

# BEHIND the HEADLINES

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**Understanding North  
Korea:  
Perception vs. Reality**

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# Understanding North Korea: Perception vs. Reality

ERICH WEINGARTNER

A LAND OF CONTRADICTIONS

**N**orth Korea, or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as they like to call themselves, is a country of dramatic contradictions. If you visit the capital, Pyongyang, you will find yourself in the midst of monumental splendour, wide avenues, high-rise apartment buildings, showcase institutions, and endless monuments to the glories of 'Great Leader' Kim Il Sung, 'Dear Leader' Kim Jong Il, and North Korea's home-grown Juche' ideology of self-reliance.

If, on the other hand, you visit outlying regions of the country, you will travel on unpaved, narrow roads. You will see decaying infrastructure, poorly constructed buildings black with coal dust, poverty-stricken and crumbling villages. Of course, even here you will see an abundance of statues, monuments, and slogans to the glories of the revolution, its leaders, and its ideology.

And in both city and rural areas, brightly lit public buildings and monuments contrast with the inadequate supply of electricity and heating, not just for the common people but for the elite as well.

The proud policy of the Juche idea' (usually translated as 'self-reliance,' although it has a much broader meaning) is considered by North Korean ideologues as a significant improvement on communism. It was so successful in its beginnings that North Korea outgrew South Korea economically until the mid-1970s.

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Self-reliance, still proclaimed in propaganda, is now in tatters, replaced by an increasing dependence on external aid and assistance.

North Korea is a mountainous country of breathtaking scenic beauty, rich in natural resources. But economic decline and energy shortages have led to deforestation and environmental degradation. Only a few areas are still protected. The Mount Kumgang (Diamond Mountain) region, for instance, has been opened for South Korean tourists for the past three years.

Self-sufficiency in agriculture - the stated goal of the government - is elusive. Only 20 per cent of the country's surface is arable. The over-used, depleted soils have become dependent upon massive inputs of fertilizer and pesticides. But chemical factories lack the oil needed to produce these in sufficient quantities.

There was a time when the state could claim to take care of people's social needs - the provision of free health services, day-care and kindergartens, free education, food and shelter for all. The institutions created to deliver those services are still in place, but today they administer deficiencies in all sectors. Hospitals lack medical instruments and even the most essential medicines. Rural schools lack paper and pencils. Professionals have fallen behind international standards and research. Most institutions cannot provide the most rudimentary equipment and materials; computers and other technology taken for granted elsewhere are available only to select institutions in Pyongyang.

Although the state promotes the artistic, academic, and physical talents and skills of children and youth, it does so through strict indoctrination that leaves little room for independent or creative thought.

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and indeed there are three functioning Christian churches in Pyongyang, as well as Buddhist temples and Chondoist places of worship. But the prescribed cult of adoration for the leaders has become a kind of ersatz religion for all generations since the Korean War.

DPR Koreans still have an uncanny ability to mobilize manpower for construction, for the military, for endless gargantuan galas and parades such as last year's marathon Arirang festival, which featured a musical, artistic, gymnastic, and military cast numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

At the same time, the majority of the country's 23 million inhabitants are engaged in a laborious daily struggle for survival. Estimates of famine deaths since 1995 range from 500,000 to three-and-a-half million. Since the summer of 2002, the United Nations World Food

Programme (WFP) has had to remove some three million beneficiaries from food distribution because of insufficient donations. Reports of people dying from the effects of malnutrition are on the rise again even though the crop assessment for last year, undertaken by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), recorded relative gains over previous years.

People in both North and South Korea have a deeply emotional and enduring desire for reunification, which is also the stated political goal of both governments. However, there is little consensus on how to bring it about. Efforts at rapprochement are regularly sabotaged by events like the West Sea inter-Korean naval clash in the summer of 2002, which cost dozens of lives and sank a South Korean patrol boat.

The DPRK has a keen desire to be accepted as a trading partner by the Western world. Since the late 1990s it has normalized relations with dozens of countries, including the European Union and Canada. Yet it continues to protect its hermetically closed society with an economic system out of phase with the rest of the world and seems bent on alienating even those willing to engage with it diplomatically. Recent actions to evict inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAF.A) and withdraw from the Nuclear non-Proliferation treaty have put numerous profitable relationships with promising interlocutors on hold.

#### IRRATIONAL BEHAVIOUR OR LACK OF UNDERSTANDING?

These contradictions - and many others - are often cited as proof that the DPRK is ruled by an irrational, unpredictable regime. But my experience tells me otherwise. The unpredictability has less to do with the regime itself than with the fact that there is so little information available on how the regime operates on the inside.

North Korea has been isolated from the rest of the world for so long, even South Koreans - who speak the same language - fail to understand them. We struggle to find meaning in their words and their behaviour, but our assumptions are founded on perceptions that may or may not be accurate. Much of our intelligence is based less on factual knowledge than on unsubstantiated beliefs and impressions. No wonder they often seem incomprehensible!

An illustration from the *Star Trek* episodes on television might be helpful here. In one episode of *The Next Generation*, Captain Picard and an alien starship captain are stranded on a seemingly deserted planet. The alien appears to speak English clearly enough, yet nothing he says makes sense. Taking his cue from body language

and manual gestures, Picard assumes he is being invited to a duel, only to discover too late that he is in fact being invited to fight side by side with the alien against a beast threatening them both. Picard finally realizes that the alien speaks in metaphors. But he is unable to understand the metaphors because he does not know the alien's culture, history, and literature. My impression is that our communication - or lack thereof - with North Korea is similarly handicapped. As in the *Star Trek* episode, this could lead to disastrous consequences.

In the spring of 1999, near the end of my stay in the DPRK as a United Nations food aid official, an editorial appeared in the newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* and the journal *Kulloja*, both organs of the Central Committee of the Worker's Party of Korea. Humanitarian workers nicknamed the editorial the 'Yellow Wind Document.' It was subsequently translated into several languages and appeared in the *Pyongyang Times*, a weekly English-language newspaper. Editorials such as these provide the content of major, countrywide educational campaigns.'

The gist of this long piece - some seven thousand words - was that the greatest danger facing North Korea was not a war of aggression in which millions of lives might be sacrificed, but the subtle influence of the 'yellow winds' of capitalist ideology and culture. The editorial quoted Kim Jong II: 'Through their ideological and cultural infiltration into other countries, the imperialists are working ceaselessly to infect people with ideological diseases, disintegrate those countries from within and then put them under their domination and control.' It then attributed the collapse of the Soviet Union and east European communist regimes to this process, adding: 'For the socialist-oriented nations, the "yellow" wind from the imperialists is more fatal than an atomic bomb.'

No one escaped the broad brush wielded by the editorialists. There were clear warnings to the Korean people about contact with foreigners bearing gifts. The document implied that humanitarians were simply the tools of the enemy bent on the people's destruction.

A number of my colleagues in the humanitarian aid community in Pyongyang were quite incensed. They had come to the DPRK motivated by a desire to save people from starvation. Yet the editorial called for a 'mosquito net' to be pitched over all fields of social life in order to prevent the influx of the 'capitalist ideological virus.'

This expresses quite eloquently what international staff have experienced since the start of relief operations in 1995. Direct contact with Korean people takes place only under very circumscribed

parameters. Even the simple courtesy of inviting local staff to your residence is met with almost insurmountable obstacles.

I did not personally view this editorial as insulting to the humanitarian community. On the contrary! The editorial was published just when humanitarian aid agencies were beginning to achieve results, despite the obstacles placed in their way. I believe that the editorial became necessary precisely because of the increased visibility of foreign aid workers throughout the country.

When I first arrived in the DPRK in the spring of 1997, the World Food Programme had five expatriates working in the Pyongyang Office. Two years later this number rose to almost fifty. Until the summer of 1997, non-governmental organizations were not allowed residence permits. Two years later, a dozen resident NGOs worked in the DPRK, bringing the total number of non-Korean workers to over one hundred.

The WFP had three vehicles for travel to barely 50 accessible counties when I first arrived. By the time I left the WFP had some 40 vehicles in the WFP alone, with easily another 30 used by other agencies. The number of accessible counties had risen to 162, in all provinces of the country. That was a lot of visibility in areas that had never been visited by foreigners.

When I began, there were restrictions about what could be printed on sacks and packaging containing humanitarian commodities. Korean lettering was forbidden, as were pictures of the flags of donor countries. When I left in 1999, packaging identified donors in the Korean language. The American flag, well known even by children because of the constant anti-American propaganda, along with the giant letters u, s, and A were visible on sacks throughout the country. What is more, the sacks themselves, being of very good quality, were re-used repeatedly. The result was that the population of American flags continued to expand in North Korea, as long as the United States continued to pour aid into the country.

Of course, this is bound to unsettle the old guard hard-liners, who are perfectly aware that the influx of humanitarian aid is not value-free. Humanitarian agencies do, in fact, constitute a threat to the status quo. Aside from the problem of economic dependency on food aid, the presence of inquisitive foreigners deep in the heartland of self-reliant socialism must be disconcerting. The government is no longer in a position to hide from its people the fact that the DPRK's worst enemies are feeding the nation's children.

As the editorial cited above clearly implies, the emergency in the DPRK is not merely an economic one, but more fundamentally an

ideological one. The latter may well be more frightening to the regime.

#### HAWKS FEEDING HAWKS

To maintain the status quo under these circumstances requires more stringent control mechanisms, something the military and internal security apparatus see as their task. How does one maintain military control when economic control has been lost? Until the DPRK recovers economically, humanitarian aid is indispensable. However, donors and agencies require minimum standards of accountability, which means access to and contact with beneficiaries - leaving the country vulnerable to the 'yellow winds' so feared and deplored in the editorial.

The DPRK finds itself in a 'Catch 22' situation: either it has to tighten control, increase belligerence, and lose the aid, or it has to accept the aid, make friends, and lose control.

For the past ten years, the pendulum has been swinging between the two extremes. My suspicion that what we see as erratic behaviour actually conceals major policy and ideological differences within the North Korean regime has been echoed by Selig Harrison in his latest book, *Korean Endgame*, in which he writes that 'Kim Jong Il is presiding over a process that might be called reform by stealth. He is tacitly encouraging change in the domestic economy without incurring the political costs of confronting the Old Guard in a formal doctrinal debate. At the same time, he is openly sponsoring flexible policies toward South Korean and foreign investment as part of the broader moves toward greater openness.' The flip side of this reform by stealth is that 'the totalitarian North Korean leadership is ready to incur horrendous human costs in order to assure its survival.'

Which brings us to the current nuclear crisis. Given the undeniable fact that the DPRK is in dire economic straits and needs massive external assistance, and given the regime's uncertainties about the course of action that will achieve regime survival, I have the impression of a leadership that deals with its internal problems by 'muddling through' (to use Marcus Noland's phrase) and with its external relations by trial and error.

The decision as to which direction the DPRK's pendulum should swing at any particular moment - belligerence or friendship - depends mainly on the short-term results achieved by the trial and error method. I see a definite pattern in the United States-DPRK relationship, for example, that follows closely the prevailing attitudes exhibited by the us administration of the day. Positive moves will

gain tension-reducing reactions; negative moves will elicit aggressive responses.

The existence of distinct policy communities struggling for ascendancy in North Korea makes sense of this seemingly erratic behaviour. As Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev allegedly told President John E Kennedy: 'My hawks feed your hawks and your hawks feed my hawks.'

I have a strong sense of *déjà vu* as I watch the current nuclear standoff unfold between the DPRK and the international community. Others have pointed to the similarities between the current crisis and that of ten years ago, which culminated in the 1994 Framework Agreement. That agreement saw the closing of North Korea's plutonium-producing graphite-moderated nuclear reactors under IAEA inspection in exchange for the promise of two proliferation-proof light water reactors. Financed by a consortium of countries under the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO) and built under South Korean supervision, the reactors were to be completed in 2003.

In the interim, to offset energy losses from the closing of existing reactors, the us promised regular shipments of heavy fuel oil. They also promised a series of moves in the direction of normalized relations between the us and the DPRK.

A common perception, promoted by most mainline media, is that blame for the current crisis rests exclusively with North Korea for failing to honour its nuclear commitments. The DPRK perception, however, is that the us failed to honour its commitments. Not only has work on the promised nuclear power plants barely begun, but also the idea of a security arrangement to end the Korean War and reach a normalized relationship between North Korea and the us was rejected out of hand by the American administration as soon as President George W. Bush came to power. Military security continues to be the number one demand of the DPRK in the current Beijing talks, followed closely by recognition of the legitimacy of North Korea's political system.

My sense of *deja vu* dates not from 1993-4, however, but from more recent times, when I still lived in Pyongyang and worked with the UN WFP. The year was 1998. The DPRK had just launched a three-stage Taepodong II missile over the skies of Japan, reaching almost as far as the coast of Alaska. Not a 'missile,' say the North Koreans, but a satellite launched into orbit for the purpose of broadcasting hymns of praise in honour of the 'Great Leader' upon a grateful world.

The us National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) failed to track that satellite. The worst was assumed. The long range

of the missile frightened South Korea and shocked Japan. Even the us felt threatened. By December of that year, the perception of threat had escalated to ever more aggressive mutual recriminations and military posturing.

Life around us in the DPRK became tense. Field trips for aid workers were curtailed. The local population was put through gruelling civil defence exercises. At three o'clock in the morning, sirens blaring, we watched from our fifth floor apartment as men and women from our neighbourhood ran toward underground bomb shelters, children in tow.

And, of course, the military brass gave speeches to the international community, using words not unlike those being broadcast today. A statement formally presented by the General Staff of the Korean People's Army to the international humanitarian community in Pyongyang in December 1998 had these words to say about the `us imperialists': 'What they seek in this is to find a pretext to trigger off war ... throwing away the mask of "appeasement" and "engagement" which it had once worn for some time. Unable to destroy our socialist system with its isolation and suffocation strategy and "appeasement strategy" to induce us to "reform" and "opening," the United States has adopted a reckless adventure, losing reason.'

And as usual, the statement contained an unconcealed threat: 'We neither want a war, nor will we avoid a war. If a war is started, we will never miss the opportunity ... "Surgical operation"-style attack and "pre-emptive strike" are by no means an exclusive option of the United States.'

But, bravado and accusations aside, for me the most intriguing part of the communiqué was the very last line, the obvious climax. This was the punch line, where one would expect the absolutely worst thing they could say about their enemies. Listen to this grand finale: 'The aggressors will never escape the fate of forlorn wandering spirits.'

What a remarkable, almost quaint, sentence, harking back to ancient shamanist folk religion! Using that kind of language when North Korea attempts to communicate with foreigners reveals a basic perception gap. What appears to us as cold strategic calculation on the part of an unrepentant rogue state bent on extortion and blackmail may in fact be an expression of profound disappointment, insecurity disguised as patriotic defiance, and courage conjured up by strong language and appeals to the supernatural.

What is being communicated here is a religious appeal to transcendent powers. After consulting with several of my North Korean

interpreter colleagues about the meaning of this statement, I came to the conclusion that it represents a genuine fear that the DPRK might well lose a war with the us. Nevertheless, the justice of their position remains unimpeachable. Whether meant metaphorically or literally, they are convinced that, even if defeated, the after-world will exact vengeance on the aggressors.

#### SWING OF THE PENDULUM

The 1998 crisis abated when the administration of Bill Clinton decided to cut short the escalating war of words by sending former Defense Secretary William Perry to Pyongyang in 1999 to study the options. In a recent article in the *New York Times*, Perry summarizes the policy that emerged:

In the end, we recommended that the United States, South Korea and Japan all proceed to talk to North Korea - but with a coordinated message and negotiating strategy. The verifiable elimination of the nuclear and missile programs was the paramount objective. Our decision not to undermine the regime could be used as a negotiating lever: much as we objected to its conduct, we could tell the North that we did not plan to go to war to change it. We could live in peace. But that peace would not be possible if North Korea pursued nuclear weapons. Far from guaranteeing security, building such weapons would force a confrontation. We could also argue that since North Korea had enough conventional firepower to make war a distinctly unpleasant prospect to us, it didn't need weapons of mass destruction to safeguard its security. This relative stability, in turn, could provide the time and conditions for a relaxation of tension and, eventually, improved relations if North Korea transformed its relations with the rest of the world.'

The Perry policy paved the way for a dramatic change in atmosphere that allowed South Korea's president, Kim Dae Jung, to implement his 'sunshine policy,' opening doors to a novel set of North-South initiatives, from family reunions to industrial cooperation to tourism to the re-opening of rail and road lines across the demilitarized zone after 50 years of division.

From the DPRK's point of view, they had begun to implement measures that would make it easier for the outside world to invest. After several years of intense discussion with United Nations agencies, the European Union, Australia, and others, the DPRK was making moves in the direction they had been encouraged to go by the international community.

Last summer the DPRK embarked on 'economy management improvement measures' that affected two key elements of the social-

ist economy: price structures and wage systems. Prices were raised 50-fold and more, 'to motivate farmers and labourers to increase productivity and improve their lives.' To help people cope with increased prices and to provide an incentive to expand production, the average working wage was raised 100-fold. The official exchange rate for us dollars was raised to approximate more closely the black market rate.

Other changes followed. The number of paid party officials assigned to public enterprises was reduced, to help factories and corporations implement 'responsible management and boost efficiency.' Basically, this eliminated one level of bureaucratic control, streamlining limited resources and taking decision-making power out of the hands of party hacks and into those of professionals, technicians, and workers.

Certain state enterprises were reorganized as corporations. A pilot 'private farming' programme was launched in the northeast corner of the DPRK, reminiscent of the 'family responsibility system' that inaugurated economic reforms in China. Small private enterprises, like ice cream vendors, neighbourhood bakeries, art dealers, and restaurateurs, received official status.

At the end of September came the announcement that a Special Administrative Region (SAR) would be set up in the northwest border city of Sinuiju, under the governorship of a foreigner, the flamboyant Chinese-Dutch tycoon, Yang Bin. With sweeping powers over the development, Yang Bin promised to turn the enclave into a haven for foreign investment, complete with a Western-style legal system independent of Pyongyang and with full respect for human rights. Less laudable from a human rights perspective is the fact that some 500,000 'ideologically risky' residents were to be expelled from Sinuiju to make room for 200,000 younger, technically trained Korean workers.

This was to be the fourth SAR to be opened to foreign investment, after Rajin-Songbon, the planned Kaesong industrial park, and the Special Tourism Region around Mt Kungang. Unfortunately, soon after the announcement, Yang Bin was arrested by Chinese authorities for tax evasion and other unspecified charges.

An unprecedented apology by the DPRK after a deadly naval clash with South Korea in the West Sea at the end of June opened the way for the resumption of numerous North-South initiatives that had been stagnating. The first direct flight between North and South Korea was tested successfully on the 21 July 2002. An emotional ceremony inaugurated work on re-connection of railways and roads across the DMZ on 18 September. South Korea promised

Inter-Korean trade climbed 1 per cent over the previous year, with South Korean firms investing in telecommunications and software development in the North. A fifth round of family reunions took place, following an inter-Korean agreement on a permanent reunion facility at Mt Kumgang. More than 200 North Korean athletes and a 'cheering group' of almost 300 North Korean sports fans participated in the 14th Asian Games in Pusan from 29 September to 14 October. The two Korean teams entered the stadium together under a unified flag. On 16 and 17 October, 670 women of both North and South met at the Kumgang mountain resort to 'rally for peace on the Korean peninsula.' It was the first time such a large and representative gathering of women from both Koreas met on Korean soil.

Then came the Japan-DPRK summit, with its startling confession and apology by North Korean leader Kim Jong II regarding the abduction of Japanese nationals. The much-reported subsequent emotional backlash in Japan overshadowed a less publicized, though in the long run more significant, breakthrough: the DPRK agreed to drop a long-standing demand that Japan pay 'reparations' for its colonial past. As South Korea had done nearly 40 years ago, the DPRK would be satisfied with taking Japan's money and simply calling it 'development assistance.'

By the end of September 2002, these openings seemed to lead in the direction of an even greater breakthrough planned by Kim Jong II for the coveted relationship with the United States. A week before the US assistant secretary of state, James Kelly, was due to visit Pyongyang, *People's Korea*, a Tokyo-based official DPRK mouthpiece, wrote that 'Pyongyang is ready to amaze Washington and the world too, in the near future, as the DPRK'S top leader did in June 2000 and September 2002, in order to put an ultimate end to the only remaining Cold War structure in Northeast Asia.'

Rumours had been floating of efforts to reform the DPRK military sector, including a possible reduction of the armed forces by as many as 500,000 men. Already, 50,000 logistics and civil engineering troops had been discharged, presumably to provide manpower for the proposed SARS in Sinuiju and Kaesong.

#### SHATTERED HOPES

As we now know, the Kelly visit ended badly. The evasive terms 'frank and useful' figured prominently in his initial press briefings. The DPRK meanwhile complained about his 'high handed and arrogant attitude.' The US version of what really happened did not come to light until two weeks after Kelly's return. Although a transcript of the

meeting has never been released, the us claims that DPRK tors had admitted to the acquisition of materials and technology to enrich uranium. Although it did not confirm this confession, the DPRK nevertheless insists on its sovereign right to nuclear weapons for the purpose of deterrence and self-defence.

The bottom line is that the DPRK felt insulted and cheated by Kelly's visit. They had hoped that improved relations with South Korea and Japan might encourage or even force the American administration to the negotiating table. From the beginning of the presidency of George W. Bush, North Korea has felt threatened - often merely by atmospherics and implied threats. Bush has not concealed his personal distaste of the DPRK regime and its leader. The 'axis of evil' label, the change in us war fighting strategy allowing for pre-emptive strikes against non-nuclear powers, the war against Iraq despite opposition from numerous us allies - all have been deeply troubling to the North Korean regime.

The DPRK'S response has been to fall back on old familiar patterns of brinkmanship. Pyongyang has withdrawn from the Non-proliferation Treaty, evicted IAEA inspectors, restarted the plutonium-reprocessing plant at Yongbyon, and threatened to end its self-imposed moratorium on long-range missile testing.

From a dispassionate point of view, the DPRK'S provocations have been effective. They wanted America's attention, and, despite White House stonewalling, they got it. They wanted to be treated with respect, and, although the respect they gained is negative rather than positive, many younger generation Koreans in the South and overseas admire this kind of guerrilla tactic, used so effectively during Korea's struggle against Japanese colonialism. They wanted direct negotiations with the us. The us wanted only talks (not negotiations), and only in a multilateral setting. What they got were bilateral negotiations brokered and hosted by China, disguised as multilateral talks.

Brinkmanship is a method of negotiation used by a weaker party to level the playing field. As long as the weaker party is able to follow through on threats, it is an effective tactic. For precisely this reason, North Korea does not shy away from appearing quite unpredictable. We may complain that its actions are counter-productive and self-defeating, but calling the bluff of an armed party suspected of being irrational and suicidal is a decidedly risky gamble. Certainly none of the DPRK'S neighbours is interested in taking a chance on such a gamble!

From a human security perspective, the current nuclear standoff

tend to shift international focus away from human security toward traditional military security. Threat is perceived to emanate from hardware; solutions are equated with the elimination of hardware; and that often means the threat to use more hardware. Diplomacy tends to be reduced to issuing ultimatums. Major players are either unable or unwilling to deal simultaneously with traditional and non-traditional security matters.

When the us, South Korea, Japan, and the European Union agreed to suspend heavy oil shipments to the DPRK in December 2002, the experts knew that the move would have little impact on the DPRK regime, even though it would most definitely reduce the available home heating for an already hungry population in the middle of a very cold winter.

Last autumn's FAO crop assessment saw some improvement in agricultural output, but there was, nonetheless, a continuing shortfall of a million tons of cereals. In the spring of 2003, UNICEF and the WFP released the results of the latest nutritional survey. A slight improvement in the rate of malnutrition was noted among North Korean children, but the authors warned that the current crisis was reducing the international assistance required to maintain those improvements. Unless the larger donor countries (primarily the us, Japan, and South Korea) honour their pledges of food and fertilizer, it is only a matter of time before the North Korean people once again descend into famine.

For more than 50 years, the DPRK has seen itself as the hub surrounded by the world's greatest powers. In fact, for centuries Korea as a whole has had to deal with powerful and predatory neighbours. Any major crisis on the Korean peninsula is bound to affect China, Russia, Japan, the us, and ultimately all of northeast Asia. When geopolitical considerations become the primary focus, little room remains for human security. All too often, the focus of attention is on how to contain the North Korean regime, rather than on how to better the lives and security of the North Korean people.

#### RECIPE FOR ENDLESS CRISIS

Although much of the blame for the current problem is directed at Pyongyang, it should be noted that there is a basic contradiction between the stated aims and the real aims of the frontline states. China, Russia, Japan, and the us all have compelling interests in maintaining the basic status quo in Korea. When looking at short-term options, none of them is interested in a collapse of the North Korean regime because that would imply a rapid, German-style reunification

on the Korean peninsula, which none of them wants in the foreseeable future. Neither can any of the DPRK's neighbours benefit from military turmoil on the peninsula, nor do they wish to be surprised by sudden eruptions, whether military or economic.

China is worried about the impact of Korean nationalism that a reunified Korea may arouse in the Korean minority in Manchuria. China also fears a mass exodus of refugees from North Korea, should the Kim Jong Il regime collapse. If a reunified Korea were to inherit the DPRK's suspected nuclear and missile technology, China worries that the technology could be turned around and aimed at it.

Japan is afraid that a sudden collapse of the DPRK regime might well result in a desperate missile assault on it as the DPRK military's last gasp. Also feared is a united Korea's historical antipathy toward Japan.

Russia is counting on economic benefits from a divided, though increasingly co-operative, Korea. It may not be able to exert the same economic influence over a united Korea that it now has over an impoverished North Korea.

A sudden collapse of the DPRK is a veritable nightmare for South Korea. The monumental problems experienced by West Germany in absorbing East Germany would be ten times worse in Korea. South Koreans fear that it could take a generation or more to pay for the economic cost of a rapid reunification.

China, Japan, Russia, and the us are all concerned about the eventual status of a reunified Korea. Would it be neutral or aligned with the us? China wants to maintain its buffer vis-a-vis us troops in Korea. Failing that, it would insist on Korean neutrality.

The us does not want a neutral Korea. The us-Korean alliance is a major pillar of American forward deployment in Asia - a deployment necessary to protect American economic interests as well as to contain the potential military threat of an expansionist China. The departure of us troops from Korea could create problems for us military bases in Japan. This would require an entirely new security configuration in northeast Asia, a prospect for which none of the players is currently prepared.

During the Clinton administration, there was an assumption that the Kim Jong Il regime would eventually collapse under the weight of its own economic mismanagement. Undue external pressure, it was felt, would only increase the danger of desperate military adventurism. The term 'soft landing' expressed the favoured option (or hope), that is, a continuation of a separated North Korean state, but with a softer, gentler, more co-operative and open regime.

However, as Henry Kissinger points out in his recent book *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* even a substantial easing of tensions on the Korean peninsula is worrisome for American interests.' If the Kim Jong II regime were to be deposed, and a democratic government would took its place, it would naturally seek to be reunited with the South. If Kim Jong II were to be replaced by another authoritarian government, it would be tempted to repeat the same dilemmas we face today.

The presence of American troops and bases is controversial even in South Korea, a fact that has not gone unnoticed during the South Korean elections that brought Rob Moo-hyun to power. Peace in Korea would accelerate the quest for autonomous defence policies in both Seoul and Tokyo and possibly spur the growth of nationalism in Japan, China, and Korea.

So we are left with a situation in which no one is happy with the status quo, yet no one can imagine better options that would not cause major strategic, political, and economic disruptions in the region and perhaps threaten to dislodge the whole balance of power in Asia. Not only should the DPRK regime stay in power indefinitely, it should continue to experience enough discomfort to maintain its agoraphobia in the international community. It should maintain its position as a credible threat, yet not be able to follow through on its threats. It should be dangerous and benign at the same time. This is obviously the perfect recipe for a crisis without end.

#### SUGGESTED POLICY GOALS

I will not presume to offer solutions to a dilemma that has failed greater minds. New visions and strategies will require co-operation among creative intellects of numerous countries. I would nevertheless offer a number of goals to be pursued by the international community - and by Canada in particular - as we seek to re-think a secure and benevolent future for the people of Korea.

- Avoidance of war at all cost (both monetary and human);
- Prevention of the development of weapons of mass destruction and reduction of conventional arms on the Korean peninsula;
- Intensification of efforts to mitigate starvation and to raise the standard of living of North Korean people;
- Economic and infrastructure development assistance to the DPRK in the short term to reduce the cost of reunification in the long term; and, above all,
- Active engagement with the people of North Korea at all possible levels, through intensive pursuit of people-to-people con-

tact and exchanges, the sharing of information, and the provision of educational opportunities for DPR Koreans, both at home and here in Canada.

It is understandable that under present circumstances, the Canadian government has limited possibilities of intervention, at least until the current nuclear impasse has been breached. This does not, however, prevent Canadian civil society involvement with the DPRK, supported and co-financed by agencies of our government. The Canadian non-governmental community has deep historical linkages with Korea. This is a resource we have hardly begun to tap.

#### ENDNOTES

1 'Reject imperialists' ideological and cultural poisoning,' *Pyongyang Times*, 12 June 1999.

2 Harrison S. Selig, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press 2002).

3 Marcus Noland, *Avoiding the Apocalypse: the Future of the Two Koreas* (Washington DC: Institute for International Economics 2000), 232ff.

4 William J. Perry and Ashton B. Carter, 'The crisis last time,' *New York Times*, 19 January 2003, sect 4, 13.

5 See Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (New York: Touchstone 2002), 127-34.

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