
The Mythical Nuclear Kingdom of North Korea

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INTRODUCTION

National mythological narratives—as illogical as they tend to be—are studied by historians for their potency, their power to ferment, grow, and endure, and, at times, even metamorphose into self-evident truths. In such myths we have celebrated the autonomy of our own national experience, as well as the superiority of our own cultural identity and values, all the while blithely justifying the idiosyncratic ways in which we have waged war, formed our views of outsiders, and controlled our own political system.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, the formal name for North Korea) in recent years has blossomed into a colorful international caricature of mythical proportions. It is today the world's last major hermit kingdom, armed with the world's fifth-largest military and, apparently, with nuclear weapons.¹ It is the world's last Stalinist state, and the only one that has held a successful dynastic succession. It is the world's only industrialized, urbanized garrison state not engaged in war, and yet faced with a prolonged food catastrophe. In spite of such contradictions, North Korea propagates the myth that its citizens live in a perfect socialist utopia, hints that its socialist revolution will continue under a third dynastic rule, and declaims that it is a self-sufficient nation under what is perhaps the most egregiously misplaced national slogan ever, *Juche* (self-reliance).

As a means of preserving the legitimacy of the regime against such anomalies, the North Korean state tirelessly churns out mythical stories of the wonders of its royal family. Much has been made of North Korea's many state-manufactured myths—from the founding myth of Kim Il Sung, who almost single-handedly defeated the Japanese colonial forces, to the creation myth of Kim Jong Il,

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whose birth atop a venerable mountain peak close to the heavens was celebrated with a double rainbow, a new-blazing star, and a flying swallow celebrating the great birth in unison.²

Outsiders viewing this most uncommon nation might be forgiven for being awed by its many contradictions and excesses of imagination. While North Korea generates many of its own myths, in recent years outsiders too, perhaps moved by a messianic impulse to change the DPRK, have added their own mythical embellishments to the fantastical kingdom of Kim Jong Il. These myths suit outsiders' image of what North Korea should be rather than describing the closed dictatorial state as it is. Far less attention has been given to understanding such equally unfounded—and immeasurably more believable—fictional molds that outsiders have cast over North Korea. The purpose of this paper is not to debunk the innumerable fantastical myths that North Korea has created for itself, but instead to address some of the myths that outside observers have imposed on North Korea, especially since October 2002—when the secret of North Korea's alleged highly enriched uranium (HEU) program came into the open following a U.S. delegation's visit to Pyongyang, the North Korean capital city.

IMAGES OF NORTH KOREA AND THEIR POLITICAL MANIFESTATIONS

Images of North Korea today range from a hermit nation of starving people run by a crazed sybaritic dictator with an uncanny taste in fashion to a more sympathetic portrayal in which a poor, paranoid, proud people are pressured by a pugnacious United States. Some like to believe, either based on "gut feeling" or an examination of past record, that the North Korean leadership simply cannot be trusted despite what it might say or any international agreements it might enter into. Others point to North Korea's troubled past, its present hardships at home, and encirclement from abroad, and argue that what is needed in order to effect gradual reforms in the country is more constructive engagement. A totalitarian state it may be, goes the argument, but the North Korean regime essentially means well, and is basically misunderstood by the outside world.

This latter view, that North Korea is in fundamental ways misunderstood by much of the outside world, is in fact quite correct. As much as North Korea casts a mythical spell on observers—with its unconventional dynastic succession and pervasive cult of personality, not to mention its people's bleak power of endurance in the face of mass starvation and acute malnutrition—the distorted lens through which North Korea's neighbors go on viewing it might say as much about those observers as about the chimerical kingdom itself. As familiarity may breed contempt, oddity breeds idiosyncratic sympathy rather than clarity.

Those who view North Korea predominantly in a pessimistic light, those who might fall under various labels such as "conservatives," "militarists," "the self-

righteous,” and even “fascists,” are repelled by what they see: a dictatorship perpetuated by dynastic succession that crushes its dissenters with large-scale gulags; a nation that behaves more like an international crime syndicate than a sovereign state.³ In the same breath, they might also mention North Korea’s hundred million dollar industries in missiles, narcotics, and counterfeit U.S. currency.

But to those with a more sanguine view, to whom their hardened detractors might give the label “appeasers,” “relativists,” “romantics,” or even “Communist-sympathizers,” North Korea today is more the sad product of a series of unfortunate circumstances that have befallen the Korean people throughout the twentieth century: brutal Japanese colonial rule, imperialist partitioning of the Korean land, violent socialist revolution, a devastating war and persisting threat from the United States, and misbegotten economic policies compounded by natural calamities in the mid-1990s.

More to the point, while the skeptics believe that coddling the Kim Jong-Il dictatorship will only beget further disaster (as well as transgress moral principles), those of a more Panglossian bent believe that North Korea today is quite capable of, and willing to, change. To the Manichean former, “regime change” looks to be the only solution,⁴ while, to the latter, the answer is to be found in less “hostile U.S. policy” and more “patient engagement.”⁵

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Of course, each is a cursory view. In between those who pine for some means to induce a collapse of North Korea and those who pray for peaceful coexistence and constructive diplomacy lies a web of competing national interests. The members of the presently stalled Six-Party Talks—North Korea, South Korea, the United States, China, Japan, and Russia—are all governed by their own national interests and burdened with different domestic preoccupations and restraints. To the detached observer it would seem that a North Korea armed with nuclear weapons would be a serious threat to regional peace. However, even on this seemingly straightforward matter, perceptions of the problem and its solution vary considerably among the United States, China, South Korea, and Russia.⁶

In any serious nuclear negotiation it would seem obvious that the issue of North Korea’s alleged highly enriched uranium program should be addressed, but even on this basic matter accounts among the participating nations differ widely. In fact, this gap among the participants is the chief stumbling block to the multinational negotiations today. North Korea denies the existence of a secret uranium-based nuclear weapons program, and claims that this charge was concocted by the U.S. delegation to Pyongyang in October 2002, led by Assistant Secretary

of State James Kelly. Some believe the North Korean denial, or find it a credible countercharge—all the more credible in light of the apparent unreliability of U.S. intelligence on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. South Korea and China, key components in this geopolitical equation, remain skeptical of the United States claim. They insist that even if the U.S. is right and North Korea does indeed have a uranium program, the threat is far less serious than that posed by its plutonium-based nuclear program, and therefore should not be the determinant of future talks. Some in the United States, now almost three and a half years removed from the shock of September 11, 2001, also share this view.⁷ But the unprecedented terrorist attacks on American soil have made homeland security the U.S. government's absolute priority, and for any U.S. administration, failing to address both North Korea's plutonium and uranium programs would be tantamount to dereliction of duty.

However, the tide is turning, at least with respect to the widespread skepticism about U.S. claims of North Korea's uranium-based program. North Korea's official announcement on February 10, 2005, that it is a nuclear state and that it will henceforth withdraw from the Six-Party Talks "for an indefinite period" was preceded by visits from key White House officials to Tokyo, Seoul, and Beijing the week before. The high-level visits were purportedly intended to brief the East Asian leaders about information indicating that the nuclear material—uranium hexafluoride—seized from Libya's nuclear stockpiles in early 2004, had originated from North Korea. According to tests by the U.S. Department of Energy, there was also strong evidence that North Korea had reprocessed 8,000 spent fuel rods into weapons-grade plutonium.⁸ With this intelligence, it is now no longer feasible for China and South Korea to object to addressing the issue of the alleged secret uranium-based program and to side with North Korea in future rounds of talks on this issue. Sensing the pressure coming from Beijing, North Korea has now gone back to its time-tested tactic of brinkmanship and laying the blame on the Bush administration: "We had already taken the resolute action of pulling out of the NPT [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty] and have manufactured nukes for self-defense to cope with the Bush administration's evermore undisguised policy to isolate and stifle the DPRK."⁹

Very early in this second round of the North Korean nuclear quagmire, as North Korea was expelling inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency and withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty,¹⁰ a "consensus" seemed to emerge among North Korea's regional neighbors; that is, if George W. Bush's United States were more flexible and less antagonistic, then Kim Jong Il's North Korea could be talked out of its nuclear ambitions and peace and prosperity in the region could go on uninterrupted.

Whether or not what I term "myths" will one day prove to have been broadly accurate assessments, only time will tell. But the current view which

holds sway among many in the region—that a change in “U.S. hostile policy” will somehow bring about a satisfactory resolution to the North Korean nuclear problem, and therefore, that the United States should indulge North Korea’s demands for money, food, fuel, and diplomatic relations—is, at best, misguided, and at worst, reckless. It is also an astounding victory for the North Korean propaganda machine, which apparently remains effective despite churning out chimerical tales about the glories of the semi-divine Kim Il-Sung and his son, and about the evils of loathsome American imperialists for the past 60 years.

Most importantly, it is fundamentally flawed and egregiously U.S.-centric to hold the position that a less hostile U.S. policy will lead to North Korea’s denuclearization. I will address this point in the last segment of this paper. Such a view discounts the long-term goals of the Kim Jong Il regime, the nature of nuclear weapons in general, and the strategic implications and uses of a credible nuclear arsenal to a dictatorship *nonpareil* on the verge of economic collapse.

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THE GREAT NORTH KOREAN MYTH: BLAME GEORGE W. BUSH AND HOSTILE U.S. POLICY

The notion that George W. Bush’s pursuit of a hostile policy vis-à-vis the DPRK somehow triggered and then exacerbated the ongoing nuclear saga is the ultimate creative North Korean myth, one that a large portion of the American public and even a larger share of the world have adopted as truth. The view that the Bush administration might have worsened the situation is debatable, but misdirected; the assertion that the Bush policy caused the nuclear crisis is simply untrue. North Korea was well on its secret nuclear path long before George W. Bush came into the White House.

The North Korean nuclear problem begins with the North Korean regime, not some new “hostile policy” by the United States over the past four years. That President Bush has been pursuing a less accommodating policy toward the DPRK than his immediate predecessor is true, but when compared to the far more bellicose policies of Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan, any punches that George W. Bush has thrown at North Korea thus far have all fallen flat.¹¹

Yet the North Korean government makes this point with unfailing regularity, and many unsuspecting listeners accept it. In its official announcement to

the world that it possesses nuclear weapons, North Korea pointedly laid the blame on the Bush administration: "The U.S. disclosed its attempt to topple the political system in the DPRK at any cost, threatening it with a nuclear stick. This compels us [sic] to take a measure to bolster its nuclear weapons arsenal in order to protect the ideology, system, freedom and democracy chosen by its people."¹²

On one level, this misperception speaks to the miserable failure of public international relations on the part of the United States; on another and far more important level, it gives momentum to North Korea's bargaining position. This myth has begotten several smaller myths, all of which are based on the following false premise: that the United States alone can wave a magic wand and make everything all right, if only it shows the will. Some notable offshoots of this overarching myth over the past two years are:

1. The United States, despite its ability to seek a resolution, chooses not to, and will not engage North Korea in good faith due to its unswerving hawkish ideology.¹³ In fact, Bush would rather invade or bomb North Korea as he has Iraq than seek peaceful coexistence with Kim Jong Il, whom he loathes.¹⁴
2. North Korea is a morally reprehensible regime, so President Bush will not seek direct talks, or lower himself to give the paranoid state what little it wants, be it "direct talks" or a "non-aggression pact" in writing.
3. Had Senator John Kerry been elected President in November 2004, an amicable solution might have been found, for a new American president could have been more accommodating, engaging, and less unilateralist in pursuing nuclear diplomacy.
4. And, most recently, if President Bush tones down his hostile rhetoric—for instance, in his State of the Union Address on February 2, 2005—then North Korea will return to the negotiating table in good faith.

Parts of the above may very well be valid; but each one by itself falls short of the truth. And taken as a whole, they create an unproductive, if not damaging, effect. These myths are all interrelated, and their collective weight speaks to the widely held view both within and outside the United States, that the culprit is the United States, and more specifically, George Bush. Myth No. 3, now with the reelection of President Bush, may no longer hover over the central issues, but it is no secret that both the North Korean and South Korean leaders wished for Senator Kerry to win, and this has implications for future U.S.-DPRK negotiations, as well as the future of U.S.-ROK (Republic of Korea, the formal name for South Korea) relations, which will be addressed later.¹⁵

Myth No. 1: "The United States might opt for war instead of diplomacy"

The view that the United States was gearing up to invade, or at least, to bomb North Korea, reached a frenzied height with the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. In the weeks preceding and following the invasion of Iraq, the U.S. government repeatedly stressed that it would seek a diplomatic resolution with North Korea.¹⁶ Yet perhaps because actions speak louder than words, the near-palpable show of U.S. military power ratcheted up hysterical prognostications of an impending war with North Korea.

At the time, much of the evidence given to support this prediction was—as has consistently remained to this day—President Bush's State of the Union Address from a year earlier. In his speech on January 29, 2002, President Bush infamously labeled North Korea, along with Iran and Iraq, "axis-of-evil" states. "North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens," said President Bush. And describing Iran and Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and the export of terror, Bush delivered the famous line: "States like these, and their allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world."¹⁷

If not for the unfortunate choice of the provocative metaphor, the above statement would not have received such public scrutiny and ridicule. In fact, it is quite an interesting feat that the phrase has attained such notoriety. That the North Korean state, anti-U.S. South Koreans, and American critics of Bush in unison lay so much importance on a mere figure of speech says more about their ideological predilections than the problem at hand. It is a rare case in which the seemingly disparate forces of North Korean propaganda, South Korean ethnic nationalism, and American partisan solipsism all converge, creating a hazy misperception. It is completely unwarranted.

President Bush may very well be convinced that the Kim Jong Il regime is "evil," but that says very little about the long-term strategic value of a credible nuclear arsenal to Kim. Yet, the "axis-of-evil" rhetoric is mentioned with dizzying frequency in discussions of the North Korean nuclear issue in the United States—in the print media, in politics, in academic seminars—thereby unwittingly affirming what the North Korean leadership, which needs an enemy to justify its oppressive rule, tells its own people and the world. In fact, it is interesting to compare President Bush's "axis-of-evil" rhetoric with statements made by his predecessor, President William Clinton, on a tour of the Demilitarized Zone between North Korea and South Korea during his visit to the South in July 1993, at a time of the first North Korean nuclear crisis: "It would be pointless for them [North Koreans] to try to develop nuclear weapons because if they ever used them, it would be the end of their country."¹⁸

North Korea in 1993 never said anything about "using" nuclear weapons

on anyone, or even admitted to developing them. Yet, President Clinton not only verbally threatened to annihilate North Korea in a hypothetical case of North Korean nuclear attack, but actually drew up extensive plans to bomb North Korea during the first round of the North Korean nuclear quagmire between 1993 and 1994. Had it ever come out into the open that George W. Bush had prepared for the bombing of Kim Jong Il's magical kingdom, or had considered using nuclear weapons against North Korea, as had Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, all the criticism of the Bush administration's bellicosity would have been more warranted.

Moreover, President Clinton's "hostile" rhetoric and policy during the 1993 to 1994 crisis did not stop North Korea from asking for food, fuel, and the normalization of relations. Neither did President Clinton's diplomatic approach lead to North Korea keeping to its own end of the bargain. North Korea was cheating and pressing forward with a separate nuclear program before the ink was dry on the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Geneva Accord. And the most plausible reason for this kind of blatant violation of international agreement is not that North Korea is "devious" or "evil," but that the acquisition of a sizable nuclear arsenal is the indispensable long-term survival strategy for an isolated dictatorship faced with myriad economic problems and the possibility of absorption by the incomparably freer, richer, and more legitimate Korean government in Seoul.

During the Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon years while the United States was at war in Vietnam, tensions between the DPRK and the United States reached new heights. In January 1968, the North Korean navy seized an American vessel, the USS Pueblo, killing one U.S. serviceman, and kept its crew of more than 80 men in captivity for almost a year. In April 1969, North Korea shot down a U.S. spy plane killing all 31 servicemen on board. And in August 1976, North Korean soldiers beat to death with axes two U.S. soldiers patrolling the North-South border. The point is that U.S.-DPRK relations have never been rosy, and the current tension is not some anomaly that suddenly befell the bilateral relationship since George W. Bush became president. As far as boisterous rhetoric goes, "axis of evil," as illogical and misplaced as it may be, doesn't even remotely resemble the degree of aggressiveness in those famous alliterative lines delivered by President John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address of 1961: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and success of liberty." The intended target is not mentioned by name, but it is no secret against whom the message was aimed.

On the surface, it does seem to make sense that U.S.-DPRK relations had been on the upswing during the Clinton administration and have somehow spiraled down into the current mess with the advent of the Bush administration. But the real questions should be whether the security calculus on the Korean peninsula

and the threat of the North Korean military had in fact kept pace with the sudden thaw in the atmosphere in 2000. Beneath the pomp and ceremony of the inter-Korean summit in June 2000, followed by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's visit to Pyongyang in October, had the North Korean threat really diminished? Or had hopes for peace and reconciliation outpaced the changes on the ground?

Admittedly, when a U.S. president speaks in such a high-profile forum as the State of the Union Address, the world, especially the country's enemies, tend to lend their ears. When a wartime U.S. president—little over four months removed from a most traumatic attack on U.S. soil and in the middle of carrying out a war in Afghanistan and a global “war on terror”—speaks, the effect of his rhetorical condemnation can be startling. But the fundamental question of North Korea's decades-old clandestine pursuit of nuclear weapons is a matter entirely apart from strong language coming out the White House, be it occupied by a “hawkish Republican” or an “internationalist Democrat” (even as misguided a premise as this is, in light of America's involvement in the major wars over the last century—the world wars, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War).

Whether the hostile warning to these three states will have done more damage than good to the United States over the long-term is certainly debatable—and perhaps a subject for future study—but it certainly bore the unintended effect of portraying the Pyongyang regime in a more pitiable light, and it reinforced much of the world's negative image of the United States as an unattractive country led by an unsophisticated, arrogant, gun-slinging cowboy of a president. In South Korea, by the year's end, Roh Moo Hyun had been elected president largely by riding on the crest of powerful widespread anti-U.S. sentiment. And, astonishingly, a year later, by January 2004, more South Koreans had come to view the United States as the greatest security threat to their nation than those who viewed North Korea as such.¹⁹

Myth No. 2: “Direct talks and a non-aggression pact with North Korea are the solution”

By the time of this writing in early April 2005, the fear of a war breaking out on the Korean peninsula due to U.S. brinkmanship and bellicosity has largely dissipated. If ever there had been serious planning for the invasion of North Korea, the would-be Cassandras of war now sigh in relief, the optimal time for it would have been the spring of 2003, closely preceding, coinciding, or following the invasion of Iraq, while war fever ran wild. The consensus these days seems to be that the storm of the prospect of a war with North Korea fortunately has passed, as the second Bush administration, still bogged down in Iraq, will not have the stomach for a new war against the much greater foe that is the North Korean military.

Indeed, the United States does not have the will to start a war with the formidable North Korean military, short of an intolerable provocation by North Korea such as an attack on U.S. territory or its allies. For even the most hawkish of the hawks in Washington, short of an incontrovertibly "just war" of retaliation, a war that would entail thousands of American servicemen returning home in body bags and millions of South Korean casualties, is simply not a viable option. This stunningly simple fact, North Korea knows—and deftly uses it to its advantage by insisting on a "peace treaty" or a "non-aggression pact"—is a historical canard if ever there was one. Peace treaties come at the end of a war, and although North Korea is still "technically at war" with both the United States and South Korea since signing an armistice in 1953, de facto "peace" has been maintained over the past half century. And non-aggression pacts between hostile states have virtually no meaning.

Critics of the United States point to the inconsistency, or the supposed "hypocrisy" of its policy: against Iraq, a nation only suspected of pursuing a program of weapons of mass destruction, the United States used overwhelming force. By contrast, in the case of North Korea, a nation openly flaunting its "nuclear deterrent," the United States has remained mum.

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North Korea does its best to exploit this inconsistency. Its cause is far less Bush's "obsession" with Saddam Hussein's Iraq than something that the U.S. government cannot admit publicly: the invasion of Iraq was carried out because the prospects for U.S. victory were high, whereas a war with North Korea would be too high a risk.

Knowing this only too well, North Korea continues to demand something that violates U.S. government protocol: that the United States provides a written pledge not to attack it under any circumstance. As a result, the U.S. president is reduced to making defiantly defensive statements like "All options are on the table."²⁰

Moreover, in any hostile international negotiations, negotiating from a position of strength through a combination of incentives and punishments is a basic and indispensable tactic. Therefore, no American president can categorically disavow the use of force against any enemy, thereby willingly surrendering his leverage. For any American president, to do so would be negligence of duty; yet, to the guileless observer unfavorably disposed toward George W. Bush, the rejection of North Korea's "peaceful" demand seems needlessly petulant.

In the first round of the Six-Party Talks in Beijing in August 2003, North

Korea came out swinging in a bellowing mix of bluster, bluff, and broadside, just as it did in Beijing in April 2003 and as it has consistently done over the past three decades. It demanded of Washington a non-aggression pact as well as oil, food, and money. North Korea's chief strategy in facing off against the five nations has been to make the most of the prevalent misperception that the United States alone can somehow resolve this nuclear impasse, if only the world's sole superpower would be more flexible and provide the security guarantee that this poor hungry nation craves and deserves.

The North's insistence on a non-aggression pact with the United States is designed to appeal to those who fear the possibility of a war breaking out on the Korean peninsula. The costs of war against the heavily armed North would devastate South Korea, shake the stability of Northeast Asia, and politically cripple any U.S. administration. On the other hand, a non-aggression pact would seem to offer a simple solution to a complex problem; it would seem to rein in the unruly war-prone impulses of the Bush administration, save innumerable lives, and allay the paranoid North's fear of meeting the same fate that has befallen Iraq. It might even, so the thinking goes, convince Kim Jong Il that his moribund regime can do away with nuclear weapons, now absent the threat from the United States.

In reality, a non-aggression pact would lay the ground for the rise of vociferous calls within both North and South Korea for the withdrawal of U.S. troops. The U.S. military in South Korea is widely viewed as a symbol of American arrogance and bellicosity. Ignorant that non-aggression pacts are little more than paper agreements and quite often a means of subterfuge, young South Koreans today tend to view the North through a romantic prism of ethnic nationalism. They blame the United States more than their Northern brethren for the current nuclear tension. On a pragmatic level, however, the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea is, more than any defense pact on paper or stirring speeches, the surest guarantee that the United States will protect South Korea from any North Korean adventurism. To think that a non-aggression pact would alleviate tensions so deep within both North Korea and the United States, or that North Korea would feel "secure" by signing a paper agreement and surrender its nuclear program is misguided to the point of absurdity. Hitler and Stalin signed a non-aggression pact in 1939, and we all know how much good that did.

The best bet for the impoverished, resource-poor, dictatorial Kim Jong Il regime for prevailing over the far richer South is to launch a blitzkrieg invasion in the absence of U.S. forces and to unify the "fatherland" on its terms. No South Korean government would be able to absorb the death toll from such an invasion or fight a war of attrition. This strategy of suing for a peace or non-aggression treaty with the United States, then creating pressure for the withdrawal of U.S. troops, and eventually unifying the Korean peninsula by force has been a constant in North Korean national strategy; it is almost as old as the North Korean state

itself. And one can only assume that it has taken on a greater sense of urgency in recent years, now that North Korea faces famine and an increasingly demanding international environment.

North Korea makes demands on the United States for “direct talks” and a “non-aggression pact” in order to create the illusion that it is pursuing peace and diplomacy while a hostile America goes on spurning its well-intended overtures. Although fundamental doubts linger among the five nations vis-à-vis their treatment of the DPRK—including wrangling over the seemingly simple goal of dismantling the North’s the plutonium and uranium programs—the United States cannot afford to abandon the multilateral framework it has so assiduously created. In any exclusive bilateral setting, North Korea will make false accusations, unreasonable demands, and create the impression that the inflexible position of the United States is the chief obstacle to reaching a negotiated settlement. The United States cannot resolve the North Korean nuclear problem on its own, and needs to keep China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia involved in the process.

For South Korea, whereas it was excluded by North Korea in negotiations in the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the early 1990s, an unprecedented opportunity to play a proactive role in future rounds of talks awaits. South Korea must realize that in the face of noisy threats and willful deceit, the use of apathy, stoicism, and quiet strangulation is far more effective than appeasement and accommodation. It is no small irony that the impoverished North, in its demonstrated capacity to threaten the peace in the region, has emerged as a prime shaper of international politics. Lacking any other leverage, North Korea will escalate the crisis and create other smokescreens, all the while laying the blame on the United States. The response of the five other nations should be to send a stern message that such tactics will no longer be tolerated. It is in this united voice that the future peace of the region lies.

Myth No. 3: “Engagement will induce change”

Perhaps the most pervasive myth in the North Korean nuclear problem is that engagement will work, if only the United States would give it a serious try. Misled by notions that the chief barrier to reaching a settlement is President Bush’s hatred of Kim Jong Il, or of Kim’s brutal Communist system, South Koreans as well as Americans have forwarded various fanciful notions, prodding the peevish president with mistaken analogies. Of all the historical analogies forwarded by way of success stories in “opening” a new bilateral relationship, the least irrelevant seems to me the so-called “Nixon in China model.” According to this model, once the United States overcomes the ideological barrier to negotiating in good faith with a totalitarian state, great mutual benefits will accrue.

South Korea was the first to suggest this idea to the Bush administration when South Korean Foreign Minister Yoon Young Kwan spoke to Secretary of

State Colin Powell of the need for "Nixon-style diplomacy" in March of 2003.²¹ In May the same year, on the occasion of South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun's visit to Washington, the idea resurfaced. Secretary Powell's diplomatic response was to give the South Korean proposal "due consideration," after which it fizzled. After nearly two years of hiatus, the idea was picked up again recently by a noted biographer of Kim Il Sung.²²

The question of how to overcome ideological differences and deal with even the most hardened dictators is an age-old challenge. The presumption that a "breakthrough" with Pyongyang is possible assumes that if President Richard Nixon, a hard-nosed anti-Communist if ever there was one, was able reach out to the powerful Chinese Communist leadership at the height of the Cold War in 1972, wouldn't it be so much easier to reach out to a far less imposing dictator in the twenty-first century? At a first glance it might look like an exciting idea, but the model begins to fall apart almost immediately after recognizing this hard fact: Nixon did not go to China to persuade Mao Zedong to dismantle his nuclear arsenal in return for aid.

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The analogy is misguided on several levels. Does anyone seriously think that Nixon or any American could have come up with a package of incentives attractive enough for China to completely, verifiably, and irreversibly dismantle its nuclear program? Were President Bush to overcome his ideological rigidity as "did" Nixon, would he be able to convince Kim Jong Il to give up his nuclear weapons program? In the case of Nixon in China, pragmatic interests, rather than suppression of ideological predilection, dictated the actions of both nations.

Mao Zedong was receptive to Nixon's overture in the early 1970s because behind the Sino-U.S. rapprochement lay a prize for both nations that eclipsed continued hostility. Both China and the United States shared a compelling national interest; the overriding goal of containing the increasing threat from the Soviet Union. Today, the confrontation between the DPRK and the United States is entirely of a different nature; absent any real alternate leverage, be it economic or political power, North Korea needs to hold on to its nuclear program to ensure long-term survival. Moreover, China's economic reforms and Vietnam's economic openings did not coincide with the surrender of any nuclear weapons. North Korea's current dilemma is very different from those faced by the Chinese or the Vietnamese Communist Parties.

Admittedly, parallels between China's interests in the early 1970s and the motives for the DPRK today exist. By forging an unprecedented relationship

with the United States, China knew it could use the United States as a counterweight to the Soviet build-up of forces along its border, while ridding itself of the U.S. troops from its southern doorstep in Indochina. Likewise, North Korea today, by forging closer ties with America can create pressure for U.S. troop withdrawal from South Korea. In such an event, North Korea's position vis-à-vis Japan and China would also rise considerably.

In 1972, being embraced by the United States meant that China could enhance its own stature in the eyes of the world, and also win new access to other nations and international organizations, which is presumably also an important goal for the DPRK today. In 1972, China thought that it might even be able to wrest Taiwan away from America's influence. Most importantly, Chinese leaders believed that an entirely new relationship with the United States could upset the growing Soviet-U.S. détente and the joint condominium premised on the containment of China. In the Shanghai Communiqué issued on February 27, 1972, the United States and China declared that they would oppose anyone trying to "establish hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region."

The benefits for the United States in the early 1970s were equally important and numerous. Even on the U.S. domestic front President Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger could take comfort in that they had "won" China even as they were "losing" Indochina. The United States could call the tunes of a romantic triangle with both the PRC and the USSR, manipulating the hostile relationship between the erstwhile socialist friends. Ever the shrewd pragmatist, Nixon believed that falling short of ending America's war in Vietnam would prevent his election to a second term. Opening China became a necessary bold move, a grand theater in which he would show the world that Communism in China could be tamed even as the United States was abandoning South Vietnam. George W. Bush is not encumbered by such considerations today. Neither does "winning" North Korea have the kind of far-reaching implications for the United States today that "winning" China did in 1972.

Most importantly, China—due to its geographical location, its population size and potential as a major world power—has always been far more important to the United States than North Korea. In fact, North Korea is important to the United States today precisely because it has nuclear weapons. Bereft of the one leverage vis-à-vis the outside world, Kim Jong Il would preside over a closed, backward country that produces not a drop of oil and in which some 22 million poor, malnourished people live under extreme oppression. Kim's influence in world affairs would mirror that reality, instead of looming at such variance with it as it now does. And the very survival of his nation would depend on either Kim's abdication or sustained aid by the international community.

*Myth No. 4: "If courted with greater civility,
the DPRK will dismantle its nuclear program"*

The last point is, perhaps, more accurately, a "myth-in-the-making" and it is possible that it will be proved not to have been a myth at all. The 2005 State of the Union Address has now come and gone, and in his speech Bush exercised restraint and chose not to use any inflammatory rhetoric against North Korea. Compared to what he had to say about Iran, the other of the two remaining "axis-of-evil" charter states, Bush's comments on North Korea were measured to the point of insipid: "We are working closely with governments in Asia to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions." On Iran, by contrast, his tone was entirely different and to the Iranian people the message was shockingly provocative: the United States will back a popular overthrow of the Iranian government:

Today, Iran remains the world's primary state sponsor of terror—pursuing nuclear weapons while depriving its people of the freedom they seek and deserve. We are working with European allies to make clear to the Iranian regime that it must give up its uranium enrichment program and any plutonium re-processing, and end its support for terror. And to the Iranian people, I say tonight: As you stand for your own liberty, America stands with you.²³

Had Bush given the same warning to North Korea and incited the North Korean people to "stand for your own liberty," the reaction from Northeast Asia would have been quite predictable. North Korea would have decried the hostile message and the blatant infringement upon its national sovereignty, and the prospects for jumpstarting the Six-Party Talks would have fallen dim. Instead, Bush's more conciliatory tone deprived North Korea of at least one ostensible excuse for further refusing to return to the talks. Since pulling out of the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks scheduled for September 2004, North Korea has given a series of reasons for stalling: first, it said that it would wait for the outcome of the U.S. presidential election in November; second, it would wait until the formation of Bush's second-term North Korea policy team; third, that it would wait until the State of the Union Address to ascertain whether the United States would negotiate in good faith. And most recently, it is demanding as a condition for returning to the Six-Party Talks that the United States "apologize" for Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's characterization of North Korea as an "outpost of tyranny."

In the aftermath of North Korea's abrupt statement on February 10, 2005 that it is indefinitely withdrawing from the Six-Party Talks, and in view of the four rounds of multilateral talks with the United States that North Korea has attended since April 2003 in spite of all its protestations about "axis of evil," the world has now seen that the message coming out of Washington—be it denunciatory or restrained—in the end has very little effect on North Korea's negotiating tactics.

North Korea always looks to create new tensions and demands corresponding concessions in return for belatedly taking action on something that it has already agreed to. The notion that North Korea simply “reacts” to U.S. rhetoric or stated policy presumes that Kim Jong Il has no real long-term designs independent of the United States. It is a grossly simplistic and ethnocentric view. It also presumes that the pursuit of a nuclear weapons program is something that an otherwise mori-

bund dictatorial state with no independent means of long-term survival can initiate or terminate virtually on a whim.

“The notion that North Korea simply “reacts” to U.S. rhetoric or stated policy presumes that Kim Jong Il has no real long-term designs independent of the United States. It is a grossly simplistic and ethnocentric view”

Whether North Korea will actually negotiate in good faith still very much remains the central question. If past behavior is an indication of future behavior, North Korea’s many instances of abrupt cancellation and abandonment of international meetings, blatant violation of international agreements, and its willful deceit of the contending party does not raise much hope.²⁴ But faced with the gloomy prospect of having to deal with the Bush White House for another four years, and the real-

ity of having to rely on Chinese good will for food and fuel, North Korea will grudgingly make a return to the Six-Party Talks in Beijing, preceded by another Chinese instance of “pipeline malfunction” or something similar to it.²⁵ Whether or not the discussions will conform to pat patterns of soliloquizing and recriminations is an entirely different matter.

CONCLUSION: “SOUTH KOREA IS THE GREATEST LONG-TERM CHALLENGE TO KIM JONG IL”

In all this, South Korea gets no respect. Rarely do the nations involved in the North Korean nuclear saga ever give serious thought to South Korea’s role in complicating, and perhaps even resolving, the stalemate. Much of this South Korea has brought on itself, as the leftist government of President Roh Moo Hyun at times seems hopelessly bent on placating Kim Jong Il. At times the South Korean president even sounds like an official spokesperson for the Kim regime, undermining the whole process of the Six-Party Talks and its stated goal: that the five nations gathered to persuade the North Korean regime will “not tolerate” a nuclear North Korea.²⁶

But despite its rapidly changing ideological orientation toward the North, its periodically virulent anti-U.S. sentiment, and its government’s servile diplomacy

toward the Kim regime, South Korea today is a rich nation; it is a model of success in development and democracy over the past half century. Even if the South Korean government intends the North no harm, by its very nature South Korea poses a near unsolvable threat to the long-term survival of the Kim regime.

From Kim Jong Il's perspective, the future is increasingly bleak as he ponders eventually handing down his rule to one of his three sons, and the near-certain prospects of a tarnished legacy looms ahead. North Korea's economy is in near collapse, having no real internationally competitive industry outside of weapons, foodstuff, minerals, drugs, and counterfeit U.S. currency. How will Kim Jong Il compete over the long-term with the immeasurably richer South, consumed as he is by an ever-increasing need to preserve his own power, and as reliant as he is today on outside aid even in the midst of exporting fear? Without the one panacea that can overturn all conventional indices of state power, without the one lever that can sustain his means of survival—extorting concessions by exporting instability—Kim Jong Il's North Korea is doomed to a permanent status of inferiority vis-à-vis the South.

This would be far less a significant problem were South Korea a neighboring state in the conventional sense of the phrase. The peculiar conditions on the Korean peninsula do not allow for a mutually peaceful long-term coexistence between the two regimes on each side of the thirty-eighth parallel. The dynamics of politics on the divided Korean peninsula are ultimately a lasting contest for pan-Korean legitimacy. And in this omnipresent contest, Kim Jong Il's North Korea is doomed to be swallowed up by the government in Seoul, no matter how "sunny" or benign the South's façade might be. Nuclear weapons alone can thwart such a scenario of absorption by the South. Therefore, short of a collapse of the Kim regime, denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is but a pipe dream. This last point is one all the parties to the talks suspect and fear, yet they cannot bring themselves to admit it in public or address it accordingly.

"...in this omnipresent contest, Kim Jong Il's North Korea is doomed to be swallowed up by the government in Seoul, no matter how "sunny" or benign the South's façade might be"

Short of an economic disaster in the form of a war or a wave of refugees fleeing North Korea, the "Dear Leader" will be able to survive by continuing to export fear and by playing on the *possibility* of dismantling his nuclear program. A nuclear DPRK alone can guarantee Kim Jong Il's future, not some half-hearted attempts at economic reforms, not some paper agreement with the United States, and most certainly not some quid pro quo exchange of nuclear weapons for money, fuel, food, and a "security guarantee." Such amenities are nice, but they

all have expiration dates, whereas nuclear blackmail can outlive every goodwill gesture. After the initial returns on surrendering his nuclear stockpile dry up, where will Kim then turn? Will it turn to the unending benevolent care of the United States, South Korea, Japan, and China? That would be even a greater myth in the making. ■

NOTES

- 1 On February 10, 2005, the Foreign Ministry of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea for the first time issued a statement through the Korean Central News Agency, the nation's official central news organ, that it had manufactured and possessed nuclear weapons. Korean Central News Agency, February 10, 2005, <<http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm>> (accessed February 11, 2005).
- 2 Kim Jong Il was born on February 16, 1942, in a military camp at Vyatskoye, an isolated hamlet along the Amur River, some 44 miles north of Khabarovsk, Russia. See Jerold Post's profile of Kim Jong Il in Jerold Post, "North Korea: The Movie," the *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2003. <<http://www.nautilus.org/DPRKBriefingBook/negotiating/Post.html>> (accessed February 6, 2005). Mr. Post is former political personality profiler and psychiatrist for the CIA. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1907197.stm>> (accessed February 6, 2005). The Korean Central News Agency, one of the pillars of the state propaganda machinery, on any given day offers several insights into the mythical nature of the regime. Its top news on February 4, 2005 reports on the "proposal to erect a monument to the three generals of Mt. Paektu in the area of the secret camp in Mt. Paektu to praise the undying feats performed by President Kim Il Sung, anti-Japanese war hero Kim Jong Suk and leader Kim Jong Il in the struggle against foreign aggressors and in the nation." The top billing from the day before reads thus: "Immortal Kimjongilia is now appreciated by people at home and abroad as a 'flower of the sun revered by all people', 'valuable flower representing the times', 'the best flower in the world', 'king of flowers.'" Both articles available at <<http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm>> (accessed February 6, 2005). *Kimjongilia* is a new begonia created by the state florists in the late-1980s. There is, predictably, also a special orchid named *Kimilsungia* from the mid-1960s.
- 3 See the first-hand account of a North Korean survivor in one of these "detention centers" (Kwanliso in Korean, or "control center"), Kang Chol-Hwan & Pierre Rigoulot, Yair Reiner, tr., *Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag* (New York: Basic Books, 2001). North Korea denies the existence of these political penal-labor colonies; but from the accounts of hundreds of North Korean escapees and satellite photographs we know that several exist, some sprawling across 30 to 40 square miles. See David Hawk, *The Hidden Gulag: Exposing North Korea's Prison Camps* (Washington, D.C.: US Committee on Human Rights in North Korea, 2003).
- 4 This term, with its unattractive connotation of "change through force and submission," has now, as applied to North Korea, been replaced in Washington with "regime transformation" or "transformation of regime behavior," which together imply a more benign approach of seeking change through moral suasion and material guidance. Although the tenor of this new term echoes the idea behind the so-called "sunshine policy" practiced by former South Korean President Kim Dae Jung, for now, the North Koreans as well as the political establishment in South Korea are not buying it.
- 5 See Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 176. Infusing a stunning dose of cultural-political-spatial relativity into President George W. Bush's remark, "Kim Jong Il's got a gulag the size of Houston!", Professor Cumings makes the following observation: "Meanwhile we have a longstanding, never-ending gulag full of black men in our prisons, incarcerating upward of 25 percent of all black youths. This doesn't excuse North Korea's police state, but perhaps it suggests that Americans should do something about the pathologies of our inner cities—say, in Houston—before pointing the finger."
- 6 North Korea's regional neighbors, except for Japan, all take a much more sanguine view of the threat that a nuclear North Korea poses than does the United States, although each nation officially take the position that it will not tolerate a nuclear North Korea.
- 7 See Nicholas Kristof, "Bush Bites His Tongue," *The New York Times*, February 9, 2005.
- 8 See Glenn Kessler, "North Korea May Have Sent Libya Nuclear Material," the *Washington Post*, February 2, 2005, A1. Also see Sonni Efron and Bruce Wallace, "North Korea Escalates Its Nuclear Threat," the *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 2005, <http://www.truthout.org/docs_2005/0211051.shtml> (accessed March 2, 2005).
- 9 Korean Central News Agency, February 11, 2005.
- 10 North Korea declared on December 27, 2002 that it would expel the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and did by the year's end. On January 10, 2003, North Korea declared that it would withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and that its withdrawal would be immediately effective.

- 11 As *The New York Times* reports, upon South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun's bequest in a meeting in Chile in November 2004, President Bush has even agreed not to mention Kim Jong Il negatively in public. David Sanger, "US Is Shaping Plan to Pressure North Koreans," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2005, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/14/politics/14korea.html?>> (accessed February 14, 2005).
- 12 Korean Central News Agency, February 11, 2005. That the United States is the cause of the nuclear standoff is the official stance of the North Korean government in speech and writing. At a forum at Harvard University on April 10, 2003, I listened to the North Korean Deputy Chief of Mission to the United Nations, Ambassador Han Song Ryol, repeatedly calling on the United States to "stop its nuclear threat and hostile policy." On February 11, 2005, one day after North Korea's official declaration of itself as a nuclear power, Ambassador Han told a South Korean newspaper, *The Hankyoreh*, "If the US wants to have direct dialogue with us, we can accept that as a change in its hostile policy toward North Korea." Moreover, the very first item on the agenda in North Korea's proposal to the US for resolving the nuclear issue is "US Hostile Policy vis-à-vis the DPRK." See DPRK Ambassador Li Gun, Sung-Yoon Lee, tr., "Requisites for Resolving the Nuclear Question," December 16, 2003, <<http://www.cnponline.org/Issue%20Briefs/North%20Korea/North%20Korea%20Paper.PDF>> (accessed February 6, 2005).
- 13 The day after the world awakened to North Korea's announcement that it possesses nuclear weapons, on February 11, 2005, major American newspapers rushed to lay the blame on Bush. "Only Bush's ideological rigidity could prevent him from making an offer that tests North Korea's willingness to leave the nuclear weapons business," intoned the editorial of the *Boston Globe*. The editorial of *The New York Times* is equally critical of the Bush administration, pointing to its "litany of diplomatic errors," etc.: "The Bush administration did not create this problem, but, with a series of avoidable errors, it has made it much worse, much faster than might otherwise have been the case."
- 14 The second part of this actually might be true, could Bush get away with it. However, it is not a serious option at this stage as it would, in all likelihood, lead to a catastrophic war on the Korean peninsula that would claim tens of thousands of American lives. Bush's personal views on Kim have become public through un-presidential name-calling ("pygmy") and statements like "I loathe Kim Jong Il" and "axis of evil." At the same time, North Korea's name-calling of Bush over the past four years has been far more colorful: "human trash" and "political idiot," to "the world's worst violator of human rights" and devoid of "even an iota of elementary reason, morality and ability to judge as a human being." See, among others, Tim Johnson, "North Korea Calls Bush 'Trash,' Spurns Future Talks on Weapons," *Knight Ridder Newspapers*, August 24, 2004. South Korean monitors of North Korean propaganda say that of all the U.S. presidents North Korea has lived with, George W. Bush has received the most number of North Korean invectives and name-calling.
- 15 South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun's congratulatory telephone call to President Bush on November 4, 2004, was preceded by an emergency meeting of South Korea's National Security Council convened by President Roh.
- 16 See the long list of transcripts by various U.S. officials to this effect in the US Department of State "US Policy Toward North Korea Archive." Available at: www.us.info.state.gov (accessed February 6, 2005).
- 17 Transcript of the full speech available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>> (accessed February 6, 2005).
- 18 See Yoel Sano, "Seoul, Tokyo and the Forbidden Nuclear Card," *Asia Times Online*, October 7, 2004, <<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Japan/FJ07Dh02.html>> (accessed April 8, 2005).
- 19 In a survey of 800 South Korean adults conducted on January 5, 2004 by Research & Research, a South Korean polling board, 39 percent of those surveyed, in responding to the question, "Which country poses the greatest security threat to South Korea?" identified the U.S. 33 percent chose North Korea. The perception gap along the generational lines is even more telling, with about three times more people identifying the U.S. as the greatest threat than those who do North Korea (58 percent to 20 percent). The pattern extends into South Koreans in their thirties, with 47 percent to 22 percent, respectively. 59 percent of college students and 52 percent of "white collar" workers with college degrees surveyed identified the U.S. as the greatest threat. *The Chosun Ilbo*, January 12, 2004.
- 20 Bush's remarks on February 7, 2003 captured the headlines, when so many of the very same remarks on other parts of the world and issues often go unnoticed.
- 21 Samuel Len, "S. Korea Suggests Nixon Style Diplomacy," *Reuters*, March 29, 2003, reprinted in *The Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace*, <<http://www.nixonlibrary.org/nrc/030331aNorthKorea.shtml>> (accessed February 14, 2005).
- 22 See Bradley Martin, "In Korea, Bush should mimic Nixon in China," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 11, 2005, B9.

- 23 CNN Transcripts of the State of the Union Speech, February 2, 2005, <<http://www.cnn.com/2005/ALLPOLITICS/02/02/sotu.transcript.5/index.html>> (accessed February 5, 2005).
- 24 North Korea returned to Japan what it claimed to be the cremated remains of Megumi Yokota, a Japanese national abducted in 1977 at the age of 13. However, according to DNA tests conducted on the remains in Japan's forensic laboratory at Teikyo University and the scientific research centers at the National Police Agency, DNA from two people other than Megumi Yokota were found in the results. *The Japan Times*, December 9, 2004. Also see "Why does North Korea do these things?" *The Economist*, December 16, 2004, <http://www.economist.com/research/backgrounders/displaystory.cfm?story_id=3503904> (accessed January 17, 2005).
- 25 Reports surfaced in China in March 2003, that sometime in late February or early March, the Chinese government halted oil pipeline shipment to Pyongyang across the Yalu River for three days, citing "technical difficulties." Soon thereafter North Korea agreed to attend talks with the United States in Beijing. China denied intentionally cutting off oil to North Korea as a coercive measure, and it is unconfirmed whether there was actually a causal link in North Korea's change of heart. But another such "coincidence" preceding North Korea's future shift in stance very well might take place. See Robert Marquand, "Watching Iraq, China begins to lean on North Korea," the *Christian Science Monitor*, August 8, 2003, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0408/p01s03-woap.html> (accessed January 15, 2005).
- 26 On November 13, 2004, President Roh, in a speech he gave at the World Affairs Council in Los Angeles, made the stunning remark that "There is rationality to what North Korea says, that their nuclear weapons and missiles are a deterrent against external threats."
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