
Nuclear Diplomacy vis-à-vis the DPRK: A Dead-End Street

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INTRODUCTION

The Korean peninsula is once again exercising a gravitational pull on the outside world. Located on the northeastern littoral of the Asian subcontinent, at the focal point where the interests of China, Japan, Russia, and the United States converged and clashed, Korea was fated by geography to face overwhelming challenges in its foreign affairs. Much like Poland in European power politics, Korea in the past century has been “akin to an anvil upon which the great powers of the Pacific have wielded their hammers to forge world history.”¹

Passivity, victimization, and frantic responses to pressures from the outside world have marked Korean political history since the twilight years of the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910). It is no small irony then that today the greatest international pressure in northeast Asia originates from the Korean peninsula. Even more ironic is the fact that the pressure to capture the attention of the world emanates not from the democratic and prosperous Republic of Korea, but from the dictatorial and impoverished regime north of the 38th parallel that calls itself the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). With its relentless pursuit of nuclear arms, the DPRK looms large as one of the prime shapers of international politics in Northeast Asia while its incomparably richer and more powerful neighbors keep watching helplessly with bated breath.

As South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia are choosing to defer to the United States and counting on the world’s sole superpower to wave a magic wand and persuade North Korea to drop its nuclear program, the intractable regime of Kim Jong Il is single-mindedly calling for direct talks with the U.S. while snubbing proposals

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for a multilateral forum. The situation has created a false illusion that all powers in the region are in agreement with North Korea on the need for the U.S. to immediately tackle the problem. However, the U.S., out of self-righteousness and preoccupation with Iraq, has refused to talk to North Korea and opted to sit idly by. In fact,

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the Bush administration has continually downplayed the North Korean nuclear crisis since it came into the open last October. This has been partly due to its focus on Saddam Hussein, but more so because “talks for the sake of talking” are counter-productive. The U.S. presumes, as it should, that nuclear diplomacy vis-à-vis the DPRK is a dead-end street. The past ten years of trial and error should be ample indication of this, but the

real answer lies in the nature of the North Korean regime and the immeasurable value of nuclear weapons to men in Pyongyang.

THE ROK AND THE DPRK: OFFSPRING OF THE KOREAN WAR

In order to understand the type of regime that Kim Jong Il operates, it is necessary to understand the role of the Korean War and the fundamental contradictions that exist between South Korea and North Korea. The Korean War of 1950-53 is the greatest disaster in Korean history in terms of casualties and the profound changes it brought to the lives of millions of Koreans. The first cataclysmic event for Koreans in the twentieth century came in 1910 when Korea was unceremoniously absorbed by imperial Japan. As a colony of Japan, Koreans were brutally ruled for the next 35 years, sans sovereignty and, most decidedly, in the eyes of the world community, sans national identity. With Japan's surrender to the Allied powers in August 1945 came not self-rule but the partition of their land at the 38th parallel by the United States and the Soviet Union. Koreans on both sides of the divided line were forced to cope with the reality dealt them in the overall scheme of postwar power politics in East Asia. The division of the Korean peninsula in August 1945 was a result of the victors of the Second World War carving up much of the world into their own respective spheres of influence.

For over a thousand years, in spite of countless foreign wars, domestic uprisings, and colonial rule, the Korean peninsula remained undivided. From the year 936 to 1945, the Koreans lived as one race, one culture, under a single polity. Therefore, the division of the land and the emergence in 1948 of two separate regimes in the North and South are a jarring anomaly in the context of Korean political history. The intense attachment on the part of Koreans to a shared past and future, as evident in their irresistible impulse to be reunited with their brethren

across the 38th parallel in both the North and South today, is in large measure a product of events over which the Koreans had next to no control. That the U.S. on August 11, 1945, divided Korea so callously at an arbitrary line is a long-held grievance for many Koreans.² However, the decisive event responsible for the division of the Korean land and the hostility that exists between the North and South is not the insensitive postwar settlement by the United States and the Soviet Union, but rather the brutal carnage inflicted for three long years during the Korean War.

With the Korean War, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea became a prime shaper of international politics principally in its demonstrated capacity to threaten peace in the region. The DPRK has existed in an uneasy strategic calculus with its neighbors, often vexing its benefactors in Beijing and Moscow with adventurous diplomacy and repeatedly resorting to blatant acts of terrorism against South Korea. Pyongyang has achieved over the past fifty years what no other nation has in human history: building the world's only industrialized, urbanized, peacetime, perennial garrison state with a food catastrophe.³ All this is topped with the world's only communist father-to-son succession, witnessed following the death of Kim Il Sung in July 1994, with plans now underway for the installation in the future of a third generational succession. The Kim Il Sung-to-Kim Jong Il dynastic dictatorship of North Korea is truly *sui generis*. In its ubiquitous and omnipotent ruthlessness, the North Korean brand of leadership presents fascinating material for study.

In the years following liberation in 1945, circumstances were not conducive to establishing a functioning democracy on Korean soil. Post-colonial Korea grappled with the anachronistic world into which it was thrust: a generation of Koreans deprived of experience in self-rule facing the monumental task of nation-building, each under a foreign military government. Amid the poverty and the uncertainty of foreign designs, South Korea under Syngman Rhee placed its hopes for the future in the U.S., while North Korea under Kim Il Sung leaned on its ideological and material benefactors—the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. With the somewhat reluctant blessing of Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin, Kim Il Sung launched a massive invasion to “liberate” the south on June 25, 1950. After three years of fierce fighting, the war ended on July 27, 1953, as the exhausted major combatants, the U.S., and China pushed for an uneasy armistice. The Korean peninsula was still divided at the 38th parallel. The inconclusive and unsatisfactory manner in which the war ended meant that there was to be a condition of permanent hostility between the North and South unless one ceased to exist or chose to be absorbed by the other.

The subsequent paths of national development taken in the North and South since the brutal Korean War offer a startling contrast in national destinies. But more importantly, the disturbing contrast spells incompatibility, which, in turn, means mutual threat. Genuine dialogue or reconciliation between a thriving democracy and a ruthless dictatorship in the absence of an overriding common

threat is hardly a common event. The prospects for such reconciliation between two enemies that share a common border, ethnicity, and language, while mutually posing—by virtue of their antithetical systems—a threat to the other regime's survival, are dismally low. Can Kim Jong Il be talked out of his nuclear designs and be nudged toward a more open and responsible behavior? The answer which historical-empirical analysis—if not sheer common sense—gives us, is categorically “no.”

THE ROLE OF THE NORTH KOREAN MILITARY

In grappling with the vexing question of the North Korean nuclear threat today, one fact must always be taken into account: never in the history of humankind has a dictator willingly given up his instruments of power. From Kim Jong Il's perspective, the strengthening and preservation of his dictatorship is necessary, and all the more so since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the death of his father in 1994. As in all other totalitarian states, the population of North Korea has been subjected to immeasurable suffering. The building of armaments, of heavy industry, of a Potemkin nation of autarkic dependency has been achieved at a terrible cost to human lives and livelihoods.⁴ Forced labor, concentration camps, and malnourishment have exacted much hope and energy out of this exhausted population. Therefore, genuine opening to the outside world would spell suicide to this ultra-secretive regime as infusions of foreign capitalists

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and the uncontrolled growth of any economic sector would constitute a small but growing opposition to the Kim clan.

The hermit kingdom not only closes its doors to the outside world—while unabashedly reaching its hands out for foreign cash and aid—but with equal vigor closes all doors on its own people. It keeps

an ever-watchful eye on its 21 million citizens through an elaborate web of secret police and informants. It persecutes and imprisons hundreds of thousands of political dissenters, captured refugees, and any others considered not wholly in line with the cult of Kim Il Sung, who, in the measured words of one state propaganda machine, is “a peerless patriot, national hero, ever-victorious and iron-willed brilliant commander, one of the genius leaders of the international Communist movement and workers' movement, and the great leader of forty million Korean people.”⁵ Families of those branded anti-Communist are whisked off to remote labor camps or underground mines for a life of hard labor, deprivation, and random torture.⁶ In a country of starving people and an entire generation of malnourished children, tight repression of such basic human rights as the freedom of speech, movement, information, and religion are regarded as vital

to further dull the people's senses and quell any disaffection. Since its inception as the "Democratic People's Republic of Korea," the North Korean population has never known democracy. Although there are growing signs of discontent within the state according to accounts told by those North Koreans who have escaped,⁷ it is still highly questionable that such popular passions, in the absence of greater pressure from the outside, will develop into any kind of dynamic social movement that can challenge the regime.

This macabre and omnipresent structure is maintained by the might of the military, which can most efficiently silence any voices of dissension. The 1.2-million-men Korean People's Army constitutes the impoverished nation's biggest employer, supplier, and consumer. It is undoubtedly the nation's greatest symbol of power and pride. Since acceding to power in 1994, Kim Jong Il has repeatedly blandished the military with preferential supply of funds, food, and material, while showering high echelon officers with generous gifts and frequent promotions. Kim's formal title itself, "Chairman of the National Defense Commission" as opposed to "President" or "Premier," speaks to the importance he attaches to the military.⁸ In addition, since 1997, Kim has promoted a so-called "military-first" campaign, singling out the military over the Korean Workers Party as the pillar upon which the North Korean state and society rest.

For Kim Jong Il and his cohorts, control over the military is crucial to the preservation of their power: first, as a means to suppress other groups that might emerge as a locus of power, and second, as a means to preventing any rebellion within the military itself. Kim's public appearances and speeches often take place before military settings. Externally, of course, the North Korean military is the surest guarantee of security against foreign aggression, as well as the surest means to exacting aid and concessions from the international community. If the North Korean military were not so capable of wreaking havoc on South Korea and Japan, the present nuclear impasse would lend itself to a simpler solution. With some 70 percent of its nearly 1.2 million men deployed near the Demilitarized Zone along with 13,000 artillery pieces and countless rocket batteries and mortars to back up this immense manpower, the North Korean Army decidedly poses a credible threat to South Korea and its ally, the United States.

THE NORTH KOREAN ENDGAME: "LIBERATION" OF THE SOUTH

Since the end of the Korean War, the U.S. has committed itself to the defense of South Korea against possible renewed invasion from the North through the U.S.-ROK alliance and, more importantly, through the visible deterrent created by the presence of frontline soldiers on South Korean soil. In the course of the past 50 years, the role of the U.S. in the national destiny of South Korea has been omnipresent. Although a multiplicity of factors has been respon-

sible for the transformation of South Korea from one of the world's poorest nations to one of twentieth century's success stories in terms of development and democratization, the peace and relative security on the Korean peninsula made possible by the U.S. commitment to defending South Korea is undoubtedly at the top of the hierarchy of causal factors behind this dramatic turnaround. With its military presence in South Korea, not only did the U.S. provide a stable environment for the South Korean government and people to channel their resources

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into recovering from the war and building their economy, it also created a market in South Korea for foreign investment, ventures, and loans, much of which otherwise would have been diverted elsewhere. In light of the recent downgrading by Moody's Investors Service of South Korea's long-term credit ratings from positive to negative amid heightened security concerns surrounding the Korean peninsula, it would certainly not be illogical to assume that had it not been for the presence of U.S. troops during the

Cold War, foreign businesses would have held a less sanguine outlook in entering into any type of business relationship with South Korean companies.

To say that South Korea owes much of its success in nation-building to the credible U.S. deterrent is to presume that a high likelihood of an invasion by the North has been consistent. As demonstrated by the innumerable instances of North Korean armed provocation and acts of sabotage over the years, the collective evidence is incontrovertible: North Korea sent a commando unit in an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the South Korean president in 1968; detonated a bomb in Rangoon, Burma, in 1983, killing 21 South Korean cabinet members and officials while injuring another 47; and blew up a Korean airliner in 1987 leading to the loss of over 100 innocent lives. But more than the litany of crimes committed against South Koreans or the kidnapping of Japanese citizens or the axe-murder of UN guards in the Demilitarized Zone, more than the macabre nature of the North Korean regime which allows its citizens to starve to death by the hundreds of thousands while pouring in one-third of its GDP into the military, more than the habitual violations of international agreements and the predictable pattern of blackmail and willful deceit that has always underlain North Korean diplomacy, there is a basic irrefutable fact that shows that North Korea always has been and remains to this day a grave threat to South Korea's national security and to peace in the region. It is North Korea's explicitly stated national goal as enshrined in the preamble of its Korean Workers' Party Rules and in its Constitution and repeated over and over again by the various channels of

state propaganda machinery: "Liberate the South and bring about the complete victory of socialism on the fatherland."⁹ North Korea is known for its endless barrage of braggadocio. In its daily invectives, the North habitually characterizes the U.S. as the greatest threat to world peace and the world's worst violator of human rights.¹⁰ That it has always held the U.S. atop a special pedestal is perhaps understandable, as the U.S. is undoubtedly its mortal obstacle to unifying the fatherland. However, President George W. Bush has set himself apart from all his predecessors by becoming the greatest target of North Korea's venom ever in both frequency and intensity. South Korean monitors of North Korean propaganda say that they have never seen Pyongyang's media spew forth such invective on anyone as much as they do on President Bush, who is "known variously in the North as 'warmonger,' 'imperialist,' 'maniac,' 'lunatic,' or simply 'that man.'"¹¹ Although such a verbal onslaught says more about the unstable North Korean system, it also reflects the regime's perception that the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea is the greatest obstacle to achieving its ultimate national goal: the absorption of the South on its own terms.

Throughout the years, "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung had regularly spelled out to his nation the need to liberate the puppet South from U.S. imperialists and achieve the sacred national goal of unification. In 1970, Kim Il Sung revealed his aspiration to his biographer, in his own dispassionate words:

The first and foremost task of the South Korean people is to expel the U.S. imperialist aggressor army away from South Korea, abolish all subjugating military and economic treaties and agreements concluded between South Korea and the U.S., destroy all the organs of aggression and so eliminate the U.S. imperialist colonial rule.¹²

This account is followed by Kim's exhortation to his fellow Koreans south of the 38th parallel to use violent means to drive out the U.S.:

The South Korean people should drive the U.S. imperialists out of South Korea and demolish their colonial rule, linking this with the struggle to seize power, and should subordinate all forms of struggle to this....Whatever their own forms, these struggles should all be preparatory to the decisive struggle for winning power, and this decisive struggle can be brought to victory only by violent means.¹³

Lest the hortatory declamations of the Great Leader be lost on his readership, the admiring biographer takes the trouble to spell them out:

This thesis of Comrade Kim Il Sung's is inspired with a profound idea that the primary issue in the South Korean revolution is that the people must take power, that that power can be taken over only by violent means, and that various types of struggle must be made in preparation for this....The South Korean people cannot expect to win genuine freedom and liberation

and accomplish the unification of the fatherland, the supreme national task, except by sweeping away U.S. imperialism and its stooges and seizing power by revolutionary and violent means, as Comrade Kim Il Sung taught them.¹⁴

THE CURRENT DILEMMA

For a revolutionary socialist dictatorship with its economy in shambles facing an incompatible prosperous constitutional democracy, nuclear weapons are the *sine qua non* to its regime survival as well as the sole means to offsetting its status of permanent inferiority in conventional weapons vis-à-vis the South. The reason that Pyongyang insists on a non-aggression pact with Washington is to undermine the rationale for the continued U.S. military presence on the Korean peninsula, to lay the foundation for declaring itself as the world's ninth acknowledged nuclear power, and to foster an even more pro-North atmosphere in South Korea with the goal of eventual absorption through subversion and force.

In spite of the optimistic mood pervasive today among young South Koreans and in spite of passionate proponents of the so-called "sunshine" policy of engagement with the North who insist that five years of sedulously beaming sunshine up north have brought peace, North Korea remains the greatest threat to South Korean security and to regional peace. And no incentive or concession to talk Pyongyang out of its drive to become a nuclear power can work. The U.S. recognizes that there are no practical means to fully verifying the North's dismantling of its nuclear program. The history of North Korean deceit should amply indicate such; but more importantly, the vital function that nuclear armament plays in preserving the beleaguered Pyongyang regime means that nuclear diplomacy vis-à-vis the DPRK is a dead-end street.

International efforts at dialogue and diplomacy with the secretive regime over the past decade have all led to the same result. International efforts at engagement and the dismantling of programs of weapons of mass destruction have dissipated in the face of Pyongyang's consistent pattern of deceit. International efforts at the provision of food, energy, and medicine have disintegrated under the weight of the impenetrable wall that is the dictatorship of Kim Jong Il. Pyongyang has time and again flouted international conventions and the good will of the international community.

The United States needs to approach the North in a clear and coordinated voice of unity with its allies and neighbors in the North Pacific—South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia. However, the U.S. is standing alone on this critical international issue, as the four states in the region all fear the potential collapse of North Korea and insist on laying the heavy burden of negotiating with the DPRK solely on the shoulders of the U.S.

South Korea, the nation most affected by a nuclearized North, has proven

itself the most exasperating ally as it continues to view both the North and the U.S. through a prism of romantic ethnic nationalism—the former as a benign poor brethren that could not possibly inflict harm on its fellow Koreans and the latter as an arrogant, unilateralist, and imperial state bent on keeping the two Koreas divided. The new South Korean president, Roh Moo Hyun, who rode to victory last December on the crest of widespread anti-U.S. sentiment in South Korea, has so far sent discouraging signs in tackling the North Korean nuclear threat. In the three months after being elected, Roh, who took office on February 25, 2003, has only widened the chasm between Seoul and Washington with his numerous diplomatic faux pas and a general looseness of foreign policy formulation. On a visit to the Federation of Korean Trade Unions in Seoul on February 13, 2003, Roh remarked:

We must talk to North Korea in order to avoid war...the South Korean media are distorting reports in foreign newspapers of discrepancy between the U.S. and South Korean positions....So what if my position is different from that of the U.S.? Should it be the same and should I [likewise] call for war? In case of war on the Korean peninsula the South Korean president doesn't even have operational control of his own troops. What's different must be different, and we must adjust such differences as to avoid war....We must give more [to the North] even if it's indiscriminate giving, and we must invest there....If the U.S. bosses us around it will be tough, but Koreans must firmly stand together, for hardship is preferable to the death of all Koreans.¹⁵

Barely a week later, at a breakfast meeting organized by the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry on February 19, 2003, Roh told industry leaders:

I oppose even considering an armed attack on North Korea at this stage because that can provoke a war which would have serious consequences....We have never had a difference of opinion with the United States on an international level. But we have one now on how we plan to counter North Korea.¹⁶

It is one thing for a leader to disagree with an ally and even to criticize it, but to publicly implicate the U.S. as, at best, the cause of South Korea's economic downturn and, at worst, as the instigator of a genocidal war is unfortunate, to say the least.

How Roh Moo Hyun, as a statesman and not a politician, approaches this grave challenge remains to be seen, but initial signs are not particularly reassuring. It is undoubtedly the hope, the dream, and perhaps even the collective obsession of all Koreans to avoid another war on their land. But for the leader of the South Korean nation to explicitly say that he is against even considering using coercive force in the Herculean task of dissuading Pyongyang from pursuing nuclear arms is plainly not a constructive negotiating strategy. With such compelling reasons for

acquiring nuclear weapons in view of the deteriorating security calculus in the region and repeated reassurance from its adversary not to fear any military reprisal, the Pyongyang regime is unlikely to be deterred and will certainly go on playing the nuclear game. But more than anything, the nuclear option means the validation of the DPRK as a revolutionary state proud, independent, impenetrable, and without doubt able to deal with the South from a position of power.

LESSONS OF THE DEFUNCT "SUNSHINE" POLICY

What is most unnerving about Roh Moo Hyun's stance on the North Korean nuclear threat is his stated goal of continuing his predecessor's failed policy of pouring money into Pyongyang without reaping tangible benefits. While it is understandable that Roh remains obligated to the various forces that helped propel him

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to power, chiefly, ethnic nationalism and anti-U.S. sentiment, he has continuously emphasized that he will continue President Kim Dae Jung's sunshine policy. As North Korea draws the world's attention with its relentless pursuit of nuclear weapons, South Korea is now awash in a monumental scandal of secret payments of \$500 million to its northern brethren preceding the inter-Korean summit in June 2000. In fact, it has now been divulged that the secret transfers took place in the days leading up to President Kim Dae Jung's visit to Pyongyang on June

13, 2000, through an elaborate web involving Hyundai Merchant Marine, the South Korean National Intelligence Service, and banks in Hong Kong and Macao.

Allegations of the secret payments have been heard since last year, and the response of the Kim Dae Jung administration until early 2003, had been steadfast denial. On February 14, 2003, in the face of mounting evidence and the public's rejection of his dubious invocation of executive prerogative of nondisclosure in the name of peace and security on the Korean peninsula, President Kim admitted to the nation that he had authorized the secret transfers "for the sake of peace and the national interest" and made an appeal to South Koreans to "make a special political decision in the national interest" and put the issue to rest. The North Korean state media had startlingly echoed President Kim's pronouncement, asserting that any further investigation would disrupt the peace.

Inter-Korean and domestic politics aside, let alone the myriad moral dimensions of government payoff without any tangible returns, there are lessons here for the U.S. and the world, for this latest scandal is a glaring example of an

ill-conceived and reckless policy of appeasement gone terribly wrong. The Korean peninsula today is an anachronistic world of dictatorship and democracy, whereby a perennial garrison state with a food catastrophe shamelessly extorts and extracts from South Korea, a success story without parallel in national development over the past half century. The Korean peninsula today is an anomalous world of darkness and light, poverty and prosperity, tenuously woven together by a common thread of outdated ethnic nationalism that the leadership in the South has only been too eager to exploit at the expense of its indispensable alliance with the United States. The Korean peninsula today is a world in which national interest and popular passions are distorted and concealed under a shroud of political collusion, a tragic-comic setting in which a major trading nation of the world is held captive to an international pariah.

Of the states in the North Pacific today, only one still insists on turning its back on the time-tested path to national growth, gradual liberalization, and market capitalism. Only one nation today still clings to the shadows of its revolutionary past, a defunct ideology of self-reliance, and ethnic nationalism. Only one nation today depends on outside help for survival, while unfailingly exhausting the good will of its benefactors by declaiming its sovereign right to develop and proliferate weapons of mass destruction. In the meantime, its repressed citizens starve to death by the hundreds of thousands, and an entire generation of malnourished children plods on restlessly under the benevolent care of their great leader while mechanically chanting the tired old refrain of revolutionary communist utopianism.

Against this tragic backdrop precariously sits today's South Korea, continually dancing to the moribund rhythm of *minjok*, blood ties, and ethnic nationalism. With its affluence and open democracy, South Korea's sunshine policy was worth a try, but after five years of generosity, the returns are disturbingly low. The sunshine policy has been a reaffirmation to the world of South Korea's muddy business practices and of North Korea's undiminished knavishness, topped off by a clandestine uranium enrichment program and nuclear blackmail, continued menacing massive forward deployment along the border, and two naval provocations with its generous sunny suitor. It requires little imagination to suspect that the huge amount of secret cash has been directed into the impoverished nation's top priority—its nuclear program. After all, North Korea has long been suspected of diverting to its military cash sent from South Korea through open channels. The Congressional Research Service indicated on March 5, 2002, that "the U.S. military command and the Central Intelligence Agency reportedly believe that North Korea is using for military purposes the large cash payments, over \$400 million since 1998, that the Hyundai Corporation has to pay for the right to operate [the] tourist project."¹⁷

The United States has its own national interests and does not operate on the principle of altruism. Since 9/11, the overwhelming priority of the U.S. has been its national security, and it would be incumbent on any U.S. administration

to take whatever means necessary to prevent North Korea from proliferating nuclear technology to transnational terrorists. It is no secret that the 37,000 U.S. troops presently stationed in South Korea lie at risk to North Korean aggression. But there are no shackles forever holding them down to South Korea. They can be brought home or withdrawn to nearby Japan or Guam in full or in progressive installments, while the U.S. reinforces its naval and air power in the region. With changing times come changing needs. In view of South Korea's growing anti-U.S. rhetoric and its cavalier stance on the global issue of the North Korean nuclear threat, the U.S. will reduce its fifty-year-old commitment to the security of South Korea. The onus of keeping the U.S. troops on South Korean soil and preventing war falls on Seoul, not Washington. And it is all too plain that pandering to Pyongyang in a paroxysm of peace and political interests is only self-defeating. South Korea and its neighbors must collectively sweep away the shattered scraps of the sunshine policy and see the North Korean nuclear design for what it is: a grave threat to the region's peace, security, and prosperity.

CONCLUSION

Ever since South Korean President Park Chung Hee's unsuccessful attempt to engage North Korea in reconciliatory talks in the early 1970s, two illusions have clouded South Korea's image of the North. On July 4, 1972, after two months of secret negotiations, an unprecedented North-South Communiqué calling for autonomous and peaceful unification was announced. The startling "breakthrough" in North-South relations created much excitement and high expectations. In subsequent years, South Korean leaders have been moved by an apparent missionary impulse to go to Pyongyang and meet the North Korean leader and somehow "talk over their differences." With each new "breakthrough" in inter-Korean relations, the South Korean public would immediately shed their distrust of the North and willingly submit themselves to a collective euphoric trance of ethnic "Koreanness," hypnotizing themselves that blood ties matter more than national interest and that unification was at hand. Such was the case with the reconciliation and denuclearization accords in 1992 and the historic Pyongyang summit in June 2000.

The 1972 North-South Communiqué, quite unlike the more celebrated and noteworthy Shanghai Communiqué effected by Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai on February 27, 1972, failed to leave any significant imprint on the bilateral relations of the two Koreas. It was a breakthrough only in that for the first time since the Korean War, high-level delegates from the North and South held a series of talks. The talks, however, went nowhere, as North Korea went back to demanding the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea and effectively broke off the talks by June of the following year. As for the so-called "Basic Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, Exchanges and Cooperation" and "Joint

Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” of 1992, the current nuclear crisis has its genesis in that very period. The Pyongyang summit of 2000 has borne fruit, if indeed several rounds of chaperoned two-to-three day meetings between estranged family members can be considered the fruits of \$500 millions that has been funneled into the North Korean military. The fundamental threat of North Korea, to the South and to the region, remains unchanged.

What is imperative is a coordinated U.S.-ROK policy toward Pyongyang. Nobody wants war—not Americans, South Koreans, or North Koreans—and war indeed must be avoided. However, it does not help for the South to announce that the use of force as a coercive measure is not an option when the North in rhetoric and act threatens South Korea, Japan, and the U.S. Not that a verbal threat needs to be met with a comparable broadside, but any policy absent a credible threat of the use of force vis-à-vis a regime that is intent on developing nuclear capacity is only doomed to failure. Any lingering illusion that North Korea will be happy to receive more aid and can, with a gentle and generous fatherly admonition, be talked out of its nuclear ambition is fantasy. Any lingering illusion that a “special envoy” to Pyongyang or any other prominent visit or talks with Kim Jong Il can solve the myriad systemic problems of the North Korean state must be shed without further romantic attachment. Simply put, there is no benign panacea that can cure the fatal disease that is the dictatorship of Kim Jong Il, except for the unlikely disintegration of the regime.

And herein lies the cause of the impotence and differences among the major states confronting North Korea today. What both China and South Korea fear the most in the short term, short of war, is the collapse of North Korea and the attendant economic costs and floods of refugees. Both states assume that even if North Korea were to develop a sizeable nuclear arsenal, it will not recklessly use its nuclear weapons on its two benefactors, on whom it relies for food and fuel. Hence, they have shown an alarmingly blasé attitude toward the nuclear question, rejecting calls for a multilateral approach and infuriating the U.S. Furthermore, both states know that the U.S., for fear of nuclear proliferation and operating on the presumption that nuclear diplomacy will only lead to faulty agreements and false expectations, desires to induce a regime change in the North by economically squeezing the impoverished state. Therefore, vital interests of China and South Korea on the one hand, and the U.S. on the other, lie at considerable variance. That is, the bottom line for the two hitherto cavalier neighbors of North Korea is preventing a costly collapse, whereas the red line for the U.S. is North Korea trying to sell nuclear material to transnational terrorists.

There is an argument to be made for living with a nuclear North Korea by means of a precarious nuclear balance of power. The proven method of dealing with North Korea over the past five decades has been vigilant deterrence—not faith in a change of heart in Pyongyang toward more openness, not hope in an

imminent collapse of the seemingly moribund state, and, most decidedly, not “sunshine.” Nuclear deterrence of a nuclear DPRK, as a very last resort, is an option, albeit a most unpalatable one. Nuclear deterrence was effective during the Cold War and was responsible for the “long peace” of the second half of the twentieth century, as unstable a peace as it was. Although none of the states with an active interest in seeing North Korea’s growing nuclear program dismantled can

Persuading South Korea and China to cut off its North Korea life-support system should begin sooner than later.

openly admit to it, putting up with a nuclear rogue regime in Northeast Asia—even a cash-strapped one only too eager to sell its military technology—is still better than risking a catastrophic war on the Korean peninsula. Distasteful or not, this is a scenario that the U.S. needs to plan for by providing South Korea and Japan with its nuclear umbrella. As unlikely as it is that the

U.S. will risk a nuclear war with North Korea for the sake of its valued allies in Northeast Asia, it is still far more unlikely that North Korea will instigate a nuclear strike against the South if a credible nuclear deterrent is provided by the U.S. in the form of physical nuclear presence on South Korean soil.

Ironically, the point at which the motives, interests, and, quite likely, policies of China, South Korea, and the U.S. all converge is just that—a nuclear North Korea. Were it to be deterred effectively and any attempt to proliferate its nuclear technology successfully contained, the regional balance of power would probably be preserved. However, that is more a wish than policy. The cash-strapped North would almost certainly try to sell its weapons technology, and, even with constant U.S. pressure buttressed by an UN-sanctioned embargo, it will be impracticable to completely contain the North’s exports. Therefore, a nuclear North Korea trying to proliferate its nuclear technology would most certainly face greater U.S. sanctions, naval blockade, and, quite probably, a military strike, as well as a fundamental change in attitude by China and South Korea. The costs of military conflict and presence of war refugees on and around the Korean peninsula would clearly surpass the costs of collapse and economic refugees.

In short, it is the United States, not the DPRK or the ROK, or the PRC, that holds the cards in the long term. The U.S. can watch a nuclear North Korea grow more threatening and take action to prepare military action against North Korean nuclear sites. This would mean withdrawing all American personnel and ground troops from South Korea out of harm’s way—a clear signal, if ever there was one, that for the U.S. from this point on it is a matter of national survival. South Korea and China will then opt for the less disastrous choice of jumping on the U.S. bandwagon and suing for sanction and perhaps even the collapse of North Korea. Perhaps, a joint strategy among the U.S., South Korea, and China

at this point—indicating a readiness to squeeze North Korea—might induce an internal revolt or a fundamental change within the North Korean system. However, there is no guarantee that the men in Pyongyang will go quietly into the night without putting up a desperate last fight. Hence, such a strategy of persuading South Korea and China to cut off its North Korea life-support system should begin sooner than later. Troop withdrawal and redeployment from South Korea while reinforcing U.S. air and naval power in the region should be accelerated. Only then will South Korea—out of a sense of self-preservation—join the U.S. in putting more pressure on the intractable regime. The great challenge to the U.S. is how to achieve this without suffering undue loss of credibility. ■

NOTES

- 1 Nicholas Eberstadt and Richard J. Ellings, eds., *Korea's Future and the Great Powers* (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2001), 2.
- 2 It has been reliable fodder for anti-U.S. sentiment in South Korea, although such critics seldom voice the fact that had the U.S. not convinced Stalin to stop the advance of Soviet troops down the Korean peninsula at the 38th parallel, all of Korea would have lain under Soviet influence by the end of August 1945.
- 3 See Andrew S. Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine: Famine, Politics, and Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002).
- 4 Marshal Grigoriy Potemkin may or may not have built a sham village in the late eighteenth century to impress Catherine II, his erstwhile inamorata. But there is no doubt that Marshal Kim Il Sung and his son have successfully built a sham nation to impress the outside world, a less-than-splendid façade lacking central heating.
- 5 *Minjokui Taeyang Kim Il Sung Changgun* [The Sun of the Nation, General Kim Il Sung] (Pyongyang: Inmun Kwahaksa, 1968), 1.
- 6 See Kang Chol-Hwan and Pierre Rigoulot, Yair Reiner, tr., *Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) and "Life and Human Rights in North Korea," <<http://www.nkhumanrights.or.kr>> (accessed April 5, 2003).
- 7 Natsios, 227-233.
- 8 Kim Jong Il had been "elected" to the position in 1992. He was reelected in 1998 with a new Constitution which invested the National Defense Commission with the power of the overall military management of the state.
- 9 See Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Article 9, <http://nk.chosun.com/law/law.html?ACT=detail&mode=list&law_id=55&nsflag=N> (accessed April 8, 2003).
- 10 For a sample of such daily fare, see the official North Korean state-run news agency bulletin, available from <<http://www.kcna.co.jp>> (accessed April 10, 2003).
- 11 Mark Magnier, "North Korea Plays an Ode to the Son as Kim turns 61," *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 2003.
- 12 Baik Bong, *Kim Il Sung: Biography [III]: From Independent National Economy to 10-Point Political Programme* (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1970), 466.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 468.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Transcripts from speech by Roh Moo Hyun at the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, Seoul, February 13, 2003, as reported in *The Chosun Ilbo*, *The Donga Ilbo*, and *The Joongang Daily*, February 14, 2003.
- 16 Martin Nesirky and Arshad Mohammed, "North Korea and U.S. Trade Tough Talk on Nuclear Crisis," Reuters, February 19, 2003.
- 17 Bertil Lintner, "North Korea: Pyongyang's Banking Beachhead in Europe," *The Far Eastern Economic Review* (February 13, 2003).

