

North Korea as a Small Great Power

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During the recent years the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has rapidly advanced to the rank of a nuclear power, drawing simultaneously lots of attention on itself both by other states and the media. We argue that this means much more than only increase in its weaponry. Combined with its decades old steadfast strive for independence and opposition to the United States, this means a qualitative change in its position in the international system. The theoretical tool used for this analysis is not statistical size, but rather the style of behaviour. Small and great powers tend to have different styles of behaviour. Small powers usually orient towards acting as "good international citizens" performing important integrative and stabilizing tasks for the system, while great powers tend to play classical realist power games, ranging from readiness for military conflict to willingness for occasionally breaking international law. Despite its small size, North Korea systematically behaves like a great power, and its actions can meaningfully be interpreted from that angle.

On Prestige and Propaganda

The year 2017 may already be a distant memory, but practically and theoretically something important related to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) happened then. Let's refresh that memory a bit. His Excellency Donald Trump, President of the United States, in September 2017 announced in the United Nations General Assembly that North Korea "threatens the whole world".¹ Trump threatened to destroy North Korea, prompting a response from the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Kim Jong Un, who charged Trump with not being a real politician, but only a "political layman" (政治素人), promising also to "tame the mentally deranged U.S. dotard with fire" (北朝鮮は、米の狂ったドタラシを火で鎮める)。² As presumably only great powers can threaten the whole world, Trump obviously verbally treated North Korea as a great power, while the North Korea leader certainly answered with the panache of the leader of a great power. In early 2018, on the other hand, the international atmosphere rapidly changed into amicable international diplomacy, in which state leaders, the Chairman among others, engaged in games of international reconciliation. What is striking is the fact that North Korea appears to be playing its game from a position of strength, speaking and acting as if it was a power commensurate with the United States or China. Both in its practical implications, and in terms of international political theory, the situation is extraordinary, and should be treated seriously. The following is a theoretical and empirical attempt to do so.



Chairman Kim Touching President Trump. Screen grab from a video by the Korean Central News Agency; YouTube: [KCTV documentary on Kim Jong Un's trip to Singapore](#). President Trump is rather corpulent, easily intimidating with his body language toward people whom he meets, especially by touching them in a protecting and controlling manner. During the first summit in Singapore in 12 June 2018 it could be observed that Chairman Kim had done his homework well and answered in kind.

In East Asia one of the most dramatic processes has been North Korea's rapid advance to the ranks of a nuclear power in the face of intense US pressure, especially during the final rush in 2017. But equally dramatic has been the sudden thaw in US-DPRK relations which remained ice cold during the Obama administration. Of great interest is what the current situation augurs in terms of international politics. Our argument is that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has come to manifest many of the characteristics of a great power, and this elevated position has important bearings on the way the diplomatic dynamics with other great powers, notably the United States and China, are taking shape. Calling North Korea a great power may sound surprising, as we also know well that it is a territorially small and economically poor state of only 25 million inhabitants with negligible soft power influence toward much of the world. Perhaps we should qualify our statement and say that North Korea is only a *small great power*, but the qualification notwithstanding, not seeing it as a kind of great power dismisses an important analytical ingredient necessary for understanding its behaviour as well as that of the United States.

Questions of perception of relative strength are easier to assess if the dimensions of a specific state are congruent, i.e. it is clearly big or small in major relevant fields of activity ranging from military, economic and political might to territorial size, population, etc. Interpretation is more difficult when there is no concordance, which is the situation in the case of North Korea. Some of its ranks, in economy or soft power, are very low, but it is higher in others. One important issue here is of course its missile and satellite capability, especially its nuclear weapons. The possession of nuclear weapons is a symbol of great powerness in certain ways comparable to the possession of colonies in the nineteenth century and through World War II. Conquering and ruling a colony implied substantial investment of material, political and administrative resources, while conquerable territories were scarce. This is the situation that rising powers like the United States, Germany, Italy, and Japan faced during the late nineteenth century. Each of them opted to establish colonies, not only because of their economic and geopolitical value, but also for the prestige they conveyed. Only a limited number of countries attained the rank of a colonial power, and a similar situation of scarcity has been created in the case of nuclear weapons with the help of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which was signed in 1968 and entered into force as international law in 1970.³ Scarcity implies a high value in the international market of images and power. A rank that only a few countries can attain commands respect.

Whether the possession of operational nuclear weapons also increases security, as argued by Kenneth Waltz in his classic 1981 article,⁴ is something that cannot be determined with certainty. This problem notwithstanding, at present the situation seems clear: no state has ever attacked another state that possesses nuclear weapons, but states that have not possessed them, such as Afghanistan or Georgia, or which have given up their development or possession in exchange for guarantees of international security, such as Iraq, Libya or Ukraine, have faced devastating attacks. In spite of the gradual development of international society with norms against the use of military violence, small or weak states still frequently face aggressive military action especially in the Middle East or Central Asia,

and the attackers nearly always are great powers, or sometimes their allies. Many of the small states attacked have been destroyed, suggesting that it may be wise for any state to acquire nuclear weapons capabilities, and once started, it would be stupid not to go all the way. This is the kind of argument that Andrei Lankov has convincingly developed to explain the behaviour of North Korea.⁵ This also is the argument that North Korea itself advances in defence of its nuclear and missile programmes. The North Korean and Iranian cases notwithstanding, most small states do not take this route. It is costly, requires considerable technological resources, and strongly provokes other powers.

Our argument is that the nuclear issue and the international perception of rank are intertwined both in international theory and in the specific North Korean case. The security dilemma in the case of North Korea is real and the main focus of international attention, but we should not forget the rank and prestige factors, which also are real ingredients in the situation. The classical realist Hans Morgenthau considered prestige important enough to think of it as a fundamental category in its own right in understanding the international system. He categorized the essential policy orientations of states into antagonistic status quo and imperialistic varieties but considered both types of states to be engaging continuously in prestige politics.⁶ Prestige has to do with rank, honour, and reputation, and in terms of importance is indeed close to Joseph Nye's concept of soft power,⁷ though not presented in equally marketable vocabulary. As Alexander Bukh reminds us, such international perceptions are cumulative entities, taking decades to build up, but also a long time to change.⁸ They are not only a matter of day to day diplomatic manoeuvres, though that aspect is also important. A reputation for being taken seriously is a necessary element in successful foreign policy, but it is also an end in itself. It feels good both in the psyches of the leadership and the population, and domestically it transforms into systemic legitimacy. Legitimacy is basically about political psychology, and international prestige enhances it.

What we saw during 2017 in and around North Korea was a huge circus of propaganda involving all participating states. North Korea displayed its advances in military technology in the form of frequent missile launches, and occasional nuclear detonations. It also boasted about its achievements and military capabilities in articles in state media and in videos in YouTube and Youku. By all this activity the North Korean leadership attempted to make the state look as powerful as possible. On the other hand, North Korea is surrounded by a number of countries that try to diminish its international status with classical war propaganda arguments by depicting it as an evil state, with a dismal human rights situation, a failed economy and an irrational dictatorial leadership. This is a situation where the proclamations of any of the participating states cannot be taken at face value. It simply has to be understood as war propaganda in a very classical sense of the term.⁹

However, even though these attempts to counter North Korea have been rather successful, and internationally the image of North Korea is exceedingly bad, in one important aspect it plays perfectly together with North Korean propaganda. It increases North Korea's perceived size as a menace; perhaps not really to humankind, but at least to the United States and its allies in East Asia. Also, to China and Russia a nuclear-armed North Korea appears to pose a problem, if not a direct threat. During 2018 every single North Korean move either in cultural or traditional diplomacy towards South Korea, the United States, China or other countries has been followed with keen interest around the world, and the trend continues in early 2019. Countries of low rank do not arouse this level of international interest, unless large numbers of people die. Nobody is presently dying because of the tension around North

Korea. Shots are not fired, bombs are not falling, but the degree of attention is high. Thus, we have to conclude that both neighbouring countries and the international media are bestowing on North Korea a high international rank. This is fascinating and its implications should be analysed in detail.

Small and Great Powers in History

Quite understandably, most theorizing of world politics deals with the so-called great powers, or something related with them. This is so especially in English language discussion, as it is so dominated by US centric perspectives, but we can find the same situation in other language spheres. There even was a time when small states were expected to disappear completely from the scene. This was from the latter half of the nineteenth century until World War I. The idea was the constant expansion of great powers, gradually eating up small states in the age of empire. At the level of practical politics this was argued most forcefully by Otto von Bismarck in his famous speech on 30 September 1862 before the budget commission of the Prussian parliament: “the great decisions of our day will not be made by speeches and majority decisions, but by blood and iron”.¹⁰

This tendency of heavy concentration on military means of expansion was then turned into a theory of international politics by Karl Theodor von Inama-Sternegg in his 1869 treatise whose title can be translated as “The Present Tendency Towards Great Power Construction”.¹¹ At the end of the 30 Year War in 1648 over one hundred political entities in Europe alone partook in the Westphalian peace treaties, which established the concept of national sovereignty in international relations. This kind of existence of a large number of small states required a lot of speeches, negotiations and votes, despised by Bismarck. However, during the subsequent centuries the number of political organizations diminished greatly. Von Inama-Sternegg found two reasons for this, the first being nationalism, which integrated small principalities into larger national states, while the second was balance of power, which forced strong states to conquer smaller ones in order to increase their territory and power. The end result of this process was conceived as a single world state, the intermediate stage being a concert of mutually competing great powers, with no independent small political entities left on the scene.

This vision of the furious competition of the great powers had a powerful influence on subsequent continental European theorizing of the international system, such as in the work of Friedrich Ratzel.¹² The most important theoretician of this tradition was the Swedish geopolitician Rudolf Kjellén. In his pre-World War I magnum opus *Great Powers* he paints a grand drama of the constant enlargement of world empires; no longer on the European, but on the global scale, with the United States and Japan appearing on the scene as challengers to the old European empires.¹³ However, in his work *The State as a Form of Life* written during World War I, small states started to reappear on the theoretical scene. They did not do this as entities in their own right, because the competition of strong states continued on a global scale, but it had become obvious that organizational problems had started to inhibit the functioning of very large states, while new small states were again being created, such as Norway in 1905, Bulgaria in 1908, and Albania in 1913. This heralds the emergence of the concept of buffer states: small states that thrive in the peripheries and intermediate areas between great powers. Their existence is on one hand precarious, but on the other hand an intermediate position is lucrative, because trade flows through such states, and they can extort various benefits from larger states. Kjellén observed that such small states

often tend to be rather wealthy.¹⁴ His examples were Switzerland and the Netherlands; nowadays Singapore, Hong Kong, or South Korea would fit equally well.

In the 21st Century most states are again small ones. In evolutionary terms, small states appear to be the most successful form of political organization in the current inter-state ecological environment. The ideological techniques of nationalism are so well developed that conquering and integrating them poses serious problems for bigger states, and simultaneously the spread and deepening of international organizations have changed the mores of the international system against territorial conquest. They have become an essential feature of the international system, though not extensively studied. An indication of this is that perhaps the most quoted American text on the question of state size in international politics is still Robert Keohane's 1969 review essay 'Lilliputians' Dilemmas'.¹⁵ Small states have more functions necessary for the stability of the world political system than the buffer state aspect only, and many of them are relatively wealthy. They move faster and often adjust better to changes in the environment than big states, and usually do not spend as much of their resources as a percentage of GDP on military preparedness as big powers. According to Raimo Väyrynen, a Finnish scholar, who naturally provides a small power perspective on the issue, small states appear as a strong integrative and stabilizing force in the international system.¹⁶

The European Union and North Korea as Powers

A Norwegian scholar, Asle Toje, took up in an interesting way the question of size in connection with the European Union, claiming that its behaviour in the international scene is that of a small power.¹⁷ Taking the EU up here is illuminating, as it is in many ways the total opposite of North Korea, and because of this brings analytical light for understanding the latter. When one observes simultaneously the endless polite discussions on European Union foreign and security policies, and the furore around North Korea, one begins to doubt the usual statistical way of characterizing the sizes of states and state-like entities like the EU. In 2017, according to the figures of the IMF, the European Union statistically appears as the second largest economic entity in the world, only slightly smaller than the United States measured in nominal GDP, or slightly smaller than China measured in purchasing power parity.¹⁸ However you interpret the second place position, the EU is economically big. With over 500 million people, it has the third largest population in the world after China and India.¹⁹ These statistical facts notwithstanding, the EU appears to be a relatively light player in the security field in world politics – unless you limit yourself to reading its own publications. The EU indeed has a global strategy, published in 2016 by the External Action Service and titled *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*,²⁰ but it is a moral soft power document. It describes the Union as a civilian and normative power, which has become slightly worried about the rapid pace of increasing armaments and belligerent verbal and military behaviour in its vicinity but is not going to waver from its basic civilian essence.

There is no doubt that the EU is a “global actor” given its presence in world markets and global administrative institutions. The EU is deeply integrated, not only within itself, but also with the rest of the world. Size indeed matters in sectors like trade and investment policy, or foreign aid, and history matters in the visible European presence in inter-state institutions like the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, or the Inter-Parliamentary Union,

but there is little indication that it is a “world power”. The EU of course possesses nuclear weapons. Both Britain and France are legally nuclear weapons states as defined by the NPT while Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy are host states for US nuclear weapons. However, these nuclear arms are either directly or indirectly controlled by the United States. Although there are occasional exclamations about European “strategic autonomy”, there exist hardly any concrete measures.²¹ Nuclear weapons played absolutely no role in the latest EU foreign and security strategy.²² They are not used as a foreign policy tool.

The EU systematically attempts to take a moral high ground positing itself as a normative power. However, as Mikael Mattlin perceptively comments, it is not able to uphold a consistent normative approach towards big powers like the United States, Russia, China, or India without appearing hypocritical. The only states with which the EU has achieved some success are small states in its periphery wishing to join it, some poor African countries, and failed states in need of international economic assistance.²³ A more recent study on EU’s external policy draws similar conclusions. In EU discourse there is a keen wish to be taken seriously in world politics, but few concrete steps have been taken in that direction.²⁴

North Korea is in many ways the opposite of the EU. It is a lonely nation state without any allies, though China and Russia have to some extent helped it. Nevertheless, they have generally upheld United Nations Security Council sanctions against it. Its external relations in any field of activity are relatively thin, and it holds no decision-making positions in global institutions. It is statistically small. According to the latest published census, the population of North Korea in 2008 was somewhat over 24 million people.²⁵ Its fertility rate is estimated to be 2.0,²⁶ which makes the population still grow, although only slowly, so that it can nowadays be estimated to be about 25 million.²⁷ This means that North Korea in terms of population is less than half of South Korea, a fifth of Japan, a thirteenth of the United States, a twentieth of the EU, and a fifty-fifth of China. Also, in terms of land mass it is quite small, 120,540 km²; a bit smaller than Greece, equal to Malawi, slightly larger than Iceland.²⁸ The CIA estimates that its GDP per capita is among the lowest in the world, at the very poor African standard, on par with Togo and Gambia.²⁹ North Korean own figures, published in October 2018 by professor Ri Gi Song of the Institute of Economics at the Academy of Social Sciences in Pyongyang in an interview with the Japanese Kyodo News Service, are similar. The GDP per capita figure that he gave was \$1,214, though it is unclear how exactly this was calculated.³⁰ The number anyway also points to a low African standard, which in the 2017 calculations of the IMF would correspond with Mozambique.³¹ On the basis of such statistics one could easily conclude that North Korea is a small, poor and weak state, forgotten by the world, never appearing in global media except in case of major natural disasters.³² Nevertheless, it definitely is not ignored by the international community. Quite the opposite, the international community has elevated it into a central focus of attention, where it regularly and repeatedly dominates the agenda of the Security Council of the United Nations.

How to Define a Great Power

This conceptual puzzle can perhaps be solved with the help of Kari Palonen’s idea of politics as a dramatic action situation, which treats actors as if on a stage, being observed and

gamed by other actors. This kind of view opens the possibility of a narrative interpretation of politics. His argument is that politics is essentially conflictual action, or "action-against-others".³³ Not all states behave in this way. Most small states tend to refrain from openly conflictual positions, but North Korea has chosen the road of drama for its foreign political style. This kind of action forces the actor to be taken seriously and elevates its rank and prestige, though not necessarily in a positive sense. The meaning of the concepts of great and small powers cannot be understood properly by contemplating only statistical sizes. A social position has to be understood as an action concept. Dramatic action presupposes the existence of an evaluating community, namely the international society of the English School theory.³⁴ The community serves in the role of spectators and co-actors, allocating ranks to players on the stage.

Within this society, a small power is as a small power does, as Toje has formulated the idea.³⁵ Correspondingly, a great power is as a great power does. Toje's idea harkens back to Rudolf Kjellén, who should be understood as an analyst of international psychology in addition to geopolitical theorizing. For him great powers were primarily organizations of will rather than matter: "A great power is not primarily a mathematical but rather a dynamic concept. A great power is most of all a unified and strong will, endowed with good resources."³⁶ In other words, resources in themselves do not establish status in the society of states. Ambitious behaviour does. If a state behaves like a great power, and can display resources supporting the behaviour, then it is likely to receive the corresponding treatment.

Toje classifies states into three categories, great powers, small powers and small states. However, as there is no discernible difference between the behavioural patterns of small states and small powers, the two categories can be subsumed into one here. All states have some kind of power resources, otherwise they could not be states, and can thus be seen as powers.³⁷ Of course contracting the variety of the world under a dichotomous conceptual arrangement is a gross simplification. There is certainly a difference between nations of 100 million inhabitants and one million inhabitants, or states with large versus tiny economies, and especially old empires like Japan, India, Germany, France or Britain might resist being placed under the category of small powers, but that does not necessarily result in an essentially different kind of behaviour. They are relatively weaker than they were during their zenith, and their leaders are conscious of their increased vulnerability against current great powers. As Peter J. Katzenstein has noted, awareness of limitations is not a bad thing. Because of their clearly understood vulnerability, small powers try to avoid conflict, especially if they would have to face the costs and consequences alone by themselves. They observe their environment keenly and are quick to learn, adjust, and create multiple forms of national and international cooperation, which diminish their risks.³⁸ In the international system there can be only a limited number of great powers at the same time. Moreover, because our interest is specifically on North Korea, a dichotomous apparatus makes the analytical discussion simpler and clearer. On this basis we can make a list of the typical behavioural patterns of small powers:

Dependence on one or more great powers

Neutrality or bandwagoning

Support of international institutions

Support of international law

Status quo orientation

Favour multilateral compromises³⁹

Small powers typically do not try to rely exclusively on their own military strength in order to survive in conflictual situations but situate themselves within the spheres of influence of big powers, which then dictates the rest of their behaviour. They are not necessarily weak in all sectors; they may have a strong economy, or a well-educated population, but they have weaknesses in other sectors, which make them careful in their dealings with other powers. This incongruence is called variable geometry.

Small powers are inclined either towards neutrality or alliance, depending to some extent on the geopolitical location of the state, and to some extent on their position in the strategies of great powers, but the idea is to position themselves so that they would not suffer from a possible military conflict. They are status quo oriented, because they do not see themselves as capable of changing the system, and thus their orientation is typically towards adjustment rather than change. Because of this, they often adjust well, and thus tend to be beneficiaries of the system. The European Union may not necessarily be especially quick in its adjustments, but it certainly has benefited from the international trading regime and is thus a status quo organization par excellence. Small powers also are inclined to be strong supporters of international institutions; they favour multilateral compromising solutions to problems, and they attempt to display themselves as “good international citizens”.⁴⁰ In Bismarckian terms, small powers thrive in an environment of “speeches and majority decisions”. They of course engage in military armaments, but all states do. Armaments do not differentiate between great and small powers, except that small powers tend to arm for defence, not for offence, and their pace for increasing their war potential tends to be slow. European states in general, the European Union itself, or Japan for that matter, tend to fit this description. The European Union actually has been since the end of the Cold War the only regional actor where military spending has been constantly and substantially falling as percentage of GDP, and although there has been since 2014 lots of talk about increasing it, it does not yet show in statistics.⁴¹

Of course, this is only good, morally and globally. Small states are an essential element of stability in the world system. The EU was not created for foreign political adventures, but for international peace, economic growth and welfare under the tutelage and protection of the United States. This situation of dependence continues without essential change, even under Donald Trump’s leadership, who to some extent challenges the premises of the EU-US relationship, but this is a side issue here. The main point is that the EU is a small power because it acts like a small power, being composed of states that nowadays are small powers. Little drama can be found in its foreign policy, though the domestic politics of the EU tend to be constant wrangling.

Great powers, by the logic of this dichotomic conceptualization, behave in ways quite different from small states. The characterization that fits best is that for a long-established great power status, especially the United States, and to a fair extent also Russia and China. It might not fit as well relatively large emerging states, such as India, Indonesia or Brazil, which still display variable geometry and do not have an established status. We are dealing here with a theoretical ideal type; practical foreign policy behaviour of any state at a

specific moment does not necessarily correspond with it. Nonetheless, the typical characteristics of a great power would be these:

- Independent
- Prepared for military conflict
- Change oriented
- Control of international institutions
- Control of international law
- Favour bilateral deals

In essence, the characteristics of great powers read like a classical realist account of international politics. It is the existence of a large number of small powers that brings the aspects of international society into the system; great powers maintain the realist configuration. Great powers make the headlines in news and create the basic drama within the system. They are not necessarily "good international citizens". They do not mind being regarded as such and are actually quite interested in achieving a positive status. All the discussion about "soft power" by representatives of big powers attests to this, but then the political constellation has to favour their foreign and domestic political needs. If it does not, they try to change the situation, even if it leads to violent or bullying behaviour. Great powers maintain large militaries and keep them constantly on alert, simply because the ability to raise and command armies is the ultimate guarantee of independence.⁴² They are able to act alone against any other state within the system if needed.

They initiate action that affects the basic character of the world system, and they try to change the system if it does not fit their goals. In Morgenthau's concepts, if a great power is at the top of the world administrative system, it is likely to be a status quo power, but that aspect notwithstanding, it would not accept a situation unfavourable to it. Kjellén, Morgenthau, or Mearsheimer⁴³ would agree with this. Great powers have to display constant will to act like great powers. They participate in international institutions, but treat them like organizations to be controlled, being less interested in their normative character inhibiting wilful action. Similarly, they participate in multilateral deals with small powers, but prefer bilateral ones, because there they can fully use the disparity of power to their advantage.

An indicative field of great power behaviour is international law. Because its norms are written, and even though there usually is ample leeway for interpretation, over time there appear situations where the legal norm and state behaviour cannot be reconciled. Great powers adhere to international law if it suits them but refuse to be restrained by it. For instance, the United States was one of the main architects of the United Nations convention on the Law of the Sea, yet it has refused to ratify it. This situation has prevailed already for over two decades, since 1994. The United States was the major victor of the UNCLOS and has taken all the territorial advantages it laid out. It is typical of United States behaviour in recent decades that it shapes major international initiatives but does not ratify them. This style is of course more manifest during the Trump administration, but he did not start it. He is only more vocal about it. Nor is the US alone in its policies. Russia ratified the UNCLOS document, but when in 2013 Greenpeace with its ship *Arctic Sunrise* attempted to protest

against Russian exploration of oil and gas in international waters in the Arctic Sea, Russia refused to comply with the law and arrested the protestors as pirates. Similarly China has ratified it, but in 2016 in its dispute with the Philippines China refused to comply with the decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration that ruled against it.⁴⁴ In such situations legal haggling can continue,⁴⁵ but there is no way of changing the decision of a great power in the absence of resort to military power, and that is not easily done. Great powers are autonomous, independent entities that break laws if they see it fit. It may hurt their reputation as good international citizens, but that aspect of international social capital is always secondary to their reputation as great powers.

Does North Korea Behave Like a Great Power?

In our judgement, North Korean behaviour fits much more closely that of a great power than of a small power. Its striving for independence has been of long duration and is systematic. The *juche* (주체) banner dates from the 1950s⁴⁶ but became prominent in the 1960s⁴⁷ after the reconstruction of the country from the devastation of the Korean War had been completed with extensive help from Eastern Bloc countries.⁴⁸ Kim Il Sung stated the complete array of elements of *juche* in a speech at the Ali Archam Academy of Social Sciences in Indonesia in 14 April 1965. These elements were self-reliance in ideology, independence in politics, self-sufficiency in the economy, and self-reliance in national defence.⁴⁹ This did not imply an isolationist policy; North Korea had barter trade relations with China and especially with the Soviet bloc states, and it also created an extensive array of diplomatic relations with countries around the world.⁵⁰ The most important element was always political independence, which was steadfastly maintained by both the Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il administrations over subsequent decades, regardless of the hardships this entailed. The rise of Kim Jong Un to the position of supreme leader did not lead into any softening of this position, as was made clear in a major policy speech in 6 April 2012. *Juche* only got the additional name of “Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism”. The expression implies that Kim Jong Il minutely organized Kim Il Sung’s *juche* thought into a theoretically comprehensive whole. At the same time, the contents are essentially the same.⁵¹ Nor have there been any changes since 2012 regarding this basic posture towards the outside world. *Juche* is frequently presented to the population in speeches, news, posters and slogans. It has been the constant ideological nucleus already for over 50 years.



A scene from the Grand Mass Gymnastics and Artistic Performance “The Glorious Country” in September 2018 in Pyongyang. Photo by Tomoomi Mori. The text says: self-sufficiency (주체), independence (주체), self-reliance (주체).

Is North Korea Prepared for Military Conflict?

Although North Korean budget allocations are notoriously difficult to ascertain, it no doubt has put a tremendous proportion of its national resources into military spending, especially on missile and nuclear technology, but also on conventional arms, and a large share of its adult population remains in military duty. All citizens, from school children onwards, receive military training.⁵² This is based on a policy adopted in a meeting of Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea in 10 December 1962, which laid out the so-called Four Grand

Military Lines. They were 1) arming all citizens, 2) turning the whole national territory into military use (군사화 지역), 3) establishing a cadre based military, and 4) modernizing the entire Korean People's Army.⁵³ The background of this decision was Park Chung-hee's coup and the establishment of a military government in South Korea in May 1961, as well as the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, which had made the possibility of nuclear war tangible. The Four Grand Military Lines implied a strategy of developing economic and military capabilities simultaneously. This is the historical source of the *pyongjin* (평성, parallel economic and military development) strategy adopted by Kim Jong Un in March 2013.⁵⁴ Like *juche* as ideology, this strong military orientation has a long and systematic pedigree.

Likewise, North Korea does not shy away from military conflict and has periodically engaged in it, especially with South Korea. After the Korean War (1950-53), the period with most action was the latter half of the 1960s, but incidents also continued later. These actions include military border violations, infiltration of armed saboteurs and spies, as well as kidnapping of citizens of various countries, especially South Koreans and Japanese. These actions of course were not one-sided only. South Korea (Republic of Korea) also dispatched numerous agents to North Korea for information gathering and guerrilla activities.⁵⁵ Specific actions against the United States include seizing the intelligence gathering ship *Pueblo* in 1968, which is still on display for domestic and foreign tourists in Pyongyang, as well as shooting down a US reconnaissance plane in 1969. From the 1990s onwards much of this kind of hostile action began to shift to the seas around the Korean Peninsula, although incidents in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) also continued to occur. There were frequent clashes with the South Korean navy, and even one with the Japanese coast guard in 2001, when a North Korean spy ship was sunk within the Japanese exclusive economic zone.⁵⁶

In more recent times the major incident involved sinking of the South Korean torpedo ship *Cheonan* in 2010, although there is no consensus on who actually did it.⁵⁷ What is certain is that this event was followed by artillery battles between the two Koreas in 2010.⁵⁸ The last time the two Koreas exchanged rocket and artillery fire was in 2015. Shooting was started by North Korea, the reason ostensibly being South Korean loudspeakers along the border blaring propaganda towards the north. Until the recent thaw that began in New Year 2018, North Korea frequently threatened South Korea and the United States with a military attack, and launched missiles to the Japan Sea, occasionally over Japan. Without doubt the most famous video in YouTube depicting a missile attack on the United States is a cut from Moranbong Band's 21 December 2012 concert, *Without a Break* (휴식없이).⁵⁹ North Korea has for decades been both prepared and engaged in military conflict, though the intensity has been gradually lowered over the years, and actual military clashes have been largely replaced by more symbolic activity such as missile launch tests, music videos and pronouncements in state media.

Is North Korea Change Oriented?

The concept of change orientation here points to one of the central ideas in the realist canon, namely the category of states called "imperialist" (Morgenthau) or "revisionist" (Mearsheimer). It means states that move against the current hegemon and its allies, which are usually called status quo powers. As a socialist state, North Korea was since its establishment a member of the general socialist camp, though keeping a distance from both China and the Soviet Union. Because of its smaller resources, it was never as important as

its neighbours in pursuing socialist world revolution. North Korea focused most of its efforts on South Korea, but it also created from the 1960s onwards a network of relations with African countries, especially with the more anti-colonial and radical ones. These exchanges included both economic and military components, especially training in guerrilla tactics and selling arms to governments and liberation movements.⁶⁰ Similarly, North Korea has long been active in the Middle East, especially in Syria.⁶¹ Thus, there is no doubt that North Korea has systematically acted in the anti-American camp, though in the past as a smaller actor. However, nowadays North Korea is the main representative of the classical socialist camp, because the Soviet Union is long gone, and China has become a global advocate of international harmony and market-driven free trade.⁶²

One of the authors of this article was able to interview in Pyongyang in August 2018 professor of international politics Ho O Bom (호오보), who works at the Academy of Social Sciences, and ask him about the DPRK's international position. He answered that the DPRK had become a "strategic state" (전략국가). He further pointed out that the counter concept to this is a "central state" (중심국가), historically represented by empires such as the Roman Empire, various Islamic empires, Mongolian empires, and the United States. These concepts have obvious historical roots in the DPRK's anti-colonial and anti-American stance. On the other hand, the concepts clearly add something new. They appeared, as usual with North Korean analytical concepts, in a speech by Kim Jong Un in 21 December 2017. Kim pointed out that the DPRK "rapidly emerged as a strategic state capable of posing a substantial nuclear threat to the U.S."⁶³ The nuclear and missile development of the DPRK thus imply a qualitative change in the strategic calculus in the games played by the great powers. A strategic state possesses remarkable national power, which is recognized by the rest of the world. National power for professor Ho meant especially ideological coherence, national unity, military might, and a strong economy. Ideology with national unity were the most important organizational resources. The main component of DPRK military power was its nuclear force. A strategic state is of course proudly independent. The slogan "For global independence" appeared in English, Chinese and Korean over the background of a globe during the Grand Mass Gymnastics and Artistic Performance "The Glorious Country". The concept of the strategic state elevates the status of North Korea's *juche* type independence from a regional to a global level.



A scene from the Grand Mass Gymnastics and Artistic Performance "The Glorious Country" in September 2018 in Pyongyang. Photo by Tomoomi Mori.



A scene from the Grand Mass Gymnastics and Artistic Performance "The Glorious Country" in September 2018 in Pyongyang. Photo by Tomoomi Mori. The text "글로벌 독립" means "For global independence".

Professor Ho further mentioned that the reason the peace process in East Asia was possible in 2018 was that North Korea had visibly increased its power, and in this sense corrected an existing imbalance in the international situation. This runs counter to the opinion outside of North Korea that its rapid nuclear armament had raised tensions in East Asia, but it fits rather well with our theory concerning North Korean insistence on the recognition of its great power status in the international system. He added that "past times have been quite

hard for living, and the future might be difficult, but we will be able to overcome difficulties by relying on our own power and single-hearted unity (□□□□)”. He thus displayed strong confidence in the abilities of his country. He seemed to be somewhat pessimistic regarding the sincerity of the intentions of the United States, but he was also confident of the national determination of the DPRK to continue with the chosen policy, whatever it would take.

We interpret his arguments in the sense that even though Kim Jong Un frequently travelled to China in 2018 and 2019, and apparently has received Chinese acceptance of his current foreign policy, North Korean experts distinguish their conflict with the United States from the US-Chinese confrontation. North Korea continues in the same revisionist position it has upheld since the 1950s, but it is now the main actor in that locus. It is a strategic country, important in its own right, playing its own games with the United States and other countries, and it can have substantial influence on the outcome of the political processes concerning it.

Does North Korea Favour Bilateral Deals?

North Korean experiences of multilateral fora, especially the Six-Party Talks during 2003-2009, have not been positive. The tortuous history of the multilateral negotiations in Beijing between China, the United States, Russia, Japan and both Koreas consisting of near breakthroughs always ending in deepening hostility provided hard lessons. The talks were initiated by China, which also chaired the meetings in Beijing, worried by the possibility of a nuclear armed North Korea, even more worried about the possibility of a nuclear armed Japan resulting from North Korean belligerence, while the long term goal has always been the diminishing of US military presence near its borders.⁶⁴ The main contestants were North Korea and the United States; North Korea initially demanding normalization of relations and a non-aggression pact, which the United States rejected, shifting the agenda towards dismantling North Korean nuclear and missile programmes.⁶⁵ South Korea under the Roh Moo-hyun administration attempted to continue its engagement policy with North Korea, though rather badly out of sync with the George W. Bush administrations.⁶⁶ With the arrival of the Lee Myung-Bak administration in 2008 and the Barrack Obama administration in 2009 there was better synchronizing of policy, but this did not include interest in a negotiated settlement. Many inter-Korea cooperative projects were ended, military tension was heightened, and attention shifted to increasing sanctions and waiting for the possible collapse of the North Korean regime.⁶⁷ Russia and Japan were more in the sidelines; the former attempted to preserve some influence in East Asian affairs,⁶⁸ while Japan tended to be mostly interested in solving the abduction issue on its own terms.⁶⁹ Although all participating states had their own goals and tended to quarrel among themselves on several issues, they were united in the basic demand for halting and abolishing the North Korean nuclear programme, and in this sense they were 5+1 power talks. North Korea nevertheless pushed on, declaring itself a nuclear weapon state in 2005. It ended all negotiations in 2009, after the UN Security Council’s unanimous resolution 1718 condemning the attempted but failed launch of satellite Kwangmyŏngsŏng-2.

During 2018 North Korea’s stance has clearly favoured bilateral negotiations with other states. The supreme leader met one head of state at a time, while diplomats travelled to and from Pyongyang, negotiations being held with one state at a time. Its stance has been warmer towards South Korea, China and Russia, cooler towards the United States, and systematically hostile towards Japan. No state has been able to force it at any point; it has

yielded only what it has deemed proper to do. North Korea has systematically prevented the formation of an international coalition against it, its leadership apparently judging that it is strong enough to behave in this way. Kim Jong Un in his 2019 New Year address announced the possibility of engaging in “multi-party negotiations”,⁷⁰ but thus far there have been no signs that such an arrangement is materializing. If such negotiations were to take place, they probably would not be a rerun of the Six-Party Talks, but North Korea would participate in choosing the states, perhaps different groups for different purposes.

Does North Korea Control International Organizations?

Here we come to the limit of North Korean ability to fulfil the criteria of a great power. It does lead or hold a significant position in any major international organization. This does not mean that North Korea is necessarily isolated. As already mentioned, it has systematically pursued relations with a large number of countries. In 2017 Miyamoto Satoru calculated that it had diplomatic relations with 164 countries, and until early 2017 it had visa-free or visa-upon-arrival arrangements with 27 countries. After the assassination of Kim Jong Nam in Kuala Lumpur International Airport in February 2017, both Malaysia and Singapore ended these arrangements.⁷¹ Nevertheless, North Korea maintains relations with the rest of the world, though relatively thinly.

It can be found among the members of various organizations. Both Koreas joined the United Nations simultaneously in 1991, but North Korea has not acquired any noticeable influence there. It is not a member of the Security Council. Nevertheless, it belongs to several other organizations under the United Nations umbrella, such as the Universal Postal Union. If you know the name and the address, at least in principle you can send a letter to a North Korean. It has also joined the International Civil Aviation Organization, World Health Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization, International Maritime Organization, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. It is a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, joining in 1975, twenty years after the Bandung Conference. By that time the movement had already grown large and established, and North Korea exercised no significant influence in it.⁷² It is absent from central global financial organizations, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Asian Development Bank.

The global organization in which North Korea holds a definite leadership position is the Juche Idea Study Groups, established since the 1970s in many countries, and still advertised in the corridor of the Juche Tower in Pyongyang. However, not all of the groups formed early are functioning nowadays. A few still exist in countries including Britain, Japan and Cameroon. In 2000 North Korea launched a new network of Korean Friendship Associations, claiming that they include members from 120 countries, but the home page of the organization displays information on only a few countries in North America, Europe and Latin America.⁷³ International organizations are a weak point in North Korea's geometry of power.

Does North Korea Control International Law?

All law, including international law, is essentially political.⁷⁴ International law is political in two ways: one of them involves bilateral and multilateral treaties between sovereign nations in classical Westphalian style; the second pertains to agreements by big power groups imposed on the rest of the world, where the principle of sovereignty is ignored. Because North Korea controls no international organizations, it has limited possibilities for controlling

international law. It can make bilateral or multilateral treaties, but these of course do not extend beyond the contracting parties, and as argued earlier, North Korea has not been successful in multilateral settings. Nor is it a member of any big power concert and does not create law through them. Its only possibility for control is to oppose such laws and in this way try to render void legal articles of this kind.

North Korean legal actions are usually discussed in light of its breaching of United Nations Security Council resolutions, which are big power concert decisions *par excellence*. The Security Council has the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. It has the right to investigate any situation that might lead to international friction, determine the existence of threats, and make decisions to address them, while members of the United Nations have consented to agree to carry out those decisions. This system of a big power concert has made possible the constant stream of UN sanctions against North Korea from 1950 to the present. North Korea has constantly protested against the sanctions, upholding the principle of sovereign equality of all members, which is one of the stipulations of the UN Charter, Article 2. However, lacking clout within the organization, its variable geometry is here most openly displayed. It cannot change the sanctions; it has only been able to confront them, carry on with its nuclear, missile, and satellite development programmes, and try to evade economic sanctions by smuggling and operating through the internet.

Its history with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is similar. North Korea acceded to the treaty in 1985 but withdrew from it in 2003. This was a legally acceptable action. Article X of the NPT stipulates: “Each Party shall in exercising its national sovereignty have the right to withdraw from the Treaty if it decides that extraordinary events [...] have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country.”⁷⁵ The wording is very clear. It is left to the state itself to determine its supreme interests, as well as to evaluate the extraordinary events. It needs to notify all other parties to the NPT and state its interpretation to the UN Security Council, but the decisions themselves are wholly consonant with the principle of sovereignty. As Tim Beal notes, there are no international treaties against developing satellite technology, carrier rockets, or even military missiles.⁷⁶ Even the development of nuclear technology is not only allowed but even encouraged by the NPT, because it can help in the development of civilian energy sources. There was thus nothing inherently illegal in the North Korean action; it just ran against a big power concert and global public opinion, acted accordingly, and dealt in its own way with the ruptures to its international image. North Korea does not control international law, but nor does it have any inhibitions against breaking it, if it runs counter to its interests. It clearly deals with international law like a great power.

How Does North Korea Perceive Itself?

North Korea systematically demands verbally, both domestically and internationally, the status of a great power. The national goal of “a strong and prosperous great power” (강성대국) is an old one, dating from the late 1990s, even being a regular ingredient in song lyrics,⁷⁷ and North Korea systematically has proceeded towards that goal. The slogan appeared for the first time in a commentary on 22 August 1998 in *Rodong Sinmun* (로동신문), the main official newspaper in North Korea. This was an important year politically. In September during the tenth Supreme People’s Assembly the constitution of the DPRK was revised, making Kim Il Sung the eternal president of the state, while Kim Jong Il was made

the Chairman of the National Defence Commission.⁷⁸ This was also the birth of another important and better-known concept, namely the *songun* (military first) policy (군사우선). Both of these concepts were without definition at first, but they started to acquire more definite meanings during the subsequent months and years.

In 1 January 1999 Kim Jong Il talked to senior officials of the Central Committee of the Worker's Party of Korea about administrative policy with the title "Let's illuminate this year as the year of great transformation in the construction of the strong and prosperous great power".⁷⁹ On the same day a joint editorial with the same title was published by *Rodong Sinmun*, the military newspaper *Joson Inmingun* (조선인민군) and the newspaper for youth organizations *Chongnyon Jonwi* (청년전위).⁸⁰ Contents of the speech and the newspaper text are rather similar; the idea apparently was to inform both the executive and ordinary citizens of the new policy. This was the launch of the national goal of becoming a great power. It might sound strange, because this was still the period of the Arduous March (고난의 행군), the hunger years when North Korea was at the bottom of global poverty with a diminished industrial structure and an army facing [food](#) shortages, but this was a good reason to try to make comprehensive renovations.⁸¹ Only the ultimate goal was unexpectedly grandiose. This meant also the birth of other slogans, such as the "Socialist ideology great power", which implied intensification for demands of national unity and respect for the leader. Songun policy implied abolishing the distinction between the military and civilian spheres of life, ensuring military education for the whole population. The main focus of the speech was, nevertheless, the economy, which was the immediate problem.⁸² The formal end of the Arduous March was publicly announced the following year in October 2000, when the economy and especially food production started to show signs of recovery, though the transformation was very slow.

Another important point in the address was foreign policy. It contained a good deal of criticism against the only global superpower, meaning the United States. North Korea had been exasperated by the refusal of the United States to "move toward full normalization of political and economic relations" as the 1994 Agreed Framework stipulated.⁸³ Points of contention included its use of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to pry open North Korean military secrets; the US also had dragged its feet on the promised light water reactor power plants, and did not maintain the schedule for the promised deliveries of heavy fuel oil.⁸⁴ In this light, the new national goal of becoming a "Strong and prosperous great power" can be seen as the threshold of losing faith in the possibility of peace with the United States, and reverting accordingly to preparations for a possible military confrontation. In practice this meant most of all focusing on developing missile and nuclear technology, because nuclear weapons are relatively cheap, militarily efficient, and politically extremely compelling. Becoming a great power was the ultimate goal, while songun was the practical tool for achieving it.

A year later, in Kim Jong Il's New Year Address in 2000, building the strong and prosperous great power was still the main theme, but the central focus in this address was no longer the economy, but rather technological development.⁸⁵ Development of the North Korean nuclear weapon did not proceed very rapidly, partly because rapprochement with South Korea during the year of the Sunshine policy indicated a possible way out, but once that possibility was closed by the Lee Myung-bak administration, there were no alternatives.

Especially during Kim Jong Un's leadership North Korea went for all out development of the nuclear and missile branch of the military force, as is well known.

The ultimate goal of the strong and prosperous great power was not laid aside, although vocabulary was changed somewhat. This tendency was especially pronounced during 2017, which started by Kim Jong Un announcing in his New Year Speech that "our country achieved the status of a nuclear power, a military giant in the East, which no enemy, however formidable, would dare to provoke", also stating that North Korea was getting ready for the test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile, capable of reaching the United States. In 2016 North Korea had conducted its first H-bomb test, tested various types of medium and long-range missiles, and launched successfully the earth observation satellite Kwangmyongsong-4. This had turned North Korea into a "space great power" (宇宙大國), and opened up a new era in North Korea's international existence, or in Kim Jong Un's words, "remarkably raised the strategic position of our country". He also announced that no outside pressure and sanctions would stop North Korea from developing its military potential further.⁸⁶

Asan Institute researchers Cha Doo-Hyun and Choe Gang point out that Kim's speech spelled out a clear will to engage in active confrontation with any hostile outside power, not only to passively respond to outside actions, which had previously been the tone of North Korean pronouncements. The message was directed foremost of course to the United States, but importantly also to China, which had displayed displeasure with North Korean nuclear weapon development. The concept of "self power" (自主 and 自強), which had made its first appearance in 2016, now appeared frequently in the text, implying a will to maintain North Korean autonomy towards China as well as toward the United States. This implied also that North Korea was ready to take the position of agenda setter in the international system. Because of its military and technological achievements, it was now qualified to deal with the rest of the world on its own terms, not following the agenda of any other state. Cha and Choe name this attitude "'Dominant Power' self hypnosis" (강대국 자기催眠),⁸⁷ but let's recall that this is exactly the kind of great power behaviour analysed by Kjellén and Toje. We may never have witnessed another statistically small state behaving in this kind of direct confrontational great power style, but here we see it, and this phenomenon is worth noting both in terms of theoretical understanding, and in terms of practical international politics.

In North Korean media the tone adopted at the beginning of the year continued throughout 2017. The supreme leader himself in a speech in June called DPRK the "world's most powerful state" (세계강대국), though he presented it as a future goal, not the immediate present.⁸⁸ The expression was taken up by the central party journal Rodong Sinmun, which repeated it, also calling the DPRK a "world class military power" (세계강대국 군사력).⁸⁹ During 2017 many poems hailed the DPRK as "the strongest state on earth" (지구강대국), "nuclear strong state of Juche" (핵강대국), "world class military power" (세계강대국 군사력), and claiming that "there is no state in the world that can match Korea" (세계에 한국을 이길 수 없는 나라).⁹⁰ There may indeed be a measure of "self-hypnosis" in these propagandistic expressions. The North Korean utterances presented here are of course speech acts in a classical Austinian sense.⁹¹ They are meaningful illocutionary hortatives, meant to create an effect on their readers, though certainly they are most effective domestically. They should also be seen as a way of building a strong unified will, which is a clear power resource in North Korea's type of juche politics. As Fyodor Tertitskiy points out, North Korean propaganda follows so scrupulously its own

fixed rules that its messages tend to be sensible only inside the country.⁹² The expressions and manner of argumentation are so fixed, deeply reverential to the Kimist ideology, and not very subtle, causing for the most part wonder or repulsion outside of North Korea. Yet, if not the exact wording, at least the content and the tone are something that is noticed outside, when added to the undeniable possession of nuclear weapons.

In September 2017 *Rodong Sinmun*, after the detonation of North Korea's last and largest hydrogen bomb test, announced victory over the United States: "The DPRK has won a shining victory in the standoff with the U.S. Now no one can disregard the immense national strength and potentiality of the DPRK and deny its strategic position as a responsible nuclear weapons state with great clout."⁹³

On 29 November 2017 North Korea test launched an intercontinental missile that flew about 53 minutes at the height of 4000 km on a lofted trajectory, falling in the Sea of Japan. With a lower trajectory it would have been able to reach Washington, D.C. At the same time it announced that it had completed its nuclear and missile development programme. After that it toned down its most aggressive announcements, and in his new year speech in 2018 Kim Jong Un called for détente between North and South Korea, offering to send a delegation to the South in connection with the Winter Olympics to discuss possible lessening of tensions.⁹⁴ That was the beginning of the current thaw in relations between North and South Korea as well as one in which US-North Korea negotiations reopened. However, Kim did this as the leader of a "responsible nuclear dominant power" (책임 있는 핵강대국), which is one way of highlighting a great power status. North Korea had simply moved towards international agenda setting, which is what great powers are entitled to do in international society. It is from this position that the diplomatic games of 2018 were played, and 2019 appears to continue in the same vein.

Conclusion

According to several of the theoretical criteria analysed above, North Korea can be understood as a great power. It has decades old policies of guarding steadfastly its independence and preparation for military conflict. It openly breaks international law when it deems that necessary. It has also systematically developed its military resources along the lines of these strategies. It is a unified state, at least in the sense that no serious political opposition or major ethnic or religious divisions are known to exist. This is a significant power resource, and because of that the DPRK leadership can behave with confidence in any international setting. It has a functioning economy; it is not rich, but it is far removed from the hunger years of the 1990s. It possesses nuclear weapons and means for their delivery. They are a great game changer, not only in a military sense, but also in the sense that they elevate status. This feat is heightened by the fact that North Korea has been able to develop its technology relatively rapidly in spite of the existence of an array of United Nations sanctions and related unilateral measures, especially by the United States, South Korea, Japan and occasionally China, displaying determination as well as considerable administrative and technical skill. It has shown that it is able to defy the United States on a long-term basis, having consistently done so already for over 60 years. This is not a minor feat.

North Korea also has clear weaknesses. It has no control of any significant international organization, and it can control international law only in a negative sense, by defying it. It cannot be considered an indisputable great power, but a small great power is a suitable

description for it. Furthermore, on the basis of what it is, and what it has, it is able to behave like a great power, in spite of its variable geometry.

This has serious implications on its future relationship with the United States. The pronouncements of the Trump administration vary depending on the person and the time, but the often-repeated basic demand of the United States is that North Korea must move towards complete and verified dismantling of its nuclear weapons capability before the lifting of sanctions can be contemplated. A possible peace treaty with North Korea is much farther on the horizon. On the other hand, "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" is what North Korea has been aiming at, and that expression is very different from "complete and verified denuclearization of North Korea." The latter has an empirical meaning, but the former, which is used by both Koreas as well as China, rather than being a definite concept, is rather a commonplace, an essentially undefined element within the rhetorical topography of the debate.⁹⁵ It is difficult to see that anything less than mitigating the tension with the United States and maintaining its acquired prestige would suffice for North Korea as a result of the ongoing diplomatic process. The practical measures would include in due time a treaty ending the Korean War, the establishment of US-DPRK diplomatic relations, and before long also carefully controlled international investment in the style that aided Singaporean, Chinese or Vietnamese development. These are all rather reasonable demands and might well induce North Korea to dismantle its nuclear weapons development facilities. North Korea appears to be strong enough to continue playing with all relevant countries on a bilateral basis and maintain its hold of the situation as it has for the past seven decades.

During 2018 the United States has attempted to play the same kind of cat and mouse games with the DPRK that it did during the Clinton and Bush administrations, trying to find out information of its military facilities – what the concept of reliable verification implies – while maintaining the sanctions regime, as Leon V. Sigal has shown.⁹⁶ The trouble with this strategy is that the mouse has grown much bigger and appears prepared to continue with the game for a new round, if necessary. As no party seems to be in any special hurry, a new cycle could well last for decades. Will the headlines in, say, 2039 again herald sensational new diplomatic peace initiatives in the Korean Peninsula? Or will we see a fundamental change in the parameters of the political game during 2019?

Addendum: March 1, 2019

The text of the article was finalized in February 2019, about a week before the Hanoi summit of 27-28 February. The fact that President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un ended their meeting without an agreement does not appear to us as a big surprise. There is still a gap in the American perception of North Korea, especially on the point of steadfastly maintaining the full array of international sanctions, which for North Korea are not only an economic issue, but also an issue of prestige and an indication of the existing level of confidence, which they appear to deem to be too low still. However, this gap also seems to be closing little by little. Both leaders treated each other with cordial respect, and the comments from both sides after the summit allowed ample leeway for further negotiations. As Rüdiger Frank suggests, we should view the summit not as a failure, but as a step along the process whereby US-North Korean relations are developing from infancy to maturity [‘US-North Korea Relations: From Infancy to Maturity’, 38North](#). A sensible historical precedent for this meeting would probably be the 1986 summit between President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in Reykjavik, Iceland. Also at that time the talks

collapsed and the leaders parted without an agreement, but both parties then knew much better the essential points of each other's positions and the array of domestic pressures they were facing, leading a year later to a positive breakthrough in their relations. This is also completely possible in the US-North Korean negotiations.

*

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Notes

¹ [United Nations \(Sep 19, 2017\) Donald Trump \(USA\) Addresses General Debate](#), 72nd session

² [Stimmekoreas \(Sep 16, 2017\) Kim Jong Un answers to 'dotard' Trump's first UN speech](#). Instead of "dotard", a more exact translation might be "old maniac".

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¹⁸ [International Monetary Fund \(2017\) World Economic Outlook Database](#).

¹⁹ [Eurostat \(2017\) EU population up to almost 512 million at 1 January 2017](#). Increase driven by migration.

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