

# *Shattering Myths and Assumptions: The Implications of North Korea's Strategic Culture for U.S. Policy*

*Balbina Hwang*

## **Abstract**

On May 25, North Korea conducted a second underground nuclear test in defiance of the international community. Many viewed this act as a provocative call for the attention of newly elected U.S. President Obama, and as a test of his administration's North Korea policy. Yet was it? Analysis of North Korean behavior and the ability to predict its future actions is critical to the formulation of any policy, but especially one that attempts to achieve the ambitious goal of denuclearizing North Korea, something that the United States has been unable to achieve for nearly 20 years. However, much of the outside world's understanding of North Korean behavior is predicated on deeply held assumptions and myths about the regime that need to be questioned and even abandoned. This article applies a strategic culture analysis to North Korea's foreign policy formation and argues that doing so reveals serious flaws in assumptions pervade the dominant thinking on North Korea. These incorrect views not only limit policy options but favor those that may be least achievable. They also cause policy debates to focus on the style, rather than substance of the relevant issues, and cause misperceptions about assessing previous policy failures.

**Key Words:** U.S. policy, Barack Obama, Six-Party Talks, denuclearization, strategic culture

## Introduction

Within days after the January 20, 2009 inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, sweeping headlines appeared in Korean and American newspapers touting the dawn of a new era of monumental change in U.S. policy towards North Korea. Almost all were enthusiastically hopeful, such as one opinion piece entitled “Obama Can Disarm Nuclear North Korea,” that breathlessly exalted an America that would inspire “many other countries around the world with renewed hope for more justice, peace, and increased economic well-being. Despite the bitter record of hostility and distrust between Washington and Pyongyang and despite North Korea’s increasing demands the denuclearization of the North is achievable under President Obama’s leadership.”<sup>1</sup>

By June, however, a new fatalism has emerged in Washington and Seoul, with the highest level of tension with Pyongyang since the early 1990s. In just four months, North Korea has undertaken a series of deliberate steps that seriously jeopardize the international community’s efforts to reverse North Korea’s nuclear ambitions: the launch of a long-range missile on April 4, followed by its categorical rejection of a unanimous United Nations Security Council Presidential Statement condemning the act; Pyongyang’s subsequent declaration that it would no longer participate in the Six-Party Talks; expulsion of a multinational team of inspectors that had been working to dismantle the Yongbyon facility; actions taken to reverse dismantlement and restart plutonium processing; declaration that it is no longer bound by the terms of the 1953 Armistice; and finally a second underground nuclear test on May 25. Much of the negative commentary and disappointment seems to be

---

<sup>1</sup>-Tong Kim, “Obama Can Disarm Nuclear North Korea,” Opinion piece, *Korea Times*, January 23, 2009.

directed at the very administration that only months before had offered so much hope.

But just as the initial sentiments of hope were misplaced in imbuing the Obama administration with super-hero abilities, perhaps as equally misplaced is the current pessimism expressed by those disappointed that the new President has not seemed to articulate any new policy on North Korea, much less implement the previously expected sweeping changes. In great part, this mismatch of expectations with reality is not the fault of the new leadership, but rather one of the pernicious misperceptions that has persistently saturated interpretations of U.S. policy towards the DPRK throughout the years. These misperceptions, which frame our understanding of North Korea itself, as well as America's interaction (or lack thereof) with the northern half of the Korean peninsula, is so grounded in deeply-held myths and false assumptions that the public discourse about U.S.-DPRK policy has degenerated into deeply divisive ideological arguments that while seemingly polarizing, are really only disagreements that remain largely at the margins and do not get to the heart of the North Korean "problem." As a result, U.S. policy towards the DPRK, and in particular the nuclear issue, has essentially paralyzed the White House and entire U.S. foreign policy apparatus for the last two decades.

As such, this paper attempts to identify and question a core set of assumptions and myths from which the outside world views North Korea, and in so doing, argue that a new policy framework with a new set of goals and objectives should replace the existing one. The theoretical basis for this argument is based on the application of a strategic culture model in order to explain the perplexing, puzzling, and often seemingly paradoxical behavior of North Korea. In short, the argument presented here is that Korea - beginning with the unified kingdom under *Silla* in 668 A.D., but one that also goes back to the mythological creation by

*Tan'gun* of a one “*Chosun*” kingdom in 2333 B.C. – has maintained a remarkably consistent national identity and strategic culture based on “nationalistic survival.” This strategic culture has prevailed through Korea’s transition into modernity and even division into two opposing mirror images as reflected by the separate political entities of the DPRK and ROK.

Given the opposing trajectories of political, economic, and social development in the two Koreas since their division in 1947, one would expect that the strategic culture would manifest in markedly different forms. Indeed South Korean and North Korean national identities reflect these dichotomies and much of the struggle for political legitimacy over the Korean peninsula during the Cold War, including a devastating fratricidal war, has been about which narrative shall prevail. But perhaps more significant is that two adversarial identities derive from the same source: a shared memory and historical experience about what it means to be “Korean.”

Consideration of North Korea’s strategic culture (and South Korea’s for that matter) is critical in assessing the inherent disposition and strategic goals of a nation as well as the policies chosen to pursue them. Such a model can help to answer fundamental questions, such as: how does North Korea determine its security? And how does it assess the external situation North Koreans feel threatened? How do these assessments or beliefs of security and threats inform Kim Jong-il and his coterie about strategic priorities regarding their security? And how do such understandings of priorities become manifested in fixed strategy, or policy? An understanding of how intentions are formed by strategic culture allows an explanation of policy actions not as isolated events but as part of a broader pattern of strategic calculations. It can also explain why one course of action was chosen over a range of other available alternative strategies. But perhaps more significantly, strategic culture

can explain the puzzling behavior of states such as North Korea that seem to implement foreign policies that do not logically respond to conditions in the international system.<sup>2</sup> This paper concludes with implications for future policy towards North Korea by the United States and regional neighbors.

### **Development of Korea's Strategic Culture of "Nationalistic Survival"**

Korea is a country whose fate is inextricably tied to the inexorable conditions of geography: occupying a peninsula that juts off the mainland of Asia and is located at the nexus of great power interests. Coveted more for its strategic than intrinsic value, Korea has suffered some nine hundred foreign invasions throughout its 2000-year history, experiencing five major periods of foreign occupation: China, the Mongolian empire under Genghis Kahn, Japan, and after World War II, the Soviet Union and the United States. Despite these foreign intrusions, Korea has managed to retain a remarkable homogeneity of language, culture and customs despite vigorous interaction with its Asian neighbors over the centuries. But by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the tides of Western imperialism spread unrelentingly throughout Asia, Korea willfully and purposely closed its borders, earning itself the reputation as the "Hermit Kingdom."

As the historian Bruce Cumings observes, Korea had been the last of the major cultures in East Asia to be "opened" by Western imperialism, not necessarily because it was stronger, but "perhaps because it was more recalcitrant." Korea entered into its first international treaty in

---

<sup>2</sup>- The analytical model of strategic culture applied to North Korea as presented here was first developed and applied to South Korea's foreign economic policies, and articulated in great detail in my Doctoral Dissertation: Balbina Y. Hwang, "Globalization, Strategic Culture, and Ideas: Explaining Continuity in Korean Foreign Economic Policy" (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, August 2005).

1876, not because it wanted to, but because it was forced to by Japan<sup>3</sup> and this marked the beginning of “modern” Korea, in which its leaders no longer could shape events as they wished: “For the first time in its history, the country was shaped from without more strongly than from within.”<sup>4</sup> In the ensuing years, with China’s relative decline, Russia and Japan exercised direct power in Korean affairs, with Japan warring against China (Sino-Japanese War, 1894-1895)<sup>5</sup> and then Russia and Japan bickering over their respective interests in Korea, the main idea being a division of the peninsula into spheres of influence.<sup>6</sup> The rivalry evolved into the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, ending with a Japanese victory and peace deal which every Korean schoolchild (in both the North and South) to this day learns as the Taft-Katsura Agreement, in which the United States recognized Japan’s claim to Korea as a protectorate in exchange for American dominance over the Philippines.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>- On February 22, 1876, the Treaty of Kanghwa was signed under foreign pressure, or “diplomacy with a gun to the temple, an offer Korea couldn’t refuse,” as Cumings observes, and featured provisions typical of an unequal treaty. Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, p. 102. The most important of its 12 articles proclaimed that, as an autonomous nation, Korea possessed “equal sovereign rights” with Japan. The objective behind this declaration of Korean independence was to open the way for Japanese aggression without inviting interference from China, which had historically claimed suzerainty over Korea. Korea would be officially annexed on August 22, 1910 under the Treaty of Annexation. Carter J. Eckert, et al., *Korea Old and New: A History* (Seoul, Korea: Ilchokak Publishers, 1990), pp. 200-201. See also Martina Deuchler, *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys: The Opening of Korea, 1875-1885* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1977), pp. 47-49.

<sup>4</sup>- Cumings, p. 86.

<sup>5</sup>- In the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which concluded the Sino-Japanese War on April 17, 1895, China formally acceded its influence over Korea, repudiating age-old Sino-Korean tributary ties, and solidifying Japan’s foothold on the Korean peninsula. Eckert, p. 223.

<sup>6</sup>- These negotiations included plans to partition Korea at the 38 or 39 parallel, although Cumings disputes the historical accuracy of these plans. Nevertheless, the significance of this latitude would reverberate profoundly a half-century later in 1945, when Russia (the Soviet Union) once again played a part in partitioning Korea at the 38 parallel along with the United States. Another agreement in 1896 to create a demilitarized zone free of troops between the Russian and Japanese armies would also resonate during the Korean War. Cumings, p. 123.

<sup>7</sup>- Akira Iriye, *Pacific Estrangement: Japanese and American Expansion, 1897-1911* (Cambridge,

And yet, King Kojong remained stubbornly impervious to the growing strength and influence of foreign powers, and in August 1897—despite living under the protection of the Russian legation amidst Chinese aggression -- proceeded to elevate the status of the *Chosun* dynasty by renaming the country *Taehan Jekuk*<sup>8</sup> (or “the Great Han Empire”) and taking the title of emperor, since wang, or king, did not sufficiently connote the independent status he claimed, and since it furthermore allowed both Japan and China to “talk down” to him. These name changes were meant to declare to the world that as a sovereign state, Korea was the equal of its neighbors, but foreigners were not to be impressed with words. Korea was viewed as a backward kingdom ripe for foreign investment and control.<sup>9</sup>

Korea had long been known before the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a country where foreigners were met with mistrust and dispatched as quickly as possible back to their homes: to those who knocked at its gates, Koreans said in effect, “we have nothing and we need nothing. Please go away.”<sup>10</sup> And yet, the foreigners kept coming. To most Koreans, the arrival of foreign-owned business that often enjoyed unfair advantages over their domestic rivals was a sign that Korea was falling under the economic control of foreign money and power, and the tenor of nationalistic discontent was fierce.<sup>11</sup> Notably, one heard eerie echoes of similar

---

MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 47-48; Cumings, pp. 141-142.

<sup>8</sup>-This would spawn the post-war South's name of *Taehan Min-guk* [“Great People's Nation”] or the Republic of Korea.

<sup>9</sup>-Emperor Kojong played his part by doling out Korean resources: gold mines went to Germany; railroads and a new electric system for Seoul went to America; banks and timber and other mine rights were divided between Britain and Russia; and merchants from Japan and China by then had well installed their businesses throughout Korea. Kongdan Oh (ed.), *Korea Briefing 1997-1999: Challenges and Change at the Turn of the Century* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), pp. 5-6.

<sup>10</sup>-Cumings, p. 87.

<sup>11</sup>-In 1898 rumors spread that a Russian bank was taking over the Korean national treasury. The *Tong-nip Shinmun* [The “Independence Newspaper”] raised its voice against these economic penetrations, and sporadic attacks were made on foreign-owned companies,

popular discontent nearly one hundred years later in 1997 when the issue of foreign power and control again dominated public attention as South Korea negotiated with the IMF for a bailout of its economy in the aftermath of a severe financial crisis. This period of “national humiliation” even caused some South Koreans to grudgingly admire North Korea for its isolation from the international economy which allowed inoculation from external forces. Thus, Cumings astutely concludes that the “real story” behind Korea’s century of modernization was “indigenous Korea and the unstinting Koreanization of foreign influence, not vice versa.”<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, mid-way between Korea’s modernization experience, a singular apocalyptic event – the division of the Korean peninsula by external powers – caused the two halves of the peninsula to pursue trajectories that were diametrically opposed and yet reflective of similar strategic cultures. Both Republics since their respective inceptions in 1948 – the ROK on August 15, and the DPRK on September 9 -- have pursued remarkably consistent and astonishingly similar, albeit mutually exclusive, foreign policy goals: national security or systemic regime survival; economic prosperity; national prestige; and unification on its own terms. During this time, regimes have changed in both Koreas, but these four foreign policy goals have not. Even more remarkable is that these goals have remained constant despite dramatic changes in the external environment with the end of the Cold War, which conventional wisdom argues should have inexorably altered the parameters if not the actual calculations of both Koreas’ foreign policies. Shifting power relations in the region after all are considered the cause for Korea’s division. The political characters of the two Koreas were determined in

---

including the Russian bank. Kongdan Oh, p. 6. First published in April 1896, it was the first modern newspaper in Korea published in both the vernacular Korean (*hangul*) and English, and became a vehicle for the new intelligentsia to voice the Korean desire for independence and national sovereignty. Eckert, p. 234.

<sup>12</sup>-Cumings, p. 20.



many ways from the outset by the ideological rivalry between East and West, and each Korean state found an external security guarantor for its own security. Consequently, the foreign policies of both Koreas were largely dominated by the ebb and flow of East-West competition.

Yet, neither Korea's foreign policy goals have been altered in the post-Cold War environment. This outcome is puzzling, given that one common supposition about Korea is that certain immutable traits - i.e. that it is a small, relatively weak power sitting at the intersection of interests among the major military and economic powers in the region - cause foreign economic policy to be determined in a reactive fashion, responding to the exigencies of the situations thrust upon Korea. According to this capabilities-based argument, the only way either Korea's foreign policy formation can become more proactive is with a corresponding elevation of its status and power in the regional hierarchy.

The argument here is that such a viewpoint is an incorrect characterization of North Korea's (and the South's) foreign policies. While the international system and its attendant pressures - for example, manifested in the international financial or trading system or non-proliferation regime -- have had important influences on policy-formation in both Koreas, they do not have direct causal effect on policy outcomes as might be expected. This is because norms of identity within Korea affect the responses to external forces in sometimes surprising and even unpredictable ways. Both global factors outside the state's control and internal elements within the domestic society have worked in both Koreas to modify the foreign policy process. While the overall argument here is that a certain continuity exists in both North and South Korea's foreign policies, this by no means implies that their foreign policies are static. On the contrary, both Koreas' foreign policies have shown remarkable flexibility. What accounts for the continuity is the underlying strategic culture, but given shifting external conditions, flexibility is also possible.

Moreover, given preternatural Korean sensitivity to the external environment, policies particularly in North Korea have not been predictably reactive, but notably pro-active.

### **The Role of Strategic Culture in North Korea's Foreign Policy**

Once a state's perception of external threats to its security is filtered through the lens of its strategic culture and implemented in policies, strategic preferences will not be readily responsive to changes, even when the material contours of that external force are altered. This is because historical experiences, perpetuated by mores and habits of the heart,<sup>13</sup> reinforce a deeper memory that is perpetually drawn upon by citizens which undergirds the "arrest" of particular identities. Such beliefs impact foreign policy outcomes when they serve as causal beliefs or road maps for decision-makers because they imply strategies for the attainment of goals, which are in and of themselves valued because of shared principled beliefs. Thus, even if an actor's preferred foreign policy outcomes are clear and given as rationalists assume, beliefs are a mediating variable because actors do not know with certainty the consequences of their actions, whether due to incomplete information or uncontrolled variables. Beliefs fill the gap of uncertainty so that actors can choose from a variety of actions to reach objectives. As Max Weber observed, "Not ideas but interests - material and ideal - directly govern men's conduct. But the 'pictures of the world' that have been created by ideas, much like switchmen, determine the tracks along which interests

---

<sup>13</sup>-Tocqueville argues that "mores," or "habits of the heart" are the sum of ideas that shape mental habits among men and includes "the whole moral and intellectual state of a people." It is precisely mores, Tocqueville argues, that form the basis of the support of political institutions within a state. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, transl. George Lawrence (New York: Harper Collins, 1966), Vol. I, Part II, Chapter 9, p. 287.

move.<sup>14</sup>

For example, North Korea's state's strategic culture (as does South Korea's) prioritizes the protection of its borders from invasion by its more militarily powerful neighbors based on extensive historical experiences of such attacks. Then, regardless of whether the present military capabilities of those neighbors have increased to indomitable levels - or diminished to relatively inferior levels as the case may be from South Korea's perspective -- there may not be a commensurate reduction of the state's contemporary or future defense postures. The reticence of strategic preferences to change even when the environment dictates otherwise provides the answer to questions such as: Why do some states such as North Korea appear to be obsessively insecure? Why do states in almost identical positions have significantly different levels of defense spending? Why do states in similar economic positions - i.e. the two Koreas at the time of division -- pursue different economic policies such as mercantilism and free-market liberalism? Only an understanding of how strategic preferences are drawn from strategic culture can satisfactorily address these questions.

In today's post-Cold War and globalized environment in which Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" is accepted as the inevitable evolutionary stage of the world's states, the outliers - North Korea, Burma, and Cuba, for example - are almost universally viewed as anachronisms for whom time is not on their side. Moreover, with the acceleration of exchange of information and sharing of "universal" ideas and values, combined with the erosion of state control over national boundaries, it is often assumed that distinctive national traditions will become less significant in the formulation of strategic thinking. Yet, national identities,

---

<sup>14</sup>- Max Weber, "Social Psychology of the World's Religions," in from *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (ed.), Gerth & C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 280.

similar to strategic choices, are less responsive to changes in the objective strategic environment, as Alastair Johnston argues, since the weight of historical experiences and historically rooted strategic preferences tend to constrain the effects of environmental variables and to mute responses to environmental change.<sup>15</sup> As a result, if strategic culture does change, it does so slowly, lagging behind changes in material conditions. And ahistorical or material variables such as technology, capabilities, levels of threat, and organizational structures are all of secondary importance to the interpretative lens of strategic culture that gives meaning to these variables. Thus, even though structural or material changes often dictate adjustments in the rational calculation of strategic thinking, mores informed by strategic culture more likely than not win out and make difficult the correlative changes of policy, particularly in countries with very strong national identities, such as North Korea.

### **Reassessing Myths and Assumptions about North Korea**

The implications of understanding North Korea's strategic culture, as well as how it informs North Korean foreign policy making are profoundly important, especially at this critical moment of an international stalemate with a seemingly recalcitrant and unrelenting North Korean regime. The sections above have laid out the historical experiences that have contributed to the formation of a deeply embedded identity of "nationalistic survival" within North Korea. This alone may not, however, satisfactorily explain why North Korean behavior does not seem to conform to logical or rational predictions. For example, how is such a weak, isolated, and failing state that is clearly on the wrong side of historical progress able to defy the world's superpowers and the

---

<sup>15</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

international community? Strategic culture, which acts as a mediational lens through which policy options are filtered, may at times produce logical outcomes – meaning those that are commensurate with a state’s international position – but at other times policies may be unexpected in nature or seemingly illogical because they do not derive from international pressures. Nevertheless, strategic culture alone does not provide a sufficient explanation as it ultimately is not a material or capabilities based variable. Therefore, it is necessary to question the underlying assumptions the external world has about North Korea, and reexamine the myths that guide our strategic calculations about the DPRK.

**Myth: “North Korea is a desperately poor, weak, and failing state, whose time is running out.”**

While the subject of North Korea usually engenders vociferous debate and widely disparate views, one assessment that almost no one disputes is that the DPRK is a “weak” and “failing” or “failed” state, whose demise is imminent unless the regime chooses a dramatically different approach in its domestic and foreign policy choices. For example, the venerable Council on Foreign Relations recently released a report stating that although North Korea defied predictions in the 1990s that it would collapse after the death of its founder Kim Il Sung, economic meltdown, and a deadly famine, the state still exists today but remains weak and vulnerable.<sup>16</sup> The Report goes on to argue the necessity of preparing for the DPRK’s collapse. Yet, it is worth questioning the underlying assumptions that comprise this characterization of the North as failing. State failure is predicated on the condition of a lack or severe weakness of central political systems. Samuel Huntington defines

---

<sup>16</sup>- Paul B. Stares and Joel S. Wit, “Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea,” *Council on Foreign Relations Special Report*, No. 42, January 2009, Washington, DC.

“state failure” as a condition in which a governing body fails to maintain control and political order,<sup>17</sup> while Susan Rice - currently the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations - specifies that it entails the central government’s inability to maintain physical control over its territory. Other widely accepted attributes include: loss of the monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force therein; erosion of legitimate authority to make collective decisions; and involuntary movement of large masses of the population both within and out of the state.

Applying these generally accepted characteristics to the DPRK yields the unsettling assessment that North Korea is certainly not a typical failing state, if we should even categorize it as one at all. The Kim Jong-il regime continues to maintain iron-fisted control over its population; there is no evidence of social or other political resistance challenging the legitimacy of the regime, and while refugees manage to cross the border with China in surprisingly large numbers, there has been no massive flood of refugees or defectors fleeing North Korea.

It may be true that other characteristics, such as non-provision of public services, widespread corruption and criminality, and sharp economic decline, are partially accurate descriptions of the condition of the DPRK regime today. Yet, even these characteristics are ambiguous at best: while the food distribution system, particularly in the provinces, no longer seems to be functioning, there is no evidence to indicate that it has failed in major urban areas, including Pyongyang. And while it may be orthodoxy to label the North Korean economy as an utter failure, in fact it continues to function, albeit inefficiently and unproductively. Finally, foreign government officials and experts often cite North Korea’s “inability to feed its own starving people” and its reliance on the international community for aid as an ultimate arbiter of the DPRK’s

---

<sup>17</sup>-Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).

inherent weakness. Yet, it is important to consider that the Kim Jong-il regime allows large swaths of the North Korean population to be malnourished not because it is *unable* to provide subsistence, but because it *chooses* not to do so, for reasons that are beyond moral calculations but are likely political in nature. Military expenditures including the estimated hundreds of millions of dollars invested in the recent ballistic missile launch are evidence that if providing sufficient food to the entire population were a priority goal for the regime, it would have the economic resources to do so. If the opposite of a “failed state” is an “enduring state,” then the strength of North Korea’s strategic culture as manifested in its political and social institutions indicates that far from being an example of the former, it is a perplexing embodiment of the latter.

Weakness is another assumption about the DPRK that ought to be questioned. According to all the traditional measures of strength – geographic size, population, economic wealth, natural resources, and military prowess, among others – North Korea certainly appears very weak, particularly in relation to all its neighbors, and almost always scores last in any major international study rating state strength. As such, it should be relatively if not absolutely powerless in the region. Accordingly, some commentators recommended in the aftermath of North Korea’s recent missile launch: “it would be a mistake to rise to the bait of Pyongyang’s provocative self-portrayal as a new member of the elite club of space and nuclear powers, to do would only lend credibility to the regime’s claims of potency. Inside North Korea, the regime can no longer deliver even the most basic of goods.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, much as King Kojong was astonishingly impervious to the reality of great powers surrounding him in 1897 and still felt entitled to declare himself emperor of the mighty *Taehan Jekuk*, Kim Jong-il defied the world’s impression of him

---

<sup>18</sup>-Daniel Sneider, “Let Them Eat Rockets,” *New York Times* Op-ed, April 9, 2009.

and the DPRK as weak and in 2007 tested a nuclear weapon. Such “irrational” policy decisions only make sense when one considers the critical role of strategic culture in the DPRK’s strategic calculations.

The traditional political science definition of “power” is the ability of one entity to compel another entity to act in a manner that the latter would otherwise not have chosen on its own. And yet, an objective assessment of North Korea’s actions taken over the course of the last few decades indicates clearly that in fact, the DPRK was rarely if ever compelled by any of the regional superpowers to pursue behavior the North Korean regime did not want to. Despite the fact that any one of the five important players in the region – China, Japan, Russia, the ROK, and the United States – has absolute material and even political resources to overwhelm the DPRK, none either individually or collectively under the auspices of the Six-Party framework has been successful in utilizing their power over North Korea. Even the international community, such as the United Nations or the IAEA, has proved ineffective in exerting its will vis-à-vis the DPRK.

Admittedly, an inarguable area of weakness for North Korea is its dependency on external sources for certain resources, despite its best efforts to pursue policies of autarky or “juche.” Yet, even here the DPRK manages to turn this vulnerability into leverage for itself. By implicitly holding as ransom the threat of a chaotic collapse of the state, regional neighbors have chosen to subsidize Pyongyang rather than risk being confronted with the greater costs of addressing instability on the Korean peninsula. Even the United States, for which such calculations are less compelling, has provided at a minimum food or humanitarian aid on moral considerations that a suffering population should not be punished for the misdeeds of its government.

The dangerous implication of perpetuating this myth of the DPRK as failing and weak is that it favors certain policy prescriptions, while



limiting the consideration of others. For example, these assumptions have produced two paradoxical views: one view is that while the United States may have limited leverage if any at all vis-à-vis North Korea, the regime is vulnerable to other actors - China, the ROK - as well as international pressure because it is so relatively weak. So Washington's priority particularly during the Bush administration was to focus on pressuring Beijing to wield its economic and political leverage on Pyongyang. Washington also turned to Seoul to reverse its Sunshine Policy, in effect outsourcing the problem to regional actors. But because the priorities for Beijing and certainly Seoul are promoting stability in North Korea and preventing collapse, using their own limited leverage against Pyongyang was an option distasteful to both.

Ironically, the myth of North Korea's weakness also spawned an opposing assessment about that regime: the leadership is dysfunctional and corrupt, and because it is barely hanging on to power, it is on the verge of collapse. Although the Kim Jong-il regime is currently well-insulated and thus has proven invulnerable to both domestic and international pressures, it can not withstand a wide-scale social uprising. Thus, the conclusion here is that the outside world should further isolate the regime, while vigorously engaging the North Korean public or average citizens so as to bring them out of isolation. Presumably, the assumption here is that much as the Iron Curtain dissolved under the irrepressible forces of open information and transparency, so too will North Korean citizens become "enlightened" and eagerly embrace the "universal" values of democracy, freedom, equality, and market capitalism, once they realize they have been victims of a cruel and fraudulent regime that kept them enslaved under the chains of brutal authoritarianism and communism for decades.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup>- This is a view espoused by Andrei Lankov, a vocal proponent of this argument. See among his many writings: Andrei Lankov, "Sanctions will Have No Effect on North

These sorts of debates and arguments have dominated the policy community in Washington for the last two decades, and continue to do so under the new Obama administration. Yet they are fundamentally flawed because they are based on incorrect assumptions about North Korea, and do not take into proper account the factors such as the country's strategic culture that have a direct impact on the effectiveness of chosen policies. Policymakers are thus left puzzled and frustrated when these policies are ineffective at best, and counter-productive at worst. The result has been criticism and bitter recriminations from both sides focusing on the style – bickering over the merits of bilateral versus multilateral, or over the wisdom or lack thereof of using certain terminology such as “axis of evil,” etc. – rather than the substance of the policies themselves. Without a thorough reconsideration of underlying assumptions and myths the policy community holds about North Korea, there can be no substantive consideration of a new and effective approach.

**Myth: “North Korea’s nuclear ambitions are negotiable for the right price of diplomatic recognition and economic engagement.”**

Another myth that has prevailed in the North Korea policy community since the end of the Cold War is that the North Korean regime is a victim of its isolation and has found itself caught in a trap of its own creation. Because the DPRK is weak and failing (as asserted above), it has no choice but to pursue development of nuclear weapons in order to create a deterrence against a superior South Korea and its ally, the United States. In the meantime, Pyongyang can always use the nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip that will help it to gain entry into the international community, in exchange for retaining survival of the

---

Korea,” *Financial Times*, April 12, 2009.

regime - this would effectively negate the necessity of retaining a deterrence, as the threat from the U.S. and ROK would effectively be removed. For the international community, such a bargain would be cheap since it is assumed that once the North Korean regime sets aside its bellicose stance and opens up to the outside world, the regime will have no choice but to transform gradually and peacefully to eventually be able to integrate smoothly with its southern neighbor.

Contrary to popular perception, these assumptions are held not just by the pro-engagers, but by the “hard-liners” who favor punishment over incentives, for while the latter group may disagree with the method of interacting with “rogue” countries such as North Korea, they inherently believe that North Korea must change and will change, if enough pressure can be inflicted upon the regime to make the “right” choice. Thus, while the two camps seem to represent opposite poles as manifested by the “appeasement Clinton” and “hard-line Bush” administrations, in reality their approaches differed once again more in style than substance. The bitter and divisive debates during the last two decades about the merits or dangers of “sitting down and talk to the enemy face-to-face” in a bilateral or multilateral fashion, as well as the content of the package of carrots and sticks, were used by both sides to blame the other for lack of progress in achieving a denuclearized North Korea, but ultimately served to distract from questioning the underlying assumption that Pyongyang’s nuclear program is a bargaining chip.

Ever since the election of Barack Obama and the ensuing collapse of the Six-Party Talks, the pro-engagers have regained their enthusiasm based on Obama’s pledge to change the tone and tenor of American foreign policy, and his emphasis on being “flexible” and open-minded when dealing with problem states. Thus, they were not shy about sharing their advice, offering suggestions that were generously expansive about the benefits North Korea could receive in exchange for some of the

tough demands that the U.S. should insist on. “The new U.S. president needs to propose a comprehensive menu of sequenced actions toward a fundamentally new relationship with North Korea – political, economic, and strategic. In return, Pyongyang needs to agree to satisfy international norms of behavior, starting with steps to stop exporting nuclear technology and eliminate its nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs. It also needs to welcome full people-to-people relations signifying its willingness to join the rest of the world.”<sup>20</sup> The obvious question one might ask is why would North Korea accept such an agreement? The authors helpfully point out that Washington can effectively test Pyongyang’s sincerity about the nuclear weapons serving as a deterrent against U.S. threats by offering substantive economic engagement including provision of power plants, a diplomatic relationship, and establishing a permanent peace process on the Korean peninsula. Another Korea expert supports this argument by observing that “such an approach could have the effect of making Pyongyang an offer that it would be foolish to refuse, lest it isolate itself further in the international community. It might also force Pyongyang to finally make the strategic decision about its relations with the United States and the international community that has eluded us over the years.”<sup>21</sup>

What these views have in common is the underlying assumption that North Korea would calculate “correctly” that what the U.S. is offering is so beneficial and valuable to the regime that it could hardly refuse, while doing so would only increase pain for North Korea. Yet, is it correct to assume that Pyongyang would view “further isolation from the international community” as making its situation somehow worse? This is only true if one believes that isolation is a condition forced

---

<sup>20</sup>- K.A. Namkung and Leon Sigal, “Setting a New Course with North Korea,” *The Washington Times* Op-ed, October 19, 2008.

<sup>21</sup>- Evans Revere, “President Obama and North Korea: What’s In the Cards?” *Korea Times*, January 14, 2009.

unwillingly upon North Korea, rather than a choice that it embraced and pursued as part of founding the DPRK's *raison d'être*. Here, consideration of North Korea's strategic culture can again provide further insights. The (original) Hermit Kingdom's experience with engaging the international community were distinctly unpleasant and downright traumatic.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century which would mark the era of Korea's final and doomed efforts to remain isolated, foreigners - in particular Westerners - were baffled by Korean resistance to the obvious benefits of opening up their closed society. Ernst Oppert, a German trader and adventurer, after having been rebuffed in his initial attempt to enter Korea to truck and barter in 1866, decided he would raid the tomb of Taewon'gun's father in order to grab his remains and hold them for ransom. "Surely this would get the Koreans to see the virtues of free, or so he thought." But he and his fellow pirates upon landing on the coast were soon met by fierce Korean troops who confronted them and with their "moderately-sized" weapons, "ended Oppert's vandalism, sending his men scampering back to their ships."<sup>22</sup> This episode is revealing not just for the Korean reaction, but for the Western conviction about how Koreans must logically comprehend the obvious benefits being offered.

Another episode illustrates in stark fashion how Korean rationale, when understood within the framework of their strategic culture of "nationalistic survival" carries with it an astonishing logic of its own that nevertheless remains baffling to Westerners. After a century of tolerating off and on stealth Catholic missionaries from Europe, in the 1860s the Korean government launched bloody pogroms against Catholics as it began to fear that Western imperial powers would use their gunboats to support missionary work. The French responded by threatening to

---

<sup>22</sup>-James B. Palais, *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 21.

mount a punitive expedition in retaliation. Koreans found the French position “incomprehensible: they told the French that they would understand perfectly the execution of their own nationals in France, should they try to disseminate Korean views over there.” French troops landed on *Kanghwa* Island anyway in 1866, but the Korean government mobilized twenty thousand men and easily pushed the French forces back to the sea. “This convinced Koreans that their forcible defense policies were correct,” and propelled the French southward, toward their eventual colonization of Indochina.<sup>23</sup> The lesson learned here and embedded deep within Korea’s strategic culture is that brute strength and force can overcome more powerful and advanced military power, and that threats to open Korea on foreign terms should be viewed with suspicion.

There is little evidence that the views in the modern version of the Hermit Kingdom in the North have evolved much from this strategic culture of isolation as preserving the Korean identity of “nationalistic survival.” North Korea’s more recent encounter with the U.S. Navy in the Pueblo incident only reinforces the earlier historical lesson. As the official North Korean version of this episode illustrates:

forty years later, “the U.S. imperialists’ armed spy ship Pueblo is displayed on River Taedong flowing through Pyongyang, which shows the miserable lot of the defeated... After the capture of the ship, the U.S. imperialists mounted a military threat against the DPRK, clamoring that it was seized in the “open sea” and it did not commit any espionage acts. But the tough attitude of the DPRK compelled them to apologize to it for the spy ship’s espionage and hostile acts and sign a document firmly guaranteeing not to let any warships intrude into the territorial water of the DPRK in the future.”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Han-Kyo Kim (ed.), *Studies on Korea: A Scholar’s Guide* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1980), pp. 48-50. Note also that this incident is cited prominently on the DPRK’s official website at <http://www.korea-dpr.com/modern.htm> as a heroic attempt to protect Korea from foreign invasion.

<sup>24</sup> KCNA, official website at <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2009/200901/news23/20090123-09ee.html>.

Further consideration of the propaganda that is still so prevalent throughout North Korean society to realize that all foreign influences are taught to the people as being corruptive, dangerous, and inherently threatening to the North Korean way of life. For the regime itself, isolation of course serves to preserve its own power and legitimacy which would immediately be undermined by openness. If this is the case, why would the North Korean regime fear the prospect of further isolation from the international community, and moreover, accept the “benefits” of openness and engagement with the international community?

### **Conclusion: The Future of U.S. Policy**

The inauguration of a new U.S. President and in particular Barack Obama certainly raised expectations throughout the world about the dawn of a new era in world politics. Yet ironically, when it comes to North Korea policy, the first one hundred days of his presidency have not only revealed little change from the previous Bush administration, but indeed a surprisingly stalwart continuation of existing policies. In retrospect, this should not be so surprising given that candidate Obama campaigned on a foreign policy platform that emphasized pragmatism over ideology. Perhaps the reason that many observers are surprised by the remarkable continuity of the new administration’s current approach to North Korea is that their perception of the Bush administration’s policies is skewed. While labeled and condemned as being “hard-line” and “unilateral” with the goal of regime change, in fact, Bush policy particularly in the later three years was in fact quite the opposite. It ended up being a policy that insisted on a multilateral solution; offered opportunities for engagement; pursued active negotiations, and even offered the possibility for diplomatic engagement and a permanent peace treaty in exchange for denuclearization. Indeed, the Bush administration

suffered criticism from the neo-conservatives for being too soft on North Korea.

For President Obama, pragmatism has indeed prevailed, perhaps with unexpected consequences. Having inherited monumental challenges, including the worst economic conditions in several decades as well as foreign policy crises in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, pragmatism dictates that the possibility for any new or bold approach toward North Korea will have to be postponed. As such, it is apparent that the Obama policy has become a de facto one of crisis prevention or containment rather than resolution, as the recent handling of the North Korean missile launch showed.

Although disappointing for many Korea experts who had anticipated the beginning of a new era in relations with North Korea, this cautious approach may offer the best opportunity for a thorough reexamination of U.S. policy on the Korean peninsula to date. This careful study should go beyond a traditional “policy review” by starting with a blank slate that sweeps away all preconceptions and assumptions about the DPRK and Korea, and takes into careful consideration of Korea’s strategic culture and its effects on North Korean strategic calculations, as was laid out in this article. Then and only then can a realistic and achievable policy vis-à-vis the North be formulated and implemented. Otherwise, we may be doomed to perpetuate the current standoff for several more decades.

■ Article Received: 4/25 ■ Reviewed: 5/19 ■ Revised: 6/1 ■ Accepted: 6/3

## References

- Cummings, Bruce. *Korea's Place in the Sun*. New York, NY: Norton Publishers. 1997.
- Deuchler, Martina. *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys: The Opening of Korea, 1875-1885*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press. 1977.



- Eckert, Carter J., et al. *Korea Old and New: A History*. Seoul: Ilchokak Publishers. 1990.
- Huntington, Samuel P. *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 1968.
- Hwang, Balbina Y. *Globalization, Strategic Culture, and Ideas: Explaining Continuity in Korean Foreign Economic Policy*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. August 2005.
- Iriye, Alira. *Pacific Estrangement: Japanese and American Expansion, 1897-1911*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1972.
- Johnston, Alastair Iain. *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1995.
- Kim, Han-Kyo, ed. *Studies on Korea: A Scholar's Guide*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press. 1980.
- Kim, Tong. "Obama Can Disarm Nuclear North Korea." Opinion piece, *Korea Times*. January 23, 2009.
- Korean Central News Agency*. Official website at <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2009/200901/news23/20090123-09ee.html>.
- Lankov, Andrei. "Sanctions will Have No Effect on North Korea." *Financial Times*. April 12, 2009.
- Namkung, K.A. and Leon Sigal. "Setting a New Course with North Korea." *The Washington Times* Op-ed. October 19, 2008.
- Oh, Kongdan, ed. *Korea Briefing 1997-1999: Challenges and Change at the Turn of the Century*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe. 2000.
- Palais, James B. *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1975.
- Revere, Evans. "President Obama and North Korea: What's In the Cards?" *Korea Times*. January 14, 2009.
- Sneider, Daniel. "Let Them Eat Rockets." *New York Times* Op-ed. April 9, 2009.
- Stares, Paul B. and Joel S. Wit. "Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea." *Council on Foreign Relations Special Report*, No. 42. January 2009. Washington, DC.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*, transl. George Lawrence. New York: Harper Collins. 1966.

Weber, Max. "Social Psychology of the World's Religions" in from *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Gerth & C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press. 1958.