

KOREAN QUESTIONS

Two more unlikely twins would be hard to imagine. A half-century after their separation, one is a militantly xenophobic bastion of communism, staggering toward collapse yet bristling with weapons and threats. The other grew into an East Asian economic powerhouse, its advance toward democracy unbroken even by a severe economic shock. Today, the drama of the two Koreas is returning to center stage as the world anxiously watches North Korea, armed with ballistic missiles and possibly with nuclear weapons, struggle against mass starvation and self-destruction.



Detail from Wrestling (late 18th century), by Kim Hong-do

- 72 Robert A. Manning assesses the North Korean nuclear threat
 - 81 Don Oberdorfer profiles South Korean president Kim Dae Jung
 - 91 Kathryn Weathersby details new findings about the Korean War
- 96 Background Books

The Enigma of The North

by Robert A. Manning

It is early March 2000. Tensions have steadily escalated since mid-November, when stories leaked to the American news media hinted at the existence of yet another North Korean secret nuclear weapons facility and suggested that Pyongyang was deploying Taepo-dong missiles capable of reaching Hawaii and Alaska. President Bill Clinton sends retired general Colin Powell and former senator Sam Nunn as special emissaries to Pyongyang, but the talks stall. Food aid from the United States, Japan, and South Korea is halted. Reports of still-mounting famine filter out as many private aid groups withdraw from North Korea, fearing that food is being misdirected to the military and the Communist Party. The rhetoric intensifies. North Korean leaders charge that food is being used as a weapon. The United States demands that Pyongyang abandon its covert nuclear weapons program. North Korea delivers a bombastic reply.

Finally, a desperate North Korea unleashes a round of artillery and Scud missile fire onto the outskirts of Seoul and sends special operations brigades through tunnels under the demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating North and South. As the 37,000 U.S. troops in South Korea brace for war, the Pentagon places all U.S. forces around the world on alert. Then Pyongyang issues an ultimatum: "We have nuclear missiles, ready to launch on warning, targeting Tokyo and U.S. bases in Okinawa. We seek to discuss the terms of unification with Seoul. If the United States or Japan intervenes in this internal Korean matter, we will level Tokyo and the U.S. installations in Okinawa."

It may sound like a Tom Clancy thriller, but such a crisis is, unfortunately, not just the stuff of paperback fantasies. Five summers after a political crisis over Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program brought the United States and North Korea to the brink of war, the nightmare Korean "implosion-explosion" scenario—a North Korean internal collapse leading to a desperate act of war—against which U.S. military forces have spent endless hours planning remains entirely in the realm of the possible.

Indeed, an August 1998 *New York Times* report about the existence of a suspected secret nuclear bomb-making facility under a North Korean mountain and Pyongyang's unexpected firing of a three-stage missile over Japan at the end of that month underscore a troubling possibility: North Korea may have managed to build not only one or two nuclear devices but also new means to deliver them against distant targets. This, despite an October 1994 nuclear deal dubbed the Agreed Framework, in which



Larger than life: North Korea's "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung addresses a Communist Party congress in 1975.

North Korea agreed to freeze its known nuclear weapons program in exchange for a variety of blandishments from the United States, Japan, and South Korea. The payoff included two light-water nuclear power reactors for generating electricity (engineered to prevent the creation of materials useful in making weapons), 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil annually, security assurances, and the promise of improved relations with the United States.

Today's Korea question is part Cold War legacy, part 21st-century nuclear proliferation challenge. Together, these two problems make Korea arguably the world's most dangerous flashpoint, and inarguably one of the most vexing and consequential foreign policy issues confronting American diplomacy. The Korea question has been made still more perplexing by the powerful humanitarian concerns about the famine and food shortages that have left a million or more

North Koreans dead and an entire generation of children malnourished. To understand the special combustibility of the situation, one need look no further than geography: the outskirts of greater metropolitan Seoul and its 14 million people (not to mention some 90,000 Americans) are barely 25 miles from the DMZ. Even without nuclear weapons, North Korea's Scud missiles, 11,000 long-range artillery tubes, and some 600,000 forward-deployed troops could enable Pyongyang to realize its 1994 threat to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire."

It was precisely to avoid such apocalyptic outcomes and to move North Korea to a trajectory of peace and reconciliation that the 1994 accord—touted by the Clinton administration as one of its great diplomatic successes—was reached. In 1995, then-secretary of state Warren Christopher boasted that "this administration has ended [the nuclear threat]." The

agreement, made possible after former president Jimmy Carter's freelance diplomacy persuaded "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung to freeze his nuclear weapons program, was certainly a watershed event. After a four-decade standoff, it was the first American deal ever with the strangest, most closed, anachronistically Orwellian society on earth.

The deal went beyond nuclear nonproliferation. It was in essence a quid pro quo: Pyongyang would trade its ultimate insurance policy, its nuclear weapons program, for a new economic and political engagement with the United States, South Korea, and Japan. At a minimum, the aid would provide a kind of life support system for the North. Like Nixon when he went to China, Kim Il Sung—who had skillfully played his Chinese and Soviet allies against each other for several decades—launched a strategic gambit aimed at turning an adversary into an asset. Kim saw the agreement as a route to more economic aid, trade, and investment that would eventually revive North Korea's moribund economy.

The United States and its allies were relieved to avert a showdown, and also saw the possibility of an eventual North Korean "soft landing," which would ease the economic crisis and promote the North's economic and diplomatic opening to the world. Over the long term, the process could lead to gradual reunification of the two Koreas. At a minimum, the accord would buy time, which, "from a Machiavellian perspective," as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Stanley Roth explained, "is in our national interest." It was also possible that the regime might collapse as its counterparts had in Eastern Europe, due to a severely weakened military. In the administration, this "collapse theory"—the notion that the North Korean problem

would go away relatively quietly—was for a time very much in vogue.

The reality has proven infinitely more complex than most people imagined. Compared with those from five or 10 years ago, satellite photos taken today literally show the lights going out in North Korea. The economy has nearly ground to a halt. The country has suffered a catastrophic annual grain shortage of about 1.5 million tons—roughly a third of consumption—since 1995. Yet the regime of Kim Jong Il, son of the "Great Leader," who died in 1994, has not collapsed, or even exhibited any telltale signs of major instability. Five years after the agreement, North Korea has not opened up significantly to the world, apart from extending its tin cup; has not substantially reformed its economy; and has used what dwindling resources it has to develop two new generations of ballistic missiles. Meanwhile, it has become the largest recipient of U.S. aid in Asia (mostly food aid), even as an economic embargo against it dating from the end of the Korean War remains in effect. While the Agreed Framework halted the overt nuclear weapons program, peace on the Korean peninsula has grown no less precarious. The administration failed to build a cohesive policy framework on the foundation of the nuclear deal. Instead, the nuclear deal became the centerpiece of a fragmented policy.

During an April 1997 press conference, President Clinton offered a rare view of the underlying logic of U.S. policy:

[The North Koreans] are better off having agreed to freeze their nuclear program. . . . And I think they ought to go the next step now and resolve all their differences with South Korea in a way that will permit the rest of us not only to give food aid, because people are terribly hungry, but to work with them

> ROBERT A. MANNING, a former State Department adviser for policy (1989–93), is C. V. Starr Senior Fellow and director of Asian studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Copyright © 1999 by Robert A. Manning.



South Korean troops patrol the DMZ in April 1996. South Korea was in its highest state of alert in 15 years after armed North Korean troops moved into Panmunjom, the DMZ village where the two sides hold talks.

in restructuring their entire economy and helping to make it more functional again . . . they need to lift the burden of a system that is failing.

This statement illuminates virtually all of the questionable assumptions of U.S. policy toward North Korea. It remains unclear, for example, whether Pyongyang has actually taken that first step of

completely abandoning its nuclear weapons program. Former defense secretary William Perry, whom Clinton chose to conduct a congressionally mandated review of Korea policy, has said he suspects North Korea may be continuing its nuclear efforts covertly. (The nuclear crisis of 1994 occurred after International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors found suspicious irregularities in spent fuel from North Korea's nuclear

reactors; under the Agreed Framework, North Korea is not required to reveal more about its nuclear past for another three or four years.)

Perhaps the most disturbing possibility of the past five years is that it is North Korea that has actually been buying time. The death of North Korean founder Kim Il Sung only weeks after Carter's 1994 visit left his son and successor, Kim Jong Il, in need of time to consolidate the Leninist family dynasty. Time has also allowed Pyongyang to develop new longer-range ballistic missiles, and thus the capacity for nuclear blackmail. And time allowed the international community to mobilize significant amounts of humanitarian aid—which North Korea's communist leaders have claimed credit at home for procuring (even going so far, for example, as to remove country-of-origin markings from bags of rice).

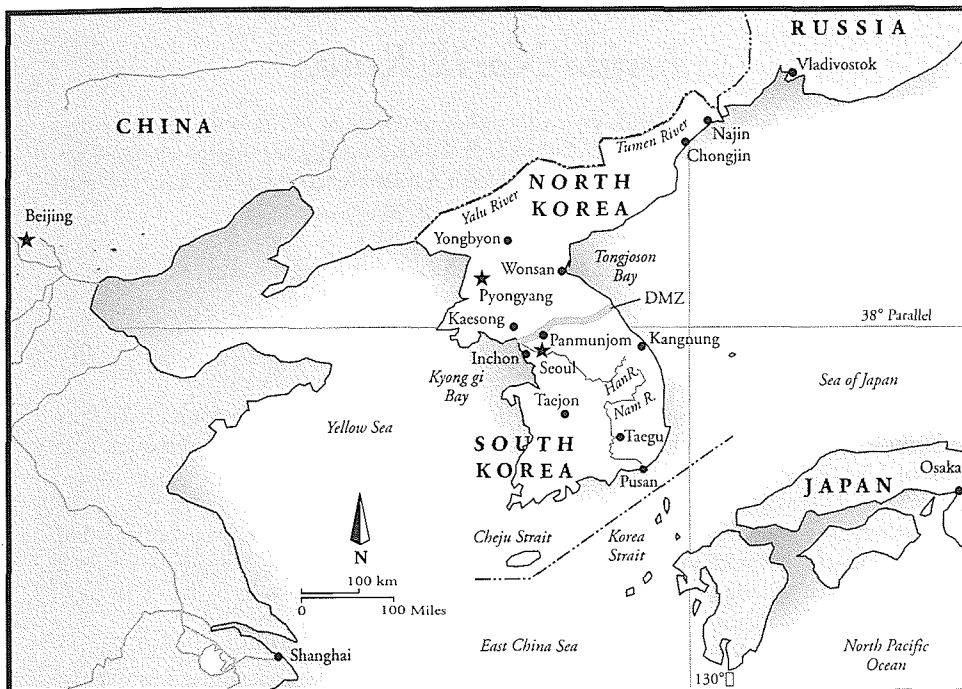
At the same time, Pyongyang has consistently rebuffed generous overtures by South Korean president Kim Dae Jung for high-level political reconciliation talks, apparently for fear of undermining its own legitimacy. The Pyongyang regime is communist, but much of its claim to legitimacy rests on its self-proclaimed role as Korea's heroic bastion of resistance against colonial powers—first Japan, then, since 1945, the United States. Like East Germany without communism, the North Korean state without its nationalist mythology would have precious little *raison d'être*.

Herein lies the fundamental dilemma facing North Korea: every path to salvation is fraught with extreme risk. The same fear of undermining itself prevents the government from pursuing market-oriented economic reforms, even though China and Vietnam have done so. After nine straight years of economic contraction, an economy that former senior White House economist Marcus Noland describes as "the most distorted in the

world" has all but ceased to function. It has survived through the kindness of strangers, particularly China (a provider of food and fuel) and the United States, and by profiting from a variety of dubious or plainly illicit schemes. Pyongyang has acquired hard currency by counterfeiting U.S. hundred dollar bills, selling its people's labor in the Russian Far East, smuggling methamphetamines, selling overflight rights to its airspace, and, not least, by selling Scuds and other ballistic missiles to Pakistan, Iran, and other Middle East countries. The North Korean economy is widely misunderstood. The problem is not that it is failing and will collapse. As a functioning national economy, it has already collapsed. What factories have not been dismantled and sold for scrap iron at the Chinese border now operate at roughly 20 percent of capacity—except for those devoted to military production, which operate at 50 percent of capacity, according to the South Korean Defense Ministry.

Lately there have been hints that North Korea may be moving haltingly toward some very modest reforms. Faced with the breakdown of its national food distribution system, the regime has accepted the existence of the farmers' markets that have sprung up spontaneously during the current crisis, and it is encouraging North Koreans to raise goats and rabbits. It is also working with South Korean corporations to secure investments in North Korean factories. Recent reports suggest the North Korean economy may have bottomed out and begun to improve modestly. Food production is up 11 percent over last year, according to South Korean estimates. But Pyongyang has not gone very far. Even the kinds of limited market-oriented reforms that Vietnam and China long ago implemented as first steps are still far beyond anything Pyongyang has pursued. A recent commentary by the official North Korean news agency declared that notions like "reform" and "opening" are a "Trojan Horse" of capitalism.

Even without reform, North Korea may



Roughly equal in area to England, the Korean peninsula occupies a strategic location in Asia. About 70 percent of the land is mountainous, protecting Korea from outsiders but also isolating regions from one another. Historically, population has concentrated near the scarce arable lands in the west and south.

continue to muddle through indefinitely. But it is on a trajectory toward oblivion. This creates the ultimate policy dilemma for the United States and its South Korean and Japanese allies. If North Korea is unwilling or unable to open up and reform its economy, it will be severely limited in its ability to usefully absorb the kind of investment and aid required to restart its economy. And if Pyongyang cannot digest such “carrots,” how can one put in place an incentive structure likely to persuade North Korea that its least bad choice is to reduce tensions and pursue a future of reform and reconciliation?

This puzzle may help explain why, amid all the discussion of “soft” and “hard” North Korean landings in recent years, the pattern of diplomacy has been one of no landing, of muddling through. In pursuing their ends, the North Koreans have made skillful use not only of military threats but of their own famine. They have rejected many overtures, such as the initial U.S. call in 1996 for talks on a peace treaty to supersede the armistice that ended the Korean War, only

to consent when food was put on the table. The American desire to have a process, however empty of substance, has led to a diplomacy of “food for meetings.”

The Clinton administration has responded to each United Nations appeal for help over the past three years, officially for humanitarian reasons, but in reality using food as a bribe to get North Korea to attend meetings in order to create the impression that diplomacy is working. Assistant Secretary Roth told reporters in 1997 that there is a “security dimension” to putting Pyongyang on “life support”: “If there is no international relief effort North Korea could approach a situation of desperation. If you have 22 percent of your population either starving or on the verge of starvation. . . . [w]ho knows what actions [you] might take. . . .?”

But such “feed me or I’ll kill you” logic is flawed in several respects. Apart from underestimating the power of the U.S. military threat to deter even a “desperate” North, it naively assumes a connection between human misery and the regime’s

Inside North Korea

Few societies have resisted outside scrutiny as successfully as North Korea. Kim Il-song's North Korea (1999), a recently declassified U.S. Central Intelligence Agency study, offers a rare portrait of North Korean life. Author Helen-Louise Hunter based her report on interviews with North Korean defectors during the late 1970s.

One has only to talk to a North Korean for a few minutes to get a sense of what is important in his life. Two phrases are likely to dominate any conversation, regardless of the subject under discussion, just as they dominate every aspect of life in North Korea. They are *songbun*, or "socio-economic" or "class background," and *Kim-Il-song sangsa*, or "the thought of Kim Il-song." . . .

In North Korea, one's *songbun* is either good or bad, and detailed records are kept by party cadre and security officials of the degree of goodness or badness of everyone's *songbun*. The records are continually updated. It is easy for one's *songbun* to be downgraded for lack of ideological fervor, laziness, incompetence, or for more serious reasons, such as marrying someone with bad *songbun*, committing a crime, or simply being related to someone who commits an offense. It is very difficult to improve one's *songbun*, however, particularly if the stigma derives from the prerevolutionary class status or the behavior of one's parents or relatives.

The regime has tried to convey a different impression—that any person can easily overcome his or her social origins. At various times, it has launched campaigns to erase bad social origin, promising to remove unfavorable designations for people who perform extraordinary service over a protracted period of time. The people concerned are not told that their names are still kept on a separate blacklist of secret surveillance. Whether they realize it or not, there is really no way to escape one's *songbun*.

In the early days, *songbun* records were spotty, and some people were able to survive by concealing the fact that a father, uncle, or grandfather had owned land or was a doctor, Christian minister, merchant, or lawyer. However, in the late 1960s, a major effort was made to conduct exhaustive secret investigations of the background of all North Koreans. Periodically after that, additional investigations were carried out by the public security apparatus whenever Kim Il-song had reason to believe that there was any substantial opposition to his rule. Because of suspected corruption of earlier investigations, the regime felt the need to conduct repeated investigations to the point where everyone has now been investigated and reinvestigated, and investigated yet again.

Since the only "good" people, in the Communist view, in Korea in 1950 were factory workers, laborers, and poor farmers, they and their descendants are the privileged class of today. The highest distinction goes first to the anti-Japanese guerrillas who fought with Kim Il-song and second to the veterans of the Korean War; next come the descendants of the prerevolutionary working people and the poor, small farmers. Together, these favored groups constitute from 25 to 30 percent of the population. Ranked below them in descending order are 47 distinct groups in what must be the most class-differentiated society in the world today.

Perhaps the only touch of humor in this otherwise deadly business of ranking people according to *songbun* is the party's terminology for the chosen versus the unchosen: the "tomatoes" versus the "grapes." Tomatoes, which are completely red to the core, are considered worthy Communists; apples, which are red only on the surface, are considered to need ideological improvement; and grapes are considered hopeless. . . .

People with bad *songbun* are plagued throughout life, not just in being denied a higher education or a better job but also a spouse of superior *songbun*. They are subjected to a host of other inconveniences and difficulties as well. In a society that allows very little freedom of movement, those with bad *songbun* are afforded virtually none. Having been assigned to a factory or cooperative farm immediately after middle school, they are likely to spend the rest of their lives in the same place, in the same job.

political stability. But Stalin's starving millions in the Ukraine during the 1930s and Mao Zedong's during China's Great Leap Forward in the 1950s serve as a reminder that under totalitarian regimes there is no necessary relation between the two. Indeed, if one assumes that scarce food is unlikely to go to those least favored by the regime, it might be argued that the food crisis may bolster Pyongyang by starving its potential domestic enemies.

In any case, the United States has fallen into the trap of rewarding bad behavior. Frustrated by Washington's unwillingness to lift sanctions and take other steps outlined in the Agreed Framework, the North Koreans have resorted to provocative actions. The process has all the qualities of a vicious circle: Pyongyang does something outrageous (such as sending troops into the DMZ or saboteur-laden submarines into South Korean waters) to command attention and a payoff, but each act triggers a reaction in Congress, making it that much more difficult for the Clinton administration to deliver what North Korea wants. Contrary to conventional wisdom, North Korea is neither crazy nor unpredictable. Once its logic of bluster and brinkmanship is understood, its behavior appears quite predictable.

This diplomacy of negative reinforcement has reached a new apogee in the past year. Last summer, even as U.S. diplomats were at the United Nations speaking about Pyongyang's suspected nuclear site, North Korea, as part of its 50th anniversary celebrations on August 31, sent a three-stage missile soaring over Japan. (The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency later determined that it was a failed



Pyongyang street scene, 1994

satellite launch.) Pyongyang then consented to further negotiations about the suspected site, and the Clinton administration announced it would send the North 300,000 tons of food aid. After several rounds of talks, North Korea agreed to an inspection. Soon thereafter, Washington announced it would ship another 600,000 tons of food. Only in late May did a U.S. team visit the construction site, with ambiguous results.

The suspected site and the missile launch—and the administration's response—combined to push an already deeply skeptical Congress over the edge. Last October, Congress passed legislation that attached conditions for future funding of the 1994 Agreed Framework, and required a review of the policy led by a prominent figure outside the administration. The White House drafted

former defense secretary Perry for the task.

The results so far are mildly encouraging. After meeting with members of Congress and with others in Washington, South Korea, Japan, and China, Perry has concluded that some adjustments are in order and has begun a new phase of diplomacy. He was warmly received in late May when he went to North Korea, speaking directly with top leaders (though not the reclusive Kim Jong Il), instead of dealing with midlevel bureaucrats, as has been the pattern in past U.S.-North Korean dealings. Moreover, the Clinton administration seems to be taking to heart its critics' concerns and is seeking some firm commitments from Pyongyang about its missile program if cooperation is to continue. The revised policy that Perry explored in North Korea seeks a comprehensive approach, more fully coordinated with South Korea and Japan. If it means a willingness to link expanded benefits to reciprocal behavior—to results rather than mere process—it is an important step in the right direction.

But have we fully learned the lessons of nine years of active diplomacy with North Korea? Pyongyang's goal clearly is to survive while taking the least possible risk of undermining itself at home. It is capable of making and implementing deals, though willing to push others to the brink to test limits. Nobody should need to be reminded that rewarding bad behavior begets more bad behavior. There is something odd about a decrepit, failing state managing to place the world's sole superpower in the role of *demandeur*. It is possible because Pyongyang has been strategically clear about its objectives, while the United States and its allies have been fuzzy and inconsistent. If our goal is to bring the North Koreans into the international community, for example, why do we still have Cold War trade sanctions against them? The Perry review also suggests that it would make for a more cohesive and disciplined policy to have a senior figure as a North Korea "point person" in Washington. That policy must be based on the principle of reciprocity, with a series of benefits tied to a series of actions.

A larger framework, structured as a "roadmap" with which to resolve all security issues—ballistic missiles, chemical and biological weapons (which the North Koreans may possess), conventional forces, forward deployments—would offer the best prospect of success. But that would require putting a larger package of economic inducements on the table. At the same time, the United States must be willing to break off if minimum goals are not met. That might mean living with one or two North Korean nuclear weapons—but we have been living with the distinct possibility that such weapons already exist for several years. As long as Kim Jong Il is bent on survival rather than suicide, the weapons will be of secondary value. The United States will still have diplomatic leverage.

It is easy—and understandable—to call for pre-emptive strikes against North Korea's suspected nuclear sites and for attempts to get rid of Kim's horrific regime. But such strikes would put the lives of tens of thousands of Americans and South Koreans at immediate risk. Moreover, obtaining precise intelligence about targets and ensuring that deep penetrating warheads actually destroy them are both difficult exercises, with no guarantees of success. Even for an administration with a clear sense of strategy, the divided Korean peninsula would pose a most un-American predicament: a problem with no good solution, only least bad choices. The most that can be asked of public policy is that it test North Korean intentions. Pyongyang must be given a clear choice: a future of cooperation or one of disengagement and confrontation.

If Pyongyang chooses to seek survival with nothing more than changes at the margins, it will set a course toward suicide, either by implosion and collapse or by explosion. In the end, a failing state cannot be saved from itself. Under such circumstances, even the best-conceived and best-executed policy may not produce a peaceful outcome. The unthinkable may be unavoidable. That is why it is necessary to exhaust all reasonable diplomatic options before drawing that horrendous conclusion.