

36. Országos Tudományos Diákköri Konferencia
Had- és Rendészettudományi Szekció
Budapest, 2023. április 18-20.
Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem
Rendészettudományi Kar

**NORTH KOREA'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY SITUATION IN
THE SHADOW OF THE CORONA CRISIS**

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Pályamunka lezárásának időpontja: 2023. 01. 08.

2023.

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1. INTRO

Isolated from the international community and its universally accepted fundamental values, the North Korean regime has been acting as a threat to the regional balance of power, and it endangers peace and security on global level through its nuclear aspiration. The recent events added another significant factor to the mixture, which is the Covid-19 outbreak. In my thesis, I would like to shed light on the complex issue that North Korea's nuclear ambitions, crisis points arising from its state instability - in general and during the outbreak - entail. Countless analyses and studies have been made focusing mainly on Pyongyang's nuclear program and the sanction politics. The aim of the research is to create a comprehensive work that assesses the consequences of the economic crisis and loss of foreign policy space in recent years in the context of the impact of regional conflicts and the coronavirus outbreak. The consequences of the pandemic came across while we examine the changes and shrinkage in North Korea's foreign policy leeway. It is an undeniable fact that even the isolated regime could not protect itself from the pandemic, in fact the virus has further exacerbated the state's instability. The pandemic targeted several weak points of the country for example: the poor medical infrastructure and the food supply among others. These sectors that serve society were already in a dire state pre-pandemic, so the outbreak only made the situation worse. The regime's income sources have seriously shrunk as a result of the crisis and the closed borders. For instance, the closed borders have disrupted one of the main ways the regime legally earns foreign cash, which is tourism¹; an article suggests that the lockdown has caused a loss of approximately 175 million dollars forcing the regime to resort to illicit activities. Restricting trade and reallocating the resources to the more heavily affected sectors has pushed the budget and the regime to the brink. Nevertheless, it is not only the budget that is in a vulnerable position, the economy has been experiencing momentary highs and massive lows for decades now. The problem does not stop here, the people have been struggling to overcome malnutrition, low living standards and extreme poverty as well. The regime and various sectors have been undergoing an unprecedented crisis under Kim Jong-un, so it is not unrealistic to claim that Kim needs to find other avenues of income.

Examining North Korea's close-knit alliance with China is inevitable in order to understand how the isolated state has been able to maintain its stance, despite the severe sanctions. Throughout the pandemic not even their profound relation could stand a chance against the

¹ North Korea suspends foreign tourism over coronavirus fears: Tour companies, The Straits Times, 3 February 2020, Source: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/north-korea-to-temporarily-ban-tourists-over-wuhan-virus-fears-says-tour-company>

rapid outbreak of the virus. North Korea implemented travel restrictions as soon as the official report of the Covid-19 virus was released from China. The economic difficulties caused by the UN sanctions only made the Kim regime more dependent on China, so the pandemic induced lockdowns have not played into Kim's hand at all. Adding the travel restrictions to the continuous UN sanctions create a deadly combination on the already fragile economy. The analysis will explore the state's relationship with China later in a chapter dedicated to this topic.

To gain a broader insight on the regime's struggle with the challenges caused by the pandemic, it is necessary to examine the inter-Korean relations in light of recent developments. North Korea's internal instability had negative effects on the overall stability of the South Asian region, especially South Korea's approach and foreign policy. In addition to this, the relationship between the two Koreas will be greatly influenced by conservative Yoon Suk-yeol, who narrowly won South Korea's 2022 presidential election. North Korea does not want the international community to consider the regime as a small power, so it aims to become a nuclear power for self-defence purposes claimed by the regime. Now with the lockdowns and concerning economic state of the world these ambitions could get irreversibly altered.

My hypothesis addresses Kim Jong-un's potential sources of income and his current foreign policy. Firstly, my work aims to prove that Kim tries to gain advantage and financial support from the Russian-Ukraine conflict in order to tackle with problems that the Covid-19 outbreak brought upon the country. The handling of the virus and the consequences it had on the sectors will be covered in detail. Secondly, my hypothesis states that North Korea's foreign policy leeway has shrunk, because of the continuous nuclear development and the coronavirus outbreak, which resulted in Kim Jong-un reaching a crossroad regarding his foreign policy. It is also important to gain insight from the other side: whether and how foreign powers concerned in the region intend to exploit the situation to shape their relations with the North Korean regime or to advance their own interests.

2. IDEOLOGY AND ITS EFFECT IN POLITICS

2.1. Circumstances of Creation

The regime as an individual centre of power was established after the end of the Japanese imperial rule in 1946. The post-occupation negotiations were aimed at unifying the two Koreas but at the end no meaningful dialogue was created between the Korean leaders. By 1948, both countries declared themselves as separate republics. Kim Il-sung – named as the Eternal President after his death - became the Prime Minister of the Democratic People's Republic of

Korea. The recognition of the state compared to its southern neighbour was a slower process the first ones to recognise the state's sovereignty were the Soviet Union and Hungary.

The state's ideology the Juche was first announced in December 1955, according to the President the North Korean people needed a Korea-centric ideology that served the country's own interests, rather than adapting a model that represented the interests of another states. Kim argued that Juche was a special interpretation of the Leninist approach, but meticulously applied to the Korean society, which has not experienced capitalism only the Japanese imperial rule and the Korean War. Self-reliance was put into effect as a consequence of Pyongyang's slow estrangement from Russia and since Beijing was not yet in a position to support the regime militarily. Kim Il-sung studied the Soviet and Chinese examples and concluded that the key to the future internal stability of the regime lies in the presence and successful integration of the successors. In simple terms, the Supreme Leader was correct because the political consequences of Stalin's and Mao's deaths were a vacuum in power and subsequent political reversal. The President wished to go from feudalism to socialism without experiencing capitalism, and to guarantee this notion the state ideology emphasised the principle of father-son succession and infiltrated every aspect of the population's life. One of the most important and most detrimental part of the Juche was that it elevated Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, the military and the Workers' Party of Korea to the highest position. Besides a severe caste system² was implemented in society, ranking the citizens based on age, gender, loyalty to the party, where they resided and other determinants. There is still a huge difference between the people who have the privilege to live in the capital and the ones who reside by the north-eastern border by Russia. The people who were placed high in ranking gained more in the distribution process. Regarding the social implications, the tight control meant foreign trends and progressive ideas couldn't infiltrate easily the minds of the people. The caste system also played a crucial role in the allocation of the medical resources and supplies for containment.

2.2. Political Determinant

The Juche's ideological background changed in tandem with the changes in the DPRK³'s foreign policy relations over the years. Under Nikita Khrushchev's destalinization efforts, USSR-DPRK relations worsened. As Kim was actively threatened not only by foreign powers, but also from within the Congress⁴, the leader strategically began to target his pro-Soviet and

² In Korean: songbun, the system of ascribed status which determines whether the person is trusted by the government and is given better opportunities, privileges within society based on their aforementioned factors.

³ DPRK in its official name Democratic People's Republic of Korea, using its abbreviation in the following.

⁴ Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea

pro-Chinese political enemies. Documents from the 1956 Congress proved that major changes have been made internally. Kim marginalised the members of the Soviet and Yan'an Factions⁵, moreover the remaining members' faced a serious loss of their influence at senior levels. Over half of the Congress delegates were under the age of 40 and most had limited education without any significant foreign connections, meaning they were easy to be controlled by Kim Il-sung. His political purge was hindered by Soviet and Chinese intervention efforts but due to a grass-root campaign Kim succeeded in eliminating the last significant source of opposition, and by 1958 him and his group exercised nearly total control over the political sphere.⁶ Nothing could stand in the way of expanding his personal cult and this was shown in the change of the slogan as well. The "Learn from the Soviet Union!" slogan was replaced in the 1960s to "Learn from the glorious revolutionary tradition founded by Kim Il-sung and his anti-Japanese partisans!" The message to the public and to the international community was now a clear advertisement of his sole and total control over the country and illustrated that Kim Il-sung is not one to be swayed or suppressed by foreign powers be it enemy or ally. In fact, the anti-Japanese bit was more than a nod to the origins of Kim and his party. On the one hand it was a guide for the people to cede control of their lives, decisions and free will, and on the other hand it filled the political directives with characteristics of the anti-Japanese guerrilla customs such as profound discipline, xenophobia, isolation, commitment to unending hardships and struggle in a world beset with hostility.⁷

2.3. Road to Independence

As expected, his ultimate goal went beyond ending internal political turmoil, and targeted his powerful allies for preventing the implementation of the Juche and disapproving of his expansion of power. Kim would describe the Juche at the beginning as 'a creative application of Marxism-Leninism', but later the Supreme Leader began to refer to it as his own creation that cannot be simply explained within the framework of Marxism-Leninism. Practically, Kim

⁵ Both the Soviet and the Yan'an Factions obstructed the advance of personality cult, therefore it was an urgent matter for Kim Il-sung to eliminate his enemies within the Congress. Since the destalinization process posed as an imminent threat to Kim's plans, the President expected an attack from the pro-Soviet group but his expectation was proved wrong because the Yan'an Faction became the most powerful within the opposition by gathering the majority. The pro-China faction strongly disapproved of the personality cult, because of the excessive industrialisation and how the subsidies from socialist countries were not used to improve the living standards. At the end the faction failed to gather majority in the General Committee and was out from the competition. Regarding the Soviet Faction it was made up of Soviet citizens with North Korean origins who were sent to join the faction from 1945 onwards. Most of them did not change their Soviet nationality. The faction was unable to win majority against the Ya'an Faction so the enforcement of destalinization process was a failure.

Csoma, M. (2016). *Korea, Egy nemzet, két ország – A közös gyökerektől*, Napvilág Kiadó, ISBN: 9789633383957

⁶ Buzo, A. (2016). *The Making of Modern Korea*. Third Edition, Asia's Transformations, ISBN: 9781317422778

⁷ Buzo, *The Making of Modern Korea*

implied “the assertion of the regime’s independence from the USSR”⁸ after he refused to yield to the Soviet-dictated prices for goods and materials.⁹ His stance on the ideological origins acted as a two-edged sword since he wanted to become less dependent on the USSR for technology, energy and raw materials, while the state was still in deep need of aid and the advantages the soviet bloc offered. Severing ties with the Soviet Union would limit the country’s already scarce trade opportunities and Kim’s revisionist ideas have not only gone against Moscow but successfully angered Beijing as well. Both powers argued that the state went beyond of theoretical and ideological aspects and instead was setting itself up for failure by going through with the independence process. As a result of Nixon’s rapprochement efforts with Beijing during 1970-1971 and Kissinger’s secret visit to China¹⁰ Kim’s resolve for independence and isolationism was strengthened since he had to realize he was left alone in the fight against American imperialism.

As Kim Il-sung deemed the process towards independence in politics requires independent national economy (self-sustainability) and the state to be capable of its own defence. The ambition of independence has greatly affected and limited the way North Korea is able to negotiate internationally, so naturally this change brought along the need for self-defence and later songun too.¹¹ Songun or military-first policy places the soldiers ahead of civilians in the hierarchy but it was only under Kim Jong-il’s leadership that the military-first policy and the military could gain more influence in the state apparatus. Essentially Juche is only effective if all three components are simultaneously and continuously present.

2.4. Entailments of the Cult of Personality

In theory the fundamental pillars seemed rock-solid, but in practice there was another crucial element to the ideology, which was Kim Il-sung’s divine role in this fragile complex.

⁸ French, P. (2007). *North Korea The Paranoid Peninsula – A Modern History*. Zed Books, p. 31, ISBN: 9781842779040

⁹ North Korea had observer status at Comecon (Council of Mutual Economic Assistance) until 1956. Comecon was the Eastern Bloc’s response to the Western Marshall Plan and OEEC (Organisation for European Economic Co-operation). All members were united by the common fundamental class interests and the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Since DPKR was not a full member the regime was invited to participate only as an observer in the Comecon sessions. Economic integration was not imposed on non-members, since in most cases these states were industrially and infrastructurally underdeveloped.

¹⁰ All in all, Nixon’s contact making efforts appeared to be fruitless, so the President ordered Henry Kissinger in September 1970 to relaunch the endeavour. Kissinger finally reached a milestone after trying to make progress through several foreign channels: the Pakistani channel provided Kissinger with an opportunity to communicate with Beijing. Soon after, slow but successful communication between the countries began.

The Beijing-Washington Back-Channel and Henry Kissinger’s Secret Trip to China, National Security Archive Electronics Briefing Book No. 66, Edited by William Burr, 27 February 2002, Source: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/>

¹¹ French, *North Korea The Paranoid Peninsula*

Countless portraits of Kim Il-sung in households, schools, museums and gyms served as proof of the – obligatory - devotion people were filled with. The Supreme Leader's powerful but fatherly character was also praised in musicals, television programs and songs reminding the people how respectable and indispensable the leader aimed to be. There was nowhere within the country, where the residents could escape from his watchful eyes. More or less, the people followed the regime's orders all throughout the ups and downs of Kim Il-sung's rule. They believed that he saved the country from the absolute demise with his revolutionary and brave economic actions, ignoring that the regime received continuous and huge support from China, the Soviet Union and from the other states of the soviet bloc including the German Democratic Republic too. The legacy of the personal cult Kim Il-sung carefully worked on throughout his life has forever altered the mind-sets of North Koreans for generations to come. Kim Il-sung and his family successfully became inalienable of people's everyday lives, additionally the patriarchal state cemented this father-children hierarchical concept, where the people as the children behaved loyally and followed every word and instruction of their dear father: Kim Il-sung and his successors. Their father was God-like, unshakeable, his words considered as law, be it a praise or punishment that came from him it was justified since he was infallible, always correct by his right and status.¹²

This dependant mind-set caused the immense despair and loss that followed Kim Il-sung's death in 1994. However, in preparation for Kim Jong-il's rise to power the well-orchestrated process of power succession started years before Kim Il-sung's death. By the 1960's Kim Jong-il was put in charge of the cultural scene, then the heir gradually gained himself several senior posts in the Presidium¹³, the Secretariat of the Workers' Party for Korea and the Military Commission. At the 6th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea Kim Il-sung officially pronounced him as his successor. In December 1991 he was appointed as the Commander-in-Chief of the Korean People's Army then not much later his father publicly stated that he was in charge of all internal affairs in the Democratic People's Republic. As mentioned before, the theoretical background for the military-first policy had already been developed in the 1960s, but it was only under Kim Jong-il's rule in the 1990s, that it was put into practice. Kim Jong-il, who was also referred to as the Dear Leader, believed that the military had superior priority and that all sectors should serve its interest. Originally, the Dear Leader inherited the position as a military leader since at the time of the Eternal President's death he was the chairman of the

¹² Pak H. (2020) *Békeszerető atomhatalom? – Kim Dzsongun Észak-Koreája*, I.P.C Könyvek Kft. ISBN: 9789636357412

¹³ Officially named the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the Workers' Party of Korea

National Defence Commission. The military did have a great deal of involvement in everything from infrastructure development to food distribution. *Despite his bias for the songun, Kim was unable to fully control the military throughout his reign, and multiple coups and assassinations were attempted but failed.* This is where father and son differed the most: while the Eternal President *utilized* the military and the political institutions as mere tools and consolidated all power in his hands, under his son's leadership the military effectively acquired support from Kim Jong-il.¹⁴

2.5. Religion for Stability

Under the second-generation of the Kim leadership, the Juche has officially risen to the level of national religion, as the leader believed that the most effective way to achieve the regime's goals is for people to follow the instructions of the party and the leader in a servant-like manner. Philo Kim in his analysis stated that religious traces appeared long before Kim Jong-il's desperate measures when the Workers Party of Korea introduced the new phrase "The great leader comrade Kim Il-sung shall be with us forever". The phrase deliberately immortalized Kim Il-sung's presence and impact into North Korea's history. Professor Kim claimed that this way the regime not only praised Kim "as a historical leader and national leader but as an object of godly worship."¹⁵ However scholars state that the ideology does not fit into the usual schema of religion, Kim has infused it with several religious elements for the people to have an even deeper and more sacred attachment towards the regime.¹⁶ Simply put, Kim expected greater compliance from the people by placing it into the level of state religion. Numerous ritual forms and ways prove the religious nature of the Juche and Kim Il-sung's divine persona. In the previous subchapter "Entailments of Personality Cult" we discussed the extents to which the Supreme Leader was part of the daily life of families. Juche's cult-like aspect became apparent during the economic crash of the 1990s, when the party declared at a press conference that the country is not threatened by the economic crisis and the Kim regime is politically remains unchanged and stable. Prioritising military over basic human needs, like food, education is a recurring theme for the Kim family.

¹⁴ Csoma, *Korea, Egy nemzet, két ország – A közös gyökerektől*

¹⁵ Kim P. (2002) An Analysis of Religious Forms of Juche Ideology In Comparison With Christianity, International Journal of Korean Unification Studies, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 127-144, Source: <https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/8881/7/0001477226.pdf>

¹⁶ Hendricks S. Is Juche the state religion of North Korea?, Big Think, 14 May 2019, Source: <https://bigthink.com/the-present/juche-religion/>

2.6. Era of Kim Jong-un

After the death of Kim Jong-il the third generation of dynasty brought controversial changes to the country. It was revealed in 2009 that Kim Jong-un was the chosen who would follow his father's footsteps but he had to wait until 2012 to officially seize power. Just like his father Kim Jong-un gradually integrated into the state apparatus: supposedly he started working either for the Workers Party of Korea or in the General Political Bureau. Next on the list was the Supreme People's Assembly and the National Defence Commission and by 2010 he was called the "Brilliant Comrade" by party members and was granted the position of the head of the State Security Department, which was responsible for political control and counterintelligence.¹⁷ Despite all the crucial posts he collected over the years Kim had little political and military experience, so to compensate his youth and lack of experience and to gain the people's acceptance the party members and officials started to point out the "striking" similarities between him and his grandfather, suggesting that the Eternal President reincarnated in him. In his political debut in 2012, Kim already laid down the determinants of his leadership and politics. Above everything stood the strengthening of the military and asserting North Korea's place in the international power dynamics by developing superior military technologies. Kim claimed that gone were the days when North Korea's enemies could blackmail the country with nuclear bombs.¹⁸ The multiple references of his strong resemblance to his grandfather and the confident, but intimidating message were meticulously cultivated by the nomenclature to balance out his young age and youthful looks.

Due to Kim Jong-un's lack of experience and exposure to foreign impressions during his school years, the international community and sceptics predicted Kim would not have a long and prosperous career. Under the many doubting eyes Kim had to go the extra mile to prove himself and he achieved this by eliminating his political rivals and weaker links, just like his father and grandfather did. The execution of the high profile politician Jang Song-thaek¹⁹ conveyed a powerful message both to the domestic politics and to the international community

¹⁷ Murray L, Kim Jong-Un, Britannica, Last updated: 12 August 2022, Source: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kim-Jong-Eun>

¹⁸ Choe S., North Korean Leader Stresses Need for Strong Military, The New York Times, 15 April 2012, Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/16/world/asia/kim-jong-un-north-korean-leader-talks-of-military-superiority-in-first-public-speech.html>

¹⁹ Jang Song-thaek the uncle of Kim Jong-un was killed in late 2013. Jang was a determining figure during the regime transition after the death of the Eternal President, many experts claimed that he could have even become a possible successor to Kim Jong-il even though the ideological terms would not allow Jang as he is an outsider of the Kim family. Numerous speculations were created but it is safe to say that his close ties with Beijing would have made the country more reliant and compliant to its northern ally. By executing him and his entire circle Kim claimed that he „removed the scum” from the KWP. - Murray L. Kim Jong-un, Britannica, Last updated: 12 August 2022. Source displayed in Footnote 17.

as well. Jang was a prominent member of Kim Jong-il's inner circle with authority, so his execution symbolized that there is no key figure pulling the strings in the background only Kim Jong-un, who follows his own interests and ambitions. Optimists thought that Jang Song-thaek was the last chance for the country to introduce real reforms and open up to the world. At the end, Pyongyang chose a new path which has ruled out the confrontation of Kim's ideas and the possibility of power struggle behind the scenes.

3. WHAT THE NUCLEAR ASPIRATIONS BROUGHT UPON THE NATION

3.1. Between a rock and a hard place

In the 60s North Korea was the more economically advanced²⁰ on the Korean-Peninsula, unfortunately for the regime this remarkable process took a major turn for the worse in the 70s, as the state became practically insolvent. Despite the recurring failure of planned economy and the decades-long famine the government did not adjust its expenditures and continued to allocate 30-35 percent of the budget to military and non-productive investments. Of course, we have to keep in mind that data accessibility is a constant problem for North Korea, and that is why critical approach is required for all data inspection. The dark ages of the 70s did not end with the start of the new decade due to the changing political and worsening economic circumstances. Substantial nuclear ambitions of the party-state can be linked to the huge shortfall in the power output after the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War in 1991. Around the late 1980s and early 1990s came the sequence of political changes, democratization in South Korea, overthrow of leaders in the soviet bloc. Simply put the former socialist states started opening up to the West. In this strange new world order North Korea, unwilling to reform, decided that integrating with the outside world would do more harm than good for the regime so to preserve the nomenclature and "internal stability" Kim Jong-il opted in favour of isolation.²¹ Yet the dictatorial framework and means of the past have proved to be no longer adequate to maintain the nomenclature in the changing environment. Obviously, both Kims knew the dire conditions the country has to operate with, despite the gloomy future the regime chose its own survival instead of focusing on economic reforms and accepting progressive western initiatives. The Kims had many adequate tools at hand to guarantee their position in power, besides expanding culture of fear and songun Kim Jong-il has hidden his ulterior motives behind the lofty objectives of Juche as well. As previously stated as a result of the unstable times the Juche was elevated into the level of national religion to further compel

²⁰ A more detailed insight on the economic aspect of the state in later chapters.

²¹ Pak, *Békeszerető atomhatalom? – Kim Dzsongun Észak-Koreája*

the people to obey. Tightening control over people, wedging distrust among neighbours and expanding the scope of the monitoring authorities has also turned out to be effective tools as well.

In terms of infrastructure, DPRK's outdated, poorly managed facilities, massive underdevelopment of alternative energy sources and lack of maintenance capacity exacerbated the situation. As a result the public was forced to endure blackouts, the fuel for transportation vehicles was strictly rationed. In 1999, the electricity generation declined by 60 percent compared to the numbers in 1990. Under the Japanese rule the economy was on the rise but by the 1970s the once advanced technology and power stations became antiquated and could no longer serve their purpose. The regime received semi-constructed power stations from the USSR too, however since they were finished with locally sourced off-grade parts the machinery often malfunctioned. The Pyongyang Thermal Power Plant frequently failed to provide the capital with the power it required. The regime – to this day - possesses oil and gas reserves and in the 1990s has invited several foreign investors to help develop these reserves. Unfortunately, the cooperation came with challenges such as the regime's antiquated equipment and the inaccessible government-protected vital data. Altogether, the shortcomings and weak points at the time could be attributed to the emerging autarky.²² Obviously, the regime struggled with the production of primer energy sources and failed to manage its power stations thus Kim Jong-il had to resort to alternative energy sources. As stated, a lot of machinery was built or brought in during the Japanese rule so the out-of-date machinery often have not met with the planned expectations. For instance, the first water power station was built under the Japanese occupation and was the biggest hydroelectric generating station in Asia at that time. Sadly, the technology became outdated and mismanaged by the 70s, so hydropower was not viable to be the main alternative choice. The same can be said to the other alternative power sources too: the regime did not possess any substantial wind or solar power producers, also its expertise and foreign contacts were and are limited to this day as well, thus the only real option the regime had under consideration – given its ulterior motives as well - was nuclear power. After all, only nuclear power could serve a dual function, both industrial and military at once.

3.2. Going Nuclear

Nuclear weapons played a determining part in international security during the latter half of the twentieth century but in current times the role changed in parallel to the evolution of military technology and the geopolitical changes. According to Stephen Younger for the United

²² French, *North Korea The Paranoid Peninsula*, 100-103 p.

States “nuclear weapons represent the ultimate defense of the nation, a deterrent against any and all potential adversaries”.²³ However, this is a very one-sided approach the United States as a great power that is a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty can follow this understanding of nuclear weapons. For the regime, possessing a nuclear arsenal is to blackmail the international community and ensure the regime’s survival. North Korea withdrew from the Treaty in 2003, because it did not wish to comply with its requirements and instructions to only use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Another approach claims – rightfully so - that nuclear weapons allowed the weak to compensate for conventional inferiority²⁴ (whether it is real or perceived). Indeed, after the 90s North Korea fell back in comparison to its southern neighbour’s economic development. Instead of correct economy policy measures, the regime compensated for the loss of status in the region by enhancing the military and reinforcing its authority with dictatorial means. In addition to this, perception of threat is a very crucial part of the DPRK’s nuclear ambitions and will be discussed in later subchapter, for now let us focus on how the regime started out on the path to its nuclear dreams.

Although the previous subchapter stated that nuclear development became more prominent under the second Kim rule, the origins of the nuclear ambitions date back even earlier. North Korea signed a cooperation agreement on the peaceful use of nuclear energy in 1955, under which Moscow has sent a number of Soviet experts to Pyongyang to share knowledge and train scientists. Not much later in 1959 Kim took a step forward with the signing of the second nuclear agreement with the USSR, which provided assistance to build a research reactor near the town of Yongbyon. During this period, the nuclear endeavours were in principle directed towards the peaceful use of nuclear science and technology but ultimately Kim’s plan went further than that. The power dynamics on the Korean Peninsula became unbalanced with South Korea hosting U.S. tactical nuclear weapons and starting to conduct nuclear weapons research.²⁵ As a consequence, the Kims considered nuclear weapons as a way of guaranteeing North Korean (essentially the Kim family’s) security. The nuclear progress soon met with many roadblocks as suddenly the USSR did not comply with Kim’s request to set up a nuclear power

²³ Younger S. (2020) Nuclear Weapons in the Twenty-First Century, Associate Laboratory Director for Nuclear Weapons Source: <https://nuke.fas.org/guide/usa/doctrine/doe/younger.htm>

²⁴ The Utility of Nuclear Weapons and the Strategy of No-First-Use, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Source: <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/utility-nuclear-weapons-and-strategy-no-first-use>

²⁵ Wertz D., McGrath M. & LaFoy S. (2018) North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons Program, National Committee on North Korea, Source: https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/issue-briefs/NCNK_IssueBrief_NorthKoreaNuclearWeapons_April2018.pdf

plant in 1967. Over the years the regime has persistently but unsuccessfully tried to persuade Moscow to give them assistance and support for their nuclear plant plans.²⁶

The next phase of the nuclear program started in the 1970s when Kim saw an opportunity in joining the global nuclear non-proliferation regime in order to develop nuclear deterrence so in 1974 joined the International Atomic Energy Agency (later IAEA). Then in 1977, North Korea signed a trilateral agreement with the IAEA and the USSR which resulted in the reactor in Yongbyon being put under IAEA safeguards. While the agency supervised the reactor's utilisation of nuclear energy, the North Korean scientists sent to Geneva gathered information which was later used in the construction of the nuclear power that produced weapons-grade plutonium. By the 1980s it became evident for the observers that the notion of 'peaceful uses' was only a pretext for acquiring the necessary technology as demonstrated by the fact that the energy generated by nuclear means would have been sufficient for a few weeks only.

Another milestone was signing the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons²⁷ (later NPT) in 1985, wherein the regime committed itself not to develop nuclear weapons. Ultimately the Kim regime turned away from these values and objectives as the technology has continued to develop. Washington declared in 1991 that it will withdraw the American nuclear weapons from South Korea after both Koreas signed an agreement to fully denuclearize the peninsula. The NPT's requirements implicated that North Korea granted access to all its nuclear facilities, but in practice the regime refused to fully comply and threatened with withdrawing from the treaty. Considering North Korea's reluctance to guarantee access and its strong stance for nuclear energy developments it was not surprising that ultimately the regime did not go through with the commitments and tried to gain advantage from the stalemate. To persuade the regime to cooperate and freeze its nuclear activities the United States agreed to supply the state with 1 million tonne of heavy fuel oil annually. At the end the deal was not long-lived and by the start of the 2000s the U.S. ceased the supplies because North Korea once again violated the terms of the agreement by undermining the security of the region. The last nail in the coffin was DPRK quitting the Non-proliferation Treaty in 2003, after which Kim openly pursued

²⁶ Revisiting History: North Korea and Nuclear Weapons, Wilson Center, 3 November 2010, Source: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/revisiting-history-north-korea-and-nuclear-weapons>

²⁷ The treaty's objective is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, to promote cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament. Furthermore each state possessing nuclear weapons commits that it will not transfer directly nor indirectly nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices to any person. In regards to the member states who do not possess nuclear weapons they pledge to not acquire nuclear weapons in exchange for their right to use nuclear technology for peaceful uses and to develop.

Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, Source: <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/>

nuclear technology development for military purposes and engaged in intimidating missile and nuclear tests as a sign of defiance and superiority. It was suspected by the U.S. that Kim could possess some prototype nuclear devices long before the regime declared in 2005 that it had manufactured nukes as a nuclear deterrence for self-defence purposes.

Timeline of the nuclear testing²⁸

1. 2006 October: North Korea announced that it conducted its first nuclear test in North Hamgyong Province, the explosion was underground and detected to reach a low explosive yield of about 1 kiloton with a small amount of radioactive output. Since other nuclear states executed tests ranging from 10-20 kiloton some say that Kim's first test was more like a fizzle.
2. 2009 May: The second underground nuclear test in Kilju – north-eastern region of the country – with a much larger 2-8 kiloton range. The test was carried out during the difficulties of the succession process and intended to send a message to the international community that the status quo is unchanged despite the precarious state of succession.
3. 2013 February: The regime claimed to detonate a miniaturized nuclear device, which was later confirmed by the South Korean authorities. The explosion was considered as an act of defiance in response to the United Nations Security Council's ultimatum, which ordered the state to stop its nuclear activity or be prepared for more severe sanctions and international isolation. The test had the kiloton range of 6-9 and created an earthquake of 4.9 magnitude.
4. 2016 January: North Korean state television claimed that Kim successfully conducted and which with North Korea is finally able to protect itself from the U.S. and other enemies. Although the regime has insisted that it was a hydrogen bomb they detonated South Korean observers have questioned its credibility. The kiloton range was said to reach 11-12 but the magnitude was measured at 5.1. The Japanese government also questioned the credibility of the test because environmental detectors have not sensed any radiation. American analysts do not believe it either that a hydrogen bomb was detonated.
5. 2016 September: Within eight months Kim Jong-un executed another nuclear test, which was said to be a "higher level" nuclear warhead test explosion. The explosion

²⁸ CBS News: A timeline of North Korea's nuclear tests, Updated on: 3 September 2017, Source: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/north-koreas-nuclear-tests-timeline/>

could have been a response to the U.S.-ROK joint military exercise. It generated a 5.3 seismic tremor with 10-20 kiloton.

6. 2017 September: A year later the regime set off its “second” hydrogen bomb and compared to the previous explosions this has been the biggest one as of yet, with its 100-150 kiloton generating a seismic tremor of 6.3 magnitude.

The analysis done by the ISDS (SVKI)²⁹ determined the first five nuclear tests to be conventional single-stage devices, while the last one is believed to a higher-tech hydrogen bomb based on the principle of nuclear fusion. According to the analysis in this case we are talking about a two-stage weapon, which requires a more sophisticated technology. Hydrogen bombs can achieve the power of the nuclear weapons based on nuclear fission with a bomb that weighs less, and this way the warhead containing the fissile material can be installed on an intercontinental ballistic missile. After the second nuclear test with the alleged miniaturized nuclear device the opinion on Kim’s nuclear capabilities was divided. In late 2014, The Defense Intelligence Agency stated with moderate confidence that whilst North Korea has nuclear weapons capable of delivery by ballistic missiles the reliability of that is very low. Military commanders of the US Force Korea remained sceptical and claimed that they believe Kim has both the capability of miniaturizing and delivering a device but have yet to show it off.³⁰ Overall, the cost of believing that Kim has not reached the required level of technology to get there is too high. By the third test in 2016 the regime aimed to intimidate the sceptics and claimed to conduct its first widely disputed hydrogen bomb test. There is simply no consensus among the U.S. Agencies and researchers on the real and perceived capabilities and nuclear assets of North Korea. What we can learn from the nuclear tests that the steady evolution of the nuclear weapons clearly displays North Korea’s dedication of becoming a nuclear power despite the international condemnation and severe sanctions the United Nations launched in response. Recently, the regime has passed a law declaring the country a nuclear weapons state. The law legitimised to use pre-emptive nuclear strike for the regime to protect itself.³¹ Obviously, the turn of events has made the denuclearisation process even more complex for the international community.

²⁹ Háda B., Péczeli A. & Tálás P. (2017) Észak Korea: az önmagába zárt atomhatalom, Stratégiai Védelmi Kutatóközpont Elemzések 2017/21. Source: <https://svkk.uni-nke.hu/document/svkk-uni-nke-hu-1506332684763/svkk-elemzesek-2017-21-eszak-korea-az-onmagaba-zart-atomhatalom-hada-b-peczeli-a-talas-p.original.pdf>

³⁰ Kristensen H., Norris R. (2018) North Korean nuclear capabilities, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 74:1, 41-51, DOI: 10.1080/00963402.2017.1413062

³¹ BBC News, North Korea declares itself a nuclear weapons state, 9 September 2022, Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62845958>

3.3. There is No Action Without Reaction

As we know, North Korea being a threat to the regional and international security can be attributed to two factors: one is its missile development program, and the other is its unwavering nuclear weaponry. The incorporation of nuclear warheads into intercontinental ballistic missiles poses a grave threat not just to the U.S. but to any state that Kim considers a danger to his authority. The imposition of broad-based sanctions was the most appropriate way of countering the threat posed by the DPRK's arms development. While the imposition of sanctions is fundamentally effective in isolating targets in many cases, this effectiveness can be undermined if some countries neglect to fully implement them and companies continue doing business with the target. Additionally Clara Portela states in her work that the dictatorial leadership often uses the sanctions as a pretext to tighten control over the population and to present them as the causes of the exacerbating conditions.³² The United Nations and the United States have launched a handful of financial and economic sanctions on the state to enforce its denuclearisation.

United Nations sanctions on North Korea

1) Resolution 1718 - 14 October 2006 ³³

- Condemns North Korea's first nuclear test and imposes sanctions, including on the supply of heavy weaponry, luxury goods, missile technology and material

2) Resolution 1874 - 12 June 2009 ³⁴

- Expands measures related to arms' exports and imports to all arms and related material
- Bans financial transactions, technical training, advices and other assistance except for small arms and light weapons and their related materiel
- Severe inspection of all cargo – seaports and airports - to and from the DPRK

3) Resolution 2087 - 22 January 2013 ³⁵

- Condemns DPRK's satellite launch and proliferation activities
- Expands measures related to Member States' rights to seize and destroy material suspected of being connected to the DPRK's weapons development or research

³² Portela C., (2011) Impact of Sanctions and Isolation Measurement with North Korea, Burma/Myanmar, Iran and Zimbabwe as Case Studies. Research Collection School of Social Sciences. Paper 1685. Source: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/1685

³³ S/RES/1718 (2006), United Nations Security Council, Source: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/1718-%282006%29>

³⁴ S/RES/1874 (2009) United Nations Security Council, Source: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/1874-%282009%29>

³⁵ S/RES/2087 (2013), United Nations Security Council, Source: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2087-%282013%29>

4) Resolution 2094 - 7 March 2013 ³⁶

- Imposes targeted financial sanctions, asset freezes and travel bans on three individuals and two firm linked to North Korea's military
- Banned more items relating nuclear, ballistic missile and other weapons of mass destruction

5) Resolution 2270 - 2 March 2016 ³⁷

- Tightens sanctions in addition to condemning North Korea's fourth nuclear test and its 2015 test of a submarine-launched missile
- Expands arms embargo and non-proliferation measures, including small arms and light weapons, dual-use nuclear/missile items among other items

6) Resolution 2321 - 30 November 2016 ³⁸

- Bans exports of minerals, helicopters, and other items in response to North Korea's fifth nuclear test
- Expands cargo inspection

7) Resolution 2321/2371/2397 from 2017 ³⁹

- The resolutions expanded measures and completely banned certain exports that were previously restricted, such as coal, iron, and seafood
- Introduced new restrictions on oil imports and on metal, agricultural, and labor exports

In 2022, the United States tried to implement a resolution that would have imposed more sanctions including bans on tobacco and oil imports into North Korea but China and Russia vetoed it. Additionally the U.S., South Korea and Japan also introduced tough unilateral sanctions on North Korea. These sanctions restrict a wider range of economic activities and target more individuals and businesses. The difference between the UN and the U.S. sanctions are that Washington have implemented some of it in response to North Korean cyberattacks. Furthermore the U.S. have tried several times to compromise with Pyongyang by partially lifting sanctions in exchange for North Korea's commitment to freeze its nuclear program and

³⁶ S/RES/2094 (2013), United Nations Security Council, Source: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2094-%282013%29>

³⁷ Council on Foreign Relations, What to Know About Sanctions on North Korea, Last updated: 27 July 2022 Source: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/north-korea-sanctions-un-nuclear-weapons>

³⁸ S/RES/2321 (2016), United Nations Security Council, Source: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2321-%282016%29>

³⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, What to Know About Sanctions on North Korea, Source displayed in Footnote 37.

dismantle some of its facilities. Pyongyang, on the other hand, has regularly broken its pledges. Although the ban on arms import from DPRK causes a great loss for the regime, the seized shipments represent only a fraction of hundreds of billion dollars' worth of illegal arms exports Pyongyang makes by exporting to third world countries. Thus the sanctions imposed have only made trade more difficult, not impossible. It should be pointed out that the North Korean leadership was already under US sanctions during the Korean War and although the restrictions were eased they never completely disappeared. Therefore the regime was no stranger to how to conduct its business and evade the regime with varying degrees of success, even with sanctions imposed for its nuclear program.

Kim Jong-un has carried out more missile and nuclear tests than his father and grandfather combined, though one reason for this may be the slow technological development of the early days. An article published from the Council on Foreign Relations suggests that the sanctions might result the opposite of their intended effect and could push Kim to pursue a more aggressive approach. This is a logical argument as the tougher sanctions only increase the regime's sense of threat, which spurs more reckless and belligerent actions from Kim in order to ensure the survival of the regime.⁴⁰ In the next subchapter, the paper aims to shed light on what defines a leader's perception of threat and the dangers North Korea's misconception may entail.

3.4. Perception of Threat

When a leadership perceives obstacles or barriers to its interest and values, the main priority is to identify and eliminate the threat that stands in the way of its objectives. The main questions in this case are:

- Who poses the threat to the political establishment or to another target area?
- Examining the factors at risk, the second question is why the perpetrator threatens them?
- How can the threatened actor eliminate the threat or if unable to eliminate them how can it manipulate the situation to ensure that the factors at risk continue to prevail?

Fundamentally, these are the questions that first comes to mind when a leader perceives that his authority is endangered whether it is perceived or real threat. The tools used for creating a perception depend on the leader's view on foreign and domestic politics and his priorities too. Objectives are determined by priorities and priorities are defined by beliefs and interests. These

⁴⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, What to Know About Sanctions on North Korea, Source displayed in Footnote 37.

factors build up a framework that “emphasizes the possible gains or possible losses”.⁴¹ Professor Kim Yongho in his paper contends that by analysing the matrix of gains and losses, we can determine which method is best suited to solve the problem.⁴² Unfortunately, in many cases, theoretical conclusions and scenarios will differ from decisions made in practice because a number of factors may be involved that are more important than initially thought or were not even considered.

In present example, North Korea’s framework is set up by the pillars of Juche and pursued in the name of songun. Juche is constructed to serve the Kim family’s interest and their entitlement to hereditary power. Juche and songun will be prioritised as long as the regime perceives that it is at risk by an imperial power. As we all know, the United States has long been the dominant imperial power. Although, it is difficult to fully assess the regime’s true military numbers and capacity thanks to the excessive display of power through military parades and drills, most agree that even if it’s a matter of “cheap” threats it is better to be safe than sorry. The argument is reinforced by the fact that North Korea is one of the few countries, which openly and continuously has threatened the United States and its allies with military retribution.⁴³ Agreeing with Professor Kim the key point really is understanding that whilst the country might not possess the capacity that it believes to have what important is that the regime lives in the belief that it can. Once we recognize this we realise the lengths to which the regime is willing to go for its goals if its interest or beliefs appear to be in danger. Many experts have made the mistake of misinterpreting DPRK’s perception of threat, but we all can agree on one matter, which is that the Kim “family prioritizes their political survival over the survival of the North Korean state”.⁴⁴ Considering how the state apparatus and belief system is shaped to enable Kim Il-sung and his successors to exercise unlimited authority, this framework is passed from father to son with minor adjustments due to external circumstances, but generally the basic formula does not and presumably will not change as long as the Kim family is in power.

⁴¹ Kim Y. (2013) North Korea's Threat Perception and Provocation Under Kim Jong-un: The Security Dilemma and the Obsession with Political Survival, North Korean Review Vol. 9, No. 1, McFarland & Company, Quote from page 7, Source: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43908903#metadata_info_tab_contents

⁴² Kim Y. (2013) North Korea's Threat Perception and Provocation Under Kim Jong-un, Source displayed in Footnote 41.

⁴³ Háda B., Péczeli A. & Tálas P. (2017) Észak Korea: az önmagába zárt atomhatalom, Stratégiai Védelmi Kutatóközpont Elemzések 2017/21. Source displayed in Footnote 29.

⁴⁴ Kim Y. (2013) North Korea's Threat Perception and Provocation Under Kim Jong-un, Quote from page 8, Source displayed in Footnote 41.

4. CONDITIONS CREATED BY THE CORONA VIRUS

4.1. Global Health Diplomacy

The impact of Covid-19 has revived and deepened the international attention to global responsibility for common humanity between the developed and third world countries. In the spirit of global responsibility the World Health Organization (WHO) acted as the main advocate for states to put their national interests aside and prioritise international cooperation. In their study⁴⁵ regarding International Relations and Covid-19, Davies and Wenham concluded that despite the vast volume of research on the aspects of preparation, prevention and communication, the concerned health institutions do not adopt the results and suggestions into practice. Without corrective measures there will remain an unbridgeable gap between global health and public health systems. Besides, the pair of authors claim that sufficient measures require comprehensive political cooperation, not isolationism. They supported the approach by reflecting on the WHO director-general's statement where he slammed accusers over criticism the organization received: "COVID-19 politics should be quarantined...Politics and partisanship has made things worse."⁴⁶ Nonetheless, critics still argued that WHO failed to fulfil its role and allowed China to influence its decisions. The study concluded that in this context we have to recognize that international organizations operate in a fiercely combative and divisive political world order and their principles and objectives are not necessarily based or should be based on political values and motives. In general, the global pandemic created a particular situation where humanitarian norms and directives have weighted more heavily in the global politics, nonetheless it is unlikely for states to absolutely disregard their national interests and grievances in a highly interconnected but antagonistic world even if it is in the name of a morally noble goal. Davies and Wenham accepted the ineradicable political nature of global health diplomacy too, because the political factor has not prevented the process of cooperation on global level. This duality was apparent in the procurement conditions attached to foreign aid. The same criticism surfaced about China's "mask-diplomacy" referring to the perception of ulterior motives behind China's dispatch of masks and other health and protective equipment to European countries. China's aim was to repair the damage to its international

⁴⁵ Davies S.E., Wenham C. (2020) – Why the COVID-19 response needs International Relations, *International Affairs*, Volume 96, Issue 5, Source: <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/96/5/1227/5901405>

⁴⁶ Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Chief Slams Pompeo Over 'Unacceptable' Allegations on Chinese Influence, Bloomberg Quicktake: Now, 23 July 2020, Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwsBrOak9FU>

image caused by the virus. However, examining similar historical examples as well we can conclude that global health diplomacy from time and time again embraces its political nature.⁴⁷

ABC News Australia released an interview⁴⁸ with Professor Robert Kelly from Pusan University where he stated that North Korea coming forward with its struggles and confirmed but suspiciously low numbered cases indicates that the situation is worse than how the regime tried to sell it to the international media. Since the regime cannot generate internally what it needs and is not set up with the essential networks and functional medical aid distribution to maintain a lockdown for a longer period of time Kim must seek out help from its allies or from other donor states. Considering North Korea's security threat to the international community the trade in vaccines and foreign aid has provided too great of an opportunity for other states not to try to engage in détente with the regime. This strategic action was indicated by the US too, when Biden urged South Korea to exploit its humanitarian aid offers to ease the inter-Korean relations and create effective dialogue with the northern state. North Korea responded in outrage stating that the regime did not want to be a part of the West's "sinister political schemes".⁴⁹ Not long after the first official case dropped in the isolated state the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement refusing foreign aid because of the lack of trust Pyongyang has in the West. Amidst the competition of vaccine and foreign aid offers the western countries and WHO-led COVAX vaccine sharing program faced a serious disadvantage against Beijing, since from the start the regime was only ever open for discussion about accepting foreign aid and vaccines if the donor country was its closest ally, China. Therefore, the competition has already had its winner even before the first reported case.

4.2. Leadership During The Outbreak

Examining Kim Jong-un's political approaches and priorities, we can claim that he follows an autocratic leadership style. The party-state is based on the principle of centralization, so the decision-making powers are concentrated in one hand. In Kim's dictatorship the military and media control lie in his hands so it's up to the leader what kind of news and information he feeds the population with. Worth noting that the country shares news not only through television

⁴⁷ Davies S.E., Wenham C. (2020) – Why the COVID-19 response needs International Relations, International Affairs, Volume 96, Issue 5, Source displayed in Footnote 45.

⁴⁸ ABC News (Australia) World Health Organisation warns COVID-19 may spread rapidly in North Korea, 16 May 2022, Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27vAaOqQzVs>

⁴⁹ NBC News, North Korea criticizes U.S. humanitarian aid as 'sinister political scheme', 12 July 2021, Source: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-korea-criticizes-u-s-humanitarian-aid-sinister-political-scheme-n1273673>

but through mass gatherings as well which initially spread the virus at a higher speed.⁵⁰ Additionally, Kim Jong-un's centralised approach and distrust in the international community also complicates the access to credible information and data. Articles claim that North Korea reported people with fever symptoms instead of confirming cases. Hiding the cases further increases the inconsistency of data, and this is reflected in Worldometer's data which shows that on 13 May⁵¹ there were a reported 350 000 new cases. The lockdowns began in January 2020 and North Korea allegedly had its first official Covid case on 12 May 2022. Experts say the sudden outbreak can be led back to a military parade held in Pyongyang on 25 April 2022 not long after the first case was identified by the authorities.⁵²

As it appears, the authorities to an extent have learned from the outbreak of SARS virus (2003) and the emergence of the Ebola virus (2004). Given the infrastructural vulnerability the sufficient pandemic strategy meant complete lockdown at the border even at the cost of halting trade and aid shipments. In theory, the North Korean health system is tailored to provide a high level of population coverage and access to free-medical services with a ratio of around 3.5 doctors per 1000 people of the population. However, as the 2021 DPRK Voluntary National Review (VNR) on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development confirmed this ratio falls short.⁵³ The report has stated that the regime is committed to build self-supporting and knowledge-based economy in the following years. The spreadsheet demonstrates how the United Nations and North Korea's approaches differ from each other. For example while the UN states that it intends to "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture" the regime to apply it to its own interests interpreted it as "Develop sustainable agriculture and realize self-sufficiency of food." The VNR provided information on the real state of the regime's infrastructure and it did not bode well at all: "the lack of the capacity of health personnel, low technical foundation of pharmaceutical and medical appliance plants and shortage of essential medicines remain as challenges".⁵⁴ The goals and expectations have raised many questions about the – intentional -

⁵⁰ Nangia R., Arora R. (2021) Critical Study of Leadership Styles in Handling COVID-19 Crisis, Transnational Press London, Source: <https://journals.tplondon.com/bc/article/view/1590/1183>

⁵¹ Worldometer, North Korea - <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/north-korea/>

⁵² Han C., Ryu S. (2022) – Impact of national lockdown on the suspected SARS-CoV-2 epidemic in terms of the number of fever cases in North Korea, Journal of Travel Medicine, 2022, 1–2, Source: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jtm/taac090>

⁵³ Democratic People's Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review, (2021) Sustainable Development Goals, Source: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf

⁵⁴ Excerpt from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review, (2021) p 20., Source displayed in Footnote 53.

disconnection DPRK has between the reality of the situation and what it wants to present to the residents and the international community.

Before its first reported case, North Korea solely relied on complete border shutdown as a prevention tactic since January 2020. Kim ordered all cities and counties to close their areas to block the spread of the malicious virus, by February all schools and colleges closed down throughout the country. Many argue that the closing down of areas and schools are not for preventing but for restricting the contagious disease. Notably, there are two main reasons for this argument: first it was months before the first case was reported and second these strict measures probably would not be required unless the outbreak started sooner than claimed. Furthermore, various sources claimed that by early-March hundreds of North Korean soldiers showed symptoms resembling to the coronavirus. Although the country has one of the world's largest conventional military forces and spends approximately 24 % of its gross domestic value on military purposes, the soldiers still suffer from malnutrition and this way they became an easy target for the virus too.

Then the first official case was reported and in response the government ordered „maximum emergency” control measures to suppress the transmission of the highly infectious virus. Initially, the regime revealed that it defeated the infectious disease without any vaccine program only relying on home-grown traditional medicines such as burdock root and japonica tea. Authorities advised residents to take painkillers and antibiotics rather than antivirals. Inarguably, Kim reached a critical crossroad: despite the uncertainty of data credibility it was clear, that the spread of the virus was rapid, therefore he either quickly accepts western or South Korean support and effectively suppresses the outbreak or waits for Chinese help while the mortality rates rise. Despite the containment actions and severe lockdowns, the state with its fragile health care sector, low-tech health devices and underqualified staff could not hold out solely relying on its own devices. Reflecting on global health diplomacy and international relations, accepting foreign – non-Chinese - aid would mean that the isolated state has failed to achieve its commitment to self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Objectively for this reason alone, the offers of western vaccine and aid are at a great disadvantage compared to Chinese offers. Additionally, the outbreak possibly affects the regime's nuclear program as well: due to Kim's failure to restrict the speed of infection and protect the fragile sectors such as health care system and food supply makes its nuclear aspirations seem more unattainable. At last, Pyongyang flew three planes into Shenyang on 16 May for medical supplies. However, experts have concluded that the vaccine supply alone is not sufficient to halt the rising rate of Covid cases, as the poor

health care system and the lack of trained staff are also major problems.⁵⁵ Thus vaccines need to be accompanied by professional medical and technical staff. Gavi - a global vaccine distribution network - declared that North Korea accepted an offer of vaccines from its greatest ally and has started to administer doses.

Now after declaring – the widely disputed - victory against Covid according to experts lifting the restrictions and easing border lockdowns were essential to restore trade, which was bleeding from multiple wounds. It is not a secret that the tightened border controls and restrictive measures only worsened the food and nutrition security problem. Even though the needs remained high the outbreak put a halt on the access for humanitarian partners. However, it was too early to celebrate and feel relief as on 25 August the state-owned Korean Central News Agency revealed health workers found four people in Ryanggang province – close to the Chinese border - who showed symptoms of fever. In quick response, the authorities closed down the areas where the fever cases surfaced and implemented tight restrictions to minimize the possible spread of infection. A day later several news articles⁵⁶ released further information on the newer suspicious cases with authorities clarifying that the symptoms were confirmed to be flu, not Covid. While the regime lifted the lockdown, the residents are still urged to wear masks and report immediately if they show signs of fever symptoms.

Overall, we can conclude that the Covid outbreak became a new tool for the regime to re-establish and tighten the social control over the population. North Korea followed China's steps and implemented nationwide lockdown, deployed soldiers to deliver medicine and publicly criticised officials for not keeping drug stocks and pharmacies open.⁵⁷ On a closer look, the party-state's actions go beyond mere containment of the virus and indicate greater political goals. For example, Kim did not hesitate to demote and get rid of the political elites that were deemed as weak or possibly rebellious links then replace them with enthusiastic and freshly trained officials. Kim claimed that the success against the virus was a “global health miracle” but the underestimated and misdiagnosed fever and flu cases are still a cause for concern. Scepticism over the widely disputed victory arose from the fact that the country possesses limited testing capacity and underdeveloped tech at hand, furthermore the malnutrition, low standard of living offered advantage to the virus. The critical state of the economy, welfare and

⁵⁵ De Guzman C., Two Million Cases: COVID-19 May Finally Force North Korea to Open Up, 19 May 2022, Time, Source: <https://time.com/6178501/covid-north-korea-kim-jong-un/>

⁵⁶ Kim T., North Korea says new fever cases were flu, not COVID-19, ABC News, 26 August 2022, Source: <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/north-korea-fever-cases-flu-covid-19-88871857>

⁵⁷ The Economic Times, North Korea's Kim Jong Un slams officials over pandemic response, deploys army, 16 May 2022, Source: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/north-koreas-kim-jong-un-slams-officials-over-pandemic-response-deploys-army/articleshow/91592479.cms>

health care systems will not be fully resolved by the Chinese vaccine delivery, so for the sake of the population and the fragile sectors Kim ought to further compromise. While the maximum control measures were lifted, the Supreme Leader stated that the country must maintain its anti-epidemic approach until the end of the global health crisis.

5. ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS DURING THE CORONA CRISIS

5.1. What Once Was

During Kim Jong-il the country was said to be resembling the Soviet Union in 1930s in the terms of infrastructure and living conditions. North Korea was starting to lose face in the economic development on the peninsula and the economic legacy of the Japanese rule – unevolved – could not sustain North Korea’s leading position for longer. Slowly but surely South Korea caught up and beat its neighbour under the second Kim leadership. The sharp decline of the economic progress could be seen in The Seven Year Plan, which was set off in 1961.⁵⁸ The data for the Five Year Plan preceding the Seven Year Plan - in the table below - shows quite a difference in production.

Average Annual Growth Rate %		
	Five Year Plan (1957-1960)	Seven Year Plan (1961-70)
National Income	21.0	8.9
Gross Industrial Output	36.6	12.8
Gross Agricultural Output	8.4	6.3

1. Table – The Average Annual Growth Rate % (Source: displayed in Footnote 58.)

By the end of 1970 the country became completely insolvent. The strategic sectors and products faced serious drop too such as rice, steel, ore, fertilisers and crude iron. As already mentioned in the third chapter, despite the concerning state of the economic and financial sectors the regime did not reallocate its expenditures and proceeded to spend 30-35 percent of the budget on military and non-productive investments, while bleeding the economy dry. The average citizens were responsible for making their own living, since the state economy was not capable to provide the goods needed to survive: food, social security or salary. For the majority of people - who were not a high-ranking member of society - this is what true self-reliance meant during Kim Jong-il’s era. Of course high-ranking citizens residing in Pyongyang had

⁵⁸ Chung J. S. (1972) North Korea's "Seven Year Plan" (1961-70): Economic Performance and Reforms, Asian Survey, Vol. 12, No. 6, Source: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2643049?seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents

more opportunities to obtain their foods. A few department stores – designed for foreigners and tourists - allowed these people to enter, though payments often required to be done in foreign currency.

Strictly speaking, any serious economic growth was due to external support and not internal growth. Given the questionable credibility of the shared data one thing is for sure: the magnitude of the economic failures is likely to exceed the figures documented on paper. Furthermore Mózes Csoma in his book noted that the regime was caught many times resorting to illicit activities – like state production of drugs - in order to fill the gaps in the budget. Since the end of the 1980 into the 2000s, there were several drug scandals all over Southeast Asia and Europe where North Korean diplomats were caught trafficking narcotics.⁵⁹ Kim Jong-un has also resorted to such deals: the rate of illicit activities – cybercrimes included – seems to be increasing from 2010 to 2022 partly to evade the sanctions and partly to generate revenue for its weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs.

Food insecurity has been a serious issue to this day for the country. Many factors have determined the food supply problem during the 90s such as the failed economic policies, declining Chinese and Soviet aids, sanctions due to the economic constraints, misuse of humanitarian food shipments by the Korean People's Army and economic constraints. During that period the famine – later named the Arduous March - was so severe that it was reported in every social class. In 1995 death caused by starvation was estimated to be five hundred thousand, and a year later it reached a million.⁶⁰ Improvements came in 2009 with the arrival of international humanitarian aid shipments, which could temporarily solve the deeply-rooted problem. Since the distributions of rations were reduced tragically and the distribution system practically collapsed the regime had no choice but to allow semi-private markets to operate. During Arduous March the average people quickly became dependant on these local markets, as the state economy and food distribution system regularly failed to provide for the citizens. However, the regime tried to regulate the merchants by their age in order to restrict the growth, but it only succeeded in causing societal changes and in enhancing the role of women. To sum it up, these trying times have taught the nomenclature that in order to guarantee political stability they must show a degree of leniency towards these ad hoc structures created by the targeted groups in response to the state's inability to provide for them. In the next subchapter,

⁵⁹ Csoma, *Korea Egy nemzet, két ország – A közös gyökerektől*, pp 129.

⁶⁰ Csoma, *Korea Egy nemzet, két ország – A közös gyökerektől*

we will learn that reportedly the severe food shortage once again reached the rock bottom amid the Corona crisis.

5.2. New Leadership, Same Old Problems

Kim Jong-un has spent a quarter of his rule during the Corona crisis, and while all countries have been facing difficulties with handling the outbreak and the sectors affected by it. Given North Korea's fragile financial, economic, and health sectors the challenges became tenfold. The two main components I would like to gain insight into are the changes Kim Jong-un's regime brought and how the Covid outbreak shaped and changed the conditions of living and economic framework. Let's start with the changes: the year is 2012, the young and inexperienced Kim Jong-un known as the Brilliant Comrade took over the position from his late father. In his first public speech, he highlighted one determining factor the objectives will be defined by, which was the strengthening of the military.⁶¹ Additionally, Kim also stated that the people would not have to tighten their belts again, but we cannot really consider it as determining priority, as Kim did not share details on his economic plans. Later in the subchapter, we will see that he could not keep his promise to provide for his citizens, as the Covid outbreak paralyzed nearly all sectors.

To understand North Korea's thinking on the economy and its determinants, we need to envision a multi-factor network system. The state struggles with a long range of issues such as denuclearisation, inter-Korean ties, and the U.S.-DPRK relations. The positive or negative shift of these factors will inevitably have economic implications too. We have to note that the phrase 'economic reform' in its classical sense cannot be applied to North Korea, because Kim Jong-un's thinking on reform-type measures is framed by socialist principles and more flexible unorthodox concepts. Under Kim Jong-un's rule the country achieved a certain level of progress in marketization and built a smaller consumer society with a larger middle class. Kim also saw an opportunity in the increase of official markets; before there were only around 200 general markets, and by 2016 an estimated 1.1 million workers were involved in official markets. But the expansion of official markets did not mean the closing of semi-private ones. Kim recognized that semi-private markets are a vital part of the economy, because the state market is often unable to meet with the demands.

⁶¹ Choe S., North Korean Leader Stresses Need for Strong Military, 15 April 2012, The New York Times, Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/16/world/asia/kim-jong-un-north-korean-leader-talks-of-military-superiority-in-first-public-speech.html>

Now plagued by the hardships of the outbreak, even the most basic tasks of the state can hardly be performed, and citizens face difficulties accessing health care and food supplies. The conditions are very similar to the crisis of the 1990s, the border closures, lockdowns and UN sanctions hampered industrial activity and trade. Trade volume was reduced by 17 percent as trade between China and North Korea was suspended to prevent the spread of infections. The Bank of Korea released data that showed that industrial output, which accounts for more than 28 percent of the North Korean economy fell 6.5 percent in 2021.⁶² Although, Kim allowed the semi-private markets to operate and make up for the failures of the state market, he re-established control over them by using the virus as a pretext.

Chronic malnourishment and food shortages have always been a challenge, but amidst the Covid outbreak and maximum control measures the situation drastically worsened. In 2021, the regime reported severe food shortages, which is a striking sign of the severity of the situation, as the terminology was last used during the famine in the 1990s. The sectors that are crumbling under the impact of the crisis desperately need resources – which are usually allocated into the military - to provide for a society hit by the virus. No matter whether the regime and society had learned to operate under the difficulties of sanctions and isolation, the government was far from prepared to deal with such a crisis. The state does not possess the necessary safety nets or resources without external support. As mentioned earlier, maximum control measures have been serving a dual purpose: tightening control over the people and containing the outbreak. Essentially, the measures leave a lot more of people to starve.

Another important part is the tug-of-war between military and civilian spending. The issue goes beyond the question, whether North Korea wants to continue its missile and nuclear programs, given the regime limited resources allocating more to national defense, means the less is left for economic initiatives. The regime feels under constant threat due to the tough and wide-ranging sanctions by the international community and its efforts to denuclearise the state. Attacks on the nomenclature mean that the military and nuclear deterrence must be strengthened, indirectly pushing the economic sector into the background. In their article Lee and Carlin claim that since the Eighth Party Congress in January 2021 Pyongyang appears to be slowing down on or even backtracking on reform, which might be the consequence of the Covid outbreak putting the state in a more vulnerable position.⁶³ Essentially, there is little chance of a

⁶² Aljazeera, North Korea's economy shrinks for second straight year: BOK, 27 July 2022, Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/7/27/north-koreas-economy-shrinks-for-second-straight-year-bok>

⁶³ Lee R., Carlin R. (2022) Understanding Kim Jong Un's Economic Policymaking: A Review and Implications, 38 North, Source: <https://www.38north.org/2022/03/understanding-kim-jong-uns-economic-policymaking-a-review-and-implications/>

shift towards market-oriented reforms, firstly because at the congress Kim instructed the party to approach economic management from a political perspective. Secondly, he has reinforced his control over non-official markets, punished corrupt officials and restricted the use of foreign currency.

6. FOREIGN RELATIONS

When considering North Korea's foreign policy partners, China comes first followed by Russia. Due to the two countries' geographical proximity and status as a great powers, North Korea's isolation has been able to survive despite its many infrastructural shortcomings, agricultural underdevelopment, and nutritional challenges. Without foreign aid and support the state would not have been able to carry out even its basic responsibilities. The failure of the state responsibility could be seen during the Arduous March and the outbreak of the Corona virus. Isolation and self-reliance only serves to keep citizens in control and blind to the outside world, because opening up would result in mass migration, uprisings and the eventual fall of the regime. This is why it is most beneficial for the nomenclature to keep its borders closed to its residents, while maintaining active trade with its allies. However, looking at only North Korea's alliances can give a partial view of its current foreign policy leeway, so it is equally important to examine the actors that pose a threat to the nomenclature as well.

6.1. China and North Korea:

The two countries have deep historical roots with one another, witnessed the fall of dynasties and the rise to modern states. Despite the shared characteristics and close economic, ideological and political ties, tensions simmer beneath the surface over conflicting interests in politics or nuclear development. The relationship between China and North Korea can be marked by many descriptions, such as: asymmetric alliance, bitter allies, and necessary dependence. For China, it is better to keep North Korea close to itself and to become its biggest trade partner than to leave a volatile nuclear-armed power unmonitored and allow other interested powers to gain leverage in the country. This notion is reflected in the way things currently are: China is North Korea's economic lifeline with the vast majority of trade and foreign investment coming from there. With the start of the nuclear tests, the numerous unilateral and multilateral sanctions have led to a decline in trade with other countries and a rise in China's dominance. DPRK offered special concessions to various Chinese companies for instance working capital investments to Chinese mining companies or exclusive fishing rights to Chinese fishing companies.

As previously mentioned, Beijing's influence expands to the nuclear development as well, the state is crucial in mitigating the impact of the numerous international sanctions imposed in response to North Korea's development of its nuclear arsenal. For instance, this happened in 2022, when China and Russia vetoed a U.S. drafted sanction against North Korea. But Beijing is also able to keep the Kims in check and affect their endeavours. This was seen by the nuclear explosions of 2006 and 2009 which caused the strain in their relation, because the tests could have resulted in a humanitarian and ecological disaster in the highly populated Chinese areas near the border. Nonetheless, North Korea serves a strategic buffer zone keeping the United States and its allies at arm's length. Even with the resurfacing tensions and occasional conflict of interest, North Korea is a great source of leverage to keep the U.S. at bay.⁶⁴

Examining the political aspects, it is clear that China's role has only grown with the deadlock of the U.S.-North Korean diplomatic talks in 2019 and the strengthening US-ROK alliance. China aims to maintain the rock solid relationship with North Korea and Russia in order to reduce the United States' influence in Northeast Asia. Although, Japan and South-Korea both are growing economic leaders, but next to the vicious giants - Russia and China - they are promising but relatively minor actors in the power dynamics.

China's importance became evident during the border closedowns as well, without its economic lifeline all concerned sectors exhausted their resources and soon collapsed. The lockdowns caused by Covid was a major hit for North Korea's trade activity since Beijing accounts to 90 percent of its foreign trade. In my opinion, China's importance in the region will not change, and will certainly increase as the regime has been weakened by the outbreak and is at its wits end. The fact that Kim could have chosen from various foreign vaccines offers but decided to wait for China's offer, also supports this argument. Furthermore, looking at the bigger picture China essentially intends to tighten its relationship with North Korea "out of political convenience in the face of the U.S.-China competition".⁶⁵

6.2. Russia and North Korea

Before gaining insight into the recent developments let us review the resurgence of the Russia-North Korea relation after 2019. North Korea has a long and difficult history with Russia and during Kim Jong-un's leadership the Russian influence was completely side-lined by China. It was evident, when examining trade data that Russia-North Korea's 34 million dollars

⁶⁴ Wertz D., (2019) China – North Korea Relations, NCNK (National Committee on North Korea), Source: <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/china-north-korea-relations>

⁶⁵ Lee Y. M., China draws North Korea closer than ever as Biden visits region, The Washington Post, 18 May 2022, Source: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/18/north-korea-china-russia-challenges-biden/>

trade – a 56 percent decrease compared to the previous year – was eclipsed by China’s 2.3 billion dollars.⁶⁶ Both powers has started to acknowledge the significance of their relation after the summit in Vladivostok. The relationship took a more spectacular upturn after Russia’s relationship with the West started to deteriorate. Their common condemnation of the United States’ political ambitions provided a strong basis for their future comprehensive bilateral relations. Besides, alliance with Russia would mean the dependence on China lessens, which is vital given how much the country suffered when trading ceased during the border closedowns. The relationship with Russia was determined by a number of factors, such as Russia’s lenient stance on sanctions, the United States’ involvement in Northeast Asia, Kim’s limited alliances and intention on lessening dependence on China. Expanding revenue sources and partners became a key issue in North Korea’s isolated regime because if China is unable to maintain or reduces its aid or trade activity then the regime loses its lifeline. This is exactly what happened during the outbreak. These factors have led to the cooperation Russia and North Korea have today.

Recently U.S. officials claimed that Russia turned to North Korea to purchase rockets and artillery to replenish its losses. North Korea was quick to deny the allegations by saying that they “have never exported weapons or ammunition to Russia before” and do not plan on doing it in the future.⁶⁷ As there is no clear evidence of arms and ammunition trafficking between the two states, the allegation cannot be proved at this stage. The United States National Security Council shared the same sentiment too and showed signs of reservation about the claim. The Wagner Group – a Russian private military company – has also came into the picture, as reports suggest that it has purchased infantry rockets and missiles from the regime. The likelihood of Russia being forced to use North Korean weapons under the tough circumstances is not zero, but in light of the war’s severity, North Korean arms would not be the most adequate substitute. Also important to note, that Russia have received weaponry from Iran, so North Korea is not its only option. As mentioned before, Kim would most certainly benefit from the trade, since the Covid outbreak has taken a massive toll on its resources and on all sectors. Both countries being at a disadvantage and under heavy sanctions would benefit from the deal. It is also notable to share that the countries refer to their relation as ‘tactical and strategical cooperation’, which does not rule out the possibility of some sort of military cooperation or support. Another

⁶⁶ Snyder A. S., Where Does the Russia-North Korea Relationship Stand?, Council on Foreign Relations, 29 April 2019, Source: <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/where-does-russia-north-korea-relationship-stand>

⁶⁷ Zubaidah A. J., North Korea denies supplying weapons to Russia, BBC News, 22 September 2022, Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62873987>

possible way of their cooperation might be to rebuild the destroyed Russian areas with the help of North Korean workers.⁶⁸ The shared isolation and main enemy – the United States – are also good reasons for closer ties between the two pariah states.

Although, evidence on the arms and ammunition trafficking has not been found or verified, the symbolic gestures showcase the closer ties between Pyongyang and Moscow. For instance, Kim Jong-un sent a birthday greeting to President Putin and in his message he congratulated him for “crushing the challenges and threats of the United States”, which clearly displays that North Korea expressed public support for Putin and the proclaimed annexation of parts of Ukraine.⁶⁹ Diplomatic gestures have been made by Putin too, in September the president vowed to expand the “comprehensive and constructive bilateral relations” between the countries. While the allegations have not been verified yet and there is no evidence that DPRK has received any financial support from Russia, it could be only a matter of time until Putin reaches that stage, considering the limited options Russia has at the moment. Therefore, I would not say that my hypothesis has been disproved, since both sides made numerous statements about strengthening ties, it cannot be ruled out entirely that Kim does not or will not receive some kind of – financial - aid from Russia for his continuous support. In addition to this, we have to consider the severe situation North Korea faces: drastic budget cuts, the wide-spread food shortages, gradual decline in trade activities, lack of external support during shutdowns have put the regime in a tough position. Therefore, if it intends to maintain the spending on the military then Kim may have to decide to expand its revenue towards Russia.

6.3. Inter-Korean Relations

The shared cultural roots and sentimental values weigh less, as South Korea feels to be at constant threat, after Kim declared the country as a nuclear weapons state, and multiplied the number of missile launches in the recent period. The political change in South Korea also hampers the possibility of tensions decreasing. The foreign policy of the conservative side represents a more passive and hard-line approach towards North Korea. In August 2022, Yoon Suk-yeol, South Korean President released an initiative, which stated that the administration is ready to help on rebuilding the devastated economy if North Korea commits itself to denuclearisation and takes substantial steps towards it. The regime did not take the plan well, Kim Yo-jong – sister of the Supreme Leader – reacted in an aggressive manner and ridiculed

⁶⁸BBC News, Russia vows to expand relations with North Korea, 15 August 2022, Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62462276>

⁶⁹ Zubaidah A. J., North Korea denies supplying weapons to Russia, BBC News, 22 September 2022, Source displayed in Footnote 67.

President Yoon's initiative. Kim strongly claimed that North Korea would be running to its doom if it accepted Yoon's terms.⁷⁰ Kim Yo-jong's stance on the denuclearisation process and the possible cooperation between the two Koreas dispels any dreams of effective dialogues. For both states, the means to guarantee their status quo and survival is a matter of life and death. At the end of the day, North Korea will always place military and nuclear capability over a functioning economy or public welfare, while South Korea will never give up on achieving denuclearisation of North Korea. The foreign policy approach and tone have limited ability to improve on the relationship, as the tensions worsen day by day.

Since Biden puts great focus on the United States-South Korea alliance, North Korea expresses its disapproval through frequent display of military powers. So the missile launches also send an intimidating message to the United States. As mentioned not much changed after the conservative turn in Seoul's foreign policy regarding the north. Of course, in return the Kim regime is not only unchanged but is even more committed to its nuclear ambitions so the inter-Korean relations will presumably be defined by the aforementioned tense and hostile disputes, disagreements and threatening military drills.

6.4. United States and North Korea

The United States has been representing a direct threat to the nomenclature from the very beginning. The indoctrination of anti-Americanism into the people begins very early in school. As a result of this deeply rooted condemnation, the likelihood of the improvement between the states is very low. Rapprochement under the Trump administration has achieved momentary success during the 2018 Singapore summit, but a year later the Hanoi talks did not end on a positive note, due to the differences over the timing of sanctions relief and denuclearization. Biden's North Korean policy has not delivered better results, but given Kim's provocations a perspective change may be more feasible. Increasing the alliance with Japan and South Korea to counter China and North Korea is an adequate step. In light of Kim's provocations Biden sent an aircraft carrier to the region and performed live-fire missile test with South Korea. Biden has also spoken with Japan's prime minister about the possible responses to North Korea's powerful missile launches. A greater American presence and exertion of pressure means greater involvement from China as well, since the country has a major interest on the peninsula.

⁷⁰ Shin M., North Korea Trashes Yoon's 'Audacious Initiative' for Denuclearization, 19 August 2022, The Diplomat, Source: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/north-korea-trashes-yoons-audacious-initiative-for-denuclearization/>

South Korea has stated in late August that before the denuclearisation process can begin, it would be great advantage if relations between the U.S. and DPRK were to be normalised, as the hostile attitude stifles any initiative towards denuclearisation.⁷¹ This idea is fundamentally flawed if we examine the history between the two countries and the principles of the military-first policy. Looking at Kim Jong-un's character and political standpoint, we can see that Kim follows a more aggressive and firm foreign policy towards his enemies. Also his sister's speeches and belligerent tone do not seem to suggest the willingness to negotiate more diplomatically or openly. The idea is also contradicted by the increase of Kim's military exercises and missile launches in response to the annual joint military drills of the US-ROK alliance. Overall, neither is the United States particularly interested in the idea, because the country would not offer recognition or normalize ties with Kim, without the regime showing honest and credible steps towards denuclearisation. Rapprochement is nowhere near as of now.

7. CONCLUSION

North Korea's relationship with the international community was already at a low point before the outbreak of the coronavirus, due to Kim's rampant nuclear ambitions. The global cooperation and the regime's fragile state presented a good opportunity for the U.S. and its allies to push North Korea towards cooperation. We saw this manifested when Biden urged South Korea to exploit the country's vulnerability and initiate negotiations. As it later turned out, the attempts to soften Kim's foreign policy were futile dreams, since the regime does not and will never put the economy above military, no matter how serious famine or the hardships are. Thus, the attempts failed and only succeeded in infuriating the Kims. In general, the shift towards the U.S. and its allies shows no success at all, and in fact conditions have deteriorated and are likely to worsen, considering simmering tensions on the peninsula and between the U.S. and North Korea too. The threatening missile launches and the widely speculated seventh nuclear test are like a slap in the face for the interested states. Therefore, it is correct to state that the rapprochement with the western powers has been undermined by Kim's aggressiveness and unstoppable nuclear developments.

The recent events of the Russia-Ukraine war demonstrate, that Kim has been trying to remedy his narrow foreign policy leeway and devastated economy by deepening cooperation with Putin. As mentioned in the previous chapter, diplomatic gestures have been made by both

⁷¹ Lee J., Normalizing US-North Korea Ties Before Denuclearization Seen as Unrealistic, VOA News, 30 August 2022, Source: <https://www.voanews.com/a/normalizing-us-north-korea-ties-before-denuclearization-seen-as-unrealistic/6723633.html>

leaders, expressing their shared respect and support for the other. Both countries are at a disadvantage and under heavy sanctions right now, thus their so called ‘tactical and strategic cooperation’ could be expressed in many forms later on as the war escalates. It is not a baseless claim, that Kim Jong-un expects some kind of financial aid in return for supporting Russia’s attack on Ukraine. Although, no clear evidence of the arms and ammunition trade has been verified, the close ties with Russia suggest that the likelihood is relatively high. Furthermore, it is important to note that the diversification of resources and partners also reduces dependence on China, which could be Kim’s goal considering the unfortunate consequences of the shutdowns. Therefore, I believe that the close ties with Russia supports the first premise of my hypothesis, which states that Kim tries to gain some kind of – financial – advantage from the conflict. Besides, relations with Russia also determinate North Korea’s foreign policy leeway. If we regard it from North Korea’s perspective, moving closer to Moscow shifts the foreign policy in a positive direction, however in the context of denuclearisation process and Washington’s objectives this shift is towards a negative direction. I believe that the second half of my hypothesis, which claims that Kim’s foreign policy leeway has shrunk in the recent years is confirmed as well, because Kim is burning bridges with his irreversible nuclear actions.

The work also intended to understand North Korea through its ideological background, because in my opinion, it is a major determinant of how the state works and how the citizens lead their lives. Essentially, the pillars of the regime are the Juche and songun, without their enforcement state stability would not be as strong as it has been. To summarise their essence, we can say that Kim exercises power in the name of Juche – which is centred around the Kim family – and enforces his interest through songun. Understanding North Korea’s perception of threat was also a crucial part of the analysis. As we have learned, the perception depends on the leader’s view on foreign and domestic politics and priorities too. Kim Jong-un made a powerful public debut, in which he emphasised the importance of songun and the continuation of nuclear development. It is also worth to note, that he eliminated the political weak links and threats within the party to demonstrate, that despite his young age and inexperience the power is solely in his own hands. His aggressive and rigid approach in both foreign and domestic politics does not promise anything good for the international community.

The survival of the nomenclature is top tier priority, which is why economic or humanitarian hardships are not real determining factors for compromise in negotiations with foreign powers. As things stand now, Kim Jong-un's resolve on nuclear weapons is deemed hardly reversible, as the regime has passed a law declaring itself a nuclear weapons state. So, these deeply-rooted interests and values cannot be changed or reformed with the Kim family

being in control. Related to this is the underlying question as to how far China will let the leash around North Korea's neck go and when the moment will come, when Xi Jinping decides to adopt a tougher approach towards the country. Even though, Kim tries to expand his partners and foreign investments, Beijing is still one of his closest allies, so the dominant power can influence North Korea's attitude and leeway by withholding food and energy assistance. Moreover, we have to mention two more key factors that confirm that China intends to keep Kim Jong-un and his nuclear ambitions in check. Firstly, fostering deep cooperation and involvement in North Korea helps China managing its own relationship with the United States. Secondly, China's priorities include maintaining stability on the peninsula out of its own national interests. China wants to be a key element in the talks regarding denuclearisation and the potential cooperation between the two Koreas to expand its influence over the region. Worst case scenario would be the collapse of the DPRK, so while the Korean peninsula is a buffer zone for China and the U.S., neither superpower is interested in the outbreak of a war. So amidst the current disputes about the nuclear developments and Kim's provocation China intends to prevent the resumption of armed conflict.

With all the evidence of North Korea's predicament, we can say that the hypothesis has been confirmed. The nomenclature has been presented with a choice during the outbreak and has invariably prioritised status quo over the welfare of its people and curbing the high mortality rate. How can we expect to see a positive opening in its foreign policy from Western perspective, if the country has been unwilling to accept help from the international community during one of its most crisis-ridden moments? It is clear that military is above people, and the survival of the nomenclature is above the security of North Korea. With this in mind, North Korea's foreign policy is not only shrinking, but also moving in a negative direction, partly because the regime provokes the United States and its allies with its displays of force and partly because it seeks to deepen ties with Russia. This directly contributes to the growing political tensions and instability regarding regional and international security. On several occasions, the regime has dismissed international law and resorted to illegal activities, so it is not impossible to imagine that it could engage in deals with Moscow, in exchange for some kind of aid and assistance to increase its budget and expand its revenue of resources. Kim's desperate and reckless actions are gradually leading the country to its demise, as it is still a small player in the stage of great powers, and mostly seen as a tool for China to counterbalance the United States' dominance in the region.

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Annex of Table:

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