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## OBSERVATIONS

# A Korean Solution?

*Arthur Waldron*

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NO ONE can doubt that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea ("North Korea") has been, for the half-century of its existence, one of the handful of the most horrible regimes in all of human history. Its people have been brainwashed, worked to death on pointless and grandiose projects, intentionally starved, tortured, and murdered, in ways every bit as wicked as were ever contemplated by Hitler or Stalin or Mao. Meanwhile, its rulers, first Kim Il Sung and now his son Kim Jong Il, have enjoyed worship, absolute authority, and lives of indescribable luxury. Today this regime is kept afloat almost entirely by massive foreign aid. To judge by the condition of its people (and its rulers), North Korea is in nearly every respect a failed state.

It would be gratifying if the powerful focus on North Korea over the past decade, not least by the United States, were driven by revulsion at the terrible evil being perpetrated

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ed by this murderous tyranny. But that is untrue. In fact, North Korea now stands in the international spotlight not because of its manifold crimes and failures but because of three real and remarkable technical successes.

The first is the development by Pyongyang of ballistic-missile technology, to the point where its latest weapons, while crude by comparison with China's, for example, are nonetheless capable of hitting much of Asia and probably soon the western United States, and are in demand on international markets. The second is the building by North Korea of workable nuclear weapons that use plutonium, weapons that now number perhaps between a half-dozen and a dozen or more. The third has been the development by Kim Jong Il's regime of a second bomb-making system using highly-enriched uranium—and doing so undetected, at a time when North Korea was thought to have definitively forsworn all nuclear programs and to be under the effective international surveillance of the Clinton administration's "Agreed Framework" of 1994.

The gradual emergence of North Korea as a nuclear power has elicited much posturing and laying down of markers, above all by the United States. In November 1993, President Clinton stated that "North Korea cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear bomb." Ten years later, by which time North Korea probably already possessed a small nuclear arsenal, President George W. Bush stated: "We will not tolerate nuclear weapons in North Korea. . . . We will not give in to blackmail. . . . We will not settle for anything less than the complete, verifiable, and irreversible elimination of North Korea's nuclear-weapons program." Two years later, in May of this year, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice added an implicit threat of military action, declaring that "if the North does not [give up its nuclear program], then of course we'll have to look at other options."

In spite of the hard words, North Korea is, and will almost certainly remain, a nuclear power. More important even than the implications of this fact for Asia is the probability of North Korea's becoming a

model for many other would-be nuclear states, showing them how to achieve their aims even in the face of almost universal global condemnation.

JASPER BECKER, an Englishman, is one of East Asia's longest-serving and best-respected foreign correspondents, first with the BBC and then as Beijing bureau chief of the once-great Hong Kong daily, the *South China Morning Post*. His firing from that newspaper in 2003, clearly on political grounds, was an accurate foretaste of what was to become of the freedoms Beijing had promised to the former British colony.

It was also a tribute to his fearlessness and skill as a writer. In his first book, *Mongolia: The Lost Country* (1992), Becker had revealed the horrors and human cost (amounting to perhaps 10 percent of the population) exacted by the Soviet Communists in the former Mongolian People's Republic. In his second and probably best known book, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine* (1996), he chronicled the catastrophic man-made famine that cost China perhaps 30 million dead after the Great Leap Forward of the 1950's.

*Rogue Regime: Kim Jong Il and the Looming Threat of North Korea*, Becker's authoritative new book,\* is what one would expect from such a writer: a thoroughly documented, all-around account. In its pages we learn about Becker's clandestine meetings in northeast China with wretched refugees fleeing the awful hunger and cruelty of their homeland, whose inhabitants are so malnourished as to weigh, on average, half as much as their South Korean relatives and to be eight inches shorter; about the acts of terror, like the 1983 bombing in Burma that killed seventeen senior South Korean officials, narrowly missing the president, that are part and parcel of the regime's repertoire; and about the utter collapse of the economy, now largely de-

pendent upon China and international relief organizations as well as on criminal activities.

If any state can be called totalitarian, it is North Korea. Becker gives a chilling account of how Kim Il Sung created and Kim Jong Il has maintained a regime of terror, indoctrination, and leader-worship that is without parallel since the deaths of Stalin and Mao and is today the envy of other East Asian despots. Reportedly, China's president Hu Jintao told a party meeting that although China was an economic success, North Korea was *the* model for politics and ideology.

When he comes to North Korea's nuclear-weapons program, Becker departs somewhat from his usual approach. In a preface to this book, he allows himself to imagine a U.S. and South Korean military strike aimed at destroying Pyongyang's weapons, only to leave us hanging in suspense as, in retaliation, North Korea successfully fires a long-range Taepo Dong 2 missile almost certainly carrying a nuclear warhead. Returning to the subject in the book's conclusion, he speculates about how the international community ought to deal with North Korea's development of nuclear weapons.

In between, in a chapter titled "Nuclear Warlord," Becker provides as clear and as comprehensive an account as one could desire of just how Pyongyang succeeded in going nuclear.

JAPAN HAD begun a nuclear program in Korea when it still controlled the whole territory in 1945. After the partition of the peninsula, the North Korean regime opened its first nuclear research center, with Soviet aid, perhaps as early as 1952; about four years later, hundreds of its scientists headed for study at the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research in Dubna, near Moscow. In 1959, Moscow supplied a two-megawatt research reactor, and work began at Yongbyon, still the best-

known North Korean nuclear site.

Communist China detonated its first nuclear weapon in 1964. Kim Il Sung, his approaches to Beijing having been rebuffed, again turned to Moscow, which supplied a second reactor along with plutonium-reprocessing technology. In 1984, Kim obtained Soviet agreement to deliver four 440-megawatt light-water reactors, and took personal control of an accelerated, all-out effort to develop nuclear weapons. In 1989, satellite photographs showed North Korea secretly unloading sufficient plutonium-bearing fuel rods at Yongbyon for one or two bombs. Thereafter, evidence has only mounted, and so has international concern.

Becker tells us about Kenki Aoyama, born in 1961 to Japanese parents and involved in North Korea's weapons program before escaping:

[I]n 1997, when [Aoyama] was working as an industrial spy in Beijing, he met an old friend, a North Korean nuclear scientist. The man looked terrible, thin and wan. His eyebrows had disappeared from accidental radiation and Aoyama asked him: "Are you still working on it?"—"No," came the reply. "It's done. We succeeded."

We have no reason to doubt the veracity of these words.

NOW THE problem for the rest of the world is what, if anything, should be done about the situation. In my view, we must start by facing reality—namely, the unwelcome fact that North Korea is now, and will remain, a nuclear power. The complex negotiations that the Clinton administration concluded in 1994 with the help of former President Jimmy Carter traded U.S. aid and construction of power reactors for the abandonment of Pyongyang's nuclear program. This turned out to be no more than a long breather, during which North Korea proba-

\* Oxford, 300 pp., \$28.00.

bly completed its plutonium-based work and developed its highly enriched uranium pathway.

Some still speak as if a diplomatic option existed by which North Korea could gain international recognition, be given aid and security assurances, and in return, with some pressure from Beijing, agree to give up its program. But the lesson of the 1994 Agreed Framework is that Pyongyang will take whatever we offer but will not give up its weapons. And the lesson of President Bush's exemplary multilateralism in the six-party talks that have been conducted since 2003 is that no one, not even China, can unmake Korean nuclear military power. The administration hoped that a friendly China might discipline a recalcitrant Pyongyang, but China is not friendly and Pyongyang cannot easily be disciplined. It is therefore time to give up the China-bells-the-cat fantasy.

Nor does Becker, in his afterword, present any ideas that promise greater success. He criticizes those who favor "engaging" Kim Jong Il diplomatically and economically, for they help keep in power an unspeakable tyranny. He has little use for the "line of complacent thinking" that sees as inevitable the replacement of the North's totalitarian regime with a working democracy. In his tough concluding paragraphs, he talks instead about "the need for new international rules" for defining North Korea as a "rogue state" and cutting it off from Chinese support while also making Kim Jong Il "personally accountable at an international tribunal or the International Court of Justice." At the very end he speaks of putting a limit on "the length of time a state can breach or abuse the Non-Proliferation Treaty without provoking war or military reprisals." But he leaves the last four words unelaborated.

Does the evident impossibility of peaceful elimination of the North Korean nuclear program mean re-

course to the "other options" to which Secretary Rice referred? These would presumably be military—but I believe they, too, are delusory.

Consider the city of New York. Given adequate warning time, would it be possible to conceal there nuclear bombs, missiles and production facilities, hiding them so effectively that even an occupying army would have difficulty finding them? The answer is surely yes. North Korea is perfectly capable of the same sort of concealment. It has an area of 47,399 square miles, much of it mountainous. Pyongyang has had a good dozen years' advance warning, thanks to which its nuclear sites have been dispersed and rendered invisible. We do not know where its networks of factories, laboratories, and mines are, but—as in the old Soviet Union—they are buried deep underground, far beyond the reach of either foreign intelligence or any sort of attack.

IF THERE is no diplomatic solution, and no military solution, what then? No one can dispute what Becker demonstrates: that North Korea has committed crimes against its own people, and against humanity, of unspeakable wickedness and cruelty. If this were a just world, all the nations would long since have risen up as one and put an end to these horrors. But this is not a just world, and the UN and the International Court of Justice are not going to make it one. Nor is the United States.

What flows from this is a strategic conclusion: the overriding interest of the United States is that the new nuclear Korea, which is here to stay, should be closer to us and to our allies than to our adversaries. On the face of it, this may sound as fanciful a prospect as actually disarming the North Koreans. But new realities call for new thinking, and recent history has given us ample cause to question the permanence of seemingly immovable arrangements.

In my judgment, our best hope for North Korea is South Korea. Although the two have lived under separate regimes for six decades, before then they were one—the stable and undivided state of Choson, also known as the Yi dynasty—for more than 500 years, until the Japanese annexed the country in 1910. Korean unity has a real historical and cultural basis, every bit as real as the unity of the two Germanies, and there is reason to believe that opinion on both sides of the 38th parallel wishes it to come to pass sooner rather than later.

Neighboring countries fear this development, with reason. A united Korea would be as big as the former West Germany, would occupy a crucial strategic position—and would itself almost certainly be a nuclear power. (South Korea began to develop nuclear weapons decades ago, only to be stopped by the United States.) But if, for argument's sake, such unification were to preserve South Korea's democracy and extend it northward, the resulting state need not be any more frightening than, say, China already is. And if the United States and the democratic countries of the region were to support this unification, working always through and with South Korea, then the chances of things going well would be greatly improved.

It might be immediately objected that a nuclear Korea would inevitably mean a nuclear Japan. But that is a likely outcome in any case, given that North Korea already has nuclear weapons and will not give them up, and that the U.S. and Japan have no answer to the threat these weapons pose. Besides, is a nuclear Japan any more dangerous than a nuclear France or England? Not to mention a nuclear Pakistan or China?

The more difficult issue would be to keep a new Korea closer to Japan and to us than to China. In particular, Japan and Korea share a bitter and bloody past, flowing not least from Japan's cruel colonial oc-

cupation of the peninsula. But China's inveterate ham-handedness may help convince the highly nationalistic Koreans to keep their distance from Beijing. China, for instance, has recently completed "archaeological research" proving that northern Korea's ancient Goguryo civilization was in fact "Chinese"—a classic example of preparing spurious historical justification for invasion or annexation.

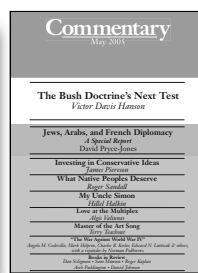
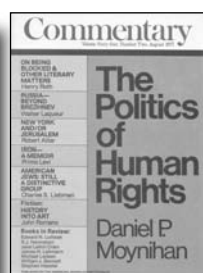
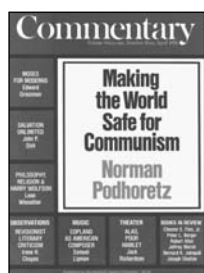
I DO not mean to suggest that the pathways to realizing this script are

obvious, or that the script itself, whose premise is that nuclear proliferation has happened and will continue, remains other than very worrying. As Becker's fine book brings home, North Korea is the model, and has shown us the stages that we may soon be going through in the case of other countries: fear as a nuclear program is discovered; greater fear as it is found to be more advanced than anticipated; tough words from world leaders, combined with empty threats; playing for time and trips down diplomatic

blind alleys; recognition of the lack of diplomatic or military options; successful nuclearization nevertheless—and then the maddening dilemma of what to do with the world's next nuclear power.

Now that Pyongyang has released the movie, we may expect many remakes, or attempted remakes. Unless we somehow close down the studios beforehand—and North Korea suggests how nearly impossible that is to do—the fundamental plot will remain the same, even as the casts speak different languages.

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