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The Korean thaw and global post-diplomacy

【By Ian Inkster and Mark Lai】The year has begun well with the seeming defreezing of relations between North and South Korea. Though the specifics can and will change daily, it looks as if the Winter Olympics has served as an icebreaker between the two systems, paving the way for a broader and more important pathway of understanding and improved diplomatic behavior.

Recalling that even this much has occurred at the tail end of some explosive public statements and tweets by both North Korea and the US, it is a reminder for us that there is positive potential to be found amid this rhetorical nonsense. This might be further clarified when we consider a more comparative historical perspective.

The beginning of the 1945-1949 nuclear arms race was established by two powers, the US and the former USSR, which divided the world into two armed camps in a manner that can never be called responsible. The risks of the Cold War were huge and served as a backdrop to the strong politicization of youth (especially through the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) during the radical decade of the 1960s.

No one, including the UN, could evaluate or sit in judgement on this process, nor was it coherent — the US program was after all begun in order to threaten or defeat its World War II arch-enemies (Germany and Japan), while the USSR was fearful of all capitalist nations as that war ended. Neither were especially trustworthy nor did they act in any sort of a systematic global consensus.

The motives of Britain and France as they built their capabilities from 1952 to 1960 were no more benign or coherent; surely NATO should have been a safeguard against both old European enemies and new eastern ones. They have remained unchallenged in building their nuclear arsenals until the present.

China faced a range of possible enemies, including the USSR and the US, when it tested its first nuclear weapon in 1964, including the immediate territorial threats in the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula. Since faster economic growth from the late 1980s, capabilities have matched economic momentum.

The sixth nuclear power — Israel — could similarly cite threats from its enemies behind its secret and ambiguous program of nuclear weapon development from the 1960s. Unlike the previous five systems, Israel did at that time promise never to be the first nation in the region to begin a nuclear attack.

When India joined the nuclear group with its 1974 successful testing, it insisted on peaceful purposes, claiming that the UN's Nonproliferation Treaty was merely an instrument of colonialism. It joined China and Israel in declaring a "no first use" profile.

However, the eighth member of the club, Pakistan, admitted that it would "eat grass, but build the bomb" in the face of the nuclear capability of its regional enemy, India. While most of the media worried over the North Korean crisis last year, the Pakistani minister of defense said in a TV interview that Islamabad was ready to use nuclear weapons against India.

The first thing we might say about this history of the nuclear club is that it is hardly benign nor illustrative of any fine thinking in world governance since 1945. This is perhaps obvious, but it has implications for today that should be teased out.

It is also clear that the extreme expenses of nuclear programs even in rich nations were balanced by the seeming extreme and particular threats from either territorial or ideological enemies. Since securing nuclear status, no nuclear usage has actually occurred. No-first-use policies might be seen as important ingredients of what were basically — despite rhetoric — defensive programs of threat that had the added advantage of raising global status.

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Back to North Korea. Other things being equal, it might be expected that an exhausted poor nation, even one under a proto-religious, familial and cultist dictatorship, would slow down its relentless search for status and national security once its nuclear capability had risen to the level of an effective threat. That seems to have become a working understanding within the existing nuclear club, at least until recently.

This could even be extended to the thought that effective deterrence reduces threats from the US or China or more certainly South Korea, and it allows a more relaxed political strategy and even — for the first time in a long, long while — some economic growth and a greater focus on social welfare.

Does the present thaw represent any measure of this? Almost certainly not. Rich nations such as the US or Britain have been prepared to increase nuclear capabilities in the face of slowing economic growth and growing social inequality. And, despite the tiredness of their institutions and the tiresomeness of their leaderships, they are indisputably democracies.

However, the real reason that we might not expect a result for North Korea that is even loosely in conformity with history since 1945 is that the global context of its new nuclear capability has changed so radically in the past few years.

For at least the last decade or so, developments of information technologies that have spread information flows not only geographically, but geopolitically — excluding almost no one from learning of very recent statements, events or intentions; destroying thoughtful diplomacy everywhere — have removed the room to move and to adjust to nuclear newcomers. Secondly, over the past year or so this feature has combined with the even more rapid deterioration of global governance (institutions) and political leadership (a handful of hot-spot political groups headed by relative outsiders to diplomacy).

James Clapper, a former US director of national intelligence and a normally cautious public servant, recently described US President Donald Trump's behavior and actions in diplomatic matters as "downright scary and disturbing." This immediately introduces as a major component of any thoughts on North Korea what is now best seen as a first phase of global post-diplomacy.

At the beginning of the nuclear arms race, the leaders — the US, the USSR, the UK and France — were also the leading conventional weapons powers, and had long been the largest economies of the world, the exception being the non-nuclear and treaty-bound Japanese. They had much to lose from a nuclear war, and the task of diplomacy was to safeguard global checks and balances.

Today, nations are driving themselves into abject poverty to gain nuclear status. The underdevelopment of conventional weaponry among lesser economies is indeed a major cause of the rise of global terrorism — on the one hand, there is nuclear capability; on the other, sporadic terrorist attacks, with far less of conventional warfare in between.

During that long period of Cold War, itself dependent upon and an outcome of nuclear arms races, the enemy was relatively well defined and was located spatially; now it is ill-defined and free of space in that terrorists might appear on the bus or in the cinema and might be acting under an ideology far removed from their place of birth. Previous outbreaks of war meant international declarations in advance and actual deaths in the field were the principal measures of success, rather than today's degrees of civilian terror.

In the new circumstances, diplomacy and the reaching of long-term understandings are much more difficult to attain within a widening group of nuclear-capable nations, and the addition of the fractious and recalcitrant North Korea merely brings this all out into the open more clearly. When we add to this the excitability of Trump and the lethargy of Europe and the UN, we cannot forecast the balance of events for even the next few months.

From last year we live in a unique conjuncture — exemplified, but not defined in both the coming of age of North Korean military status and the coming of Trump. We are fast moving toward post-diplomacy in which relations within the old comity of nations are being replaced by emergencies caused by strategically placed leaders. This leads to a situation where now a premature stupid action might become a last action before nuclear war, in contrast to an old world wherein even stupid actions by thoughtless leaders could be resolved within a quieter world of the diplomats, and where their failures resulted in more limited conventional warfare.

At the present thaw we can all doubt the depth of North Korea's sincerity and the extent of South Korea's sagacity. However, where in earlier cases of nuclear transition there has been some modicum of interpower understandings, where potential rogue elements could be challenged and inhibited by treaty or by commercial blackmail, or even by non-nuclear force, today's North Korean nuclear capability has emerged in an era wherein governance is unstable and where rogues are everywhere.

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