

North Korea and the Bomb

Tony Boyles

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The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) is widely considered to be one of the most substantial threats to global security today. To quote the United States Marine Corp Intelligence Activity's *North Korea Country Handbook*, "[North Korea] is, and will likely remain, one of the most dangerous countries in the world." And not without reasonable justification can the Marine Corps publish this. North Korea possesses one of the largest conventional militaries on the planet, openly considers chemical warfare an acceptable wartime tactic (USMC 1997), and most importantly, currently maintains a functional nuclear arsenal. However, North Korea's nuclear weapons program has endured a complex and difficult series of advances and stalls, and its future is uncertain.

The United States Intelligence Community took note of North Korea as a state developing nuclear technology early in the 1980s. However, a very brief note believed to have originated from the CIA regards the possibility of North Korea actually constructing nuclear *weaponry* a distant unlikelyhood, and that the then-new Yongbyon nuclear facility would probably fall under appropriate International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) scrutiny at the insistence of the Soviets, who originally shared this technology with the North Koreans (CIA 1982). The following year's CIA report entitled *A 10-Year Projection of Possible Events of Nuclear Proliferation Concern* reaffirmed these U.S. beliefs about the viability of a North Korean weapons program (CIA 1983). As more information about Yongbyon became available in the following years, U.S. intelligence invested an increasing amount of attention in the program, particularly following the realization that the Yongbyon reactor would, in fact, be

capable of producing weapons-grade plutonium (CIA 1985).

The true history of North Korea's nuclear weapons program began with what arguably *should* have been its end on December 12, 1985, when North Korea submitted to Soviet pressures to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (IAEA 2008, CIA 1985). This was a major reversal of past policies. The "Eternal President" Kim Il-Sung had mistrusted the neighboring People's Republic of China. And while he maintained a near-hero worship complex for Iosef Stalin, Kim did not align North Korea with the Soviet Union (Suh 1988). Instead, he implemented the policy of "Juche" or "self-reliance"¹ (CIA 2008), a declared neutrality to protect North Korea from landing in the crossfire between China and the Soviet Union, should a war occur. The prospect of a war between the two powers looked increasingly more likely as relations deteriorated throughout the cold war, and so "self-reliance" became a staple of the Kim government (Suh 1988). It survived Kim Il-Sung, and has persisted to this day as the principle from which Kim Jong-Il's government derives much of its justification for its current starkly isolationist policies. In a more perfect world, the signing of the Non-Proliferation Treaty should have effectively ended the need for close U.S. observation of North Korea's activities. In reality, however, the event only called the Intelligence Community to more attentive analysis of the development at Yongbyon. A dense series of technical memos, notes, and other (formerly) classified documents led up to the 1992 inspections.

In May of 1992, North Korea allowed a team of inspectors from the IAEA to visit

¹ The translation is disputed, since the literal translation is more akin to "Main body." For the sake of simplicity, I refer to the more metaphorically-meaningful "self-reliance."

the facility at Yongbyon, in compliance with its obligations to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (albeit five years belatedly). The inspectors calculated a discrepancy between the actual volume of spent nuclear fuel and the expected volume, leaving the IAEA with serious concerns over what it believed to be undeclared plutonium yielded from the facility. The inspectors requested additional access to two other facilities believed to be related to the storage of spent nuclear fuel, but were denied. On March 12, 1993, North Korea declared its intent to withdraw from the nonproliferation treaty. North Korea suspended its withdrawal literally days before the act was formalized by the three months' forewarning required by Article X of the treaty (IAEA 2008).

Despite the agreement maintaining North Korea's status as a nuclear non-proliferator, North Korea complicated attempts by IAEA inspectors to verify its actions at its seven nuclear facilities. The IAEA proposed an alternative, to allow scientists to test samples taken from the facilities to determine the nature and scope of the projects carried out at the facilities. This proposition met harsh opposition from the Korean leadership, culminating in a hasty, messy discharge of fuel from the reactor to prevent the inspection team from possibly extracting useful information from any samples collected. The IAEA, in its disenchantment with this latest ploy to subvert normal restrictions and oversight, decided to cease providing any technical aid to the Korean nuclear energy program. The North Korean government responded by withdrawing its membership from the IAEA. Tensions mounted as talk of sanctions and conventional military intervention passed through diplomatic channels (IAEA 2008).

Finally, in June of 1994, former President Jimmy Carter went to Korea to meet with Kim Il-Sung. After his efforts, Pres. Carter contacted Washington with a far more hopeful message than any other diplomat had yet provided. Unfortunately, before the U.S. could respond to the offer, Kim Il-Sung died. This misfortune did not derail Pres. Carter's propositions for either party. On October 12, 1994, the United States and North Korea both signed the "Agreed Framework." (Fischer 1997) In the framework, North Korea agreed to halt its plutonium production program and work toward the eventual goal of dismantling the existing nuclear facilities and sending the expended reactor fuel out of the country. In exchange, the U.S. would supply North Korea with fuel oil, increase economic cooperation, and aid in the construction of two modern light-water nuclear power plants equipped with full surveillance capabilities (IAEA 1994).

This agreement was a regrettably short-lived comfort to U.S. policy makers. President Clinton found increasing difficulty in garnering support for the framework, particularly the construction of the light-water reactors. The Republican Revolution of 1994 and Republican Senate majority in 1996 frustrated attempts at beginning construction of the reactors, viewing the agreement as appeasement. On August 31, 1998, North Korea launched a missile. While the stated purpose was the attempted launch of a satellite, the prevailing belief in the U.S. is that the actual reason was simply to test the intercontinental ballistic missile, easily capable of reaching Tokyo (Walpole 1998).

With the abrupt change in policies from President Clinton to President Bush, once again, the situation changed from unstable to volatile when, on January 29, 2002,

President George W. Bush named North Korea along with Iran and Iraq as part of the new “axis of evil” in his State of the Union Address. North Korea responded by quietly reactivating the Yongbyon nuclear reactor. Amidst calls to cease the violation of the 1994 agreement, North Korea—for the second time—formally announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Unlike the close scrape nine years earlier, no bargains or interventions prevented the North Koreans from formally withdrawing three months later on April 10, 2003 (IAEA 2008).

The years that followed would be marked by numerous meetings encompassing five different six-party talks aimed at establishing an appropriately satisfactory agreement between the U.S., North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia. The insistence on six-party talks is a product of the U.S. distrust of North Korean bilateral agreements, remembering the failure of the 1994 agreement. After much alternate perceived progress and realized failure, North Korea finally launched an aggressive series of tests in 2006, including several missiles in July and a major nuclear warhead on October 9. The yield was a disappointing one kiloton, leading many experts to believe the test had “fizzled.” Despite the humiliation of a minimal yield, the North Koreans had finally demonstrated unequivocally that they were capable of launching a nuclear strike (Hecker 2006, CIA 2008).

An immediate backlash against the test yielded fresh sanctions against the North Korean government. It was vigorous diplomacy, however, catalyzed by the prospect of a nuclear North Korea acting aggressively that drove North Korea back into some moderately successful six-party talks by December of that year (2006). By the following

March (2007), the North Korean government had extended new invitations for inspection (CIA 2008). While these improvements are widely considered to be successful even today, their scope overlaps one of the most unsettling and dangerous parts of North Korea's nuclear history.

In the morning hours of September 6, 2007, Israel sneaked through Turkish airspace across the northern border of Syria and quietly bombed a single mysterious complex in the Deir ez-Zor region. The bombing, known as "Operation Orchard," receive minimal media coverage, in part because the only government that formally acknowledged the event was Syria's. Israel was completely silent, as were all the surrounding Arab states. During the days that followed, some stories of unknowable authority began circulating concerning some North Korean scientists who may have been killed in the bombing (Kumakura 2008). Additionally, a mysterious North Korean ship had docked at a nearby port three days before the attack. The North Korean government issued a response to the attack, condemning Israel and expressing support for Syria (Xinhua 2007).

Though much is still unknown to the general public about the events leading up to Operation Orchard, North Korea's involvement in the affair is now unquestioned. North Korea was supplying Syria with a nuclear reactor similar to the Yongbyon reactor (Hersh 2008). One of the worst fears of the Western world had been realized: a nuclear power was furnishing nuclear technology to a pariah state. It is only a small step between exchanging nuclear material with the Syrian government and exchanging nuclear material with terrorists. The U.S. was clear, however, that rumors concerning

North Korea's part in the affair would not interrupt the progress of the six-party talks (Hersh 2008).

Despite the U.S. optimism of 2007, the latest round of talks has failed. There are currently no plans to resume talks, and it is not expected that any will appear before President-elect Obama takes office. The Yongbyon plant is currently non-functional, but it is not technically disabled. So, *was it worth it?* To ask this question of any nuclear state is to delve into a much more complex set of ethical and political issues. No rational actor would be able to answer a simple "yes" or "no" without substantial justification. This simple question implies several inquiries: Why did the nation seek the Bomb? Has it met these needs? If so, has it helped enough to justify the cost on the international stage? With the histories and motivations of all nuclear powers being widely varied, this line of inquiry presents unique stories for each state. North Korea's nuclear development program has created untold international strife without proportional benefit. In short, *it has not paid off*. It is important to note that nuclear weapons are not the cause of North Korea's current problems, but symptoms of much deeper issues. With this in mind, a more satisfying answer is *it has not paid off yet*.

The successes of North Korea's nuclear weapons program have yielded a substantial degree of attention from the international community. While it is tempting to color this effect the motivation for the establishment of North Korea's nuclear arsenal, accusing Kim Jong-Il of merely attention-mongering is too narrow and simplistic an approach to explain the complications to which he has subjected all concerned parties. Instead, perhaps the DPRK's nuclear program is a defensive pursuit. However, North

Korea faces no substantial domestic military threat. Though it is still technically involved in a war with the South, the two sides have maintained a shaky cease-fire for decades now. Russia, China, and Japan have all expressed no modern² expansionist interests in the region (and if they had, South Korea should be in comparable peril). And while the policies of the second Bush administration have proven less than ideal, 2007 and 2008 have been marked by diplomatic progress which weakens any extant odds of a military challenge to North Korea from the United States.

If not for security reasons, maybe nuclear weapons lend North Korea some well-needed bargaining power. The economic failures of North Korea and intensification of the famine in the mid-1990's created an immense need for foreign aid. A period of suspended nuclear development could have been an adequate trade in bargaining to bring in the necessary aid to stall the disaster. This is, however, another inadequate oversimplification. North Korean officials denied aid organizations full access to the most famine-stricken areas, fearing the foreign influence might sow the seeds of dissension.

Why they did it.

The obvious first step toward understanding why any country seeks nuclear weapons is learning what the state could gain from the nuclear program. Ironically, the most candid answer to this question can come from the treaty attempting to end the program. For North Korea, the pursuit of nuclear weapons did not end with the 1995 Agreed Framework, but the agreement did clearly signal North Korea's interests: secure

² Conservatively, since the end of the Cold War

sources of energy for domestic use and economic and political normalization of relations with the U.S. While the long-term intent of the agreement was to halt the operation of North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear facility (and thereby the production of plutonium for use in weapons), the agreement mentions nothing about immediate changes to the defensive policies of either party, save a promise by the U.S. not to use nuclear weapons against North Korea.

In his paper "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," Scott Sagan argues that the conventional wisdom concerning the incentives to develop nuclear weapons is dangerously simplistic. Sagan instead outlines three possible scenarios which could lead a state to pursue nuclear technology. The first (and most obvious) is security: one nation feels that only the threat of a nuclear strike will sufficiently deter aggression from other, unfriendly, state actors. The second is internal pressures, such as a push to garner public support leading up to an election. The third is normative incentives, where a nation will seek nuclear weapons in furtherance of its own national prestige (Sagan 1996). While he provides a useful framework, Sagan is a little too quick to classify North Korea as a clear-cut example of a state serving only its own security.

North Korea has the conventional forces and chemical weaponry available to launch a strike potentially as damaging as a nuclear strike, against Seoul, South Korea (USMC 1997). The promise of carnage of a scale comparable to a nuclear strike is a bargaining chip the North Koreans can use in place of the threat of a nuclear explosion. The nuclear weapons, therefore, provide no deterrent against South Korea, the only

sovereign nation with which North Korea is formally at war³ (USMC 1997). Until 1998, the North also lacked a missile delivery system capable of threatening any other nation in opposition to its government (Niksich 2002), meaning it had *no* defensive advantage to gain from possessing nuclear warheads. Even if it had, Nina Tannenwald's paper, "Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo," presents a compelling sociological argument that no rational actor will launch a first strike (Tannenwald 2005). Even with escalation after numerous tit-for-tat exchanges, Tannenwald's assertion suggests that North Korea *cannot* wage an attack against the United States, limiting the usefulness of the weapons to deterrent purposes. The security model is thus too narrow an explanation for North Korea's continued nuclear ambitions.

Because the security model fails to address adequately North Korea's defensive situation pragmatically, perhaps one of Sagan's other models can fill in the blanks (even if Sagan himself would argue the security model was most appropriate). North Korea likely does not suffer from the need to develop nuclear weapons because of internal pressures. The Kim leadership has masterfully kept the nation under its power, despite a disastrous famine and Orwellian degree of social regulation. The possibility of a third-party within the country garnering enough support to influence a policy decision like the pursuit of nuclear weaponry is remote at best. Additionally, were such a group powerful enough to drive any policy, it would likely push for more aid, *not* the construction of

³ Let me emphasize "formally" in that the "at-war" status is a formality. Actual (as opposed to potential) interstate violence on the Korean Peninsula has not been a substantial issue during the entire lifetime of North Korea's Nuclear Program.

nuclear weapons. Thus, the internal pressures model does not apply to North Korea. In Sagan's framework, this leaves only the normative, or national prestige, model.

To quote Sagan, "[...] Military organizations and their weapons can therefore be envisioned as serving functions similar to those of flags, airlines, and Olympic teams; they are part of what modern states believe they have to possess to be legitimate, modern states." Knowing that security is not a real concern and internal bureaucratic institutions cannot initiate a nuclear weapons program without Kim's approval, it seems far more likely that the leadership of North Korea isn't concerned about the strategic implications of possessing nuclear weaponry. Instead, the government is interested in the legitimacy that follows nuclear weapons. North Korea cannot be ignored, and commanding that kind of attention is something for which Kim can be proud.

This explanation within Sagan's framework would represent a fairly comprehensive picture (given the limited availability of information about the governance of North Korea) had the Agreed Framework survived. Unfortunately, the Agreed Framework did not hold U.S.-D.P.R.K. relations together, and the reasons why are as meaningful as the reasons why North Korea initially signed the document. Without the formal declaration, these reasons are not as readily comprehensible. In addition to the U.S. failure to begin construction on the promised and much-needed light-water reactors, a sometimes irregular delivery of fuel oil (Jones 1999, IAEA 1997) may have further strained North Korea's patience. If the tardiness of the U.S. delivery tanker incited North Korea into acting outside the constraints of the agreement, two possibilities may explain the behavior: either it needed the fuel oil for energy (not likely,

considering it had disabled but not yet dismantled the Yongbyon reactor), or it had not intended to adhere to the spirit of the agreement, even if it might have (optimistically) followed the agreement to the letter as long as the United States did. The fact is the U.S. did not, and subsequently North Korea did not (Sigal 2005).

Alastair Smith's paper, "Personalizing Crises," resoundingly indicts nations for the carelessness with which they can lob attacks at populations and expect the damages to affect the leaders. The United States would not hold the people of North Korea accountable for the behavior of their government (unless the regime instituted massive democratic reforms and the people consciously elected to maintain the unfavorable policies of the current regime), but the people of North Korea absorb the damages of U.S. policies against North Korea, while the executives enjoy lavish lifestyles. Smith's argument draws heavily on the military example of the U.S. air war over Kosovo in 1999, but it is not difficult to translate his military-centered arguments to the sanctions on North Korea.

The economic sanctions on North Korea have exacerbated a decades-long famine which has likely needlessly starved millions of Koreans. The intended target of the sanctions is the "Dear Leader," Kim Jong Il. Kim's exploits and quirks are nothing short of legendary: according to his BBC profile, he possesses a movie collection exceeding 20,000 videotapes, drinks heavily and has fresh lobster carried via helicopter to his train (he has a mortal fear of flying) daily during long trips, a delicacy which he eats with silver chopsticks. Clearly, the Dear Leader does not suffer beside the comrades he claims to act in the best interests of. While his policies elicit sanctions which he feels no

effects from, this knowledge does not deter him from pursuing policies which lead to the continuation of the damaging economic sanctions.

Sanctions, as explained by Nikolay Marinov in “Do Economic Sanctions Destabilize Country Leaders?” destabilize incumbent regimes which do not adequately address major crises further aggravated by a lack of international backing (Marinov 2005). The crises North Korea has faced should have led to the downfall of the Kim government. The prediction from Marinov’s analysis, however, does not apply to North Korea because Marinov’s experiment only explores the effects of sanctions on democracies and so-called “mixed regimes,” and conspicuously ignores authoritarian regimes. The logic from the paper may still apply, though the statistics do not. The government’s failure to address the starvation of its people or damages from other disasters should incite the North Korean people into a revolutionary sentiment. This has not occurred, however and likely will not occur.

A probable reason why Marinov’s logic cannot scratch authoritarian states is control of the media. In preventing contact with the outside world, the government gives itself immense leeway to justify its own actions and criminalize the developed world for failing to provide aid. Without dissenting opinions, it is likely very difficult for citizens within to grasp the breadth and depth of the government’s modifications to the factual record. We cannot say much about North Korea’s internal affairs authoritatively. The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index rates North Korea as the least free nation in the world. With such a tightly closed society, it is difficult to extrapolate factual information from the usual sources of media outlets and non-government organizations.

What sources are available are invariably riddled with anti-Western sentiments. For instance, the government of North Korea established a website⁴ in the mid 1990s. It is largely devoid of content, in contrast to the expansive web presences of most governments. The North Korean site does, however, provide stunning examples of the kind of propaganda the North Korean people endure daily:

Korea is an independent and sovereign state, but the South is still controlled by the imperialist interests and the U.S. troops .If any South Korean citizen tries to visit North Korea crossing the big concrete wall, he'll be killed by the american soldiers. The 'Security Law' in South Korea forbides to any South Korean citizen to talk or read about the North or else he'll be punished with jail or even death penalty. [sic]

The “Korean Friendship Association” (which maintains the site), and by association the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, very clearly takes issue with the United States. If we assume the same leader-centric mindset of a North Korean, nuclear weapons were not a defensive option but a defensive *necessity*. The United States’ defensive ties to the South make the lack of nuclear weapons an unacceptable risk. Kim Jong-Il has come out very well for his weapons program: he has maintained his grasp on North Korea and attracted much international attention. But what serves the leader of North Korea does not necessarily serve North Korea.

⁴ <http://www.korea-dpr.com/>,
excerpt taken from <http://www.korea-dpr.com/reunification.htm>

The U.S.'s representative at the Six-Party Talks lists five points of contention: denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, normalization of U.S.-D.P.R.K. relations, normalization of Japan-D.P.R.K. relations, economy and energy cooperation, and a Northeast Asia peace and security mechanism (Hill 2007). The issue of denuclearization is intimately linked to the need for a "peace and security mechanism." Likewise, normalization of relations with the U.S. and Japan has intimate ties to the need for energy cooperation. North Korea cannot decommission the Yongbyon reactor and expect to continue powering its cities with its domestically available energy resources. Additionally, the annual crop yield has not kept the North Korean population fed. The famine which killed 30 million Chinese in Mao's Great Leap Forward persists today in North Korea. Without an open-trade market, the North Korean government cannot support the population's basic need for nourishment. But North Korea is not without its achievements.

North Korea has deterred the U.S. In establishing a nuclear weapons program, Pyongyang attracted the military attention of the United States. In demonstrating the functionality of said weapons, Pyongyang gained the tools necessary to deter the United States militarily. Ironically, the only reason the United States military would have entertained even a minimal interest in North Korea was because of its nuclear weapons program to begin with, hearkening back to the argument that national prestige is the real motivation for the program. What is left up to question is whether it justifies the program *enough*. The actual costs of producing nuclear weapons are substantial. In addition to the superficial costs of running the reactor (offset by the money not spent on

other methods of generating electricity) and reprocessing the spent fuel into weapons-grade plutonium, North Korea has paid a substantial cost internationally. Without diplomatic or economic relations with the West, North Korea has halted its own growth.

What if North Korea had not developed nuclear weapons technology?

Answering counterfactual questions about North Korea's nuclear weapons is difficult because the nuclear weapons are a symptom of the much deeper issues of a closed society. It is appealing to think that without the nuclear program, North Korea could have followed China's model of opening diplomatic relations with the outside world, and perhaps gradually establishing economic relationships with greater potential gains than the humanitarian aid North Korea currently relies on to feed its population. The absence of the substantial economic sanctions would dramatically decrease the number of casualties of the famine. This fantasy is unrealistic, however, considering the lack of interest the North Korean government has shown towards implementing *any* changes, regardless of how beneficial such changes have been for the Chinese. More likely it would have quietly endured the humanitarian crisis of the famine with very little change domestically, and very little attention internationally.

Ultimately, the costs North Korea has paid to keep its weapons have exceeded the gains. It is a problem of having the interests of the leadership pitted against the interests of the people. North Korea is unique in that it acts to the detriment of its citizens and faces no repercussions. Despite its widely recognized "failed state" status, or title of least free nation in the world (Economist 2008), it is extremely stable in its current regime. This could soon change with the failing health of Kim Jong-Il, but the greatest

likelihood is a high-ranking official or member of the Kim family will step up to the leadership role and continue the policies of the previous two leaders. It may, perhaps, behoove the West to stall peace talks until such a leader takes power, lest we should relive another viable agreement broken by a leader who did not whole-heartedly support it (i.e. the Agreed Framework).

The North Korean government still has the power to make their nuclear weapons program worth the costs. It cannot do this, however, by maintaining the arsenal. The most valuable quality of the arsenal is how much the world will pay to be rid of it. In 1994, Presidents Jimmy Carter and Kim Il-Sung negotiated an agreement that cost North Korea nothing but the opportunity to become a nuclear power, and would have gained two new reactors outputting 120 times the amount of power generated by the Yongbyon reactor, a hefty sum of fuel oil, a move towards diplomatic recognition by the United States, and the economic benefits that would follow. The Agreed Framework conspicuously did not touch the possibility of North Korea rejoining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. If this bargaining chip were on the table, the potential gains for the North Korean regime would be enormous. However, the greatest gains to be made will follow a succession of multi-lateral agreements, and not a mushroom cloud. It is this simple logic which ultimately protects us all from the threat of nuclear weapons.

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