

Nuclear and Rogue: Rethinking US Strategy Toward North Korea and Iran

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 10-05-2019			2. REPORT TYPE FINAL		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) N/A	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Nuclear and Rogue: Rethinking US Strategy Toward North Korea and Iran					5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A	
					5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
					5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S) Ryan L. Hill					5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
					5e. TASK NUMBER N/A	
					5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)					8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A					10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) N/A	
					11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.						
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES						
14. ABSTRACT The US views North Koran and Iran as rogue states which either possess or seek nuclear weapons. To combat this combined threat, the US adopted a strategy aimed at achieving two objectives simultaneously: 1) altering the behavior of these nations, bringing them into compliance with international norms, and 2) preventing or disarming their nuclear programs. These conflated goals, which the US continues to strive toward today, are overly ambitious. They have led to a hard power strategy that has proven not only ineffective, but counterproductive, pushing nations toward nuclearization and undermining soft power tactics. Instead of seeking these two objectives as though they are one, the US should focus first on the most urgent objective of non-proliferation and pursue a strategy that balances hard and soft power to achieve it.						
Non-proliferation, Rogue, Hard Power, Soft Power, Categorizing States						
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT N/A	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 14	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Director, Writing Center	
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) 401-841-6499	

The moment the twin towers crumbled to the streets of New York City on September 11th, 2001, the US was awakened to the devastating effects of global terrorism. This realization quickly led to a re-examination of US defense strategy and a recognition of the terrifying potential of nuclear weapons in the hands of irresponsible actors. The US's attention quickly turned to "rogue" states, such as Iraq, North Korea and Iran, viewing them as a volatile mixture of aggressive behavior and nuclear intentions. To combat this combined threat, the US adopted a strategy aimed at achieving two objectives simultaneously: 1) altering the behavior of these nations, bringing them into compliance with international norms, and 2) preventing or disarming their nuclear programs. These conflated goals, which the US continues to strive toward today, are overly ambitious. They have led to a hard power strategy that has proven not only ineffective, but counterproductive, pushing nations toward nuclearization and undermining soft power tactics. Instead of seeking these two objectives as though they are one, the US should focus first on the most urgent objective of non-proliferation and pursue a strategy that balances hard and soft power to achieve it.

The Problem of Rogue and Nuclear States

Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the US brought the issue of rogue states to the forefront of the non-proliferation discussion. In his 2002 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush referred to the nations of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the "axis of evil," and drew a clear comparison between the irresponsible behavior of non-state terrorists and rogue nations that could aid these terrorists or pose similar threats themselves. He stated, "By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, ...attack our allies or attempt to blackmail

the United States.”¹ This “grave and growing danger” is one with which the US continues to contend today.

US intervention has since changed Iraq’s status; however, North Korea and Iran continue to worry the US for two primary reasons. First, each of these nations is considered “rogue.” Such a state, according to Robert Rotberg from the Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center, is both “repressive and aggressive.”² Repressive states are those that “systematically oppress their own people, deny human rights and civil liberties, severely truncate political freedom, and prevent meaningful individual economic opportunity,” while aggressive countries “sponsor terrorism and threaten their neighbors militarily.”³ The NSS describes North Korea as “a country that starves its own people—has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on... weapons that could threaten our homeland.”⁴ Similarly, the NSS states that Iran “brutalizes their own people” and “sponsors terrorism around the world. It is developing more capable ballistic missiles... that could threaten the United States and our partners.”⁵ Clearly, both nations have a history of repressive and aggressive behavior that underwrites their ‘rogue’ status.

The second and compounding problem is that these states are suspected of possessing or aggressively pursuing nuclear weapons. North Korea withdrew from the United Nations’ (UN) Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 2003 and conducted multiple nuclear tests spanning from 2006 through 2017. They claim to have successfully tested both a thermonuclear weapon and an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in 2017.⁶ Iran remains a signatory to the NPT; however, in 2005 the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) found the nation to be in non-compliance with its Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) subsequently passed seven resolutions banning Iran’s enrichment.⁷ The state’s continuous contempt for nuclear regulation, its repeated violations, and

its misleading of the IAEA have led many to suspect Iran of continuing its nefarious pursuit of nuclear weapons.⁸ Both North Korea's and Iran's nuclear intentions deeply concern the US.

This unique status of being rogue and seeking or possessing nuclear weapons places North Korea and Iran in a unique category in the US's international relations strategy. **Figure 1**, which categorizes nations based upon whether they are a rogue or responsible state and whether they seek or possess nuclear weapons, illustrates this status. States in quadrant I are ideal, being both responsible and non-nuclear; they pose the least threat. States in quadrant II, such as Russia and China are nuclear, but are considered responsible and rational enough not to cause a major concern. In quadrant III, rogue states like Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan are considered manageable because they do not seek nuclear weapons or pose an existential threat.⁹ On the other hand, rogue states like North Korea and Iran, which possess or seek possession of nuclear weapons, are in the most dangerous quadrant, IV. These states constitute an unacceptable risk to the US and the international community.

	Responsible	Ideal I	Acceptable II
	Rogue	Manageable III	Unacceptable IV
		Non-Nuclear	Nuclear

Figure 1. General State Categories

US Strategy Toward Rogue and Nuclear States

In response to this unacceptable threat category, the US has chosen to pursue two objectives simultaneously, non-proliferation and changing rogue behavior, therefore adopting a strategy to move North Korea and Iran into quadrant I. Robert Litwak, director of International Security Studies at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, contends that this conflation of objectives began when the Bush Administration “contentiously linked the terrorism and non-proliferation agendas, on the assumption that a ‘rogue state’ might transfer [weapons of mass destruction] WMD to a terror group.”¹⁰ The equality of the two goals has persisted; in a 2017 address to the UN, President Trump condemned North Korea for its “contempt for other nations and for the well-being of their own people,” as well as its “reckless pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles threaten the entire world with unthinkable loss of life.”¹¹ Dr. Christopher Ashley Ford, the US Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of International Security and Non-proliferation, also placed rogue behavior on par with nuclear ambitions when he stated that the US “goal” in Iran was to bring about an Iran “forever unable to develop nuclear weapons... does not torment its region, ... support terrorism... or produce destabilizing missiles.”¹² These statements reflect the US view that has fused the two objectives and implied that both behavior change and non-proliferation must be pursued simultaneously.

This ambitious two-fold objective compelled the US to adopt an aggressive hard power strategy capable of countering rogue behaviors and addressing proliferation concerns. The logic of such an aggressive strategy is nothing new when it comes to non-proliferation; the US has long considered not only hard power, but the use of pre-emptive military force to circumvent the possibility of an enemy state possessing nuclear weapons. In a 1946 memorandum, the commander of the Manhattan Project, General Leslie Groves, wrote, “If we were ruthlessly realistic, we would not permit any foreign power with which we are not family allied and in

which we do not have absolute confidence, to make or possess nuclear weapons. If such a country started to make nuclear weapons, we would destroy its capacity to make them before it had progressed far enough to threaten us.”¹³ Aiden Warren, associate professor at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, cited that the US had considered pre-emption against the Soviet Union from 1945 to 1954, China from 1960 to 1964, and North Korea from 1993 to 1994.¹⁴ Though pre-emption was considered in these cases, the US never perceived that the threat was urgent enough to call for such extreme measures. However, the September 11, 2001 attacks and the link that the Bush administration made to nuclear weapons and rogue states made a compelling case for not only preventing rogue states from obtaining nuclear weapons, but for simultaneously ending their defiant behavior.

This ambitious strategy proved effective when the US pre-emptively invaded rogue and presumably nuclear-seeking Iraq in 2003.¹⁵ Within weeks, the repressive and aggressive Baathist Party led by Saddam Hussein was displaced, quickly ending the state’s rogue status. The task of non-proliferation was frustrated by the fact that the US, acting on poor intelligence, failed to find any WMD or signs that Iraq had been pursuing a nuclear weapon.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the military operation had achieved its purpose; Iraq was successfully moved from quadrant IV, a rogue nation presumed to be seeking a nuclear weapon, to quadrant I, a non-nuclear, responsible actor.

Though the operation was a military success, several factors associated with the operation made future pre-emptive war untenable. The invasion, which was never backed by a UN resolution and lacked international support, demonstrated that the global community viewed this US pre-emptive policy as illegitimate.¹⁷ When the US and the accompanying “coalition of the willing” failed to find WMD, the act was further condemned internationally and domestically. Author Robert Litwak wrote that “while military action to avert an imminent

terrorist threat enjoys broad international support, no such consensus exists on the use of force against a state violating international norms.”¹⁸ Furthermore, the prolonged and chaotic nature of the post-war conflict soured what had originally been a high degree of domestic support. All these factors combined to create a stigma against this use of military force and will likely prevent the US from taking such action without an imminent threat again.¹⁹

Though the US largely abandoned the idea of pre-emptive attacks on Iran and North Korea, it did not surrender its co-objectives of moving the nations from quadrant IV to quadrant I, nor its commitment to a hard power strategy. The US has continued to make military threats. In 2017, President Trump threatened to “totally destroy North Korea.”²⁰ In 2018, National Security Advisor John Bolton warned Iran that “If you cross us, our allies, or our partners; if you harm our citizens; if you continue to lie, cheat, and deceive, yes, there will indeed be hell to pay.”²¹ In addition to these threats, the US stepped up economic sanctions, which according to author Robert Pape, many believe are “as effective as military force”.²² The US has put its weight behind this economic form of hard power.

The intent to affect both rogue and nuclear issues within increased US sanctions is obvious. The most recent UNSC Resolution inflicting sanctions on North Korea, issued in December of 2017, prohibited nuclear development and testing and emphasized “the importance that the [Democratic People’s Republic of Korea] DPRK respond to other security and humanitarian concerns of the international community including the necessity of the DPRK respecting and ensuring the welfare, inherent dignity, and rights of people in the DPRK.” The document also admonished North Korea for destabilizing the region and threatening international peace.²³ The US has dealt similarly with Iran. According to the US Department of State, “The United States has imposed restrictions on activities with Iran under various legal authorities since

1979, following the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.”²⁴ Many of these sanctions, which have increased over the years, were in response to the nation’s support to terror organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas.²⁵ Others, usually in the form of UNSCRs, address Iran’s disregard for nuclear inspections and perceived pursuit of nuclear weapons.²⁶ It is clear that the US views these sanctions as a credible tool to bring about its combined objectives.

The Problem with US Strategy

Despite the use of hard power attempts at coercion, North Korea and Iran have relentlessly continued their defiant behavior and continued a steady path toward nuclearization. Hard power options outside of invasion have proven fruitless, yet because of the ill-founded conflation of the two objectives, the US has locked itself into an ominous hard power strategy. While the dangerous volatility of a rogue state possessing a nuclear weapon is certainly of great concern, this view focuses on a symptom of the problem, not on its origin. If the US wants to achieve the goal of non-proliferation, it must address the reason these nations seek nuclear weapons instead of being preoccupied with the consequences of them having them. There is no evidence that nations seek nuclear capabilities for aggressive or destructive purposes. On the contrary, author David A. Smith, summarizing theories about nuclear proliferation, wrote that “state survival is ...the principal reason that states have sought nuclear arms.”²⁷ By merging its non-proliferation objective with the goal of countering aggressive rogue behavior, the US has failed to account for this and thus developed an ineffective and counterproductive strategy.

The US’s hard power strategy has served to entrench North Korea and Iran in their desire to become nuclear. Litwak argued that the preventive war precedent set by the Bush administration “would create an incentive in Pyongyang and Tehran to accelerate, rather than roll back, their nuclear weapons programmes (sic) in order to deter an American attack.”²⁸ Pape

made a similar claim about sanctions, stating that “external pressure is more likely to enhance the nationalist legitimacy of rulers than to undermine it.”²⁹ Secretary of Defense William Perry reinforced these claims; speaking about North Korea’s missile program, he stated “We may not think of ourselves as a threat to North Korea, but I fully believe that they consider us a threat to them and , therefore, they see this missile [program] as a means of deterrence.”³⁰ John Glaser, director of foreign policy at the Cato Institute, noted a similar reaction in Iran. Summarizing a study from the International Crisis Group, he wrote that “aggressively sanctioning Iran, surrounding them militarily as we have, and threatening them with war only creates fear that Iran then acts upon.”³¹ This phenomenon is similar to what renowned Harvard professor and author Graham Allison referred to as the Thucydides Trap, named after the ancient Athenian writer who documented the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides declared that “it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.”³² Today, this realist progression is being played out as the US pressure on North Korea and Iran has caused these countries to assume a more aggressive posture in order to ensure their own sovereignty and provide a counter to US “deterrence,” rather than abandoning their pursuit of WMD to comply with US and international demands.

Hard power strategy has also been counter-productive to soft power attempts at non-proliferation. The US has made clumsy attempts at the soft power strategy of “deterrence and reassurance,” which consists of communicating a deterrent stance towards irresponsible behavior while assuring nations that we have no intentions of pre-emptive invasion or regime change.³³ Secretary of State Colin Powell attempted this following the invasion of Iraq when he “signaled in declarations... that the United States seeks compliance with international non-proliferation norms and has no intention of invading or attacking North Korea or Iran.”³⁴ Powell’s overture of

reassurance was quickly undermined by hard power military threats when a government official made the statement that “Iraq is not just about Iraq... It is of a type,” indicating that it was intended to set a precedent. Even President Bush declared, just after Saddam’s regime fell, the “terrorists and tyrants have now been put on notice.”³⁵ Whether these statements were to be taken at face value, or to serve as a deterrent, they were anything but assuring and also failed to persuade North Korea or Iran to abandon their rogue behavior or their nuclear ambitions.

Similarly, diplomatic efforts have fallen victim to US insistence on hard power. Policy-makers have refused to ease sanctions for non-proliferation alone because of concerns over rogue behavior; such attempts have even been labeled as “appeasement.”³⁶ In 2015, the US, in conjunction with France, Germany, Great Britain, Russia, and China made a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement with Iran to lift certain sanctions in return for guaranteeing that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) could inspect its nuclear program and ensure it was “exclusively peaceful.”³⁷ The lifted sanctions were only those that concerned the nuclear program, leaving other sanctions in place.³⁸ Though Iran remained in compliance for three years, the US unilaterally withdrew from the deal and reinforced sanctions. Mark Fitzpatrick, former Executive Director of the International Institute of Strategic Studies, wrote that “criticizing the JCPOA because it failed to achieve this impossible goal [of restraining Iran’s nuclear program and compelling better behavior in other policy fields] is equivalent to arguing against any diplomatic outcome.”³⁹ By insisting on the ideal goal of accomplishing both objectives simultaneously, the US assumes a position of hard power and ironically pushes these rogue nations into quadrant IV.

A New US Strategy Toward Rogue and Nuclear States

The US must decouple the non-proliferation objective from the goal of changing the aggressive and repressive behaviors of rogue states. Outside the use of pre-emptive military force, which it is loath to use again, the US cannot successfully accomplish both goals simultaneously. The attempt to achieve both objectives only prevents the US from accomplishing its more urgent goal of non-proliferation. Litwak noted that “in a context where pre-emption is not an option,” insistence on pursuing both objectives simultaneously “is the functional equivalent of acquiescing to proliferation.” This has been the case as the US has insisted on hard power options to address both objectives while North Korea has obtained nuclear weapons and Iran has made considerable progress.⁴⁰ The US cannot continue to operate this way. If it is serious about non-proliferation in these countries, the US must pursue that end as the first and most important objective.

In order to achieve this prioritized objective, the US must change its methods and strategy by balancing hard and soft power. While hard power is necessary to counter aggressive rogue state behavior, the US must tailor its actions to target the rogue nation’s conduct without threatening its existence. This balanced strategy of “deterrence and assurance” has failed in the past due to hard power threats and application overshadowing attempts at assurance. Litwak wrote that “an overplaying of the military component can undercut the message of political reassurance,” providing an “incentive to maintain and even accelerate its nuclear programme (sic).”⁴¹ However, if the US is able to temper hard power deterrents, it may eliminate a major incentive for these rogue nations to go or stay nuclear. It is hard power rhetoric and intentions that drive nations toward nuclearization; therefore, the US must carefully balance these tools, or judiciously apply them in conjunction with soft power to convince nations that the US seeks “behavior rather than regime change.”⁴²

In the past 5 years, the US has taken steps in both the right and wrong directions on this issue. The Obama administration's efforts to secure the JCPOA with Iran was a great step in separating the two objectives that had been closely joined since the end of 2001. However, the Trump administration's withdrawal from this agreement in 2018 demonstrates the US's reluctance and unwillingness to disconnect the two objectives and its propensity toward hard power. Whether the administration can get a better deal by returning to sanctions is yet to be seen; however, the recoupling of the two objectives makes it highly unlikely.

President Trump's diplomatic engagement with North Korea has shown glimpses of hope, as the administration has thus far prioritized the objective of nuclear disarmament. Johns Hopkins University professor Carla Freeman noted that "while signaling a willingness to use force directed against North Korea's nuclear assets, some top Trump administration officials... had expressed the view that US policy does not seek regime change or Korean reunification."⁴³ Additionally, the US scaled back annual military exercises that North Korea perceives as a threat.⁴⁴ While negotiations with North Korea have failed in the past, if the US can maintain a unitary objective and a balanced approach, despite setbacks, the current approach has the potential to make progress where other attempts have failed.

Conclusion

Nuclear proliferation, which poses a threat to the US and the international society, is exponentially more dangerous when dealing with irresponsible rogue states like North Korea and Iran. However, US overreaction to this threat risks making the situation worse. Outside the use of pre-emptive military invasion, hard power methods meant to achieve the co-objectives of non-proliferation and changing rogue behavior have been counterproductive. The threat of military force and sanctions have only strengthened the resolve of these nations in their nuclear intent.

The US must decouple the non-proliferation objective from the behavior objective and make it the fundamental goal. This clear objective should then produce a strategy based on an understanding of why nations seek nuclear weapons and that balances both hard and soft power.

Notes:

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⁴ Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: The White House, December 2017), 3.

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¹⁴ Litwak, “Non-proliferation,” 54.

¹⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

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¹⁸ Litwak, “Non-proliferation,” 17.

¹⁹ Ivo H. Daalder and James Lindsay, “The Preemptive-War Doctrine has Met an Early Death in Iraq,” *Brookings*, May 30, 2004, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-preemptive-war-doctrine-has-met-an-early-death-in-iraq/>.

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²² Robert A. Pape, “Why Economic Sanctions Do Not Work,” *International Security* 22, no. 2, (Fall 1997), 90.

²³ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2397*, (December 27, 2017) 1, [http://undocs.org/S/RES/2397\(2017\)](http://undocs.org/S/RES/2397(2017)).

²⁴ U.S. Department of State, “Iran Sanctions,” accessed February 9, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/index.htm>.

²⁵ U.S. Department of State, “Iran Sanctions: Statutes,” accessed February 9, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/statutes/index.htm>.

²⁶ U.S. Department of State, “Iran Sanctions: Resolutions,” accessed February 9, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/resolutions/index.htm>.

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³⁰ Carla Freeman and Mel Gurtov, "Unpacking a US Decision to Engage North Korea: What it Entails and What it Could Achieve," *38 North*, April 2018, 6, https://www.38north.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/38-North-SR-1804_Freeman-Gurtov.pdf.

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³³ Litwak, "Non-proliferation," 28.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

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⁴⁰ Litwak, "Non-proliferation," 27.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴³ Freeman and Gurtov, "Unpacking a US Decision," 4.

⁴⁴ Aaron Mehta, "Pentagon Shrinks Key US-South Korean Military Exercise," *Military Times*, November 21, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2018/11/21/pentagon-shrinks-key-us-south-korean-military-exercise/>.