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Asia-Pacific Responses to U.S. Security Policies

The Hermit Mouse Roars: North Korea's Response to U.S. Security Policies

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Executive Summary

- Misperceptions matter. Even two rational actors may appear as unpredictable madmen if they refuse to communicate with each other and compromise.
- The DPRK believes that the U.S. ultimate goal is to remain the world's "only superpower." To that end, the United States strives to put the entire Korean Peninsula, a strategic vantage in Northeast Asia, under its total control, in order to contain China, Russia, and Japan and to achieve its ambition of turning the international system into a U.S.-led unipolar world thereby establishing an unchallenged U.S. domination all over the world.
- The North Korea leaders fear war with the United States and are constantly preoccupied with what they perceive as the threat of a U.S. preemptive nuclear attack.
- Pyongyang has lost much interest in genuine negotiations with the Bush administration. They escalate nuclear and missile tensions to the brink to drive their position home, namely "fight us now or leave us alone."
- Pyongyang and Washington talk past each other, find themselves in an exacerbating security dilemma, and continue to undertake "self-defensive" measures resulting in further escalation of nuclear tensions. A mutually aggressive posture of preemptive preemption may lead to accidental outbreak of hostilities.

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THE NORTH KOREAN PUZZLE

Misperceptions matter. The United States underestimates North Korea's political will and technological ability in its relentless drive to become a full-fledged nuclear power. In turn, Pyongyang seems to bank on Washington's unwillingness to use force to stop nuclear weapon development program in the North. Kim Jong Il believes that the United States will begin to treat his government with respect and on an equal footing only when he undeniably demonstrates to the world that he is not bluffing and can actually deliver on his threats to resume and step up nuclear and missile development activities. In contrast, the Bush White House is adamant that no peace negotiations shall take place until and unless North Korea verifiably dismantles its nuclear weapons program and disarms its missile arsenal first. Both sides talk past each other, find themselves in an exacerbating security dilemma, and continue to undertake "self-defensive" measures resulting in further escalation of nuclear tensions.

This essay is designed to present the outlines of the worldview and key beliefs espoused by the North Korean leaders and to analyze their perceptions of the U.S. goals on the Korean peninsula and in East Asia. The goal is to figure out what motivates their responses to U.S. policy toward Korea. Why does North Korea continuously challenge the United States in the escalating nuclear standoff? Are its leaders blatantly misinformed, or utterly ignorant, or intellectually incapable of understanding the existing balances of power on and around the Korean peninsula and the overwhelming military superiority of the U.S.-ROK alliance, and, therefore, do they hopelessly miscalculate their chances of winning in any potential outbreak of hostilities? Why do they fail to grasp all the disastrous consequences that may befall them in the event of a direct military confrontation with the West?

KEY NORTH KOREAN BELIEFS ABOUT U.S. SECURITY POLICY

The post-war history of the North Korean state irrefutably proves that it has been a rational actor in the international system. North Korean leaders are not unpredictable madmen with suicidal urges. If ever they display traces of perceived irrationality, the latter are either meant to send well-calibrated signals to the international community and can be viewed either as part and parcel of their bargaining strategy, for instance, brinkmanship, or can be interpreted as unintended consequences of domestic bureaucratic externalities. Sometimes, North Korean leaders misperceive the world around them and consequently miscalculate the international response to their actions. Hence, the latter backfire and put them in a worse situation than where they were before. But, North Korea reveals a propensity to learn from its interaction with the international community and adjust its long-term policies and bargaining strategy accordingly.

What comes out clearly from careful reading of the North Korean official propaganda is that the *juch'e* ideology still plays a dominant role in defining how the North Korean leaders view the United States and its policy on the Korean peninsula. Although the impact of Marxist-Leninist ideas had been less pronounced throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the anti-imperialist tendencies have regained their prominence in the official *juch'e* thinking on foreign policy issues since the complete breakdown of the DPRK-U.S. relations in October 2002. At the same time, these traditional ideological views are increasingly buttressed by the realpolitik considerations that reflect significant changes in

the North Korean perceptions of their national interests, deteriorating external threat environment, and shifting balances of power in the region and beyond. Here are some of the most representative examples of the North Korean thinking about what the Bush administration intends to do in Korea and why.

First of all, revealing the mixed influence of classic Marxist-Leninist teachings on imperialism and current global balance-of-power assessments, the North Korean leaders believe that in the post-Cold War world, the U.S. ultimate goal is to remain the world's "only superpower" and to establish a new international order that will ensure and support the U.S. global hegemony. To that end, the United States pursues a "policy of strength for hegemony" and tries to "put its strategic rivals in Northeast Asia under its political and military domination."

They believe that although the collapse of the former Soviet Union remarkably weakened Russia's military muscle, while Japan continues to be a "mere puppet of the U.S. colonial master," China still presents a difficult challenge before the United States in "its ambition for hegemony in the region." They assert that only if the United States succeeds in "putting the entire Korean Peninsula, a strategic vantage in Northeast Asia, under its total control through a war of aggression in Korea," then Washington will be able to contain China and other big powers around the Korean peninsula, as well as "to achieve its purpose of turning the international system into a U.S.-led unipolar world and to establish an unchallenged domination all over the world."

In other words, in a traditional Korean manner, the self-centered North Korean state seems to misperceive itself as the center of world politics and to view its external *raison d'être* in apocalyptic terms as the vantage point and savior of the non-American world and collapsing multipolar international system. It is interesting to note that in the similar apocalyptic fashion, following the dissolution of the former Soviet communist bloc, in the early 1990s, the North Korean official propaganda began to depict the Korean revolution as the ultimate embodiment of the world communist civilization, the true repository of Marxist-Leninist values and last indestructible bastion of the world communist movement, and took upon itself the messianic role of the last and most faithful defender of the world communist cause. As long as such a messianic approach continues to play a dominant role in shaping the North Korean official thinking, such self-centered and apocalyptic terms of reference are likely to continue to distort their worldview and perceptions about their "pivotal" place and exaggerated role in the international system, as well as their overblown expectations from the world community.

Second, true to their Marxist-Leninist roots, the North Korean leaders believe in economic determinism as the driving force behind the "U.S. quest for world hegemony." They assert that the U.S. national security strategies are primarily designed to meet the interests of the U.S. military-industrial complex and to satisfy the U.S. thirst for oil as one of the main pillars of the U.S. economic development. In addition, as if they had read a chapter from an old school Keynesian textbook, they consider war spending to be a good economic policy tool designed to stimulate domestic economic growth in times of recession. They say that since the Truman administration, the U.S. involvement in the East-West Cold War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and other wars has been driven by the desire of the U.S. ruling class "to put its war industry in full-capacity operation in a bid to save the U.S. economy from depression and to drive its strategic rivals to an arms race till their strength is neutralized." Even at present, the Bush administration, "much upset by a serious economic crisis as evidenced by recession, a slowdown in exports and increase in unemployment, is keen to help the munitions monopolies rake up huge profits

through ridiculous military spending and the establishment of missile defense in a bid to consolidate its political foundation, reenergize the economy, and, at the same time, draw its strategic rivals into the arms race.” That is why, they assert, “the U.S. needs new flashpoints for war in oil-rich Iraq and Korea, a strategic vantage in Northeast Asia.” It is curious but the logical conclusion of the above line of thinking should be an underlying general belief that economic crisis tends to lead to external aggression. It is unclear how the North Korean propaganda officials would respond if the same supposition were applied to the current predicament of their country.

Third, the North Korean leaders are well aware that the Bush administration views their government as “a member of the axis of evil,” “a rogue state,” a “lawless regime,” an “oppressive regime,” a “repressive regime,” a “prison for its own people,” and a “terrorist regime.” They are aware of President Bush’s intense personal negative feelings about the North Korean supreme leader. In a propaganda counter-offensive, they allege: “the most lawless regime in the world is none other than Bush’s regime, which is pursuing unilateralism, violating international laws and commitments in disarmament, environment, human rights and other sectors. It is the United States that is the war maniac and empire of evil, as well as the rogiest state of all, which gives great fear of nukes to humankind.”

They are convinced that “the U.S. ideologues always believed that the DPRK would collapse sooner or later” and that “since the emergence of the Bush administration, they have been more frenzied in the moves to isolate and stifle the DPRK.” They firmly believe that “the Bush White House seeks to destroy the system in the DPRK one way or another.” They reiterate: “It is the Korea policy of the U.S. imperialist war hawks to stifle the DPRK under the pretext of its nuclear issue and topple its dignified socialist system by force, if containment fails to do so.” But, they put the brave face on and assert that neither “tailored containment” nor “military blockade” nor “economic sanctions” against the DPRK under the pretext of the “nuclear issue” will be able to frighten and stifle the North Korean regime or lead to its collapse.

Fourth, despite their brave rhetoric, the North Korean leaders fear any war with the United States and they are deeply fearful about the threat of a U.S. preemptive nuclear attack. Where do these fears come from? They are rooted in the North Korean original bloody encounter with the U.S. military during the Korean War half a century ago. These fears are also based on the Korean People’s Army (KPA)’s analysis of the Cold War-era U.S.-ROK plans of military operations against the North, including the “Operation Plan 5027-98,” which, they assert, are designed to deliver nuclear strikes against the DPRK. The KPA is certain that “these plans have been steadily supplemented and specified through the U.S. nuclear war exercises targeted against the DPRK such as “Team Spirit,” “Foal Eagle,” “Ulji Focus Lens,” and “RSOI” exercises.”

Moreover, these deeply seated old fears of a U.S. military attack are bolstered by the North Korean reading of the recently announced National Security Strategy of the United States and the fact that the Bush administration designated North Korea as a “rogue state and part of the axis of evil.” They believe that

“The “Bush doctrine” calls for U.S. preemptive nuclear strikes at the “rogue states,” including the DPRK...The Bush administration’s strategy for “preemptive strike,” i.e., a strategy for “preemptive strike-defensive intervention,” calls for containing those countries the U.S. defined as the “enemy” by mounting preemptive nuclear attacks on them anytime without any prior warning.

In addition, they are well aware that since September 11, 2001, the United States has been waging a global war against terrorism. They believe that “since the Bush administration labeled the DPRK as a “terrorist state” and the U.S. secretary of defense listed the DPRK as “a terrorist regime,” the United States has internally designated the DPRK as the next target of its “anti-terrorism war.” The renewed U.S. accusation against the DPRK as being a state sponsor of international terrorism confirms their fear that Washington may use it as a pretext to mount a preemptive military attack on the DPRK.

Furthermore, these fears of war may reflect the North Korean expectations about the possible U.S. reaction to their recent decisions to unfreeze the Yongbyun nuclear facilities and to re-start their nuclear weapons development program, as well as to lift their ballistic missile launch moratorium and to accelerate their missile development program. Also, their paranoia may be exacerbated by the U.S. repeated assertion that in the nuclear standoff Washington will keep “all options open.” Instead of restraining their behavior, such an open-ended U.S. posture strengthens the KPA arguments that the U.S. military threat must be taken seriously and deterred and frustrated at all costs.

There are some people within the North Korean foreign ministry who believe that the war fears do not have to be so pronounced. They argue that “there are no such rich oil fields in North Korea as in Iraq, and, therefore, the U.S. has no reason to fight North Korea for oil.” Also, they bravely state: “Washington can never overlook the potential retaliatory capability of North Korea, which has played its role as a major deterrence to a second Korean War.” Besides, they assume that “neither Seoul nor Tokyo wants war on the Korean Peninsula because they know that they will be the direct victims of such a war, not the U.S.” In particular, they stake their hopes on the fact that “unfavorable (for the U.S.) developments in South Korea, following the election of President Roh Moo-hyun and rising anti-American sentiment, have aroused serious concerns in Washington over its relations with Seoul, baffling George W. Bush’s unilateralist hard-line policy on North Korea.” In other words, if the North Korean regime continues to strengthen its deterrent capabilities, including its nuclear shield and missile sword, and succeeds in driving a deep wedge between Seoul and Washington, then Pyongyang will be able to contain the United States and deter a possible U.S. preemptive strike, let alone an all-out U.S. military invasion.

This notwithstanding, the prevailing wisdom in Pyongyang is that after the Iraqi conflict is over, the U.S. military buildup in Northeast Asia and intensifying war games in the South may become much more destabilizing and threatening. What worries the North Korean military the most is the fact that “nobody can predict when the military exercises will go over to real action,” especially, in light of the perceived intrusions of the U.S. strategic reconnaissance planes into what they believe is the North Korean airspace, which the KPA considers as “premeditated moves to find an opportunity to mount a preemptive attack on the DPRK.” The North Korean top military brass knows very well why they worry about the war games so much: they started the first Korean War on June 25, 1950, by sending spies for strategic reconnaissance and sabotage to the South a few days in advance and rolling their exercising infantry and armored divisions over the 38th parallel overnight in continuation of their pre-war exercises. The KPA-sponsored *Minju Chosun* openly warns the United States: “It is a miscalculation for the U.S. imperialists to try to invade the North with the “Foal Eagle” or any other military exercise as a momentum.”

Fifth, the North Koreans struggle to understand the meaning of the occasional U.S. signals about Washington’s seeming interest in “dialogue” and “diplomatic settlement.” After Assistant Secretary of State Kelly’s visit to Pyongyang in October 2002, they tend to think that these signals constitute “no more than deceptive tricks to relax our spirit and

ensure the surprise of a forestalling (preventive) attack.” In other words, they think, “the U.S. utterances are a camouflaged peace tactic to cover up its attempt to ignite a war of aggression.” They believe that “there is no change in the U.S. conditional stand that it will have dialogue with Pyongyang only after it scraps its “nuclear weapons program,” and, therefore, “the “dialogue” much touted by the U.S. is no more than a farce to lead the world public in its favor.” The DPRK MOFA states that the U.S. talk about the possibility of “peaceful settlement” of the nuclear issue is nothing but “a broad hoax to deceive the world public opinion.”

The North Koreans are aware that the United States perceives their actions as “brinksmanship tactics,” “blackmail,” “measures seeking concessions and economic benefits,” and “begging for aid.” They reject these accusations by saying that these charges have nothing to do with reality and represent sheer U.S. propaganda. In the past, they used to say: “If the United States acts in reason, the nuclear issue of the Korean Peninsula may be settled smoothly.” In particular, “the DPRK has willingness to clear the U.S. of its security concern if the latter recognizes the DPRK’s sovereignty, assures the DPRK of non-aggression including non-use of nukes by concluding a legally binding non-aggression treaty, and does not stand in the way of the DPRK’s economic development.” But, in the past couple of months, they seem to have lost much interest in genuine negotiations with the United States. Now their position is basically “leave us alone.” These days they often reiterate: “there is no need for the DPRK to threaten or blackmail anyone to “get its system guaranteed” or receive any “economic reward.” Increasingly, they assert that “now that the United States is seeking to attack us by force of arms, we have no choice but to take strong counteraction against it...There is no place for us to step back and we have nothing to make a concession to the United States.”

Moreover, the North Korean leaders bluntly warn: “If the United States continues military pressure as it is now, the present situation will lead to catastrophic explosion.” They stress “the DPRK neither wants a war nor avoids it.” Pyongyang informs Washington “we will increase our self-defensive power in every way to cope with the prevailing situation no matter what others may say.” They further warn: “the army and the people of the DPRK will counter confrontation with confrontation and an all-out war with an all-out war.” They defiantly put the world on notice that “the DPRK will be compelled to take a self-defensive measure when it thinks that the U.S. preemptive attack is imminent.”

PYONGYANG’S REVIVED COLD WAR MENTALITY

The North Korean government perceives the U.S. intentions on the Korean peninsula as extremely hostile. They consider the United States to be the “biggest rogue state,” “an arrogant superpower” that controls international organizations and manipulates international regimes and runs amok in total disregard of international law. They believe that the U.S. ultimate goal is not simply nuclear disarmament of North Korea, but arbitrary “regime change” in Pyongyang. They know that Washington is going after the designated “axis of evil,” with North Korea being Number Two on the hit list. In their judgment, the United States has a stronger and technologically superior military, controls the ROK and Japanese armed forces, maintains an offensive posture on the Korean Peninsula, and poses a clear and present threat of preemptive attack with both conventional and

nuclear weapons. Pyongyang considers Washington to be an untrustworthy and deceitful negotiating counterpart and views President Bush with disdain and no personal credibility.

It is clear that most of the seeds of the “new thinking” in the North Korean foreign policy emphasizing the need for the full normalization of relations and broad constructive engagement with the United States and the West, that began to crop up in the late 1990s–early 2000s, have been mercilessly eradicated since the Kelly visit when the U.S.-DPRK relations took a dramatic turn for the worse in October 2002. The DPRK’s five-year old “peace offensive” was abruptly halted. Pyongyang reverted to its earlier Cold War-style confrontational course vis-à-vis the United States and revived its anti-U.S. propaganda campaign and anti-imperialist Red Flag ideology. It goes without saying that the fear of abandonment prevailing in the period of increasing openness and international engagement faded away, whereas the fear of entrapment by hostile powers came to the forefront to dominate the North Korean strategic thinking.

The fundamental objectives of the North Korean regime appear to remain intact, namely regime survival, international legitimacy, and, if possible, procurement of foreign assistance. It is no longer the peninsular domination and communization of the South. But, because of the deteriorating threat environment, Kim Jong Il seems to have chosen to build a nuclear deterrent to guarantee his regime survival. Kim Jong Il’s nuclear breakout strategy is not a bluff. It is not a bargaining ploy. Nor is it negotiable for him at this stage. Kim Jong Il is not irrational. He will not trade food for nuclear weapons. Like all dictators, he could care less about his starving subjects, even millions of them, when it comes to regime survival. He wants the Bomb and North Korea will do its utmost to become a nuclear state, whether it will officially declare it outright or not.

Moreover, the risk-taking capacity of the North Korean leaders will continue to rise, and they will display greater readiness to resort to force in order to advance their strategic goals. The North Korean deterrent warning that the Korean People’s Army may resort to a “preemptive self-defensive measure,” if the North Korean leaders decide that the threat of the U.S. preemptive attack against their country becomes imminent, is to be taken seriously. Such an aggressive posture of preemptive preemption may lead to unwarranted and uncontrollable escalation of tensions and accidental outbreak of hostilities.