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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.