

# **MOVING AWAY FROM ZERO-SUM GAMES: North Korea and the Bomb**

*by Jennifer Fleury*

“North Korea has the worst public relations in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

David Kang, “Threatening, but Deterrence Works”

The dominant outlook in the current U.S. administration is that during President Clinton’s term in office a disproportionate amount of leniency was shown towards North Korea. According to Gilles Andréani in *Survival*, North Korea was guilty of violations, including:

Blatantly disregarding its obligations under the NPT (nonproliferation treaty), being caught by an I.A.E.A. (International Atomic Energy Agency) eager to reestablish its credibility after the Gulf War, threatening to denounce the Treaty as a result and, eventually, getting a three-fold reward that consisted of humanitarian aid and energy supplies; a multi-billion project to build two light-water reactors in North Korea; and a direct political engagement with the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The reluctance of the U.S. to risk war in Korea is credited as the source of the engagement policy adopted during both the Carter and Clinton administrations. It is often seen as a weak-willed approach that cedes power to an aggressive regime and rewards North Korea for its dangerous activities. Although there is merit in the view that North Korea should be held accountable for its agreements and not rewarded for reneging, North Korea should not be expected to simply give up its program in exchange for noth-

ing. Its security concerns are legitimate and should be addressed seriously, as should all plans for any economic aid that might actually reach the people of North Korea.

The prevailing wisdom in Washington is that the North Korean leadership is insane and unbalanced. Kim Jong-il is described as a womanizing alcoholic who spent the years prior to his father's death partying and organizing acts of terrorism.<sup>3</sup> It has since become clear that Kim Jong-il was running the country well before his father's demise, and the transfer of power was relatively smooth.

The rule of both Kim Il-sung and that of his son have been characterized by a tendency to vacillate between dramatic threats and conciliatory gestures, augmenting the perception of either systemic or personal instability. However, upon examination of the literature by experts on North Korea, the general consensus seems to be that given its position in the world and specific circumstances, the policies adopted by the government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) are understandable. The regime comes across as extreme and dangerous, but, according to an article in *Survival*, "most Korea specialists believe that the North Korean regime is neither irrational nor crazy, but rather has a distorted worldview and warped expectations about how other countries will respond to its actions."<sup>4</sup>

Yet often the characteristic erraticism comes off as orchestrated, or, rather, a plan begins to emerge through the screen of eccentric vacillation. In 2000, a delegation from the U.S. led by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang. The delegation was treated to the North Korean ceremonial mass games where spectators on one side of a giant stadium are treated to a panorama of colorful images made by the throngs of people on the other side of the stadium who hold up cards in amazingly synchronized patterns. One of the images that emerged was of a missile being launched into the sky. As the *New York Times* reported:

But Kim, ever the showman, turned to Albright on his right and said, "That was our first missile launch and our last." To make sure his message got through, he turned to Sherman on his left and repeated his statement. The meaning was clear: the missile program can be stopped if you offer us a new relationship.<sup>5</sup>

Kim Jong-il, by all accounts, comes across as eccentric, but fully in command of his faculties and his country, the latter being quite a feat given its current state of disarray. When it comes to characterizations of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, David Kang writes "the evidence used to argue that these leaders have been irrational or crazy is speculative, having to do with hair styles or propensities to like western movies."<sup>6</sup>

Another view is that North Korea is simply using its nuclear weapons program as leverage to extract economic support, which is a reasonable—and hopeful—conclusion, but it is also one that misses several important points. It ignores the North Korean leadership's longstanding preoccupation with security issues and the well-documented fact that virtually every time the U.S. made moves to enhance its own security in the region, North Korea responded by stepping up its nuclear weapons program. North Korea's primary motive for acquiring a nuclear weapons program, according to a study

on the nonproliferation treaty, was “to deter U.S. nuclear use and to counterbalance the U.S. nuclear umbrella.”<sup>7</sup>

Recent events notwithstanding, U.S.-North Korean relations and North Korean-South Korean relations have been better in the past decade than they have been in a very long time. This is because the U.S. displayed a growing readiness to meet the North Koreans halfway. The regime has proven to be paranoid, reactionary, and shrewd at negotiation, but still eager to engage with the United States, and more willing than ever before to put economic aid and relations with potential allies ahead of their nuclear weapons program.

There remains a prevalent view in the U.S. that North Korea still harbors an active desire for forcible reunification of the peninsula. However, were they to attempt this, they would have little potential for success. South Korea probably possesses one of the stronger militaries in the world, presenting a strong forward-defense capability against any possible North Korean attack.<sup>8</sup>

Threats notwithstanding, North Korea has not even come close to invasion in 50 years, and with a failing economy and few, if any, true allies, now does not seem the best time to try. Given that North Korea is unlikely to be aggressive in this sense in the near future, what is the remaining rationale for classifying it as a rogue state? The inclusion of North Korea in the axis of evil seems a deliberate attempt to connect the country with the war on terror.

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North Korea’s past involvement with terrorist activities is undeniable. But the North Korean leadership has no known connections with international terrorist organizations, and in 2000 it attended anti-terrorism talks with the U.S. and officially renounced terrorism. Pyongyang has signed two UN anti-terrorism conventions. Yet these developments have gone largely unappreciated in the U.S.; North Korea remains a rogue state, ineligible for the normalization of relations with the United States. This characterization carries political consequences, for, as the article in *Survival* states, “the rogue state concept also implies that force and threats are the only appropriate way to deal with fundamentally unreasonable countries.”<sup>9</sup>

North Korea’s desire to obtain nuclear weapons cannot be characterized as merely part of the trend of the past two decades, as so-called rogue nations have tried to acquire nuclear weapons to culminate their deviousness. In fact, that desire dates back to the mid-1950s, when nuclear threats were used by the United States as a way to try to

end the Korean War.<sup>10</sup> Though North Korea's nuclear weapons programs are regarded as dangerously offensive in today's world, they appear to have originated from a defensive desire to protect the North from nuclear threats. The fall of the Soviet Union and the resulting loss of Soviet protection, combined with the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and South Korea, no doubt reinforced North Korea's sense of its own vulnerability.<sup>11</sup>

North Korea today faces a world in which its two natural allies, China and Russia, have proven to be fickle patrons and could now be suspected to have better relations with South Korea. It is a world in which the hegemonic power, the United States, has taken an ideological stance and declared North Korea an irredeemable source of evil. The current administration has displayed a willingness to preemptively attack rogue states, a fact which certainly did not go unnoticed by Kim Jong-il.<sup>12</sup> It is a world in which Korea's rival, South Korea, enjoys the protection of the U.S., with 36,000 permanently stationed U.S. troops as a tangible reminder, and the less apparent but all-too-real latent threat of U.S. nuclear power. The "Dear Leader" of North Korea faces this world without the self-delusion one might expect from reading the official government public announcements, and, as such, the real issue isn't whether Kim is foolish enough to amass a nuclear arsenal but whether he is crazy enough to rid himself of his own bargaining chip.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Limited Engagement Policy*

"The American aversion to cooperating in order to prevent proliferation is perverse."

— Leon Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*<sup>14</sup>

North Korea is continually described with adjectives such as: closed, stagnant, backwards, poor, isolationist, extremist, and anachronistic. The dominant characterization of Korea, as well as the established doctrine that its entire political structure rests around the personality of one man, Kim Jong-il, all contribute to a U.S. policy towards Korea that is itself rather stagnant. At some level, it has become a waiting game to see if and when Korea will falter—because of the desperate situation of its economy, because of internal rebellion, or because of the death of its leader.

Though this is an interesting and pivotal question, waiting for what may or may not be the inevitable does not make for an effective foreign policy. The policy decisions that led to the 1994 agreement were predicated on a firm belief in the collapse of North Korea (and its absorption by South Korea) within the decade.<sup>15</sup>

The collapse of North Korea was not and is not considered a direct political objective; rather, it is seen as an inevitability that can legitimately influence policy decisions. This reasoning seems flawed, to say the least. Comparisons are often made between East Germany and North Korea, with the insinuation that the North Korean regime will crumble, as did the Berlin Wall. But North and South Korea, having fought a bloody civil war, remain far more strictly divided, and North Korea is far more tightly

insulated from foreign influence. Regardless of if or when the current North Korean regime will collapse, this debate, as Selig Harrison, the dean of American specialists on the region points out, “has paralyzed American policymaking regarding North Korea.”<sup>16</sup> It is now more important than ever to establish coherent, long-term goals that extend beyond the needs of a particular crisis moment.

As far as North Korea goes, the policy of the U.S. has always been geared toward preventing or containing its nuclear advancement, often at the expense of the diplomatic relationship between the two countries. Washington has made any sort of advantageous relationship with North Korea contingent on the termination of the country’s nuclear weapons program. The objective, insofar as it has been defined, has traditionally been nonproliferation first, diplomacy second. All this would lead one to believe that the acquisition of nuclear weapons alone is enough to forestall good relations with the United States.

But this has not proven to be the case, for although the U.S. wishes to limit the nuclear club as much as is possible, it does not react to its allies developing nuclear weapons nearly as severely as it does to states such as North Korea. This would seem to suggest that there might be two approaches to dealing with an unfriendly state set on developing nuclear weapons. One could respond by endeavoring through any and all means necessary to keep that state from becoming a nuclear power, which is plausible, given a certain amount of power and influence, but only at the risk of ensuring both that country’s unremitting enmity and the continuation of its desire for nuclear weapons.

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the potential for a mutually beneficial solution;  
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Another approach is to examine the country’s motives for nuclear development, attempt to address them and thus remove the impetus for obtaining the weapons in the first place. At the same time, Washington should develop good relations with the country in the hope that this will ease the gravity of the situation. The United States has not been pursuing either policy actively, but rather “keeping its options open with a policy of “limited engagement.” In the absence of coherent, long-term goals, successive administrations have improvised ad hoc responses to a series of crises precipitated by Pyongyang in pursuit of its own objectives.”<sup>17</sup>

What has emerged from this policy, or lack thereof, is a series of confusing and contradictory impulses within the U.S. government that leave openings for exploitation by North Korea and leave the United States without much real leverage. On the surface, the U.S. appears to be holding all the cards, yet North Korea thus far has dominated the game. In reality, neither country has yet realized the potential for a mutually beneficial solution; both are still proceeding as if it’s a zero-sum game: “In a nutshell,” as David Kang observes, the problem is that “the United States refuses to give security guarantees

to North Korea until it proves it has dismantled its weapons program. The North refuses to disarm until it has security guarantees from the United States. Hence, stalemate.”<sup>18</sup>

Active engagement is not only the best policy—it is the only real policy that does not entail war, stalemate, or simply waiting for the regime to collapse. The question is how to proceed.

### *What is to Be Done*

The first step is to stop characterizing North Korea as “rogue” or “evil.” Regardless of whether these perceptions are accurate, their expression is counterproductive. They lend weight to North Korea’s complaint that it is the U.S. that established and continues to maintain the hostility between the two countries. Those characterizations help to bring about the very situation they profess to describe.

The second step is to grant North Korea some of its security requests—not contingent on their meeting a list of demands first, but initially and up-front. This is the only diplomatic approach that has met with real success in the past, and the active realization by the U.S. that security does not have to be a zero-sum game is the only way to open a dialogue that could convince the North Koreans of that principle as well. Leon V. Sigal’s term “cooperative security” is a good candidate for replacing “coercive diplomacy.” Only cooperation, rather than coercion, can work in the end because as long as the desire for a nuclear weapons program remains, depriving a nation of the means to obtain one can only be a temporary solution. Cooperation entails taking the necessary steps to reassure insecure powers, offer inducements—and actually grant them—to make abandoning their nuclear goals worth something.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of North Korea, given that North Korea has consistently demanded a security guarantee or nonaggression pact from the United States, this request should be given careful consideration.<sup>20</sup> United States officials have not so much refused this option as never taken it seriously, first because they have no plans to invade North Korea and assume that that much is clear, and second because there is general skepticism about the utility of such nonaggression guarantees.

Moreover, the lack of diplomatic relations with the North Korean government makes a discussion of any sort of treaty face immediate resistance. On the other hand, considering the fact that the U.S. does not plan to invade North Korea and considers such agreements relatively nonbinding anyway, a non-aggression pact might prove to be a fairly painless way to reassure the North Koreans and thus hope to extract some concessions from them as well.

The Bush Administration has described a policy of offering concessions to the North Koreans as “buying off” a regime that is blackmailing it. Halting the fuel transports was Washington’s way of taking the initiative and making an implicit threat against a dangerous power. However, this policy has little chance of success, considering the intractability of the Koreans and their perception that it is the United States that is principally responsible for blackmail. In the end, according to Kenneth Waltz, “the more vulnerable North Korea feels, the more strenuously it will pursue a nuclear program ...

Noticing this, we should be careful about conveying military threats to weak states.<sup>221</sup>

The more we threaten, the more insecure they feel, the more they covet nuclear weapons, the more dangerous we think they are, and so on, in an extremely unproductive escalation. Offering whatever incentives we can without obstructing our own security interests is the most sound approach the United States could take.

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  - 2 Gilles Andréani, "The Disarray of U.S. Non-Proliferation Policy," *Survival* 41 (Winter 1999-2000), p. 52.
  - 3 Peter Maass, "The Last Emperor," *The New York Times Magazine*, 19 October 2003, p. 62.
  - 4 Daniel Pinkston and Phillip Saunders, "Seeing North Korea Clearly," *Survival* 45 (Autumn 2003), p. 80.
  - 5 Peter Maass, p. 128.
  - 6 David Kang, p. 66.
  - 7 Michael Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb: A Case Study for Nonproliferation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 17.
  - 8 Michael O'Hanlon and Mike Mochizuki, *Crisis on the Korean Peninsula: How to Deal with a Nuclear North Korea* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), p. 69.
  - 9 Daniel Pinkston and Phillip Saunders, "Seeing North Korea Clearly," *Survival* 45 (Autumn 2003), p. 88.
  - 10 Mazarr, p. 17.
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  - 15 Selig G. Harrison, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 4.
  - 16 Harrison, p. 3.
  - 17 Harrison, p. 3.
  - 18 Kang, p. 43.
  - 19 Leon V. Sigal, p. 254.
  - 20 Pinkston and Saunders, p. 92.
  - 21 Kenneth Waltz, "More May Be Better," in *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*, ed. Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), p. 40.