

North Korea, the Beijing Consensus, Soft Power, and the Art of War

(A short note written for the Asymmetric Threats Contingency Alliance (ATCA) dated 9 October, 2006)

Today (9 October) I woke up in my London flat at dawn as usual, to be greeted by breaking news that North Korea claimed success in carrying out a nuclear test identified to be at Hwaderi near the Chinese border at 0136 GMT.

This is not entirely unexpected. The so-called Six-Party Talks are in disarray with an impasse. The US and some of its Western allies continue to demand for North Korea to undertake to give up its nuclear programme before any negotiations while the DPRK insists on seeing some real money on the table. Meanwhile, the US continues to dismiss direct talk overtures from North Korea, which the US has branded as part of the Axis of Evil and has recently frozen some of DPRK's overseas bank assets suspected of being involved in currency counterfeiting and money laundering.

China received only 20 minutes advance notice of the test from North Korea, following which China immediately notified the US, Japan and South Korea.

Following initial seismic evidence of the underground blast, there was outrage in the immediate international official reaction: 'provocative' (US), 'blazen'(China), 'unpardonable' (Japan), 'stern response required' (South Korea), 'serious harm' (Russia), 'completely irresponsible' (UK) and 'unacceptable' (EU). Similar outrage is expected at the imminent United Nations Emergency Security Council meeting. Naturally, to maintain the credibility of international order, it would be unthinkable that this blatant 'two-fingered' defiance should go unpunished. An unambiguous message must be sent to prevent a dangerous slide on the slippery road of nuclear proliferation.

Meanwhile, the world's commentariat is abuzz with conjectures on what should be an effective solution. Unless the precise locations of all of the DPRK's Weapons of Mass Destruction are known and pinpointed accurately, would a pre-emptive strike be risk-free so as not to trigger off asymmetric and disproportionate reprisals? Would stringent economic sanctions, at the cost of even more suffering of the North Korean people, be persuasive enough, given that compassion is not amongst the Dear Leader's strongest virtues? Is the ultimate solution the collapse of the current regime, and if so, what fallout this would have on the stability of the whole region, including South Korea and China? Or does it require, as Richard Lloyd Parry of the Times (UK) seems to suggest, a change of direction in Washington?

I have proposed the idea that where a country has become so destitute as to have nothing to lose, it is often necessary first to nurture an expansion of the size of the economic stake it holds before any 'responsible stakeholder' behaviour can be induced ('How best to deal with a desperado' ATCA, 6 July, 2006).

Some may find that the Dear Leader appears to have taken a leaf out of Chairman Mao's book, in opting for the Bomb rather than 'trousers for the masses'. With the rise of nationalism worldwide and the advent of a uni-polar world, more countries (Iran included) may perhaps be tempted to possess its own nuclear deterrent, if only to assert their own independence against external coercion. This could lead to a domino scenario, where 'keeping up with the Joneses' would acquire a nightmarish meaning.

Since Mao's Bomb, China has spectacularly changed from Mao to Market, learning to become a more responsible international stakeholder. What is more, there is a marked shift in the most recent 11th Five Year Plan towards equality, social justice, and environmental sustainability. Momentum is now being sustained at the current four-day Sixth Plenum of the 16th Chinese

Communist Party Central Committee in Beijing on how to build a Harmonious Society, leading to the 17th Party Congress next year.

To enable herself to meet its many daunting internal and external challenges, China has no alternative to pressing for a peaceful international environment, which translates into her external policy of mutual respect, co-existence, equality and win-win cooperation. This also translates into her policy of Harmony: harmony within the same country, between countries, and between Man and the Environment. Such thinking also sits well with deep-rooted Chinese culture.

My point is that all these welcome changes have not happened out of any external coercion. A potent change agent has been the exponentially expanded economic stake in China, including the number of stakeholders amongst its huge masses in market-driven openness, with a momentum which has become self-fulfilling.

Termed by Joshua Cooper Ramo as '*The Beijing Consensus*', China's policies of a self-determined path towards equitable and sustainable growth, with peaceful cooperation and co-existence with other countries and an implied disbelief in any one-size-fits-all recipe, are increasingly gaining ground in the developing world in Africa, South America and the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Realpolitik implies that China's increasing number of friends do have their own economic and geopolitical agendas. But this begs the question whether the now discredited '*Washington Consensus*', full of hegemonic hype, should be assigned to the dustbin in a much more globalised and interdependent world. Even Francis Fukuyama has made an about-turn from his earlier much-vaunted End of History line of thinking in his '*After the Neocons – America at the Crossroads*.'

Fukuyama now advocates that the US could use more of Professor Joseph Nye's concept of Soft Power. When I was a young boy in Macao in the 50s, when Mainland China was in the grips of waves of internal political struggles, I was greatly attracted to America's soft power romanticized in *The Little House on the Prairie*. I borrowed the Chinese translation from the US Information Service library, as my English then was not good enough. America remains a very attractive country, but much of its attraction is draining away as the hopes and aspirations of much of the developing world are beginning to turn to the China model.

Indeed, with the messy situation in Afganistan, Lebanon and Iraq highlighting various double-standards, the question must be asked whether something akin to China's use of soft-power (notwithstanding China's own still less-developed civil society) is a better alternative to projection of hard-power, economic or military, in addressing some of the issues challenging a globalised world.

Soft Power implies a great deal of patience. It does not lend itself to quick fixes. It works on the long-term psychology of attraction leading to the desired change. But how many people still think that quick-fixes like the so-called Harvard 'big bang' of instant perestroika and glasnost for the former USSR, or the War in Iraq, are success stories to be repeated?

Indeed, the concept of Soft Power echoes the Chinese classical stratagem of 'Winning without War' in Sun Tzu's Art of War written in 500 B.C.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and what dramatic changes have followed, have not come about from any direct military attack. In matters of desired regime change, patient, long-term engagement is more likely to yield a satisfactory outcome. As a Confucian saying goes, grand statecraft is like cooking a small

fresh fish. Achieve the best taste and texture demands a great deal of delicate skill and patience.

So while North Korea must be taken sternly and swiftly to task for its flagrant intransigence, it may take more than a few recipes of external coercion to bring about a lasting outcome conducive to regional peace, stability and prosperity.

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