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Unraveling North Korea's Preferences and Managing its Nuclear Threat¹

Monti Narayan Datta²

"Though this be madness, yet there is method in't."

—*Hamlet* (Act 2, Scene 2)

Introduction

The Problem: North Korea is "Crazy," and has Nuclear Weapons

Chief among US national security concerns is the North Korean nuclear threat. Led by its reclusive, enigmatic leader, Kim Jong Il, the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) is one of the last bastions of communism, representing a strategic and ideological challenge for the United States in the post-9/11 era.³ So great is the perceived threat of the DPRK, that in his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush proclaimed, "States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger."⁴ Moreover, President Bush argued it is in within the rights of the United States to strike first against such threats, lest the nation be caught off-guard again and suffer the harrowing consequences of another September 11.⁵

Although North Korea has yet to test a nuclear weapon, most security experts agree Pyongyang has at least enough fissile material and the technical expertise to construct a handful

¹ I wish to thank Angela Haeusler, Clark Murdock, Tara Murphy, Miroslav Nincic, David Palkki, Owen Price, Michael Wheeler, and others from the May 19th 2006 CSIS: PONI Young Scholars meeting for their helpful comments. Any errors are, of course, my own.

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³ It is important to demarcate contemporary international politics before and after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. After this event, the White House implemented the "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," better known as "The Bush Doctrine," in which it became US policy to, "make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them." This policy led the White House to invade Iraq without consent from its major allies, signaling a significant shift in US foreign policy from multilateralism to unilateralism.

⁴ To read the full-text of President Bush's State of the Union address, please go to: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

⁵ In his 2002 State of the Union Address, President Bush remarked, "I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons."

of crude nuclear bombs.⁶ Moreover, using its long-range, intercontinental Taepodong-2 missile, the DPRK could launch an attack against South Korea, Japan, or even the United States (e.g., Hawaii, Alaska, and San Francisco).⁷ Thus, with one well-placed strike, North Korea could devastate a major American city.

Given the isolated and mysterious nature of Kim Jong Il, and the probability that the DPRK has nuclear weapons, two key questions arise for debate: (1) How can the United States best understand the behavior and preferences of the DPRK? (2) What policy options should Washington consider in dealing with the North Korean nuclear threat?

Is Kim Jong Il Crazy?

For years, there has been a perception among some Washington elites that Kim Jong Il is bizarre, or simply outright “crazy.” There are at least two reasons for this perception. First, rumors have circulated for decades about Kim’s behavior, perhaps the most famous of which was his orchestration of the 1978 kidnapping of South Korea’s top movie starlet, Choi En-hui and her director husband Shin Sang-ok. Upon securing these two elites from the South Korean film industry, Kim allegedly kept the couple imprisoned for four years, later forced them to produce several movies, and invested tens of millions of dollars in their cinematic endeavors before they finally escaped. Kim is also known for spending significant amounts of time watching videos in seclusion, especially watching Warner Bros. cartoons featuring Donald Duck when he is not busy with his “Pleasure Squad,” a group of Korean women at his service. Given that Kim has made few public appearances, such rumors have fueled speculation over his state of mind, ranging from descriptions of him as an eccentric playboy to a crazy dictator.

Second, under Kim Jong Il’s leadership, Pyongyang has consistently volleyed harsh anti-American rhetoric against the United States, not to mention sporadic missile tests over the Sea of Japan—despite America’s unflagging humanitarian assistance to the DPRK and its repeated efforts to establish multilateral talks. Perhaps for such reasons, political elites such as Paul Wolfowitz, a key architect of the Iraq War, has professed, “I’m more profoundly skeptical of North Korea than of any other country—both how they think, which I don’t understand, and the series of bizarre things they have done.”⁸ Along these lines, influential newspapers, such as the *Wall Street Journal*, have repeatedly editorialized North Korea as a “crazy rogue.”⁹

⁶ Hecker, Siegfried: “Technical Summary of DPRK Nuclear Program,” Carnegie International Non-proliferation Conference, (Washington, DC, 2005).

⁷ As of June 18, 2006, *The New York Times* reported, “North Korea appears to have completed fueling of an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the United States ...a move that greatly increases the probability that Pyongyang will actually go ahead with a launch.”

⁸ Snyder, Scott: *Negotiating on the Edge: North Korean Negotiating Behavior* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006).

⁹ See, for example: “Those Dictator ‘Dominoes,’” *The Wall Street Journal*. [Apr 15, 2003](#); and “Interdicting North Korea,” *The Wall Street Journal*. [Apr 28, 2003](#).

North Korea is not “Evil” or “Crazy”; Washington Should Engage Pyongyang

Contrary to the views of some Washington elites that North Korea is an evil, crazy regime, I argue North Korea is a rational actor—a weak-state¹⁰ simply seeking to survive within an international system characterized by anarchy, self-help, and fledging global norms.¹¹ Although one may understandably construe the behavior of Kim Jong Il—and by extension, the behavior of North Korea—as erratic or perhaps even criminal, there is a logic to the North Korean mind, based on a unique blend of cultural and structural forces.¹² To borrow from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, there is a “method” to the apparent “madness” of Kim Jong Il. Kim is a shrewd tactician who knows exactly what he is doing.

Furthermore, I argue it is in Washington’s best interests to look beyond the apparent irrationality of Kim, and instead politically and economically engage Pyongyang with the intention to transform the current relationship from one of enmity to one of trust.¹³ Experience suggests a policy of tough measures (e.g., political alienation, economic sanctions and military intervention) are ineffective tools for the United States to use when coercing weak states, because the long-term costs typically outweigh the short-term benefits. Rather, a policy of cooperative engagement with Pyongyang will help Washington improve the odds in achieving its foreign policy objectives: to democratize North Korea, diffuse its nuclear weapons ambitions, and promote peaceful reunification with South Korea.¹⁴

Plan of this Essay

I begin this essay with an overview of US foreign policy toward North Korea to date, and illustrate that Washington’s traditional policy of political, economic, and military sanctions against Pyongyang have resulted in only limited success at best. Next, I discuss the manner in which one may interpret North Korea’s behavior as rational, based on a unique set of cultural and structural factors, which I detail. This is particularly important: the prevalent stereotype about North Korea (at least among some Washington elites) is that Pyongyang is simply out of

¹⁰ I define a weak state as a nation that lacks a strong civil society, and is easily subject to despotism and corruption, contrary to the will of its suppressed people.

¹¹ Classic works that describe the nature of the international system include Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw Hill, 1979), and Robert O. Keohane and Joseph Nye’s *Power and Interdependence 3rd edition* (Longman, 2000).

¹² Throughout the rest of this essay, I use the terms Kim Jong Il, DPRK, North Korea, and Pyongyang interchangeably.

¹³ Part of the theoretical rationale of this argument is that anarchy is what states make of it. That is, states within the international system can change how they come to view and interpret one another. Because of this, states can transform their relations from hostile to benign. For an excellent theoretical discussion of this “constructivist” framework, see Alexander Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ For more details regarding official US policy toward the DPRK, see: www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2792.htm

its mind and unpredictable. Thus, it is important to demystify the apparently “bizarre” and “evil” behavior of the DPRK. I conclude this essay with a series of policy recommendations for Washington to consider, using an approach that privileges a policy of cooperative engagement.

Past and Present US Policy toward North Korea: A Critique

Before proposing policy recommendations to tackle the North Korean nuclear threat, it is important to review US policy toward the DPRK to date, reflect on what has and has not worked, and project future outcomes based on such behavior. In brief, for the past fifty years, the United States has adhered to a hard-line policy of economic sanctions¹⁵, diplomatic alienation, and military coercion toward North Korea, yielding little substantial results.

Military Policy toward the DPRK

Militarily, US policy toward the DPRK over the past fifty years has been harsh, yielding little success. Throughout the Cold War, the US focused primarily on a policy of containment, seeking to balance against the rising hegemonic power of the USSR. In 1948, amidst the aftermath of the Second World War, the two superpowers divided and occupied the Korean peninsula along the 38th parallel, instigating a geopolitical contest of strength. To the south of the 38th parallel, the US supported Syngman Rhee’s democratic government; to the north, the USSR backed Kim Il Sung’s communist regime. When Kim invaded the south in 1950 to reunify the peninsula on communist terms, the US committed itself to a three-year proxy war against the USSR upon Korean soil, ultimately culminating in the deaths of over one-million Koreans and thirty-six thousand Americans.

Since the end of the Korean War, Washington has consistently maintained an upwards of 40,000 American troops on the peninsula, traditionally along the 38th parallel’s Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), as a “tripwire” to deter Pyongyang from invading again, lest it directly attack US forces and face certain retaliation. Seen from Korea’s perspective, the DMZ has come to symbolize the nation’s splintered identity, in which two foreign powers arbitrarily divided thousands of families that would never meet again.¹⁶

¹⁵ One may define sanctions as “the temporary abrogation of normal state-to-state relations to pressure target states into changing specified policies or modifying behavior in suggested directions.” Source: Arne Tostensen and Beate Bull. “Are Smart Sanctions Feasible?” *World Politics* Vol. 54., No. 3, 2002.

¹⁶ This was not the first time that Koreans have blamed the United States, at least in part, for its woes. Prior to Korea’s division at the 38th parallel, Japan (in explicit agreement with US President Theodore Roosevelt at the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905 to end the Russo-Japanese War), colonized the peninsula from 1910 to 1945, and sanctioned a searing series of punitive measures against Koreans, including forced labor, conscription, cultural assimilation, and sexual slavery. Roosevelt would later go on to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for his negotiation efforts at Portsmouth.

How can one make sense of this? From a neorealist¹⁷ perspective of international politics, the US understandably took a tough stance opposing North Korea during the Cold War, as it engaged in a proxy-war to balance against the burgeoning might of the USSR. At the time, the United States knew little about the motivations and capacity of the USSR, and the “Red Scare” was very real. The least Washington could do was prevent the spread of communism. Uncertain of the scope with which communism was a significant threat to its interests, Washington overcompensated and aggressively implemented its policy of containment. Along these lines, one may reason that the ravages of the Korean War, such as the loss of one-million Korean lives, were an unfortunate, though necessary “evil” in the ideological war against totalitarianism.

Yet, despite such hard-line measures, the evidence appears very weak that the US has been successful in its military policy toward North Korea. The North Korean regime survives to this day, and still threatens the US national interest, especially with its growing array of nuclear weapons delivery technologies, such as its Taepodong-2 missile, the development of which may eventually fall into an uncomfortable range of pinpoint accuracy. Despite a bloody, three-year conflict during the 1950s and the subsequent military presence of tens of thousands of US troops along the DMZ, little has changed for the better. On the contrary, US military personnel have faced a long history of violence in South Korea, stoking anti-American sentiment.¹⁸ Further, the Korean War remains inconclusive: there has yet to be a formal peace treaty reached between North and South Korea, and the two nations are still technically at a state of war.

Furthermore, despite the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, it has appeared somewhat hypocritical that the United States would not work more aggressively in establishing democracy and capitalism in weak communist states—like North Korea—against which it once fought ferociously to defeat and democratize. With the Soviet threat effectively neutralized in the early 1990s, the US had a ripe opportunity to plant the seeds of political and economic ties with North Korea. Yet, Washington did not engage Pyongyang nearly as much as one might expect of a nation that has loudly trumpeted its core principles of capitalism, democracy, and freedom. One reason for this lack of action may be the US was simply expecting the DPRK to collapse on its own, along with the USSR, like dominoes toppling in succession across the world’s stage of newly emerging democracies.

Unfortunately, Washington got it wrong. Over the past two decades, Pyongyang has become one of the most tenacious weak-states in history, devoting up to one-quarter of its

¹⁷ By neorealist, I refer to the dominant school of thought in international politics that suggests states seek to survive within an international system characterized by anarchy and self-help. See, for example, Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw/Hill, 1979).

¹⁸ The most recent incident occurred in July 2002, when two US soldiers were charged over the deaths of two South Korean school girls, struck by an armored vehicle during a training exercise.

annual gross national product to military developments. Even with reports of widespread starvation and poverty throughout the countryside, the DPRK has diverted most of its resources to ensuring the military security of its regime. Despite fifty-years of Washington's tough military policies, Pyongyang remains more of a threat today than ever.

Economic Policy toward the DPRK

Economically, US policy toward Pyongyang has aimed to exclude, isolate, and implode the North Korean economy. Except for humanitarian relief efforts, American products have rarely reached North Korea's ports. Simultaneously, the US has encouraged many of its allies to follow suit, resulting in widespread economic isolation of the DPRK over the past fifty years.

By economically isolating North Korea, the United States has successfully blocked the DPRK's access to a wide array of trading partners, crippling its chances of globalizing and benefiting from the law of comparative advantage.¹⁹ Moreover, since the collapse of the USSR, US-led economic sanctions have placed tremendous pressure on the DPRK, and have pushed the regime to the brink of collapse. Whereas prior to 1989 North Korea had relied heavily on Russia and China for economic aid, since the dissolution of the USSR, North Korea has received scant economic assistance. For a while, it seemed that this hard-line approach of US economic policy toward the DPRK was working. North Korea was literally starving to death, and had no choice but to approach its enemies for some much-needed assistance.

Yet, in the early 1990s, the widespread famine in North Korea necessitated a change in how Pyongyang interacted with its enemies in a way that Washington most likely did not consider. Washington's tough economic sanctions served to exasperate rather than breakdown the North Korean regime. Backed into a corner, Pyongyang had little choice but to fight, not with weapons (as that would be sheer suicide), but rather with the perceived threat of using its nuclear weapons. This situation evolved into the North Korean nuclear crisis of 1993-94.

Diplomatic Policy

Diplomatically, US policy toward North Korea has been dysfunctional. Relations between the two countries were put to the test and barely passed during the 1993-94 nuclear crisis. On the verge of economic collapse, Pyongyang threatened to withdraw from the NPT and reprocess plutonium from the spent fuel rods from its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, the fissile material of which it could convert into simple nuclear bombs for use against its enemies, sale to the highest bidder, or both. Although the threat that North Korea would play its 'nuclear card' was perhaps the iciest and least-expected tactic in the post-Cold War era, former President Jimmy Carter (unbeknownst to the Clinton Administration) brokered eleventh-hour

¹⁹ The Theory of Comparative Advantage rests primarily on David Ricardo's 1817 book, *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, in which he argues it is cost-effective for a nation to trade those goods and services in which it has a relative advantage in producing.

negotiations, which eventually gave way to the 1994 Agreed Framework. In exchange for North Korea's assurances that it would not to withdraw from the NPT and would suspend its nuclear weapons ambitions, the treaty called for the US to assist the North with substantial food, fuel, and two proliferation-resistant, light-water nuclear reactors. North Korea got what it needed through its pretense as a tough renegade.

Yet, the terms of the 1994 Agreed Framework have never fully materialized, aggravating subsequent diplomatic relations between the US and DPRK. From the North Korean perspective, the US appears never to have delivered on its promise to help construct the two proliferation-resistant, light-water nuclear reactors. After glimmers of diplomatic progress upon Secretary of State Madeline Albright's follow-up visit in 1998, Pyongyang appeared miffed when the incoming Bush Administration would not follow suit and send more high-level VIPs to Pyongyang for additional talks.

At the same time, from the US side, North Korea appears never to have planned to keep its promise of nonproliferation, as evinced by withdrawing from the NPT in 2002, breaking the seals on its reprocessing facilities in Yongbyon, and expelling weapons inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency. Meanwhile, the White House has gone at great lengths to admonish Pyongyang, and the 2005 six-party non-proliferation talks failed. North Korea has maintained it will neither dismantle its nuclear weapons program nor rejoin the NPT until it has received the two light-water nuclear reactors, per the 1994 Agreed Framework. Indeed, from February 2003 to March 2005, North Korea evidently reprocessed an estimated 10 to 14 kg of plutonium, enough to make two crude nuclear bombs.²⁰

Is Current US Policy toward the DPRK Effective?

Thus, over the past fifty years, the US has pursued a policy of tough military, political, and economic sanctions toward the DPRK, most recently embodied in President Bush's aforementioned "axis of evil" speech. Clearly, such sanctions have conveyed a sense of strength, of hyper-masculinity, and have conformed to the universally held value that bad deeds must not go unpunished. As one scholar put it, "Negative sanctions have become psychologically linked with such characteristics as courage, honor, and masculinity."²¹ In short, sanctions feel good, not only for those politicians who might be able to ride to reelection victory on the crest of though-talk against rogue states, but also as a tool to rally the mass public and direct hostility toward another nation in order to shore-up domestic political support and divert attention from more pressing issues at home.

²⁰ Hecker, Siegfried. 2005. "Technical Summary of DPRK Nuclear Program." 2005 Carnegie International Non-proliferation Conference, Washington, DC

²¹ "The Power of Positive Sanctions," *World Politics*, Vol.24, No.1, 1971, p.34.

If the US maintains its current hard-line policy toward North Korea, then the Bush Doctrine could very well be successful, as it has in dismantling the regime in Iraq.²² However, given the differences between Iraq and North Korea, it would behoove the Bush Administration to consider North Korea in a different light, and think twice before applying “The Bush Doctrine,” for at least two key reasons.

First, North Korea almost certainly possesses weapons of mass destruction—including nuclear weapons. If Kim Jong Il so chose, he could unleash a devastating attack upon an American ally or America itself. This situation compares differently with the case of Iraq. Saddam Hussein was never in possession of nuclear weapons, and the US invaded Iraq with the comfort of knowing a nuclear exchange would not occur. If the US were to preemptively attack North Korea, however, it would be with the uncertainty to triggering a nuclear exchange, or worse yet, a limited-scale nuclear war.

Second, if the US maintains its current hard-line trade embargo, then it will continue to force North Korea into economic collapse, but this tactic could be at the expense of forcing the North Korean regime to act under drastic measures, such as selling its weapons of mass destruction to other anti-American states for a handsome profit. By tightening the economic noose, the US may be encouraging North Korea to sell its weapons technologies to the highest bidder.

Clearly, then, it would seem that tough sanctions have not proved to be in the best interests of the United States. Perhaps the reason for this is that US policy makers ought to reconsider their views and perspectives on the North Korea regime, and try harder at understanding what makes Pyongyang tick.

The Logic of North Korean Behavior

Now that we have some background about US-DPRK relations to date, it is time to unpack the stereotypical, irrational behavior of Pyongyang, and try to explain why North Korea has behaved in the way it has. Based on the assumption that governments and its leaders are rational actors with unique and ordered preferences, one can explain North Korea’s behavior quite well by considering an interaction of cultural and structural factors.

Cultural Factors Shaping the DPRK

In particular, three cultural factors—Confucianism, the cult of Kim Il Sung, and self-reliance (*juche*) interact to help explain North Korea’s behavior, and may provide US policy makers with more traction on how to understand the North Korean approach to negotiations.

Confucianism: The first of these three factors is Confucianism. More than any other factor, Confucianism represents the ideological foundation upon which one may broadly

²² Although the treat of civil war in Iraq looms.

interpret North Korean behavior. Based on a male-dominated hierarchy of filial piety and loyalty, Confucianism has structured relationships in all walks of Korean society, public and private, for hundreds of years, and remains deeply ingrained in even the most trivial of social interactions to this day.

In Korean society, it is the norm to consider public leaders, such as teachers or politicians, as members of one's extended family. One can carry the analogy further, and suggest that every public sphere of influence—corporations, schools, hospitals, banks, etc.—has a unique “family” order. For instance, it is common for employees at work to call one another “older brother” or “older sister” as a sign of closeness, loyalty, and respect, independent of any actual blood ties.

Because of the preponderance of such surrogate family structures throughout Korean society, Confucianism promotes collectivism as a prominent dynamic in social relationships. Compared to the individualism of the west, in which the “I can” spirit of America is a source of pride and respect, in Korea a spirit of “we can” is far more socially acceptable. In Korean culture, it is uncommon for individuals to work, socialize, or solve problems alone; such behavior disrupts the social harmony and centrality of the group.

Because Confucianist ties form the core-structure of social relations in Korea, North Koreans typically desire a favorable, convivial atmosphere (*punŭigi*), which provides the tone and mood of the overall external negotiation environment, before serious, effective negotiations can take place. From the manifestation of *punŭigi*, comes the possibility of fostering good *kibun*, or good feelings, which can serve as the foundation for mutual respect and trust which can in turn generate good negotiations. *Kibun* is the social lubricant that keeps personal relationships running. Individuals with an abundance of good *kibun* are more likely to grant favors and provide more leniency if things go awry.

Yet, the maintenance of good *kibun* is premised on the notion of keeping close personal ties over time—not ad-hoc diplomacy during crisis management, such as the 1994 Agreed Framework. Perhaps the one individual who held the lynchpin of the Agreed Framework together was former President Jimmy Carter, who had sufficiently good *kibun* with North Korea's former leader, Kim Il Sung, to come to Pyongyang and initiate negotiations upon the leaders' request. Had there been there only marginally positive *kibun* between Carter and Kim, one may surmise the 1994 Agreed Framework may never have taken place.

Thus, if the *kibun* is unfavorable, there is little incentive for North Korean negotiators to propose policy alternatives that may expose their weaknesses. If the *kibun* is favorable, however, North Korean negotiators are more likely to expose their flaws and not feel at a disadvantage. This is a key element of negotiations with North Korea that one cannot overemphasize in terms of importance. Given this cultural insight, one must take great care in cultivating *punŭigi*, so that good *kibun* will be abundant, and negotiations can flow in a spirit of cooperation and trust. It does not help, nor will it probably ever help Washington to cultivate a

hostile atmosphere in which good *kibun* is negligible. A statement such as North Korea is part of an “axis of evil” does not help. On the contrary, it drastically reduces the likelihood of good negotiations.

The Cult of Kim Il Sung

In addition to the rich cultural intricacies of Confucianism, another key element to understanding the DPRK is the enduring legacy of its founder, Kim Il Sung. Kim adapted Korea’s Confucianist heritage to his advantage, not only solidifying his position as the ruler of North Korea, but also securing his cult-like status as the patriarch of the nation, affectionately known among the North Korean people to this day as their “Great Leader.”

Applying the key Confucian elements of filial loyalty and piety, Kim carefully constructed an image of himself as the father of the nation, from the founding of the DPRK in 1948 to his death in 1994. Symbolically, Kim ensured his image would adorn houses, public places, and even the lapel of every North Korean citizen.²³ He also had his military accomplishments against the Japanese during World War II canonized in school textbooks, whereby generations of schoolchildren would come to associate him with an unassailable, god-like status.

Clearly, Kim was not a god, yet he associated his name and image with the regalia of one and shrewdly positioned himself as an unassailable champion of the North Korean people. Having full control of the media and the dissemination of information throughout the country, Kim was in a position to create his own mythology. Perhaps as some evidence of public reception of his cult-like status, upon his death in 1994, citizens of Pyongyang cast themselves on the streets, weeping and gnashing their teeth in grief and despair.²⁴

Lest one think that this near-deification of Kim Il Sung was limited only to the “Great Leader,” Kim spent his career politically socializing North Korea to accept his son, Kim Jong Il, as its “Dear Leader.” When Kim Sr. died, Kim Jr. declared a three-year period of mourning for his father, during which he grasped full control of the North Korean regime with no reported incident of others questioning his authority to rule. One cannot overstate the importance of the cult of Kim Il Sung. As the father of the nation, the word of Kim Il Sung was supreme among the North Korean people. As the son of the nation, the word of Kim Jong Il has become supreme among the North Korean people.

Through this culturalist lens, one can perhaps see reasons why North Korea has consistently demanded face-to-face bilateral negotiations with the United States over the past fifty years. According to the Confucian credo and the cult of Kim Il Sung, a father is superior to other members of the family, yet fathers are each other's equals. One may draw an analogy

²³ Snyder, Scott. 2006. *Negotiating on the Edge: North Korean Negotiating Behavior*, Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press.

²⁴ Kirk, Donald. 1994. “The View from South of the DMZ,” *The National Review*, August 1, 1994.

between fathers and nation-states, and argue that, because the North Korean government (father) and the US government (father) are each other's equals, Pyongyang has long thought that Washington should engage in direct negotiations, on a basis of patriarchal equality.

Self-reliance (juche)

The last of the cultural variables explaining the DPRK's behavior is the idea of self-reliance (*juche*). The idea behind *juche* originates from early Korean history, and suggests rectitude over adversity. For hundreds of years, the people of the Korean peninsula have defended themselves from foreign aggression by Mongolians, Manchurians, Han Chinese, Japanese pirates, and samurai. Each invasion helped forge a belief-system of victimization among the Korean people.²⁵ From such experiences, Korea would earn the epithet, "the hermit kingdom," as a country desirous to stay isolated and independent of foreign influence. When Kim Il Sung took control of North Korea in 1948, he adapted Communism to the uniqueness of the Korean experience and privileged the role of isolationism and *juche* as a way to unite and defend the country from foreign invaders, particularly Japan and the United States.

It is easy for critics to point out the apparent hypocrisy of *juche* in modern times. Some wonder, how can North Korea be self-reliant if it does not have enough food, clothes or medicine to take care of its citizens? How can Kim Jong Il afford to keep his people in poverty when it would be economically more profitable to open up the country to a free-market system? The answer lay in understanding that *juche* is not about material self-reliance per se as much as it is about maintaining dignity and composure in the face of adversity. Throughout the hundreds of years in which foreign powers invaded their homeland, Koreans have contended with generations of inhumane treatment. Japanese, Chinese, and later US forces would burn homes and villages, destroy roads and schools, as blood and battles spilled across the peninsula. Yet, Koreans strove to maintain their sense of pride and self-worth throughout such ordeals. In this manner, one may view *juche* as independent of material wealth or power.

Structural Factors Shaping the DPRK

In addition to characterizing North Korea according to these three cultural elements—Confucianism, the cult of Kim Il Sung, and *juche*—North Korea is structurally a weak state within an anarchic system of self-help and limited international institutions. No longer reliant on the USSR and China for support, North Korea is one of the worlds' poorest nations.

Backed into a corner, as it were, and facing political and economic isolation, it has been in North Korea's interests to draw international attention using unorthodox, unconventional tactics, such as crisis diplomacy, if necessary, to secure its survival and well-being. As a nation that has traditionally privileged *juche*, North Korea may have had little choice but to play the

²⁵ Lee, G. "Juche." *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 1. (2003).

“nuclear card” upon the collapse of the USSR as a way to command the attention and respect of the international community. By leveraging its most important geopolitical asset—nuclear weapons, or at least the perception of having nuclear weapons—North Korea could successfully extract concessions from much more powerful states that would otherwise perhaps have had little incentive to become involved. Missile testing, bellicose rhetoric, threatening to withdraw from pivotal treaties—such are the maneuvers that North Korea pulls out from proverbial bag of tricks from time to time when it wants to command the attention of major powers in the world.

When forced to approach external powers for much-needed foreign assistance, North Korea can become fixated on its image of self-reliance to the extent that it will only enter into negotiations only if appears to have the upper-hand, even if bluffing. Because of its deep-seated belief in *juche*, North Korea cannot explicitly ask for assistance. If it asks, it appears needful—the antithesis of the North Korean identity. Instead, North Korea must create a situation in which the reception of much-needed assistance is merely incidental to an apparently larger issue of importance, such as its withdrawal from the NPT in 1993, after which Washington consented to Pyongyang’s concessions.

Such reliance on *juche* occurs not only in international crises, but also during any negotiation process with other nations. So revered is the cult of Kim Il Sung that any offense to the “Great Leader” during negotiations can result in their immediate suspension. From time to time, US policy makers may inadvertently insult Kim Il Sung, whereupon North Korean diplomats will subordinate any pressing matters on the negotiation table to defend the reputation of the “Great Leader.” For instance, during the recent six-party non-proliferation talks, Vice President Dick Cheney labeled Kim Jong Il on CNN’s “Larry King Live” “one of the world’s more irresponsible leaders.” Immediately afterwards, North Korean officials vowed not to return to the nuclear bargaining table unless it received an apology from the United States for making hostile remarks about its leadership.²⁶ Although one might be hard-pressed to conclude that Cheney’s comments effectively stymied the six-party talks, his words clearly did not help.

The Logic of Positive Engagement

Rather than apply punitive measures against Pyongyang, as it has against Iraq, it is in Washington’s best interests to politically and economically engage Pyongyang and gradually transform the current relationship from one of enmity to one of trust. There are several why a diplomatic solution with North Korea is highly desirable, in lieu of military options. First, US armed forces will be preoccupied in Iraq (and possibly Iran) for the near future, and thus the US military lacks the resources to fight another war. Second, because of the high likelihood that North Korea already possesses at least one crude nuclear weapon and the missile technology to

²⁶ Source: <http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/06/02/northkorea.cheney/>

deliver it to one of America's allies (e.g., Seoul or Tokyo), a military intervention into North Korea could quickly become a limited scale nuclear conflict with catastrophic results. Third, the American people have grown increasingly weary of a war-prone administration that has premised many of its pre-war justifications on dubious intelligence, to the extent that almost no American would likely desire a war with North Korea. Finally, if North Korea's economy collapsed, this is not something many of its regional neighbors might desire. In particular, South Korea would not relish the prospect of absorbing North Korea and rehabilitating its economy. It saw how hard a time West Germany had with East Germany, and it knows that the local difficulties would be much greater.

As mentioned earlier, President Bush has labeled North Korea part of an "axis of evil," implying that North Korea is an evil regime that somehow needs to be purged of its evilness. Although such rhetoric is persuasive to some extent in the context of an apprehensive and understandably angry post-9/11 American public, I believe it is fundamentally flawed; such language generates a self-fulfilling prophecy. If President Bush believes, or constructs North Korea to be "evil," then he will only encourage political, economic and military policies based on a lack of trust, similar to the prisoner's dilemma. In the prisoner's dilemma, two criminals are in police-custody, held in separate rooms, and offered a separate deal to incriminate the other. Since both prisoners do not trust one another, they invariably opt for the worst strategy of defection, thus ensuring each receives the greatest amount of mutual punishment. In the world of nuclear weapons, mutual punishment could mean mutual annihilation via nuclear weapons.

In a recent hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Barbara Boxer echoed the negative repercussions of espousing President Bush's harsh rhetoric against the "axis of evil":

"You know about North Korea's history—isolation, a little paranoia, mistrustful, and the rest. And you're sitting in North Korea, and the president of the only superpower in the world lists three countries, and you're the second one on the list, and the first one is about to be invaded ... Now he's sitting there, and we know he's already isolated, is—he's got horrible economic problems and the rest. And he's thinking, 'I'm probably next.'"

Senator Boxer presents a vivid and striking interpretation of how Kim Jong Il might have interpreted President Bush's bellicose remarks. With Kim possibly thinking that the US will soon demolish his regime, just as the US has neatly disposed of Saddam Hussein's regime, how can the US ever expect North Korea to come to the table of diplomacy and cooperate? To transform its adversarial relationship, Washington must engage Pyongyang as a peer in the eyes of the international community. If Washington could offer Pyongyang more reassurances that its security needs would be met, then North Korea might stop playing its "nuclear card"

and instead focus more on rebuilding its economy and infrastructure. Surely Kim would want to see his country become more wealthy and thereby more self-sufficient, a key element of the North Korean cultural ideology of *juche*. If Washington could take the moral high ground and approach North Korea in a spirit of reconciliation and trust then Pyongyang might favorably respond. Indeed, as Arnold Wolfers argues, “there are many occasions when disputes can be settled peacefully and when enmity can be eliminated or avoided, provided one side at least has enough courage, imagination and initiative. Sometimes a spirit of conciliation or even of generosity can do wonders in evoking a ready and sincere response.”²⁷ North Korea only wants to be a strong, stable country, not starving and weak as it is now. Instead of continuing to follow a fifty-year old policy of mutual mistrust, it is time for the United States to take the higher ground and give North Korea the benefit of the doubt.

Policy Recommendations

To socially transform the relationship between the US and North Korea, I believe that the US—and more specifically the Bush Administration—should articulate the following confidence building measures.

Improve Diplomatic Relations with North Korea

First, the US should show North Korea diplomatic courtesy, respect, and recognition. To this day, the US has never diplomatically recognized the DPRK, nor has it ever received a North Korean head of state. There has never been an American embassy in Pyongyang, nor has there ever been a North Korean embassy in Washington, DC. Indeed, the political situation is so harried that whenever North Korean senior officials want to communicate messages to the Bush Administration, they do so through back channels such as meeting informally with New Mexico governor Bill Richardson, who then travels to the White House and gives President Bush their message.

The US should directly engage North Korea by formally establishing full diplomatic relations. The US should establish an American embassy in Pyongyang, and North Korea should open an embassy Washington, DC. President Bush should invite North Korean VIPs to the White House for a state dinner. Moreover, for the time being, Washington should stop proposing multilateral talks with Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul and Moscow and instead directly engage Pyongyang in a series of high-level bilateral talks. Although it is true that North Korea threatens all of these parties in the Pacific, it would be to the advantage of the United States to confront North Korea. After all, the US has nearly 40,000 troops stationed along the DMZ. It is the US that has severed its economic ties with North Korea (Japan, South Korea, China and Russia are all major trading partners of North Korea). The United States has labeled North Korea as part of

²⁷ *World Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Jan., 1949)

an “axis of evil.” If Washington continues to hide behind the wall of multilateral talks then it will never have any significant, direct contact with Pyongyang. President Bush should send Condoleezza Rice — as a very high-level US government representative — to meet with Kim Jong Il and offer a formal non-aggression treaty, assuring the North Korean regime in the eyes of the world that Washington will never initiate a first strike against Pyongyang. The US should sign the non-aggression treaty under full media attention in the White House Rose Garden. In exchange for this diplomatic courtesy, respect and recognition, I believe North Korea would be more likely to offer to dismantle its nuclear weapons program with the help of the United Nations.

What would the United States have to lose in normalizing diplomatic relations with North Korea? The US could avoid the devastating nuclear holocaust that would ensue if North Korea continues to feel threatened or isolated and decides to retaliate against an invasion/regime change. What North Korean diplomat would not want to be party to an official White House reception? After all, a large part of East Asian culture has to deal with the concept of “saving face,” which means that a leader or an official has to look as if he is being well taken care of, or catered to, in order for someone to get him do to what is needed. There has been enough pressure between Washington and Pyongyang; now is the time for hand shaking.

Improve Economic Relations

Second, the US should engage economically with North Korea and gain access to the populace. The US must renegotiate the 1994 Agreed Framework in good faith and finally deliver on its promise of normalizing economic trade and finishing the construction of the two light-water reactors that it had originally promised North Korea over ten years ago under the Clinton Administration. Washington should pursue an aggressive strategy with Pyongyang to allow American corporations to start investing in business ventures with North Korea. With an infusion of economic support, America will be able to have a significant amount of influence over North Korea in terms of soft power, such as the media and popular culture. Through the venue of economic engagement, America will be able to wield a tremendous amount of influence over the thoughts and opinions and attitudes of North Koreans who come to frequent quintessential American institutions such as McDonalds and who come to watch popular movies like “Spider-Man.” Ultimately, soft power is more effective than hard power.

Let North and South Korea Work Out Their Own Problems

Third, the US should make a show of trust and respect for the self-determination of both Koreas. The US should withdraw all of its troops from the Korean peninsula, just as the Carter

Administration proposed twenty-five years ago.²⁸ While American troops will remain nearby in Japan, Washington should make it abundantly clear to Pyongyang that it will pursue a policy of noninterference between North and South Korea, which should help speed up the reunification process. With Washington out of the equation, the two Koreas can finally negotiate without intrusion from the outside community.

Conclusion

Clearly, these are drastic proposals that I would not expect President Bush to accept at first. However, Washington must stop looking at the short-term and set its sights on the long-term. We have a “war on terrorism” because the US has made so many enemies throughout the world. If the US continues to cultivate relationships based on empty promises (the 1994 Agreed Framework), harsh language (President Bush’s “axis of evil” speech), and lack of diplomacy (President Bush’s hard-line “no negotiation” approach and refusal to engage in direct talks with North Korea until it disarms), then Washington will continue to sow the seeds of doubt, mistrust, and enmity. The US can only permanently disarm the North Korean nuclear threat through a policy of trust and a mutually beneficial game of reciprocity.

²⁸ One might argue that, if the US withdraws all of its troops from the Korean peninsula, then this might be an incentive for North Korea to march into South Korea. After all, Kim Il Sung had led an invasion into South Korea fifty-years ago, perhaps in part because there was no “tripwire” as a deterrent. However, the presence of US troops today in South Korea is no longer required. South Korean troops are well equipped, and US forces are nearby in Japan, and could launch a conventional strike within minutes. Moreover, increasing levels of anti-American sentiment in South Korea suggest the US military is not desired.