

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 52
Number 3 *Volume 52, Number 3 Autumn Demi
Issue*

Article 5

7-28-2022

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Recommended Citation

George Shatzer, "SRAD Director's Corner: Understanding North Korea and the Key to Security in East Asia," *Parameters* 52, no. 3 (2022), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.3166.

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Understanding North Korea and the Key to Security in East Asia

George Shatzer

Review of

Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer's Insights into North Korea's Enigmatic Young Dictator

By Jung H. Pak

Rationality in the North Korean Regime: Understanding the Kims' Strategy of Provocation

By David W. Shin

Keywords: North Korea, Kim Jong-Un, nuclear, China, South Korea

Outgoing US President Barack Obama warned President-elect Donald Trump that North Korea's nuclear weapons program would be the greatest danger he would face as president. By late 2017, the Korean peninsula seemed to be the closest to war as it had ever been since July 1953, when the armistice ending the hostilities of the Korean War was signed. On September 3, 2017, North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear weapons test (the last to date). The device, claimed by North Korea to be a hydrogen bomb, triggered a 6.3 magnitude earthquake and had an explosive yield of about 250 kilotons. Throughout 2017, North Korea also conducted 17 missile tests. The final test on November 28 was of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) with a range capable of striking anywhere in the United States and doing so within as little as 30 minutes after its launch.

The Trump administration's policy of "maximum pressure" against the Kim family regime in North Korea sought to compel dictator Kim Jong-Un to end his pursuit of nuclear weapons. The comprehensive set of sanctions was precedent setting in scope and even had public support from the People's Republic of China (PRC)—North Korea's closest, and nearly only, ally. While the North Korean

people were feeling the bite of these sanctions, the tough measures had yet to change Kim's aggressive actions.

As a result, the United States conducted a massive buildup of military power on and near the Korean peninsula to ensure readiness for potential combat operations against North Korea. United States Forces Korea (USFK) and its service components, especially the US Eighth Army, executed this buildup over several months in 2017. Vast quantities of supplies, especially ammunition and medical stocks, were rushed to the region. Extensive preparations were made to train and receive additional US units to fight as part of USFK alongside South Korean forces. As the director of plans (G5) for Eighth Army during this time, it was apparent to me, from our discussions with senior civilian and military leaders, that the United States was seriously considering military options to end the North Korean nuclear program. It is safe to assume Kim could see these same preparations (perhaps through the PRC sharing intelligence with him) and arrived at the same conclusion about US intent.

Whether the increase in USFK military readiness was the decisive factor in pushing Kim to pursue diplomacy with the United States is impossible to say. Perhaps he realized his nuclear program had only pushed the United States and South Korea closer together, especially within the military alliance, and that it was time to adopt a new track with better near-term prospects. He recognized Trump's expressed dissatisfaction with the US share of the financial burden in defending South Korea. Kim also knew South Korean president Moon Jae-In was a progressive and much more open to dialogue and improving relations with North Korea. Plus, the Winter Olympics scheduled to take place in South Korea in February 2018 presented a fantastic opportunity to off-ramp tensions and burnish Kim's standing on arguably one of the largest stages in the world. Regardless of his exact calculus, throughout 2018 and up to his final meeting with Trump at the Korean demilitarized zone on June 30, 2019, Kim demonstrated the wiles and skills to preserve his regime and drive his nuclear program further forward.

Understanding Kim Jong-Un's thinking and how he develops strategy is the central issue in *Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer's Insights into North Korea's Enigmatic Young Dictator* by Dr. Jung H. Pak. While Pak's book is not an academic work and is intended for a popular audience, it is a serious examination of Kim and his regime and deserves a careful read. Pak is currently a deputy assistant secretary for multilateral affairs and for global China issues with the US State Department and a deputy special representative for North Korea. Previously with the Central Intelligence Agency and as the deputy national intelligence officer for Korea at the National Intelligence Council, Pak leverages

her vast expertise on North Korea to deliver a work that is as analytical as it is engrossing.

What makes her focus on Kim and the regime especially relevant is the peculiar nature of the Kim family's dynasty. The regime is a paradoxical blend of communism with a heredity cult-of-personality grounded in a largely mythologized self-view as anti-Japanese guerillas. North Korea's extreme isolation from the rest of the world, and a relatively small population (approximately 26 million people) locked inside a tight police state, means Kim's decision making is comparatively insulated from the typical range of factors contended by other heads of state. This isolation greatly complicates outsiders' efforts to understand Kim's motivations or to attack his strategies. Hence, works that illuminate the person are of special significance.

Early after the start of Kim's rule in North Korea, following the death of his father (Kim Jong-Il) in December 2011, some dared wonder if Kim would take a different path as the national leader. As a teen, he had been educated briefly in Switzerland and seemed to have an affinity for certain aspects of Western culture, such as professional basketball. If anyone still clings to those hopes, Pak's analysis of Kim's evolution as dictator over the past decade should dispel them.

Rather than reform himself or the family regime, Kim has effectively doubled down on the legacies both of his grandfather (Kim Il-Sung) and his father by tightening even further the surveillance and control over the populace while charging ahead with nuclear weapons development. Kim recognizes, though, that outside influences will only become harder to block. Shrewdly, he has sought to consolidate his control over the elite class by building a self-contained internet and creating a pocket of wealth around the capital city of P'yŏngyang. Kim has done this while ordering the murder of his rival half-brother (Kim Jong-Nam); the execution of his uncle (Jang Song-Thaek); and purging several top military, government, and business officials. On top of all that, Kim has become something of a television and social media star—a twisted development that, as Pak notes, undermines the sanctions regime that took so much effort to build (221).

Pak's analysis really shines in her assessment of Kim's goals and perspectives. Her judgment that Kim sees possession of nuclear weapons as vital to elevating North Korea's status and preserving his regime is nothing new. However, she makes additional points that are novel or at least overlooked by many. First, a viable nuclear deterrent sets North Korea apart from South Korea after decades of South Korea surpassing it in every other way. Where South Korea remains dependent on the United States' extended deterrence, North Korea is on the cusp of having its own. Not only does this give North Korea a domestic military advantage over South Korea, but it also reinforces North Korea's claim the

government of South Korea is an illegitimate puppet of the United States. Second, Kim has made possession of nuclear arms an essential component of North Korean national identity and placed it at the core of his regime's legitimacy. Where, in the past, his father had been at least temporarily willing to negotiate on aspects of the nuclear program for economic gain, Pak assesses Kim's stance hardened as the program matured and his leverage increased. As a result, she believes Kim may no longer be willing to compromise on any part of the nuclear program (228).

Perhaps most worrisome are Pak's assertions that Kim's hubris is increasing and that he believes he has greater freedom of action than ever before. She notes Kim has been very good at reading the United States and calibrating his actions. But she also argues that Kim has "witnessed how Washington has no desire for a military conflict and that South Korea and the United States would restrain each other from taking actions that could potentially spark a war" (237). Combined with a strong sense that the PRC would not abandon North Korea in a crisis, and that the United States would prevent South Korea or Japan from developing nuclear arms, Kim might well be emboldened to take increasingly aggressive actions to undermine the US-South Korean alliance or pursue reunification of the peninsula, seemingly secure in the knowledge no serious combined force is willing to confront him. So, the Kim family regime remains rational but increasingly dangerous, as it feels more secure than perhaps at any moment in recent decades.

In his book, *Rationality in the North Korean Regime: Understanding the Kims' Strategy of Provocation*, Dr. David W. Shin squarely tackles the question of Kim's rationality. Shin, a former US Army colonel and current faculty member at the National Intelligence University, settles this question firmly. The book opens with an excellent discussion of rationality and strategy making. He correctly points out that many observers are quick to render a judgment of the Kims' rationality but fail to define rationality. Shin uses a seven-component framework to analyze the actions of the Kim family regime through each of its ruling leaders. The framework components are achieving the desired outcome (success), the role of emotion, assessments based in fact (truth), a logical design (strategy), the use of appropriate resources, the probability of success, and accounting for supporting and opposing actors. In assessing nearly every instance of major aggressive action by North Korea since 1950, Shin convincingly finds the three Kim leaders have been quite rational. Overall, the book was a welcome find and should be essential reading for anyone wanting to understand North Korea.

Shin buttresses this assessment with a strong accounting of Kim Jong-Un's rationality. Shin correctly notes that Kim understands he cannot survive by relying solely on his lineage. Accordingly, Kim has taken several steps to consolidate his control of the regime through killings, purges, and tightened

surveillance, as noted previously. But, Kim also recognizes an iron grip alone can prove self-defeating, so he has returned to his grandfather's policy (*byungjin*) of prioritizing economic and military development simultaneously. In addition to creating an island of wealth around P'yŏngyang, Kim has permitted once-banned local markets (*jangmadang*) to operate under heavy regulations. Where some might see such action as limited reform that could one day seriously threaten regime control, Kim recognizes the markets are an opportunity to reinforce his control since many people are wholly dependent on the markets for survival.

Shin also points out, like Pak, that Kim has proven to be quite savvy in his dealings with the United States and the PRC. Not only has he prevented any new significant US action from undermining his regime or his nuclear program, but he has also managed to retain the strong support of the PRC to the same end (evidenced recently by the PRC's veto of proposed new United Nations sanctions). Finally, Kim had done all this while pushing forward with further development of the nuclear weapons program, conducting 31 missile tests in 2022 alone (through June). As Shin summarizes, "Kim could use high-level nuclear negotiations to weaken the U.S.-South Korea alliance as a part of his demands for a U.S. security guarantee, and take advantage of opportunities to gain support from the North's traditional allies to resist the U.S.'s maximum pressure" (289).

Shin's analysis of Kim's rationality is also impressive because it accounts for the possibility that emotion can play a positive role in supporting rationality and successful outcomes (9–10). This uncommon view is important to consider, given the peculiar history and nature of the Kim family regime. As Shin points out, the Kims have imbued North Korean national history with a deep sense of being a guerilla state, first defeating the Japanese occupation and now defending itself from the constant threat of attack from the United States and its South Korean lackeys. The Kim doctrine of national self-reliance (*juche*) has been criticized by some observers as a sham, given its turgid, propaganda-style language and the reality of North Korea's heavy dependence on support from the PRC over the decades. Yet, this siege mentality and self-view of underdog self-reliance is clearly a strong motivating factor in Kim's strategic thinking. So far, he has seemed adept at balancing emotional motivation with the practical calculation of ends, ways, and means. This balance is evident in Kim's emotional characterization of nuclear weapons as a "treasured sword" that will protect North Korea—which is also a calculated recognition that states who have given up on nuclear weapons programs (for example, Iraq, Libya, and Ukraine) have been attacked by larger powers. Shin also notes the reunification of the Korean peninsula, on North Korean terms, remains Kim's ultimate deeply emotional aim (286).

In the end, Shin (like Pak) expresses concern that the chance of miscalculation on Kim's part is increasing as he feels emboldened by the progress of his nuclear

weapons program. Shin cites Kim's 2017 threats of preemptive use of nuclear ICBMs against the United States as an indication of this. However, Shin concludes Kim's strong desire to possess a nuclear deterrent and his willingness to talk with Trump in 2018 means Kim can be deterred from using nuclear weapons (290).

What readers take away from both books is a clear sense that the North Korean problem has potentially entered a dangerous new phase. Kim Jong-Un is young and charismatic. He has proven himself to be ruthless and highly intelligent. For over 10 years, he has skillfully manipulated two global powers to his advantage. He is adapting his regime and his nation's economy to preserve his rule. Kim likely possesses the ability to strike the United States with nuclear weapons, and he is presumably building a so-called "second strike" capability to prevent preemptive strikes against his nuclear weapons program. He also continues to enjoy the PRC's backing, which is a strong counterbalance to almost any threat the United States can pose to him.

Additionally, Kim possesses a massive and capable conventional deterrent capability primarily in his long-range artillery and stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons. As both authors point out, war with North Korea is simply an unacceptable option. Conventional strikes against Seoul, South Korea's capital city, would quickly kill tens of thousands of people, wound hundreds of thousands more, and devastate one of the world's top economic centers. A nuclear strike against any major Japanese or US city would do the same.

Both authors make sensible, necessary US policy and strategy recommendations for dealing with North Korea. These include maintaining strong alliances with South Korea and other regional allies like Japan, continuing to use economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure to constrain Kim's resources and options, and working toward regional dialogue that places more burden on the PRC and Russia to deal with North Korea. None of these measures alone or combined are sufficient to end the North Korean threat, as the past many years have shown.

As Pak and Shin point out, Kim may be willing to risk increasingly aggressive actions to achieve his aims. Future conditions such as economic crises or natural disasters in North Korea, perceptions of instability in the South Korean government, fissures in the US-South Korea alliance, perceived slights from the United States or South Korea, or even just a desire to claim a victory, might well encourage Kim to lash out. A sudden attack against US forces (such as on the USS *Pueblo* in 1968 or the shoot down of the EC-121 in 1969) or on South Korean forces (such as the sinking of the navy corvette *Cheonan* in 2010) is quite possible. Such an incident is a no-win situation for the United States. It would force

US leaders to balance a desire to punish North Korea with the risk of escalation a response in kind would entail.

Planners today must prepare detailed contingency plans to deal with such provocations from North Korea. These issues, while serious, are near-term problems that require containment. Planners must remember North Korea's so-called provocations are just as likely intended to deter more significant US and South Korean actions. The larger, unpalatable choice facing the United States is a question of very long-term strategy—attempt to change the regime in North Korea or accept it as a nuclear power.

Seeking regime change would require the United States to play the long game against North Korea. Both Pak and Shin point toward the possibility of undermining the Kim family regime or that it might destabilize on its own due to outside influences. Despite predictions of collapse or overthrow of the Kim family regime for many years, it has not happened, nor do any requisite conditions seem to exist. The United States has no practical, sustained access to the North Korean people, nor does any of the broader populace seem to possess the means or drive to organize a coup. Kim appears to control the elite firmly, who are probably too few in number to overcome the vast security apparatuses monitoring them and defending the regime, or he has co-opted them. It is possible some portion of the security services might choose to seize power, but they would be checked by other sectors of the security services, which all watch one another. There is also no assurance a usurper would be friendly to the United States and South Korea. Also, the PRC is likely to intervene to stabilize North Korea in the event of a leadership crisis there. Finally, the challenge of reunifying the Korean peninsula would be enormous and complex. Its success would almost certainly depend on the United States organizing a vast international financing and support effort to assist a South Korean-led campaign to reintegrate with and rebuild the North.

Shin more squarely advocates for considering the alternative—accepting North Korea as a nuclear state and learning to coexist with it. He argues that good-faith US negotiations with North Korea, and military confidence-building measures between the two Koreas, could normalize relations between all parties. These actions would permit peace treaties that could assuage North Korean fears of US aggression and perhaps even persuade it from fully developing a nuclear ICBM capability. Others, such as Victor Cha, have argued the United States provided North Korea a nonaggression guarantee in the 2005 Six-Party Talks Joint Statement, but North Korea quickly dismissed it as disingenuous. Shin does not explain what it would take to alter Kim's siege mentality or to have him accept the South Korean government as legitimate. Also, Shin's suggested approach seems to be grounded in a view that Kim is pursuing only regime survival and not

reunification of the peninsula under his control. Finally, Shin correctly states the PRC will play an important role in trying to influence North Korean behavior.

Indeed, the United States must recognize North Korea and the People's Republic of China are a package deal. Beijing may well be playing the long game concerning North Korea. The two nations have a shared cultural history stretching back many centuries. While the two do not share the warmest relations today, China views North Korea as vital to its security, as evidenced by its direct intervention in the Korean War to fight against US forces. Beijing has also spent vast sums on keeping the Kim regime afloat and retaining North Korea as a territorial buffer zone. Should North Korea become a fully nuclear state, it would still be almost solely dependent on PRC support, giving China an unmatched degree of leverage over the Kim family regime. It would also provide the People's Republic of China with something the United States does not have in the region—a nuclear-capable ally. This possibility gives Beijing a potentially significant counterweight for any effort it wants to undertake, including the forceable seizure of Taiwan. As such, Korea may well be the future key to regional security in East Asia.

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