

A Strategy for the Korean Peninsula

Beyond the Nuclear Crisis

Colonel David S. Maxwell, U.S.Army

THE ENTIRE international community faces a twofold crisis on the Korean Peninsula—the erosion of the 50-year Republic of Korea-United States (ROK-US) alliance and the development of the nuclear weapons program in the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK). All eyes are on the “6 Party Talks,” which include the United States, the DPRK, the ROK, Japan, China, and Russia, to decide whether the DPRK will become a member of the “nuclear club” and whether it might provide nuclear capabilities to rogue states and nonstate terrorist organizations.

This crisis is only one problem that exists on the divided Korean Peninsula. The world is faced with this threat solely because of the Kim Family Regime (KFR), established by Kim Il Sung and now led by his son Kim Jong Il.¹

The Korea Question

The United States needs to do two things to forestall conflict and help the people on the Korean Peninsula solve the “Korea question.”² The first priority would be to repair the relationship between alliance partners to ensure an effective defensive capability remains in place to deter an attack by the DPRK, to defeat an attack from the North if deterrence fails, and respond to the chaos and instability that is likely to result when the KFR collapses.

The problem with the alliance was evident when U.S. President George W. Bush decided not to visit

the ROK during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in Thailand in 2003.³ This situation must be corrected. With a strong alliance, the United States and the ROK could focus on using the alliance’s elements of national power to develop and execute a combined, synchronized strategy to achieve a mutually agreed-on end state. This combined strategy would have to accomplish the following goals:

- Forestall conflict or regime collapse until the ROK is prepared for reunification.

- Manage near-term crises caused by the KFR and its attempts to use provocation and blackmail to achieve political and economic concessions.

- Prepare the population in the North for eventual reunification.

This approach assumes no combination of coercion or engagement would cause the KFR to alter its goals or change its behavior; that negotiations by the 6 parties would ultimately fail; and that the efforts of the United States, ROK, and United Nations would not lead to a peaceful settlement of the Korea question. This strategy would not conflict with any attempts to negotiate or try to change regime behavior that would cause it to acquiesce to the goals of the allies and the major powers. In fact, a major part of this strategy relies on negotiation, talks, and engagement. If the assumption proves false, and the DPRK acquiesces and becomes a normal member of the international community, the result will be peace



Workers from the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea.

“In the course of this struggle against factional opponents, for the first time Kim began to emphasize nationalism as a means of rallying the population to the enormous sacrifices needed for post-war recovery. This was a nationalism that first took shape in the environment of the anti-Japanese guerrilla movement and developed into a creed through the destruction of both the non-Communist nationalist forces and much of

and stability, with the ROK and DPRK coexisting for an indefinite period, which is unlikely.

Michael O’Hanlon and Mike Mochizuki, authors of *Crisis on the Korean Peninsula*, assume that the DPRK will change its behavior and will be coaxed out of its nuclear weapons program.⁴ They argue that a comprehensive approach to issues should go beyond the nuclear program to bring an end to DPRK’s nuclear program. David Kang and Victor Cha, authors of *Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies*, take a different approach.⁵ Kang minimizes DPRK’s nuclear threat, but Cha takes a hardline view. Both agree that to achieve resolution engagement is needed. I feel that the assumption that the KFR will change its behavior and turn its back on 55 years of a consistent strategy is flawed. However, many of the elements in the books have merit and should be incorporated into a new strategy.

To understand why the DPRK would not change its behavior, we must understand the nature of the regime and its strategy. When trying to recommend a strategy, most outsiders violate Sun Tzu’s dictum to “know the enemy and know yourself.”⁶ By not understanding the KFR’s fundamental nature, outsiders fail in their attempts to deal with the DPRK in the conventional sense, where negotiations are in good faith and with some semblance of transparency.

Author Adrian Buzo’s book about the KFR, *The Guerrilla Dynasty: Politics and Leadership in North Korea*, describes how Kim Il Sung consolidated his power to become the Great Leader:

the leftist intellectual tradition of the domestic Communists. Kim’s nationalism did not draw inspiration from Korean history, nor did it dwell on past cultural achievements, for the serious study of history and traditional culture soon effectively ceased in the DPRK. Rather, DPRK nationalism drew inspiration from the Spartan outlook of the former Manchurian guerrillas. It was a harsh nationalism that dwelt on past wrongs and promises of retribution for ‘national traitors’ and their foreign backers. DPRK nationalism stressed the ‘purity’ of all things Korean against the ‘contamination’ of foreign ideas, and inculcated in the population a sense of fear and animosity toward the outside world. Above all, DPRK nationalism stressed that the guerrilla ethos was not only the supreme, but also the only legitimate basis on which to reconstitute a reunified Korea.”⁷

Chuche (Self Reliance)

Understanding Kim Il Sung’s unique philosophy of Chuche is important. Chuche is a Confucian ethic on which Korean society has been based, but which has been turned into a method of controlling the North’s population. Raised to religious stature, Chuche teaches that to give one’s life for the fatherland will bring immortality. In the Chuche philosophy, the KFR has been deified.⁸

Chuche can best be summed up as “Dear Leader Absolutism,” a term coined by Hwang Jang Yop, who defected from the North in 1997. Yop actually developed the Chuche idea for Kim Il Sung, but after his defection, he wrote, “The fundamental

reason for human rights being trampled in North Korea lies in the 'Dear Leader Absolutism' dictatorship. There can be no human rights for the people in North Korea where the greatest morality and absolute law is giving one's mind and body to the Dear Leader; and living as a slave who obeys completely and unconditionally the Dear Leader—it is the only life permitted the North Korean People."⁹

Dear Leader Absolutism, the Chuche ideology, and a guerrilla mindset are the DRK's fundamental principles and the concepts from which the KFR gains its legitimacy. When comparing these ideas with the free market system and ROK's liberal semi-democracy, it is easy to see how the two systems are mutually exclusive. For the DPRK, reunification is a zero-sum game.¹⁰

Four simple concepts or national objectives sum up DPRK's strategy:

1. The survival of the Kim family regime—a vital national interest.
2. Reunification of the Korean Peninsula—a strategic aim.
3. Recognition of the DPRK as a world power—a strategic objective.
4. Removal or neutralization of U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula—a required condition to achieve the strategic aim.

The DPRK has been following this strategy since 1948. The regime's survival is paramount, and the regime makes all decisions. Reunification under the DPRK system ensures regime survival. The regime has sought to be the leader in the nonaligned movement, and both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il have demonstrated that they want North Korea to be recognized as a world power. Finally, because reunification under regime control can only happen through a force of arms, the DPRK needs U.S. forces to either withdraw or be neutralized so the DPRK will have the correlation of forces necessary to be successful.¹¹

Academics and media pundits question how a country as bankrupt as the DPRK can do anything except attempt economic reforms. How can a country that cannot feed its people embark on such an ambitious and expensive project as developing nuclear weapons? The answer lies in the trap that



US Army

the regime has set for itself by resting its legitimacy on the Chuche ideology and the deification of Kim Il Sung.¹²

The DPRK is in a no-win situation, one that has no good options. It needs to reform its economic system to be self-sufficient and to ensure its survival. However, doing so would undermine the KFR's legitimacy, implying that the system Kim Il Sung built was flawed and that reform would lead to more North Koreans being exposed to information outside the inner KFR's inner circle, which would expose the myth of the regime and its bankrupt ideology. If the regime is undermined and faced with imminent collapse, it might turn to its only option—the use of military force—to reunify the Peninsula to ensure the regime's survival.¹³

An important part of the DPRK's efforts has been to use Sun Tzu's strategy of splitting alliances.¹⁴ The DPRK has attempted to capitalize on the deteriorating relations between the ROK and United States, which were worsened by the tragic accident in June 2002 in which two teenage Korean girls were hit and killed by a U.S. armored vehicle during a routine training exercise, and by U.S. initiatives to relocate U.S. forces farther south on the Peninsula.

The DPRK has attempted to win the hearts and minds of the ROK people by supporting family reunions, agreeing to open economic corridors, and re-establishing rail links between North and South. These attempts have led the younger generation particularly to view the DPRK more favorably. The DPRK's goal is for the ROK and America to conclude that the United States no longer belongs on the Peninsula.

If America withdraws its forces, the DPRK achieves a key advantage in achieving reunification on its terms. Because of this strategy, the KFR would not negotiate in good faith. While an agreement could be reached, as for example the 1994 Agreed Framework with the United States or the 1992 Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges (ARNE) with the ROK, the KFR might not live up to its agreements. In fact, the KFR has violated these agreements as well as the Non-proliferation Treaty.¹⁵

The DPRK believes it needs nuclear weapons as a deterrent against the United States. At a minimum, the nuclear-capability threat is a useful tool in blackmailing the international community to try to gain political and economic concessions, which plays well with the regime's ideology. The DPRK tells its people that the food aid that they have been receiving from the international community is a "tribute" to the KFR because its military capabilities are so feared, which fits nicely with DPRK's "military first" policy.¹⁶

The United States needs to develop a new strategy using two pieces of wisdom from U.S. North Korea Policy Coordinator William Perry: "We have to deal with the DPRK as it is and not as we would wish it to be, borrowing from [President John F. Kennedy], 'Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate'"¹⁷ Although we should not assume that the DPRK would negotiate as we would like them to, this does not mean that negotiation should not be an important element of the new strategy.

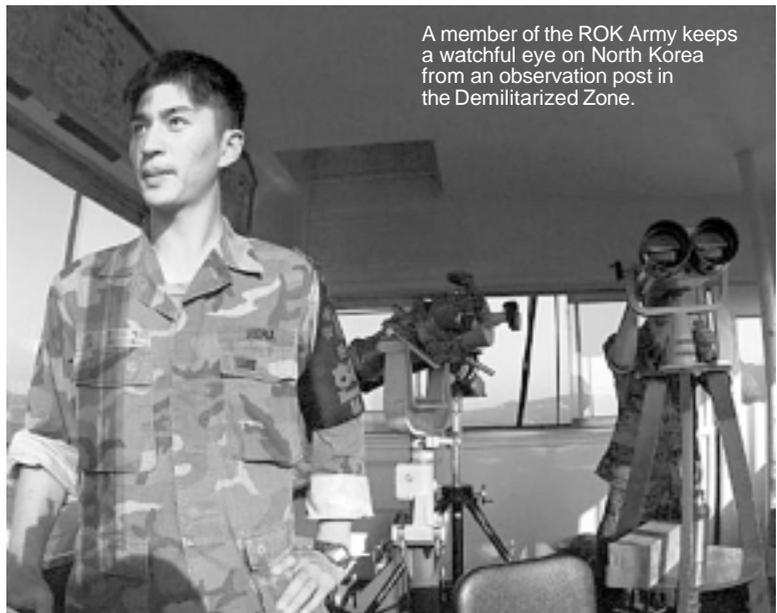
Priorities

Any strategy we choose should give the KFR two of its four national objectives—ensure the regime's survival and recognize it as a world power. Reunification by force would not be an option, and the United States would not withdraw forces from the Peninsula until the situation was resolved. This could be demonstrated through a peace treaty between the ROK and the DPRK.

The United States' first priority must be to rebuild its alliance with the ROK through close consultations and working toward a mutually agreed on long-

term end state. The United States must recognize that the ROK is the key to the Peninsula's future and must play the major role in determining the outcome of the Korea question, assuring the ROK that it would undertake no unilateral action on the Peninsula. The relocation of U.S. forces should not occur unless the ROK and the United States agree that such relocation would support the strategy to deal with the DPRK. Without a strong alliance, no strategy would be successful.

The publicly stated end state would be a stable, secure, peaceful, economically viable, nonnuclear Peninsula. The ROK and the United States should work toward a reunified Peninsula that is under a liberal constitutional and democratic form of govern-



A member of the ROK Army keeps a watchful eye on North Korea from an observation post in the Demilitarized Zone.

US Army

ment. Given the dangers of regime collapse and the potential for war, Kim Jong Il's survival illusion should remain alive.¹⁸ As long as Kim Jong Il believes he will survive and has the possibility to achieve reunification under his terms, he can be deterred from attacking.

To sustain this illusion, the United States and ROK must initiate an information operations program. As an example, the ROK and United States would project a withdrawal date for U.S. forces to forestall Kim Jong Il from any deliberate attack and to buy the alliance a few years to execute its long-term strategy.

Although it seems counterintuitive, the regime needs to have a strong ROK-US alliance with a military capability on the Peninsula to support the DPRK's military-first policy to allow it to continue

its people's "Spartan existence."¹⁹ U.S. forces would actually enhance the regime's legitimacy.

The United States and the ROK should immediately normalize relations with the DPRK. Despite the regime's repulsiveness, normalizing relations helps maintain permanent communications channels. More important, normalized relations might provide the potential for increased access to the regime and to the population. Normalization must be comprehensive and include the removal of all barriers to trade.

As part of normalization, the U.S. should reexamine the 1953 Armistice Agreement and initiate a negotiation process for a formal peace treaty without consideration of the DPRK nuclear development program. A key factor in influencing the regime to negotiate might be to recognize that the DPRK possesses a nuclear capability and that the ROK, the United States, and the United Nations are willing to negotiate a peace treaty disconnected to DPRK's nuclear capability. Kim Jong Il would likely be viewed as a world power with significant influence. Although this could be a long process, along with normalization, it could serve to maintain a dialogue and access to the regime and, potentially, to many officials in the middle and upper levels of the party.

The critical aspect of the strategy is unconditional engagement.²⁰ Although the ROK has undertaken a fairly aggressive economic engagement approach, especially under the Kim Dae Jung administration with its "Sunshine Policy," U.S. corporations, the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and other nations throughout the international community, must authorize and encourage economic investment. This strategy's purpose is threefold: it sustains the illusion that the regime can survive; its economic investment would strengthen its ability to control the nation; and legitimate profits would offset illegal activities, such as the drug



Members of the 2d Infantry Division refill their truck from a creek during a nuclear, biological, and chemical exercise.

US Air Force

trade and counterfeiting, which would reduce the incentive to proliferate weapons of mass destruction.

An economic investment would promote outside contact for the country and its population. Initially, Kim Jong Il would resist this contact, and when there was too much contact, he would likely provoke a crisis that would cause a reduction in investment and contact. With persistent attempts to invest in the DPRK, however, Kim Jong Il might eventually relent as he began to enjoy the "profits" he was receiving.

Changing the Outlook

Contact with the outside world could be instrumental in changing the outlook of the population and would lay the foundation for two important future events. The population has been long-suffering under the yoke of the Chuche ideology. If reunification occurs, knowledge of the outside world could ease the eventual integration process with the ROK. Outside knowledge could provide a catalyst for the people to undermine the regime and solve the Korea question internally.

There will be extreme danger when the KFR is faced with the potential for collapse. The alliance must continue to plan for the spectrum of conflict from a deliberate attack to spill over from civil war and chaos that would occur if Kim's governing ability eroded. A strong, well-trained, integrated force

would have to remain on the Peninsula until reunification, first to deal with conflict, then to deal with a prolonged occupation.

In executing this long-term strategy, the ROK would have to prepare for reunification, refining plans for the integration of a potentially hostile population. The government would also have to prepare financially to handle the huge costs of reunification.

As access to the outside world increased, the United States would have to attempt to contact key military commanders of the Korean People's Army (KPA), particularly frontline commanders of the 4th, 2d, 1st, and 5th Armies from west to east respectively. These commanders would need personal security guarantees by the ROK and the United States. When issued an order to attack from Kim Jong Il or when faced with internal instability and the collapse of the regime, these commanders would have to be promised security if they are to maintain control of their forces and weapons of mass destruction. In fact, maintaining the cohesion of KPA units would be key to reducing instability following a collapse or conflict.

The fundamental assumption is that Kim Jong Il would not alter the pursuit of his ultimate goal—the

survival of his regime through reunification of the Peninsula on his terms. The only alternative would be that regime change would have to occur. The only way a regime change could occur is if Kim Il Sung were to initiate an attack on the ROK or if the people of the DPRK were to cause a regime change themselves. In essence, this proposed strategy is designed to manage the tensions on the Peninsula while forestalling conflict and giving the tools to the Korean people to allow them to determine their own destiny and rid themselves of the tyrant who is enslaving them.

If the strategy's fundamental assumption is flawed, the alliance would have to handle a worst-case scenario and be militarily prepared to defend the ROK in case of attack. On the positive side, if the KFR were willing to reform, the strategy could provide a blueprint, through unconditional engagement, for that to happen.

The situation on the Peninsula is dangerous, and the threat Kim Jong Il poses is real. The alliance would have to manage the situation while preparing for the ultimate outcome. For a lasting peace to occur, the people of the DPRK must execute regime change. **MR**

NOTES

1. Stephen Bradner, Commander in Chief, UN Command Special Adviser in Korea uses the term "Kim Family Regime" extensively in UN Command/Combined Forces Command/U.S. Forces, Korea, briefings. See Bradner, "North Korea's Strategy," presentation at the third Nonproliferation Policy Education Center/Institute for National Security Studies/Army War College, Arlington, Virginia, 12-14 June 2000. See on-line at <www.npec-web.org/essay/Bradner.htm>, accessed 11 May 2004. For more detailed information on the Kim Family Regime and its origins, see Adrian Buzo, *The Guerrilla Dynasty Politics and Leadership in North Korea* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1999); Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), and Sydney A. Seiler, *Kim Il Song 1941-1948: The Creation of a Legend, the Building of a Regime* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994).

2. The phrase "Korea question" is from the 1953 Armistice Agreement, sect. IV, para. 60. For more information, see on-line at <www.intellnet.org/resources/korean_war_docs/armistic.htm>, accessed 11 May 2004. The Korea question refers to a final political solution about how the people of Korea will choose to govern themselves.

3. Richard Halloran, "Bush's Skipping South Korea Points To Shaky Relations," *Honolulu Advertiser*, 19 October 2003.

4. Michael O'Hanlon and Mike Mochizuki, *Crisis on the Korean Peninsula* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003), 83-112.

5. Victor D. Cha and David C. Kang, *Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 161-65.

6. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 84.

7. Buzo, 27.

8. Han S. Park, ed., *North Korea: Ideology, Politics, Economy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 15. Park describes Chuche (Juche) as theology. See also *KukPang Ilbo*, editorial, Korea, 15 March 1999, 6. Chuche's basic concept is, "Man rules all things; man decides all things."

9. Chosen Ilbo, on-line at "North Korean Human Rights/HwangJong-yop, <www.chosen.com/w21data/html/news/199912/19991202034.ht>," accessed 2 December 1999.

10. Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs: America and the World, Debating the New Shape of International Politics*, Council of Foreign Relations, 2002, 137, n 4.

11. Nicholas Eberstadt, *The End of North Korea* (Washington, DC: AEI Press), 1999, 28-40. Eberstadt's is one of the best analyses of KFR strategy; Bradner, n 2.

12. Thomas J. Belke, *Juche: A Christian Study of North Korea's State Religion* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Press, 1999) and "The Spirit of Human Bombs." (No publishing data given).

13. Robert Collins, "Patterns of Collapse in North Korea," *The Combined Forces Command C5 Civil Affairs Newsletter*, Seoul, January 1996, 2-12.

14. Sun Tzu, 78.

15. See on-line at <www.ceip.org/files/projects/npp/resources/koreaaf.htm>, accessed on 11 May 2004. The United States brokered the Agreed Framework to "freeze" the DPRK nuclear program in 1994. The agreement called for the DPRK to receive two light water reactors (LWR) by 2003; 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil per year; and that both sides would move toward full normalization and reduction of trade barriers. See also "Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression and Exchanges and Cooperation Between the South and the North," on-line at <www.intellnet.org/resources/korean_war_docs/arme.htm>, accessed 11 May 2004.

16. Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Special Report, "Military-First Ideology is an Ever-Victorious, Invincible Banner for Our Era's Cause of Independence," Nautilus Institution, 11 April 2003, on-line at <www.nautilus.org/pub/ftp/napsnet/special_reports/MilitaryFirstDPRK.txt>, accessed 11 May 2004.

17. William Perry, lecture, The Brookings Institute, Washington, D.C., 24 January 2003.

18. Colonel Rick Gribbling, Chief, Plans Division, CJ3, UN Command/Combined Forces Command, Korea/U.S. Forces, Korea, coined the phrase "sustaining the illusion that Kim Jong Il will survive" during a crisis-action planning session in June 1997.

19. Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Special Report.

20. Richard N. Haas and Meghan L. O'Sullivan, "Engaging Problem Countries," Brookings Policy Brief #61, June 2000, on-line at <www.brook.edu/comm/policybriefs/pb61.htm>, accessed 11 May 2004.

Colonel David S. Maxwell, U.S. Army, is a student at the National War College, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. He received a B.A. from Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, and an M.M.A.S. from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, School of Advanced Military Studies. He has held various command and staff positions in the continental United States, Germany, Korea, Okinawa, and the Philippines. His next assignment will be Chief of Staff, Special Operations Command-Korea.