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North Korea: The Eastern End of the “Axis of Evil”

by

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Introduction

One of the most remarkable things about the presidentially designated “axis of evil” in the world today is the heterogeneity of the countries involved. Iraq, Iran and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) have different forms of government and different languages and cultures, and they harbor widely varying attitudes toward religion. Iraq is an Arabian secular socialist dictatorship; Iran is an Islamic republic with Persian culture; while North Korea, the focus of this paper, is a classic totalitarian communist state—if not quite the last of the breed.

As has been noted in previous Landpower Essays,¹ from a religious point of view, Iran is the most intense of the three, ensconcing its ruling clerics and official faith on pedestals above the law of man. Iraq follows with a more relaxed view of the role of religion in society, attaching greater importance to tribal identity. North Korea trails the others with a denial of the legitimacy of faith in society altogether, focusing instead on atheist dogma.

Still another point to be noted about this unholy trinity is that, as a group, the countries bear little resemblance to U.S. foes of the last century. In World War I, our enemies were led by crowned heads of Christendom. In World War II we faced a mixture of fascism in Europe and military dictatorship in Asia. In the Cold War (to include Korea and Vietnam) the adversary was international communism. The mix today is nothing of the sort; in fact, two of the three, Iran and Iraq, are mutually antagonistic, and neither has much interest in the third—save as a source of particularly destructive weapons.

And there we find a bonding link. All three have aspired to regional power through the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the means for long-range delivery. This vital matter, besides their common antipathy for the United States, is at the heart of their designation as members of an “axis of evil.” As President George W. Bush set forth in his address to the graduating class at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York on 1 June 2002, “The gravest danger to freedom lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology.” Clearly he perceives these countries as outstanding examples of our most important post-communist bloc enemies. This essay is an examination of the poorest, but the one which has probably achieved the greatest advances in the development of a capacity to strike potential foes at great distance and with the most devastating of instruments.

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The discussion begins with a brief examination of U.S. interests in Korea and of our public rationale for involvement in the region. Subsequent sections deal with DPRK weapons of mass destruction; conventional forces; the DPRK as a terrorist state; North and South Korean strategic interests, objectives and strategy; reconciliation; the interests of China, Japan and Russia; and conclusions.

It is the question of mass destruction weaponry that is most cogent in this discussion, but geography also plays a large part. The DPRK lies at the juncture of three of the world's greatest powers: China, Japan and Russia. The United States joined this incendiary combination just a century and a half ago with the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry in Tokugawa, Japan. Since then, all of the powers have fought one another or, at times, stood apart in hostile seclusion. The history of the region has been an unhappy one of war, occupation and dictatorship. While, as will be seen, some observers are optimistic for developments on the Korean Peninsula later in the current century, the historical record provides little basis for encouragement.

U.S. Interests in Korea

In the wake of World War II, U.S. forces occupied the southern half of the Korean Peninsula, providing a tentative aura of stability for the birth of the government of the newly independent Republic of Korea (ROK). However, official interest in the area dwindled rapidly, along with a vanishing defense budget. In the words of one observer, "Washington had finally written off South Korea, and everyone concerned knew it."²

Pyongyang's attack on South Korea in 1950 prompted a rapid reversal of U.S. policy and military intervention. Notably, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger would write, "[President] Truman had powerful geopolitical arguments in favor of intervention in Korea, [but] he appealed to the American people on the basis of their core values, and *described intervention as a defense of universal principle rather than of the American national interest.*"³

In Truman's words, "The United States will continue to uphold the rule of law."⁴ Kissinger went on: "That *America defends principle, not interests, law, and not power, has been a nearly sacrosanct tenet of American rationale in committing its military forces*, from the time of the two world wars through the escalation of its involvement in Vietnam in 1965 and the Gulf War of 1991."⁵

However, in 1988 the United States began publishing a series of national security documents setting forth neither "principles" nor "law." Instead, the successive versions of the publications have focused increasingly upon "interests" and "strategy," both with respect to the world as a whole, and for the various principal regions. Typical of those relevant to Korea have been:

- The maintenance of the security of the East Asian region, recognizing that the United States is, itself, a Pacific nation.
- The maintenance of deep bilateral ties with allies, including South Korea.
- The abolition of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the region and beyond.
- In the long run, the emergence of a nonnuclear, peacefully reunified Korean Peninsula.⁶

The most recent issue of the document has taken a sharp turn toward preemptive action against real or apparent threats from abroad. Without specific reference to North Korea, but certainly germane, are such points as:

- "[W]e recognize that our best defense is a good offense."
- "We must be prepared to stop rogue states and their terrorist clients before they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction against the United States and our allies and friends."
- "We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries."⁷

North Korean Strategic Interests, Objectives and Strategy

Above all, regime sustainment undergirds North Korea's strategic interests. The government believes that it must stave off threats from the United States and the ROK and resist corruption which it suspects to lie behind economic reform. The country has a bad habit of lashing out in fits of ill-behavior, oddly enough apparently intended to elicit aid and assistance from neighboring powers, or from the United States. Such brinkmanship has helped the DPRK to remain on the front burner of American security concerns while blackmailing the United States into a degree of complicity.

Pyongyang maintains its aggressive defense posture and crude diplomatic gymnastics despite nearly a decade of economic failure and famine. (The great physical tragedies of the land are probably the result of equal parts of floods, drought and incredibly bad management.) But Chairman ("Dear Leader") Kim Jong Il has defied Western analysts with his high-wire act, while they have repeatedly predicted the collapse of his government before the new millennium. Projections of "soft" and "hard" landings have had little relevance to the situation on the ground within the DPRK. Kim has maintained a ruthless stranglehold on his population. Executions, gulags and knocks on the door at midnight are mainstays of the security structure. As the majority of the population struggles through illness and starvation, the Korean People's Army (KPA) has become larger and more lethal than ever.⁸ While its citizens forage for food and struggle to keep warm, the KPA rolls ahead, fed and fueled.

In the determination and measurement of North Korean objectives, DPRK military statistics have ominous implications. The country spends 25 to 35 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defense—about five to seven billion dollars annually.⁹ By comparison, the ROK spends about five percent of its GDP, or \$10 billion, on defense. The alarming fact is that in 1999, five years into its worst economic and humanitarian crisis, the (DPRK) Kim regime mandated a "military first" policy, dumping further bundles of budgetary resources into the armed forces at the expense of the already suffering civilian population.

North Korea is on a perpetual war footing. Its largest employer, buyer and consumer is the military. The entire nation is centered around sustaining and bolstering the armed forces.¹⁰ The formidable military ensures loyalty to the Kim regime, provides both domestic security and infrastructure maintenance, and broadcasts a confusing, usually menacing, message to the United States, the ROK and Japan. Determining the true dimensions of the strategic threat of a failing nation with an aggressive, numerically superior force poses a complex challenge. Factor in nuclear weapons, and the stakes skyrocket.

Since 1993, North Korea has played its nuclear card with brash skill, holding the United States and its regional allies on an uneasy diplomatic track. The 1994 "Agreed Framework," aimed at halting North Korea's suspected nuclear weapons program, has proven a sham. With its October 2002 admission of a clandestine program, Pyongyang revealed where its priorities lie. The program is fully consistent with its launching of a *Taepodong* rocket over Japan in August 1998 and continued incursions and agitation over the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) dividing the peninsula. Nicholas Eberstadt has described North Korean diplomacy as the "methodical export of strategic insecurity."¹¹

At the same time, North Korea has realized substantial benefit from its behavior. The United States and the ROK have striven to meet most DPRK demands in some form to head off further outbursts. Until Pyongyang dropped the final straw on the camel's back with the open admission of a continued clandestine nuclear program, it had successfully negotiated heating oil, food relief and humanitarian assistance simply by raising the stakes with its threats.

Kim (of the DPRK) seems to worry that the acceptance of Western relief and economic reorganization will corrupt the self-sufficient North Korean nation and incite collapse, just as it did in the Warsaw Pact countries in the early 1990s. Simultaneously, the DPRK leverages relief packages with the same nations that receive the brunt of its scathing propaganda—the United States, the ROK and Japan.



This dual-track diplomacy technique is not new to North Korea. The appearance of warming relations has often accompanied (or concealed) expanded military capabilities. The DPRK has never rescinded its call for forceful reunification of Korea under communist rule. While that objective is no longer possible, given North Korea's floundering conditions, its nuclear, chemical and conventional capabilities could inflict severe damage in a frenzied, last-ditch attack on South Korea. The advent of the DPRK's ballistic missile capabilities, and probable nuclear weapons, extends the range of possibilities for lashing out. North Korea badly needs international relief and economic reform to alter its waterlogged path. In short, the determination of North Korea's objectives and strategy strikes some as a dangerous game of three-card Monte.

DPRK Weapons of Mass Destruction

According to one account, North Korea began its nuclear program in the early 1970s as a "mirror image" of one initiated by President Park Chung Hee of South Korea.¹² Subsequent American assurances to its peninsular ally of continuing interest in the defense of South Korea, together with a revelation of actual U.S. deployments of nuclear weapons to the country, served to quiet Park's apprehensions, but the Northern effort had other factors to consider. As a country without a reassuring nuclear sponsor, and without ready access to oil, North Korea viewed nuclear power as attractive for both economic and military purposes. Kim Il Sung (the "Great Leader") pointed out that the DPRK had little ability to control the sea by which oil might be brought in. *Juche* (self-reliance) was his clarion call. "We are not yet in a position to depend on imports," he said. "[To do so] means allowing a stranglehold on our jugular."¹³

But nuclear weapons were clearly no less important to the dictator than nuclear electric power—and not simply as a bargaining chip. Kim saw the weapons as a potential survival aid in the face of political, military or economic adversity.¹⁴ His first move, in 1962, was to obtain a small 4-megawatt nuclear reactor from the Soviet Union for research purposes. In 1977 he submitted his program to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and agreed to comply with official safeguards. Two years later he began construction of a 30-megawatt facility at Yongbyon. In 1985 the DPRK became a signatory to the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), and in 1987 the reactor was put into operation.

Kim waffled to the IAEA on the purpose of the Yongbyon facility, but few observers paid much attention. In March 1993 the DPRK ominously announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT. Negotiators attempted to apply diplomatic Band-Aids to keep North Korea within the fold of non-nuclear states, but not with great confidence. Pyongyang was running a breeder reactor program that could have yielded enough plutonium to build a half-dozen bombs per year. In late 1993 the Director of Central Intelligence signed off on a national estimate to the effect that the North Koreans could have covertly extracted 12 kilograms of weapons-grade material, with commentary to the effect that there was a "better than even chance" that they already had a bomb.¹⁵ The following year the United States and the DPRK reached the "Framework Agreement" under which North Korea would suspend its nuclear program and the United States and its allies would provide oil and a light-water reactor to generate electricity to replace that which the more dangerous breeder reactor might have provided. Early in 1995, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord would praise North Korea for "meticulous" fulfillment of the terms of the agreement, including inspections of its nuclear facilities and a freeze on construction of other reactors.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the CIA currently estimates that Pyongyang has managed to husband enough fissile material to assemble two weapons—if it has not already built them.¹⁷ The Secretary of Defense has been more explicit. On 16 September 2002, Donald H. Rumsfeld stated that North Korea already possesses nuclear weapons and is developing more.¹⁸ In a somewhat off-hand manner he explained the selection of Iraq as the first member of the "axis of evil" to be attacked by the United States with the

remark that it had not yet acquired nuclear weapons. Analysts interpreted the secretary's phraseology to mean that North Korea was not selected for attack at this time because it already has the bomb.¹⁹

With respect to chemical weapons, there is little doubt that the DPRK depots are well stocked with some 2,500 to 5,000 tons of agents. And it appears that it has conducted research with 13 different strains of bacteria and toxins. Estimates of North Korean biological weapons production place annual capacity at one ton.²⁰ The entire matter deserves reexamination, and may get it as the United States breaks a two-year freeze on contacts with Pyongyang, dispatching in October 2002 an Assistant Secretary of State to take soundings while the DPRK rails against U.S. policy.

Weapons delivery systems, of course, are as important as warheads. It appears that the DPRK was able to reverse-engineer the Soviet-built 300 kilometer-range Scud B missile in the early 1980s, along with the longer-range Scud C. By 1994 the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency estimated that the North Koreans could produce both weapons domestically at a rate of four to eight per month. The following year a South Korean defense official suggested that the DPRK had about 500 Scud missiles of all types, with ranges of up to 500 kilometers. Three hardened bases for Scuds were reported to be under construction in the vicinity of the DMZ.²¹

The Scud is a notoriously inaccurate missile (circular error probable at maximum range: 1,000 meters). To overcome this problem, the North Koreans are believed to have imported from Syria and reverse-engineered the guidance system from a Soviet SS-21.²² They have probably applied this technology to longer range systems, too, some possibly reaching 6,000 kilometers or more. These missiles are named for towns in the vicinity of observed launching sites: the *Nodong*, which is road mobile, on a transporter-erector-launcher, and the *Taepodong-1* (with a 1,500-kilometer range) and *-2* (with possibly as much as 6,000 kilometers.).²³ A missile with the latter reach would be able to strike targets in most of Alaska, but not as far south as the capital, Juneau.²⁴

There is no definitive information that the Scud missiles, which might be used against targets in South Korea, could be used for delivering nuclear weapons. A high-ranking defector in 1994 reported that the North lacks the technology for mounting nuclear warheads on Scud missiles. On the other hand, he said that the nukes could be used with the longer-range systems for attacking such targets as Okinawa or Guam.²⁵

Relevant to the proposition that North Korea is linked to other members of the "axis of evil" is its central role in the proliferation of missiles and missile technology to other countries with which the United States has experienced security policy differences. The Pakistani *Ghauri* missile project was developed with North Korean assistance while Pakistan and the United States were on unfriendly terms. And Iranian technical specialists were included, along with Pakistanis, to observe Pyongyang's firing tests of the *Nodong* missile in 1992 and 1993. North Korea benefited from nuclear technology from Pakistan while Pakistan received missile technology from Pyongyang. Pakistan reportedly received not only missile technology from North Korea, but components and a number of complete missiles as well. Specifically, in 1997, when Pakistan was believed to be close to the Taliban government in Afghanistan, it received a complete *Nodong* missile from North Korea, prompting the United States to impose economic sanctions on both Pakistan and the DPRK.²⁶ It should have been a surprise to no one when later it was revealed that Pyongyang had received substantial support from Pakistan for a clandestine nuclear weapons program.²⁷

DPRK Conventional Forces

The armed forces of North Korea are enormous considering the modest size of the country (120,500 square miles) and its population (24.5 million). Virtually all adult males serve in one of the armed services for three to eight years and are then enrolled in the Worker/Peasant Red Guard until age 60.

Approximately a quarter of the male population of military age (18–49) is on active duty full time, with almost 90 percent of these in the army.²⁸

For the most part, North Korean military equipment is of old design, much of it dating from World War II. Nevertheless, there are a few notable factors about it. One is the density of artillery in the army. The DPRK has some 10,400 artillery pieces, providing it a higher ratio of artillery to troops than any other country in the world.²⁹ In fact, North Korea has almost as much artillery as the entire Chinese army, even though its ground forces are outnumbered by those of its great neighbor by more than two-to-one. Another point is the concentration of DPRK ground forces along the 150-mile frontier with the South. Much of the artillery is deeply entrenched in mountainous caves with multiple openings for firing in different directions. Some pieces are reported to be within range of Seoul, the South Korean capital. Further, the North Korean missile forces provide great potential depth to its fire plans.

This concentration of force is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, it affords a capability for surprise attack; on the other, it tends to reduce the country's defensive capabilities in the rear, especially against airborne or amphibious assault forces. Both the United States and South Korea maintain significant marine forces in the theater posing threats to the northern coast lines, especially to the port areas and outlying islands. Pyongyang might be obliged to rely heavily upon reserve units of the interior to deal with intruders landing north of the DMZ.

It should also be noted that North Korea has 26 submarines—an extraordinarily large number, providing it the fourth largest sub fleet in the world. At some time in the past this may have been more significant than it is today. The boats are of old design (Soviet *Romeo* and *Whisky* class), and probably would not be able to venture far from their home ports in the face of modern U.S. antisubmarine forces. Nevertheless, they are capable of providing a measure of coastal defense, support for special operations far along the coast of South Korea, mining operations, and attacks on unescorted merchant vessels and troop transports near South Korean ports.³⁰

The North Korean air force has but a small numerical superiority over that of the South in combat aircraft: 621 (largely of old design) in the north, compared with 538 (mostly of later vintage) in South Korea. Further, the South Korean air force is immediately augmented by two U.S. fighter wings with 84 high-performance combat aircraft on the peninsula.³¹

In sum, the North Korean forces pose a significant threat of potential short conventional war damage, especially to the city of Seoul, but its capabilities for seizure of terrain do not extend very far beyond that, considering the present balance of forces. Many of its tanks belong in museums. Where it retains a significant threat capability is in long-range missile systems, which can reach the islands of Japan, Taiwan, the Aleutians, and possibly beyond. These systems, if coupled with warheads containing weapons of mass destruction, provide both politically and militarily significant instruments. By sheer mass, Pyongyang's conventional forces retain capabilities for limited-objective operations, but they are unlikely to pose an existential threat to South Korea in the next decade or two.

The DPRK as a Terrorist State³²

Since its inception, North Korea has employed a wide range of special forces infiltration into South Korea for the purpose of stirring up antigovernment elements, destroying property and assassinating selected individuals. The 1960s saw numerous commando raids across the border to gather intelligence and inflict casualties on South Korean military units. The intensity of the incidents reached a pinnacle in 1968 with more than 600 such episodes, including an unsuccessful commando attack on the presidential mansion in Seoul, during which 37 South Korean citizens were killed. Also in that year, 120 infiltrators attempted penetration into two east coast provinces to organize guerrilla bases for subsequent operations.

Many later terrorist operations appear to have been more precisely, if unsuccessfully, targeted. In November 1970 an infiltrator was killed as he was attempting to plant a bomb to assassinate South Korean president Park Chung Hee. Three years later, a Korean resident of Japan killed the president's wife in another attempt to murder the president.

After a decade of increasingly unsuccessful infiltrations along the DMZ by heavily armed reconnaissance teams, the North Koreans shifted in 1980 to try sea infiltration. But like the border transgressions, these gradually decreased in effectiveness. South Korean counterterrorist operations were becoming increasingly successful.

In 1983, the North Koreans shifted tactics again, to stalk their prey in third countries. In October of that year a three-man team attempted to assassinate President Chun Doo Hwan in Rangoon, Burma. The president was not injured by the remote-controlled bomb which was used, but four of his cabinet ministers and several others were killed. On 29 November 1987, a bomb planted aboard a South Korean airliner by two North Korean agents brought down the aircraft, killing all 135 persons aboard. One of the agents committed suicide after being apprehended. The other, a female, confessed to being a North Korean intelligence agent and stated that the mission was directed by Chairman Kim Il Sung to discredit South Korea before the 1988 Seoul Olympics. As if these operations were not enough to win the country a title as a terrorist state, on 17 September 2002, the new North Korean leader, Kim Jong Il, admitted that his country had kidnapped 12 Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s to provide false identities for secret agents and to provide linguistic training for North Korean spies.

After 1990, the DPRK appeared to turn away from terrorism as a principal tool of foreign policy. Since that time, it has focused its "security" efforts more upon its nuclear and long-range missile programs, but every so often—as in the fall of 1996 when an attempted infiltration of armed North Korean agents by submarine lead to senseless bloodletting,³³ and in late June 2002 when a North Korean naval vessels sank a South Korean patrol boat³⁴—the public is reminded that there is still no peace treaty from the 1950–53 war.

ROK Objectives and Strategy

South Korea seeks continued security and economic prosperity. In the last decade, the United States has handed over increased responsibility to the ROK for its military missions and material production. Much of this is the result of South Korea's evolving democratic government and booming free market economy. ROK prosperity and stability have secured international investment and enhanced its legitimacy and respect among other governments. The DPRK has observed these developments with alarm and anxiety. The North's long-term ambition to topple an artificially U.S.-sustained ROK regime ground to a halt as the South Korean economy accelerated in the late 1980s and as the country expanded to become a regional and international powerhouse.

In its economic triumph, South Korea has experienced the power that accompanies reasonably good governance and economic well-being. Weathering the 1997 financial crisis, the ROK has established a firm foothold as a viable international player. Of course, any sudden military threat from the DPRK could upset that status, discouraging investment and disrupting trade flow. At the same time, an unanticipated spontaneous movement for Korean reunification would be a shock, likely imposing tremendous costs on the ROK, perhaps as high as \$1.2 trillion.³⁵ Seoul has no desire, and is unprepared, for the absorption of a broken DPRK. Historical bonds and family ties propel a sentimental desire for reunification, but the practical implications of such a decision take priority in the South.

Regional security is critical to continued ROK prosperity. President Kim Dae Jung has extended unprecedented openness and cooperation to North Korea. But it remains to be seen how his policies

can weather the fresh turn of events under the disclosure the North's nuclear ambitions. The goodwill of the recent past may not have great traction under the hard facts of DPRK realpolitik. The ROK imperative is to balance fundamental security concerns and domestic opinion and aspirations with a progressive approach to governance.

Reconciliation

Upon his election to office in 1998, South Korean President Kim Dae Jung initiated a "Sunshine Policy" of reconciliation with North Korea. The main points of the program seemed well balanced: no tolerance for provocations from the North, no intention to absorb the North, and the separation of political cooperation from economic cooperation.³⁶ So revolutionary was the effort that in 2000 Kim (of the ROK) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. As noted above, the path since has not been an easy one, but as time has progressed, so have indications that his opposite number in Pyongyang, Kim Jung Il, is attempting to react in a positive, if somewhat stumbling way. It appears likely that some roads and railroads will soon be opened up to permit at least limited contacts between families long separated by the hostile policies of the two capitals, and North Korea appears quite anxious to open, on its western border with China, an international free-trade zone that would welcome a wide range of foreign traders.

Japan has also sought to participate in the effort to break down barriers, making positive noises about aid to its long-estranged neighbor. It would appear that both Tokyo and Seoul are in tune with the judgment of analysts at the U.S. Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis that "the standoff between North and South Korea will come to some kind of conclusion, perhaps within the next decade, but certainly by 2025."³⁷

The United States, on the other hand, has taken a more cautious line toward North Korea (witness its designation of the DPRK as a member of the "evil axis"). Untoward incidents, such as those taking place at sea off South Korean shores as noted above, have become less frequent in recent years, but resolution of the problems on the peninsula is by no means a slam-dunk cinch.

China

The People's Republic of China (PRC) maintains a pragmatic approach to the Korean Peninsula. Its interests center on sustaining its own security while improving economic power. China deals with its traditional communist ally and contiguous neighbor in the North as evenhandedly as it does its vested economic partner in the South. Beijing does not see these as mutually exclusive relationships. Diplomatic recognition of the ROK in 1992 and trade has bolstered both China and South Korea. The direct political link to Seoul provides both parties with improved transparency, particularly as South Korean military forces have taken over many of the duties previously overseen by the United States.

China's traditional communist-bloc allegiance to the DPRK hinges on an even deeper defensive concern. As reflected in the memory of its fearsome counterstroke across the Yalu River on October 1951, China has a vested interest in securing its own border and maintaining the DPRK as a buffer against U.S. troops in South Korea.³⁸ Yet Chinese policymakers have come to understand the hard-won benefits U.S. presence has brought to the entire peninsula since 1953. While bolstering South Korean defenses against DPRK aggression, the United States has at times also restrained ROK overreaction to stress, and has fostered economic and political development in the South. The United States has helped to avoid resumption of large-scale hostilities and encouraged regional stability. On the question of Korean unification, the PRC acknowledges the key role that the United States is likely to play, but it has reservations about the endgame. A single Korean nation, modeled on the ROK/U.S. system, with a free-market economy and democratically elected government, could bring unpredictable new power uncomfortably close to the Middle Kingdom of yore.

North Korea has been dismayed by many of China's policy initiatives, particularly its normalization of relations with the ROK. China, while historically generous with the (DPRK) Kim dynasty's weapons and economic needs, has acquiesced to much of Pyongyang's calamitous agitations against the ROK and the United States. Without condemning or abandoning North Korea, China has distanced itself from the most outrageous acts of the DPRK over fifty years of armed aggression and diplomatic brinkmanship.

As unpredictable as North Korea is, the PRC remains its primary ally in multilateral negotiations with the United States and South Korea. The North's threatened withdrawal from the NPT in 1993 ignited a crisis on the peninsula that quickly escalated to a war footing. China played a pivotal role in guiding the Kim Il Sung regime toward a sensible solution. Similarly, throughout the last decade, the PRC has been influential in gently steering the DPRK to maintain security in the region and to avoid upsetting the status quo, which it finds most beneficial.³⁹ China manages to balance booming trade with the ROK while maintaining North Korea as a rampart.

For some time, refugees fleeing oppression and famine in the DPRK have been crossing into China. Recently, in several highly publicized incidents, Beijing has demonstrated its resolve to intercept the refugees and return them to North Korea. An economic or political implosion (or explosion) in North Korea could result in a mass exodus that would strain China's far-from-robust humanitarian relief capabilities. Beijing has a strong interest in choking off the current trickle of refugees and disabusing the Korean peoples' view of China as a fire escape to the South.⁴⁰

The PRC could prove critical to the United States in establishing and enforcing a sensible solution to a number of Korean security issues—including nuclear weapons. President Jiang Zemin assured President Bush on 25 October 2002, "We Chinese have always held the position that the Korean Peninsula should be nuclear-weapons free."⁴¹ China's influence with North Korea is evident, particularly as a model for potential economic and diplomatic reform. With cooperative efforts toward North Korea, the United States and China might reduce tensions, not only between the two Koreas but between each other as well.

Japan

Security concerns top the Japanese agenda with North Korea. The DPRK has demonstrated the same vituperative agitation against Japan as it has against the ROK. Without a standing military force capable of long-range attack and sustained combat, Japan relies heavily upon the United States for regional protection. Pyongyang has tested and penetrated the Japanese security sphere on several occasions. From sporadic naval intrusions to the August 1998 launch of a *Taepodong-2* rocket, North Korea has evaded Japan's defense forces and confounded its intelligence analysts.

Japan has had to pay for the animosity lingering from its imperial period of iron-fisted rule in Korea. Both the ROK and the DPRK have demanded reparations for hardships endured at the hands of Tokyo's troops early in the last century. In 1965 the ROK agreed to an \$800 million settlement. The DPRK has rebuffed all offers, demanding instead substantially higher sums. Japan countered with its own grievances against the DPRK. At issue are nearly 1,800 Japanese brides, married to North Koreans, who have been forbidden from returning to Japan since the Korean War. The kidnapping of Japanese citizens from their home shores, only recently admitted by Pyongyang, is another issue of high political impact.

Japan hefts its economic leverage in containing North Korea. In periods of heightened tension, such as after the *Taepodong* launch, Japan has halted financial and agricultural aid. The power of the purse has proven an effective tool in bringing North Korea into line and shaping its behavior. However, it is not clear whether recent improvements in Japanese–North Korean relations reflect a measure of genuine good faith or simply the Kim regime's urgent need for humanitarian relief, energy resources and financial capital.

Japan enjoys a prosperous relationship with the ROK. With the United States responsible for the majority of its defense arrangements, Japan has enjoyed considerable freedom to pursue commercial interests. But Korean reunification could change things. While it might reduce the security concerns of many, it could also affect Japanese views regarding the continued need for U.S. troops in the region. And that, in turn, could affect Chinese calculations regarding the possibilities of Japanese military resurgence. The entire matter is a jackstraws puzzle in which every piece affects others one way or another.

Russia

Russia's experiences in Northeast Asia since the Korean War illustrate the drama of changes which can unfold rather quickly in the neighborhood. In the mid- to late 1980s, the Soviet Union accounted for approximately 50 percent of the DPRK's trade. By 1994, that figure had dropped to 6 percent.⁴² With but a short border with the DPRK, Russia (as the lead player in the old Soviet Union) provided North Korea with a majority of its metal—and mettle—to challenge and agitate the combined forces below the 38th parallel. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states not only incited an ideological dread within North Korea, it capped off fifty years of charitable supplies of arms, technology and raw materials. The dissolution of the Eurasian empire, and Russia's subsequent demands for hard currency for goods and services to the DPRK after 1991, marked the end of Pyongyang's fat-cat era.

Russia granted diplomatic recognition to the ROK in 1990, adding further consternation to Pyongyang's dilemmas. And North Korean support for the 1991 military coup in Moscow did nothing to bolster its standing with its Eurasian neighbor. With economic and security concerns of its own, Russia has kept a low profile on the Korean Peninsula. Russia has expressed interest in the reconnection of the north-south rail link in Korea, but very clearly more for its own benefit in reducing shipping costs from Seoul to Moscow than for the welfare of its small oriental neighbor. Aside from sporadic diplomatic visits and commentary on multilateral arrangements, Russia has not appeared to be much more than a bit player. Even its recent announcement of joint Russian-North Korean naval exercises⁴³ may be more closely tied to getting the railroad going than to recreating a brothers-in-arms spirit with a volatile colleague.

Conclusions

The revelation of North Korean cheating on the Agreed Framework of 1994 has delighted critics in the West who have long suspected the worst regarding the character of the regime in Pyongyang, but it has done little to help our understanding. Pyongyang apparently was deterred from exploiting the hot products of the plutonium-yielding Yongbyon reactor as it turned to the slower, but more secretive course of uranium enrichment. Instead of dozens of bombs in its arsenal, it now seems unlikely that Pyongyang has more than one or two.

Still, the policy ramifications are not much different. An unstable, impoverished totalitarian state is reaching way beyond its means in a desperate, eleventh-hour attempt to find respect on the world stage. Its "Dear Leader," Kim Jong Il, may or may not be calling the shots from the highest post in the government. If so, it begs the question of why he seems to seek international photo opportunities in company with the Prime Minister of Japan and the President of South Korea—the likely targets of his nuclear planning staffs. His father would not have done that. The son's gestures abroad—apologies for the kidnapping of Japanese youths, the opening of roads and railroads across his country, and his admission of guilt in nuclear weapons development—do not fit well with a dictator comfortable in his own skin.

Perhaps he holds court over an Arthurian round table of powerful military chieftains more interested in their share of the public purse than anything else. It is difficult to imagine a regime with the record of

this one coming to a final settlement on any issue that does not enhance its security, but Kim Jong Il may not find that his interests are fully reflected by all the others at the table. It may be that he is less of a free agent than some suppose.

In any event, we have had sufficient experience with the country to draw a number of clear conclusions. First, the DPRK is a rogue state by any definition:

- It violates with impunity both the spirit and letter of formal agreements and treaties.
- It resorts to the most threatening brinkmanship in its foreign policy, frequently threatening the destruction of other countries and peoples.
- It is an active proliferator of WMD and missilery.
- It maintains an enormous army in a threatening stance towards its southern neighbor.
- It neglects its economy.
- It practices notorious police brutality towards its people; as a police state, it forbids internal political activity, the exercise of religious beliefs and private connections with people of other countries.

Second, the DPRK may be the most unpredictable and dangerous of countries currently hostile to the United States:

- It is a serious threat to U.S. interests, both within the Northeast Asia region and beyond, because of its propensity for trading in high-technology lethal goods with others intent upon acquiring and perfecting WMD. In this regard, the acuity of the threat it poses to the United States interests is no less than that currently posed by Iraq.
- The United States has tended to pay less attention to North Korea than to other states in the “axis of evil” largely because it no longer has a capability for overrunning South Korea. This may have contributed to Pyongyang’s tendency toward diplomatic tantrums and bad behavior in its campaign for status and recognition.
- Rapid turns in tactical policy may reflect a power struggle between Chairman Kim Jong Il and others at the highest levels of government.
- North Korea’s key strategic location at the maritime juncture of China, Japan and Russia mandates extreme care on the part of the United States as the likely final arbiter of virtually all global security questions in the 21st century.

Third, the United States must establish and maintain strict security parameters with the DPRK:

- The United States should clearly define its “red line” of tolerance for North Korean behavior with respect to South Korea and Japan. Failure to do so could result in pressures upon the governments of those countries to develop security programs in undesirable directions (e.g., WMD).
- High priority should be given to close coordination of U.S. policies regarding the DPRK with all other countries in the region.
- The United States should give high visibility to its policies with respect to North Korea for the benefit of the United Nations to minimize surprises in time of stress, and to facilitate development of international security measures and programs for support of human rights on the Korean Peninsula.

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