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REVISITING JUCHE AND SONGUN: WHY NUCLEAR MATTERS FOR NORTH KOREA?

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Introduction

North Korea has challenged traditional security threats by emerging as a rogue state capable of testing and launching nuclear missiles. The threat landscape of North East Asia is predominantly ruled by tackling North Korea's nuclear proliferation and bring stability and peace to the Korean peninsula. North Korea's interest for nuclear science and technology antedates the founding of the state in 1948. Presently, it has tested the solid fuelled ICBM *Hwasong-18*¹ further compromising the stability in the region. The US, South Korea and Japan have resorted to engage diplomatically but have not been able to deter the threat.

The security landscape of North East Asia is changing, especially with elevated ties between Russia and North Korea. Henceforth, it is imperative to comprehend the logic and drive for North Korea's nuclear policies. To policy makers the question that have lingered around for long has been to assess the dilemma of denuclearisation and unification of the Korean Peninsula. Apart from policies that largely assess external factors, mostly geopolitical in nature to explain North Korea's nuclear proliferation, a

detailed peek governing the ‘domestic’ factors should also be equally highlighted, where *Juche* and *Songun* finds relevance

North Korea’s Nuclear Trajectory: An Overview

The ‘hermit kingdom’ began exploring and experimenting with nuclear right after the division of the Korean Peninsula. The table (table 1) below presents a timeline for North Korea’s nuclear developments:

Table 1: Timeline of North Korea’s Nuclear Development

1960s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Soviet Union provided assistance to North Korea in building the Yongbyon Nuclear Reactor; • Fission Experiments begin in 1960s.
1970-1980s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Korea joined the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1974; • In July 1985 North Korea joined the Non-Proliferation treaty.
1990s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declaration on the Denuclearization of Korean Peninsula; • Continued Nuclear Missile Tests and Negotiations by The Us to Contain Further Missile Testings.
2000s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Korea Admitted to having secret nuclear weapons development; • In January 2003, North Korea leaves the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and acknowledged having uranium based reactors; • North Korea Tested its first Nuclear Missile in 2006 and the Second In 2009; • The 6 Party talks resumed but failed due to stalemate.
2010- Present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kim Jong Un takes the Leadership In 2011 and declares

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> North Korea as a ‘Nuclear State’; Long Range Nuclear Missiles added in weapons development; ICBMs began to be tested in 2017; ICBMs and Hypersonics continues to be tested by North Korea.
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Source: Compiled by Author

The aforementioned timeline provides a deep insight into North Korea’s trajectory for nuclear development and despite strict UN sanctions, it continues to pose a threat to regional security architecture. Table 2 depicts the weapons development by North Korea:

Table 2: Major Weapon Development by North Korea

1998	Test launches the Taepodong-1 rocket over Japan in an apparent attempt to launch a satellite.
2006	Conducts its first underground nuclear test.
2009	Launch of Taepodong-2
2012	An Earth observation satellite was successfully launched into orbit by a multistage rocket.
2016	Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs) tested.
2017	ICBM HWASONG-14 launched.
2023	ICBM HWASONG-17 launched and HWASONG-18 tested.

Source: Compiled by Author

Juche: Self-Reliance and Guarding the Home Front

Juche and *Songun*, often termed as the ‘regime survival model’ ² can be used as extended lenses to examine why nuclear is so significant for North Korea. The survival of North Korea in the face of economic hardships can be attributed to its *Juche*

ideology, and *Songun* politics. It is also believed that the state regime will likely experience relative longevity in the near future and that North Korea's existence is objectively necessary to maintain the balance of power among the major powers in Northeast Asia, as dealing with a nuclear-armed North Korea is critical to maintaining peace and stability in the region.³ These elements have combined to provide the state regime control over public opinion and some degree of popular support in the "eroding totalitarian system" despite long-term economic hardships. North Korea's political, economic, cultural, and military activities are ideologically guided by the tenets put forward by three generations of Supreme leaders; *Kim Il-Sung*, *Kim Jong-Il* and *Kim Jong-Un*, respectively. These are key concepts that ought to serve as the foundation for any analysis of North Korean programs and state strategies.

The party and nation of North Korea are based on the *Juche* philosophy. It serves as the cornerstone for the formulation of the ideals, directives, and strategies for the socialist revolution in North Korea. Historically, the country's exposure to the politics of Cold War and its vulnerable spot in international and regional systems gave rise to the *Juche* philosophy.⁴ North Korea adopted the political theory of *Juche* as its official autarkic state ideology in 1972.

In a speech titled "***Let Us Defend the Revolutionary Spirit of Independence, Self-Reliance, and Self Defence More Thoroughly in All Fields of State Activities***,"⁵ which Kim Il Sung addressed to the Supreme People's Assembly on December 16, 1967, articulated the guiding principles of *Juche* in unambiguous terms. However, Further, Kim advanced three key political-ideological principles of *Juche* in his speech "***On Socialist Construction and the South Korean Revolution in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea***",⁶ that defined ***Chaju*** Domestic and Foreign Independence; ***Chajip***: Economic Independence and ***Chawi***: Military Independence. The regimes in North Korea have remained clear on reducing dependence on any foreign power and continuing with a communist way of state politics. While foreign academics frequently characterize *Juche* as "self-reliance," the term's actual meaning is far more complex. As Kim Il Sung clarified:⁷

"Establishing Juche means, in a nutshell, being the master of revolution and reconstruction in one's own country. This means holding fast to an independent position, rejecting dependence on others, using one's own brains, believing in one's

own strength, displaying the revolutionary spirit of self-reliance, and thus solving one's own problems for oneself on one's own responsibility under all circumstances."

It was under Kim Jong-Il that all the principles were consolidated into one book titled '*On the Juche Idea*' in 1982 and since then it has been embedded intricately into North Korea's political behaviour extending to its nuclear and foreign policy. The book epitomizes why North Korea must achieve 'Self-Reliance in Defence'. Independent sovereignty is predicated on the idea of self-reliance in defence. The principle of self-reliance in defense must be applied in order to combat imperialist aggression and intervention, defend the nation's political independence and economic self-sufficiency, safeguard the revolutionary achievements, and ensure the security of one's people.⁸ Kim Jong Il highlighted in his book that self-reliance in defence for North Korea would 'consolidate the home front' thus ensuring that the any regime remains stable and guarantees political legitimacy.

Apart from its anti-imperialist tendencies, what *Juche* serves distinct purposes for the incumbent regime legitimizing any act that is undertaken by the country's supreme leader. Kim Jong Un's government has been at the cusp of global sanctions and yet North Koreans have expressed their utmost confidence in their leader for his nuclear ambitions. The Kim regime's dictatorial underpinnings cannot alone justify this behaviour. Part of the attribution to *Juche*'s embeddedness has to be acknowledged. *Juche* serves four distinct purposes:⁹

1. It served to maintain political independence of North Korea in the international community;
2. *Juche* simultaneously indoctrinates citizens to be loyal followers of the leaders and to believe that they are the "Masters of society";
3. It promotes popular solidarity amongst North Koreans;
4. Finally, *Juche* justifies the North Korean conception of state socialism amidst any adversarial challenges.

In its totality, *Juche* preserves the North Korean leadership's 'privileged social interests' by having influence on domestic and foreign policy. *Juche*'s imprints on North Korea's Nuclear policies and proliferation can be understood into how there is a diffusion of *Juche* ideology into North Korea's Nuclear doctrine. Additionally, it puts nuclear program in tandem with national ideology whilst creating a rhetoric-based state ideology to promote its nuclear development. This national ideology achieves domestic

legitimacy granting popular acquiescence to the regime in the process and aiding its continued survival.¹⁰

North Korea's nuclear program had so far been beneficial in its bargaining strategy with the United States. Nuclear negotiations had given the country a tool for manipulating power dynamics among the greater nations. Even though these negotiation tactics are extremely perilous, it does pose the ability to upend both its own position in the hierarchy of geopolitical relations and great power interactions. North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile development demonstrate the country's continued use of the *Juche* rhetoric at the helm of all issues.

Songun: Military First-ism and North Korea's Nuclear Goals

After *Juche*, *Songun* or military first-ism is the second deeply embedded ideology that also advocates for North Korea's national independence, self-defence and the 'core valorization' of the Korean People's Army (KPA). *Songun* underscores the need for North Korea to have a military government which is "capable of ensuring the survival" of the political class and system.

It is an extended *Juche* principle that places the National Defence Commission at the head of state and economic affairs post the constitutional revision of 1998.¹¹ *Songun* legitimized the party-army leadership, somewhat similar to the relation between the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army's relation in China. The adoption of *Songun* can be categorized into internal and external factors; the need to increase military strength to respond to any economic or ideological crisis whilst also safeguarding the position held by the Kim line in the country.

Songun works with seven distinct characteristics namely:¹²

- Military as 'centre of the political system';
- Military as 'deliver and provider';
- Military as 'problem solver';
- Military as an 'engine for social engineering';
- Military as a 'creator and advancer of new culture';
- Military as 'synthesizer of body-mind-spirit';
- Finally, Military as an 'exemplar'.¹³

As a result, the *Songun* system keeps North Korea trapped in a vicious loop wherein the military needs to continue to have a privileged position in order to preserve the legitimacy and survival of the regime. In order to bring foreign partners to the negotiating table, coercive bargaining techniques are employed to acquire international aid and concessions and this privileged position itself necessitates the use of threats, aggression and nuclear brinksmanship.¹⁴

Further, this system has come to define 'Civil-Military Relations' in North Korea. The external and internal security environment of North Korea has not changed for the ruling elites since the decline of communist forces, but *Songun* doctrine has only consolidated civil-military relations and defence institutions in North Korea more strongly.¹⁵ The economically unsustainable *Songun* system, which gives the military an excessive number of national resources, impedes economic growth and therefore promotes a culture of repression and militarism.¹⁶ Domestically, nuclear establishment paired with military bureaucracy are both essential for the survival of the regime and is seen as a symbol of pride in the country. This justifies the military's privileged position within the regime.¹⁷

This doctrine makes it plain that Pyongyang may not easily surrender its nuclear programs and weapons over any negotiations with the US or its allies. It views foreign insistence to denuclearize as a danger to its national security and a direct threat of the party-military leadership. Fundamentally, North Korea continues to pride itself as a 'full-fledged nuclear power' with *Songun* shaping the country's foreign and domestic decision-making process.¹⁸ North Korea today has joined the nuclear club, which also includes China, France, India, Israel, Pakistan, Russia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States, despite international sanctions and extreme poverty in the country.¹⁹ This implies that the fundamental ideas of *Songun* are in line with Pyongyang's belief that the only thing that can avoid US invasion is developing its nuclear program and weapons.

De-nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula: A Mirage?

As the security landscape of North East Asia evolves, with South Korea considering to now implement having its own nuclear program and weapons, it is imperative for policy makers to understand how the North Korean state functions. By leveraging the principles of *Juche* and *Songun*, North Korea has somehow managed to continue with

its nuclear ambitions raising serious threat concerns amongst the US and its allies. However, it is clear that diplomatic negotiations by the US that may compromise the stump of legitimacy for the Kim regime in North Korea will continue to remain a distant dream.

North Korea's pursuit of nuclear program serves two significant purposes; deterrence from external threats and regime survival as argued using the *Juche* and *Songun* lens. Domestically, the nuclear program is a catalyst for an invigorating nationalism and loyalty towards the Kim leadership. The military drills undertaken by US and the South Korean military serves as a reminder for the North Koreans to further go nuclear as the only source of protection against any menace, thereby legitimizing any decision or action undertaken by their supreme leader on the face of economic headwinds. As part of the US's proposal on the de-nuclearization strategy, it lacks incentives that are of "equal or greater value to the Kim regime as its nuclear program". The pervasiveness of *Juche* and *Songun* is so rampant that it is certainly difficult for the US to resume diplomatic talks, particularly post Hanoi Summit in 2019.

Furthermore, North Korea is unlikely to renounce its 'nuclear armed' status, which upholds the nationalist ideals of *Juche* and *Songun* and that lends legitimacy to Pyongyang's leadership. Thus, it is necessary to reconsider the North Korean nuclear issue from a perspective other than the traditional oppositional framework to simply de-nuclearize.

US-China relations aggravate the present North Korean nuclear crisis. China although maintains a 'lip to teeth' relationship North Korea, China needs it as a buffer zone. The US must engage China that a united Korea may not act against China's interests and that North Korean aggression might actually strengthen the US security architecture in East Asia and push Japan and South Korea to the brink of developing their nuclear programs.

Along with China and other East Asian nations, the United States may create contingency plans in case North Korea's regime falls or there is an armed confrontation. China must be guaranteed that the reunification of the Korean Peninsula or a regime transition in North Korea will not jeopardize its fundamental interests. North

Korea will not be forced to the brink of collapse or disarmament unless China successfully imposes sanctions against the incumbent Kim regime.²⁰

Conclusion

Peaceful negotiations are not predicated on denuclearization; rather, it is an aim. Expecting North Korea to voluntarily denuclearize would be wishful thinking in the absence of security guarantees from the US. It could be necessary for the international community to get ready to acknowledge North Korea as a de facto nuclear power. North Korea is not inherently more dangerous because it possesses nuclear weapons; rather, it is because it intends to use them. The international community at large should take into account how deeply ingrained North Korea's nuclear program is in its national narratives and ideologies, as well as how its nuclear ideology has been used in the past—not the least during the early years of Kim Il-sung—to maintain the regime-state in its current configuration.

Security on the Korean peninsula has entered a vicious cycle and North Korea is determined to improve nuclear weapons as recent events demonstrate. A deeper comprehension of its domestic nuclear program can be attained through the prism of *Juche* and *Songun*, providing a fresh perspective on the significance of nuclear weapons for the regime-state in North Korea.

DISCLAIMER

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Endnotes

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