> "Blessed with enormous military and economic power, Americans expect to find quick and effective solutions to whatever crises they encounter. For North Korea's Kim Jong-il, however, generating one crisis after another may be the best way to stay in power."

North Korea's Nuclear Politics

KONGDAN OH AND RALPH C. HASSIG

The Kims, father and son, have not managed to rule North Korea for more than 50 years by making foolish decisions. This basic insight needs to be kept in mind when trying to understand North Korea's decision to develop nuclear weapons. Exactly when that decision was made is as unclear as why it was made, but we do know enough to say that North Korea was goaded in part by changes in the international political situation, the challenge of competing with South Korea, and the Kims' need to dominate domestic politics. Examining each of these influences can help to explain where North Korea's nuclear program comes from, where it is headed, and what might redirect it away from nuclear weapons applications. Whatever course of action the United States and the rest of the international community take, it must be understood that the ultimate goal of North Korea's nuclear weapons program is to keep a Kim in power, not to assure the security of the North Korean state or improve the welfare of the North Korean people.

THE MILITARY FIRST . . .

Given its national priorities, it would be surprising if the North Korean regime did not exploit its nuclear capabilities to make nuclear weapons. As the party newspaper *Nodong Sinmun* reminded its readers this May, "Our socialism is, first of all, a unique socialism with its root originating in the barrel of a gun." North Korea's founder, Kim Il-sung, made a name for himself as a guerrilla fighter affiliated with the Chinese First Route Army fighting the Japanese during World War II, later becoming a captain in the Soviet army after he was chased out of China by the Japanese. During the final years of the war, Kim was stationed in a training camp in Siberia. In the political vacuum left by the departing Japanese colonial administration, the Soviet Army that took control of the northern half of the Korean peninsula brought with them Captain Kim Il-sung to take the lead in creating a Stalinist client state.

Kim's approach to reunifying the two halves of the Korean peninsula was to launch an attack against South Korea on June 25, 1950, beginning a disastrous war from which he had to be extricated by Chinese forces. After the war, Kim spent the rest of the decade rebuilding his shattered economy and consolidating his political position by purging rivals, often blaming them for his own Korean War mistakes. Once the foundations of a heavy-industry-dominated command economy had been rebuilt, he returned to what he knew best: the pursuit of military power. Over the objection of some of his associates, who believed that efforts should be made to develop a more balanced economy, Kim in 1962 adopted the policy of "four military lines," which called for the arming of the entire country in preparation for another fight to reunite the peninsula under communism.

. . . AND THE COUNTRY SECOND

The political choices of Kim Il-sung and his son, Kim Jong-il, put their own political survival ahead of the welfare of their country. Even with the world's most comprehensive social control system, the Kims needed to establish their political legitimacy to stay in power. The elder Kim's legitimacy was rooted in his activities as a guerrilla fighter against the Japanese in the 1930s and 1940s. North Korean propagandists, however, wildly inflated his military career to the point that he was credited with single-handedly driving the Japanese out of Korea in World War II and inflicting a humiliating defeat on American forces during the Korean War.

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In fact, Kim Il-sung's greatest military victory against the Japanese involved leading a contingent of about 200 men across the Chinese border into Japanese-occupied Korea on June 4, 1937, to raid the town of Pochonbo, where the guerrillas destroyed Japanese administrative offices and set fire to a police box, the elementary school, and the post office before retreating across the border.

Kim Jong-il grew up as the spoiled child of the "great leader." He was bright but hardly a serious student during his university days, and after graduating from Kim Il-sung University with a degree in political economy, he became known as the panjandrum of North Korea's brand of socialist arts, especially film, and then as the official elaborator of his father's simplistic and self-serving state ideology of *Juche* (nationalistic self-reliance). Years later, the (North) Korean Central News Agency would claim that the youthful Kim had written over 1,400 works during his years at the university, "performing great ideological and theoretical exploits which ordinary people could hardly accomplish all their life."

A patron of the arts and dabbler in political philosophy is hardly a suitable candidate to lead a highly militarized state. In the early 1990s, with his father's support, Kim Jong-il transformed himself into North Korea's "respected and beloved general," despite being neither widely respected nor loved, and never having served in the army apart from a short stint of student military training. His military career essentially began in 1991 when he assumed the position of supreme commander of the Korean People's Army (KPA). In 1992 he took the military title of "marshal" (his father was "grand marshal") and in 1993 he became chairman of the National Defense Commission, the top policy-making body on military affairs. Then he began announcing promotions of senior-grade KPA officers, usually on his birthday or the birthday of his father, thereby putting them in his debt. By 1999, a majority of North Korea's 1,200 general officers were Kim's men, including most of the top generals.

Kim Il-sung died of a heart attack on July 8, 1994, at the age of 82. The younger Kim had no immediate need to worry about his legitimacy among the Korean masses, who were politically powerless and had so extravagantly worshipped Kim Il-sung that his choice of Kim Jong-il as successor was unquestioningly accepted. But he had to be sure that the military would fall in behind him. The younger Kim has never been much of a public figure, preferring to rule from behind the scenes; the only words he has ever spoken before a large audience are "Glory to the heroic Korean People's Army," which he shouted at a military parade in 1992.

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THE LITTLE GENERAL

Without bothering to convene a party congress, in 1997 Kim had himself elevated "by acclamation" to the post of general secretary of the Korean Workers' Party, although he had been controlling party affairs since the 1970s. In 1998 the constitution was revised to make his father the "eternal president," while the junior Kim led the state in his current position as chairman of the National Defense Commission, now the highest organ of state government. Just as Kim adjusted the government structure to accommodate his needs, he modified government policy and relied on the North Korean propaganda system to embellish his military reputation by proclaiming him "the most distinguished of all military geniuses heaven has ever produced."

Ever since the promulgation of Kim Il-sung's four military lines in 1962, the army has had first call on the economy's scarce resources. In 1998, articles in the press began to emphasize Kim Jong-il's instruction to "attach importance to the military," and this policy gradually evolved into the "military first" *(songun)* policy—allegedly a brilliant theoretical innovation of Kim Jong-il. *Songun* was not simply a wartime mobilization policy, but a new way of North Korean life and the trademark of the Kim Jong-il regime.

The North Korean press has conjured up a brilliant military career for Kim. He is said to have been at his father's side during the Korean War, virtually helping him plan the campaigns (Kim would have been about 10 years old at the time). His peacetime visits to military bases are described as brave marches through deep snow to inspect troops under the guns of the enemy (that is, the US and South Korean troops posted across the Demilitarized Zone). His political maneuvers to prevent North Korea from being "invaded" by the Americans during the first nuclear crisis are described as a great military victory in which "no bullets were fired." The famine that ravaged the country between 1995 and 1998 is dubbed the "arduous march"—borrowing the term used to describe his father's campaigns against the Japanese a half century earlier.

A great general needs a strong army and formidable weapons. The million-strong KPA is the fifth-largest army in the world, giving North Korea the dubious distinction of having, per capita, the largest number of its citizens in uniform—and this figure does not include North Korea's 6 or 7 million reservists. However, the KPA is equipped with obsolete and poorly maintained weapons and, like most North Koreans, KPA soldiers suffer from malnutrition, poor health, and flagging morale. To offset these military weaknesses, the Kim regime needs a weapon that would frighten even an adversary as powerful as the United States, a weapon that North Koreans can be proud of, a weapon easily hidden and not vulnerable to attack. A nuclear weapon would satisfy all those criteria.

THE SHRIMP AND THE WHALES

One of the most important considerations behind the Kim regime's decision to turn its nuclear program to the production of nuclear weapons was undoubtedly the changing international situation. Korea has always been a shrimp surrounded by whales, living in fear of invasions from China and Japan. North Korea's security situation stabilized during the cold war, thanks to its alliances with the Soviet Union and China, and Kim Il-sung learned to respect the value of the nuclear weapons that the major powers relied on for their ultimate security. The United States had demonstrated the power of these weapons in defeating Japan, and during the Korean War General Douglas MacArthur asked for the option of using nuclear weapons against China and North Korea.

Competition with South Korea was also an important issue for North Korea. With relatively few natural resources to produce energy, the South Koreans established a nuclear energy program in the 1960s, and in the 1970s even planned to develop nuclear weapons before being stopped by the United States, which until 1991 had its own tactical nuclear weapons stationed on US bases in South Korea.

North Korea's security situation worsened in the early 1970s when relations between the United States and China began to blur cold war boundaries. For Pyongyang, a crisis of support occurred in the early 1990s when first the Soviet Union and then China established diplomatic relations with South Korea. In 1991 the United States, backed by an international coalition, attacked Iraq, a state whose political system was in many ways similar to North Korea's. At this point, the Kim regime was essentially on its own, facing a South Korea growing economically and militarily stronger by the day, a quietly rearming Japan, and a hostile American adversary emerging as the world's only superpower.

In 1992, with a view toward improving relations with the United States, Pyongyang belatedly signed an international nuclear-safeguards agreement and provided the International Atomic Energy Agency with an inventory of its nuclear materials and facilities. (North Korea had signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty at the insistence of the Soviet Union in 1985.) In May 1992, a visiting IAEA team of

AN ABIDING AMBITION

NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM has a long history. Three years after the end of the Korean War, with their industry still in ruins from a devastating American bombing campaign, the North Koreans were already interested in nuclear power. In 1956, the first North Koreans arrived for training and joint research at the Soviet Union's international nuclear science and research center in Dubna. In 1959, the Soviet Union signed an agreement to provide North Korea with assistance in constructing a nuclear research center, and in 1965 a small nuclear reactor began operating at Yongbyon, the nuclear research complex about 60 miles north of the capital of Pyongyang.

By the late 1970s, the North Koreans had acquired the necessary technology to begin building their own nuclear reactor, fueled by domestically mined uranium. This reactor, rated at 5 megawatts (MWe) of electrical power, began operating in 1986, and to date is the nation's only operating reactor. It is far too small to be of practical use for electricity generation, but it can burn uranium fuel to produce the plutonium that could be reprocessed into material for nuclear weapons.

In the late 1980s, US spy satellites photographed the construction of a nuclear-fuel-reprocessing facility. The size of two football fields and several stories tall, it was the world's second-largest reprocessing building. By 1990 the plant was ready to begin limited reprocessing of spent uranium fuel from the 5 MWe reactor into weapons-grade plutonium. Construction of 50 and 200 MWe reactors were begun in 1984 and 1991, but neither reactor was completed. *K. O. and R. C. H.*

inspectors discovered discrepancies in North Korea's safeguards statements. In particular, the past activities of a huge reprocessing facility, which North Korea insisted on calling a "radiochemical laboratory," were not clear, and during the inspection the North Koreans prevented inspectors from visiting two suspected nuclear waste facilities. In February 1993, the IAEA for the first time in its history called for "special inspections." Claiming the IAEA inspections were a stalking horse for US aggression, North Korea announced its intention to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), something no signatory had ever done, thus setting the stage for what would become the first Korean nuclear crisis.

THE "REWARDING" LESSONS OF 1994

When the North Koreans announced their withdrawal from the NPT in March 1993—claiming that the United States was behind the IAEA's demand for special inspections—it fell to Washington to solve the problem of North Korea's nuclear noncompliance. Convinced that the United States was the only state threatening its sovereignty with nuclear weapons, the Kim Il-sung regime insisted that any new nuclear agreement be negotiated directly with Washington. Serious bilateral negotiations began in June 1993, resulting in a "suspension" of North Korea's NPT withdrawal one day before it became effective. The negotiations stalled only a month later, in July. To bring the Americans back to the bargaining table, the North Koreans in May 1994 began unloading the spent fuel from their only operating reactor in preparation for reprocessing it into plutonium. Fearing that this action would overstep Washington's "red line"—triggering a military response—former President Jimmy Carter paid an unofficial visit to Pyongyang in June 1994 to explore with Kim Il-sung ways to restart the nuclear negotiations. Kim agreed to halt the unloading of nuclear fuel if the United States would return to the negotiating table, which it did. Negotiations were in progress in Geneva on the day Kim died, and resumed a month later, culminating in the signing on October 21, 1994, of an "Agreed Framework."

Given its national priorities, it would be surprising if the North Korean regime did not exploit its nuclear capabilities to make nuclear weapons.

The terms of this accord are by now well known: the North Koreans agreed to freeze and eventually dismantle their nuclear program in exchange for the construction by a US-led international consortium of two "proliferation-resistant" nuclear reactors capable of generating 2,000 MWe of electricity. Until the reactors were completed, the North Koreans would receive an annual shipment of 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil to compensate for the energy they claimed would be lost by not pursuing their own nuclear program (presumably referring to the future output of 50 MWe and 200 MWe reactors that were under construction). The United States also promised to gradually improve diplomatic and economic relations with the Kim regime.

The North Koreans' stated willingness to freeze and eventually dismantle a program that the United States suspected was Pyongyang's ultimate guarantee of national security should have made the American negotiators suspicious. Nevertheless, the short-term political and security benefits of the agreement were deemed sufficient justification for overlooking this paradox. With the North Koreans preparing to reprocess spent fuel, Washington had few other means of stopping the nuclear program, short of bombing the reactors and likely triggering another war on the peninsula.

About six years later, American intelligence sources became aware of a clandestine North Korean uranium-enrichment program that could eventually provide the nuclear weapons material that Pyongyang was forgoing by freezing its plutonium-producing program. In October 2002 the North Koreans apparently acknowledged the existence of this program in a closed meeting with US diplomats, although they later claimed their words had been misinterpreted.

The debate over the virtues and shortcomings of the Agreed Framework continued right up to and beyond the disclosure that the North Koreans had been cheating on it, but this debate is seriously flawed by a lack of knowledge about what would have happened in the absence of such an agreement. Whether North Korea would have otherwise proceeded to "churn out nuclear weapons" (to borrow a North Korean phrase) is difficult to say, because a stronger US or international response might well have stopped the program or unseated the regime that sponsored it. From the vantage point of a decade later, the Agreed Framework illustrates one important lesson learned by the North Koreans: the threat of nuclear weapons can bring the United States to the bargaining table and entice substantial economic aid for a failing North Korean economy.

The "reward for freeze" model, as the North Koreans would later call it, is a clear case of contingent reward (the punishment side was not developed), but what North Korean behavior was being rewarded? Indeed, it can be argued that in the Agreed Framework the United States was not rewarding the North Koreans for freezing their nuclear program, but was instead rewarding them for having pursued a program that the United States viewed as a threat. If this is the case, then a North Korean abandonment of that program would permanently remove the threat, thus ending the need for the United States to provide further rewards. Only if that threat could continue to hang over Washington, like a carrot in front of the donkey's nose, could the North Koreans be assured that the United States would continue to deal with them.

Viewed from this angle, it is hardly surprising that the North Koreans insisted on postponing the dismantling of their nuclear program until after substantial rewards had been delivered at some future date (when the 2,000 MWe nuclear reactors were completed), or that they continued to pursue at least one other means of securing nuclear material to be used in future negotiations. Those who characterized North Korea's behavior as blackmail argued that the North Koreans were simply proving that blackmailers are not easily deterred from blackmailing, even when they receive their promised payment

REVISITING THE NUCLEAR DILEMMA

North Korea's admission that it had a uranium-enrichment program in October 2002 marked the beginning of a second nuclear crisis during which relations with the United States spiraled downward. When the United States ended its support for the Agreed Framework, the North Koreans disconnected IAEA surveillance cameras from the nuclear facilities and restarted their 5 MWe reactor. When the IAEA in January 2003 adopted a resolution condemning North Korea's violations of the NPT, North Korea announced its immediate withdrawal from the treaty. Shortly thereafter, the North Koreans began reprocessing the 8,000 spent fuel rods that had been placed in storage pursuant to the Agreed Framework, and even invited a visiting US nuclear scientist to view two jars allegedly containing newly reprocessed plutonium.

In an attempt to distract the attention of the Bush administration, then focused on Iraq, the North Koreans throughout 2003 boasted of having a "physical deterrent" and a "nuclear deterrent," and sometimes, "something even stronger than a nuclear deterrent." In two meetings with American negotiators, the North Koreans also mentioned the possibility of staging a test to demonstrate their deterrent. The North Koreans have presented a rationale for developing (or claiming to develop) such a weapon, even while continuing to insist that their long-term goal is a nuclear-free peninsula. They point out that the United States, which has more nuclear weapons than any other country, has labeled North Korea a member of the "axis of evil," thereby making the country a possible target of preemptive attack. The North Koreans ask, "who is blackmailing whom?"

From his youth, Kim Jong-il has been known for his boldness, a fitting characteristic of a crown prince who does not have to answer for most of his actions. But Kim is also a shrewd decision maker, ever concerned about his personal safety and the security of his regime. On military issues, the North Koreans like to say that when their adversaries take a hard-line approach, North Korea responds with a "super hard-line" action. In actuality, this is often not the case, but saying so confers on Kim a dash and daring suitable to a great military leader, thereby boosting his image within the North Korean military and the general population. And in fact, Kim's bold strokes, such as withdrawing from the NPT, do tend to unsettle North Korea's adversaries (as well as its supporters, such as China).

IN SEARCH OF SOLUTIONS

In 1995, Michael Mazaar published a thought-provoking book entitled *North Korea and the Bomb*, in which he argued that "Over time, the [North Korean nuclear] program will grow enmeshed with issues of regional security, domestic politics . . . economic trade and aid, diplomatic relations, arms control, and a host of other areas. Once that happens, no strategy of nonproliferation . . . may be able to eliminate or even slow the nuclear program." A decade later, this argument has gathered even greater force.

In 2004, North Korea again demanded a quid pro quo for freezing its nuclear program, according to the formulas, "words for words and actions for actions" and "reward for freeze"—with the freeze to last only as long as the rewards were proffered. This time, the North Koreans requested annual compensation of 2 million tons of fuel oil, rather than the initial half-million tons.

Most of the strategies that have been proposed to deal with North Korea's nuclear program fall under one of three broad headings: move against the Kim regime, cooperate and negotiate with it, or ignore it. Moving against the Kim regime may look like an attractive way to end, once and for all, the North Korean nuclear threat. But unless a form of punishment can be devised that would, first, exceed the Kim regime's threshold of tolerance, second, effectively eliminate the nuclear weapons program, and third, not severely hurt South Korea, threats of punishment may only harden the Kim regime's resolve and earn it the sympathy of other states.

North Korea has always held out the promise that if the United States ends its hostile attitude and adopts a cooperative approach, all problems can be solved. However, it is politically difficult for the United States to embrace such a reprehensible government, and in any case past experience suggests that North Korea will interpret "no US hostility" as an open-ended opportunity to extract compromises and rewards.

Ignoring a North Korean nuclear weapons program may appear to be a case of sticking one's head in the sand, but this criticism overlooks the fact that threats are by their very nature psychological constructions. Nuclear weapons, economic trade policies, and any number of other "weapons" are threatening only if they become the focus of fear. To take a widely cited example, President George W. Bush's administration chose to focus its energies on stopping a possibly nonexistent Iraqi nuclear threat, even while North Korea was developing a real nuclear weapons program.

A number of considerations should be taken into account in deciding how to respond to North Korea's nuclear weapons program. First, the North Koreans are not likely to verifiably dismantle their nuclear program for any price. Second, embargo and containment have limited usefulness so long as North Korea's neighbors, especially China and South Korea, continue to support the Kim regime. Third, it is unlikely that North Korea's plutonium and nuclear weapons could be eliminated with surgical strikes. In any case, North Korea has other weapons of mass destruction (chemical and biological) and conventional weapons and special forces that could present a threat to the United States and its allies. And any attack on North Korea risks starting a second Korean War of incalculable cost, reinforcing international opinion that the United States has a predilection for dealing with threats by attacking small countries. Fourth, although North Korean society is slowly changing, at the present rate of change it will be decades before the Kim regime and its proliferation policies disappear.

In 2004, the North Korean nuclear threat is greater than it was in 1994, and, as in 1994, no satisfactory solution is at hand. If the military option is discarded as too costly, there remain two alternatives. One is to ignore the North Korean nuclear program as long as the rest of the international community—especially North Korea's neighbors—chooses to play it down or ignore it. This course of action—or rather inaction—virtually invites the Kim regime to increase its threats, but those higher threats may register on other countries as well as the United States.

The second alternative is to negotiate once again with the Kim regime and settle for a reachable solution that only partially eliminates the nuclear threat in the foreseeable future—rather than holding out for an unreachable solution, as the United States does now with its demand for "CVID": the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Because negotiating a compromise with North Korea means that nuclear weapons—or at least the threat of nuclear weapons—would remain, as they did following the 1994 agreement, this alternative is politically unattractive, especially the second time around.

THE DISASTROUS AND THE UNPALATABLE

John Kenneth Galbraith's Cuban missile crisis assessment that politics "consists in choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable" aptly characterizes the situation facing the United States today. In the past four years, the Bush administration has been unable to formulate a workable North Korea policy, even while North Korea has augmented its nuclear arsenal. Preoccupied with the war in Iraq, the administration has pushed for multilateral dialogue (read "pressure") to stop the nuclear program. The Kim regime, on the other hand, is only interested in bilateral negotiations.

In the past decade, two-party, three-party, four-party, and most recently, six-party talks (the United States, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia) have been convened to address the North Korean nuclear issue. The dynamics of these negotiations are simple: the United States and North Korea, far apart in their positions and openly hostile, try to rally other participants to their side.

In the six-party talks, hosted by China and first convened in August 2003, the United States has discovered that its focus on eliminating North Korea's nuclear weapons in the service of a "war" on terrorism is not the first priority for any of the other participating states, who want above all to keep their neighborhood peaceful. South Korea under the Roh Moo-hyun government has been particularly solicitous of the Kim regime, insisting that dialogue and economic aid will eventually convince Kim that he does not need a nuclear deterrent to stay in power. Even Japan, which has reason to fear North Korean missiles and nuclear weapons, is probably more concerned about preventing a new conflict from emerging on its doorstep than in pressuring the Kim regime to irrevocably abandon its nuclear weapons program. Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi says he wants to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea within a year or two, with the understanding that as part of the normalization process Japan will pay several billions of dollars in wartime reparations to North Korea.

The only discernible accomplishment of three rounds of six-party talks is that the United States and North Korea have more clearly laid out their positions. For freezing and gradually dismantling its nuclear weapons program, North Korea demands economic assistance up front and hard evidence that the United States fully accepts and genuinely respects the Kim regime. The United States insists that North Korea refreeze its plutonium program and freeze its uranium-enrichment program (which the North Koreans deny having) before substantial rewards are delivered. A seemingly insurmountable barrier to a negotiated settlement is the US insistence, justified by past experience with North Korea, that any future agreement include a mechanism by which North Korea's nuclear freeze and program dismantlement be completely verified. Given the culture of secrecy that pervades North Korea (the country does not even publish economic statistics), it is difficult to see how the United States will ever be able to determine what it is getting for its money.

It is easy to forget that any inducements offered to North Korea should not be valued according to whether they are good for the North Korean economy or people, but whether they help keep Kim Jong-il in power. A North Korea that is integrated into the international community would not be good for the Kim regime, which must keep its people isolated and impoverished in order to control them. This perverse qualification means that North Korea cannot be dealt with as a normal country. Blessed with enormous military and economic power, Americans expect to find quick and effective solutions to whatever crises they encounter. For North Korea's Kim Jong-il, however, generating one crisis after another may be the best way to stay in power. ■

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