

Making Sense of the Korean Crisis: An Interview

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By Stephen R. Shalom & Mark Selden

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1. Could you summarize political and economic conditions in North Korea today?

MCCORMACK: Till the 1980s, North Korea was one of the more industrialized countries in Asia. There- after it has been reduced to penury and near-collapse by a combination of circumstances,

some the consequence of its own choices, others beyond its control.

With the end of “socialism” in the 1990s, both Russia and China shifted from “friendly” to commercial terms of trade, which meant skyrocketing prices for North Korea’s energy imports, especially oil. The country’s heavily chemical and machine intensive agriculture suffered a severe blow on the eve of a succession of unprecedented climatic disasters. The country became chronically unable to feed its people, and many starved. People were urged to adopt a two-meals-a-day regimen, when for many even one became too much to hope for. According to the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for North Korea, four out of ten North Korean children are now stunted by malnutrition. In February 2004, the World Food Program, its reserves rapidly diminishing as donor countries lost interest in North Korea, had to cut off supplies for four million aged people, women, and children (more than one-sixth of the population).

Blocked by the U.S. and Japan from participation in such multinational institutions as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, denied diplomatic relations with the U.S. and Japan, and subject to sanctions as a “terror-

exporting” state, North Korea is also caught on the horns of the dilemma of desiring to engage much more comprehensively with the global economy and fearing that such engagement might undermine its political and security system. The biggest change is in the rapidly burgeoning web of ties that link North Korea across the DMZ to its erstwhile bitterest enemy, booming South Korea.

The hostilities of the Korean War that ended more than 50 years ago are still suspended only by a temporary “cease-fire” and the economy remains distorted by the priority to military preparation. In 1987, soon after North Korea commenced operation of a gas graphite nuclear reactor for power generation, it seems to have begun diverting the plutonium-containing reactor wastes to a weapons program designed to produce its own deterrent, thereby to neutralize the semi-permanent U.S. threat and to bring the U.S. to the negotiating table.

A U.S. attack on its installations was narrowly averted in 1994. North Korea then came close to normalization of relations with the U.S. under the Clinton administration, trading its nuclear weapon and missile programs for economic and diplomatic normalization. The advent of the Bush administration plunged all this back to the starting line.

For much of its history, since its foundation in 1948, North Korea was a Marxist-Leninist, communist party dictatorship, but since the late 1990s under its “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Il (after

the death of his father Kim Il Sung in 1994), it abandoned communist theory and embraced the principle of “Army-first-ism,” with Kim Jong Il as supreme military and political ruler. In place of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the military dictatorship today resembles an absolute monarchy and justifies itself on purely nationalist grounds. Kim Jong Il’s control is far reaching. Political criticism, let alone opposition, is not tolerated, and huge efforts are devoted to controlling people’s thoughts from childhood. Dissenters, and their families, most likely numbering somewhere well over 100,000, are confined in harsh camps (gulags) in remote or mountain areas.

Centralized economic controls were largely abandoned in 2002 in favor of the market. Foreign businesses are encouraged to set up in enclaves in the North, and South Korea has responded positively.

In the hope of unlocking the doors to normalization with Japan, and a flow of Japanese aid and technology, North Korea in September 2002 apologized over the abduction of Japanese citizens in the late 1970s and early 1980s and over “spy-ship” intrusions into Japanese waters, but the Japanese response has been harsh and the overtures thus far fruitless.

North Korea is a fossilized encapsulation of the 20th century: the legacies of colonialism, imperialist interventions, externally imposed division of the country, and incorporation in the Cold War, all remain unresolved. Economic

failures, especially the inability of the regime to feed the people, have gradually sapped the regime's credibility. A steady flow of refugees crosses the river frontier into China and even some key figures close to the leadership have fled.

2. At one time North Korea's economy seemed to be growing faster than South Korea's. What happened?

When the CIA studied the two economies in the late 1960s, it found North Korea out-performing South Korea in almost every particular. From 1979 to 1990, the UN's FAO was reporting North Korea as an agricultural miracle, the world's number one in terms of rice yield per hectare. Both reports were dubious and the accomplishments, such as they were, soon dissolved. Now the GDP gap is between 20 and 30 to 1 in the South's favor and North Korea's agriculture has collapsed.

The North was more industrialized prior to the Korean War. In the decades that followed liberation from Japan and the foundation (in 1948) of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the North achieved dramatic growth rates fueled by the nationalization of seized Japanese colonial assets, the adoption of a comprehensive land-reform program and of Soviet-style central planning, and substantial aid flows from Soviet, East European, and Chinese sources. After the initial high growth of the 1940s

to 1960s (with the exception of the drastic setbacks of the war between 1950 and 1953), however, North Korea began a slow decline. Plants rotted or became obsolescent, resources were monopolized by the military, or used to shore up the cult of the leader, and in the 1990s the country was buffeted by natural disasters—even as the confrontation with the United States sharpened.

3. What has been the significance of the leadership passing from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il?

Kim Jong Il was groomed for succession long before his father Kim Il Sung (1912-1994) actually passed the reins to him. Kim Il Sung had the prestige associated with his role as an anti-Japanese partisan or guerrilla, an anti-fascist fighter. The cult that was built around him rested ultimately on nationalist and internationalist credentials. For Kim Jong Il, however, legitimacy stemmed only from being his father's son. A huge effort had to be launched to legitimize his succession. At his hands, the cult of his father was intensified and extended to the entire family: continuation of the revolution could only be entrusted to the blood-line. The entire country was turned into a family moent and grandiose projects in honor of the Leader and his family were given priority.

Kim Jong Il's dilemma is how to reform his country while retaining power. The more he

“reforms,” the less credible his dynastic and feudal rule becomes.

4. In 1994, the Clinton administration reached an agreement with North Korea designed to resolve the nuclear controversy. What happened to that agreement?

Under the 1994 agreement known as the “Agreed Framework,” North Korea was to freeze its graphite nuclear reactor program and to hold its 8,000-odd rods of plutonium-containing waste from the reactors in specially constructed ponds, under sealed IAEA camera scrutiny, in return for two electricity-generating light-water reactors to be built by 2003 and an interim annual supply of 3.3 million barrels of oil. The United States and North Korea agreed to “move towards full normalization of political and economic relations” while the U.S. was to provide “formal assurances to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea against the threat or use of nuclear weapons.”

Wrangling over the site and getting the agreement of others to pay for it (South Korea 70 percent, Japan about 20 percent) took several years, by which time North Korea was in the depths of economic crisis and famine so severe that Washington believed the regime might not survive and therefore the reactor construction need not go ahead. As control of Congress passed to the Republicans, who had opposed the deal from the start and never took seriously its

commitment to political and economic normalization, the Agreed Framework was sidelined and criticized as misguided Democratic appeasement that should never have been entered into and should not be honored. It took the launch (albeit unsuccessful in achieving orbit) of the Taepodong satellite in 1998 to restore a sense of urgency to the North Korea question. In 2000, visits were exchanged by Madeleine Albright and North Korea’s Marshall Jo Myong Rok and the two countries came to the brink of normalization and to fulfillment of the Framework’s commitments. A Clinton presidential visit was anticipated, but time ran out before it could be realized.

Under President Bush, North Korea was labeled a “terror state” and evil, its leader the particular object of presidential hatred. The present crisis was initiated in October 2002 by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly’s claim that North Korea had admitted to having a secret program of uranium enrichment. Allegation and denial brought the Framework to collapse. What actually was said to Kelly, and whether he understood it correctly or not, remains controversial. Pyongyang denies any admission. China, Russia, and South Korea doubt that North Korea has the kind of program it is supposed to have admitted to. It is hard to imagine any possible motive for North Korea to have said what Kelly alleges was said.

From 2003, the uranium enrichment story was complicated by the admissions stemming from

Abdul Qadeer Khan, the founder of Pakistan's nuclear program, to the provision of nuclear technology, including centrifuges, to Libya, Iran, North Korea, and other countries in the 1990s. This breach of the non-proliferation regime is what Washington says it most fears North Korea might commit.

Whatever the outcome of the uranium enrichment story, it seems beyond doubt that, until the Kelly-initiated crisis and the ensuing breakdown of the Agreed Framework, North Korea had honored its commitment to freeze the graphite-moderated reactor works and waste storage ponds at Yongbyon. The 1994 Agreement covered the plutonium-based (Nagasaki-type) weapons program, not the uranium-based (Hiroshima-type) program that became the subject of the Kelly allegations in 2002 and the Khan revelations in 2003. U.S. experts visiting Yongbyon in December 2003 found that one small (5 MW) experimental reactor had been turned on to provide the local town with power and heat, but the larger (50 MW) reactor works were in such a state of dilapidation and disrepair that they estimated it would take years to restore. The storage ponds were empty, however, suggesting that the plutonium had been processed and might be incorporated in a weapons program.

5. During the run-up to the Iraq war, many commentators suggested that the only

conceivable scenario in which Saddam Hussein might use WMDs was in the event of a U.S. attack. Does this same logic apply to North Korea?

No serious analyst has ever suggested that North Korea was preparing to attack or invade any of its neighbors or constituted any threat to regional peace except if faced with threats to its own survival. North Korea is best seen as a porcupine, stiffening its bristles and looking fierce to try to repel attack, rather than a tiger rapaciously seeking prey.

Although North Korea has neither threatened nor committed any act of aggression against any neighboring state, its relationship with South Korea is of course in a different category. Ever since the country was divided by external intervention in 1945, both North and South have committed themselves to restoring national unity, each claiming national legitimacy. The civil war of 1950 to 1953 arose out of that contest and 50 years later remains unresolved, but the momentum of reconciliation between the two has accelerated greatly since the shift from confrontation to "sunshine" under the previous South Korean presidency of Kim Dae Jung. South Korean people today are more fearful of the United States than of North Korea.

6. Are North Koreans "paranoid?" And, if so, why?

If paranoia means unreasonable, groundless, or

grossly exaggerated fear, then the word is inappropriate to describe North Korea, whose fears can hardly be described as unreasonable.

While in Washington the North Korean “nuclear threat” has been an issue for the past decade, Pyongyang has faced the U.S. nuclear threat for the past half century. North Korea has lived under it for longer than any other nation. During the Korean War it escaped nuclear annihilation by the barest of margins. General MacArthur, his successor as Commander-in-Chief, General Ridgway, Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, and the Joint Chiefs, all at one or other stage favored or recommended using nuclear weapons against North Korea. Britain and other allies opposed its use, but in the end it was only fear of Soviet retaliation and, following the death of Stalin, the rapid progress in negotiations, that prevented it. Then, just four years after the Armistice and in obvious breach of it, the U.S. introduced nuclear artillery shells, mines, and missiles into Korea, keeping them there, adjacent to the Demilitarized Zone, designed to intimidate the non-nuclear North for 35 years till they were finally withdrawn at the insistence of the South Korean government. Even withdrawal did little to diminish the threat as perceived by Pyongyang as the rehearsals for a long-range nuclear strike on North Korea continued. Under the Agreed Framework, however, Clinton finally lifted the threat, pledging no first-use of nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear state. That reprieve was in turn revoked under Bush and North Korea was

specifically included on the Nuclear Target List. Watching its fellow “axis of evil” country Iraq being pulverized in 2003 although it had no weapons of mass destruction or any immediate prospect of developing them, Pyongyang could be forgiven for concluding that its turn was likely to come next and that its only hope of survival was actually to possess what Saddam Hussein had not. Without nuclear weapons, North Korea was a poor and insignificant country; perhaps only with them, it might not only deter a U.S. attack, but actually induce it to enter negotiations on longstanding grievances.

North Korea’s perception of its role in the 20th century (and the 21st to date) is that of victim, suffering from a series of colossal and uncompensated injustices at the hands of colonial Japan and the U.S. Its demands for lifting of the threat against it and for recognition and normalization may be voiced in strident tones, but that is best seen as a measure of its anxiety. What the world has never recognized is the core of legitimacy in Pyongyang’s cry for settlement: of the bitter legacy of colonialism (from Japan) and of nuclear intimidation, economic embargo, and diplomatic isolation (by the U.S.).

7. What is the role and position of the key regional players in the current North Korea crisis: South Korea, Japan, and China?

The Six-Sided Framework set up during 2003 was designed to present North Korea with a united

front of regional and global powers (U.S., Japan, China, Russia, South Korea) insisting on its nuclear disarmament. As the crisis has developed, however, the U.S. position has steadily weakened and the Six-Sided frame has served to bring pressure, unexpectedly, to bear on Washington as much as on North Korea. Strangest of all, China, designated by the early Bush administration as the real strategic threat to the United States, moved to center stage in the negotiations.

All six of the countries are committed to a non-nuclear peninsula and, save for the U.S., all consider the idea of another war in Northeast Asia absolutely anathema. While none dare openly oppose the U.S., North Korea's four neighboring countries share the belief that its security problems are genuine and serious and that North Korea should be entitled, without having to plead for it, to the guarantee of its right to exist. All express doubts about U.S. intelligence on North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons and about the U.S. version of the events that led to the collapse of the Agreed Framework in 2002.

South Korea: South Korea, which once fought a fratricidal war and has been locked in hostile military confrontation with the North ever since, now shows most understanding of its neighbor and has chosen a path of dialogue and cooperation, a policy styled by former President Kim Dae Jung as "Sunshine," stemming from a vein of Confucian wisdom in which human

nature is seen as complex, but never evil and in which even the poor, desperate, and friendless are entitled to respect. It chooses to believe that change is in the cards and any residual military threat is adequately contained and shows no sympathy for the moralistic, fundamentalist frame within which North Korea is represented as "evil." Ultimately, as one critic put it, South and North Korea constitute a single "family business."

At any given moment now, hundreds of South Korean diplomats, bureaucrats, and business people are in Pyongyang, doing deals, talking to their opposite numbers, working out new links by road, rail, fiber-optic, or pipeline between North and South, or framing investment projects in energy, tourism, or manufacturing.

Japan: Under Cold War conditions, it was more-or-less impossible to imagine reconciliation between Japan and North Korea. After it, North Korea's demand for apology and compensation for colonialism was the major sticking point. Only when enfeebled to the point of desperation by economic crisis in the 1990s did it agree to set that demand aside. North Korea also showed its eagerness for change when it offered visiting Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi, in September 2002, a dramatic apology for having abducted 13 Japanese citizens during the late 1970s and early 1980s and for the "spy ships" that intruded into Japanese waters in the 1990s. It then returned to Japan the 5 it said were the survivors of the 13 people abducted. These indications of desire for

change came to nothing, however. Instead, a huge Japanese wave of anger over the abductions overshadowed all else.

The abductions of two and a half decades ago, at the height of the Cold War, were a form of state terrorism and outrage was understandable. However, the Japanese response was itself strange, in that it followed the North Korean apology and promise not to commit such acts again. Furthermore, both sides were well aware that Japan had undertaken state terror in the not so distant past on a much larger scale, including the mobilization of large numbers of Korean young women into sexual slavery and that it took Japan more than half a century before it began, grudgingly, to admit and to make reparation (indirectly and inadequately).

The continuing showdown with North Korea constituted a major axis of political and institutional change in Japan. With fear and hatred of North Korea a shared social consensus, Japan has taken a series of recent steps towards “normalizing” its military (“Self-Defense”) forces and strengthening its support for the U.S. military in its global operations. Prime Minister Koizumi specifically linked the Self-Defense Force detachment sent to Iraq to the expectation that the U.S. would defend Japan in the event of a North Korean attack. Japan has also committed itself to the purchase of a massively expensive and unproven (U.S.) missile defense system to ward off any North Korean missiles, tightened the rules governing the entry of North Korean

ships into Japanese waters, and passed legislation to authorize unilateral economic sanctions on North Korea if it judged the situation to warrant it.

China: China has the closest of historic ties with North Korea and is today both the source of most of the supplies of food and energy on which North Korea depends and the most likely possible model of how it might develop in the future; in the North Korean present, Chinese see their own past. The Chinese role in brokering a resolution of the problem of North Korea has steadily grown, at the U.S. request. The Chinese “bottom line” is that there must not be any resort to force. China was bold enough to say, from its position as convener and chair of the Beijing August 2003 talks, that it was the U.S. that was the major obstacle to the negotiations. Steady Chinese pressure since then has been instrumental in bringing the U.S. to soften its position. From absolute refusal to negotiate until North Korea agreed unilaterally to a complete, verifiable, irreversible end to its nuclear programs (at the three meetings that took place in 2002 and 2003), the U.S. in late 2003 indicated it was ready to offer some kind of security guarantee and to consider graduated steps to resolution. China has also been instrumental in persuading North Korea to come to the table again without the draft document it sought in advance and to agree to a freeze (and ultimately destruction) of all its nuclear programs, not only weapons-related ones.

China has long disputed U.S. intelligence estimates about North Korea and has stated in advance of the February meeting that it is not persuaded of the central U.S. claim about North Korea's possession of a uranium enrichment program. On this, given the record of U.S. intelligence and its manipulation on Iraq, Washington will have a hard time persuading its negotiating partners in Beijing. Any successful resolution of the current problem is likely to enhance China's role as the lynchpin of a future East or Northeast Asian order, with the "Six" constituting the core of a future community.

8. Does anyone know what the status is of North Korea's weapons programs? Can you summarize what we do know.

American intelligence first estimated back in 1993 (possibly earlier) that North Korea had "one, or possibly two" nuclear weapons. Like the intelligence on which the U.S. in 2003 went to war against Iraq, it seems to have been false and/or subject to political manipulation. By 2003, the U.S. had shifted to adopt the South Korean, Russian, and Chinese view that North Korea actually did not have any nuclear weapons. It then argued that it had the ingredients (plutonium and uranium), the will, and the intent to develop them.

It is almost certainly true that North Korea would like to have nuclear weapons, its own "deterrent," but also that it suspended its efforts

to produce them when it felt its security needs were satisfactorily met by the Agreed Framework in 1994, only changing course when the U.S. changed course from Clinton to Bush. North Korea today almost certainly has plutonium and may be in the process of extracting more of it from the waste rods removed from the Yongbyon ponds, but it seems highly unlikely that it has achieved "weaponization." As for delivery system, the Nodong missile has been test fired only once, in 1993; the longer-range Taepodong likewise once, when it failed to achieve orbit and crashed into the ocean in 1998; and the supposedly improved model, Taepodong 2, also once, when it blew up on the launching pad in 2002 (according to South Korean intelligence). It is hardly a scintillating record.

Objective assessment is complicated by the fact that both U.S. intelligence and Pyongyang share an interest, for different reasons, in having the world think North Korea possesses both nuclear weapons and a delivery system—the U.S. in order to justify its hegemonic role in East Asia and North Korea in order to deter U.S. attack.

9. What is the Bush administration currently trying to achieve with respect to North Korea?

Jack Pritchard, a senior North Korean specialist at the State Department until his resignation in August 2003, says of U.S. policy (New York Times, January 21, 2004): "At best it could be described only as amateurish. At worst, it is a

failed attempt to lure American allies down a path that is not designed to solve the crisis diplomatically but to lead to the failure and ultimate isolation of North Korea in hopes that its government will collapse.”

For the neo-conservative group within the Bush regime, whether in the 1990s or today, history and politics are less important than the moral frame. North Korea is evil and should be liberated. Where political, economic, and historical differences can be negotiated, evil can only be stamped out. Bush has made no secret of his loathing for North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, in terms similar to those he used for Saddam Hussein. He has, however, also intimated, in quite contrary mode, that a peaceful, negotiated solution in Korea is possible and even expressed optimism about the prospects. While the neoconservatives around Cheney and Rumsfeld prefer ultimatum, backed by the readiness to use force, the State Department favors negotiation and cooperation with regional powers.

The current U.S. position—readiness to meet North Korea’s security concerns by some form of document and to offer economic aid in return for complete, verifiable and irreversible abandonment of its nuclear programs—is a big step forward from that enunciated by James Kelly in 2002 and 2003. On the face of it, this is close to what North Korea wants (though it fudges the key issue of full diplomatic normalization).

10. How would you assess the Bush administration’s strategy?

Two major contradictions affect U.S. North Korea policy, nuclear on the one hand, strategic on the other.

The U.S. wants to maintain nuclear-based hegemony over the earth, and indeed over the universe, while blocking any new countries from joining the existing nuclear club. The non-proliferation regime to which it signed up in 1968 was a deal by which those countries that did not possess nuclear weapons pledged not to take steps to get them, while those with weapons pledged not to threaten non-possessors and to take steps to eliminate their existing arsenals and move to comprehensive nuclear disarmament. Until the nuclear club powers take seriously those obligations, their insistence on others fulfilling their obligations is hypocrisy. If security can indeed only be guaranteed by possession of nuclear weapons, then there can be no complaints about North Korea. If that is not the case, then the possessing powers must take steps towards elimination of all nuclear weapons.

The second contradiction is between short- and long-term U.S. objectives. Regime change in North Korea would remove a thorn in the U.S. side, but at the same time it might serve to undermine U.S. regional hegemony. George W. Bush and Kim Jong Il stand in a paradoxically symbiotic relationship. Bush’s loathing for Kim, and his nuclear threat, maintains the isolation and siege conditions that allow Kim to legitimize

his rule, mobilize nationalist support, and crush opposition. Bush, for his part, rules and reigns over Northeast Asia because Japan and South Korea feel compelled by the North Korean threat to seek U.S. protection and to shelter under Washington's "nuclear umbrella."

The framework of U.S. military presence in East Asia is justified in Seoul and Tokyo by the threat from Pyongyang. Without the "North Korean threat"—whether resolved peacefully or otherwise—Washington strategists would have to think of some new justification for the bases in Japan and South Korea and for the massively expensive anti-missile system soon to be constructed in the region. Some might want to declare China the real enemy, but a military alliance with the United States whose orientation was containment and hostility towards China would find little support in contemporary South Korea and Japan. Paradoxically, if the U.S. does accomplish what it wants in North Korea—regime change—it could find that its own domination of the region is undermined.

It is time for the U.S. to grow beyond the Cold War assumptions of Asia as a threatening and yet economically crucial area that must be maintained under tight control. In time, Asia, especially East and Northeast Asia, most likely in close cooperation with Southeast Asia, will emerge as an autonomous global center of power and wealth. The process is, indeed, already advanced. The security reliance on the chain of U.S. bases and on Washington's priorities

becomes increasingly anomalous.

North Korea is a tiny country that has successively been colonized, invaded, and abandoned. Its neighbors are the booming core of the world economy. Incorporated into "normal" relations with them, North Korea could be expected to become increasingly like them. North Korea's neighbors have their reasons for wanting to incorporate North Korea into the emerging Asian community and should be encouraged to take a key role in doing so on their own terms. To accomplish this, the price North Korea seeks for abandoning its nuclear weapons program is not unreasonable: an end to nuclear intimidation, diplomatic normalization, and removal of economic sanctions.

It would be sensible for the U.S., while maintaining the existing security guarantees to both South Korea and Japan, to give North Korea the chance to show if it really does wish to change. Kim Jong Il's avowed desire for opening and normalization should be tested. He should be invited to talks in Washington or Tokyo or anywhere else and his willingness to denuclearize put to the test. Attempts to enforce change by issuing demands and refusing negotiation simply will not work. North Korean "face" is an important part of the security equation and a sympathy for the pain and the sense of justice that drive it, however perverted, will be needed for security goals to be met. Kim Jong Il's rule feeds off the current tension and he would not long survive the process of whittling it

away, the normalization of economic and political relations with Japan and the U.S., and the steady flow of Japanese and other capital into the country.

Above all, a resolution of the problem will depend on seeing it not in the narrow frame of North Korean threat but in the broad context of history. North Korea is essentially a Korean problem and South Korea must assume a central role in negotiations and plans for the future because its people must after all live with their northern compatriots.

11. How does the U.S.-North Korea impasse impact on issues of peace and security in Northeast Asia? Are there regional approaches toward a reduction of tensions?

North Korea is a structural pivot of contemporary U.S. hegemony in East Asia. Washington's post-Cold War vision asks Japan and Korea, in effect, to accept a future world predicated on continued fear and hostility to North Korea, so as to require their continuing military, political, and economic dependence on the United States. For Japan, the role of the "Britain" of East Asia, is on offer, and its actions in Iraq suggest that Koizumi's Japan is keen to take up the offer. For South Korea, or a united Korea, no clear role has yet been articulated, but one thing is clear: it is expected to remain secondary to Japan, perhaps as a kind of East Asian Northern Ireland. However, while U.S.

regional and global policy offers negative priorities—anti-terror, anti-"evil," security against North Korea—from East Asia there are tentative signs of the emergence of an alternative, non-imperial vision. Beyond the gloom, anger, and rising tension of the "North Korean crisis" may be detected a process of evolution in a "European" type direction. Like Europe, however, East Asia has its own rhythms and its own dynamics, and its tectonic plates are moving towards greater mutual cooperation and community.

People begin to ask why it is that East Asia in the 20th century failed to evolve a concert of states other than the Japanese-dominated "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" in the first half and then the U.S.-dominated "free world" in the latter half, the former disastrous, the latter originally a Cold War product, and increasingly anomalous as the conditions that gave it birth disappear. Offered ongoing dependency on the U.S., structured around bilateral treaty arrangements and trade flows rather than any regional consensus, and marked by a base structure meant to last till well into the century ahead, the peoples and states of East Asia are likely at some point to reply: no thank you. Permanent East Asian dependence on American markets and security guarantees looks more and more anachronistic. Looking at the evolution of postwar Europe, people ask why Asia should not follow a similar path.

The Kim Jong Il regime in North Korea is

indefensible, but violent intervention to change it is more likely to lead to the sort of chaos that engulfs Iraq and Afghanistan than to a resolution of problems that, in the last resort, only the Korean people, north and south, can solve. The necessary condition for them to do this is the “normalization” of the Korean peninsula, with problems ignored for far too long finally addressed: the lack of any peace treaty to settle the Korean War, the absence of diplomatic relations between North Korea and the world’s two most important countries, the U.S. and Japan. Only then will it be possible to liquidate the militarized tension that has blighted the lives of North Korea’s people for half a century and created the conditions within which the dictatorship sustains itself.

12. What, if anything, was achieved by the February 2004 Six-Sided Conference in Beijing? The February Conference faced some major obstacles:

- * How to arrive at a mutually satisfactory text to guarantee North Korea’s security
- * How to establish the truth about the claims and counter-claims concerning an enriched uranium program
- * How to address the North Korean demand for deletion from the list of terror-supporting countries
- * How to persuade the US to accept the North Korean “freeze” as sufficient warrant of good

faith to justify the resumption of shipments of heavy oil in the short term, and an end to the virtual economic embargo of North Korea in the long term

* How in the longer term, to persuade all sides that the issue to be settled is not merely a putative North Korean weapons program but normalization of relations on all sides

* How to incorporate in that normalization a permanent peace agreement to settle the Korean war of 1950–53

* How to resolve the issue of North Korean abductions of Japanese, and simultaneously the issues of Japanese abductions and abuse of Koreans during the long colonial period This agenda was not just about nuclear weapons on the peninsula, but of the accumulated problems of a century, and therefore almost certainly too much to be settled in a few days. While the conference proceeded in business-like fashion, without obvious acrimony, it ended with little more than the agreement to re-convene before the end of June. The Communiqué declared a shared commitment to a nuclear weapons-free Korean peninsula, but even such a bald statement concealed a major difference: for the U.S., North Korea would have to submit to “complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantling” (CVID) of all its nuclear programs, military and peaceful; for its part, North Korea offered to freeze, not dismantle, only its plutonium-based weapons programs, and denied that it had any enriched uranium programs at all.

The two sides were miles apart. One other major participant in the talks, Japan, abstained on this occasion from making an issue of its major bone of contention with North Korea, the kidnapping of its citizens in the 1980s. However, the problem continued to fester as preliminary steps had been taken in the Japanese Diet to authorize the unilateral imposition of sanctions if Pyongyang did not give satisfaction. The U.S. in the Beijing forum again forfeited the possibility of offering a “Roadmap” towards comprehensive settlement. Instead, it came with an empty hand, continuing to insist that CVID was the only agenda. It appears, according to Pyongyang’s account, to have declared that relations could not be normalized until North Korea not only ended all its nuclear programs but also dealt to U.S. satisfaction with missiles, conventional weapons, biological and chemical weapons, human rights, and other issues.

However, in the face of pressure from China, South Korea, and Russia, the U.S. position weakened steadily. Around the six-sided table Washington could look only to Japan for unconditional support. Its insistence that North Korea had an enriched uranium weapons program was contradicted or seriously doubted in Beijing, Seoul and Moscow, despite the A. Q. Khan confession. The security guarantee for North Korea that it had long refused to consider was on the table. Its position of “no reward for bad behavior” was in tatters as it was forced to concede to Beijing, Seoul, and Moscow that they

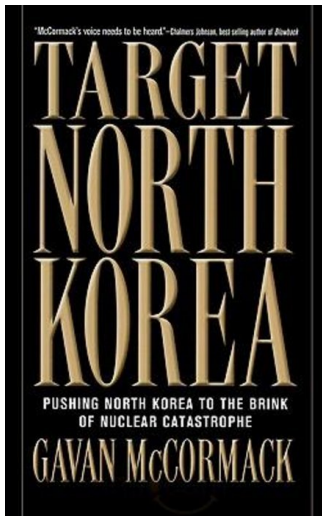
could offer Pyongyang economic cooperation on the condition of a mere freeze plus a commitment to proceed towards complete dismantling. Ultimatum had given way to engagement.

For North Korea, the dilemma is that it has only one card to play. Once its nuclear weapons “threat” is eliminated, it becomes an insignificant, poor country at the mercy of its enemies. It therefore cannot afford to trade away that card lightly and remains unlikely to give up its weapons (if it has any), dismantle its nuclear plant (peaceful and energy-related as well as weapons-related), and agree to intensive inspections—presumably anywhere in the country—unless its historic grievances are met and its relations with the U.S. and Japan normalized. It continues to insist it is no threat to anyone but that its security depends on possession of its own deterrent until such time as its security needs are otherwise guaranteed.

As the U.S. proceeded with its plans towards adoption of a new generation of tactical, battlefield nuclear weapons and promised to extend its existing global military and nuclear hegemony into space, it found itself unable to enforce its will against tiny and feeble North Korea. On the issue of North Korea, the power of the mightiest nation in history was slipping steadily away to regional capitals, especially Beijing and Seoul. By the time the Beijing Six meet again, if they do, at the end of June, the U.S. presidential election will be four months closer, and nobody could be more fervently hoping for a

regime change in Washington than the diehards in Pyongyang. U.S. hostility and inability to see beyond the North Korean nuclear wood to the trees of the historical and geopolitical context helps Kim Jong Il legitimize his brutal rule and offers him the ironic satisfaction of a process that carries high risks to the region and to his enemy, the United States, as it does to himself.

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