

North Korean Motivations for Developing Nuclear Weapons

Daniel A. Pinkston

During the first week of October 2002, United States Assistant Secretary of State James A. Kelly visited Pyongyang to discuss a number of outstanding issues with North Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sök Chu. During their meetings, Kelly presented evidence of a North Korean program to enrich uranium, and North Korean officials acknowledged the existence of the program after initially denying the accusations.¹ Since these recent developments, many people are wondering about the motivations behind Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program.



National Defense Commission Chairman Kim Jong Il and senior military officers of the Korean People's Army.

Developing and producing nuclear weapons take time, especially for developing countries like North Korea. Therefore, we must analyze the North Koreans' threat perceptions over the past half century to clearly understand their motivations for acquiring the bomb. In brief, Pyongyang's initial decision to develop a nuclear bomb came from a Kim Il Sung directive, probably in the 1960s.² North Korea established its nuclear complex in Yöngbyön-kun in 1964, and by the 1980s was expanding its nuclear facilities to include everything necessary to produce weapon-grade plutonium.³

However, the North Korean leadership's political decision to seek nuclear weapons was not made in a vacuum. Pyongyang confronts a number of external and internal security problems. Korea is surrounded by major powers, and the peninsula has been subject to numerous invasions over past centuries. Colonialism and war during the 20th century still resonate with policymakers in Pyongyang, and these experiences continue to influence the perceptions of the ruling elite and their supporters. A strong military posture and advanced weapons systems not only help the leadership deal with external threats, but they are also popular among nationalistic citizens who are constantly reminded of the potential external threats to North Korea.⁴

U.S. military forces have been stationed in South Korea since the end of the Korean War to deter a repeat of the North Korean invasion across the 38th parallel on 25 June 1950. However, all North Koreans are taught that the United States invaded the North on that day, and that the "Great Leader Marshal" Kim Il Sung repulsed the American invasion during the "victorious Fatherland Liberation War."⁵ The North Korean media continue to provide extensive reports of the U.S. military intervention in 1950 and of the need to remain vigilant against the possibility of "another American attack."⁶

Despite Pyongyang's historical revisionism, historical facts provide North Korean leaders with the motivation to acquire a capability to strike U.S. targets so that Pyongyang could deter American military intervention in the future. At a minimum, North Korean leaders desire a strong conventional capability to achieve this objective, but nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles as a delivery system are likely the preferred choice. During the Korean War, North Korea and China were subjected to nuclear threats by the United States, and some analysts argue that Pyongyang's leaders are motivated to develop nuclear weapons and long-range missiles because of this experience.⁷ Nevertheless, North Korean leaders have long speculated about the utility of nuclear weapons and the costs to develop them.

The end of the Korean War in 1953 did not mean the potential for nuclear conflict in Korea had completely disappeared. There have been several incidents since the war that could have escalated into a nuclear conflict: the North Korean capture of the *USS Pueblo* in 1968, a North Korean commando raid on the South Korean presidential residence in 1968, the ax-murders of two U.S. soldiers at P'anmunjŏm in 1976, the assassination attempt against South Korean President Chun Tu Hwan in Burma in 1983, and the stand-off over Pyongyang's refusal to permit the completion of IAEA safeguards inspections in 1994.

Given Pyongyang's threat perception and security needs, North Korea has sought to strengthen its military capabilities by forming security alliances and by allocating a tremendous amount of resources to the military sector. North Korea formed security alliances with China and the Soviet Union, but North Korean leaders have been dissatisfied with its alliance partners on several occasions. For example, even though China and the USSR provided assistance during the Korean War, Kim Il Sung desired more support than he received. Kim was disappointed that Stalin did not provide ground forces and other resources to expel the Americans from Korea, and following Soviet acquiescence during the Cuban missile crisis, North Korea quickly implemented an import substitution policy in the arms sector to reduce dependence upon foreign weapons suppliers.⁸ Other events that shook Pyongyang's confidence in its allies include the normalization of U.S.-China relations, the collapse of the USSR and the socialist countries in Eastern Europe, the normalization of relations between Moscow and Seoul, and the normalization of relations between Beijing and Seoul. In sum, these events led North Korean leaders to question the credibility of its alliance partners, while also increasing Pyongyang's perceived utility of nuclear weapons.

Although North Korea's nuclear weapons program, including the highly enriched uranium (HEU) program, preceded the Bush administration, some argue that Bush administration policies could have pressured North Korea into admitting its HEU program in an effort to negotiate and to meet U.S. demands over its nuclear program. On the other hand, others argue that Bush administration policies could have encouraged North Korea to accelerate its program to acquire nuclear weapons through the HEU route. However, Pyongyang has undoubtedly expressed concern about being included in George W. Bush's "axis of evil," and about the possibility of being subject to a "preemptive nuclear strike."⁹

Many analysts argue that inter-Korean rivalry has also motivated Pyongyang to acquire nuclear weapons. It is unclear how North Korea would use a nuclear bomb against South Korea, except for deterrence and/or for coercive diplomacy. Eliminating the South Korean government and reunifying the country on Pyongyang's terms would certainly resolve North Korea's main security problem. North Korea claims to be the sole legitimate government for all the Korean people and all of the territory on the Korean peninsula. According to North Korea's Socialist Constitution, "all state activities shall be conducted under the leadership of the Korean Workers Party (KWP), and the North Korean state will complete the revolution based on *chuch'e* (주체)¹⁰ under the leadership of the KWP." The constitution also declares that the North Korean government represents the interests of all the Korean people.¹¹ All North Korean government activities are guided by the KWP, which is also committed to revising the status quo on the Korean peninsula. The KWP bylaws state that the party is to "liberate all the people on the peninsula, complete the revolution, and establish communism and *chuch'e* ideology throughout all of Korean society. Furthermore, the KWP is to "continually strengthen unification solidarity based on *chuch'e* ideology."¹²

In sum, there are a number of historical, external, and internal factors that have motivated North Korea to seek nuclear weapons. Pyongyang's motivations have probably varied over time, and there is still no

consensus over North Korea's recent behavior and its policies regarding nuclear weapons development. North Korea's opaque government and policymaking process often create difficult challenges for those seeking to understand Pyongyang's motivations; however, a clear understanding of these motivations could be critical if diplomacy is to end North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

¹ Press Statement, Richard Boucher, Spokesman, "North Korean Nuclear Program," U.S. Department of State, 16 October 2002, <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2002/14432.htm>>; David E. Sanger, "North Korea Says It Has a Program on Nuclear Arms," *New York Times*, p. A1, 17 October 2002, <<http://www.nytimes.com>>; Oh Young-hwan, "North Continued Nuclear-Arms Project," *JoongAng Ilbo*, 18 October 2002, <<http://english.joins.com>>.

² Interview with North Korean defector by Daniel A. Pinkston, 1 November 2001, Seoul.

³ For a description of North Korea's nuclear facilities, see "North Korean WMD Facilities and Chronologies," on the Nuclear Threat Initiative website, <http://www.nti.org/e_research/e1_nkorea_profile.html>.

⁴ Analysts often ignore or underestimate the lingering psychological effects from conflicts that occurred centuries ago but that are still prominent in the curricula of both North and South Korea. Most notable are probably the so-called "Hideyoshi invasions" in 1592 and 1597. Korean Admiral Lee Su Shin (이수신) is credited with having saved Korea because of his naval victories over Japanese forces, and Lee is still one of Korea's most popular national heroes. For a brief review of the Hideyoshi invasions, see Carter J. Eckert et al., *Korea Old and New: A History* (Seoul: Ilchokak Publishers, 1990), pp. 143-148.

⁵ For example, see "Kim Il Sung's Exploits in War Eulogized," Korean Central News Agency, 24 July 2002, <<http://www.kcna.co.jp>>; "강철의 령장 김일성주석의 탁월한 령군업적," Korean Central News Agency, 24 July 2002, <<http://www.kcna.co.jp>>.

⁶ For example, see Kim Hye-song, "Extremely Evil Instigator of Korean War," *Rodong Sinmun*, 25 June 2002, p. 6, in "DPRK Decries US as 'Extremely Evil' Provoker of Korean War," FBIS Document ID: KPP20020705000041; "Koreans Called Upon to Frustrate U.S. Moves for Aggression and War," Korean Central News Agency, 25 June 2002, <<http://www.kcna.co.jp>>; "미제의 침략과 전쟁책동을 단호히 짓부시자 / 로동신문 사설 (전문)," Korean Central News Agency, 25 June 2002, <<http://www.kcna.co.jp>>; "Provocation of Korean War," Korean Central News Agency, 24 June 2002, <<http://www.kcna.co.jp>>; "조선전쟁의 도발자," Korean Central News Agency, 24 June 2002, <<http://www.kcna.co.jp>>.

⁷ In the early 1950s, several American military and political leaders believed nuclear weapons offered an opportunity to quickly end the war in Korea. Some examples of North Korea's perceived nuclear threats from the United States during the war include President Truman's press conference on 30 November 1950, when he stated that the use of nuclear weapons in Korea was under consideration; General MacArthur's request for 34 atomic bombs to use in Korea and Manchuria; and statements by candidate and President Eisenhower, and others in his administration about using nuclear weapons to end the Korean War. See Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Volume II, The Roaring of the Cataract 1947-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 750; Roger Dingman, "Atomic Diplomacy During the Korean War," *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Winter 1988/1989, pp. 65-66; Rosemary J. Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict, 1950-1953* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1985); Peter Hayes, *Pacific Powderkeg: American Nuclear Dilemmas in Korea* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1991), pp. 9-11; Stanley Weintraub, *MacArthur's War: Korea and the Undoing of an American Hero* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), pp. 257-259, 263-264;

⁸ In December 1962, the Central Committee of the Korean Workers Party adopted "four policy lines" to: 1) improve political and technical discipline in the military, 2) modernize the military, 3) "arm" all the people with "class conscientiousness and military technology," and 4) fortify the "whole country." See 장명순, *북한군사연구* (서울: 팔복원, 1999), pp. 118-119; 장준익, *북한 핵-미사일 전쟁* (Seoul: 서문당, May 1999), p. 246; 대한민국 통일부, *북한개요 2000* (서울: 통일부, December 1999), pp. 160-161; 262-263.

⁹ See "Conclusion of Non-Aggression Treaty between DPRK and U.S. Called For," Korean Central News Agency, 25 October 2002, <<http://www.kcna.co.jp>>; "조미사이의 불가침조약체결이 핵문제해결의 합리적이고 현실적인 방도 / 조선외무성 대변인," Korean Central News Agency, 25 October 2002, <<http://www.kcna.co.jp>>; "An End to US Hard-Line Stance Urged," *Pyongyang Times*, 19 October 2002, <<http://www.times.dprkorea.com>>. For a copy of George W. Bush's State of the Union address where he named North Korea as part of an "axis of evil," see "The President's State of the Union Address," 29 January 2002, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>>. Also see "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," September 2002, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf>>; excerpts from the "Nuclear Posture Review," 8 January 2002, <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm>>.

¹⁰ “*Chuch’e*” literally means “independence” or “self-reliance.” For a brief description of North Korea’s “*chuch’e* ideology” see the ROK National Intelligence Service, “Ruling Ideology” in “North Korea: Politics,” <http://www.nis.go.kr/english/democratic/politics_index.html>.

¹¹ See the Preface in Chapter I Politics, Article 1, Article 2, and Article 11 of the DPRK Socialist Constitution, cited in 최종고, 북한법 (서울: 박영사, 2001), pp. 95, 97.

¹² Ibid., p. 137.