

**CHALLENGES POSED BY THE DPRK  
FOR THE ALLIANCE AND THE REGION**



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# NORTH KOREA'S STRATEGIC INTENTIONS

by Andrew Scobell

North Korea is probably the most mysterious and inaccessible country in the world today. Officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the Pyongyang regime is headed by perhaps the most mercurial and enigmatic political leader alive. No prominent figure of the early twenty-first century—with the possible exception of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden—has been more reviled by Americans or considered more dangerous to the United States than Kim Jong-il.<sup>1</sup> The regime Kim leads is generally considered to be one of the most repressive in existence, with a vast gulag, a massive security apparatus, and an extensive system of controls. Despite the facade of a powerful party-state possessing an enormous military, the North Korean economy is in shambles, hundreds of thousands of its people are living either as refugees in China or as displaced persons inside their own country, and as many as 3.5 million people have died from starvation and related diseases.<sup>2</sup>

Pyongyang is one of only two surviving members of the exclusive axis-of-evil club identified by President George W. Bush in January 2002. Topping the U.S. list of concerns about North Korea is its nuclear pro-

gram. Washington is extremely alarmed that Pyongyang is not only developing a nuclear capability for its own use but also proliferating nuclear material and technology. But the United States and other countries are also concerned about other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that North Korea possesses, as well as its ballistic missile program. Moreover, North Korea's conventional military forces are sizable, with significant capabilities, and they confront the armed forces of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the United States across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

## Approach

This monograph analyzes the North Korean regime's strategic intentions and motivations. "North Korean regime" refers here to the highest echelon of the power structure in Pyongyang, that is, Kim Jong-il and his senior associates.<sup>3</sup>

This monograph surveys and examines the views of six leading analysts of North Korea regarding Pyongyang's strategic intentions.<sup>4</sup> Analysts (in one case a two-person team)—Stephen Bradner, Victor Cha, Bruce Cumings, Selig Harrison, David Kang, and

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1. President George W. Bush is quoted as saying, "I loathe Kim Jong-il." See Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 340.

2. See the discussion in Marcus Noland, Sherman Robinson, and Tao Wang, "Famine in North Korea: Causes and Cures," Working Paper no. 99-2 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for International Economics, 1999), [www.iie.com/publications/wp/99-2.pdf](http://www.iie.com/publications/wp/99-2.pdf). For two studies, see Andrew Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001); and Meredith Woo-Cumings, "The Political Ecology of Famine: The North Korean Catastrophe and Its Lessons," ADB Institute Research Paper no. 31 (Tokyo: Asian Development Bank Institute, January 2002), [www.adbi.org/files/2002.01.rp31.ecology.famine.northkorea.pdf](http://www.adbi.org/files/2002.01.rp31.ecology.famine.northkorea.pdf).

3. Opinions differ considerably about the nature of the power structure and policy process in North Korea. Most analysts view the regime as totalitarian, but some scholars, including Selig Harrison, appear ambivalent about that and refer to the system variously as "totalitarian" and "corporatist." Selig Harrison, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

4. This manuscript has benefited from careful readings by Guy Arrigoni, Don Boose, Ralph Hassig, Jiyul Kim, Katy Oh, and Dwight Raymond. These individuals do not necessarily agree with all of its analyses and findings. Any errors or leaps of logic are solely the responsibility of the author.

Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig—were selected on the bases of their significant records of substantial research and major publications on North Korean security issues and their distinguished professional careers focused on North Korean security affairs.<sup>5</sup> They also represent the wide spectrum of thinking about Pyongyang—indeed, the assumptions and findings of these analysts vary considerably.

Analysts often are labeled in ideological terms as either liberal or conservative in their views on North Korea. This is a legitimate distinction because it is important to recognize the possible biases experts may bring to their analyses and blinders they might have. Such differentiation is of limited utility, however, because of some significant and surprising overlaps and commonalities as well as contrasts in analyses of Pyongyang and policy prescriptions for Washington that do not seem to fit neatly into either a Left or a Right position. For example, most analysts contend that North Korea is fearful of U.S. military capabilities, and most agree that Pyongyang is a morally repugnant and highly repressive totalitarian dictatorship.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, they differ on the significance of ideology to North Korea—whether it makes Pyongyang more rigid or flexible in policymaking and decision making. Some analysts, such as Stephen Bradner, argue that North Korea’s leaders are trapped in a kind of ideological straitjacket that tends to preclude certain policy options. Others assume that a significant number of North Korea’s leaders are actually pragmatists and that the key barrier to major policy changes lies with the dogmatism of some entrenched ideologues in the elite.<sup>7</sup>

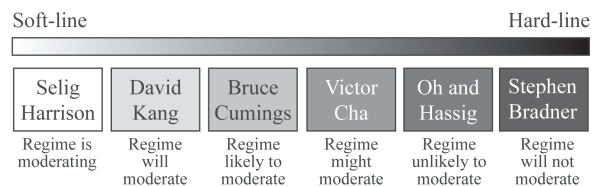
The terms hard-line and soft-line are used in this paper to classify broadly an analyst’s assessment of

North Korean strategic intentions. But even within the hard-line and soft-line camps, one can find a diversity of assessments. This diversity can prove valuable for discerning the main points of controversy and identifying key common themes in strategic assessments of North Korea. Furthermore, this approach will identify each analyst’s fundamental assumptions vis-à-vis North Korea.

### Spectrum of Expert Views of North Korea’s Intentions

Perhaps the most significant difference among the six analysts is in their assessments of the likelihood that the North Korean regime will moderate its policies (*Figure 1*). Moderation, here, means to pursue economic reforms, reduce defense spending, and improve relations with perceived adversaries, notably the United States. Assessments range from a belief, at one extreme, that Pyongyang is already in the process of moderating, to the belief, at the other extreme, that Pyongyang will never moderate. The key variable is motivation. What drives the regime? Motivation, however, is a difficult dimension to identify and gauge.

**Figure 1: Selected Experts’ Assessments of North Korea’s Strategic Disposition**



5. The list of experts should not be considered exhaustive and does not include everyone researching and writing on North Korea. Moreover, the sample does not include specialists primarily focused on the North Korean economy (for example, Nicholas Eberstadt), military (for example, Joseph Bermudez), foreign relations (for example, Samuel Kim), or history (for example, Charles Armstrong).

6. All the analysts listed in the text appear to hold both the former and the latter views. Distaste for the repressive Pyongyang regime is also evident in the writings from analysts often considered sympathetic to the North Korea system. Bruce Cumings, for example, calls the regime an “abhorrent family dictatorship” and places blame for the “truly inexcusable . . . suffering of the North Korea people” squarely on its shoulders. See Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (New York: New Press, 2003), 207, 189. David C. Kang, “Threatening, but Deterrence Works,” in *Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies*, Victor D. Cha and David C. Kang (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 46, says “the regime’s actions are abhorrent and morally indefensible.”

7. Harrison, *Korean Endgame*, 25.

### Selig Harrison: Regime Is Moderating

Selig Harrison is a longtime observer and writer on the subject of North Korea who has visited the country at least six times (1972, 1987, 1992, 1994, 1996, and 2005). Of the six analysts under review, he is the most benign in his assessment of North Korean intentions. He argues that a “fundamental change in the North Korean worldview during the past three decades” has occurred. Although Harrison admits that Pyongyang continues to possess a “siege mentality,” he nevertheless asserts that the regime has undertaken a “steady liberalization of economic life.” He contends that Kim Jong-il is pursuing “reform by stealth” because the pace and scope of economic change depends on a struggle between an “Old Guard” faction and “reformers” in the North Korean leadership.<sup>8</sup>

Harrison argues it is crucial that the United States support the reformers by pursuing more accommodationist policies toward North Korea. He suggests that, if the United States moderates its approach in the face of Pyongyang’s heightened threat sensitivity to Washington, this U.S. policy will strengthen the hands of the moderates in Pyongyang and, hence, provide greater impetus for further reform and opening. North Korea, in Harrison’s view, has also sought arms control agreements and has periodically made proposals for troop reductions.<sup>9</sup>

Harrison asserts that it is very difficult for North Korea’s leaders to renounce publicly the goal of full Korean unification because this is a key legitimacy issue for the Pyongyang regime.<sup>10</sup> He argues that North

Korea’s leaders are actually seeking confederation between the two Koreas, and that this has been a consistent theme put forward by Pyongyang since 1972. Harrison contends that North Korea is fearful of the United States, and this is the reason North Korea has built a large military. Pyongyang, he claims, developed its nuclear program only when a “severe deterioration” in the “military readiness” of its conventional forces occurred.<sup>11</sup>

### David Kang: Regime Will Moderate

David Kang, a scholar at Dartmouth College, specializes in North Korean security issues. He argues that Pyongyang has tenaciously gone about ensuring regime survival in the most logical way a small, weak, and vulnerable state can—by winning a reputation for acting in a dangerous and unpredictable manner. Kang calls this strategy “deterrence through danger.”<sup>12</sup> Kang stresses that the reason North Korea is so highly militarized and has pursued a nuclear program is because it believes it is facing a massive security threat from overwhelming U.S. might. The purpose of its sizable military machine is “deterrence and defense” against the United States.<sup>13</sup> Kang insists that the regime wants to moderate and will do so under the proper conditions. These conditions are predicated on the United States taking a less hostile and threatening approach to North Korea.<sup>14</sup>

Kang argues that for four decades following the Korean War, North Korea remained in a “holding pattern” with “minor changes” in foreign policy and no reform.<sup>15</sup> But in recent years the regime has pursued

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8. Ibid., xxi, 6, 26.

9. Ibid., 139–40.

10. Ibid., 75–78.

11. Ibid., xxi.

12. David Kang, “North Korea: Deterrence through Danger,” in *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 263.

13. Kang, “Threatening, but Deterrence Works,” in *Nuclear North Korea*, 43.

14. Kang, “Response: Why Are We Afraid of Engagement?” in *Nuclear North Korea*, 119.

15. Kang, “North Korea,” 240.

a “cautious and tentative” opening in economic and diplomatic spheres.<sup>16</sup> If the perceived threat from the United States diminishes, Pyongyang will more vigorously pursue economic reforms. Kang argues that it is “highly unlikely that North Korea currently retains such aggressive intentions [plans to invade South Korea] in any serious way.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Bruce Cumings: Regime Likely to Moderate**

Bruce Cumings is a renowned historian of modern Korea, and his prolific publications include a two-volume history on the origins of the Korean War. Although his views are routinely considered pro-Pyongyang, this characterization is inaccurate. Although Cumings does tend to be somewhat sympathetic to North Korea, he is certainly no apologist for the regime. Indeed, Cumings is clear-eyed about the horrors of the system, openly critical of it, and not sanguine in his assessments of the current situation. He contends that Pyongyang is “neither muddling through . . . nor is it seriously reforming like China and Vietnam.” He laments that, during the past decade, the system was beset by “paralysis and immobilism.”<sup>18</sup> North Korea, he says, is “the most astounding garrison state in the world” and “deeply insecure, threatened by the world around it.” Precisely because of this insecurity, Cumings—like David Kang—argues that the regime projects a fearsome image.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, he seems to believe that the regime would likely moderate if the United States eased its hawkish approach. Cumings appears to suggest that Pyongyang has given up on unification and desires “peaceful coexistence with the South.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Victor Cha: Regime Might Moderate**

Victor Cha, a professor at Georgetown University until he joined the staff of the National Security Council in late 2004, is a leading scholar of contemporary East Asian security. In recent years, he has focused on North Korea and tends to be viewed as hawkish; indeed, he has advocated a policy approach—he calls it “hawk engagement”—for the United States. In fact, he is less harsh than his reputation would lead one to believe.

Cha argues that, although the United States must be tough on North Korea, toughness does not mean Washington should refuse to engage Pyongyang. He contends that North Korea feels threatened by the United States. Cha suggests it is possible that North Korea might be willing to moderate, and the United States should pursue this possibility but with caution and willingness to employ a stick when necessary. He believes that Pyongyang has given up on unification on its terms, and, hence, it is conceivable that the regime might be willing to moderate its policies.

Nevertheless, although North Korea has lowered its expectations, Cha believes that “Pyongyang’s endgame . . . [now boils down] to basic survival, avoiding collapse, and avoiding domination by Seoul.”<sup>21</sup> North Korea’s leadership recognizes that it is weaker than South Korea and has concluded that time is not on its side. Cha fears that Pyongyang “could perceive some use of limited force as a rational and optimal choice, even when there is little or no hope of victory.”<sup>22</sup> He calls this concern “lashing out.” In short, Cha wor-

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16. Kang, “Response: Why Are We Afraid of Engagement?” in *Nuclear North Korea*, 114.

17. Kang, “North Korea,” 236.

18. Cumings, *North Korea*, 184.

19. *Ibid.*, 1, 151.

20. Cumings quotes with apparent approval the conclusions of Anthony Namkung; *Ibid.*, 61.

21. Cha, “Weak but Still Threatening,” in *Nuclear North Korea*, 21.

22. *Ibid.*, 18.

ries that North Korea might be getting more desperate and, hence, more prone to act violently.

### **Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig: Regime Unlikely to Moderate**

Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig are long-time analysts of North Korea—Oh is a researcher at the Institute for Defense Analyses, and Hassig is a professor of psychology. They believe that the regime is unlikely to moderate because moderation will likely undermine its position. Most, if not all, measures adopted during the past few years that have been characterized as reforms actually appear to be ad hoc adjustments (or modifications) to ensure the survivability of the regime rather than part of any thorough reform effort.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Pyongyang almost certainly will not agree to give up completely its nuclear program or negotiate away other WMD or missile programs because “military strength” is seen as vital to ensuring the survival of the regime.<sup>24</sup> The regime, Oh and Hassig argue, has not given up on attaining unification on its terms and, under certain circumstances, could possibly launch an attack across the DMZ.<sup>25</sup>

### **Stephen Bradner: Regime Will Not Moderate**

Stephen Bradner is a veteran analyst of North Korean security affairs who has served for many years as special adviser to the commander of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK). The most hawkish of the analysts reviewed here, he argues that the likelihood of North Korea moderating is virtually nil. Bradner asserts that

Pyongyang is tightly and brutally controlled by one kinship group—what he calls the Kim Family Regime. This regime is single-minded in its determination to unify the Korea peninsula on its own terms.

Despite the severe economic difficulties North Korea has faced during the past decade and a half, Bradner contends that the regime has neither scaled back its goals nor curbed its ambitious plans. Pyongyang is focused single-mindedly on maintaining a powerful military to the detriment of all else (“maximizing its military power”).<sup>26</sup> North Korea’s leaders will never give up their WMD or missile programs.<sup>27</sup> “They will not reform,” although the regime “may cautiously hazard some limited experimentation.”<sup>28</sup> Instead, Pyongyang’s leaders will likely continue to pursue an “aid-based strategy” of accepting or extorting handouts from foreign governments and nongovernmental organizations, pending the achievement of their ultimate goal.<sup>29</sup> North Korea’s leadership believes the road to its unification goal leads through military preparedness and defeating the enemy.

According to Bradner, Pyongyang recognizes that the troops of the United States and ROK Combined Forces Command constitute a formidable and determined foe. Pyongyang’s strategy is to weaken its adversary through undermining and eventually breaking the alliance.<sup>30</sup> Its goal is to bring about the withdrawal from South Korea of U.S. forces. Because Pyongyang views Seoul as a puppet regime that cannot stand without U.S. backing, it believes that, once this withdrawal has occurred, the South will be ripe for the

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23. Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, *North Korea through the Looking Glass* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 63.

24. *Ibid.*, 192.

25. *Ibid.*, 110–11.

26. Stephen Bradner, “North Korea’s Strategy,” in *Planning for a Peaceful Korea*, ed. Henry D. Sokolski (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), 40.

27. *Ibid.*, 39.

28. *Ibid.*, 28–30.

29. *Ibid.*, 32–38.

30. *Ibid.*, 37.



taking. Bradner argues that Pyongyang “will not reconcile with the South” but rather is intent on overthrowing the Seoul government.<sup>31</sup>

### Observations and Analysis

All of the analysts surveyed concur on a number of conclusions. Although the conclusions may seem basic and even obvious, they bear stipulating.

First, each analyst assumes that the North Korean regime is not irrational and that there is an internal logic to the regime’s words and deeds. The experts of course tend to differ on what this internal logic is. Although some in the media proclaim that North Korea’s leaders are crazy, all serious observers of the Pyongyang regime tend to insist that, quite to the contrary, they can detect a perverse logic and clear pattern of behavior from North Korea. Cha and Kang assert that North Korea is “neither irrational nor undeterrable.”<sup>32</sup> Kang argues that Pyongyang deliberately depicts itself as dangerous in order to deter the enemy. Oh and Hassig also argue that North Korean leaders consciously have cultivated an image of irrationality to serve as a deterrent.<sup>33</sup> This is not to say, however, that even veteran analysts have not at times betrayed a sense of frustration in seeking to make sense of the Pyongyang regime.<sup>34</sup>

Second, in the consensus view of assembled experts, this rationality leaves North Korea’s leadership with a heightened sense of insecurity. While leaders of Communist countries tend to be prone to paranoia in the first place, the Pyongyang regime also believes that it

faces a very real threat from the armed forces of the United States and the ROK. The North Korean regime appears truly afraid of possible attack. This fear may have heightened in the spring of 2003 when U.S. and coalition forces toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq; it may have led North Korea to fear that it might be the next object of a U.S. military operation.<sup>35</sup>

At a minimum, the North Korean leadership probably believes that, in any major force-on-force conflict with the United States, the Korean People’s Army (KPA) would be defeated, leading to the collapse or overthrow of the regime. The clearest indication of this fear and the existence of this logic in the North is that, for more a half century, Pyongyang has not launched an attack southward across the DMZ. In other words, the presence of USFK immediately below the DMZ appears to have deterred North Korea. Pyongyang’s leaders know that, from the very start of any attack on South Korea, they would be battling U.S. military forces and be at war with the United States.<sup>36</sup> In short, deterrence seems to have worked.

Third, North Korea’s rulers—or at least some of its rulers—appear to be acutely aware of the dilemma they face. On the one hand, they seem to recognize that, on the surface, the most logical way to rescue North Korea’s economy is to adopt thoroughgoing reforms. On the other hand, they seem to realize that pursuing such a course is likely to mean that they would be undermining their positions in the process—threatening their own power and control. Such reforms might be so successful that, after the reforms

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31. Ibid., 28.

32. Cha and Kang, “Introduction: The Debate over North Korea,” in *Nuclear North Korea*, 4.

33. Kang, “Response: Why Are We Afraid of Engagement,” in *Nuclear North Korea*, 110.

34. Kim Il-sung biographer Suh Dae-sook writes in *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 305, that “at times [North Korea seems to adopt a] completely irrational attitude toward others.”

35. Kang, “Threatening, but Deterrence Works,” in *Nuclear North Korea*, 67; Cha, “Response: Why We Must Pursue ‘Hawk Engagement,’” in *Nuclear North Korea*, 84–85. Kang’s comments highlight Pyongyang’s alarm, while Cha’s comments downplay it.

36. Kang, “Threatening, but Deterrence Works,” in *Nuclear North Korea*, 54. Kang argues that deterrence has worked in preventing a North Korean attack against South Korea as well as an attack from the opposite direction.

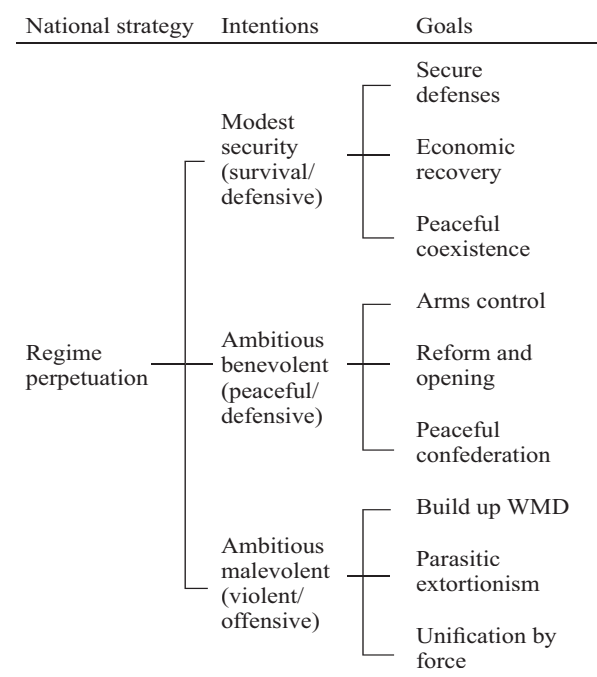


gathered momentum, the regime would find itself reformed out of existence. Because North Korea's leaders fear this would be the outcome, they are reluctant to move down what they view as the slippery slope of reform.<sup>37</sup> The alternative—to undertake little or no reform—is just as problematic. Without significant reform, North Korea's leaders realize they are probably condemning their regime to the ash heap of history. In short, they are damned if they do and damned if they don't. Pyongyang is probably more fearful of initiating change that it fears will spiral out of control than it is of doing little or nothing.

### Strategic Intentions

After surveying the range of expert views about North Korean thinking in the absence of access to internal documents and interviews with key North Korean policymakers, one cannot state North Korea's strategic intentions with any certainty. Yet, on the basis of the assessments of North Korea reviewed above, it seems prudent to narrow the range of possibilities to three alternatives for the thrust of North Korean strategic intentions: modest/security, ambitious/benevolent, and ambitious/ malevolent (*Figure 2*)

**Figure 2: National Strategy, Intentions, and Goals of North Korea, 2004–05**



37. Cha, "Response: Why We Must Pursue 'Hawk Engagement'," in *Nuclear North Korea*, 85; Harrison, *Korean Endgame*, 64; Oh

### Modest/Security

The first possible set of Pyongyang's strategic intentions comes down to a single, overriding, but modest aim: the survival of the North Korea regime. The paramount goal is to ensure that North Korea is adequately protected. Pyongyang would be willing to negotiate but reluctant to agree to give up its nuclear or missile programs. The siege mentality would be alleviated if North Korea could be reassured adequately that the United States and South Korea do not threaten it. Then it might be possible for Pyongyang to develop a more conciliatory relationship with Seoul—a policy of peaceful coexistence. Harrison, Kang, and Cumings believe Pyongyang subscribes to this set of intentions.

### Ambitious/Benevolent

The second package of intentions is a driving desire to maintain a strong, independent, and autonomous North Korea. Pyongyang would still need to conquer its siege mentality, but confidence-building measures might increase trust. This alternative would entail Pyongyang making peace with its longtime adversaries in Seoul and Washington. North Korea would also desire to undertake thoroughgoing economic reforms and become an integral part of the global economic system. Pyongyang would be prepared cautiously but purposefully to reduce, but probably not give up, its massive military through arms control efforts—conventional, WMD, missiles, and personnel—while seeking ways to guarantee North Korea's security. This represents an extremely ambitious but peaceful and defensive strategy. Harrison and Kang would certainly concur with most elements of this set of intentions; and Cumings, Cha, and Oh and Hassig would likely be prepared to entertain this possibility.

### Ambitious/Malevolent

The third possible set of North Korean strategic intentions is ambitious but extremely aggressive. In this option, Pyongyang has not given up on the conquest of South Korea through violence or deceit or both—in other words, unification on North Korea's terms. In this scenario, North Korean leaders would not be and Hassig, *North Korea*, 77.

seeking merely to protect themselves and deter a possible attack by the United States, the ROK, or both countries. Instead, Pyongyang would desire to possess the conventional and unconventional capabilities to topple Seoul by force and deception. For this set of intentions, nuclear weapons and other WMD are essential offensive or at least coercive weapons, and North Korea will never give them up. Pyongyang would not see an urgent need to repair its deplorable economy because it views the current priority as maintaining a military capable of attacking the forces of the United States and South Korea. In other words, North Korea has a wartime economy, and, rather than be diverted from its consuming focus on military preparedness, Pyongyang intends to sustain itself in the interim by extorting aid and revenue by whatever means necessary (including criminal activities). Bradner clearly believes this set of goals most accurately reflects North Korean intentions.

So, what are the intentions of the North Korean regime? Is it package 1, 2, or 3? Analysts often argue that Pyongyang's priority is simply regime survival. Bradner writes, "It has . . . become fashionable to describe North Korea's objective as survival."<sup>38</sup> But this probably does not capture its intent accurately. Kim Jong-il and his associates do not simply want to survive; they want to perpetuate and sustain their system. Fighting merely to survive would be implicitly to accept ultimate defeat, inevitable decline, and the DPRK's inferiority vis-à-vis the ROK. It is unlikely that North Korea's current leaders, at least the highest echelon, have lost all hope and have fatalistically accepted that the end of the DPRK looms on the horizon. But one must consider the possibility that this may be so. Cha argues this and outlines a worrisome mind-set imbued with logic that might lead North Korea to "lash out" militarily to assure "basic survival."<sup>39</sup>

What all of the analysts profiled in this paper assume (rightly, in my view) is that North Korea's rulers are rational. This, however, can imply a presumption of clear-eyed and absolute rationality. Most analysts surveyed here have refrained from assuming perfect logic, and they recognize that the reasoning of Pyongyang's leaders is likely constrained or limited by the view from where they sit gazing out on the world. North Korea's rulers are influenced by history, ideology, and notions of nationalism that produce what social scientists term a "bounded rationality."<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, some analysts appear to presume North Korea's leaders are capable of rationally calculating their options and are in possession of a complete and accurate picture of the situation on the Korean peninsula. Cha and Kang, for example, fundamentally assume that Pyongyang's rulers have weighed all the statistics and, after comparing North and South Korea by the numbers, have determined that Seoul's system is superior. According to Cha and Kang, the only conclusion that Pyongyang can logically draw is that there is no conceivable way the regime can possibly emerge victorious under current conditions, and urgent action is needed. Cha argues that the regime is desperate and preoccupied with avoiding collapse and absorption by South Korea.<sup>41</sup> Kang argues that "the flurry of North Korean diplomatic and economic activities in the past few years shows that the North Korean leadership is actively pursuing a strategy they hope will ease their domestic problems." Although Kang argues that there is "little evidence that North Korea is backed into a corner" and the regime has "not given up hope," Pyongyang, nevertheless, does appear to believe that urgent measures are necessary, according to Kang.<sup>42</sup>

But what if North Korea's rulers do not have all the facts? Even if they have all the facts or at least most of them, what if they remain convinced of the supe-

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38. Bradner, "North Korea's Strategy," 33.

39. Cha, "Weak but Still Threatening," in *Nuclear North Korea*, 18, 21.

40. Herbert Simon is credited with the concept. The term is discussed explicitly by at least one set of analysts under review here, Oh and Hassig, in *North Korea*, 192.

41. Cha, "Weak but Still Threatening," in *Nuclear North Korea*, 21.

42. Kang, "Response: Why Are We Afraid of Engagement?" in *Nuclear North Korea*, 102-4.

riority of their own system and confident in their ultimate victory? My conclusion is that North Korea's senior leaders are determined and confident that they will not only survive, but that they will be able to restore and revitalize their regime. Although most observers agree that North Korea's leaders possess a siege mentality, they are not defeatists and they retain a high degree of self-confidence, if not outright arrogance. Kim and other leaders are not crazy or irrational, but they are almost certainly extremely ambitious. Kang argues that "the North Korean leadership—far from having lost all hope and going into a bunker mentality—has been actively pursuing a number of options through which it can survive into the future."<sup>43</sup> Madeleine Albright has remarked that when she met with Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang in November 2000, he "seemed confident"; he certainly "didn't seem a desperate or even worried man."<sup>44</sup> If this observation is correct, it rules out option number 1. But beyond the likely strong desire to persevere and reenergize the DPRK, what can one say with a high degree of confidence about North Korean intentions? To address this question one needs to look closely at observable manifestations.

### Propaganda, Policy, And Planning

What are the observable manifestations that indicate which of the three sets of strategic intentions North Korea is pursuing? Three manifestations—propaganda, policy, and planning—will be examined, each with regard to four areas: general intentions, security intentions, economic intentions, and intentions regarding unification.

#### Propaganda

In North Korea, propaganda is all pervasive—evident in virtually all official documents and public pro-

nouncements. There are two aspects of propaganda: ideology and rhetoric. Ideology, or "basic principles," many analysts argue, is critical to understanding the North Korea regime.<sup>45</sup>

Officially, ideology remains central for Pyongyang, and, hence, some dogmatic justification or rationale must be forthcoming on virtually any issue. The key element of the ideology is the cult of Kim Il-sung as manifest in the concept of *juche*. According to North Korean propaganda, citizens of the country owe everything to the great leader, Kim Il-sung, whose brilliance and superhuman efforts have made the DPRK what it is today. Kim Il-sung is credited with having "invented" *juche* in the 1930s.<sup>46</sup> The ideology is portrayed as uniquely Korean. In fact, the "idea of *chuch'e* [*juche*] is . . . firmly rooted in the experience of the North Korean people and Kim Il-sung."<sup>47</sup> The concept highlights the role of a supreme leader and stresses the importance of unity and loyalty.<sup>48</sup>

Although *juche* is normally translated as "self-reliance," it is perhaps more accurate to translate it as "Korea first." Putting Korea first is the opposite of accepting a subservient role for the country. In this sense, *juche* can be seen as the opposite of tributary status. According to propaganda, North Korea today stands proudly on its own and bows to no one. It is no longer the supplicant to China that it was in dynastic times. In a dramatic reversal, today dignitaries from other countries come to North Korea bearing gifts.

For *juche* to be perpetuated, it must be continually validated in the eyes of the North Korean people, which occurs in at least three ways.

- **Foreigners travel to Pyongyang.** Most important are foreign leaders and dignitaries who come to pay their respects to Kim Il-sung by visiting his mauso-

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43. Ibid., 104.

44. Madeleine Albright, with Bill Woodward, *Madam Secretary* (New York: Miramax Books, 2003), 467.

45. Bradner, "North Korea's Strategy"; Charles K. Armstrong, "Inter-Korean Relations: A North Korean Perspective," in *Inter-Korean Relations: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Samuel S. Kim (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 38–56.

46. Suh, *Kim Il Sung*, 305.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., 304.

leum. They also meet with other leaders, including Kim Jong-il. These visits are shown prominently on North Korean television and reported in the print media, which depicts their visits as pilgrimages.

• **North Korea receives aid from abroad.** This aid is portrayed as tribute or gifts from around the world.<sup>49</sup> The flow of both people and gifts is used by the regime to demonstrate that North Korea is a powerful and respected country. There is a paradox, however: on the one hand, veneration and tribute from foreigners is seen as positive, but, on the other hand, *juche* represents a “xenophobic nationalism” that teaches North Koreans to be wary and suspicious of foreigners.<sup>50</sup>

• **Unification on North Korea’s terms is forthcoming.** For *juche* to be validated, the regime must be seen to be keeping the country strong and continuing to make at least token efforts toward unification. This requires staunch political independence (*chaju*), self-defense (*chawi*), and economic self-sustenance (*chalip*).<sup>51</sup> Kim Jong-il’s primary theme has become *kangsongtaeguk*,<sup>52</sup> a slogan that translates as “strong development, powerful country.” How does the regime ensure a strong and powerful country? Unifying the peninsula would seem to be the strongest guarantee. How can the regime justify the continued sacrifices it asks of its citizens? These are rationalized as only temporary. The implicit logic is that, pending unification of the Koreas, North Korea must maintain a strong military while it endures temporary economic hardships. The stress on achieving “a unified, self-reliant, independent state free of foreign interference” is traceable back to Kim Il-sung’s pre-Korean War speeches.<sup>53</sup> Pyongyang believes that realization of

unification will ensure a powerful independent country with a revitalized economy.

Although the words in public pronouncements, official documents, and news releases are invariably propaganda, they can reflect actual thinking, reveal key trends, and indicate significant changes. Bluster, threat, and hyperbole are staples of North Korean documents and pronouncements, but, if examined methodically, they can provide insights or at least hints of regime intentions. These official communications include the various versions of the DPRK’s constitution, party documents, major editorials in the most prominent publications, and the text of public statements by senior officials. This paper examines several key documents: the 1998 state constitution, the 2000 Inter-Korean summit news release, the five most recent New Year’s editorials (2001–05) jointly published in the three leading newspapers (*Nodong Sinmun*, *Josoninmingun*, and *Chongnyonjonwi*), statements made following each of the three rounds of the six-party talks held in Beijing in 2003 and 2004 (23–25 April 2003, 27–29 August 2003, and 25–28 February 2004), and the Foreign Ministry statement of 10 February 2005.

**General situation.** The current state constitution, amended in 1998, appears more Kim Il-sung-centric and nativist than earlier versions. First, this constitution contains a new preamble that is essentially a eulogy to the late North Korean leader.<sup>54</sup> Second, the post of president was abolished, and deceased leader Kim Il-sung is designated “eternal president.” There are no mentions of Marxism-Leninism and only vague references to “socialism”—all overshadowed by con-

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49. Nicholas Eberstadt, *The End of North Korea* (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 1999), 19 and chap. 5.

50. Suh, *Kim Il Sung*, 313.

51. *Ibid.*, 302.

52. See, for example, Armstrong, “Inter-Korean Relations,” 46.

53. For an August 1947 speech, see Bruce Cumings, “The Corporate State in North Korea,” in *State and Society in Contemporary Korea*, ed. Hagen Koo (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 215.

54. Inter-University Associates, Inc., “Introductory and Comparative Notes,” in *Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*, ed. Gisbert H. Flanz, vol. 10 of *Constitutions of the Countries of the World* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana Publications Inc., 1999), v.

stant reiteration of *juche* as the guiding theoretical principle for North Korea attributed to the genius of Kim Il-sung.

Article 11 of the constitution states that “all activities” of the nation should be conducted “under the leadership” of the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP). Despite this assertion, repeated emphasis on the centrality of the armed forces in such places as the highly authoritative annual New Year’s joint editorials calls into question the leadership role of the KWP. The 1 January 2005, editorial, for example, urges the people to give “priority to military affairs” and “unite as one . . . [to] demonstrate the might of *Songun* [military first]!”<sup>55</sup> The editorial also insists that “[t]he People’s Army is the mainstay and main force of the *Songun* revolution.” Although this contrasts with an emphasis on a leading role for the “party’s leadership” in the January 2004 editorial, the 2005 editorial was consistent with the exhortations of the preceding two years’ editorials (2002 and 2003) to advance under the “army-based” banner.

**Security.** The defense portion of the 1998 amended constitution remains unchanged compared with the previous version. National defense continues to be the “supreme duty and honor of citizens. Citizens shall defend the country and serve in the army as required by law (article 86).” The January 2005 New Year’s editorial exhorts the people to “actively learn from the People’s Army’s fighting spirit, work style, and traits.”

Both the 1 January 2005 editorial and 10 February 2005 Foreign Ministry statement insist that the United States should end its “hostile policy” toward North Korea.<sup>56</sup> The 2004 editorial also noted the “extremely hostile policy” of the United States. The editorial calls upon “All Koreans . . . [to] stage a powerful struggle . . . to drive the U.S. troops out of south Korea [and thereby] remove the very source of a nuclear war.” The January 2004 editorial pledged Pyongyang’s com-

mitment “to seek a negotiated peaceful solution to the nuclear issue between the DPRK and the U.S.” This statement underscored the statement of a DPRK Foreign Ministry spokesperson four months earlier, on 30 August 2003, following the conclusion of the second round of the six-party talks. He said, “The DPRK made clear its consistent stand on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.” The DPRK spokesman ridiculed the U.S. insistence on “complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement” of Pyongyang’s nuclear program:

This means that the U.S. is asking the DPRK to drop its gun first, saying it would not open fire, when both side[s] are leveling guns at each other. How can the DPRK trust the U.S. and drop its gun? Even a child would not be taken in by such a trick. What we want is for both side[s] to drop guns at the same time and co-exist peacefully.<sup>57</sup>

The spokesman then went on to state that, as a result of the U.S. position, Pyongyang had concluded that “there is no other option for us but to further increase the nuclear deterrent force as a self-defensive measure to protect our sovereignty.” The 10 February 2005 Foreign Ministry statement announcing an “indefinite” suspension of North Korea’s participation in the six-party talks also declared that Pyongyang possessed “manufactured nuclear weapons.” The statement concluded by insisting that North Korea, nevertheless, remained committed to “the ultimate goal of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula.”

The 2003 and 2002 New Year’s editorials were somewhat more strident, emphasizing North Korea’s “military-based policy” and echoing the language of the 2001 New Year’s editorial. The January 2001 joint editorial was very clear: “The policy of giving priority to the army is the permanent strategic objective in the present time.” The 2004 editorial notes that the Su-

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55. The New Year’s joint editorials can be found in the archives of Pyongyang’s Korean Central News Agency, [www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm](http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm).

56. Foreign Ministry statement (in Korean) (Pyongyang: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 February 2005), broadcast by Pyongyang Central Broadcasting Station, translated by U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service.

57. “DPRK Foreign Ministry on Six-way Talks, KCNA,” 30 August 2003, [www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/dprk/2003/09/dprk-030901-kcna06.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/dprk/2003/09/dprk-030901-kcna06.htm).



preme People's Assembly "strengthened" the political system by enhancing the "exceptionally high . . . authority" of the National Defense Commission "to meet the requirements of the *Songun* era."

**Economy.** Article 34 in the DPRK constitution states that the "national economy of the DPRK is a planned economy." In terms of planning, the top priority continues to be national defense; therefore it is no surprise that the 2005 editorial insists that "[t]he defense industry is the foundation of the nation's military and economic potentials." The editorial states emphatically: "It is imperative to supply everything necessary for the defense industry on a preferential basis, pursuant to the Party's line of economic construction in the *Songun* era."

Despite the emphasis on national defense, the civilian sector does get attention in the constitution as well as in each New Year's editorial during the past five years. Article 37 of the amended constitution of 1998 includes a new sentence: "The state shall encourage institutions, enterprises, or associations of the DPRK to establish and operate equity and contractual joint venture enterprises with corporations or individuals of foreign countries within a special economic zone." Furthermore, a new phrase is inserted in article 33: "The state shall introduce a cost accounting system in the economic management . . . and utilize such economic levers as prime costs, prices, and profits." The 2003, 2004, and 2005 New Year's editorials all stress the necessity of improving "economic management." The 2003 editorial states: "We should manage and operate the economy in such a way as to ensure the largest profitability while firmly adhering to . . . socialist principles."

Regularly singled out in January 1 editorials as "the most important front[s] in socialist economic reconstruction" (the 2001 editorial) or as "a main link on efforts to revitalize the national economy" (the 2003 editorial) are: "power, coal mining, metal industries, and railway transportation." In January 2005, however, agriculture was declared "the main front of socialist economic construction." Increased attention to consumer goods is also stressed (in the 2004 and 2005 editorials). Efforts are also urged to increase energy

output and push forward with modern "science and technology" (2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 editorials).

**Unification.** Unification figures prominently in all of the items under review. The preface to the current DPRK constitution states: "Kim Il-sung set reunification of the country as the nation's supreme task . . ." And reunification is mentioned five times in the preface.

But the most prominent item is the "North-South Joint Declaration" issued by President Kim Dae-jung of the ROK and Kim Jong-il on 15 June 2000 at the conclusion of their summit in Pyongyang.<sup>58</sup> The document highlights the common aspiration of both Pyongyang and Seoul as "peaceful unification." The declaration notes that proposals put forward by both sides for reunification "have elements in common." The final sentence of the joint declaration states that President Kim invited his North Korean counterpart to visit Seoul, and Kim Jong-il "agreed to visit . . . at an appropriate time in the future."

All five of the most recent joint New Year's Day editorials stress the continued significance of the 15 June "North-South Joint Declaration." The January 2005 editorial states: "This year is a significant year which marks the 5th anniversaries of the historic Pyongyang meeting [between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il]." The editorial provides the slogan for the year: "Let's advance holding high the flag of cooperation for national independence, cooperation for peace . . . and cooperation for reunification and patriotism!" It further opines: "It is unbearable shame on the nation that the sovereignty has been infringed upon for more than 100 years in . . . half of the country due to the 60-year-long presence of . . . U.S. troops in the wake of the Japanese imperialists' colonial rule that lasted for over 100 years."

North Korea routinely identifies the United States as the main barrier to unification. According to the 2003 editorial: "It can be said that there exists on the Korean Peninsula at present only confrontation between the Koreans in the north and south and the United States." The editorial urges Washington to ". . . stop its provocative military pressure and withdraw their aggression forces from South Korea without delay."

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58. "North-South Joint Declaration," 15 June 2000, [www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/dprk/2000/000615-dprk-flash.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/dprk/2000/000615-dprk-flash.htm).

According to the 2005 editorial: “All Koreans should stage a powerful struggle for peace against war in order to drive the U.S. troops out of South Korea, remove the very source of nuclear war, and defend the peace and security on the Korean Peninsula.”

An analysis of North Korean ideology and rhetoric does not offer a clear indication of which package—1, 2, or 3—would be selected. Clear, however, is an unrelenting focus on maintaining a robust conventional national defense capability and building a nuclear capacity.

## Policy

Examining past and present policies reveals consistent national priorities of focusing on maintaining military power, centrally planned economic development, and initiatives promoting national unification. At the same time North Korea has depended for decades on substantial external assistance in the form of food, fuel, and technology to compensate for the serious inadequacies of its Stalinist economy.

**General situation.** The history of Pyongyang’s policies reflects the guerrilla origins of the regime. This experience has produced a record of policies that are extremely ambitious, do not deviate even in the face of great adversity, and approach domestic affairs and statecraft as perpetual warfare to be overcome through military-style campaigns.<sup>59</sup> This guerrilla experience also underscores the militant nature of the regime—its military-first policy. Conceiving of policy implementation as constant struggle and being preoccupied with threats—old, potential, and newly emerging (both internal and external)—have led Pyongyang

to adopt a siege mentality. In its diplomatic relations, North Korea in the past tended to be rather hostile or belligerent, but this has changed since the collapse of the Soviet bloc, especially since 2000, as Pyongyang has made efforts to be far more conciliatory and has reached out to Seoul, Washington, Tokyo, and other capitals.

**Security.** Defense has long been Pyongyang’s highest national priority, a priority that has only seemed to increase over time. Particularly since the 1960s, when North Korea’s relations with both the Soviets and the Chinese soured, Pyongyang has undertaken a massive defense buildup, increasing its defense production output and expanding substantially the number of uniformed personnel.

North Korea has also long been obsessed with nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons and has been conducting research and development in these areas for a considerable period. This should be neither surprising nor shocking because Pyongyang believes it has been the victim of both actual use of WMD during the Korean War and constant subjection to nuclear blackmail for decades.<sup>60</sup> North Korea has had a nuclear program since the 1950s, although reportedly efforts at weaponization did not get under way until the late 1970s.<sup>61</sup> North Korea has also had a vigorous cruise and ballistic missile program for decades, producing both for deployment at home and sale abroad. Evidence strongly suggests that Pyongyang also has exported nuclear technology and material, its primary impetus being entrepreneurial. Most recently, in February 2005 there were claims that North Korea provided processed uranium to Libya.<sup>62</sup>

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59. Adrian Buzo, *Guerrilla Dynasty: Politics and Leadership in North Korea* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999).

60. North Korea appears convinced that the United States used biological weapons in the Korean War. Although Washington certainly considered the use of such weapons, all evidence to date indicates that it refrained from doing so. Nevertheless, the belief that the United States did remains strong. The belief is perpetuated by slapdash Western scholars who assert myth as fact. See, for example, Harrison, *Korean Endgame*, 9–10. For a noble effort to set the record straight, see Conrad C. Crane, “Chemical and Biological Warfare during the Korean War: Rhetoric and Reality,” *Asian Perspective* 25, no. 3 (2001): 61–84.

61. Alexandre Y. Mansurov, “The Origins, Evolution, and Current Politics of the North Korean Nuclear Program,” *Nonproliferation Review* 2, no. 23 (Spring-Summer 1995): 25–26.

62. David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, “Test Said to Tie Deal on Uranium to North Korea,” *New York Times*, 2 February 2005; Glenn Kessler, “North Korea May Have Sent Libya Nuclear Material, US Tells Allies,” *Washington Post*, 2 February 2005; David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, “Using Clues from Libya to Study a Nuclear Mystery,” *New York Times*, 13 March 2005.



**Economy.** North Korea has a long history of heavy-handed central control of its economy. Since 1954 Pyongyang has pursued economic development through multiyear state plans with durations of three, five, six, and seven years.<sup>63</sup> This policy proclivity has eased only slightly in recent years and is unlikely to undergo dramatic reform any time soon. Although the constitution was amended in 1998 to allow for consideration of “profit” and the establishment of “special economic zones,” remarkably little actual policy follow-through has occurred. One example is that, although a law on foreign investment was passed in 1984, for more than a decade there was very little actual foreign investment or even any serious attempts to attract foreign investment. Still, in recent years Pyongyang has stepped up efforts to attract foreign investment and capital in special zones but with modest and disappointing results. The first attempt was the Rajin-Sonbong special economic zone in the northeast of the country in the Tumen River border region.<sup>64</sup> The second effort was the establishment of a foreign investment zone at Kaesong on the western edge of the DMZ, and the third effort was the Mount Kumgang tourist venture located east of Pyongyang near the eastern end of the DMZ. None of the investment zones has attracted the volume of investment hoped for, but at least the latter two have had limited success while the first appears to be languishing.<sup>65</sup> The Mount Kumgang tourist project has been the most lucrative of all. Under the terms of the agreement for the zone, Hyundai guaranteed North Korea \$940 million in exchange for permitting South Korean tourists to visit the scenic mountain. Since 1998, hundreds of thousands of tourists have visited the locale.<sup>66</sup>

Domestic economic reforms have been jerky and uncoordinated, with limited and sometimes contradictory results. In recent years the authorities have permitted farmers’ markets to operate, and in July 2002 the government released price controls on food. These policies have appeared to make food more available, but freeing prices has caused serious inflation. Although salaries were also increased, they do not seem to have kept pace with the food costs. Serious reform of the way agriculture is organized and planned does not appear to have occurred. As a result, there has been no dramatic improvement in the food situation in the country. In January 2005, Pyongyang announced that the cereal allocation per person had been reduced by 50 grams—to 250 grams—half of the minimum daily amount recommended by the World Food Programme.<sup>67</sup>

In fact, rather than pursuing structural reforms in agriculture (or in industry, for that matter), North Korea seems to have preferred the policy of continuing to rely on foreign aid to alleviate food shortages and keep famine at bay. Foreign governments, including the United States, China, and South Korea, provide such humanitarian assistance. In early 2005, for example, Pyongyang asked Seoul for half a million tons of chemical fertilizer—the largest amount it had ever requested<sup>68</sup>—in a continuation of the DPRK’s ongoing policy of surviving economically by receiving aid from governments and nongovernmental organizations. This aid-seeking policy spills over into North Korea’s foreign relations, where Pyongyang exacts payments for coming to the diplomatic table. North Korea agreed to host the 2000 inter-Korea summit after receiving at least \$500 million for its troubles.<sup>69</sup>

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63. For a list of these plans and their basic emphases, see Noland, *Avoiding the Apocalypse*, 66–67, table 3-1.

64. *Ibid.*, 133–39.

65. For discussion of the Rajin-Sonbong zone, see Oh and Hassig, *North Korea*, 64; for discussion on the Kaesong zone, see Norimitsu Onishi, “2 Koreas Forge Economic Ties to Ease Tensions,” *New York Times*, 8 February 2005.

66. Oh and Hassig, *North Korea*, 181; Noland, *Avoiding the Apocalypse*, 139–40.

67. “North Korea Slashes Food Rations” British Broadcasting Corporation, 24 January 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4200861.stm>.

68. “N. Korea Asks for a Record Amount of Fertilizer,” *Chosun Ilbo*, 6 February 2005, <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200502/200502060017.html>.

69. Gordon Fairclough, “South Korean Officials Paid North before 2000 Summit, Panel Says,” *Wall Street Journal*, 26 June 2003.

Similarly, Pyongyang appears to have been promised significant amounts of Chinese assistance as incentive for sending a delegation to the six-party talks in Beijing.<sup>70</sup>

Other entrepreneurial efforts aimed at earning foreign currency include what are widely considered to be activities more befitting organized crime than a government: smuggling, narco-trafficking, counterfeiting, and gambling.<sup>71</sup>

**Unification.** Policy strands of both peaceful consensual confederation and coercive unification are evident. Formal efforts by Pyongyang to pursue confederation go back at least to the joint declaration signed by representatives of the North and South in 1972. North Korea has restated this policy repeatedly and regularly refers to this agreement. Can this policy initiative be taken at face value? The answer, apparently, is no, judging from the transcript of a discussion held in July 1972 between the DPRK's ambassador to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) Lee Chang-su and GDR officials. Documents discovered in the archives of the now defunct East German regime report that Lee told East German leaders that the declaration was actually a tactical ploy.<sup>72</sup>

This ruse is consistent with other information we know about North Korean diplomatic initiatives. Admiral C. Turner Joy, chief negotiator for the United Nations (UN) command at the truce talks at Panmunjom, noted the efforts of Pyongyang officials to use every ruse possible to promote their overarching goals. Negotiating, in short, is not seen as a substitute for military options but, instead, as another arena of battle.<sup>73</sup>

Advocating confederation did not preclude North Korea from pursuing nearly simultaneous violent and subversive efforts against South Korea. These initiatives include assassination attempts against the ROK's most senior leaders in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; elaborate tunnels dug under the DMZ; and acts of terrorism. North Korean special forces infiltrated Seoul and came close to penetrating the perimeter of the Blue House (the residence of South Korea's president) in January 1968 before they were detected and defeated. In August 1974 another attempt to assassinate President Park Chung-hee failed, but the assassin did kill South Korea's first lady. In October 1983, a bombing in Rangoon killed 17 South Korean government officials, including 4 cabinet ministers. Perhaps the most horrifying act of terrorism carried out by North Korea was the bombing of Korean Airlines flight 858 in November 1987 that killed all 115 passengers and crew on board. The infiltration of special operations forces into South Korea continued into the 1990s, as the discovery of North Korean submarines and commandos attests.

More recently, at the 2000 inter-Korean summit, Pyongyang claimed to be pursuing a policy of peaceful unification. The summit and the related North Korean high-profile diplomatic charm offensive reflect that, as decades have passed, Pyongyang has become more savvy and more adept at using diplomacy. Since the early 1990s, North Korea has engaged in unprecedented waves of diplomatic activity: establishing diplomatic relations with a cluster of states, joining the UN, and participating in a variety of multilateral forums, including four rounds of six-party talks with South Korea, China, Russia, Japan, and the

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70. On speculation, see, for example, Mark Magner, "'Unofficial Visit' Includes Pledge of Patience, Peking Duck and a Tour," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 April 2004.

71. See, for example, Bradner, "North Korea's Strategy," 24; and Noland, *Avoiding the Apocalypse*, 119–21. Gambling comes from a casino operated by a Hong Kong company in the Rajin-Sonbong zone and from the *pachinko* industry in Japan that is operated by ethnic Koreans who remit earnings to North Korea. The casino is reportedly being closed down because of Chinese pressure. See Michael Rank, "China Cashes N. Korean Casino Chips," *Asia Times*, 24 February 2005.

72. The DPRK ambassador called the joint statement a "tactical measure"; see Bernd Schafer, "Weathering the Sino-Soviet Conflict: The GDR and North Korea, 1949–1989," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 14/15 (Winter 2003/Spring 2004): 32, [www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/ACF2837.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/ACF2837.pdf). This comment is also cited by Cha, "Response: Why We Must Pursue 'Hawk Engagement'," in *Nuclear North Korea*, 84.

73. C. Turner Joy, *How Communists Negotiate* (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

United States in Beijing between April 2003 and September 2005.

An analysis of North Korean policies reveals efforts at piecemeal economic reform, continued preoccupation with military matters, and greater initiatives to engage with Seoul and other capitals.

## Planning

What evidence is there of preparation and coordination by the regime for the future? The data to be examined include what senior leaders say in both formal statements and discussions with foreign officials and reporters. Revisions or additions made in major documents, such as the constitution, and new laws passed can also be important indicators. Moreover, foreign study tours and training programs conducted overseas for regime officials provide useful evidence of planning.

**General situation.** In terms of aspirational policies, what is the regime thinking? If one is to go by the words of Kim Jong-il, Pyongyang is not interested in wholesale opening to the outside world and thoroughgoing reforms. Former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, who visited North Korea in November 2000, has written that Kim is rather cautious on this front. When Albright asked him about economic opening, he responded: “What do you mean by ‘opening’? We will have to define the term first, because opening means different things to different countries. We do not accept the Western version of opening. Opening should not harm our traditions.”<sup>74</sup>

Which countries does the regime look to as models? In terms of the number of foreign study tours and volume of personnel dispatched in recent years, China is far above the rest. Yet, if one judges by Kim’s

words, Pyongyang is not interested in imitating the Chinese model of combining free markets and socialism. Albright has written that Kim is far more enthusiastic about Swedish socialism and Thailand’s experience. “Thailand,” Kim noted approvingly, “maintains a strong traditional royal system and has preserved its independence through a long turbulent history and yet has a market economy.”<sup>75</sup>

**Security.** No tangible evidence beyond rhetoric suggests North Korea’s willingness to give up its nuclear capability. Nor is there any evident willingness to downsize the massive military. The KPA continues to maintain cordial, if rather superficial and symbolic, relations with the militaries of China, Russia, Vietnam, and Cuba. At Chinese institutions of professional military education, North Korean officers continue to take specially tailored short courses, but they are isolated from Chinese and other foreign students.<sup>76</sup>

**Economics.** Economics is the one major area under review where considerable evidence suggests that North Korea is actively contemplating experimentation and innovation. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of plans for radical reform of the central planning system. The highest levels in the DPRK seem reluctant to make such a dramatic break. The regime fears it will lose control. This concern is probably strongest among the economic planning bureaucracy, which fears that major steps in this direction would threaten its own power and influence.

Ongoing foreign study tours and training programs for officials provide perhaps the best indicators that the regime is seriously contemplating significant changes in economic policy. According to Kang, in 2001 alone “more than 480 [officials] visited China, Australia, Italy, and Sweden”<sup>77</sup> Field trips of note since then have included China, Vietnam, and Russia; and

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74. Albright, *Madam Secretary*, 466.

75. *Ibid.*

76. Civilian and military analysts in China, conversations with author, May 2002, September 2003, and June 2004.

77. Kang, “Response: Why Are We Afraid of Engagement?” in *Nuclear North Korea*, 110.

training programs on economic-related subjects for DPRK personnel have taken place at universities in China, Australia, and the United States.<sup>78</sup>

Other evidence consists of efforts to open new special economic zones. In 2002, North Korea sought to establish a new zone at Sinuiju on the northwest border with China. In an unprecedented move, Pyongyang appointed a Dutch-Chinese entrepreneur, Yang Bin, to direct the zone. Little indicates that the initiative was well-conceived or planned. Soon after, Yang was arrested in China, charged with various crimes, and sentenced to 18 years in prison.<sup>79</sup> The zone has since failed to make significant progress.

Further evidence suggests that North Korea's leaders are keen on pursuing high-tech projects, especially in the field of information technology (IT). Pyongyang apparently has a small but vigorous IT sector. In the late 1990s, it reportedly developed an award-winning computer game and in 2002 embarked on its first Internet joint venture with a South Korean firm.<sup>80</sup> These are very small steps, and nothing indicates that Pyongyang is preparing to overcome the major impediments to pursuing IT.

**Unification.** There is no sense of urgency for unification, let alone any indication of planning—for example, no detailed proposals—by Pyongyang to move on the nuts and bolts of unification or confederation. At the very least, one might expect some discussion of or proposals for Kim Jong-il to visit Seoul in the near future to make good on the joint statement that he and Kim Dae-jung issued in June 2000. Thus far, there has been none. Although some hyping of road

and rail links across the DMZ has occurred, no links have been completed or have become operational.<sup>81</sup>

An examination of the key indicators of North Korean planning suggests that the regime continues to think about and prepare for the future. Although there is little evidence of any new thinking pervading Pyongyang's approach to security or unification matters, significant indications suggest that North Korea is contemplating further economic reforms. However, what is under consideration appears far removed from systemic transformation and opening.

## Conclusions

Which package of intentions is Pyongyang pursuing? It remains difficult to say with certainty. Nevertheless, the above analyses provide considerable insight and strong hints.

### Modest Security: Wishful Thinking?

A careful analysis of propaganda, policy, and planning leads to a high degree of skepticism about the possibility that North Korea is focused on mere survival: simply maintaining a self-defense capability, engineering a modest economic recovery, and coexisting peacefully with South Korea. Pyongyang appears to have far more ambitious intentions, and nothing indicates absolute desperation on the part of North Korean leaders. David Kang notes that the leaders of “countries [that are] falling to pieces do not engage in long-term planning.”<sup>82</sup> The indications are that Pyongyang envisions a bright future—it is considering significant economic changes and examining foreign systems as models.

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78. Analysts in China and Vietnam, conversations with author, November 2004; Kang, “Response: Why Are We Afraid of Engagement?” in *Nuclear North Korea*, 116.

79. Andrew Scobell, *China and North Korea: From Comrades-in-Arms to Allies at Arm's Length* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, March 2004), 8.

80. Nina Hachigan, “The Internet and Power in One-Party Asian States,” *Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2002), 44–45; Sonni Efron, “Computer Chips Stacked to Master Japanese Chess,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 August 1999; and “North Korean Launches High-Tech Venture,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 2002.

81. See, for example, “Seoul to Finish S-N Railroad by December,” *Korea Times*, 24 February 2005.

82. Kang, “Response: Why Are We Afraid of Engagement?” in *Nuclear North Korea*, 116.

### **Ambitious Benevolence: Cautious Optimism?**

A careful analysis of propaganda makes it conceivable that Pyongyang's intentions are focused in the direction of arms control, a policy of economic reform and opening, and the pursuit of some form of peaceful confederation with Seoul. Pyongyang's propaganda insists that North Korea seeks a peaceful negotiated settlement of the nuclear issue and is committed to the denuclearization of the peninsula.<sup>83</sup> However, actual Pyongyang policies and planning do not seem to bear this out. When one remembers that the most consistent theme of North Korea's propaganda continues to be the essential need for military strength and the military-first policy, a healthy dose of skepticism emerges. Moreover, because evidence from planning is unclear, overall the data remain inconclusive.

### **Ambitious Malevolence: Reluctant Pessimism?**

There is a real possibility that North Korea's key strategic goals are to build up its WMD programs, engage in parasitic extortion, and pursue unification by force or coercion. According to Pyongyang's propaganda, maintaining its military strength is the regime's foremost priority. This is born out by examinations of implemented policy, planning, and ruminations about the future. As for the economy, although propaganda has made vague claims about redoubling efforts to improve economic performance, there is little evidence of policies of thoroughgoing reform. North Korea's history of central planning and the absence of any obvious blueprint for how to proceed suggest that systemic reform is unlikely. Pyongyang appears likely to continue to hope that ad hoc changes, coupled with continued foreign aid and income generated from arms sales, tourism, and criminal activity, will be adequate to meet the country's needs. As for unification, although the country's propaganda stresses using peaceful means to unification, it also urges a united front between North and South Korea against the United States. Statements continue to call for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea. An examination of the record of unification policy suggests that Pyongyang believes that South Korea's govern-

ment enjoys no real popular support and is merely a U.S. puppet. With the United States out of the picture, North Korea thinks it could relatively easily bring about the collapse of the South Korean regime and unification under the auspices of Pyongyang through limited military acts. North Korea has yet to put forward a clear blueprint for peaceful unification and then follow through on it.

Data are insufficient to say with absolute certainty what North Korea's strategic intentions are. Any one of the three packages outlined in this paper is plausible. North Korea's intentions could conceivably fluctuate among the three, depending on how the regime assesses the situation at any particular point. The United States needs to probe and prod the Pyongyang regime to learn for sure. We need to keep an open mind and continually monitor what North Korea says, what it does, and how it prepares. We should look for consistencies and inconsistencies. We should not entirely discount propaganda, but we should pay closest attention to what the regime is actually doing and planning and give less credence to what it says. We do not want to reward and reinforce bad behavior, but at the same time it is important to provide incentives for good behavior. Complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program is a laudable goal, but the level of mutual distrust and suspicion is such that some intermediate confidence-building measures are necessary to develop trust on both sides.

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83. Foreign Ministry statement (in Korean) (Pyongyang: Democratic People's Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 February 2005).



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