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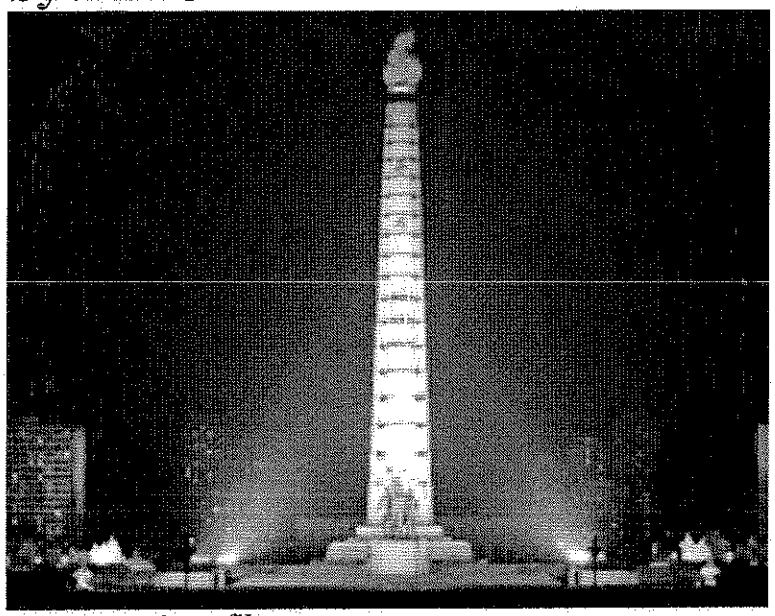
# Making Sense of the 'Hermit Kingdom': North Korea in the Nuclear Age

**by MITCHELL LERNER**



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Juche Tower in Pyongyang, North Korea. Built as a monument to both Kim Il-sung and the "self-reliance" ideology of "juche," Juche Tower stands as an example to North Koreans of their diplomatic and economic potential. At the same time, Juche results in diplomatic paradoxes as the North Korean state tries

to balance power at home with prestige abroad.

**Editor's Note**:

The Bush administration's controversial October 2008 decision to take North Korea off the list of state sponsors of terrorism, in an effort to keep Pyongyang's nuclear program halted, opens a new chapter in the history of North Korea's international relations. Nuclear proliferation is worrisome anywhere in the world, but particularly coming from secretive, unpredictable, and, for many analysts around the world, incomprehensible North Korea. Water Mondale once declared 'anyone who claims to be an expert on North Korea is either a liar or a fool.' This month, Mitchell Lerner, a professor of history at Ohio State, braves being called one or the other. He offers insight into how policy is formed in North Korea and what drives its seemingly fickle relations with the rest of the world.

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While Americans have been focused on the economic crisis and the Presidential elections, events in North Korea have not received the attention they otherwise might. This fall, much to the consternation of American officials, North Korea threatened to restart its nuclear facility at Yongbyon, demanding that the U.S. remove it from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. North Korea had agreed to shut down Yongbyon in 2007, following its October 2006 nuclear detonation and the ensuing six-party talks (involving North and South Korea, China, Russia, Japan, and the U.S.).

Amidst intense debate in Washington, and despite significant opposition, the Bush administration quickly complied with the terror-list demand (in return for certain limited assurances about disarmament,

information, and inspections), fearing that the delicate nuclear balance reached in 2007 was about to be overturned. Just weeks after celebrating its 60th anniversary as a country, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was released from George Bush's "axis of evil."

Still, few in the U.S. were optimistic that the dispute was now resolved. "I am profoundly disappointed," complained Florida Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. "By rewarding North Korea before the regime has carried out its commitments, we are encouraging this regime to continue its illicit nuclear program."

North Korea has arguably been the greatest thorn in the side of American foreign policy since the end of the Second World War. Yet, while so many in and out of American government express concern and at times outrage over DPRK policy, few claim to understand the underlying motives and objectives that have guided the nation's seemingly incoherent and unpredictable belligerency. "Anyone who claims to be an expert on North Korea," former vice-president Walter Mondale once famously declared, "is either a liar or a fool."

Particularly vexing has been the North's propensity for creating trouble just when it seems to be at its weakest, sometimes even taking bellicose action against the West while at the very same moment its leaders seek Western assistance, spurring anger and frustration from the U.S. and its allies. North Korea, lamented one exasperated American congressman recently "makes it very difficult to have a normal relationship with them."

Events from the past few decades offer a series of instructive examples. Torrential rains in 1995 and 1996, followed by a series of droughts, devastated the nation's

food production. Further complicating the situation was the fact that China was also reducing its food aid significantly.

Conditions were simply horrific. Children lived on 35% of the UN recommended caloric intake and families tried to survive on diets of weeds, roots, and bark. "Today," began one official radio broadcast in 1996, "I will introduce you to tasty and healthy ways to eat wild grass." The United States, South Korea, and Japan, among others, helped to fill the void, providing food aid worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

Suddenly, in the midst of this disaster, a North Korean submarine on an espionage mission ran aground near South Korean territory. DPRK commandos abandoned the vessel and attempted to infiltrate the South, sparking firefights that left 24 North Koreans and 14 South Koreans dead. A very unrepentant North Korean government condemned the South's behavior as "barbarousness and beastliness," and warned that they might "be forced to take strong countermeasures." South Korea responded by cutting off most aid to the destitute country.

Soon thereafter, U.S. reconnaissance satellites discovered a newly built North Korean launch platform for its medium-range Nodong-1 missile, which placed almost all of Japan in range. Rumors of an impending missile test followed, as did widespread condemnation. In August 1998, while still accepting massive amounts of Western-bloc aid, North Korea launched a multi-stage Taepo-dong I missile across Japan and into the Pacific. Quickly Japan and the U.S. condemned the test and cut off most forms of assistance.

Americans were stunned by the North's ingratitude and

irrationality. "We don't know much about North Korea and who this Kim Jong-il is," lamented Congressman Jay Kim (R-CA). "I understand he is not a rational individual."

Current events on the Korean Peninsula have followed a similar pattern. So far this year, the North has received four large shipments of food aid from the United States, including 24,000 tons of corn distributed just a few weeks ago. The U.S. also provided $1.2 million in medical assistance earlier in the summer, and other nations delivered critical aid as well, including 600 tons of steel provided by South Korea.

Considering the dire economic situation inside the North, few doubted the necessity of such support. Problems were, as they so often are in North Korea, virtually ubiquitous: food shortages; flooding; significant price increases for rice; cuts in government food rations; and massive insect infestations marked daily life. Once again, thousands suffered, starved, and perished in a food crisis the World Food Program warned was the worst in a decade.

And yet, once again, the North, just when it seemed most dependent on outside assistance, suddenly reverted to its more aggressive and provocative behavior. In April, the government launched a series of attacks against foreign media, ordering its security forces to confiscate all videocassettes, mobile phones, and written materials that foreign press brought into the country. In September the government expelled international inspectors from Yongbyon and removed the seals and video cameras that had been installed by the International Atomic Energy Agency to monitor the facility.

Once again, widespread condemnation followed, much of

which focused on the obvious irrationality of a country that always seemed to choose moments of great internal weakness and foreign dependency to spark international crises. To re-write Theodore Roosevelt's famous adage, the DPRK seems to speak most loudly when it has to borrow a stick.

***The Ideology of Juche***

These crises serve as revealing snapshots of the long history of U.S.-DPRK relations. By Western standards, the contradiction was obvious: how could the North expect to receive outside aid while at the same time stirring up trouble for those providing it? How could any government implicitly threaten a long-standing rival by launching a missile test in their direction and still expect that rival to offer assistance?

And yet, a window has recently opened into Pyongyang, one that suggests that this apparent contradiction actually holds the key to understanding North Korean foreign policy. Critical to this interpretation was the collapse of the Soviet Union, which for the first time allowed scholars access to materials related to the DPRK. North Korean records, of course, remain inaccessible (if they exist at all), but North Korean communications with their former allies, as well as their allies' records about them, have finally started to emerge. And in these documents, some believe, lie the key to understanding the policies of the Hermit Kingdom.

These new materials suggest that two related forces serve as the driving factors behind DPRK foreign policy, both of which place domestic imperatives at the core. Most obvious is the nation's tendency to use or even manufacture the presence of an American threat to justify domestic shortcomings and repressive policies.

When an economic downturn became pronounced in the 1960s, for example, North Korean ruler Kim Il-sung blamed it on the need for "strengthening the national defense power," and constantly played up the threat of American invasion, even to the point of claiming fictitious American assaults (and their equally fictitious defeats) against the DPRK people, and provoking military crises involving the U.S. and South Korea. Unable to deny the economic deprivation sweeping his country, Kim simply attributed it to the growing military conflicts with the United States, neglecting to point out that he lay behind most of these conflicts.

Communist-bloc allies recognized the tactic. The DPRK, noted the East German Ambassador in Pyongyang in 1967, "tries to portray the situation as if an attack by the USA is imminent in order to justify their positions domestically and externally." But within the closed and isolated nation itself, there was little information available to challenge Kim's claims.

Put simply, an examination of DPRK-U.S. relations during the Cold War suggests that North Korean leaders have relied on the ability to point the finger of blame at an American threat in order to keep it from being pointed at themselves.

Such an argument, though, could be made (and often was) about many of America's Cold War enemies. A second factor, however, makes the North Korean case exceptional. Understanding DPRK policies requires recognizing the vital role played by the nation's defining ideology: *juche*. *Juche* (roughly translated as "self-reliance") was first introduced by Kim Il-sung in 1955, and soon became the almost ubiquitous principle underlying the society.

On a basic level, *juche* can be defined as a state of mind in which Koreans advance their interests free of external influence. It stresses the need for Koreans to develop their nation in accordance with their own traditions and values, and under the guidance of indigenous leadership above all else. Such a belief system rooted in nationalism is of course not uncommon, but in Korea, a country with a long history of colonial occupation and resistance, a common language, and shared ancestral culture, it was particularly effective.

Long ago, Koreans had come to resent decisions by the nation's elite to turn the country essentially into a vassal state of China for hundreds of years under the Yi Dynasty. This sycophancy, labeled *sadaejuui* (or, "serving the great"), was generally regarded as the ultimate betrayal of the nation's interests and a critical factor in the nation's constant struggle against foreign occupation, particularly the Japanese occupation that marked the first half of the 20th century (1910-1945). Accordingly, it helped spark a sense of national spirit and resentment of foreign influence that made the nationalist appeal of *juche* even stronger.

While *juche* praised the contributions of the Korean people in national development, it also emphasized the role of a single leader, the *suryong*, without whose guidance the masses would be unable to discern the correct path toward their socialist utopia.

The extent to which *juche* permeated the society is almost difficult for outsiders to comprehend. Here, in the most fundamentally closed and repressive nation in the modern world, Kim Il-sung was able to eliminate all competing belief systems and create a nation where *juche* was the omnipresent guide to life and existence.

The nation's constitution became a tribute to *juche*, explaining, "The DPRK is guided in its activities by the *Juche* idea, a world outlook centered on people, a revolutionary ideology for achieving the independence of the masses of people." Citizens were required to study*juche* from birth; calendars were revised to start with the year *Juche* 1 (the year of Kim's birth); and in 1982 the DPRK built the *juche* tower, a 170 meter national monument honoring *juche* and its ideas, complete with 25,550 blocks of white granite, one for each day of Kim's life from birth to his 70th birthday. North Koreans simply could not escape its intellectual thrall. "I never thought that *Juche* . . . was a closed or oppressive ideology," recalled one defector, "but I simply believed it as truth... I could not even imagine being disloyal to Kim Il-sung. When he died I was sad much as when my father died."

Evidence reveals that little has changed with the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994 and the ascension of his son, Kim Jong-il, to power. In fact, among the first signs of the younger Kim's entry into DPRK politics was the publication in 1982 of his treatise, *On the Juche Idea*, which was claimed by the regime to be the definitive explanation of this principle. He has since written and spoken widely of *juche*, and continued his father's efforts to foist it onto the collective consciousness of society.