

North Korea's Strategic Goals and Policy towards the United States and South Korea

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Abstract

Pyongyang under the Kim dynasty has pursued three broad and consistent strategic goals: (1) The pursuit of nuclear weapons program in order to gain international acceptance of the North as a bona fide nuclear weapons state; (2) securing a peace treaty in an effort to remove U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula; and, (3) reunification with South Korea on its own terms—the ultimate if increasingly unrealistic objective. To achieve these goals, the North has followed a policy of brinkmanship with the U.S. and South Korea: provoke when Washington or Seoul seem preoccupied, up the ante in the face of international condemnation, and pivot back to a peace offensive, which usually ends with some form of dialogue and negotiation, culminating, finally, in concessions for the North. This article reviews in detail how such policies have been pursued by Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un. It shows that, while there have been changes in North Korean policy, they have been primarily tactical not strategic—the North has changed how it pursues its goals (sometimes using military forces, at other times covert actions, or even negotiations), but it has remained consistent in its objectives. Not even the regime's literal bankruptcy has convinced the regime to change course, and for good reason: such brinkmanship tactics have paid off for the North by making possible the regime's survival for more than sixty years. Kim Jong-un, accordingly, has continued this strategy. This article ends by suggesting how the U.S. and South Korea should deal with the North's militaristic foreign policy. In brief, the two allies need to break the cycle of provocation by making clear they will no longer reward North Korea's destabilizing behavior while pursuing a longer-term goal of their own.

Keywords: North Korea, South Korea, U.S. foreign policy, Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-Un, “military-first” politics, North Korean strategy and policy, nuclear negotiations, nuclear weapons, proliferation, peace treaty, unification

Introduction

Any examination of North Korea's policies toward Washington and Seoul must begin with the realization that North Korea is without equal in this world—the unique political system its leaders, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il have built (and one that Kim Jong-un is now continuing) is the sole Communist-Confucian hereditary dynasty and the world's most cultish, isolated, and nationalistic nation. North Korea has a repressive, totalitarian system that keeps hundreds of thousands of its citizens confined to slave-labor camps while all others are in constant terror by the secret police and informants in their midst. It has the distinction of having gone from an industrialized state in 1945 to one where famine is a constant danger, making this the world's only industrialized/urbanized peacetime economy that has suffered constant and persistent widespread famine. As perhaps the most militarized society in the world, North Korea possesses the world's largest military in terms of manpower and defense spending proportional to its population and national income. It also has the most distorted economy in the world, a country that spends billions of dollars in armaments while at the same time watching its people starve. Living standards among the North Koreans citizens are among the lowest in the world (North Korea's 2012 GDP per capita, based on purchasing power parity, estimated by the Central Intelligence Agency as 197th in the world).¹ In short, North Korea is an unparalleled model of failure in contemporary history.

Yet, ironically, North Korea also remains the most influential regional political actor in the world proportionate to its economy and territory because of its formidable military power and its cunning and shrewd foreign policy, which is particularly skillful in its management of Washington and Seoul. The North Korean regime has survived for sixty years by relentlessly pursuing the development of nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and other forms of military power that hold South Korea—and its other neighbors—hostage. North Korea continues to employ its nuclear blackmail and brinkmanship strategies, including test firings of weapons and carefully-controlled attacks on South Korea, to wrest concessions from the U.S., South Korea, China, and other states that are far more powerful. The most recent examples of the North's destabilizing behavior include the sinking of *Cheonan* in March 2010, the shelling of Yeonpyong island in October 2010, and a third nuclear test in March 2013.

Both the U.S. and regional powers lack an effective response to the “North Korean problem,” in no small part because our understanding of the inner workings of the “Hermit Kingdom” is rather poor. As David Sanger recently wrote in the *New York Times*, “the black hole of North Korea intelligence gathering is getting blacker”—at a time when the United States has “learned to conduct drone strikes with increasing accuracy in Pakistan and direct cyberweapons at specific nuclear centrifuges deep under the Iranian desert, its understanding of North Korea’s leadership and weapons has actually gotten worse.”² Indeed, Korea scholars, intelligence analysts, and policymakers can’t agree on simple questions such as: Who is really in charge in North Korea? How firmly has Kim Jong-un consolidated his power? What exactly is on the minds of the inner circle, including Kim Jong-un himself? And what is the extent of the North’s nuclear and missile capabilities? In addition to poor intelligence, as B. R. Myers notes in *The Cleanest Race*, we lack a fundamental understanding of the North’s ideology and mindset, and too often project our Western values and “common sense” onto North Koreans and try to understand the North through our own lenses rather than theirs.³

Such a dearth of information and lack of understanding of the North, particularly about the inner workings of the North Korean leadership, therefore often leads to misreading of the North’s intentions and capabilities. In particular, both the so-called “engagement” and “hardline” camps of Korea watchers engage in wishful thinking, with the former expecting that the North will dismantle its nuclear weapons program if not for Washington’s “hostile policy” and the latter being put in the position of waiting for an “imminent” regime collapse which has been forecast for decades.

Kim Jong-un: Change or Consistency?

Such misguided analysis in both camps of Korea watchers was particularly evident in the aftermath of Kim Jong-Il’s sudden death on December 17, 2011. The “engagers” hoped and expected to see a shift in North Korea’s foreign and domestic policy toward greater moderation, democracy, and free market policies under the elder Kim’s hand-picked successor, his third and youngest son, Kim Jong-un. Hopeful Korea watchers fixated on a photo of Kim Jong-un as an 11-year-old with a bratty grin (shockingly, the only photo that was available outside of North Korea until the young man came to power) and a few recollections

by Kim Jong Il's former sushi chef, who writes by the pen name Kenji Fujimoto, to glean any information about the inexperienced leader. On the other end of the spectrum, Korea watchers were equally passionate in declaring that "North Korea as we know it is over" with the death of Kim Jong-il.⁴ Respected Korea watcher and former White House official Victor Cha, for example, wrote in the *New York Times* two days after Kim Jong Il's death that "whether it comes apart in the next few weeks or over several months, the regime will not be able to hold together after the untimely death of its leader, Kim Jong-il."⁵

As it turns out, neither scenario came to fruition. Nearly two years since Kim Jong-il's demise, the world is still waiting for any meaningful change in the North's hardline domestic and foreign policies, while Kim Jong-un remains firmly entrenched in power. The young dictator now occupies all of the leading state, party, and military positions, and has put confidants in other key posts, removing several prominent military officers from their commands. The only changes associated with Kim Jong-un's regime have been cosmetic and superficial. North Korean women wearing high heels, sleeveless shirts, even miniskirts, and various Disney characters (in a violation of international intellectual property laws) are dancing on a North Korean stage. Wrapping himself in the mantle of his grandfather, Kim Jong-un has been exercising more hands-on leadership than his father, embracing public speaking and comfortably frolicking with school children. He seems to enjoy riding rollercoasters with his young and attractive wife, who sports a designer handbag. Kim the third is also a huge fan of basketball. The eccentric former NBA star Dennis Rodman, who came to Pyongyang as part of a stunt arranged by a television show, is the only American with whom has the young Kim chosen to spend any significant time. Kim Jong-un has even recently proposed an international basketball tournament involving both Korea; China, and Japan.⁶

In fact, the prospects of more meaningful changes in North Korea's behavior were dashed by the failure of the February 29, 2012, "Leap Day" agreement. The ink of this deal to freeze Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs in exchange for food aid was hardly dry when the North launched a satellite in a clear violation of that agreement as well as of several United Nations Security Council resolutions.⁷ Combined with a string of provocations since December 2012, including a long-range rocket launch in December 2012 (the second one that year), a third nuclear test in February 2013, amplified rhetoric against Washington and

Seoul, restarting of the Yongbyon nuclear complex and the withdrawal of North Korean workers from the South-Korean funded Kaesong joint industrial park, we can now conclude with some confidence that the Kim Jong-un regime appears to be pretty much bent on continuing the strategies and policies that have worked for the North in past decades.

North Korea's Three Goals

The questions that this article will seek to address these: What are these strategies and policies? And what goals are the North trying to achieve in pursuing these strategies and policies?

The highest priority of the North Korean state has always been its own survival in the face of what it perceived, and still perceives today, as an extremely hostile security environment, a perception exacerbated by the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and its client states between 1989 and 1992. The regime also operates according to certain ideological assumptions which have not changed much since 1948. It believes that the North is the true representative of the Korean people, that the government in the South is a puppet regime backed by an antagonistic United States, that the continued U.S. presence on the Peninsula constitutes a severe threat to the very existence of North Korea, that the South Korean people (as opposed to their government) would welcome unity with their Northern brethren and would be much more sympathetic towards the North were it not for the indoctrination by their government and U.S. propaganda, and that, ultimately, the North's position will prevail because it is morally virtuous and will gain support from the people of the North and South. These principles have led the North to assume that it must have a strong defense at all costs, given American and South Korean hostility; that this defense is not just military but also ideological, that is, the people of North Korea must be protected from any ideological infection of the U.S. or South Korean capitalism; and that continuing tension on the peninsula remains an indispensable means to both keep control of its own population and deal with the North's enemies in Washington, Seoul, and elsewhere.

More specifically, Pyongyang under the Kim dynasty has pursued three broad and consistent strategic goals: (1) pursuing a nuclear weapons program in order to gain international acceptance of the North as a bona fide nuclear weapons state; (2) securing a peace treaty in an effort to remove U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula; and, (3) reunifying with South Korea on its own terms—the ultimate if

increasingly unrealistic objective.

Let us look more closely at each of these goals in turn.

The First Goal: A Nuclear-Armed State

The primary goal of the North Korean state today is gaining international acceptance as a legitimate and full-fledged nuclear power, because its leaders are convinced that no other nation, not even a superpower such as the United States, would dare attack or even significantly undermine a state armed with the ultimate weapon. To this end, Pyongyang has relentlessly and systematically pursued nuclear weapons in the face of international condemnation. The North sees possessing nuclear weapons as essential for its national identity and security, and for achieving power and prestige on the international stage. The North's pursuit of a nuclear program cannot be explained away as only a defensive reaction to external threats and stimuli, viz., the "hostile" policies of Washington and Seoul. Furthermore, North Korea's long history of nuclear development, culminating in its first nuclear test in October 2006, strongly suggests that it can neither be cajoled nor persuaded into giving up its nuclear arsenal. This should hardly be surprising. While a few states have voluntarily ended nuclear programs or given up nuclear arsenals (e.g., South Africa, Libya, Brazil, Kazakhstan and Ukraine), typically following regime change, other states—namely Russia, Britain, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and the United States—continue to cling to their arsenals despite lobbying for disarmament, while Iran is working feverishly to acquire its own arsenal in spite of punishing international sanctions. North Korea is firmly in the latter camp. It is highly unlikely to negotiate away its nuclear weapons program, regardless of what political or economic concessions are offered.

Jonathan Pollack demonstrates with ample historical evidence and rigorous analysis that the North Korean leadership did not embark on the nuclear path on a whim, nor does it treat nuclear weapons as simply a bargaining chip.⁸ In fact, the germination of Kim Il-sung's nuclear aspirations dates back to the 1950s⁹ when North Korean scientists gained basic nuclear knowledge by cooperating with Soviet and Chinese nuclear scientists and engineers.¹⁰ The North's more serious nuclear development efforts began in earnest during the mid-1960s when Moscow supplied North Korea with advanced nuclear reactor technology, including assisting with the construction, starting in 1965, of

an eight megawatt research reactor located near the town of Yongbyon.¹¹ The North's overall nuclear program expanded at a rapid rate in the 1970s and 1980s, when it began accumulating what we would call today "sensitive nuclear technologies," including spent fuel reprocessing techniques, plutonium, and the development of facilities for the fabrication and conversion of uranium. The North built a significant nuclear complex, including a second five-megawatt reactor near Yongbyon, in the 1970s and 1980s.¹²

A number of external events likely reinforced the North's desire to pursue nuclear weapons, including the May 16, 1961, military coup that brought staunchly anti-Communist Park Chung-hee to power in Seoul, thereby accentuating the North's fear of the South; the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, which made Kim Il-sung distrustful of Russian security guarantees after the Soviet Union betrayed Fidel Castro by withdrawing its nuclear missiles from Cuba in an effort to improve relations with the United States;¹³ and, the possibility of a Washington-Tokyo-Seoul alliance following the 1965 establishment of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan, which raised the prospect of yet another powerful state being arrayed against the North. The North's thinking regarding the need for nuclear weapons further hardened when the Cold War came to an abrupt end. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, whose geopolitical and financial support had sustained the North for forty-five years, the North's geopolitical and economic situation changed dramatically for the worse. Nuclear weapons thus became an even more important tool of regime preservation.

Pyongyang threatened to withdraw from the Nonproliferation Treaty in March 1993, thus precipitating its first nuclear crisis with Washington. After lengthy negotiations, the U.S. and North Korea on October 12, 1994, signed the "Agreed Framework" in which the North froze its plutonium production program in exchange for an American-led consortium providing ten years' worth of heavy oil deliveries and the building of two modern, electricity-generating light-water nuclear plants at an estimated cost of approximately \$4 billion.¹⁴ (The cover story for the North's pursuit of nuclear plants, actually guided by its desire for geopolitical power, was a purported desire for more electrical power.) Unfortunately, despite the Agreed Framework, the North continued to stage provocations to extort more benefits from the West.

In 1998, North Korea acknowledged that it was exporting missiles and then launched a newly-developed, multistage, long-range ballistic

rocket over the main island of Japan. The Clinton administration responded by saying that this should not derail the deal with the North and affirmed its intention to send 400,000 tons of food aid worth almost \$200 million to the North. At the same time Washington raised concerns about the huge underground complex being built in Kumchang-ri, North Korea, which was suspected of being a covert nuclear-weapons site. U.S. diplomats demanded access to the site, a demand that Pyongyang's representatives loudly and strenuously resisted. The North finally agreed in early 1999 to allow inspection of the site after the U.S. promised 700,000 tons of further food aid.¹⁵ It turned out that North Korea's actions had been an elaborate charade—by the time inspectors arrived at Kumchang-ri, there was nothing to see save a hole in the ground. The North did continue working on nuclear weapons, just not at this site. Northern officials finally and brazenly admitted their covert uranium-enrichment program in an October 2002 meeting with a visiting American delegation led by Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly.¹⁶ In fact, far from stopping the nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs he had inherited from his father, Kim Jong-il, whose rule began in earnest in 1994 after the death of Kim Il-sung, accelerated the programs he had inherited. As Jonathan Pollack aptly puts it, the North's nuclear capabilities are thus part of the legacy that Kim Jong-il bequeathed to his young son, Kim Jong-un, much as Kim Il-sung mandated the building of a nuclear infrastructure that he then passed to Kim Jong-il.¹⁷

Kim Jong-il's acquisition of nuclear weapons was another tool for cultivating the military's support, which Kim needed to solidify his position and ensure his power. Kim Jong-il consolidated his grip through the introduction of *songun* or "military-first" politics, which prioritized the Korean People's Army (KPA) in the affairs of state and allocated national resources to the military first. Kim Jong-il in essence co-opted the military by bestowing on it policy influence and prestige, as well as a large share of the national budget (between 25 percent and 30 percent of GDP).¹⁸ Kim's "military first" approach was codified in 1998 in a revised constitution which granted the military primacy in the Korean government and society.¹⁹ As part of the "military-first politics," which have guided both domestic policy and international interactions with Washington and Seoul since 1997,²⁰ nuclear weapons were important to bolster the North's deterrence against adversaries with far superior conventional military forces.²¹ While the North froze its plutonium

program in 1994, it began in earnest to pursue the enrichment of uranium instead. Pakistan, through its former top scientist, Abdul Qadeer Khan, supplied key data, stored in compact discs, on uranium enrichment in exchange for missile technology between 1990 and 1996, both before and after the signing of the Agreed Framework.²² (A. Q. Khan himself claimed that the North gained access to Pakistan's nuclear technology in the late 1990s by paying bribes to Pakistan's senior military officials.²³ Former President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz acknowledged in 2005 that Khan had provided centrifuges and their designs to North Korea.²⁴)

Why has the North been willing to endure international opprobrium and crippling sanctions to pursue nuclear weapons? Aside from the obvious strategic benefits of deterring the U.S. and South Korea, which have powerful conventional forces poised along the DMZ, the possession of nuclear weapons has been an important tool of internal legitimacy for the regime. Nuclear weapons have provided the Kim regime with an ideological rallying point and a point of national pride, both of which justify the deprivations ordinary citizens suffer to support the military and the state. Nuclear weapons also dramatically raise the North's clout in world affairs, allowing an impoverished and otherwise insignificant state to be treated as a regional and even global power.

North Korea's first nuclear test in October 2006, for example, painted the George W. Bush administration into a corner. While the nuclear test yielded a strongly-worded United Nations Security Council resolution, it also triggered a change of heart in the administration. In response to stinging criticism that his "hardline" policy in the first term had led to the North testing its first nuclear weapon, President Bush chose to abandon an effective policy of financially squeezing the North Korean elites' cash flows which began with the imposition of sanctions on Macao-based Banco Delta Asia (BDA). The U.S. Treasury ordered U.S. companies and financial institutions to cut links with BDA, where the North reportedly kept \$25 million in various accounts.²⁵ After easing the BDA sanctions, the Bush administration then negotiated a nuclear agreement with the North in February 2007 and even went as far as to remove North Korea from the state-sponsored terrorism list and to resume food aid in 2008, at the cost of straining the U.S. relationship with its closest regional ally, in Japan.

Hoping for a similar concession from the Obama administration, the North subsequently conducted a second nuclear test on May 2009 and

yet another one in March 2013, which, by some assessments, was two-and-a-half times larger than the previous test, with a yield between five and fifteen kilotons.²⁶ The North followed the third nuclear test by declaring that its nuclear weapons were “not a bargaining chip” and would not be relinquished, even for “billions of dollars.”²⁷

In sum, North Korea has pursued nuclear weapons for a multitude of pressing reasons since its founding and even at the cost of considerable risk, isolation, and sanctions. It would seem most unlikely, then, that the Kim Jong-un regime would negotiate away an instrument that was long perceived to offer possible dominance in its struggle against the South—and to guarantee protection and ultimately survival in the face of global hostility. If he needed any more justification, Kim Jong-un’s determination to maintain nuclear weapons has only been enhanced by the example of Libya where the West first convinced Moammar Qaddafi to abandon his WMD program and then backed a revolt, which overthrew and killed Qaddafi.

The Second Goal—A “Peace Treaty”

Along with securing the international acceptance of the North as a full-fledged nuclear weapons power, another important priority for North Korea has been, and continues to be, securing a peace treaty with Washington. Contrary to the claims of regime apologists, the most important rationale behind the North’s insistence on signing such a treaty with its longtime foe is not the desire for peace per se, but, rather, the desire to evict U.S. troops from South Korea, which in turn will enable the achievement of its third and ultimate objective—reunification on its terms.

The Korean War ended with a ceasefire signed on July 27, 1953, after prolonged negotiations. It has never been replaced by a formal peace treaty.²⁸ The armistice was signed by North Korean and Chinese military leaders on one side, and, on the other, by the U.S.-led United Nations command. No South Korean representatives signed the agreement, which was always intended as a temporary measure, not a lasting political settlement. The armistice, which set up a 2.5 mile (4-kilometer) Korean Demilitarized Zone along the 38th parallel, was designed to “insure a complete cessation of hostilities and of all acts of armed force in Korea until a final peaceful settlement was achieved.”²⁹ The armistice also included a recommendation that within three months of its taking effect, negotiations should be held to speed the withdrawal

of all foreign forces from Korea.³⁰ Sixty years after the signing of this “temporary” agreement, it is still in place, even if the North now claims that it will no longer abide by its terms—as Pyongyang has announced at least six times in the past.³¹ There have never been meaningful negotiations of the removal of all foreign troops from the peninsula. While Chinese troops long ago left North Korea of their own accord, the U.S. continues to base 28,500 military personnel in South Korea.

North Korea’s desire for a permanent peace treaty, leading to the withdrawal of U.S. troops, first resurfaced in a meaningful way on July 4, 1972, with the release of the North-South Joint Communiqué, the first document agreed upon by both North and South Korea following the division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945. The two countries agreed in principle to seek national unity through negotiations without interference from outside powers (read: the U.S.).³² The Communiqué also pushed the North-South dialogue to a new level, with both sides agreeing to cease slandering one another, to renounce armed provocations, to begin various forms of exchanges, and to set up a hotline between Seoul and Pyongyang. Soon thereafter, however, the North and South clashed over the interpretation of the key provisions of this document.³³ By June 1973, inter-Korean dialogue had become again deadlocked and, in the next two years, North-South contacts were downgraded and eventually terminated.

The North attempted in November 1973 to circumvent the South Koreans by trying to conclude a peace treaty through direct negotiations with the U.S.³⁴ Appealing directly to the Americans for peace talks, the North Korean government sent letters to the U.S. Congress in which it proposed direct bilateral negotiations to replace the armistice with a peace treaty and suggested that the first phase should involve the withdrawal of all U.S. troops and the dissolution of the United Nations Command which unites U.S. and South Korean troops under a single command structure headed by an American general.³⁵ The U.S., predictably, did not rise to the bait, but in subsequent years since the North has made repeated demands for a peace treaty with the United States. North Korea has steadfastly insisted on the dissolution of the UN Command and a complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from the South so that the two Koreas may achieve independent, peaceful reunification by themselves without the interference of “external powers.” As recently as May 29, 2013, the North has called for the replacement of the armistice with a formal

peace treaty in its official paper, *Rodong Sinmun*, which cited “a pressing need to replace the Armistice Agreement, which is a relic of the war, with a permanent peace regime.”³⁶

Some Korea scholars and watchers of the “engagement” school have argued that the North is seeking a treaty because it genuinely wants to mend its relations with Washington. Leon V. Sigal, a key proponent of the argument that the North’s denuclearization requires the end to America’s “hostile policy” and a peace treaty to replace the armistice, summarized this view in a *Foreign Affairs* article: “The North wants to reconcile with Washington . . . It is inconceivable that Pyongyang would dismantle its nuclear and missile programs, never mind its nuclear weapons, without such a treaty.”³⁷ Arguing that “such a treaty would have immediate benefits,” he writes that it “could reduce the risk of military clashes on the peninsula.” In another article advocating a peace treaty, Sigal also said that “to be politically meaningful, it would require rectification of land and sea borders—whether temporary pending unification or permanent—and normalization of diplomatic, social, and, economic relations. To be militarily meaningful, it would require changes in force postures and war plans that pose excessive risks of unintended war on both sides of the Demilitarized Zone.”³⁸

The problem with this argument is that there is not a shred of evidence that a peace treaty would be panacea for solving all the problems created by North Korean policies, ranging from its nuclear program to human rights concerns. How can we be sure the North Korean regime would ever abide by any deal it actually signed? How can we be certain that the North will actually do what it says, even if it promises to abandon nuclear weapons in return for a U.S. pullout? As indicated earlier in this article, the North has relentlessly pursued its nuclear weapons program for six decades, and it views the program as essential to its very survival. Borrowing a phrase from a conservative Korea watcher, Nicholas Eberstadt, the North’s “leaders” are firm believers in situational ethics: Whenever an international security treaty, agreement or promise looks to constrain the pursuit of their immediate interests, North Korean leaders will reject it as unacceptable,” as they have since the founding of its republic in 1948.³⁹

Eberstadt is right. The long history of dealing with the North is littered with a string of broken promises and verification problems: the Agreed Framework of 1994, the Perry Process of 1999, the intermittent

six party talks since 2003, and the list goes on. Also noteworthy is the failure of South Korea's experiment with the decade-long "Sunshine Policy" of 1998 to 2008 (generous and unconditional aid to generate a modicum of good will from the North). As B. R. Myers put it, "to expect Washington to succeed with Pyongyang where the South Korean left failed is to take American exceptionalism to a new extreme."⁴⁰

In fact, the North's sincerity in pursuit of a peace treaty is to be doubted, because a real peace with Washington would be problematic for Pyongyang: How could the North justify its existence if normalization with the U.S. occurs and it has to abandon the confrontational anti-Americanism that constitutes one of its last remaining sources of legitimacy? The real reason North Korea seeks a peace treaty is that it believes a treaty would cause all sides—including South Koreans and Americans—to question the need for a continuation of the US military presence in Korea, leading ultimately to their removal, thus making South Korea easier to coerce.

The Third Goal--Reunification

As with the development of the nuclear program and the pursuit of a peace treaty with Washington, reunification on its own terms has also been a vitally important goal for the North since the regime's very inception. As Nicholas Eberstadt noted more than a decade ago in *The End of North Korea*, the continued existence of a rival Korean state on a shared peninsula ultimately poses a threat to the North's legitimacy, authority, and security.⁴¹ North Korean leaders' figures have thus consistently upheld the ideal of a unified, self-governing, and socialist Korea. For the North, unification on its terms would be not only a highest achievement but the decisive guarantor of the state's continued existence.⁴² Accordingly, the urgent priority accorded to the goal of unconditional unification has been made clear in the fundamental documents of both party and state. The preamble to the charter of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) declares that its task is to "(en)sure the complete victory of socialism in the northern half of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the accomplishment of the revolutionary goals of national liberation and the people's democracy in the entire area of the country."⁴³ In simple and blunt language, that means kicking U.S. troops out, dissolving the South Korean government, and communizing the entire Korean Peninsula by force.

North Korea's June 1950 surprise attack against South Korea, which launched the Korean War, was the North's first effort to reunify the country. Kim Il-sung at the time anticipated that his offensive against the South would reunify the entire peninsula in less than a month.⁴⁴ The attack did not, of course, work out well for the North. The Korean War proved to be a disastrous miscalculation, and cost over a million lives from all sides.⁴⁵ Had Mao Zedong not come to Kim Il-sung's rescue, North Korea would have ceased to exist.

After the Korean War, Pyongyang prudently decided to shift its tactics in the pursuit of reunification.⁴⁶ Indeed, reunification went on the backburner for about a decade after the Korean War. Between the July 1953 armistice and the Fifth Plenum of the Fourth Korean Workers Party Congress in December 1962, when a military buildup was formally embraced, the North's focus was on rebuilding its war-ravaged economy.⁴⁷ In its focus on reconstruction, North Korea secured support from virtually the entire socialist camp of the 1950s, including China, the Soviet Union, and the Warsaw Pact countries of Eastern Europe. China agreed to leave a huge troop presence in North Korea through the late 1950s, thereby relieving Pyongyang of the burden of onerous military expenditures and freeing up a large pool of manpower for construction projects. North Korea's strategy was successful—it was able to outpace the South economically during this period (1953-1962).⁴⁸

Beginning in the early 1960s, however, the changing domestic environment in the South caused the North to adjust its tactics. In April 1960, South Korean President Syngman Rhee was ousted by a student-led pro-democracy uprising and replaced by a democratic but weak and ineffective Chang Myon government. The South's brief experiment with democracy came to an abrupt end when Chang Myon was himself pushed out of office only a year later, in April 1961, in a coup led by General Park Chung-hee. With Park in power, it soon became apparent to Pyongyang that his military regime was developing a strong anti-communist posture. In response, the North shifted to a more hostile policy of seeking "reunification by revolution."⁴⁹ The North hoped to spur a socialist revolution in the South that would evict U.S. forces and make possible peaceful reunification under Pyongyang's aegis.⁵⁰ The North therefore launched a campaign of infiltration, subversion, and terror to subvert the government in Seoul. This secret offensive reached a peak in January 21, 1968, with the infiltration by North Korean commandoes onto the grounds of the South Korean Presidential

compound, the Blue House, in a failed attempt to kill President Park.⁵¹ This was followed two days later by North Korea's capture of an American intelligence ship, the USS *Pueblo*, whose crew was held captive for nearly a year and only released following an American apology—swiftly rescinded—for spying on the North.⁵² The following year, in 1969, the North shot down a U.S. reconnaissance plane, killing all thirty-one servicemen aboard. Five years later, in 1974, North Korean agents killed South Korea's first lady—the current president's mother—in yet another failed assassination attempt against President Park.

Even as it was pursuing a campaign of subversion in the South, the North was also building up its own military forces to create a more favorable correlation of forces on the Peninsula. In the early 1960s, the Korean People's Army may have had fewer than 400,000 soldiers and probably did not rise much above that figure before 1972.⁵³ The force expanded relentlessly over the next two decades, however, so that by the late 1970s—when Washington and Seoul finally detected the buildup—the North's armed forces were apparently approaching the million-man mark, which amounted to “total war mobilization on a permanent basis, a state of readiness perhaps unmatched in any other contemporary economy.”⁵⁴

This extraordinary military effort was designed to put Pyongyang in a position to seize the day if and when another opportunity for forcible reunification appeared. From the North's perspective, the events of the 1960s and 1970s—America's defeat in Vietnam, the 1969 announcement of the "Nixon Doctrine" (that the U.S. would continue to provide a nuclear umbrella for its allies but not the bulk of their conventional defense), Jimmy Carter's determination to withdraw all U.S. troops from South Korea (a pledge finally abandoned in 1979 after the removal of fewer than 4,000 troops)—could reasonably have been interpreted as an erosion of America's ability or willingness to defend Seoul.⁵⁵

In the early 1970s, there was a thaw in relations between Seoul and Pyongyang as the North temporarily moderated its strategy of fomenting a revolution in the South. In 1971-1973, for the first time in its history, the North carried out direct, high-level talks with its South Korean counterparts. This led, as we have already seen, to the issuance of a joint Communiqué between the two sides, which subsequently became a dead letter.

After the failure of the Communiqué, the North reverted to its policy of fostering a revolution in the South. On April 18, 1975, immediately

after Vietnam's unconditional military reunification on communist terms, Kim Il-sung went so far as to call for a South Korean insurrection while he was visiting Beijing: "If a revolution takes place in South Korea we, as one and the same nation, will not just look at it with folded arms but will strongly support the South Korean people. If the enemy ignites war recklessly, we shall resolutely answer it with war and completely destroy the aggressors."⁵⁶ There are even reports that Kim went so far as to ask Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai for military aid.⁵⁷

If Kim's pronouncements in Beijing revealed a certain anxiety for reunification, the cause was not hard to find: North Korea was losing its economic contest against the South. By the 1970s, thanks to Park Chung-hee's policies, South Korea was emerging as one of the "tiger" economies of Asia, while North Korea's economy was steadily sinking under the weight of excessive military spending. Meanwhile, the Nixon administration's "opening" to China and *détente* with the Soviet Union threatened to cut the support that North Korea traditionally had received from its patrons in Moscow and Beijing.

In the 1980s, the North resorted to high-profile acts of terrorism in a renewed if futile attempt to undermine an increasingly prosperous and stable South Korean state. On October 9, 1983, the North's agents attempted to assassinate President Chun Doo-hwan when he was on an official visit to Rangoon. Although Chun survived, a bomb blast killed twenty-one others, including several South Korean cabinet ministers.⁵⁸ In 1986, North Korean soldiers used an axe to kill two U.S. Army officers in in the DMZ. The following year, on November 29, 1987, Northern operatives detonated a bomb aboard Korean Air Flight 858, killing all 115 people on board.⁵⁹ South Korea emerged from the decade stronger than ever as seen in its first democratic presidential election in 1987 and the staging of a successful Olympic games in 1988.

If the North's strategy for reunification was at best a long shot at the start of the 1980s, by the start of the 1990s it looked increasingly like sheer fantasy. Yet, despite increasingly unpleasant international and domestic realities, North Korea's leadership seems to have made no substantive adjustments to its grand strategy, which dated back to the 1940s. Pyongyang evaded anything but hesitant and shallow talks with the South and instead built up its military at full strength. By 1987, by some accounts, as many as 1.25 million men may have been armed, making the North's military the world's fourth-largest armed service, behind China, the Soviet Union, and the United States.⁶⁰ The costs of

that commitment were too great for the North's small economy to bear. By the mid-1980s, North Korea had entered economic stagnation, heading for destitution, famine, and decline. Without major economic reform, North Korea could no longer hope to compete against the South, much less hope to subsume the South into one socialist state. Sweeping economic reform, however, would necessarily erode the North Korean leadership's political and ideological control—and might well set forces in motion that would eventually undermine the regime and the system.⁶¹

The North's options narrowed even further after the end of the Cold War—a surprise and a shock for Pyongyang's isolated leadership. Particularly dismaying for the North was the demise of Nicolae Ceausescu, the Romanian ruler with a cult of personality analogous to Kim Il Sung's, and the disappearance of East Germany, another communist state sharing a national territory with a Western-style democracy. The material consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union were even more severe. Russian military shipments to the North all but ceased and trade between the former Warsaw Pact countries and Pyongyang—long an economic lifeline for the regime—all but collapsed. Beijing continued subsidizing the North but at a reduced level because it no longer saw itself in competition with Moscow for influence in the North. In 1992 China even normalized its relations with South Korea. North Korea was left more isolated than ever, while South Korea now had good relations with all the great powers of Northeast Asia—the U.S., Japan, China, and Russia.

As a result, the North shifted its policy towards the South yet again, adopting a less hostile tone and soft-pedaling attempts to force reunification. In September 1991, the UN Security Council approved the simultaneous entry of both Koreas into the UN. The North and South then were able to reach the Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, Exchanges, and Cooperation on December 13, 1991. Then-North Korean premier Yon Hyong-muk called the agreement “the most valuable achievement ever made between the South and North Korean authorities.”⁶² The North also began an unprecedented flurry of diplomatic activity with Tokyo in the early 1990s in an attempt to counter the South's increasingly successful diplomatic outreach to Moscow and Beijing.

By the mid-1990s North Korea was battling for its very survival, effectively postponing all thoughts of reunification on its terms. In late 1993, Pyongyang officially conceded that its people faced a "grave

situation" but still offered no plausible design for improving their prospects.⁶³ Kim Il-sung's death in July 1994 did not seem to alter the North's steadfast resistance to economic experimentation, let alone substantive reform. From 1994 to 1998 North Korea was gripped by famine that killed several million people and showed the bankruptcy, quite literally, of its economic system.⁶⁴

South Korea's "Sunshine Policy" of 1998-2008, launched by President Kim Dae-jung and continued by his successor, Roh Moo-hyun, did little to improve the North's internal situation, even though, over the course of a decade, Seoul pumped approximately \$8 billion in economic assistance into the North.⁶⁵ The Sunshine Policy went into eclipse under President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013), whose Unification Ministry called it a failure, stating that a decade of cooperation, cross-border exchanges and billions of dollars in aid had not changed Pyongyang's behavior or improve the lives of North Korean citizens.⁶⁶ But neither the discontinuation of the South's subsidies nor the death of Kim Jong-il has brought North Korea to the brink of collapse. The state continues to stagger along under Kim Jong-un, who benefits from Chinese subsidies, the sales of missile (and possibly nuclear) technology, and various criminal activities such as counterfeiting, drug dealing, and money laundering.

Given the dismal state that the North is currently in, some may question whether its leaders still maintain reunification of the Peninsula under their aegis as a realistic goal. It is hard to know what top leaders are thinking, but it certainly remains a constant theme of all the propaganda pumped out by Pyongyang. (As B.R Myers has noted, the only institution in the country that did not miss a beat during the famine years in the 1990s was the propaganda apparatus.⁶⁷) It is doubtful that the top leaders, themselves weaned on decades of this propaganda, would continue to inculcate in their citizens a view to which they did not subscribe. This may seem deluded to Westerners, but history is filled with examples of regimes promulgating, and acting upon, ideas at least as bizarre. Think of Adolf Hitler killing millions in the name of "lebensraum" and Aryan "racial purity," Mao's killing millions to enable China to experience a Great Leap Forward and a Cultural Revolution, or Pol Pot's killing over a million people to realize a socialist revolution in his poor, agrarian country. In point of fact, Pyongyang continues to pursue a reunification agenda, and it has some hopes, however faint, that it may succeed. The U.S. has been drawing down its forces in South

Korea for years, and many Americans question the need to continue defending a prosperous country like South Korea; the North may imagine that the remaining troops may be withdrawn too. Moreover, the North no doubt hopes that it can one day demonstrate its capability to marry a nuclear warhead with an intercontinental ballistic missile with the range to hit the West Coast. If that were to happen, North Korea's leadership might imagine that the U.S. could be dissuaded from defending South Korea and thus allow the North to complete its grand project.

Whatever the actual prospects of unification on North Korea's terms, Pyongyang cannot give up the dream which underlies the state's very existence. Neither North nor South imagines that the division of the Peninsula will be permanent. It is only a question of who will be in charge when the two Koreas unify: leadership in Pyongyang or Seoul? If Pyongyang concedes that it will not run a unified Korea, it is implicitly conceding that Seoul will. This defeatism could prove damaging, even fatal, to the continued existence of the state—so it will never be permitted as long as North Korea continues to exist in its present form.

North Korean Foreign Policy Today

For decades, as we have seen, North Korea has been pursuing its essential objectives—recognition as a nuclear-weapons state, a peace treaty with Washington, and eventual reunification—through a policy of brinkmanship. Its strategy and tactics are by now familiar: provoke when Washington or Seoul seem distracted, up the ante in the face of international condemnation, and pivot back to some sort of peace offensive, which usually ends with dialogue and negotiation, culminating, finally, in concessions for the North. Such brinkmanship tactics make sense from the North's perspective. The U.S. and South Korea both have a long history of making concessions to the North in response to its bad behavior. In spite of numerous attacks on its citizens and leaders, South Korea has seldom retaliated. A recent exception was the shelling of some North Korean gun positions after the attack on Yeonpyong, but even that counterattack inflicted no casualties on the North Korean side. Instead of responding in kind, Seoul has chosen to give the North billions of dollars in economic aid over the years.

The North, then, must have been surprised when its tried-and-true brinkmanship tactics failed to yield concessions during President Obama's first term. The North, overplaying its hand, initially greeted President Obama with a series of provocations, while ignoring the new

president's stated desire to engage with North Korea and even to meet with its leader personally. The North's provocations during the first six months of the Obama administration included short- and long-range missile tests, an announcement that it was withdrawing from the Six-Party Talks for good, a declaration that it planned to pursue uranium enrichment program, and a second nuclear test. This did not, however, gain the North any concessions either from Obama or from South Korea's conservative new president, Lee Myung-bak. Yet the North under Kim Jong-un has continued its provocations, apparently in the hopes of being paid to stop.

The current cycle of provocation began with a successful test of a long-range rocket used to launch a satellite (the second satellite launch of the year) on December 2012, followed by the North's third nuclear test on February 2013. These tests have moved the North closer to its goal of developing a viable, long-range, nuclear-weapon delivery system, which it believes will force the international community to recognize it as a bona fide nuclear-weapons state. Along with the increase in weapons testing has come an escalation in rhetoric, with the North threatening to launch a nuclear attack on the United States and South Korea.⁶⁸ Despite its continuing financial hardship, the North has even pulled its workers out of the Kaesong Industrial Complex for a time, an undertaking run jointly with South Korea which generated, by some estimates, \$90 million in hard currency each year.⁶⁹ Having provoked Seoul and Washington, Kim Jong-un has predictably pivoted toward seeking negotiations that will result, or so he hopes, in the provision of billions of dollars in aid. Currently, however, the North has agreed to resume operations there, evidence of the North's latest "peace offensive."⁷⁰

The strategy, by now, is familiar and shopworn but it remains, at least to some extent, successful. In spite of not coming close to achieving its second and third policy aims (a peace treaty and reunification), the North has achieved its first aim by emerging as a de facto nuclear-weapons state. More importantly, for all of its economic and political failures the North Korean state remains standing after more than sixty years while other totalitarian regimes, from Eastern Europe to the Middle East, have fallen by the wayside. Pyongyang's brinkmanship policies have never seriously endangered the state's continued existence, and they have brought considerable benefits to its rulers. The Kim dynasty has shown itself to be shrewd, calculating and resilient. If foreign policy is designed to aid a regime's security, then

North Korean foreign policy may be judged a success.

Looking Forward: How to Deal with North Korea

In spite of its impressive and somewhat surprising survival to date, North Korea's future is bleak. There is no other country in the world that is more diplomatically isolated. Even its closest ally and benefactor, China, is indicating that it is getting less tolerant of the North's saber-rattling. (One sign of Beijing's displeasure: it recently ordered its state bank to shut down the account of the North's foreign exchange bank.) Meanwhile, the North's most feared and despised enemy, the United States, is still the world's single and unrivaled superpower, the rise of China notwithstanding. In the realm of diplomatic and economic competition, the North has lost the badly to South Korea, which is often cited as a successful model of economic and political development to the rest of the world. North Korea, by contrast, may be the world's poorest nation; it subsists on steadily diminishing foreign economic assistance. Yet, despite the poor outlook for the North, Kim Jong-un is unlikely to deviate from the policies his father and grandfather have pursued over the past sixty years.

It remains as unlikely now, as in the past, that the North can be persuaded to give up its crowning achievement—its nuclear-weapons program. The North, in the past, has been willing to make agreements to stop its nuclear weapons program, but it has not been willing to keep its promises. The North repeatedly has shown an ability surreptitiously to continue or restart its nuclear-weapons program after extracting the maximum possible concessions by promising to suspend them.

Many Americans tend to blame the problems of North Korea on whoever happens to occupy the Oval Office, thinking the president is either too soft or too hard on Pyongyang. South Koreans exhibit the same tendency, blaming the North's actions on supposed mishandling from the Blue House. This is a patronizing view of the North Korean leadership, and it does not comport with the historical record. The overriding reality and unpleasant truth is that the North's leaders cannot disarm or change and hope to stay in power. The strategic and symbolic value of the acquisition of a credible nuclear arsenal for the North should be taken at face value: nuclear weapons equal power and prestige for a state which has few other assets. The North's provocative actions, including tests of missiles and nuclear weapons and attacks on South Korea, are not defensive actions motivated by hostile policies emanating

from Seoul or Washington but, rather, manifestations of Pyongyang's time-honed strategy and policies toward Washington and Seoul.

Given this reality, what should be the policies of Washington and Seoul going forward?

Washington and Seoul should begin by realizing that the North negotiates with them not to defuse tensions but to manage tensions, to keep an existing crisis from tipping into all-out war or (equally perilous) all-out peace, while gaining concessions to ensure the regime's long-term survival. Similarly, if and when Washington and Seoul return to the negotiating table with the North, they should be realistic about their goals. The aim of any dialogue should be tactical—to manage the relationship, to keep the North Korean crisis from tipping into all-out conflict, and to slow down or to cap the North's nuclear program. Talks with the North can serve limited but important purposes such as intelligence gathering, delivering warnings, conveying positions and exploring differences. But Washington and Seoul should abandon the unrealistic hope that negotiations with the North will lead to its denuclearization. Even if there is a deal, Pyongyang will never accept the strict verification requirements needed to make sure that it is keeping its part of the bargain.

The U.S. and South Korea should make clear to the North that they will pursue a zero tolerance policy in the face of future provocations. For decades, North Korea has been taught that it faces virtually no penalties for its choreographed and calculated acts of provocation. That lesson must be untaught by the alliance of the U.S. and South Korea. The North will have an incentive to discontinue its aggression only when it knows that it will not pay—and might even trigger devastating retaliation that could threaten the survival of the regime. Words alone will not convey a strong enough message to the North. The U.S. and South Korea must show they are serious about what they say. To demonstrate this, they could enhance missile defense systems around the Korean Peninsula (including in Japan and at sea), introduce more air and naval assets into the region, and stage more frequent and more robust U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises, while also enhancing counter-proliferation measures including the interdiction of all North Korean ships and aircraft suspected of complicity in sanctions violations, criminal acts, arms sales, or nuclear and missile proliferation. Washington and Seoul should also enhance their sanctions regime on the

North. Washington, unilaterally if need be, should hit the North hard by trying to cut off all the regime's illicit sources of revenue, especially drug-smuggling and currency-counterfeiting, while also expanding financial sanctions aimed at ending all banking transactions related to the North's weapons trade, and halting most grants and loans. This would effectively freeze many of the North's overseas bank accounts, cutting off the funds that the leadership has used to secure fine cognac, smart phones, Swiss watches, and fancy flat-screen television sets so valued by the North Korean leadership. As the BDA case showed, the U.S. can act effectively to freeze North Korean assets in other countries.

Ideally such measures would be enacted in cooperation with China. If Washington sustains this vigorous approach, the accumulated pressure would most likely minimize Chinese obfuscation and may even induce the Xi Jinping regime to cooperate in protecting the integrity of the international financial system. There have been glimmers of hope in the past year that China may finally get tough with North Korea. But even if China does not cooperate, the U.S., South Korea, and their allies should adopt these measures, many of which—missile defense, deployments and exercises, interdiction, covert measures, and sanctions—are beyond Beijing's control.

While tightening the noose around North Korea, the U.S. and South Korea should also take concerted action to bring the crimes against humanity to the attention of the world. Washington and Seoul's current policy of downplaying the dismal human rights record in the worlds most brutal and cruel landscape is no longer viable. They should combine efforts to draw global attention to the North's vast prison camps and other egregious violations of the most fundamental international human-rights standards. A robust international human-rights campaign in support of the world's most hideously abused population would further isolate the regime, just as the anti-apartheid campaign did against South Africa in the 1980s.

This human-rights campaign should be not restricted to the world outside North Korea—it should also be directed to help the people of North Korea break the information blockade imposed by the state. The U.S. and South Korea can step up radio broadcasts and other means, some of them covert, to transmit information to North Korea about what is going on in the rest of the world, developments hidden by government propaganda. The Kim regime has thus far maintained tight control over information, conducting an indoctrination campaign to instill blind

loyalty to the Kim regime. But increasingly, foreign media is becoming available through the porous China-North Korea border and is slowly eroding the regime's monopoly on information. That trend can be accelerated by concerted action from the U.S. and South Korea.

At the end of the day, the North's strategies and policies, including its nuclear policy, will change only if a fundamentally different leadership emerges. The goal is for these combined steps to begin affecting the stability of the North Korean system and provide the foundation for bringing about a different leadership. In the long run, there can be only one happy ending to this long-running saga with the North—reunification of the Korean Peninsula as a free and democratic republic.

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- ¹⁷ Pollack, *No Exit*, 184.
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