

# HOW ROGUE STATES PLAY THE GAME: THE CASE OF NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the difficult issues in the field of international relations is the question of how to deal with so-called 'Rogue States'. Rogue Regimes, by definition, do not play the 'game' of international politics according to the international and legal 'rules'. So far, it has proven rather difficult for the international community to deal with these kinds of states and to put a stop to their 'rogue' activities. This chapter will try to analyze the ways in which Rogue States play the game of international politics. Understanding how Rogue States act may be vital to improve the international strategies towards them.

After discussing the term Rogue State, this chapter will use North Korea as case study. This country is probably the clearest example of a Rogue State and also one of the oldest Rogue States of these times as it has already frustrated the international community for some sixty years. The case study will especially focus on the clandestine nuclear programme of North Korea. This programme has been the main 'rogue activity' of the regime in Pyongyang during the past 15 years, and as such attracted the most international attention and activity in order to halt it in this period. How has North Korea acted in reaction of this international pressure? After analyzing the North Korean case, the chapter focuses at the existing 'basic strategies' towards Rogue States, comparing them to the North Korean situation. The chapter ends with some concluding remarks on dealing with Rogue States.

## ROGUE STATES: DEFINITIONS AND PROBLEMS

There exists no internationally accepted definition or listing of Rogue States, and the term is not uncontroversial either. The term Rogue State became fashionable especially during the 1990s, but these kinds of states are also known as

‘Pariah States’, ‘Outlaw States’ or ‘Renegade Regimes’.<sup>1</sup> States that are labelled as a Rogue State often have authoritarian rule, restrict human rights, carry out or support terrorist activities, attempt to acquire or proliferate weapons of mass destruction, and/or are involved in large-scale criminal activities like illegal weapons and drugs trafficking, money laundering or counterfeiting activities. More generally, they can be characterized as ‘flouting established international rules and norms.’<sup>2</sup>

Rogue States are nothing new in history. The twentieth century is full of examples of states that could be earmarked as a Rogue State – from Germany under Adolf Hitler to Libya under Muammar Gaddafi and from Uganda under Idi Amin to Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Nevertheless, the international community still struggles with the question: how does one deal with this kind of state?

Rogue States have been actors in the past and will also be so in the future, threatening other states in whatever way. Today, countries that are often labelled as Rogue States are North Korea, Iran, Syria and Sudan. In addition, some states are not a Rogue State at this moment, but are seen as a potential future one. Examples are states like Venezuela, Saudi Arabia and Russia. Some authors also consider the United States to be a Rogue State.<sup>3</sup> When talking about the threat of Rogue States in the near future, especially North Korea and Iran are frequently named, mostly because of their nuclear programmes. Their quest for weapons of mass destruction threatens the security of other international actors. The threat becomes even greater when weapons of mass destruction are proliferating from these Rogue States to other states, or even worse: to non-state actors like terrorist organisations.

Given the differences between the countries mentioned above, it may be clear that every Rogue State is a case apart. Hence talking about general policies towards Rogue States is difficult. It is possible, however, to learn from case studies. These can be positive cases, because there are some instances to be found in recent history in which the international community had surprising success in dealing with Rogue States. The sudden change, some years ago, of the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi from ‘rogue’ to ‘best friend’ may be the best example. It proves that, although there are many difficulties along the way, Rogue States may be effectively persuaded to change. It may also be possible, however, to learn from cases in which the international community has

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Preble, ‘The Bush Doctrine and “Rogue” States’, *Foreign Service Journal* (October 2005) pp. 25-30; Miroslav Nincic, *Renegade Regimes. Confronting deviant behavior in world politics* (New York, Columbia University Press 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Preble, *supra* n. 1, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> William Blum, *Rogue State. A guide to the world's only Superpower* (Monroe, Common Courage Press 2001 (second edition)).

failed in effectively dealing with Rogue Regimes. The ultimate case in this regard might be North Korea.

This chapter will analyze the case of North Korea, especially with regard to its nuclear programme. Although North Korea is only one of the Rogue States that can be distinguished nowadays, the regime in Pyongyang may be described as one of the most obvious members of this category of states – presumably, the regime is even proud of its reputation, given the way it exploits the international fear about its nuclear programme. Being some sort of Rogue State since coming into existence in the 1940s, North Korea may also be labelled as probably today's oldest Rogue State. How has it managed to survive six decades without being influenced by the international community to end its rogue activities?

### THE PERFECT ROGUE STATE?

North Korea may be depicted as an almost perfect example of the classic 'Rogue State'. Not especially because of the somewhat lunatic, Cold War type of regime that is often portrayed in the Western media,<sup>4</sup> but more because of the astonishing capability of this regime to play the game of international politics in a 'rogue' way without being overthrown by its far more powerful opponents. The regime in Pyongyang, first led by Kim Il Sung and after his death in 1994 by his son Kim Jong Il, has a long record of 'rogue activities'. Even without mentioning the invasion of South Korea in 1950, that started the Korean War, the rogue activities during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were multiple. Infamous are the various terrorist attacks on South Korean politicians and citizens, the dropping of spies on South Korean territory and the abduction of Japanese citizens to use them as language trainers for North Korean spies.<sup>5</sup>

Since the 1990s, however, the terrorist activities, in particular, seem to have ceased. The efforts in the field of other rogue activities, on the contrary, have increased. The North Korean state is still involved in large-scale international criminality, such as drugs and weapons trafficking, counterfeiting and illegal gambling activities. In addition, North Korea has increased its efforts in running a clandestine nuclear weapons programme and has been involved in nuclear proliferation activities. In particular these nuclear activities have attracted the most international attention during the 1990s and the current decade and they therefore show how difficult it is to deal with a Rogue State.

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<sup>4</sup> Hugh Gusterson, 'Paranoid, potbellied Stalinist gets nuclear weapons. How the U.S. print media cover North Korea', 15 *Non Proliferation Review*, No. 1 (March 2008) pp. 21-42.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Andrew Scobell, *North Korea's strategic intentions* (Carlisle, Strategic Studies Institute 2005) p. 23.

## BACKGROUND TO NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR POLICY

To understand the background of the North Korean nuclear programme, at least to some extent, it is necessary to look into the ideology of the regime that has shaped the (political) culture in North Korea since the establishment of the state in the 1940s. The essence of the so-called Juche ideology is often summarized as 'self-determination' or 'self-reliance'.<sup>6</sup> After a long history of suppression by the neighbouring states of China and Japan, North Korea's main goal is complete independence in all respects. All the policies of the North Korean regime are based upon this ideology.

The foreign policy of North Korea can be described by the terms 'fear' and 'distrust'. The strong belief in Juche ideology is that other states will never accept a completely independent North Korea; every (regional) power will always try to influence and to make use of the North Korean people, just as they did in the past. After Chinese and Japanese rule, now the United States is considered to be the main threat: after arriving on the Korean peninsula during the Second World War, the Americans never left and made half of the Korean nation (read: South Korea) a 'vassal state' where troops and weapons are stationed to conquer the independent North as soon as they will see a possibility. These ideas are the source of North Korea's aim to become a military power to be reckoned with, even by superpowers like the United States, China and Russia. Military strength is considered necessary to guarantee self-determination. Next to its large conventional forces – North Korea has the largest army in the world when counting the military as a percentage of the population – acquiring weapons of mass destruction has always received a great deal of attention. North Korea possesses large amounts of chemical and biological weapons, and the nuclear programme is just another step along the road to 'self-defence'. Nuclear weapons are seen as necessary to deter all (possible) enemies that are often nuclear powers themselves.<sup>7</sup>

In the field of economic policy, the self-reliance of the Juche ideology is also important. The problem is that economic self-reliance is almost impossible in North Korea. The agricultural conditions are quite unfavourable, while the country does not possess many raw materials either. That the North Korean economy has already survived for some sixty years has only been possible because this economic self-reliance has not been taken to the extreme. During the Cold War the North Korean regime proved very skilled in playing off the communist ri-

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<sup>6</sup> For an interesting overview of the Juche ideology see: Kongdan Oh & Ralph C. Hassig, *North Korea through the looking glass* (Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Scobell & John M. Stanford, *North Korea's military threat. Pyongyang's conventional forces, weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles* (Carlisle, Strategic Studies Institute 2007).

vals China and the Soviet Union against each other, receiving extensive economic support from both. When the Cold War ended, however, the assistance from its main supporter at that time, the Soviet Union, also stopped. This resulted in a major (and still ongoing) economic crisis. Famine became a returning catastrophe for the population; estimates of famine victims during the past fifteen years vary between one hundred thousand and several million.

Although North Korea still receives economic support from China, and to a lesser extent from South Korea and Russia, the country has a structural lack of almost anything, especially food and energy. Rather than pursuing economic reforms, the North Korean regime seems to prefer to rely on foreign aid, in the same way the regime has survived during the last six decades. This 'aid-seeking policy' is an important part of the explanation for North Korea's nuclear programme and the way the regime deals with the international negotiations on this subject. Seen from an economic point of view, the nuclear programme has a so-called 'blackmail function' to extract aid from other states. Pyongyang wants to be paid for every step it takes on this issue, even for coming to the negotiation table at all.<sup>8</sup>

#### AIMS AND STRATEGIES OF NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR POLICY

The aims of the North Korean nuclear programme are multiple. Nuclear deterrence against supposed enemies is the most important goal. Next to that, there is the economic goal of using the nuclear programme as an instrument for 'blackmailing' in order to extract foreign aid. In exchange for North Korean concessions on this programme, many concessions from the other side of the negotiation table are expected. A third aim that should be mentioned, although it partly overlaps with the first two aims, is that North Korea wants to be taken seriously, to be dealt with like a state that matters. This is one of the reasons why North Korea always urges the United States to engage in unilateral talks; the world's biggest superpower has to recognize that North Korea is an equal partner.

Especially the non-security aims make the North Korean case special when compared to other states with clandestine nuclear weapons programmes. Normally, these states try to develop their nuclear weapons in secret to prevent any interference from outside. The North Korean regime, on the contrary, openly acknowledges its endeavours to become a nuclear weapons state – some observers characterize the North Korean behaviour as 'atomic exhibitionism'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> E.g., *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> William J. Broad, 'North Korea's nuclear intentions, out there for all to see', *New York Times* (8 October 2006).

By showing how dangerous North Korea is, the regime expects to extract more concessions from the international community.

In the meantime, the North Korean leadership takes into account that military intervention is not highly likely at this moment in time. First of all, there is no unity among its opponents. The United States seems to be the only state eventually willing to intervene militarily, but it will not do so without the consent of its most important partners in the region, South Korea and Japan. Those states are fearful of North Korean violence towards their own territory and will probably refuse any support for military action. Especially South Korea is not in favour of military options for various reasons, one of them being the fact that the South Korean capital, Seoul, is very close to the border and might be destroyed in the first hours of any war because North Korea considers the South to be a vassal state of the United States. China and Russia, in turn, are not at all in favour of US involvement in what they consider to be their area of influence. An even more important reason for North Korea to assume that international military action is highly unlikely is the fear, shared by all parties involved, of the chaos that would arise in case the regime in Pyongyang were to collapse. Because of a lack of political opposition in North Korea, a collapsing regime will not be easily replaced by new leaders in the short term, so anarchy and chaos will spread through the country – and beyond its borders. The neighbouring states of China, Russia and South Korea fear large flows of hungry refugees, as well as the spread of weapons (including weapons of mass destruction).<sup>10</sup> Chaos and instability in North Korea may influence the whole region in a negative sense and the costs of stabilisation and the development of the ruined country will be enormous.<sup>11</sup> North Korea not only recognizes these international fears, but also makes use of them, playing ‘the instability card’ at the negotiation table to attract more concessions from its counterparts.<sup>12</sup>

Next to the strategy of playing the instability card, the North Korean regime uses the strategy of constantly slowing down all negotiation processes. Every possible detail is used to delay negotiations. One example of many is the Banco Delta Asia affair. In 2005 the United States declared that the North Korean accounts at this bank in Macau had been ‘infected’ because they had been used for illegal activities. The bank accounts were consequently frozen. North Ko-

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<sup>10</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, ‘When North Korea falls’, *The Atlantic Monthly* (October 2006) pp. 64–74.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Woolf Jr. & Kamil Akramov, *North Korean paradoxes. Circumstances, costs, and consequences of Korean unification* (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation 2005). Estimates concerning the costs of developing North Korea toward a level comparable to South Korea vary between 290 billion and 3.2 trillion US dollars (Ibid., p. 49).

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Bennett, ‘Commentary: North Korea policy options’, *United Press International* (28 November 2006).

rea, in turn, refused to negotiate any further on anything as long as this relatively small problem was not resolved.<sup>13</sup> Time is on the North Korean side, or so seems to be the idea in Pyongyang. As long as negotiations are possible, military action against the regime is highly unlikely, while at the same time rogue activities may continue. And as long as negotiations are dragging along, aid requests due to floods and other disasters – that sometimes seem to be exaggerated to extract more support – are more likely to result in concrete deliveries by the international community. After all, nobody wants to see the regime in Pyongyang collapsing because of popular unrest as long as there could be nuclear devices available in the chaos that will arise, so food and energy supplies will surely follow such aid requests.

North Korea has been rather successful in dealing with pressure by the international community. As will be explained next, the international activities to end the nuclear programme of Pyongyang have been continuously thwarted and slowed down during the last 15 years.

## INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIES TOWARDS NORTH KOREA

During the 1990s, when the world found out about the North Korean clandestine nuclear programme, the international efforts to end this 'rogue activity' started. The international community, led by the US administration of President Bill Clinton, tried to stimulate Pyongyang to change its behaviour by diplomatic negotiations combined with imposing economic and political sanctions. These international efforts led to the 1994 Agreed Framework, in which North Korea agreed to freeze its nuclear programme in exchange for energy assistance (oil supplies and the construction of energy plants).

Soon, however, controversy arose about the requirements of the agreement. North Korea claimed that not all the promised assistance and the lifting of sanctions were being delivered. The United States, backed by other Western states, stated that North Korea did not completely fulfil the inspection and verification requirements of the Agreed Framework. In the end, it was Pyongyang that dealt the last blow to the agreement in 2002 by revealing that its nuclear activities had not been halted at all. North Korea expelled all verification experts, withdrew from the Non Proliferation Treaty and openly restarted its nuclear reactors. In the meantime, President George W. Bush had taken office in the White House and described North Korea as one of the states of the 'Axis of Evil'.

The international strategy towards North Korea did not change, however. Diplomatic negotiations, combined with pressure through sanctions, were still

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<sup>13</sup> International Crisis Group, *North Korea-Russia relations. A strained friendship*, Asia Briefing No. 71 (Seoul/Brussels 2007) p. 8.

seen as the best instrument to deal with North Korea. This is why in 2003 the so-called Six Party Talks were started, i.e., diplomatic negotiations in which North Korea, the United States, China, Russia, South Korea and Japan are participating. The main goal of the negotiations is 'the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner.'<sup>14</sup> The Six Party Talks are still continuing at the time of writing, five years later.

## NEGOTIATING WITHIN THE SIX PARTY TALKS

To learn how North Korea plays the game of international politics, it is important to analyze the North Korean negotiation strategy within the Six Party Talks. This strategy can be described as follows: slowing down the negotiations as much as possible, not only by causing problems concerning as many details as possible, but also by making the negotiations as complicated as possible. This is why Pyongyang does not want to negotiate on the nuclear programme as an isolated subject, but also wants to include other themes, like relations with South Korea and the United States, energy deals, economic and security arrangements, and so on. The Japanese insistence on including the abduction case in the negotiations in this sense favours the North Korean strategy, making the negotiations even more diffuse. By making the negotiation process as complicated as possible, it is easier to slow it down or to sabotage parts of it.

Although the North Korean negotiation strategy is sometimes simply earmarked as rude and unwilling by the Western media, it is important to acknowledge that indeed this sometimes rude and seemingly unwilling behaviour is not meant to completely end the negotiations. On the contrary, North Korea has nothing to gain by ending the international negotiations.<sup>15</sup> The non-cooperative behaviour that North Korean diplomats often demonstrate at the Six Party Talks is only meant to slow the negotiations down, not to let them fail completely. From the North Korean perspective, the negotiations should preferably go on forever – negotiations avoid conflict, offer possibilities to obtain foreign aid, and do not seriously restrict the regime's room to manoeuvre.

Nevertheless, the Six Party Talks have had a positive outcome for the international community. Although the negotiations seemed to have completely failed when in October 2006 North Korea conducted its first nuclear test explosion, only some months later, in February 2007, an agreement was reached. According to this agreement, North Korea would dismantle its nuclear programme and

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<sup>14</sup> 'Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six Party Talks', Beijing, 19 September 2005', see <[www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)>.

<sup>15</sup> James A. Foley, 'Fail-safe: North Korea's stability paradox', *Jane's Intelligence Review* (October 2007) pp. 30-37.



give complete openness about all past nuclear activities in exchange for economic (mainly energy) assistance and the normalisation of international relations, among other things by lifting the US anti-terrorism sanctions. Although the February 2007 Agreement resembles the failed 1994 Agreed Framework, on this occasion North Korea seemed to be more serious. Nuclear installations were indeed closed down and documents on past nuclear activities were handed over. True, the North Koreans did miss all the agreed deadlines, but in the end they apparently did what they had agreed to do. When, in August 2008, the United States missed a deadline to remove North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, however, North Korea immediately ended all cooperation and threatened to restart its nuclear programme. The United States, in turn, mentioned the inadequate information received from Pyongyang as the reason for the delay in sanction lifting.<sup>16</sup> What these developments mean for the process as a whole is still to be seen.

Considering the North Korean aims with its nuclear weapons programme, one may question Pyongyang's willingness to fulfil all promises it has made. Some observers can simply not believe that North Korea would ever completely surrender its nuclear weapons programme, because it is Pyongyang's only real bargaining chip concerning the international community.<sup>17</sup> They may have a point there. But in spite of the image of the North Korean regime in the Western press, Pyongyang is not at all irrational, but is very capable in playing the game of international politics. When the North Korean leadership made the calculation that dismantling the nuclear programme is the most profitable action at this moment, it may be serious. The outcomes of this kind of North Korean calculation are unfortunately not known outside a select group of people in Pyongyang. And this rather mysterious way of acting is exactly the problem when dealing with Rogue States: they do not always act like 'normal' states would do, and their reactions to international strategies to influence them are thus difficult to predict. It is this unpredictability that makes it difficult to formulate successful international strategies to deal with Rogue States. This can be illustrated by comparing the existing basic strategies to the North Korean case.

## HOW NORTH KOREA EVADES INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE

The case of North Korea's nuclear programme effectively shows how difficult it is for the international community to deal with a Rogue State. Considering the

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<sup>16</sup> 'N Korean nuclear disablement falters in dispute over terror list', *Financial Times* (27 August 2008).

<sup>17</sup> E.g., Andrei Lankov, 'Staying alive. Why North Korea will not change', 87 *Foreign Affairs*, No. 2 (March/April 2008) pp. 9-16.

five 'basic strategies' towards Rogue States that are described by the American researcher Colin Dueck;<sup>18</sup> none of them have proved very effective in ending these 'rogue activities' of Pyongyang. All five strategies, appeasement, engagement, containment, rollback, and non-entanglement, will hereafter be projected in case of North Korea.

The strategy of *appeasement*, to start with, does not seem that illogical when one considers the background to North Korea's nuclear programme. One of the reasons for developing nuclear weapons is the perceived insecurity of the regime; it feels threatened and especially fears an American attack in the future to reunite the North with the 'American vassal state' South Korea. Appeasement could be an appropriate method to decrease this feeling of insecurity in Pyongyang. But even when neglecting the ideology of the North Korean regime that is built upon a fear of 'the world outside', there is a problem with the appeasement strategy. Next to the security background, the nuclear programme has economic aims; it functions as a so-called 'blackmailing tool' to extract economic support from the international community. Appeasement will not easily be able to solve this part of the problem.

At first glance, *engagement* may also seem a promising strategy. North Korea suffers from severe economic problems, so when negotiating, the international community certainly has something to offer. And even without negotiating, economic and diplomatic contacts may open the door to modernisation, liberalisation and democratisation, which in the long term may change the (foreign policy of the) regime so that it no longer sees any need for its nuclear policy. But this also appears unrealistic. North Korea's state ideology is not aiming to achieve 'Western-style' contacts and negotiations. Instead, because of the fundamentally paranoid and authoritarian nature of the North Korean state ideology, every engagement strategy that will give Pyongyang the impression of being encapsulated into international structures will fail. The experiences with engagement strategies towards North Korea indicate that Pyongyang will wring whatever concessions it can from the other party, without changing any policy or ambition.<sup>19</sup>

*Containment* is actually the strategy that has been mostly used by the Western part of the international community since the North Korean state came into being – during the Cold War North Korea belonged to the communist bloc and China and Russia were allies of Pyongyang to some extent (and to a lesser extent, they still are). Even more so, North Korea stimulated its own containment by the policy of self-reliance and the conscious lack of international con-

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<sup>18</sup> Colin Dueck, 'Strategies for managing Rogue States', 50 *Orbis* (Spring 2006) pp. 223-241.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

tacts. Even after the end of the Cold War, when almost all observers predicted a collapse of the Stalinist regime in Pyongyang, no signs of any crumbling of power have been signalled. North Korea's isolationism makes it more or less immune to containment strategies. Although, economically, Pyongyang certainly needs assistance from the outside, only a few countries that are willing to support the regime even to a lesser extent (China, South Korea, Russia) are enough to survive.

*Rollback* is no option either at this moment. As described above, almost no one wishes to see a sudden regime change in Pyongyang. A regime change, in whatever way, will most likely result in a power vacuum and thus cause enormous chaos by which the whole region of North East Asia may be negatively influenced. Pyongyang even makes use of this fear by playing the 'instability card' at the negotiation table.

*Non-entanglement*, finally, seems to be no option either. Sooner or later Pyongyang will reach the status of nuclear weapons state, and, even worse, may sell these weapons or manufacturing techniques to whoever will pay. Most world powers understand that something has to be done to stop the 'rogue activities' of the regime in Pyongyang.

What strategy might then be useful to deal with North Korea? A combination of engagement and rollback strategies seems to be an imperfect, but at this moment the best option available. It is important, however, to be aware of the North Korean strategies to make the international policies towards it less effective. Although the behaviour of the regime in Pyongyang may be difficult to predict, it is not irrational. More research into the way North Korea plays the 'game' of international politics could be very helpful.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

While the threat of Rogue States to the international community might be increasing – think of the current concerns about the proliferation of nuclear weapons – it has so far proven rather difficult to stop the 'rogue activities' of these kinds of states. In this chapter the case of North Korea's clandestine nuclear programme was analysed to describe the difficulties in dealing with rogue regimes. North Korea has been able to move on with its rogue activities without being seriously hindered by international efforts to stop them. Because North Korea is not adhering, like all Rogue States, to the general international and legal norms and rules, the international community has little leverage concerning the regime in Pyongyang. North Korea has so far been able to thwart and slow down all international initiatives to stop its rogue activities.

Rogue States do not always act like 'normal' states would do, and their reactions to international strategies to influence them are thus difficult to predict.

It is this unpredictability that makes it difficult to formulate successful international strategies to deal with Rogue States. This chapter showed that a combination of engagement and rollback strategies seems to be an imperfect, but at this moment the best available way to deal with Rogue States. To improve the effectiveness of the international policies, a better understanding of the counter-strategies that Rogue States use is vital. Although all Rogue States differ and there is no single way to deal with them, much can be learned from studying their behaviour. As long as no better strategies towards them will be found, Rogue States will remain an international problem.