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# What's at stake in North Korea

by DAVID WHITEHOUSE

**A**S HORRIFIC as a new Iraq war would be, the human cost of a new Korean war would probably be even higher. U.S. military officials estimate that one million Korean civilians, half in the North and half in the South, would die in the first few days of an all-out war. U.S. casualties—dead and wounded—could exceed 50,000 in the first 90 days. As one military official understated it, “We can win, but it would be bloody.”<sup>1</sup>

Because of the high stakes, critics of the Bush administration seem to be justified in complaining that the White House and Pentagon have neglected the confrontation with North Korea as they focus their attention on Iraq. The situation reached a new crisis level in late February as the Northern regime of Kim Jong-il inched closer to being able to turn out plutonium bombs on a near-monthly basis—and Northern MiGs buzzed a U.S. spy plane offshore. Bush sent 24 heavy bombers to the island of Guam, well in range of North Korea, and declared that he might take military action if diplomacy fails to reverse the North's nuclear arms programs.<sup>2</sup> But as one senior official commented, “We haven't exhausted diplomacy. We haven't begun diplomacy.”<sup>3</sup>

However, the Bush team's neglect is only on the surface. Ever since Undersecretary of State James Kelly's visit to North Korea touched off the confrontation in October 2002, the real objective seems to be to create a crisis and keep it going. The refusal to enter direct talks with the North makes sense in this light. The Clinton administration dealt with a similar crisis in 1993–94 through direct talks, and the same approach is the most promising strategy for defusing the current situation. By insisting on a framework of multilateral talks that North Korea rejects, Bush has signaled his willingness—or even his desire—to prolong the crisis, perhaps until he has the Iraq war that he's worked so hard to get. Then, the persistence of trouble in Northeast Asia will serve to justify Bush's imposition of a “solution” on the North.

The only question is what solution the Bush team has in mind. If all they wanted was for North Korea to reverse its nuclear arms programs, they would have entered into direct

talks long ago. Instead, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell traveled to Asia in February and talked to every key head of state *except* Kim Jong-il.

For his part, Kim does not want to let go of the crisis, either, until he gets satisfaction for his main demand—a security guarantee, preferably in the form of a peace treaty. Kim no doubt wants a more comprehensive settlement package that includes new economic concessions, but his main concern is to head off perceived military threats to his regime's very existence. Given Bush's open hostility to North Korea from his first days in office, Kim seems fully justified in fearing that he and his country will receive the same treatment as Saddam Hussein and Iraq.

## What Bush wants

Bush doesn't want to talk, and perhaps bribe the North into compliance as Clinton did, because this approach wouldn't address a larger, slow-burning crisis for U.S. imperialism. East Asia is becoming increasingly integrated economically, with China (for now, at least) as the central engine of growth. This trend—which includes growing investment and trade among Japan, China, Taiwan, South Korea and the countries of Southeast Asia—threatens to raise China's influence in the region at the expense of the U.S. The process of economic integration may be unstoppable, but the Bush team seeks to slow its pace and set the terms—to allow the U.S. to remain the region's major player for as long as possible.

Kelly's October confrontation with North Korean diplomats followed a summer of unprecedented rapprochement between the North and its old foes—South Korea and Japan. In September, Japan was on the verge of normalization talks with the North and the restoration of food aid that it has withheld since mid-2001. Talks with South Korea led to promises of greater development aid to the North and an acceleration in the reconnection of road and rail links to physically reunite the divided peninsula—a step in the direction of the political reunification that most Koreans desire.

The wider significance of this local connection would be to break Japan and South Korea out of their isolation from the mainland. The links would tie Seoul, the capital of the South,

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to its business partner Beijing by superhighway. The rail link would eventually connect South Korean and Japanese manufacturers, through China or Russia, to markets in Europe for half the freight costs of ocean transport.<sup>4</sup> In October 2000, top Japanese officials even floated the idea of digging a 121-mile undersea tunnel to connect Japan with South Korea, which could ultimately allow direct rail traffic from Tokyo to London.<sup>5</sup> This sort of dream is a nightmare for U.S. imperialists, because it entails new international connections that would marginalize U.S. influence and make it harder for U.S. corporations to get a piece of the profits to be made in Eurasian markets.

Undersecretary of State Kelly sought to undermine these kinds of developments on his trip last October to Pyongyang, North Korea's capital. His mission was to play up the military "threat from the North," which has been a linchpin of U.S. Far East grand strategy, second only to the related "threat from China." These threats, both real and trumped-up, help to discipline key allies—South Korea, Japan and Taiwan—to follow the U.S. lead. The strategy plays to the strongest suit in the American imperial hand: firepower. The U.S. arsenal (some of it owned and purchased at premium prices by Taiwan and South Korea) is uniquely qualified to overwhelm the military capacities of North Korea and China. In short, Kelly went to Pyongyang to reinforce the old lines of Asia's division that the U.S. laid out at the beginning of the Cold War—lines that have tended to blur as trade and investment cross them.

When Kelly arrived in Pyongyang October 3 for the long-

delayed first official visit from the Bush administration, he opened the meeting "with an accusation rather than the expected greetings," according to former *Washington Post* reporter Don Oberdorfer. A few weeks later, Oberdorfer traveled to Pyongyang and got this account of the meeting from Kim Gye-kwon, Kelly's counterpart in the talks:

North Korea, [Kelly] charged, possesses a secret program to produce highly enriched uranium, the essential component of one type of nuclear weapon, and was therefore violating signed agreements with the United States, South Korea and the International Atomic Energy Agency....

Minister Kim [Gye-kwon] told me...that he had been "stunned" by Kelly's statement.... After an all-night meeting of its top officials, North Korea detonated its own verbal explosion the next day.... Kang Sok-ju, North Korea's most important diplomat, told Kelly...that the reclusive nation is "entitled to have nuclear weapons" to safeguard its security in the face of a growing U.S. threat. After a debate of their own, the Americans interpreted the statement to be an admission that Kelly's charge was true. Now it was the Americans' turn to be stunned by an unexpected declaration and to wonder what to do next.<sup>6</sup>

This account squares with the view, confirmed by other signs before and since, that the Bush team set out to provoke some kind of crisis over North Korea—and that they stumbled into more of a confrontation than they bargained for.

They may have had geostrategic reasons for wanting the crisis, but their belligerence toward North Korea is real. That



JANWOOK KIM—IPHOTO

*U.S. and South Korean soldiers conduct joint war games in early March, 2003*

is, whatever else it's about, this confrontation really is about North Korea, too. The CIA has alleged that the pursuit of uranium enrichment for bomb production may have begun as early as the summer of 2000, and the credibility of U.S. power depends on holding small countries to their promises not to seek nuclear arms. And before last summer, when the administration says it learned about the uranium program, Kelly and other officials had already complained about the North's heavy conventional arms, which include up to 750 missiles and some 14,000 artillery systems.<sup>7</sup> These arms have served as a deterrent to a U.S. attack for decades—and thus run afoul of the new Bush Doctrine, which does not tolerate any effective deterrents to U.S. force. Then there's the apparently heartfelt antipathy that Bush and others feel for the Northern regime ("I loathe Kim Jong-il," says Bush)—which mixes Cold War fanaticism with racism (Bush also called Kim a "pygmy").<sup>8</sup>

Add these points together, and it's clear that alongside the force of broader imperial concerns a direct antagonism toward the Northern regime is also driving Bush's policy. As the situation develops, these two motivations may begin to pull in opposite directions. For the time being, the "bash North Korea" and "reassert influence in the region" objectives still coincide in the minds of administration planners—even to the point that they are considering military action.

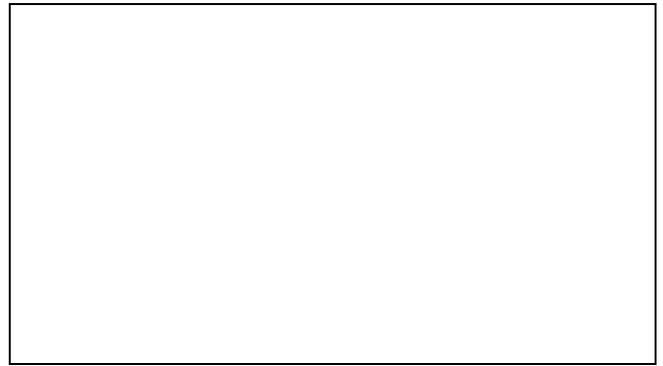
### The logic of escalation

North Korea did not emerge as a heavily armed "rogue state" when that phrase became current at the end of the Cold War. The characteristics of the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) are largely the product of a vicious civil war in 1950–53—made genocidal by the incineration of the North's cities as UN-flagged U.S. forces experimented with napalm—followed by a permanent U.S. political and military quarantine of the new DPRK. The war concluded with an armistice. The U.S. and the ROK (the Southern regime—the Republic of Korea) still have not signed a peace treaty with the North, let alone established full diplomatic relations. The North may have massive defenses and a million soldiers, with 700,000 stationed within 60 miles of Seoul, but there are 37,000 U.S. troops in the South and some 65,000 more in nearby Japan, the nuclear-armed Seventh Fleet lies offshore, and 540,000 U.S.-armed ROK troops are stationed 60 miles from Pyongyang.<sup>9</sup> The DPRK is indeed isolated, secretive and militaristic, but a half-century of U.S. policy has a lot to do with that.

The logic of the standoff is for both sides to threaten such massive damage that neither would contemplate a war. Ever since President Dwight Eisenhower placed nuclear weapons in South Korea in 1958—in violation of the armistice, which forbids the introduction of qualitatively new weapons systems—every U.S. administration has avowed a "first-strike" policy, which envisions U.S. use of nuclear weapons even though (or rather *because*) the DPRK has lacked the capacity to respond in kind.<sup>10</sup>

On the other side, almost one-quarter of North Korea's heavy weapons are pointed at Seoul and its environs<sup>11</sup>—a metropolitan area of 21 million people that local U.S. forces refer to as the "kill box."<sup>12</sup> Seoul could be pounded with 5,000 artillery rounds in the first 12 hours of a war.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, Pentagon planners are now thinking about starting a fight, as leaks in late February revealed.<sup>14</sup> It's not



### The Yongbyon nuclear site in North Korea

clear, however, what they would target or whether they expect to avoid an all-out war.

The contested 5-megawatt nuclear reactor at Yongbyon is one of three plutonium-producing reactors that the DPRK is working to bring online. The others, at 50 and 200 megawatts, are clearly designed for producing electricity, but they would have to be destroyed in any effort to wipe out the North's weapons-producing capacity. What the Bush team can't wipe out is the uranium-enrichment project that they initially seized on in October, since they don't know where it is.

The logic of even a "surgical strike" is for the conflict to escalate, especially since Kim Jong-il's calculations are based, with some justification, on anticipating the worst-case scenario—a massive U.S. attack. Kim's seemingly "irrational" threats to escalate the conflict actually make good sense as lessons learned from watching the U.S. destruction of Iraq. The policy is not to allow a massive U.S. buildup of force and not to hunker down under UN sanctions—at least, not without a fight. In January, the official DPRK press summed up Kim's approach by declaring that the U.S. does not have the exclusive right to preemptive self-defense.

The Pentagon seems undaunted. Planners are considering the unthinkable—"neutralizing" the North's artillery and missiles with the latest generation of "precision" weapons, possibly including nuclear missiles.<sup>15</sup> That's a reason for Bush to carry out the new Iraq war *before* dealing with North Korea. He wants to find out whether the newest weapons actually work; precision is crucial if the goal is a simultaneous strike on more than 10,000 targets.

The Clinton administration, which considered its own attack on the Yongbyon reactor in 1993–94, also recognized the logic of escalation. Accordingly, they drew up concrete plans for the invasion of the North and the overthrow of its government, plans that no doubt exist in an even more developed form today. The North is fully aware of the plans, since the South's defense minister laid them out publicly in 1994.<sup>16</sup> Thus, as joint U.S.-ROK forces began a month of massive war games in March, it's no surprise that the DPRK labeled the exercises as a dress rehearsal for invasion.

### Would Bush really fight?

Considering the number of lives he's willing to sacrifice in Iraq, Bush may not be deterred by high casualty estimates for a new Korean war. And a war would certainly satisfy his desire to bash North Korea. But it might also damage his broader imperial objectives.

If Bush stoked this crisis to head off the reconciliation of old Asian antagonists—symbolized by the possible reunification of Korea—he might hesitate to launch a war that would achieve that very unification. The key to the question is in the political, not merely the military results of a war. South Koreans already blame the U.S. for the current crisis by a margin of two to one. This view must have some resonance among South Korea's soldiers, who form the bulk of the ground troops that would have to fight a war on the U.S. side. In other cases, reluctant soldiers get pushed into war by a frenzy of nationalism. In this case, however, nationalist sentiment seems more likely to hold South Korea's soldiers back from fighting their brothers and sisters to the North. Mutinies are a possibility that imperial planners would have to take into account.

Even a military victory could leave the U.S. in a precarious political position—since the war could unite all Koreans, North and South, in hatred of the U.S. Then, if the U.S. imposed a repressive postwar government, it might face a huge nationalist insurgency. On the other hand, if the U.S. allowed more than a puppet government for a united Korea, its leaders might seek out close relations with China—and send U.S. troops packing.

Thus a military victory could aggravate the overall predicament of U.S. imperialism in the region—the long-term rise of Chinese influence at America's expense. There's even an outside chance of stumbling into a war with China, although China's rulers would probably try to head this off because they're not ready, just yet, for a direct confrontation with the U.S.

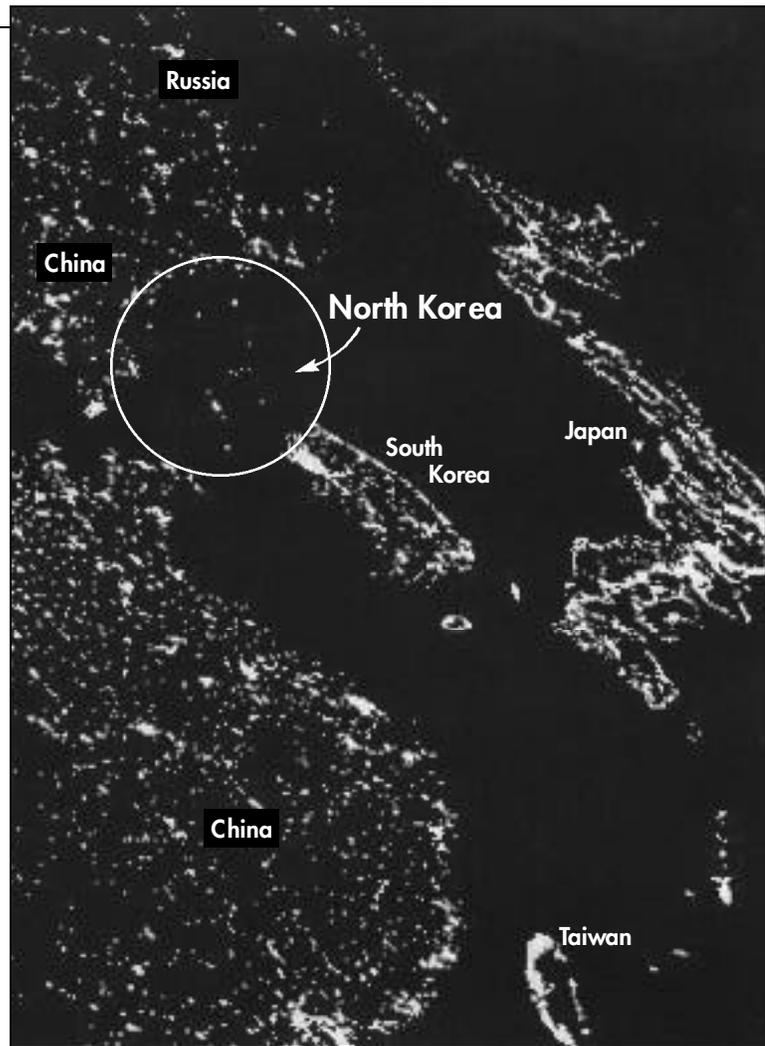
Despite the dangers, Bush is a president who rolls the dice, and one who's driven by ideology as well as calculation. Despite the political risks, the Bush administration's ideological fixation on North Korea might tip the scales in favor of war.

## What Kim Jong-il wants

Koreans, today artificially divided into North and South, have had the misfortune to live for centuries at the crossroads of empires. The Cold War partition was just the latest episode in which Korea served as the battleground for outside forces that played the decisive role—China vs. Japan, Russia vs. Japan and finally the U.S. vs. the “reds”—the USSR and China.

Following the end of the Korean War in 1953, both North and South developed as highly repressive garrison states, though dressed up with different ideology. In the late 1980s, the South Korean democracy movement, propelled forward by the rise of workers' struggles, overcame three decades of military dictatorship—no thanks to the U.S., which backed the generals throughout.

North Korea still has its dictatorship. The DPRK binds its population to the state with the ideology of *juche* (national self-reliance) and resistance to U.S. imperialism—an option that obviously wasn't available to the dictators of the South. North Korea may be unique among today's regimes in its de-



In this satellite view, North Korea is dark

gree of regimentation and repression, mixing Stalinist state direction of the economy (and of everyday life) with Confucian exaltations of fatherly leaders.

Today, North Korea faces a dual crisis. First, the chaos at the end of the Cold War destroyed the country's international economic support system. Second, the U.S., the old Cold War antagonist, has pursued policies toward the DPRK that still alternate between slow strangulation and physical annihilation of the regime. To understand the North's approach to its confrontation with the U.S., it's important to look first at the DPRK's hidden crisis—its staggering economic decline.

### The economic collapse

Per-capita income in North Korea is \$706 per year, just one-thirteenth of the \$8,900 yearly income of Koreans in the South.<sup>17</sup> This disparity in wealth shows up graphically in the recent nighttime satellite photo shown above. South Korea, Japan and parts of China are brightly lit, while North Korea lies in darkness.

The region's destitution follows a century of considerable economic development. The mountainous northern part of Korea was developed as an industrial area under Japanese colonial occupation from 1910–45, as the South's fertile lowlands were pressed into service as a breadbasket to the Japanese empire. In 1945, the North, occupied by the Soviet

Union following the Japanese retreat at the close of the Second World War, was home to more than four-fifths of Korea's heavy industry. The South, controlled by the U.S., produced 65 percent of the food.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the destruction of the North during the Korean War of 1950–53, the economy rebounded in the late 1950s and outstripped the South's well into the 1960s. That was when Che Guevara expressed his hope that Cuba would one day look like North Korea.<sup>19</sup>

Economic growth slowed in the following decades, but relative prosperity continued well into the 1980s. During this period, the regime of Kim Il-sung received substantial assistance from China, the Soviet Union, or both—depending on fluctuations in the alliances among the three Stalinist states. Of the two, China has generally been the closer ally and bigger donor.

Several enduring features of the economy emerged in these years. In general—and despite the outside assistance—Kim strove for absolute political independence. To this end, he tried to build a self-contained economy, a microcosm of the USSR's "socialism in one country," which could insulate the DPRK from outside influence, even from China and the USSR.

This "*juche* idea" led Kim to push hard for agricultural development despite the region's rough terrain. Kim also hoped to avoid reliance on oil imports by mining domestic coal, developing hydropower and using domestically-mined uranium to fuel nuclear plants. These policies led to heavy reliance on electricity.<sup>20</sup> Trains and winter heating still depend on electricity, and the goal of agricultural self-sufficiency requires a big investment in the electricity-intensive manufacture of nitrogen fertilizer.

The background to the *juche* idea was the brutality of the Japanese occupation, followed by an even more brutal Korean War. It's no surprise that the DPRK's economy came to be dominated by military production. Uppermost in the minds of the DPRK's rulers, of course, has been defense against a renewed assault from nearby U.S. forces. As U.S. military pressure continues, Kim Jong-il—Kim Il-sung's son and dynastic successor in 1994—has stuck to the "military-first" economic policy, even though economic disaster struck in the 1990s. As much as one-quarter of the economy is devoted to sustaining the military,<sup>21</sup> and arms, particularly missile technology, have become the DPRK's most lucrative export.

Before the disasters began, the economy of the DPRK's second biggest aid donor went into crisis. In the 1980s, aid from the USSR began to dry up, and Mikhail Gorbachev failed to deliver the light-water nuclear electric plants that his predecessor, Konstantin Chernenko, had promised in 1985. The North had built its 5-megawatt reactor at Yongbyon from indigenous materials in the early 1980s. The reactor uses a cheap "gas-graphite" technique that produces plutonium as a by-product, which can be purified to produce nuclear bomb material. The Reagan administration urged the USSR to offer the DPRK light-water reactors (LWRs), which produce more power and no easily convertible waste.<sup>22</sup> At \$1 billion apiece, LWRs were technically and financially out of reach of the DPRK on its own. As part of the LWR deal in 1985, Chernenko induced Kim Il-sung to sign the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), the 1968 measure by which the world's major powers sought to maintain their monopoly on nuclear weapons.

But the LWRs never came, and the North began to im-

port more and more oil and coal to fill its energy needs—and to cut more trees for firewood.

Later, following the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe, the Soviet crisis came to a head with an attempted military coup against Gorbachev in 1991. Kim Il-sung backed the hard-line coup plotters. Then, Boris Yeltsin, who attained power in Russia through his role in standing up to the coup, cut off all credit and direct aid to the DPRK. The cutoff starved the North of fertilizer inputs.<sup>23</sup> Energy imports from Russia—now purchased on a cash-only basis—fell by 1993 to less than 7 percent of their 1987 levels.<sup>24</sup> In the meantime, aid from China also declined as its rulers, like Gorbachev and Yeltsin, shifted their attention away from the North to focus on making economic connections to the now more prosperous South. In 1991, China, like Russia, started demanding that the DPRK pay for its imports in cash at world market prices.<sup>25</sup>

With the DPRK's economy already in rapid decline since 1990—aggravated by a series of bad harvests in the early 1990s—natural disasters began to strike with heavy rains in 1995. Floods washed out terraced fields that had been cut into deforested, unstable soil on the sides of mountains. The outwash buried farms in the lowlands, overwhelmed hydro plants and flooded coal mines.<sup>26</sup> Then a typhoon off the west coast in 1997 caused a tidal wave that damaged a major irrigation dike—leading to the inundation of hundreds of thousands of hectares of rice fields.<sup>27</sup>

The result has been a decade of recurrent famine. Nearly 10 percent of North Korea's 22 million people have died of starvation since 1994. The worst years were at the beginning, but the threat of famine is ever-present, as years of drought have followed the flood years. Millions still depend on direct food aid from the UN.

Agricultural recovery is hampered by a fertilizer production industry that is starved of energy and raw materials. In 2001, three years into an economic recovery,<sup>28</sup> rice yields per acre at a model cooperative farm were still just 65 percent of the 1989 harvest.<sup>29</sup> And one foreign diplomat in Pyongyang estimated in the summer of 2002 that North Korean industries were running at 10–15 percent of capacity for lack of energy, raw materials and spare parts.<sup>30</sup> This decade of economic retrogression, including the energy shortage at the center of the crisis, is why North Koreans don't turn lights on at night. As of last November, even before the U.S. cut off the shipments of heavy oil that fuels the DPRK's electric plants, it was not unusual for Pyongyang to experience as many as eight or more power outages per day.<sup>31</sup>

### The Clinton crisis—and broken promises

The withdrawal of the Chinese and Russian lifelines in 1990–91 spurred Kim Il-sung to begin to make overtures for normalization to South Korea, Japan and even the United States. George Bush Sr. followed a fairly conciliatory tack. Though concerned about the Yongbyon gas-graphite reactor, he pulled land-based nuclear weapons out of South Korea in 1991. In 1992, he cancelled the annual Team Spirit war games scheduled for 1993.

The confrontation of 1993–94 arose from renewed U.S. pressure on the regime, just when North Korea's economic crisis was becoming severe. When Bill Clinton took office in January 1993, he declared that the cancelled Team Spirit war

games would go ahead in March after all. In February, the Pentagon announced that some of the nuclear weapons then aimed at Russia would be retargeted on North Korea.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, Hans Blix, then head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)—whose main function is to police the nuclear activities of countries that have promised not to build nuclear weapons—was stepping up inspections in North Korea that he had begun in 1991. Since the end of the Gulf War, Blix had pioneered the IAEA's use of U.S. spy satellites, CIA data and U.S. military labs—even though the IAEA is a supposedly independent agency of the UN.<sup>33</sup> The North Koreans naturally regarded Blix as a U.S. stooge. In the middle of disputes over inspections, and three days into the Team Spirit war games, the North gave notice that it would withdraw from the NPT in three months—which drew the attention of the Western press to the fact that a confrontation was going on.<sup>34</sup>

The NPT contains an escape clause for signatories who conclude that their “supreme interests” are threatened. Without this clause protecting basic sovereignty, non-nuclear countries would never have signed the treaty in the first place. North Korea cited the supreme interest clause in 1993, though it never carried through with its withdrawal. Pyongyang cited it again in January of this year, when it did withdraw from the treaty. Even though the North is out of the NPT, the IAEA, now under Mohamed ElBaradei, still claims the right to call for Security Council sanctions against North Korea.

Eventually the Clinton administration smoothed over the dispute with a document called the Agreed Framework. Under the framework, the U.S. would arrange (mostly at South Korea's expense) to provide light-water reactors to replace the North's gas-graphite reactors. While North Korea waited for the LWRs, the U.S. and its allies would provide heavy fuel oil to meet the DPRK's electricity needs. The North's demand for LWRs is not as presumptuous as it may seem. The NPT—in another clause designed to get non-nuclear states to sign on—promises assistance from nuclear-weapons states to non-weapons states for the “peaceful” development of nuclear power.

As with the Russian promise, the LWRs never came. They were supposed to be operational in 2003, providing a total of 2,000 megawatts of electricity. In fact, the delivery of fuel oil is the only clause of the Agreed Framework that the U.S. ever observed—until it cut off deliveries in November 2002, the move that spurred North Korea to restart its gas-graphite reactor projects.

The U.S. was also supposed to take steps toward full normalization of relations—and, crucially, to “provide formal assurances against threat or use of nuclear weapons.”<sup>35</sup> The U.S.

never dropped its “first-strike” policy for the use of nuclear weapons against North Korea. In fact, a leak of a “nuclear posture review” in March 2002 reconfirmed the policy. This nuclear threat, along with Bush's “axis of evil” speech the January before, helped set the stage for today's crisis—and confirms that Bush intends to threaten the regime's “supreme interests.” So, unlike the situation of 1993–94, the DPRK's nuclear program is probably more than a bargaining chip. It seems that Kim Jong-il really wants a nuclear arsenal to back up his artillery and missile deterrents—against a foe that he expects may possibly attack.

### **Kim's common ground with George W. Bush?**

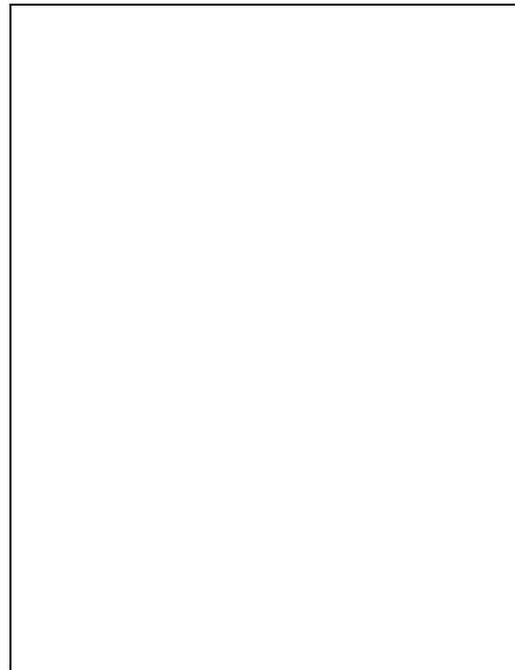
Although Bush threatens Kim Jong-il's political survival, there is one aspect of Kim's outlook that Bush, the imperialist, may find useful: Kim is not as keen as his neighbors are to turn his country into a transit point for Asian commerce. Of course, North Korea would charge fees for using rails and highways through its territory, but most of this traffic would simply pass the country by—and profit somebody else. The regime is also afraid of opening up because freer access to the country means a freer hand for hostile agents of the U.S. to spy on the regime.

This insular outlook is evident in the one case where North Korea has allowed a road to open through the Demilitarized Zone that separates North from South. The road, opened in February 2003, is hemmed in by sentries and barbed wire. It goes up the east coast to Mount Kumgang, a famous scenic spot that the DPRK wants to turn into a tourist trap—funded by Hyundai and staffed by non-Northerners who aren't allowed to go into the rest of the country.<sup>36</sup>

In a broader sense, North Korea is in no hurry for reunification—although talking about it is good propaganda—simply because unification would mean the end of the regime. A symbolic “joint gov-

ernment” is conceivable as a transitional step, but the center of power would remain where the economic center is, in the South. For that matter, South Korea's rulers don't want instant reunification, either. They'd rather build up the Northern economy slowly from the outside than swallow all of its problems in one gulp. But the North is different because its rulers actually have a positive stake in remaining separate forever, despite the ideology of national unity. So the regime needs the U.S. as an antagonist—to keep its subjects loyal and to hold onto its own piece of ground against Southern rivals—just as the U.S. has needed the “Northern threat” for its own reasons.

Time, however, is not on Kim's side. His best chance of getting a favorable deal from Bush is while U.S. forces are preoccupied with Iraq. This explains the North's series of provocations beginning in mid-February, from its threats to pull



**North Koreans in a UN “food for work” program**

out of the armistice, to a test-launch of a medium-range missile, to its extra effort to shadow the U.S. spyplane offshore. The Bush team's cool response to these acts confirms that they want to keep the crisis burning slowly until after an Iraq war, when they'll have more military options.

## What next for empire?

Because both peace and war are fraught with political dangers for U.S. imperialism, Bush may seek a middle ground between the two—and look for a way to continue the 50-year siege of North Korea without provoking an explosion. If this were possible, it would help maintain the U.S. in the region as the “indispensable nation” whose military abilities underpin its continued clout with weaker allies—South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. This “solution” would probably require pressure that falls short of comprehensive UN sanctions, and Bush might have to accept the North for the time being as a nuclear power—and thus absorb a serious blow to the Bush Doctrine. At the same time, he would no doubt want to establish his freedom to intercept the North's military exports.<sup>37</sup>

Even in the short run, however, no such solution may be available. Kim Jong-il may not sit tight for further strangulation of the DPRK, especially since the economy seems to have taken a new turn for the worse even before the fuel oil cutoff.<sup>38</sup> Kim would want to fight instead of waiting for total economic collapse, a hemorrhage of refugees into China or internal revolt.

In the long run, even if it is possible to preserve North Korea as a hobbled but still-dangerous “rogue state,” this would only be a holding action against U.S. imperialism's real problem—the rise of China. The rise continues, and so does the integration of East Asia. Taiwan is an example. Separated from the Chinese mainland throughout the Cold War, Taiwan spends \$1 billion yearly on U.S. military hardware to defend itself against China—and invests twice that amount yearly on the mainland.<sup>39</sup> In February, Taiwan began its first airline flights to the mainland, a previously illegal connection.

Along with economic integration goes political polarization, as the region lurches toward further militarization. The crisis with North Korea has spurred new debate in Japan about breaking Cold War prohibitions on offensive arms, and Japan agreed on February 16 to begin joint tests of missile defense systems with the U.S. next year.<sup>40</sup> Such moves would provoke North Korea (if it still exists next year), and especially China, to further beef up their arms—which could, in turn, alarm India, then Pakistan.

U.S. regional policy will continue to be aggressive. Even with a relatively peaceful resolution of the North Korea crisis, the U.S. must keep coming up with more provocations—perhaps over Taiwan the next time—in order to keep China boxed in.

Agence France-Presse, October 20, 2000.

- 6 Don Oberdorfer, “My private seat at Pyongyang's table,” *Washington Post*, November 28, 2002.
- 7 Dorgan, “High cost of a war.”
- 8 Bruce Cumings, “North Korea's nuclear winter,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 2003.
- 9 Bruce Cumings, *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2nd edition 2002), p. 126.
- 10 See *ibid.*, pp. 128–33, for an account of the extensive—and chillingly casual—preparations that the U.S. has made over the years to use nuclear force against North Korea.
- 11 Dorgan, “High cost of war.”
- 12 Kristof, “Secret, scary plans.”
- 13 Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, pp. 313–14.
- 14 Kristof, “Secret, scary plans.”
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