995 to US\$1.6 billion in 2005.<sup>28</sup> It is acknowledged that without this economic support, North Korea would simply collapse. On the military aspect, the 1961 PRC-DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance is still in place. Even though Beijing has made clear that it will not support North Korea if Pyongyang launches an attack, the treaty is still a guarantee that China will defend North Korea if the latter suffers an aggression. Finally, Beijing has zealously defended North Korea's actions in the UN Security Council, of which China is a permanent member with veto power.<sup>29</sup> And the only time that Beijing allowed a resolution sanctioning North Korean actions to pass, following the October 2006 nuclear test, it immediately announced that it would not enforce the sanctions.<sup>30</sup>

As explained in the previous section, Russo-North Korean relations improved swiftly following President Putin's access to power. In the years since the second nuclear crisis exploded, the improvement in relations has continued unabated. Security relations between North Korea and Russia do not suffer from serious problems. Russia has supported North Korea's right to a self-defence military programme. Even though some Russian military officials have expressed limited concern about North Korea's nuclear programme, Moscow believes that it is not a real threat. Kim Jong Il has made visits to the Russian Far East to see economic programmes undertaken by Moscow in the region, and trade between the two countries has more than tripled since the low point of the mid-1990s, growing from US\$65 million in 1996 to US\$210 million in 2004.<sup>31</sup> Finally, both countries have publicly opposed the US-led intervention in Iraq and, more generally, what they see as American unilateralism and expansionism. Perhaps more importantly for Pyongyang, Russia, another permanent member of the UN Security Council, hence with veto power, has aligned itself with China in blocking all attempts to impose severe sanctions on North Korea.<sup>32</sup> And just as Beijing did, Moscow promptly made clear that it would not support the sanctions imposed following October 2006's nuclear test.<sup>33</sup>

With reference to inter-Korean relations, it is true that they have never reached the momentous point of the June 2000 summit, even though the planned October 2007 summit between President Roh and Chairman Kim could signal a new high point in inter-Korean relations. Nevertheless, arguably relations have never been so relaxed on the security front. The opening of road and rail links between both Koreas shows that neither country seriously fears an invasion from the other. In addition, military clashes with casualties have not taken place for over five years as of August 2007. Perhaps, economic relations have seen the biggest surge over the past few years. Two joint projects stand out: the Kaesong Industrial Park, a South Korea-managed production park located in North Korea and in which North Korean labour produces goods for South Korean companies, and the Kumgangsang Tourist Region, a South Korea-managed tourist resort in the North Korean mountain of Kumgang. Thanks to these and other projects, by 2006 inter-Korean trade had increased 80-fold since it was legalized in 1989.<sup>34</sup> On the diplomatic field, North and South Korean officials hold regular meetings on different joint working groups dealing from economic to security issues. In addition, South Korea has repeatedly tried to moderate American reactions to North Korean provocations, while Seoul's own response to these actions has been mild for years.<sup>35</sup>

As we see, by March 2007, when a first round of open-agenda bilateral talks between North Korea and the US took place in New York, relations between North Korea and China, Russia, and South Korea were warm. This is not to suggest that Beijing, Moscow, and Seoul do not have their own agendas or more profound interests with regards to North Korea. Rather, it shows that, far from being shunned

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<sup>28</sup> Aden, N, *North Korean Trade with China as Reported in Chinese Customs Statistics: Recent Energy Trends and Implications*, accessed at <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/0679Aden.pdf> on July 25, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Kim, p. 63-89.

<sup>30</sup> New York Times, October 16, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Kim, p. 139.

<sup>32</sup> Kim, p. 127-156.

<sup>33</sup> New York Times, October 16, 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Unification, *Updated statistics on inter-Korean trade (as of the end of December, 2005)*, accessed at [http://www.unikorea.go.kr/en/ENK/ENK0301R.jsp?brd\\_cd=eng0302&main\\_uid=89](http://www.unikorea.go.kr/en/ENK/ENK0301R.jsp?brd_cd=eng0302&main_uid=89) on July 30, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Flake, L G, *Sunshine or Moonshine?: Inter-Korean Relations and their Impact upon the U.S.-DPRK Conundrum*, in Niksch, L A et al., *Implementing the Six-Party joint statement and the Korean Peninsula* (Korea Institute for National Unification, Seoul, 2005), p. 82-84.

because of its provocative behaviour, North Korea has reliable allies that do not hesitate to confront Washington on its policy towards the Kim Jong Il regime. This has been understood by the latter, and has given Pyongyang enough confidence to defend its position. Concurrently, Washington has realized that North Korea will not collapse, if only because of the support of China, Russia, and South Korea. This has forced the Bush Administration to balance its own interests with those of the other countries in the region, and finally to accept that negotiation with North Korea is probably the best solution.

With regards to the second point, an effective use of the Six-Party Talks, this institution was created following North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT. At first, North Korea sought bilateral talks with the US to solve the second nuclear crisis. However, the US opposed to this and instead supported the multilateral institution designed by China to deal with the crisis, believing that multilateral talks would put pressure on North Korea to relinquish its nuclear programme. The first three rounds of talks, from August 2003 to June 2004, produced almost no advances in the resolution of the crisis. However, throughout these three rounds it became clear that China, Russia, and South Korea were leaning towards North Korea's action-for-action solution, in contrast to the American demand that Pyongyang denuclearized before receiving anything in return.<sup>36</sup>

After a break due to the US General elections of November 2004, the Six-Party Talks reconvened in July 2005, not before North Korea had raised the stakes by claiming in February 2005 the manufacture of nuclear weapons. During the second phase of the fourth round of talks, in September 2005, there was a turning point. Beijing exhorted Washington to either support a South Korea-crafted agreement or be held publicly responsible for the break-up of the talks. Sensing President Bush's falling popularity due to the conflict in Iraq, the standoff with Iran, and domestic problems, Beijing was successful in forcing Washington to support an agreement that established a step-by-step process with broader goals than the "mere" denuclearization of North Korea, a process originally demanded by Pyongyang.<sup>37</sup> Even though the September 2005 agreement was not implemented because of differences between North Korea and the US, it was the foundation for the February 2007 agreement that, at the time of writing, has proved much more successful and has led to the holding of bilateral talks between Pyongyang and Washington.<sup>38</sup>

Thanks to Kim Jong Il regime's willingness to accept an agreement that did not completely satisfied its goals, but that included the all-important promise of establishing a diplomatic normalization process with the US, Pyongyang was able to strengthen its bargaining position with the US. The Six-Party Talks have served as a forum in which the different participants have been able to openly discuss their positions. In this context, North Korea has shown more flexibility than the US. China, willing to claim a diplomatic success that could further reinforce its credentials as a rising superpower, has not hesitated to press Pyongyang when the Kim Jong Il regime has seemed reluctant to commit to the talks, but has also made clear to the US that its confrontational position was unacceptable and only had the support of Japan. Pyongyang, having found a receptive environment in the Six-Party Talks, has finally understood that these were a necessary step before establishing bilateral talks with the US, and has played the role of the ready-to-compromise participant when necessary. Meanwhile, the Bush Administration has discovered a hostile environment in the Talks, being forced to accept an agreement in which several important concessions have been made.

With regards to the third point, the successful development of a nuclear programme, proceedings started in the 1970s or 1980s with Soviet support. The programme became an issue with the first nuclear crisis, solved in October 1994 after North Korea and the US signed the Agreed Framework. However, a second nuclear crisis began when North Korea withdrew from the NPT in April 2003, after Pyongyang had supposedly admitted to a visiting US delegation that it had a uranium enrichment programme. At first, the development of a nuclear programme was the main strain in North Korean-US relations: Washington refused to negotiate with Pyongyang until the Kim Jong Il regime dismantled its nuclear arsenal, while the latter rejected the idea of giving up its nuclear programme without obtaining

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<sup>36</sup> Lee, p. 238-256; Park, J S, *Inside multilateralism: The Six-Party Talks*, in The Washington Quarterly 28:4, 2005, p. 75-91.

<sup>37</sup> Kim, p. 262-267.

<sup>38</sup> As explained before, the February 2007 agreement produced a first round of bilateral normalization talks that took place in New York in March 2007. A second round is scheduled for September.

significant concessions in return.<sup>39</sup> Hence, given the US commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, it seemed that Pyongyang's actions were undermining the achievement of its foreign policy goals.

However, as time passed it became clear that Washington was powerless to successfully punish North Korea for its nuclear brinkmanship. As a result, North Korea became more assertive with regards to its nuclear programme. In September 2004, Pyongyang announced the manufacture of nuclear weapons for self-defence, a claim repeated in February 2005. The US was not only unable to punish North Korea for its nuclear adventure, but even accepted the above-mentioned September 2005 agreement. After the agreement was not fulfilled by any party, North Korea announced in December 2005 the resumption of the building of nuclear reactors. Then, during the first six months of 2006, North Korea test-fired short- and long-range missiles potentially capable of carrying nuclear weapons. Despite condemnation from the US, no significant sanctions were executed.<sup>40</sup> Finally, in October 2006 North Korea first announced and then conducted its first-ever nuclear weapon test. This was followed by a largely symbolic resolution passed by the UN imposing sanctions. However, and most importantly for North Korea, the nuclear test seemed to tilt the balance within the Bush Administration towards the officials who support talks with Pyongyang, given the failure of the hawkish approach used until then.<sup>41</sup>

Pyongyang has found in its nuclear programme an excellent bargaining tool. Few experts, if any, believe that North Korea was actually preparing a nuclear arsenal for belligerent, or even defensive, purposes. Instead, it is widely accepted that North Korea was ready to give up its nuclear programme in exchange for a series of concessions by the US, most notably the establishment of bilateral talks leading to future normalization of relations. In fact, North Korea has frequently stated its readiness to renounce to its nuclear programme if the US made some compromises.<sup>42</sup> In spite of the opposition by Bush Administration's most hawkish officials to such an agreement, the failure of their policy of contention, most clearly seen with the nuclear test of October 2006, gave voice to the more diplomatic officials, led by Christopher Hill, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs since August 2005. Pyongyang has understood that the development of a nuclear programme would go unpunished, and would be a powerful deterrent against an Iraq-style American intervention, apparently a real fear of the Kim Jong Il regime. In the end, Pyongyang's belief that the US would eventually negotiate instead of having a nuclear-armed North Korea has proved true.

As explained, the changing environment in Northeast Asia following the advent of the second nuclear crisis has been used by North Korea to reinforce its bargaining position with the US. Before the crisis, North Korea had an improving relation with China, Russia, and South Korea, no institution in which to regularly interact with other actors in the region, and no nuclear programme. During the crisis, relations with China, Russia, and South Korea improved further, the Six-Party Talks served as a forum in which each party could clarify its position, and North Korea developed a nuclear programme. These three factors weakened the position of the US, making the Bush Administration more willing to find a negotiated solution to the crisis. Meanwhile, North Korea understood the benefits of being flexible so that the goal of holding bilateral normalization talks with the US could be achieved, even though other foreign policy goals could not be obtained immediately.

This section has examined North Korea's use of different bargaining tools to successfully bargain with the US. The next section of this paper connects the case study of North Korea's foreign policy during the Bush Administration with Weak Power theory.

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<sup>39</sup> Lee, p. 223-238.

<sup>40</sup> Reiss, M B, *A nuclear-armed North Korea: Accepting the 'unacceptable'?*, in *Survival* 48:4, 2006-07, p. 97-110.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with a US State Department official, London, June 6, 2007, 3pm. This possibility has also been suggested, among others, by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, see Albright, M, *Dealing with the Axis of Evil*, in *New Perspectives Quarterly* 24:2, 2007, p. 24-27. It has also been discussed in the media; see, for example, New York Times, December 12, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with the British Charge d'Affaires, Pyongyang 2001-2002, London, June 13, 2007, 2pm; talk by Ambassador Song Ryol Han, former representative of North Korea to the UN Mission, *North Korea Foreign Relations*, at Chatam House, July 4, 2007, 14.30pm.

## 5. Weak Power theory: The case of North Korea

As explained in the first section of this paper, Weak Power theorists agree that weak powers can successfully bargain with great powers mainly because of four characteristics: the focus on a relatively small number of issues, the use of bandwagoning, the possibility of engaging in riskier behaviour than great powers, and the use of international institutions. The author contends that North Korea has been able to use these four features to successfully bargain with the US to achieve one of its main foreign policy goals, the holding of bilateral talks between both countries.

First, there can be little doubt that the US' status as the sole superpower means that, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, its diplomatic and military resources have been overstretched. From the wars in the former Yugoslavia to conflicts in Africa and the Middle East, it is expected that the US will be involved in the resolution of almost every issue. Obviously, American resources are not unlimited, and at some point successive Administrations have had to choose where to concentrate them. In the case of the Bush Administration, the focus has been on the Middle East, as shown with the wars in Afghanistan and Iran, the Road map for peace between Israelis and Palestinians initiative, or the dispute with Iran over Tehran's nuclear programme. Certainly, this has distracted resources from the North Korean issue, and in fact some experts have argued that the second Bush Administration is speeding the resolution of the North Korean problem as a way of not having its attention diverted from the Middle East.

On the opposite, North Korea's attention since President Bush was inaugurated has focused mainly on improving relations with the US. Given that, in spite of the poverty of most of the North Korean population, an internal threat to power is almost non-existent, and that relations with China, Russia, and South Korea have improved to a great extent because of the fear of these countries over a possible collapse of the Kim regime and the chaos that could follow, Pyongyang has been able to focus its attention on the goal of holding bilateral relations with the US. The survival of the Kim Jong Il regime, an important goal of its leadership, has not been in doubt once the famines of the mid-1990s were over. Meanwhile, reunification with South Korea, also a central goal of Pyongyang, remains a long-term dream, especially after Seoul saw the problems derived from German unification. Therefore, improvement of relations with the US has remained as the only important North Korean goal, and Pyongyang has concentrated its diplomatic efforts on having face-to-face contacts with the US whenever possible.

Second, North Korea has bandwagoned towards China throughout the Bush Administration period. Even though China distanced itself from North Korea during the 1990s, its growth as an economic giant and desire to create a peaceful environment in which to maintain this growth means that Chinese leaders have tried to contain North Korea's periodic military provocations. At the same time, China has acted as a mediator between North Korea and the US, conveying Pyongyang's position to Washington, containing the Bush Administration's calls to punish North Korea for its aggressive actions, and, perhaps most importantly, being the main force behind the Six-Party Talks. In short, China, a rising superpower that already has this status in Northeast Asia, has made a constant effort to improve the environment in Northeast Asia with regards to the North Korean issue.

China's urge to create a stable regional environment and to avoid the collapse of North Korea has been employed by the latter to bandwagon towards Beijing and therefore has strengthened its stance towards the US. Hence, Pyongyang has been able to oppose the Bush Administration's efforts to weaken its position in the international system. Pyongyang has not suffered greatly from the US' economic sanctions, thanks to Chinese, and also South Korean, support. In addition, it has not become an international pariah left destitute by the UN, because of China's use of its veto power to paralyse any significant sanction. Moreover, North Korea has found in China a channel to transmit its words to the US. In spite of some divergences, the Sino-North Korean relationship has remained solid throughout the past years. Hence, it can be argued that Pyongyang's skilful use of bandwagoning has allowed the Kim regime to avoid isolation or a direct confrontation with the US, while containing the position of Bush Administration's most hawkish elements.

Third, North Korea has been able to engage in riskier behaviour than the Bush Administration can afford to display. Because of the US' position as a superpower, Washington has to carefully balance a set of interests that go far beyond North Korea or even Northeast Asia. Hence, in the specific case of this region, the US has to act cautiously to prevent behaviour that could be considered belligerent by China or Russia. Moreover, the US has to take into account its two long-term allies in the region, Japan and South Korea. Therefore, the Bush Administration has had to act carefully to avoid significantly defying the position of any of the four countries just mentioned. As a result, the US has responded to North Korea's provocations in a mild manner. Certainly, the Bush Administration has imposed economic sanctions and sought international isolation of the Kim Jong Il regime. But military action has never been a serious option, and even the enforcement of sanctions has not been strong.

Conversely, North Korea has engaged in risky behaviour, most notably with the development of a nuclear programme in spite of the opposition of the US and the disapproval of China and other regional actors. Even though the development of this programme antagonized Pyongyang and Washington, the Kim Jong Il regime seemed to be well aware that the US could do little more than publicly denounce the programme. In addition, North Korea conducted several missile tests and shunned foreign agencies whenever it has considered this appropriate. This behaviour, which would be considered unacceptable for a superpower like the US, has been employed by North Korea with the hope that it would bring benefits while not significantly deteriorating the image of the regime. In the end, this proved to be a powerful tool for North Korea when bargaining with the US, which saw that a nuclear-armed North Korea could lead Japan and South Korea to develop their own nuclear weapons programmes, which in turn would have probably lead Taiwan to build its own.

Finally, North Korea has used the only existing international institution exclusive to Northeast Asia: the Six-Party Talks. Pyongyang has seemed sometimes adamant in shunning the Six-Party Talks as a forum to solve the nuclear issue, persistently insisting in the holding of bilateral talks with the US. In fact, more than one year passed between rounds of talks on two occasions: from June 2004 to July 2005 and from November 2005 to December 2006. In the case of the first impasse, North Korea was awaiting the result of the Presidential election won by Bush in November 2004.<sup>43</sup> In the second case, North Korea staunchly refused to hold new talks until the US, following North Korea's nuclear test, agreed to consider lifting financial restrictions on a Macau bank where Pyongyang kept around US\$24 million in financial assets.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of its initial reluctance to use the Six-Party Talks as a forum in which to engage with the US, North Korea has nevertheless made use of this institution to make its voice heard, strengthening its bargaining circumstances, and gathering support for its position.

Almost from the beginning, participants in the talks have been divided in two blocs. On the one hand, China, Russia, and South Korea have sought a diplomatic resolution to the conflict and the improvement of relations between North Korea and the US. On the other hand, Japan and the US have favoured a tough stance towards the Kim Jong Il regime. Certainly, the first position accommodates North Korea's goal of normalization of relations with Washington, which found a receptive forum in the Six-Party Talks. In fact, reports state that China threatened the US with publicly denouncing Washington for derailing the Six-Party Talks if it did not accept a September 2005 agreement that included normalization of North Korean-US relations among its goals. This agreement was extremely similar to the one signed in February 2007, in which normalization of relations between Pyongyang and Washington was again among the objectives, and which led to bilateral talks between both. Hence, we can see that the Six-Party Talks, in spite of being shunned by North Korea at first, have served Pyongyang to gather support for its objectives and to somehow balance the uneven relation with the US.

In conclusion, it has been shown that the case study of North Korea's bargaining with the US to reach one of its main foreign policy goals proves four central points of Weak Power theory. Pyongyang has used its almost-obsessive focus on improvement of relations with Washington to concentrate resources on attaining this goal. In addition, the Kim Jong Il regime has bandwagoned towards China

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<sup>43</sup> Pollack, J D, *The United States and Asia in 2004: Unfinished business*, in *Asian Survey* 45:1, 2005, p. 1-13.

<sup>44</sup> New York Times, November 1, 2006.

to gain the support of the only remaining superpower capable of restraining the US influence in Northeast Asia. Also, North Korea has been able to develop a nuclear programme, test missiles, and expel foreign agency officials, a behaviour unacceptable for the US but without significant dangers for Pyongyang. Finally, North Korea has used an international institution such as the Six-Party Talks to convey its message and gather support for its position while weakening the American stance. The use of these bargaining tools has helped North Korea to successfully bargain with the US to obtain one of its main foreign policy goals, the holding of bilateral normalization talks between both countries. Hence, at least in the case object of this paper, Weak Power theory has proved to be still valid in a unipolar system, different to the bipolar system in which this theory was first developed.

## **6. Conclusions**

The paper has examined Weak Power Foreign Policy theory through the case study of North Korea's foreign policy towards the US during the Bush Administration period. This is relevant because there is a growing recognition that weak powers are an integral part of the international system, somehow neglected in the Cold War era because of superpower rivalry and in the post-Cold War period because of the hegemonic position of the US and, lately, the rise of China. Moreover, Weak Power theory was developed mainly in the bipolar system characteristic of the Cold War, and has largely remained untested since the fall of the Soviet Union and subsequent emergence of a unipolar system.

The case study of North Korea's foreign policy towards the US during the Bush Administration is interesting because it is an example of successful bargaining of a weak power with an overtly hostile superpower. Weak Power theory suggests that weak powers can bargain with great powers through the use of four main foreign policy tools: focus on a limited number of issues, bandwagoning, use of riskier behaviour than great powers can afford to display, and the use of international institutions. Given that Weak Power theory was developed while the Soviet Union and the US were involved in superpower struggle, it is necessary to test it in the current unipolar system.

The author's research has shown that Weak Power theory bodes well to explain North Korea's successful bargaining with the Bush Administration. Pyongyang's focus on the goal of improving relations with the US, bandwagoning towards China, engagement in nuclear provocation, and use of the Six-Party Talks have allowed Kim Jong Il's regime to strengthen its negotiating position with the US. As a result, the Bush Administration has felt compelled to negotiate with North Korea and grant Pyongyang one of its main foreign policy goals, bilateral normalization talks. Hence, the case study of North Korea has proved the validity Weak Power theory.

Certainly, the case of North Korea presents a set of special characteristics derived from its location at the heart of Northeast Asia, a region in which the interests of the sole superpower, the US, an emerging superpower, China, and two great powers, Japan and Russia, collide. Obviously, this makes the case of North Korea significantly different from those of other weak powers located in regions in which there is not such and "overpopulation" of superpower(s) and great powers. Hence, Weak Power theory needs to be further tested to see whether it suffices to explain weak power behaviour under different sets of conditions.