

RESEARCH OF NOTE

The North Korean Nuclear Endgame

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**Introduction**

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) remains the enigmatic geopolitical entity it has been since its inception in September 1948. Over the past six decades, the threat it represents has grown, steadily expanding into a global threat through its propensity to proliferate missile technology.¹ By far the most problematic aspect of the regime's increasing threat profile has been its goal to develop a credible nuclear weapons program, evidenced by the July 2006 missile launch followed closely by its detonation of a nuclear device in October.² The global community's response, both quick and predictable, was to impose sanctions and further isolate the regime by passing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1718. While such an approach purports to demonstrate international resolve, it addresses only manifest North Korean behaviors while ignoring underlying causes.

Until the late 1980s, North Korean foreign policy was focused primarily in two areas: 1) increasing its international stature while simultaneously decreasing the stature of the Republic of Korea (South Korea); and 2) communization of the Korean peninsula through absorption of South Korea. Since the early 1990s, however, the regime's foreign policy has come to be dominated more by domestic imperatives: 1) regime survival; and 2) maintenance of economic welfare to the extent that it provides for the North Korean elite and the nation's military. The implement of choice for exercising the statecraft necessary to pursue these goals has been "brinkmanship missile diplomacy," which includes some combination of developing a credible geo-strategic nuclear threat; employing nuclear-centric bellicosity to extract concessions from the global community in furtherance of political and economic

survival imperatives; and infusing some amount of unpredictability into discussions

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surrounding its nuclear weapons program, a measure that has helped to keep other nations off balance. In short, its nuclear weapons program has become the regime's single, yet most potent and cost effective, geopolitical playing card. Paradoxically, nuclear weapons are of value to North Korea only if they are not used; their employment would bring about a catastrophic response from the US and its regional allies, undermining its survival imperatives. Consequently, despite endless vituperations there is little likelihood the regime would ever employ nuclear weapons.

Two circumstances led to the regime's confrontational posture with the world in July and October. First, it continues to demand direct negotiations with the US rather than through the Six Party Talks venue. Despite its animus toward the US, the regime continues to link its international legitimacy to bilateral negotiations with the US. Secondly, demands for negotiations during 2006 had a particular purpose: removal of US sanctions on \$24 million in financial assets frozen in Banco Delta

(Macau) on suspicion that the bank has helped launder North Korean funds gained through illicit activities such as counterfeiting US currency. Consequently, both nuclear events of 2006 may actually have been avoidable had the US chosen to engage the regime via a more comprehensive strategy rather than compartmentalizing the nuclear issue.

Recognizing the regime's motivations and intent—in short, its endgame—are fundamental to understanding its drive to acquire a nuclear weapons program. The first step in this process is to better understand the perceptual framework through which the regime views the geopolitical landscape in which it operates.

The North Korean Perceptual Fundamentals

North Korea's geopolitical view is most accurately described by the old Korean proverb, "A shrimp amongst fighting whales gets crushed." This perhaps is not without good reason. Historically, the Korean fate has not been one of self-determination.³ The Japanese, who considered Korea "a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan," forced it to establish trade relations in 1876 through the Treaty of Kanghwa (Korea-Japanese Treaty of Amity), which was, for all purposes, an "unequal treaty" quite similar to the Treaty of Kanagawa (1854) that the Japanese had been forced to sign with the Americans. The USS General Sherman incident (1866) was another attempt to open Korea, this time by the US; the tactics employed were similar to those of Commodore Matthew Perry when he opened Japan in 1853. Although the Koreans fought the incursion, by 1882 they capitulated with the signing of the Treaty of Chemulpo (Schufeldt Treaty). By 1905 Japan had established a Korean protectorate, followed by full annexation in 1910. The end of WWII saw a continuation of this pattern. Despite

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domestic Korean expectations for achieving self-determination, the peninsula was divided between the former Soviet Union and the US in an attempt to blunt potential Soviet expansion in the region. From the North Korean perspective, the historical fate of Korea has always been that of the “shrimp.”

This historical backdrop forms the basis of Kim Il Sung’s development of the *Juche* philosophy, which initially served as a means for eliminating political rivals and achieving political consolidation, but which has expanded over the decades to guide foreign policy issues as well. Often reduced to a definition of “self-reliance,” *Juche* encompasses a great deal more. While self-reliance is an integral aspect of *Juche*, it is more accurately described as autonomous self-identity, which at its core has an enabling independence of action that renders North Korea insusceptible to, or at the very least mitigates the undesirable external influences of larger powers, particularly the US, and to a lesser degree the PRC, Russia and Japan.⁴

Juche is essentially comprised of three determinants: *independence of action*; *equality*; and *flexibility*.⁵ Historically, *independence of action* meant an ideological freedom to develop a unique brand of North Korean communism, differing distinctly from Chinese and Soviet models. Presently, this determinant appears to have transformed itself into model that permits North Korea to pursue its survival imperatives free of international constraints, to include development of a nuclear weapons capability. The determinant of *equality* has changed little over the decades. Kim Il Sung expressed deep aversion to what he called “big power chauvinism”—the undue influence of larger powers on North Korean domestic and foreign affairs. Consequently, equal status for North Korea in its dealing with other countries became an obsession. The regime remains obsessed with this notion and development of the nuclear geopolitical card can be seen equalizing the playing field with the traditional “whale” nations of East Asia and the US.⁶ Finally, *flexibility* for the elder Kim meant taking advantage of windows of opportunity as they presented themselves with the regime’s two communist benefactors, China and the Soviet Union, which sometimes required playing one against the other. It also allowed the regime to accept external economic and military assistance

despite its mantra of self-reliance. Little has changed in this regard either. For example, during 1996-2005 North Korea received 10.1 million tons in food aid through the UN World Food Program, more international humanitarian assistance than any other country.⁷ Yet self-reliance remains an important pillar of *Juche*.

Toward a Nuclearized North Korea

North Korea’s experience with nuclear technology dates back to the mid-1960s when it developed an atomic energy facility in Yongbyon with assistance from the Soviet Union. By the 1980s its technology had advanced to the stage where the regime began undertaking research to develop its own nuclear weapons program. The decision to pursue such a program was impacted by several factors. First, by 1989 it had become clear to the regime that the traditional socialist bloc was disintegrating and any hope of communizing the Korean peninsula had essentially been lost. Moreover, it was becoming increasingly isolated. By the end of 1989 South Korea had normalized relations with Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia; by the end of 1990 added to this number were Bulgaria, Algeria, Mongolia, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and, most importantly, the Soviet Union. German reunification was achieved by 1990; and by 1992 South Korea had reached rapprochement with China. Thus, by the end of 1992, North Korea had become diplomatically, ideologically, and economically isolated. Important contributing factors to the socialist bloc break-up were the infusion of *realpolitik* into Soviet economic and foreign policies through Gorbachev’s reforms and the South Korean policy of *Nordpolitik* toward socialist bloc nations, an important element of which was the extension of economic and trade assistance.⁸

A second factor contributing to North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons was its flagging economy, which was exacerbated by natural disasters. North Korean industry, plagued by a lack of electricity, poor management practices and a highly inefficient distribution system, has underperformed for decades. Similarly, poor agricultural practices—denuding hillsides of vegetation to increase the amount of arable land; extensive use of pesticides; and indiscriminant planting that robbed the soil of nutrients all led to decreased agricultural output. This coupled

with the floods of 1995 and 1996, followed by drought conditions in 1997 (and 2001), left an emaciated North Korean economic infrastructure barely able to sustain its past military posture. These conditions became increasingly problematic for the regime when juxtaposed against South Korea’s increased ability to underwrite its security needs. For example, during 1990-1993, North Korea’s defense budget decreased 58%, from \$5.23 billion to \$2.19 billion. Conversely, South Korea’s defense budget increased during the same period, growing by 13.6%, from \$10.62 billion to \$12.06 billion.⁹ Finally, with diminishing Soviet support during the 1980s that ended after Soviet-South Korean rapprochement, North Korea had no means of securing repair parts for Soviet-made equipment or access to new military technology. Consider that North Korea’s 1990 trade volume with the former Soviet Union reached \$2.35 billion of its total \$4.66 billion in trade. By 1991, trade had dropped to an estimated 3% of earlier levels.¹⁰ Consequently, the only viable and cost-effective means for ensuring its survival imperatives were safeguarded in the face of an increasingly hostile geopolitical landscape was development of a credible nuclear weapons program, which it began in earnest during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Mindful of the imminent danger a nuclearized North Korea presented, President George H.W. Bush, in 1990, extended a series of carrots to the regime as a means of cajoling it to sign on to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) nuclear safeguards agreement, which included inspections of its declared nuclear facilities. North Korea signed the agreement in February 1992.¹¹ The lesson learned: even superpowers negotiate when in the shadow of a growing nuclear threat.

The process proceeded without incident until IAEA inspectors discovered inconsistencies in the amount of plutonium the regime claimed to have produced and the amount actually produced, leading them to demand the right to inspect facilities not listed in the original 1992 agreement. In retaliation, North Korea threatened withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. By 1993-94, during the Clinton Administration, the situation had deteriorated to the point that recommencement of hostilities on the peninsula was becoming increasingly realistic. Growing tensions were diffused

in June 1994 when former President Jimmy Carter traveled to North Korea and met with Kim Il Sung, during which Kim appeared amenable to freezing the regime's nuclear program in exchange for appropriate economic inducements. This, in turn, led to a series of talks convened in Geneva, which ultimately netted the Agreed Framework. In part, it provided for the following major points:



Jimmy Carter in Pyongyang, with Kim Il Sung in 1994

- North Korea would receive two light-water reactors (LWR), construction of which would be completed by 2003; these would replace its graphite-moderated reactors¹²;
- North Korea would agree to freeze its existing nuclear program in return for 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil annually until the completion of the LWR;
- The US and North Korea would move toward full normalization of political and economic relations;
- and the US and North Korea agreed to work together to strengthen the international nuclear non-proliferation regime.

The Framework fell victim to domestic US politics later that year. With the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, there was much less enthusiasm for supporting an agreement viewed as propping up an odious regime. Consequently, congressional approval for budget allocations to provide the 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil was often delayed, leading to late and sporadic shipments. Delays in the agreement also ensued as a result of disagreements over which country would build the LWR; North Korea was adamant that South Korea not construct them. Similarly, there were funding issues regarding the LWR. With the change of administrations in 2001, Bush was determined not to follow Clintonian policies, among which was the Agreed Framework. By October 2002, the regime admitted to pursuing a highly enriched uranium program; the Bush Administration countered by halting the shipments of oil. By November 2003, any construction of

the LWR was officially ended. In the final analysis, both sides were complicit in the Framework's demise.

While the Framework was not without its shortcomings, it was successful in halting the regime's plutonium-based nuclear weapons program. Supporters of the Framework contend that without the agreement, the regime would

have continued its plutonium-based nuclear weapons research and would by now have developed a formidable nuclear arsenal. The agreement, however, fell short in that it did not expressly limit development of highly enriched uranium (HEU) or ballistic missile programs, both of which have become points of contention since 2003.

North Korea during the Bush Administration

Despite the tumult of the 1990s, the Clinton Administration ended its discourse with the regime on an historic high note: the two countries exchanged envoy visits in October 2000, initiated by North Korea, followed by meetings in Kuala Lumpur in November 2000 to discuss the regime's missile program. The North Korean motivation for this last minute diplomacy may have been to wrest as much out of the Clinton Administration as possible before the change of administrations in Washington, but it demonstrated the viability of constructive engagement as a way forward. These conditions would not continue during the Bush Administration.

Critical of Clinton's engagement efforts, the Administration perceived them as rewards for the regime's bad behavior. Instead, the new administration followed the course of complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID), which required as an antecedent to any discussion of economic assistance dismantlement of the regime's nuclear weapons program. This can be regarded as the critical juncture. Had the Administration understood the regime's perceptual framework and the role of nuclear weapons within it—a geopolitical playing card rather than a tactical or strategic threat—and comprehensively engaged the regime, the outcome may have been different.

The regime had, by October 2002, admitted to pursuing a HEU program, to

which the Administration responded by halting heavy fuel oil shipments under the Framework. In December 2002 the regime expelled International Atomic Energy Agency personnel assigned to monitor activity at North Korea's nuclear reactors and reopened a nuclear facility at which were stored 8,000 spent plutonium fuel rods with an estimated yield of five nuclear weapons; and it withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in January 2003. It was this series of events that ultimately led to the creation of the Six Party Talks, a means to finding peaceful resolution to the regime's nuclear program.

The Six Party Talks (US, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and North Korea) have accomplished little of substance since their commencement in August 2003, although they do presently offer the only existing venue for potentially resolving the nuclear issue. Unfortunately, over the past several years, the Talks have become fractured, highlighting growing schisms amongst its participants. Although all agree that a nuclearized North Korea is harmful to regional stability, they pursue divergent paths toward that end. For example, the Bush Administration's pursuit of CVID does not accord well with the softer approaches of other members. South Korea, China and Russia take longer term views of the North Korean nuclear situation, although for dissimilar reasons. South Korea remains guardedly optimistic that its program of economic outreach, formerly known as the Sunshine Policy, will eventually bring about the necessary political and social change in North Korea that will lead to some form of reunification. China prefers a "go-slow" negotiated settlement that maintains regional stability as it seeks to improve its own international stature—politically, economically and strategically. Russia also prefers a negotiated resolution that safeguards its trade and economic investments with both North and South Korea. Japan on the other hand, since the 1998 North Korean missile launch that flew over its main island of Honshu, has maintained a growing wariness of North Korean intentions. In the wake of the regime's July 2006 missile launch and October 2006 nuclear detonation, its position has hardened and is closely aligned with the US position.

North Korea remains a threat to the East Asia region—a growing nuclear capability that provides the seeds for a

(continued on page 19)

at an understanding of social groups as well as explore social problems and social-justice concerns;

(7) Become more sophisticated as observers, readers, and writers.

(8) Come to understand that ethics and morality require a careful and deliberate analysis in heterogeneous, multi-cultural societies and cross-cultural relationships.

Methods of Evaluation

Your work will include 3 short (5 page) papers (60%) and a fourth and final (10 page) paper (40%) and active participation in film discussions, guest lectures, and seminars, and positive contributions to class discussion about readings.

Reading List

Ashwill and Diep, *Vietnam Today*

Borton, *After Sorrow*

Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam*

Duong Thu Huong, *Paradise of the Blind*

Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*

Halberstam, *The Making of A Quagmire*

Kolko, *Anatomy of a Peace*

SarDesai, *Vietnam: The Struggle for National Identity*

Templer, *Shadows and Wind: A View of Modern Vietnam*

The Gioi, *The Traditional Village in Vietnam*

Course Outline:

1. History and Cultural Patterns

Readings:

Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, Chapter 1

SarDesai, *Vietnam...*, Chapters 1, 2

Duiker, *Sacred War...*, Chapters 1-4

2. Organization & Structure: Tradition and Modernity

Readings:

Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, Chapters 2-4

The Gioi, *The Traditional Village in Vietnam*

3. The American War & Its Aftermath

Readings:

SarDesai, *Vietnam...*, Chapters 5, 6

Duiker, *Sacred War...*, Chapters 3-7, Epilogue

Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*

Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, Chapters 5-7

Borton, *After Sorrow*

4. Contemporary Assessments: Is Vietnam on the Right Path?

Readings:

Duong, *Paradise of the Blind*

SarDesai, *Vietnam...*, Chapters 7-10

Kolko, *Anatomy of a Peace*

Templer, *Shadows and Wind*

Ashwill and Diep, *Vietnam Today*

Paper Topics:

Paper One: "Distinctive Aspects of Vietnamese History"

Paper Two: "Distinguishing Elements of Vietnamese Culture"

Paper Three: "The American War: An Interpretation"

Paper Four: "The Future of Vietnam & the Vietnamese"

(*North Korean Nuclear Endgame, continued from page 27*)

potential nuclear arms race and potential mass displacement of its citizenry. Resolution of current tensions hinges on greater understanding of the regime's endgame, which begins with recognition of its survival imperatives, intent and perceptual framework.

Endnotes

¹The North Korean regime has sold missile technology to Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Pakistan, Libya, Iran and United Arab Emirates. It has also imported missile technology from Pakistan and Iran.

²North Korea's nuclear weapons program is comprised of two components. First, is the nuclear payload, which is derived from plutonium produced as a by-product of nuclear reactors or uranium extracted from mines. Second, is the means for delivering a nuclear payload—ballistic missiles. Consequently, for purposes of this discussion, the term "nuclear weapons" assumes the presence of both components unless otherwise stipulated.

³The lack of self-determination in Korea actually can actually be traced back as far as the Koryo Dynasty (935-1392), but space constraints do not permit fuller treatment of the topic.

⁴Jacques L Fuqua, Jr. *Weapons of Mass Destruction or Weapons of Mass Disruption: The North Korean Nuclear Endgame*. (Westport Connecticut: Greenview Publishing, forthcoming), p.24.

⁵Fuqua, p.24.

⁶The irony here is that each of the nations participating in the Six Party Talks, with the exception of South Korea, has historically been and continues to be regarded as a big power in the North Korean view, against which it must protect itself from chauvinistic influence. Such a world view offers at least some explanation as to the regime's inconsistent and unpredictable behavior within the Six Party Talks venue.

⁷United Nations World Food Program, *INTERFAIS. Food Aid Monitor Annual Report (2005)*. Table 15. Retrieved June 2006. URL: <http://www.wfp.org/interfais/index2.html>

⁸Gorbachev's reforms consisted of three components: 1) *perestroika*, which included economic reforms and restructuring; 2) *glasnost*, or openness, which translated into transparency of management practices with regard to the economy; and 3) *novoe myshlenie* or "New Thinking" with respect to Soviet foreign policy pursuits.

⁹Samuel S. Kim, "North Korea in 1994: Brinkmanship, Breakdown and

Breakthrough," *Asian Survey* 35:1 (January, 1995): 21.

¹⁰Rhee Sang-woo, "North Korea in 1991: Struggle to Save Chuche Amid Signs of Change," *Asian Survey* 32:1 (January, 1992): 59.

¹¹North Korea also signed the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula with South Korea in 1991. The Declaration called for bilateral inspections to verify the denuclearization of the peninsula.

¹²Graphite-moderated reactors produce weapons-grade plutonium as a by-product. It is much more difficult for LWR to produce weapons grade plutonium because they use ordinary water as a moderator.

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Jacques Fuqua is a retired US Army officer (Lieutenant Colonel, 2000) who spent 12 years in Japan and Korea as a Northeast Asia Foreign Area Officer negotiating international security agreements. He assumed his current posting as Director of International Engagement and Communications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in June 2005 and has written about North Korea, the US-Japan security relationship, and Okinawa. His forthcoming book, *Weapons of Mass Destruction or Weapons of Mass Disruption: North Korea's Nuclear Endgame* will be published by the Greenwood Publishing Group under the Praeger label.