North Korea’s Weapons of Mass Destruction: Badges, Shields, or Swords?

VICTOR D. CHA

On the morning of 30 January 2002, wire reports, television news, and internet chat rooms throughout Asia were abuzz with speculation about phase two of the United States war against terrorism coming to the Korean peninsula. The previous evening, President George W. Bush in his State of the Union address outlined the U.S. mission beyond Afghanistan to include not only the termination of terrorist threats beyond al Qaeda networks, but also the prevention of links between these threats and regimes in an “axis of evil” enumerated as North Korea, Iraq, and Iran, that seek weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to threaten the United States and its allies.¹ Contrary to concerns expressed by many different media circles, the axis of evil speech did not signal imminent military action against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea). The President calmed any such concerns during his summit meetings with Japanese, Chinese, and especially South Korean leaders shortly after the speech.² The axis of evil statement, however, did intimate a harder-line policy toward North Korea at odds with the engagement or “sunshine” policy of ally South Korea. Also, the speech made clear the priority placed by the Bush administration on countering WMD threats as an integral, if not central, component of the post-September 11 American security agenda.

These developments point to the renewal in coming months of an acerbic debate that took place at the end of the Clinton administration over the merits of engaging or containing the DPRK. Although the Bush administration’s initial review of North Korea policy in June 2001 recommended unconditional engagement with Pyongyang on a broad range of issues including its suspected nuclear weapons program, ballistic missile production and export, and its conventional force posture on the peninsula, this position is far from a conclusive one given the well-known skepticism of North Korean intentions expressed in the Bush’s axis of evil speech as well as other statements by administration officials. A confluence of forces, moreover, adds to the likely reemergence of North Korea as a front-burner foreign policy issue after a period of calm and relative stasis in 2000–2001, following the unprecedented thaw created by the summit meeting between the South and North Korean leaders, Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il in June 2000, and by the visit of U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to Pyongyang in October 2000. The standing nonproliferation agreement between the United States and the DPRK, the 1994 nuclear Agreed Framework, soon reaches critical implementation stages that will test the intentions of both parties and raises debates about American revision or abandonment of the agreement. A presidential election in South Korea in December 2002 has already sparked a contentious debate over the current government’s sunshine policy. Japan’s normalization talks with North Korea remain stalled since winter 2000 with no sign of resolution. Finally, Kim Jong Il’s self-imposed missile testing moratorium, which was contingent on continued progress in U.S.–DPRK dialogue, ends in December 2002.

Engagement with the DPRK, proponents argue, will avert crisis. Carrots in the form of normalized political relations, economic aid and investment, and mutual tension reduction will reduce North Korea’s insecurity and offer a path of reform for an end to the proliferation threat and other belligerent DPRK behavior. Skeptics of engagement do not believe that the regime’s revisionist
intentions will change, and therefore the offer of economic and diplomatic carrots only strengthens the hardliners in Pyongyang, exemplifies Western weakness (in DPRK eyes), and ultimately strengthens a regime bent on overturning the status quo on the peninsula. As Douglas Paal has argued, the policy amounts to “conditional appeasement” that does not produce observable change for the better in the DPRK. Rather than rehash the engagement-containment debate, this article tries to address a prior and axiomatic question. The very existence of a vigorous policy debate in Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo indicates not consensus but a fundamental absence of agreement on the nature of the threat that emerges from the DPRK. I take the primary agent of the DPRK “threat” in the post-cold war era—the nuclear weapons program—and seek to explain the context of DPRK weaponization. In short, are these weapons basically built out of insecurity, metaphorically as shields to ensure against acts by the United States and others to crush the regime? Or are they swords built for aggressive and revisionist purposes? Or are these programs essentially badges or symbols of prestige for an otherwise bankrupt regime?

The answers to these questions lie in an investigation of strategic doctrine. It is only by understanding the doctrine in which this weapons capability is em-

---


7 I focus primarily on nuclear doctrine rather than the entire portfolio of weapons of mass destruction. Doctrine or strategies for each of these weapons is different and cannot be generalized under a nuclear doctrine. I do include implicitly the ballistic missile program as delivery vehicles for nuclear warheads.
WMD Threats and Doctrine

There is no dearth of arguments or scenarios about the ways in which North Korea's WMD capabilities might be threatening. Pyongyang might employ nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles as part of an attempt to overrun the peninsula again; but in the interim, it might utilize strategic deception to lull South Korea and the United States into believing it is interested in a deal on non-

---

8 This argument does not deny that even a wholly defensive doctrine by a small nuclear power like North Korea can still be threatening in terms of the dangers associated with poor safeguards and accidents often cited about fledgling nuclear programs. On the other hand, given recent revelations regarding the superpowers' nuclear programs during the cold war, there is growing debate about whether such safety arguments are any more applicable to Third World proliferation than they were to the First World. See Waltz's arguments in Kenneth Waltz and Scott Sagan, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate (New York: Norton, 1996); Peter Feaver, “Optimists, Pessimists, and Theories of Nuclear Proliferation Management,” Security Studies 4 (Summer 1995); and Ahmed Hashim, “The State, Society, and the Evolution of Warfare in the Middle East,” Washington Quarterly 18 (Autumn 1995); and Avery Goldstein, Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 276–79.

9 The propositions I derive here would have to be confirmed by rigorous empirical investigation of DPRK military writings. Nevertheless, I believe this is a useful exercise that provides a testable framework for understanding weaponization choices by the DPRK.
proliferation and tension reduction.\textsuperscript{10} Another view, consonant with many reports about DPRK dictator Kim Jong Il before the summit with South Korea in June 2000, argues that the reclusive leader is irrational, unpredictable, and mad enough to use these weapons without probable cause. A third view posits that the threat stems primarily from the DPRK state’s collapse or implosion resulting either in the problem of “loose nukes,” inadvertent detonation, or accidental use of these weapons.\textsuperscript{11} Finally, Kim Jong Il might strike out with these capabilities in a last-gasp act of desperation if the regime faces imminent extinction or perceives an imminent attack.\textsuperscript{12}

These are all plausible and real concerns. However, probability estimates for these scenarios generally focus on variables like the regime’s viability, the sanity of the leadership, and the strength of U.S.–ROK (South Korea) defense and deterrence capabilities on the peninsula. Assessing the true threat posed by these weapons, however, is a function of two additional factors. First, as Robert Jervis has argued, the offensive or defensive nature of the weapons in question is an important determinant of the security dilemma and, derivatively, the level of threat.\textsuperscript{13} Weapons systems that are defense-oriented (fortifications, trenches, short-range fixed artillery sites, recessed force deployments) are less likely to generate insecurities among other states while contributing to the security of arming states. On the other hand, a state’s buildup of offensive weapons generates acute security dilemmas and threat perceptions, because potential expansionist intentions behind the buildup cannot be ruled out by the state’s competitors. Second, if weapons cannot be clearly distinguished for offensive or defensive purposes,\textsuperscript{14} then transparency regarding the threat will hinge on


\textsuperscript{14} For example, tanks are slow and relatively immobile, but they can be used for offensive purposes. Surface-to-air missiles are notionally defensive weapons; but depending on who uses them, they can be seen as offensively intended. Nuclear weapons can be used for offensive (first-strike) or defensive (assured second-strike) purposes.
the doctrine in which the weapons systems are embedded.\textsuperscript{15} Whether a given weapon is offensive or defensive greatly depends on the context and circumstances of its use, and often the best indicator of this context is the military doctrine under which the system operates.

\textit{Weapons for What Purpose?}

Given the importance of strategic doctrine in assessing the WMD threat posed by a state, the next step is to locate a better understanding of a state’s pronouncements and writings on the topic. For the declared nuclear powers, this doctrine is usually established, public, and fairly transparent.\textsuperscript{16} However, in the case of a proliferating country like North Korea, the task is doubly difficult, because transparency is minimal and the stakes are very high. The government of North Korea does not release any official statements on its nuclear weapons or ballistic missile programs. This stands in stark contrast to another new proliferator, India, which after its nuclear tests released statements explicating the doctrine (however faulty) in which these new capabilities were embedded. Thus, in the opaque case of North Korea, the first step in learning its strategic doctrine might be to understand the government’s predominant political objectives. Strategic doctrine and the regime’s national objectives are likely to be linked. The \\textit{Juche} ideology of “self-reliance” is the most known aspect of North Korea’s national strategy.\textsuperscript{17} At a minimum, one could posit that a primary political goal of the DPRK regime and its \\textit{juche} strategy is state survival and protection of national sovereignty, given the deteriorating domestic and geostrategic conditions since the end of the cold war.

This may appear obvious, but it was a goal taken for granted by the North until the 1990s. From the outset of the regime’s creation in 1948, the primary national goal was not merely state survival and protection of sovereignty, but “victorious unification” (\textit{songong t’ongil}) over the rival regime in the South.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} As Eyre, Suchman, and Alexander note, “[T]echnology is never just technology, . . . every machine has a socially constructed meaning and a socially oriented objective and the incidence and significance of technological developments can never be fully understood or predicted independently of their social context.” Cited in Dana Eyre and Mark Suchman, “Status, Norms and the Proliferation of Conventional Weapons” in Peter Katzenstein, ed., \textit{The Culture of National Security} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 86. Also see Robert O’Connell, “Putting Weapons in Perspective,” \textit{Armed Forces and Society} 9 (1983).

\textsuperscript{16} See Goldstein, \textit{Deterrence and Security}.


\textsuperscript{18} For some of the classic works on North Korea during the cold war, see Dae-Sook Suh, \textit{Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); B. C. Koh, \textit{The Foreign Policy Systems of North and South Korea} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Robert Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee, \textit{Communism in Korea} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); and Bruce Cumings, \textit{Korea’s Place in the Sun} (New York: Norton, 1997).
Moreover, most economic and military indicators of relative state power substantiated such a goal. Throughout the first three decades of the cold war, the two regimes faced off as relative equals with each buttressed by security guarantees from its great-power patrons. From the early 1960s to 1970s, North Korean gross national product per capita and conventional military capabilities rivaled, if not surpassed, that of its southern counterpart. This relative equality enabled each regime its particular vision of unification, which essentially meant domination of one over the other.

Today, despite rhetoric to the contrary, North Korea no longer sees overthrow of the South and unification of the peninsula as a realistic objective. By the 1990s, an enormous and insurmountable gap emerged between the two countries. Annual 8 percent growth in the ROK (before the 1997 Asian financial crisis) versus successive years of 3–8 percent negative growth in the North between 1991 and 1998 resulted in a nearly twenty-fold gap in the gross domestic product of the two economies and a ratio of South to North per capital income as high as 11:1. Although Pyongyang clings to juche and visions of hegemonic unification, even staunch ideologues like Hwang Jang-yop admitted after defecting in 1997 that a communist revolution in the South is no longer a viable DPRK objective. In a similar vein, a low-key but very significant event at the September 1998 session of the Supreme People’s Assembly (1st session, 10th term) was abolition of the Unification Committee. Propaganda emanating out of Pyongyang under Kim Jong Il, while still promoting strict adherence to “revolutionary traditions,” increasingly admits that “existing theories” may not be sufficient to deal with new problems and developments. Russian observers note that among the core principles that have made up the juche ideology, emphasis has shifted over the past year from universal “communization” to “self-dependency” as the ultimate revolutionary goal. The government-run newspaper, Nodong Sinmun, in a moment of candor at the end of 2000 admitted how much national goals had changed: “The masses’ independent demands grow higher ceaselessly with the times as the revolution develops. ... Should

---

19 For economic data, see Bruce Cumings, *The Two Koreas*, Foreign Policy Association, Headline Series No. 269 (May/June 1984): 65–66. The North Korean military grew from 300,000 to over one million troops over the two decades. See Nicholas Eberstadt, “‘National Strategy’ in North and South Korea,” National Bureau of Asian Research, *Analysis* 7 (no. 5, 1996), 10, 12.


21 See Oberdorfer’s recounting of conversations between Hwang and Selig Harrison in Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1998), 401. Also see Hwang’s interview in Myers, *Korea in the Cross Currents*, 140–45.


the regime fail to strengthen and develop fast enough to meet the masses’ incessantly growing independent demands, the people would turn their back on it and eventually it would collapse.” As one expert noted, “[t]hirty years ago a very different verdict on the national strategies of the two Koreas might have been rendered. . . . [T]he North Korean goal of enforcing a Socialist unification upon the South was no mere pipedream.” Now, Pyongyang’s end game has changed from one of hegemonic unification to basic survival.

**Shields?**

If one can posit that a critical DPRK national objective is state survival, then insight into the DPRK’s strategic doctrine is best broached first by understanding how nuclear proliferation and this survival objective are interlinked. This question is a fundamental one that often gets lost in the debates about the nuclear program, which have fixated on quantities of weapons-grade plutonium accumulated and whether or not the North already has a bomb, rather than on the context of weaponization. If the regime’s objective is survival, then one line of argument would posit that the North seeks nuclear weapons as a deterrent. If the DPRK case is typical of new, small and medium-size proliferation in the “second” nuclear age, then the “rules” regarding proliferation and deterrence are substantially different from the first nuclear age. The rationale behind proliferation is not based on achieving assured second-strike capabilities as the backbone of stable deterrence, as was the case between the United States and Soviet Union. Instead, what appears to be the operative doctrine for smaller nuclear powers is existential deterrence: “. . . the mere existence of nuclear forces means that, whatever we say or do, there is a certain irreducible risk that an armed conflict might escalate into a nuclear war. The fear of escalation is thus factored into political calculations: faced with this risk, states are more cautious and more prudent than they otherwise would be.” Security for the proliferator is therefore achieved not through assured second-strike capability but by creating “first-strike uncertainty.” Deterrence and security derive from hav-

---

26 For a good critical survey of these debates and speculations, see Sigal, *Disarming Strangers*.
ing just enough capabilities to raise uncertainty in the mind of the opponent so that it cannot neutralize you with a first strike.²⁹

What are some of the parameters by which one could test whether the North’s nuclear program is driven by an existential deterrent doctrine? The first are material constraints. Existential deterrent doctrines (as opposed to stable deterrence doctrines) are most likely among proliferating states that are small, limited in resources, and with proximate adversaries. The DPRK’s well-documented economic difficulties in the 1990s impose severe resource constraints on closing gaps with rival competitors through modernization and a buildup of conventional forces. As Avery Goldstein argues, the self-help imperatives of anarchy also render reliance on allies for security an unattractive proposition (when abandonment fears are high) or an unfeasible one (when allies do not exist).³⁰ Nuclear weapons, therefore, offer the most efficient means by which to optimize security needs, abandonment fears, and resource constraints. Nuclear weapons are also more “fungible” than conventional forces in the sense that they remain relevant security assets in most cases regardless of wholesale changes in future adversaries or contingencies.³¹ If programs are developed under a veil of secrecy, this often signals existential deterrence, because opacity generates worst-case assessments that tend to err on the side of caution (hence increasing first-strike uncertainty). If the nuclear arsenals are small, inaccurate, and countervalue-oriented, this usually indicates a doctrine not based in nuclear war-fighting or second-strike capabilities.

There is some evidence to suggest DPRK interest in nuclear weapons as part of an existential deterrent doctrine.³² The geostrategic situation from the

²⁹ The precedent for this form of deterrence had already been set by the second-tier nuclear powers in the first nuclear age. As Goldstein’s study shows, existential deterrent doctrines were what drove China, Britain, and France’s pursuit of an independent but not second-strike assured nuclear deterrent against their respective superpower adversaries. See Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security*, 44–46. This argument does not deny the vigorous debate on whether existential deterrence is stable, nor does it deny the debates about the safety of small nuclear programs. Illustrative of these arguments, see Waltz and Sagan, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*; Peter Feaver, *Guarding the Guardians: Civilian Control of Nuclear Weapons in the United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Bruce Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1993); Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and David Karl, “Proliferation Pessimism and Emerging Nuclear Powers,” *International Security* 21 (Winter 1996/97): 87–119. The point is that pursuit of weaponization by small powers like the DPRK may be based in a belief in the efficacy of existential deterrence, regardless of whether this is correct or not.


³¹ For further discussions on the relative advantages of nuclear over conventional deterreers, see Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security*, 35–40, 54–55.

³² A peaceful uses of atomic energy agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1960s enabled North Korea to develop a small nuclear research reactor and a basic understanding of nuclear physics, engineering, and reactor operations. Pyongyang’s nuclear industry was capable of supporting a complete nuclear fuel cycle by the 1980s. Subsequent reactors (an operational five megawatt reactor and construction of 50 and 200 megawatt reactors) presaged an annual reprocessed plutonium production capacity that could sustain an excess of ten nuclear weapons. While these activities
early-1990s (when revelations about the nuclear program became front page news) shifted heavily against the North and in favor of its southern rival. Pyongyang’s primary cold war patron, the Soviet Union, ceased to exist. Its successor state in Russia normalized relations with Seoul in September 1990 and declared that it would not honor Soviet cold war security guarantees to DPRK defense. Pyongyang’s other critical patron, China, sought diplomatic normalization with South Korea in 1992 and also disavowed its “as close as lips to teeth” cold war security relationship with the North. Thus, in a period of three years between 1989 and 1992, the world, as Pyongyang knew it since 1948, changed beyond recognition. Such changes dictated some form of self-help security solution beyond relying on allies. In addition, the insurmountable gap in capabilities with the ROK that emerged at the end of the cold war made regime salvation paramount. Consequently, as one long-time DPRK expert asserts, “The growing political, economic, and military imbalance between the North and South almost forces [the DPRK] to produce nuclear weapons for survival and for security. It is the only alternative to guarantee North Korea’s own style of socialism and to insure the continuation of Kim Il Sung’s dynasty.”33 The nuclear program was developed with a premium on opacity, and even the most generous estimate would put the arsenal at a handful of primitive weapons. In addition, while much has been made of the DPRK’s long-range ballistic missile program in the aftermath of the Taepo-dong test in August 1998, these missiles are notoriously inaccurate with inordinately high circular probability errors. Such missiles as delivery vehicles for nuclear warheads could not practically or effectively be integrated in some doctrine that focused on counterstrike targets, which rely on high accuracy. Inaccurate delivery vehicles could however be evidence of a doctrine that holds countervalue targets (like cities) for deterrence purposes.34

There is little evidence that the program is integrated into the military structure. Despite the Soviet origins of the nuclear program, the North’s military lacks training in nuclear weapons or nuclear war-fighting, which gives the sense that the weapons are for deterrent and not war-fighting purposes. The Korean


34 Clearly there are alternative explanations for these traits that do not necessarily mean an existential deterrent doctrine, in particular, resource constraints.
Peoples Army (KPA) is presumably outside of the entire nuclear chain of command.\(^\text{35}\)

Most North Korea experts agree that the primary agent in understanding the intentions behind the nuclear program is Kim Il Sung. Initiatives and ideas with regard to the program were Kim’s and disseminated sparingly among a small circle of advisers; moreover, these views were never recorded in any of Kim’s military writings. In spite of this, there is no denying that the DPRK leader from very early on appreciated the awesome destructiveness and deterrent value of the weapon, particularly as a young guerrilla fighter who witnessed the United States subdue the Japanese with merely two of these weapons.\(^\text{36}\) Kim most likely comprehended ex post facto the compellent value of implicit nuclear threats by the United States to end the Korean war in 1953.\(^\text{37}\) He consequently sought extended nuclear deterrent guarantees from the Soviet Union, and his interest and activity in pursuing independent capabilities positively correlated over the years with lapses in confidence in the Soviet security guarantee. Kim was clearly affected by the Soviet-South Korea normalization pact, referring to it as a “betrayal of socialism.” In perhaps the most direct statement linking the nascent nuclear capabilities with the loss of confidence in Moscow, the DPRK foreign ministry stated in September 1990 that it would take “measures to provide for ourselves some weapons for which we have so far relied on the [Soviet] alliance.”\(^\text{38}\) The Chinese experience also weighed heavily in Kim’s calculations. China in the 1950s was a fledgling regime perceived as besieged and threatened by the United States. However, nuclear capabilities changed China’s strategic and political context dramatically and provided it with a measure of security unattainable previously.

**Deterrence Operationalized**

Hence, an argument could be made for DPRK nuclear weaponization and existential deterrence. There may have been other alternative purposes intended with the weapon, but as Alexandre Mansourov argues, “It appears that Kim Il Sung gave first priority to deterrence when he thought about the possible mission for nuclear weapons in the overall military doctrine of the DPRK.”\(^\text{39}\) This, as North Korea expert Dae-Sook Suh argues, was for regime survival: “The


\(^{36}\) Mansourov conversations with Steve Linton cited in ibid., 5–6.


reason for the North Korean nuclear weapons program is based on its need to survive. It is not to improve its power position vis-à-vis South Korea or to use nuclear blackmail in its international relations. It is not the purpose of the North Korean nuclear weapons program to engage in nuclear arms trade. . . . North Korea thinks it needs such weapons for its survival."40

Another longtime North Korea scholar, Bruce Cumings, agrees with this general assessment: “The DPRK probably decided in 1991, if not earlier, to develop a small-state deterrent for a country surrounded by powerful enemies, like Israel: To display enough activity to make possession of a nuclear device plausible to the outside world, but with no announcement of possession. . . . in short, to appear to arm itself with an ultimate trump card and keep everyone guessing whether and when the weapons might become available."41 Although reliable evidence is lacking, one could surmise the doctrine operationalized as follows: First, defense and deterrence against U.S.–ROK conventional ground invasion accomplished by the forward deployed forces and artillery along the demilitarized zone.42 Second, existential nuclear deterrent against the United States. The countervalue target of this deterrent would not be South Korea (for tactical as well as nationalist reasons) or the United States (absent long-range delivery capabilities) but Japan.43 Third, neither-confirm-nor-denial policy with regard to these capabilities. Opacity forces others to “worst-case” the DPRK’s capabilities, which then enhances the deterrent value of the threat.

Policy Implication: If Deterrence, then Engagement

The policy implications of an existential deterrent interpretation of DPRK strategic doctrine favor arguments for engagement. The logic of this policy argument would be that a security dilemma operates with regard to DPRK weaponization. Although provocative by violating nonproliferation norms and couched in aggressive rhetoric, this weaponization is largely defensively intended. Moreover, the nuclear program is best ended by the guarantee of regime survival, not by pressure.44

Pressing the consistency of the engagement logic further, one might argue that if North Korea’s primary interest is survival, why consider giving up the nuclear program? Perhaps Pyongyang just wants the outside world to believe it is interested in a trade while surreptitiously cheating on any agreements concluded. Nuclear and long-range missile capabilities, after all, would be the ultimate equalizer and security guarantor for a weak regime like North Korea. This criticism does not consider the relative unattractiveness of such an option for

41 Cumings, Korea’s Place in the Sun, 467.
42 The defensive rationale for forward-deployed forces derives from “use-or-lose” conditions.
43 For interesting discussions to this effect, see Bermudez and Richardson, “The North Korean View,” 83–112; and Mansouriev, “The Origins, Evolution and Current Politics,” 7–8.
Pyongyang’s overall political objectives. The objective is regime survival. Nuclear weapons and missiles may promise survival through existential deterrence, but they offer nothing else. The objective of survival might be attained but it would be a barren one where the North would remain excluded and alienated from the world community and its benefits. A more desirable outcome for the regime would be what might be called “enriched” survival, a scenario in which the Pyongyang regime endures without nuclear weapons—being able to maintain a credible neither-confirm-nor-deny policy would be optimal—while simultaneously accumulating concessions that improve the overall situation.

**Swords?**

The existential deterrence argument for North Korea appears logical to many DPRK-watchers and is consonant with much of the small and medium-proliferation cases in the second nuclear age. North Koreans, if asked, would probably offer this rationale for their proliferating as well. However, the deterrence argument is not without its inconsistencies.

**North Korean Fears of U.S. Attack**

One internal contradiction in particular is devastating. There is no denying that the overriding political objective of Pyongyang in the post-cold war era has been to ensure regime survival; however this has not always been the North’s primary concern. For the majority of the regime’s existence, survival was not the issue; instead, the primary security contingency that the DPRK feared was defending against unprovoked aggression or preemptive attack by the United States and South Korea.

This has been stated countless times in North Korean propaganda for Western and internal consumption. U.S.–ROK military exercises to maintain combat and defense-readiness (Team Spirit) involving nearly 200,000 men were routinely condemned by Pyongyang as provocative exercises aimed at attacking the North. The Reagan administration’s decision in the 1980s to sell advanced F-16 fighter planes to Korea as well as its explication of a “horizontal escalation” doctrine with the Soviet Union reconfirmed North Korean beliefs that the United States was threatening preemptive attack on the North, either directly as a function of the balance on the peninsula or as a response to Soviet actions elsewhere in the world. As Cumings observes, “This scenario truly horrified the North Koreans, and during the remaining Reagan years they shouted themselves hoarse in opposition to U.S. policy.” More recently, revelations in the late 1990s regarding revision of the U.S. operational battle plan for Korea (Operation Plan 5027) confirmed the North’s view of a salient U.S. threat to

---

45 Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security*; and Hagerty, *The Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation*.

46 Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 461.
attack. The new plan substantially expanded the target list, timetable, and depth of a U.S. counter-offensive on Pyongyang. Comments by one U.S. official with regard to OP-PLAN 5027 played right into the hands of those in Pyongyang preoccupied with a U.S. attack: “When we’re done, [the DPRK] will not be able to mount any military activity of any kind. We will kill them all.”

Fears of a preemptive U.S. attack are evident in DPRK conventional military doctrine. Kim Il Sung’s Four Military Lines and Three Revolutionary Forces are premised on repelling and rolling back a U.S. attack to Pusan in three days. Nowhere is this fear more evident than in the forward deployment of DPRK forces along the demilitarized zone. These deployments are seen by the West as aggressively-intended; but from a DPRK perspective, they reflect a defensive mentality about fending off a U.S. attack. As General James Clapper (director of Defense Intelligence Agency [1991–94] and former chief of intelligence in Korea and Pacific commands) noted, the North’s forward deployments may actually reflect a use-or-lose mentality to compensate for inferiorities in the relative military balance on the peninsula. In other words, the North does not necessarily believe that offense has the advantage but chooses to forward deploy because its main fear is unprovoked U.S. attack. Should the United States undertake an offensive attack (complete with relentless bombing runs as was the case in 1950), anything other than forward deployment would render DPRK forces incapable of mobilizing quickly enough in a counter-offensive or sustaining supply routes with rear-area forces.

The Preemption Contradiction

Most North Korea watchers who agree with the existential deterrent argument and therefore favor engagement would also agree with this assessment of DPRK threat perceptions. Given these traditional DPRK security concerns about a U.S. attack, however, a glaring contradiction obtains. If the primary military contingency that the regime is preoccupied with is unprovoked U.S. aggression, then nuclear proliferation, rather than deterring, actually increases the likelihood of attack. As the literature on nuclear deterrence has shown, in security competitions between two states, proliferation by one side dramatically increases the incentives for preemptive attack by the other. Moreover, if a state’s prolifera-

---


48 Buzo, Guerilla Dynasty, chap. 8.

49 Clapper’s analysis as cited in Sigal, Disarming Strangers, 21.

tion activities are revealed to be small and still incomplete, the window for the adversary is open widest to act preemptively quickly and destroy the program before the capability is acquired. Fledgling nuclear weapons programs in China and Iraq created very strong incentives for the United States and Israel to undertake preemptive strikes against these facilities. In the Iraqi case, such a strike was carried out. In the Chinese case, recently declassified documents show that the United States, despite claims to the contrary, seriously considered a preemptive attack against Chinese nuclear facilities, including intelligence-gathering, contingency planning for air attacks, and discussions with the Soviets.51

If the DPRK claims that their nuclear weapons program is embedded in a defensive existential deterrent doctrine, this is effectively an oxymoron. If the motive is defensive, then nuclear proliferation actually makes Pyongyang less secure. Given Pyongyang’s long-held fears of a U.S. attack, proliferation raises the likelihood of U.S. preemptive attack.52

Nuclear Denial Strategy

The contradiction in the existential deterrent logic requires one to look for alternative strategies in which DPRK nuclear weaponization might be embedded. One possibility that can never be ruled out given past DPRK aggression is nuclear weapons as part of a war-fighting strategy that seeks to deny the United States access to the peninsula. War game scenarios have posited, for example, an all-out DPRK surprise attack on the ROK that attempts to take advantage of an initial indecision by the United States and creates chaos among the South to “liberate” the fatherland.53 Primary instruments of attack would include heavy artillery barrages destroying U.S.–ROK forward defenses that would hurt and weaken morale among South Korean soldiers. During this frontal barrage, DPRK special operation forces would infiltrate key civilian and military communication and transportation centers from the rear. An integral part of the offensive is to create panic and chaos in Seoul and other major cities, giving rise to refugees and road congestion, which would create maneuverability nightmares for U.S. and ROK forces responding to the attacks. The strategy also banks on a period of political hesitation in the United States with regard


52 This argument in part hinges on the degree of risk acceptance in the North. If the DPRK perceives itself in the domain of losses, it might be more risk-acceptant with regard to proliferating and therefore willing to accept a period of high instability and increased threat of U.S. attack to reach an existential deterrent capability. For this line of inquiry, see Victor D. Cha, “Engaging North Korea Credibly,” Survival 42 (Summer 2000): 136–55; and Cha, “Engagement and Preventive Defense.”

to taking casualties in a bloody ground war, and ultimately it aims for defeat of the U.S.–ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC) within seven days. 54

Nuclear weapons and WMD-armed missiles would play a critical denial role to U.S. reinforcement operations in such a war strategy. In the initial and critical stages of the war, the primary concern for the United States is to have its forces on the peninsula capable of absorbing the DPRK invasion long enough so it can fly in reinforcements for the counter-offensive. For the DPRK, the primary obstacle in the battle plan for invasion is logistics. Given the KPA’s inability to sustain ample supply lines from north of the demilitarized zone for any protracted period of time, the strategy requires a quick victory over Seoul from which the advancing KPA forces can then replenish supply lines. In order to avoid a protracted battle over Seoul, the DPRK must disrupt and delay the U.S. ability to flow reinforcements to the peninsula through Okinawa. This could be accomplished through a two-pronged denial strategy of persistent chemical and biological attacks on ports and logistic nodes in South Korea to delay U.S. reinforcements; and/or hold Tokyo or other major population centers in Japan as nuclear hostage to complicate, delay, and ideally deter the U.S. response. The latter could be accomplished either through U.S. indecision or by the Japanese government not granting American access to its bases for Korean defense. It is important to note that the feasibility of the strategy rests not on U.S. and Japanese capitulation but on the allies’ indecision for a long enough period of time for KPA forces to overtake Seoul. Once the DPRK holds Seoul, it then exercises considerable leverage. It might choose to prosecute the war further south to take the entire peninsula, which is highly unlikely. Or it might cease hostilities and seek to negotiate from a position of strength given the new status quo post bellum. The introduction of the nuclear component is therefore critical not as part of a defensive existential deterrent doctrine, but an offensive denial strategy.

Ideology and the KPA

Evidence of a nuclear denial strategy is, of course, hard to come by. From a tactical level, if the DPRK were offensively-intended, they would follow the denial strategy secretly while publicly explaining their proliferation as deterrence-based. In addition, if they were truly defensively motivated, then the de-

nial strategy would be irrelevant. In this sense, the absence of explicit evidence of a denial strategy does not necessarily preclude its existence. Hence two alternative avenues of inquiry might be useful. The first is to induce from DPRK propaganda and ideology any evidence of a denial strategy. The second is to observe the extent to which KPA force structure has changed over time. The latter, in particular, might offer clues as to whether DPRK priorities with scarce resources have been focused on defense or offense modernization, which could then offer some insight on the likelihood of a denial strategy.

With regard to ideology and propaganda, as a recent study by General John Tilleli (former head of U.S. forces in Korea) and Major Susan Bryant points out, DPRK rhetoric, even in the face of Kim Dae Jung’s sunshine policy and its hapless post-cold war situation, has not formally renounced its intention to reunify the peninsula. Instead, the North has made countless statements about the destruction it would wreak on Seoul if provoked. But perhaps more important as evidence of a denial strategy than this inflammatory rhetoric (which has all but lost its meaning given its persistent use) is the extent to which DPRK ideology is fully accepting of a major bloody conflict as the final outcome of the Korea problem. Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il fully accept the tenets of Leninism, which posit violent conflict as a necessary stage for universal communication and wholly reject in the long term any notions of peaceful coexistence with capitalism. The first vice minister of the People’s Armed Forces reinforced such a view, stating that “the question is not if there will be another war on the Korean peninsula, but when.” Any overt denial strategy would require that the DPRK regime accept without question the untold numbers of casualties that would result on both sides of the demilitarized zone as well as in Japan. Though not confirming evidence, this fundamental assumption of DPRK ideology is not inconsistent with a denial strategy.

With regard to the KPA, anyone who has studied the security balance on the peninsula is familiar with the current profile of the DPRK military: 1.1 million man army, 3,500 tanks, 2,500 armored personnel carriers, 10,600 artillery guns, 2,600 multiple rocket launchers, and 500+ combat aircraft, all forward-deployed near the demilitarized zone. But interesting insights can be drawn from a longitudinal analysis of the evolution and devolution of these forces. From the end of the Korean war until about the mid-1970s, the KPA threat was largely infantry and artillery-based. Heavy fixed artillery was the mainstay of the force (a lesson of the war as artillery dominated) and KPA forces, while larger than during the Korean War, were still only a fraction (400,000) of the

1.1 million benchmark associated with the threat today. Thus in spite of any aggressive intentions explicitly stated by the DPRK for “unification by force” (songong t’ongil), their capabilities dictated otherwise.

The KPA significantly improved their offensive capabilities from the 1980s. Not only did ground forces increase greatly (to 700,000 and then to 1.1 million), but the military also underwent significant mechanization (infantry, armor, and artillery forces). These mechanized units were reorganized from separate divisions into corps-level formations, which are more conducive for commanding a sustained offensive deep into the enemy’s territory. This offensive modernization and reorganization was complemented by a significant movement of mechanized armored and artillery units southward to the extent that 70 percent of all combat forces are positioned south of Pyongyang, versus 40 percent in 1980. Although energy and food shortages in the 1990s have decreased the overall fighting capability of these forces, the specific capabilities that continue to be augmented do not elicit any sense of a reduced threat. The KPA has added thousands of long-range artillery tubes and substantially added to its special operations forces; the latter can wreak havoc on population centers in the South and the former can sustain in the range of 500,000 rounds of artillery per hour against CFC forces.

The northern side of the demilitarized zone shows no defensive fortifications equivalent to forward edge of battle area zones or concentric defense lines that are clearly observable on the southern side. Although recent North Korean actions in 1999–2000 in response to the ROK’s sunshine or engagement policy indicated some degree of political thaw on the peninsula, one cannot wholly rule out hypotheses on an offense-based DPRK war doctrine. As North Korean defector Hwang Jang-Yop stated, “North Korea still believes that it could conquer South Korea—should the Americans ever leave the peninsula. This withdrawal is one of Pyongyang’s most important goals in all its international negotiations.” In sum, there are logical inconsistencies in the DPRK existential deterrent argument. There is no evidence that explicitly precludes a nuclear denial strategy, especially important given the methodological problems with confirmation through no evidence. The past decade has witnessed a steady and deliberate enhancement of offensive conventional capabilities. These facts render nuclear weaponization as part of an offensive denial strategy as a credible alternative proposition.

Policy Implication: If Denial, then Coercion

If the DPRK practices a denial strategy, then the implications for policy become clear. Engagement will neither reduce tensions on the peninsula nor con-


vince the North to give up its proliferation threat. On the contrary, all of Pyong-
gyang’s diplomatic contacts and smile diplomacy in 2000–2001 reflect changes in tactics to gain the food and economic aid necessary to keep the regime afloat, but the DPRK’s intentions remain fundamentally revisionist. Through strategic deception, Kim Jong Il seeks to lull the West into a false sense of confidence in engagement as the regime secretly continues to improve its WMD capabilities. Any policy other than coercion and/or isolation and robust deterrence will be interpreted as weakness by the North and will buy time for the regime to fulfill its ultimate objective of subverting liberal-democratic South Korea.

**BADGES?**

A third and final set of propositions about DPRK nuclear weaponization has to do with factors not explicitly related to military rationales. This hypothesis derives from the view that small- and medium-scale proliferation cases are the result of internal bureaucratic processes or prestige/status motivations rather than external threats. As Scott Sagan has argued, states acquire nuclear weapons not only to balance against external threats but also for their symbolic power. For many countries in Asia, nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles are today what armies were in the postcolonial era. They serve as marks of modernity and power. Asia is rich with nationalisms growing out of history, colonial legacies, and economic growth. Inherent in this nationalism are aspirations to rise in the international prestige hierarchy and to be treated as a great or major power. Nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles have become an important indicator of this status. In extreme terms, these capabilities almost become like national airlines; countries seek to acquire them because of how they reflect on one’s identity and level of development.

Regarding bureaucratic rationales, in some countries the drive for nuclear weapons-related research over the years became the means by which a young, rising, civilian technocratic sector circumvents and displaces the old, corrupt, and inefficient military bureaucracy. This was especially the case in India, where the Atomic Energy Commission, Defense Research and Development Organization, and the Space Program formed a triumvirate of new influential technocratic bureaus that demand respect in Indian society and develop powerful interests in self-perpetuation.

A degree of bureaucratic politics appears relevant in the DPRK case, but this was not central to initial decisions to proliferate. Where nuclear weapons

---

may be most relevant to bureaucracies is in their reflection of the military’s rise in all sectors of the North Korean state over the past two decades.\textsuperscript{64} Since about 1980, the dominance of the party has given way to military-first politics and a garrison state in which virtually all the key positions of power are occupied by the military. This is evident not only in Kim Jong Il’s rule from his position in the National Defense Commission (and not the Workers’ Party of Korea [KWP]), but also the conspicuous absence of a party congress in over nineteen years.\textsuperscript{65} In this sense, internal politics did not drive proliferation in North Korea, but proliferation may be reinforcing internal changes that are in motion.

The international prestige-hierarchy may have been relevant as a driver of proliferation, but not nearly as important as what the program meant for regime self-validation. As Sam Kim argues, nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles were symptomatic of a system trying to fulfill its kangsong taeguk (strong and prosperous power) vision, but being blocked in the economic vein and trying to compensate for this in the military.\textsuperscript{66} At best, though, these arguments complement but do not supplant the two primary security rationales. If one surveys all the cases of proliferation in the twentieth century (first or second nuclear age), the primary driver of proliferation in the end is security, which takes us back to the deterrence or denial strategies as the primary drivers.\textsuperscript{67}

The final observation regards nuclear and missile proliferation and DPRK bargaining leverage. A byproduct of proliferation has been a coercive bargaining strategy adopted by Pyongyang against its adversaries. Pyongyang’s \textit{modus operandi} is to undertake or threaten acts of belligerence that violate the peace and disrupt the status quo, usually highlighting some grievance the DPRK holds. This individual action is usually severe enough to raise concerns that if combined with other similar and subsequent actions, it might be the precursor to a larger conflict. At the same time, the individual violent act alone does not warrant all-out retaliation by the United States and ROK. Washington and Seoul are thus manipulated into the awkward position of wanting to punish the initial act but also wanting to avoid an unnecessary and costly escalation of conflict that might follow from such an action. The response that obtains is then to renegotiate a new status quo, coupled with a token verbal denouncement or sanction against the initial act. This has been the most frequent and consistently threatening behavior by the DPRK since the end of the cold war. It is a coercive bargaining strategy, backed by these capabilities, that seeks not to win militarily but to scare the other side into a new negotiation outcome better than the status quo.

\textsuperscript{64} This school of thought is separate from and inconsistent with the earlier deterrent school, which argued that the military is divorced from the chain of command on nuclear issues.


\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 1408.

\textsuperscript{67} Goldstein, \textit{Security and Deterrence}. The exceptions to this rule are countries that “inherit” nuclear weapons (for example, Ukraine), but even in this case as well as other cases of denuclearization (South Africa), the primary rationale for giving up the capability is an amelioration of security threats.
It is important to note that this bargaining strategy is not a cause of proliferation but a product of it. In other words, Pyongyang’s nuclear weaponization may have inadvertently given rise to this pattern of behavior, but weaponization was not sought specifically for this purpose.

The DPRK as Evil or Engaging? A Three-Step Framework

The debate on the security and foreign policy of the DPRK has taken place in three concentric circles. At the innermost ring were debates and speculation surrounding the regime’s survivability at the end of the cold war. This literature was in vogue largely because it dealt with the question that preceded all others about the DPRK in the early 1990s: Could the regime survive for very long? At the next level, particularly after the DPRK’s unexpected resilience, were policy-oriented debates about whether to engage or contain North Korea. The third circle of literature focused on negotiating behavior. This body of work emerged out of the West’s first substantive interaction or engagement with North Korea in the early 1990s, culminating initially with the 1994 Agreed Framework. Each of these debates was discrete, dealing with a different aspect of North Korea security and foreign policy; at the same time they were interconnected, for one set of works often derived from the success or failures of the previous body of work.

In this article, I have offered a fourth circle of security debate for understanding North Korea. The first circle of debates on DPRK regime survival in the early 1990s was empirically premature and conceptually ill-conceived, neglectful of an understanding and appreciation of the DPRK system’s resiliency despite acute hardship. The second and third circles provided illuminating lenses through which to view North Korea. However, as phase one of the anti-terrorism war in Afghanistan subsides, questions about implementation of the Agreed Framework surface. Debates about engagement face the United States,

---

68 For the development of this argument, see Cha, “Engagement and Preventive Defense.”


70 See notes 5 and 6 for literature on this topic.

South Korean, and Japanese governments, and none of these previous analyses get at the heart of the issue for policy: Upon what assumptions about the DPRK threat should policy be based?

The common perception of North Korean nuclear weaponization is one of unadulterated threat. However, I have argued that understanding the strategic doctrine in which these capabilities are sought offers a true assessment of the nature of the threat. Only then can we define the appropriate policy. Trying to locate inductively the intentions behind one of the blackest of boxes in the world today is nearly impossible, given the paucity of evidence. As an imperfect substitute, this article deduces a three-step model to explain the context and intentions behind DPRK nuclear weaponization. This model provides a framework by which to interpret any new evidence that becomes available.

If evidence emerges about the DPRK that confirms the existential deterrent (shields) hypothesis, then the threat is not nearly as bad as we believe. Security dilemmas can be averted through engagement. Moreover, the potential for denuclearization is real, provided that the North’s survival can be guaranteed. If evidence does not support this view, then the next step is to discern whether the evidence validates a prestige-based or badges argument for DPRK weaponization. If so, then the threat is resolvable if status incentives on the part of Pyongyang can be satisfied. This could be accomplished through engagement, particularly in the economic arena such that the DPRK could, as Sam Kim argues, validate its state identity through economic rather than military avenues.72 The third and most worrying outcome is if evidence surfaces confirming the denial strategy (swords hypothesis). In this case, not only is the threat real (and the regime “evil” in Bush’s axis of evil verbiage), but nuclear rollback is highly unlikely, because DPRK intentions are zero-sum and aggressive. Engagement, though well-intentioned, will not work.73 At best, the policy will build consensus among the United States and its allies that once Pyongyang reveals its true intentions, more coercive measures might be required.*

---

72 Kim, “North Korea in 1999,” 1408.
73 For elaboration on this viewpoint, see Victor D. Cha, “Korea’s Place in the Axis,” *Foreign Affairs* 81 (May-June 2002).

* The author thanks Samuel Kim, Jeong-Ho Roh, Scott Snyder, David Steinberg, Henry Sokolski, and the late Joe Lepgold for comments on previous drafts.