



Policy Forum 06-92: The Taoist Enlightenment on Mt. Huashan: How American Eagle and North Korean Tortoise Can Get Along



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Article by Alexandre Y. Mansourov

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I. Introduction

Alexandre Y. Mansourov, Associate Professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu, writes, "The Taoist "Way" out of the current nuclear standoff between North Korea and the United States is based on four simple Tao wisdoms - "small steps together," "use help from others when in trouble," "know when enough is enough," and, finally, "doing less is doing more." It may look paradoxical and even heretic, but the Taoist conclusion is that the less we do in our quest to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis at present, the more we will achieve in the end and the safer we will all be in the meantime."

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II. Article by Alexandre Y. Mansourov

- The Taoist Enlightenment on Mt. Huashan: How American Eagle and North Korean Tortoise Can Get Along
by Alexandre Y. Mansourov

One day last fall, I made a trip to Mt. Huashan located 120 kilometers east of Xi'an in Shaanxi province in Northwest China. The five-peak Huashan mountain is one of the five sacred mountains in China, the ancient playground of the mythical Jade Emperor Yu Huang, the ruler of Heaven and supreme sovereign of all, a holy cradle of the Taoist religion and home to many Taoist temples. In the past, many emperors came to pray and sacrifice to the God of Mt. Huashan. It is said that Lao Tzu, the founder and patriarch of Taoism, once lived and gave sermons there.

It was a beautiful warm autumn day. Mt. Huashan dramatic cliffs were majestically shining in the bright sun. Rare trees still boasted colorful autumn leaves. A dazzling waterfall was attracting the eye in the distance. Spotty white clouds in amusing shapes were floating below. A friend of mine and I embarked on an long arduous journey, hiking over sixty-six hundred steps carved in stone to reach the temple for God of Mt. Huashan on the top of the spectacular South peak located 2,160.5 meters high above the sea level.

Looking at the five peaks from the mountain foothill, we thought we would never make it even to the first elevation, let alone all the way to the summit. But, we decided to try it anyway. We climbed a few dozen almost vertical steps and took a rest, and then we climbed a few dozen steps more, took pictures, and rested again. During the hike, we sweated and we lent a helping hand to one another. We climbed, and talked, and cheered up each other, and kept on climbing. In the end, we reached a major milestone - the North peak often called the Clouds Stand at 1,614 meters high above the sea level. And this is where I realized the first wisdom of the Tao: it is all about "small steps."

No matter how ambitious the road ahead appears to be, it starts with the first small step: "A journey of a thousand miles starts under one's feet." (*Daodejing* , Verse 64) You can even make it all the way if you advance one small step at a time. And that is what we did, and look at the progress: the day before we were facing a huge terracotta warrior army ready to die for their divine emperor deep underground near the Qin Shi Huang Di Mausoleum in Lishan and the next day we were about to reach the highest peak of Mt. Huashan, liberating us from all evil possessions. We were able to accomplish that by climbing from the very bottom of the darkness embodying all human fears to the

very top of human ambition opening the Taoist gate to heaven, one small step at a time. Had either my friend or I attempted to make a quantum leap and jump from the foothill to the summit, we would have fallen abruptly into the bottom of the abyss between the cliffs. Had I attempted to ride to the top of Mt. Huashan on the back of my friend, without making any steps myself, or had he attempted to ride on my back, we would have fallen dead right at the outset. The only way how we could succeed was climbing up in small steps with occasional measured rest stops, cheering up and helping each other all the way and all the time.

As we were standing on the North peak, marveling at the majestic white clouds slowly floating by beneath us, I realized how blessed we were that it was a spectacular day with lots of sunshine and little wind. It was a rare day of heavenly beauty and divine calm on the top of the mountains known for their whimsical weather that could be both brutal and unforgiving. Just in case if the weather were to turn against us, we acquired some walking aides like a walking stick, a pair of soft gloves to hold onto the rusting iron chains, and a know-it-all local guide. All these were designed to help us overcome the negative consequences of any possible change for the worse in accompanying weather conditions. These precautions taught me a little bit more about the Tao: "In action, be aware of the time and the season" (*Daodejing* , Verse 8).

After taking a brief rest at one of the Taoist temples near the North peak, we ventured out to conquer the South peak up the frightful path equipped with an iron chain to help adventurers climb up almost a vertical cliff. I was awe-struck while climbing up the Ca'er Precipice, one of the most dangerous places along the only-existing path in Mt. Huashan. The cliff, less than 30 centimeters wide, faces such a deep valley that it was almost mind-boggling. Then, we climbed up the Sky-leading Ladder, passed by the Sun and Moon Precipice, and reached the well-known Blue Dragon Mountain, at the top of which my Chinese friend and I decided that we halt our climb - "we have seen enough." We turned back to descend, filled with the satisfaction of mission accomplished. It was at that moment that I realized the third wisdom of Tao, namely "He who knows when to stop does not find himself in trouble" (*Daodejing* , Verse 44).

As we descended from Mt. Huashan, my friend entertained me with vivid stories about the glorious lives of colorful emperors of the Han dynasty that ruled China for more than four centuries from 206BC to 220AD. The Han rulers lowered taxes, relaxed government regulations, and did not interfere into the public's life; hence, economy boomed, culture flourished, and peace prevailed. As Lao Tzu said, "If nothing is done, then all will be well" (*Daodejing* , Verse 3). Hence, the fourth wisdom of Tao is as follows: "doing less is doing more." If one just follows the natural trends, everything will be alright in the long run.

Now let's consider the U.S-North Korean nuclear standoff from the Taoist perspective. No matter how far apart the North Korean and American positions on the nuclear issue may seem to be and how far their ultimate goals are considered to be from the current departure point in negotiations, if both sides were to adopt the first rule of Tao - "small steps, holding hands together," then they could make it all the way to their perceived final destination. Even now that the DPRK has crossed the nuclear threshold and geared up to building up its nuclear arsenal, there is still a way to reverse the course and roll back the nuclear arms race on the peninsula: it can be done by "small steps" in a tit-for-tat or action-for-action fashion. But, if Pyongyang and Washington were to attempt to leap frog across the abyss that separates them by negotiating some kind of a grand deal from the start, they would certainly fail from the lack of capacity and political will. If one side were to attempt to pile on the other side and ride to its ultimate objectives on the back of its negotiating counterpart, then they both would surely fail from exhaustion, too. The first wisdom of Tao is "small steps," even when "going forward seems like retreat" (*Daodejing* , Verse 41).

The second plain wisdom of Tao is that "difficulty can be overcome with the others' help." In the

1990s, when the post-Cold War international environment was rather benign, the United States and North Korea did not need much external mediation, and they could reach a bilateral agreement or the Agreed Framework on their own with little outside help. In contrast, when the vicious storm hit on 9/11, and the international environment became much harsher and more hostile, Washington and Pyongyang found it extremely difficult to negotiate one-on-one and reach their individually desired outcomes. They now need some helping aides, some sort of international mediation that may ease their mutual suspicions and tensions and bring them closer together. That is why Chinese and other parties' intermediation should be welcomed. Multilateral approach to negotiations may prove to be helpful in finding the final solution to the North Korean nuclear problem. As Lao Tzu himself put it (*Daodejing* , Verse 81), "The more he does for others, the more he has. The more he gives to others, the greater his abundance."

As one ponder over possible outlines of a future nuclear settlement between North Korea and the United States, it is hard to escape the thought that whatever final objectives these two nations may want to achieve today, these may turn out to be false or misguided or not really in their fundamental interest from tomorrow's perspective. Once Pyongyang and Washington decide to agree on something and get engaged in the implementation of their prospective nuclear agreements, the more they learn from and about each other, assist each other and rely on each other's support and encouragement, the more comfortable they are likely to feel about one another, the more mutual confidence they will develop, and the more flexible they may become. "Under heaven nothing is more soft and yielding than water. Yet for attacking the solid and strong, nothing is better. It has no equal." (*Daodejing* , Verse 78).

In turn, this process of mutual learning and accommodation may cause them to re-evaluate their final objectives vis--vis one another. The United States and the DPRK may even decide to soften their mutual demands and lower their traditional benchmarks and old planks to accommodate each other. In other words, what appears as a true objective in the beginning of a long journey may turn out to be a false one; whereas the real objective may not even be known at the outset. North Korea may develop enough sense of security and common interest with the U.S. in the process of implementation of possible nuclear agreements that it may decide eventually to abandon its nuclear weapons programs without feeling the risk of losing legitimacy or power for its regime. Alternatively, as time goes by, there may arise a set of circumstances in the future under which the United States might be willing to accept a nuclear North Korea in the same vein as Washington chose to acquiesce to a nuclear China, a nuclear India, and a nuclear Pakistan. As Lao Tzu put it eloquently, "He who knows that enough is enough will always have enough." (*Daodejing* , Verse 46). Lao Tzu went on to say in *Daodejing* , Verse 61,

"If a great country gives way to a smaller country,
It will conquer the smaller country.
And if a small country submits to a great country,
It can conquer the great country.
Therefore those who would conquer must yield,
And those who conquer do so because they yield."

Now as I look back at the past half-a-century of nuclear diplomacy on the Korean peninsula - Russian, Chinese, and American interactions with North Korea on the nuclear issue, I reach a paradoxical, and, perhaps, even a heretic conclusion, which is quite in line with the fourth wisdom of Tao. If the former Soviet Union, PRC, and the United States had followed the natural trend and did nothing at all back from the 1950s up to the present, probably, there would have been no nuclear armament program in the DPRK today. Surely, Lao Tzu would say that the less we do in our quest to

resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis at present, the more we will achieve in the end and the safer we will all be in the meantime. In practical terms, if the North Koreans want to pursue their nuclear dreams, let them stew in their radioactive soup and eat plutonium for desert: the rest of the world should take a step back, stay alert, contain and mitigate any possible nuclear spillover effects, and maintain its current posture of patient waiting for the trend reversal in the hermit kingdom. If we do nothing today, perhaps, that will do the trick tomorrow.

When I returned to my hotel back in Xi'an, I knew that I was enlightened with the "Way" out of the current confrontation between North Korea and the United States. It was based on four simple Tao truths - "small steps together," "use help from others when in trouble," "know when enough is enough," and, finally, "doing less is doing more." If only could the U.S. and North Korean leaders visit Mt. Huashan and climb together up to the majestic South peak! They could learn their own Tao, too. As for the rest of the pundits, Lao Tzu said, "Those who know do not talk. Those who talk do not know." (*Daodejing* , Verse 56).

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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