

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN NORTH KOREA

By

DR. C. KENNETH QUINONES

MERCY CORPS INTERNATIONAL

Kim Jong Il has consummated his long anticipated succession to his father Kim Il Sung's place in the sun with a flurry of unanticipated spectacle. For Kim Jong Il, famous for his love of dramatic film, all the world has served as a stage since his father's death in July 1994. He has mesmerized people around the world with masterful manipulation of their fear and curiosity of his tiny, impoverished and malnourished yet militarily potent nation of twenty two million or so subjects.

Since August, 1998, the much maligned Kim Jong Il orchestrated a startling, unnerving climax to his one man show. With a single, failed launching of a rocket, the Taepodong-2, he stunted the world, enraged Japan, frightened South Koreans and confused the United States. As the entire world listened and looked on, Kim brazenly berated Japan for challenging his "sovereignty" to launch a rocket over Japanese territory. Before the world could catch its breath, his mass media proclaimed the unbelievable - the Democratic People's Republic of Korea had commemorated its fiftieth anniversary by launching a satellite into orbit around the world. The deed fell short of reality, but the spectacle achieved Kim Jong Il's desired result.

Appearing pleased with himself, Kim strutted onto the stage of the massive Supreme People's Assembly hall in Pyongyang on September 5, 1998 to accept the acclaim of his million man army, the Korean Workers Party and the hungry multitude of North Koreans. The assembled crowd of humanity jumped to its feet to greet him with raucous applause and cheers. Without uttering a word and dressed in normal daily attire, Kim humbled foreign observers around the world. For months they had competed with one another to accurately read his mind. In the end, Kim did nothing they had predicted. To their amazement, he even declined the title of president and, instead, bestowed it permanently on his father, then he calmly restored the once potent Defense Council as the chief organ of state and named himself chairman.

What is the political significance of all of this? Will Kim Jong Il continue his father's policies or gradually alter them? Why is there no new five year economic plan? What will he do regarding South Korea? Why did he revise the Constitution and put military men at the pinnacle of his regime? No one outside the DPRK government can know the precise answers to these and numerous other questions, but the urgency of the situation requires that we make at least some educated guesses.

Let us begin by putting this small land of paradox in perspective. Compared to its neighbors, it is a mere dot on the globe. Geographically it is smaller than any single administrative district in China, Russia and the United States. North Korea's population of twenty two million falls far short of even the population of any single province in China, and is only half that of South Korea. Economically, Pyongyang is no match for any of its immediate neighbors, be it China, South Korea or Japan. Despite all of this, North Korea retains the military ability to explode into armed rage on short notice. Consequently, it is feared internationally as a potent threat to peace in northeast Asia.

Kim Jong Il's preeminent goal is to perpetuate his father's legacy and regime with its political and economic "juche" system. All else is of secondary importance. For half a century, he and his people have been educated to believe they are engaged in a war of survival against the "imperialists," specifically the United States and Japan. Ultimate survival would require total selflessness: loyalty and submission to the "Great Leader," total support for the Korean People's Army and personal sacrifice, even to the point of dying for the state in battle or famine.

Politically, Kim Jong Il rules North Korea as the Chairman of the Defense Council, the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Armed Forces, and the Secretary General of the Korean Workers Party (KWP). Kim's role as Supreme Commander allows him more than control

of the Korean People's Army (KPA) and the DPRK government. Looking from the outside into North Korea, Kim's title appears presumptuous for the ruler of such a tiny nation. In the eyes of his people, however, the title makes him the equal of his nemesis, the Commander in Chief of the United Nations Command or CINCUNC, who also happens to be the Commander in Chief of US Forces Korea.

Also, looking north from South Korea, we see a bristling fortress running parallel from west to east along the northern edge of the DMZ. Manning this 151 mile wide fortress of barbed wire, mine fields, concrete bunkers, trenches and hidden artillery is an army of one million people. Given their forward deployment close to the DMZ and high degree of mechanization, a surprise attack could place them in Seoul with a matter of hours.

None of this should be ignored, but for a change, let us look beyond the obvious fortifications and uniformed multitude. In the hinterland of North Korea we find an economically bankrupt nation close to starvation that has few reliable allies and little if any international respect. The entire economy is dysfunctional. The infrastructure is obsolete, rusted and decaying. Buildings and roads are crumbling. The soil's fertility has been depleted, the destruction of forests is quickening the erosion of land. The people are hungry, cold, unwashed and poorly educated.

What is going on here? Is North Korea a mighty armed nation or a declining regional power? Again, we must force ourselves to look beyond the obvious, beyond the camouflage of North Korea and seek out the reality.

For half a century, Kim Jong Il's father convinced us he was the master of a militarily mighty paradise. Only since his death have been able to look beyond this facade at the reality. Subsequently we have found the nation to be in serious disrepair.

At the same time, however, Kim Jong Il has struggled to perpetuate his father's myth of invincibility. But as the veil of secrecy has been lifted and the reality exposed, Kim has shifted to other means to deter his foes. For him, his first line of defense is no longer secrecy but rather fear and unpredictability. Kim has been working since before the beginning of his reign to convince us that he is a dangerous and irrational leader. This lover of drama and movies has captivated us with his charade of pretending to rule a mighty nation capable of building nuclear weapons, launching ballistic missiles against the US and Japan, and of conquering South Korea in a matter of days. He has made us forget our strengths and his weaknesses while focusing our fears on his quest of the ability to build weapons of mass destruction and use them against us.

Certainly no one would deny that Kim Jong Il rules a potentially dangerous nation, but that does not make it either invincible or capable of victory. All the time, Kim has worked to maximize our fears so he can maximize the possible concessions he can gain through negotiations from us so he can use these resources to pursue his primary goal - survival of his regime.

CONTINUITY OR CHANGE?

Given North Korea's incredible problems, what course of action is Kim Jong Il likely to pursue? To better understand Chairman Kim's situation, let us imagine that he is driving a cart pulled by two horses, one military and the other civilian. Since he holds the reins, he can emphasize in his policies either what the military favors or what his civilian advisers favor. In other words, he can appear either warlike or peaceful, hostile or conciliatory. The arrangement keeps him firmly in control of the entire government while affording him considerable flexibility to respond to changing circumstances surrounding his small domain. This suggests that North Korea's changing posture is intentional and not a consequence of friction within his government over which direction the nation should go. The goal remains the same - survival of the *juche*

system, only the methods for achieving this goal change, and it is Kim Jong Il who decides when to make the change.

Since July, 1998, he has emphasized to the outside world his military posture. Another submarine appears on South Korea's east coast. The DPRK Foreign Ministry on July 8 warned the United States that Pyongyang would restart its nuclear program unless Washington fulfills its pledges under the Agreed Framework. Japan was berated for allegedly returning to militarism. Then on the eve of his succession, Kim Jong Il shocked South Korea, angered Japan and confused the United States by launching a long range ballistic missile over Japan.

Is all of this a prelude to war? I think not. Surely North Korea's military leaders recognize that they are hardly in a position to win a war against the US, South Korea and Japan. Certainly they must recognize the poor state of North Korea's economy, its inability to feed its people and lack of powerful allies to support it in war. Given this reality, North Korea is not likely to be the first nation in history to commit national suicide. On the contrary, its leader Kim Jong Il's objective is just the opposite - preserve the *juche* national system.

Instead, I think Kim Jong Il's dramatic projection of his nation's military capabilities is an assertion of his policy of deterrence. In other words, he is doing what the United Nations Command frequently does in South Korea: publicly flex its military muscle to deter North Korea from considering war as a way out of its present predicament. After all, this is one of the purposes of the Ulchi Focus Lense exercise conducted each August.

North Korea's military might is indeed impressive and potentially devastating if unleashed upon South Korea. The Republic of Korea and the United States must be on the alert and maintain a potent deterrent force on the Korean peninsula. At the same time, however, it is essential to view North Korea's military might in proper perspective. Not only has the North's ability to launch a conventional, first strike land assault been eroded by its deteriorating economy, the entire geo-political context surrounding the Korean peninsula has further diminished the potency of Pyongyang's war making capability.

THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF POWER IN NORTHEAST ASIA

The Korean peninsula today is profoundly different from 1950, even from 1990 when the Cold War ended and the Soviet empire collapsed. Ever since, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has struggled to survive in the wake of tremendous change. One consequence is that it is gradually doing what many once thought impossible -- opening itself to the world. In the process, it is exposing its long cloistered interior to external stimuli for change. Two years stand out as possible watersheds in this process: 1991 and 1995. The Communist Bloc and the Soviet Union ended in 1991. No longer could it turn to Moscow or Beijing for military assistance and markets for its goods. For the small yet potentially volatile Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), this meant the end of the world as it had known it since birth in 1948.

This external stimulus for change set in motion a complete alteration of Pyongyang's foreign relations. By October 1994, North Korea's relations with its former champions, Moscow and Beijing, had cooled significantly while relations with its primary enemy the United States had warmed impressively with the signing of the Agreed Framework. Along the way, North and South Korea entered the United Nations and signed the Basic Agreements of 1992 in which they pledged mutual respect, among other things.

The swirl of diplomatic realignments that followed the Soviet Union's demise appear to have been of little political consequences within North Korea, other than to cause its leadership to

reaffirm their commitment to perpetuate Kim Il Sung's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism, *juche*. Even Kim Il Sung's death in July 1994 was not a stimulus for change. On the contrary, North Korea's leadership rushed to reaffirm their allegiance to him and his legacy, the *juche* system. Across the land, North Koreans followed this example and wailed at the foot of his statue as they committed themselves to become "human bombs" to defend and to preserve his legacy. Kim Il Sung's son and heir Kim Jong Il was but one in this multitude. He avowed continuity, and labeled those who might urge "reform" heirs of the bankrupt Soviet system. Even worse for the prospects for change and reform, the Korean Workers Party (KWP) daily newspaper, *Nodong shinmun*, judged advocates of reform to be traitors to *juche* and to the memory of their "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung.

Change, however, began in 1995. It came from a source totally unforeseen - nature. The torrential rains and subsequent flood of August 1995 washed away North Korea's corn and vegetable crops, exposing the structural weakness of the DPRK's economy, its agricultural system. The natural consequences of flood and famine, not ideology, have since stimulated change despite the resolute opposition of the KWP and the Korean People's Army (KPA)

Surprisingly, the pace of change in North Korea's policies, particularly its foreign policies, has not been matched by the United States, South Korea and Japan. After successfully negotiating with North Korea a resolution to the nuclear crisis of 1992 to 1994, the pace of inducing North Korea into engaging the international community stalled. The amazing extent of North-South reconciliation achieved between 1990 and 1992 did not resume once the Agreed Framework was signed. The agreement assuaged but did not overcome the mistrust that the nuclear crisis had rekindled in North-South relations.

THE US AND ROK - FALLING BEHIND

Additionally, Seoul squabbled with Washington over how best to deal with North Korea, and questioned Washington's wisdom concerning implementation of the Agreed Framework. The helicopter incident of December 1994 further complicated the situation. The KPA postponed the implementation of an agreement reached just before the incident between the DPRK Foreign Ministry and the Department of State concerning the opening of liaison offices.

Washington, moreover, began to argue with itself over how to deal with Pyongyang. Indecision and colliding priorities within the Clinton Administration retarded progress toward the resolution of outstanding US-DPRK issues concerning ballistic missile production and export and terrorism. Meanwhile, Tokyo watched in dismay as President Kim Young Sam pressed Japan to commit funds to support implementation of the Agreed Framework yet at the same time insulted Tokyo integrity with accusations about its intentions regarding the tiny island of Tokdo.

Virtually overlooked at the time was Pyongyang's rather impressive pragmatism regarding its dealings with the outside world. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) quietly resumed its work at North Korea's nuclear research center at (N)yongbyon. Americans also arrived there to begin placing the facilities spent nuclear fuel in safe, long term storage. After some starting up problems, the DPRK in June 1995 committed itself to joining KEDO. By year's end, it had accepted Seoul's operational leadership in the project, reversed itself and agreed to the construction of a South Korean designed light water reactors by a South Korean company at Pyongyang's designated site in North Korea, Sinpo.

PYONGYANG'S OPENNING STALLS

Once again, just as North Korea seemed to be putting its policies on the right track, it again erred grievously. This time its misdeed was of less serious proportions since it did not involve the nuclear proliferation. On the other hand, the grounding on South Korea's east coast in September

1996 of a North Korean submarine filled with commandoes did have very adverse consequences concerning both South Koreans' confidence in a policy of inducing North Korea to become a responsible member of the world community. After considerable effort on the part of the United States, Pyongyang eventually publicly expressed regret to Seoul for the incident. Again, this was another pioneering break through on the part of North Korea, and in the relations between the two Koreas.

Unfortunately, however, the submarine incident of 1996, like the helicopter incident of December 1994 when a US Army helicopter was shot down just north of the DMZ, further blurred the foresight of policy makers in Washington and Seoul. Instead of focusing on resolving current problems to resume progress toward a less troubled future, they refocused on the history of hostility and mistrust. They appear to have concluded it would be best to link past misdeeds to future actions. In the process, they created a log jam in negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington, Pyongyang and Tokyo and until early this year, between Pyongyang and Seoul.

For example, Washington insists that the DPRK take several steps before economic sanctions will be phased out. This is all well and good, except that Washington has been adding to its list since 1992 when it was first presented by then State Department Under Secretary for Political Affairs Arnold Kantor to DPRK Korean Workers Party Secretary Kim Yong Sun. The list began with a requirement that Pyongyang renounce terrorism, then came reference to the return of Japanese Red Army terrorist to Tokyo, then the end of ballistic missile development and exports, and most recently participation in the Four Party Talks process. Japan at the same time insists on an accounting of whether the DPRK government is responsible for the disappearance of some Japanese citizens twenty years ago. Again, this is understandable, but linking the past to the future tends to preserve the past more than open the way for improved relations. The accumulative affect is to preserve the Cold War on the Korean peninsula.

Since the signing of the Agreed Framework between the US and the DPRK in October 1994, Washington appears to have gradually reoriented itself to clinging to the past. It's policy initiatives have resembled serving up old wine in new bottles. The time would appear proper for it to come up with a new recipe for its efforts to induce North Korea out of the past and into the international community.

This will require that Seoul, Tokyo and Washington step out of their past policy patterns and venture forward with creative, new initiatives aimed at inducing Pyongyang to abandon its past reliance on coercive diplomacy to pursue its national goals. President Kim Dae-jung appears intent upon doing just this. Maybe it is time for Washington and Tokyo to respect his leadership, to support his endeavors and to fulfill their previous commitments to the DPRK, particularly regarding the Korea Energy Development Organization (KEDO). Surely then the pace of change in the foreign policies of the U.S. and Japan toward the DPRK can catch up to the change which that small nation has achieved since 1991. Otherwise, an accidental encounter on the Demilitarized Zone could abruptly and unwittingly thrust everyone back into the Korean War. Surely this is too high a price to pay for the current preference to link future actions to past deeds.

The administration of President Kim Dae Jung has initiated so-called "sunshine diplomacy" which accents persistent private and official overtures to Pyongyang aimed at opening multiple channels of communication to facilitate reconciliation. Since assuming the presidency in February, 1998, President Kim has made several attempts to resume official North-South dialogue. North Korea has thus far dismissed the efforts. But Pyongyang has been much more responsive to initiatives at the private level. Business between the two Korea's is expanding gradually. Tourism to the North from the South is under serious consideration. South Korea remains committed to

fulfilling its pledges under the Agreed Framework, despite waivering by Washington and Tokyo.

Building reconciliation after fifty years of intense mutual distrust created by a devastating war will take a great deal of time and consistent effort. If we understand that North Korea's goal is self preservation, we need not be so fearful of it. Then too,the greater the extent of reconciliation between South and North Korea, the less the chances of war on the Korean peninsula.

can slowly train ourselves to think of North Korea less as an enemy and more as and that destain and So-called "sunshine diplomacy"

NORTH KOREA'S OPENING DOOR POLICY

North Korea, the society once dismissed in most Western nations as an "unchanging, stagnate, secretive Stalinist" state is gradually engaging the international community and undergoing glacial yet significant change. Never before has the DPRK been so accessible to foreigners. Since the Korean War of 1950-53, Pyongyang has shrouded its interior and population of 22 million in a cloak of secrecy. Visits by foreigners were carefully managed political events, crafted to accent North Korea's positive aspects and to veil its shortcomings. The DPRK government, determined to project the nation as a socialist paradise united in a "single mind, single heart" behind the "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung, cautiously selected and guided all visitors. Even as recently as February 1996, a foreigner staying at the Koryo Hotel in central Pyongyang could find no more than two or three fellow foreigners to converse with at supper.

Now, only two years later, foreigners from around the world, not just a few socialist or Non-aligned nations, fill Pyongyang's hotels all year long. Representatives of the once despised United Nations, North Korea's primary enemy during the Korean War, now live and work in six of North Korea's eight provinces. Businessmen, engineers and technicians from Europe, North and South America, Australia and elsewhere in Asia fill each of the two flights from Beijing on Tuesday or Saturday. They arrive to seek joint ventures in North Korea's free trade zone of Najin-Sonbong and elsewhere in the DPRK.

The critical and growing barter trade with China, Japan and South Korea attracts thousands of citizens from these countries. Then too ethnic Koreans from China, Japan and the United States further fill the hotels of Pyongyang, Wonsan and Najin-Sonbong. The Sino-Korean border is relatively open. Since 1996, tens of thousands of Koreans resident in China have visited their relatives in North Korea's northeastern provinces. A smaller but not insignificant number of North Koreans have ventured into China to visit relatives in the hope of obtaining food.

Possibly the most amazing visitors are the Americans - still considered by most North Koreans to be their most despised enemy because of the Korean War. But even these "imperialists" have been allowed to live and to work since June 1995 at North Korea's once highly secret Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center. Other Americans represent the US Army, and have been visiting North Korea since June 1996. Both groups are now out numbered by the growing presence of American famine relief workers. One can occasionally encounter groups of American diplomats, Congressional delegations, journalists and specialists working with the Korea Energy Development Organization (KEDO), among others.

The Genesis of Opening

North Korean leader Kim Jong Il appears to have set out in 1994 to preserve unaltered his father's legacy but, paradoxically, the younger Kim's brief period of rule has brought considerable change. Kim Jong Il after his father's death faced a profound challenge: how could he preserve the Democratic People's Republic (DPRK) unchanged while contending with a worsening diplomatic and economic crisis? Daily since his father died, external pressures and domestic realities confront Kim Jong Il with a choice between trying to prevent change, which could eventually risk the possible collapse of his regime, or manage "adjustments" to his father's legacy in the hope of improving the chances for survival of the nation and his father's *juche* system?

Initially, Kim Jong Il appears to have hesitated in making a choice, preferring instead to focus domestically on paying prolonged and elaborate respect to his father's memory. Externally,

Kim concentrated on the politically relatively safe issue of improving relations with the United States by concluding the Agreed Framework in October 1994. Doing so was less problematical for him immediately after his father's death because the improvement of relations with the United States was Kim Il Sung's dying wish. Pyongyang's conservatives could hardly object. The same could have been true of North-South relations since Kim Il Sung had agreed to a summit with President Kim Young Sam in the summer of 1994 but, unfortunately for all concerned, the latter Kim alienated the North by insulting the memory of Kim Il Sung and, in the process, gave Pyongyang's conservatives the excuse they may have sought to obstruct a resumption of North-South dialogue.

Internally, Kim Jong Il has had less flexibility to work with. For one year, July 1994 till the fall of 1995, he was conspicuous by his absence as North Korea's trade, industrial and agricultural production all plummeted. Then the torrential rains of the summer of 1995 came, creating a national food crisis and compelling Kim Jong Il to decide in favor of permitting domestic change for the sake of national survival and economic revitalization.

Stimulus for Change - A Traumatic Decade

The impetus for this decision, however, dates from 1990. The decade of the 1990's has been a traumatic period for North Korea. First came the demise of one of North Korea's foremost sponsors, the Soviet Union, and the dysfunctional Communist Bloc. At the same time, China began to emerge as a new economic force in the world market. Possibly motivated by uncertainty about the DPRK's future, Kim Il Sung first sought rapprochement with South Korea, the UN, and even the U.S. By October 1994, North Korea was surrounded by a dramatically altered international environment and its relations with friends and foes had undergone extensive adjustment since 1990. Two years stand out as possible watersheds in this process; 1991 and 1995. The Communist Bloc and the Soviet Union ended in 1991. For the small yet potentially volatile Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), this meant the end of the world as it had known it since the DPRK's birth in 1948.

Russia: Distant Friends

The Soviet Union's collapse shocked North Korea's economy, and led to a radical revision of the DPRK's relationship with Moscow. Pyongyang soon found itself stripped of access to low cost crude oil, food grain and other essential resources. Some seventy percent of its traditional export market evaporated. When Russia took over from the USSR, Moscow's new leadership said it wished to continue cordial relations with the DPRK, but then established full diplomatic and commercial relations with the Republic of Korea. Any hope Pyongyang had of reclaiming its former markets in Russia were dashed by Seoul's ability to out compete Pyongyang both in terms of price and quality. Soon, Moscow notified Pyongyang that it would revise their long standing defense treaty; no longer would Russia rush to North Korea's defense except in the event that it was the victim of external aggression. Also, any future arms deals would be on a cash and carry basis; there would be no more long term, concessional credit. By 1992, Moscow-Pyongyang relations were frigid.

China: No More Benevolent Big Brother

Pyongyang soon learned that Beijing's impressive lunge toward prosperity caused it to put national interests before communist collective collegiality. Deng Xiaoping told Kim Il Sung during the latter's October 1991 visit to Beijing that the days of cheap oil and grain, and interest free loans had ended. On January 26, 1992, China advised North Korea that their substantial barter trade would be put on a cash basis. Already critically short of hard currency, Pyongyang's faltering economy sustained another heavy blow. Unable to make hard currency payments to China,

China's oil pipeline across the western end of the Sino-Korea border was shut down later in the year. Then in September 1992, Beijing announced the normalization of diplomatic and commercial relations with Seoul. Pyongyang found itself left out in the cold by not just Moscow, but also Beijing.

Japan - Frustrated Expectations

Decades of trade and relatively substantial Japanese investment in North Korea have yet to be converted into normal diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Pyongyang. Expectations of diplomatic normalization peaked in 1990 when Kanemaru Shin, chief Japanese delegate and then (since deceased) ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) member in the lower house of the Japanese Diet, Japan Socialist Party (JSP) Vice Chairman of the Central Executive Committee Tanabe Makoto, and Korean Workers' Party (KWP) General Secretary of the Central Committee Kim Young Sun signed the "Joint Declaration" of September 28, 1990 in Pyongyang.

The eight point declaration called on the Japanese government to "fully and officially apology and compensate to the DPRK" for Japan's thirty six year colonization of Korea. is now deceased, met Kim Il Sung on September 29 in Pyongyang. The three parties also urged the quick normalization of relations, and the development of bilateral political, economic and cultural exchanges. Also, the rights of Koreans in Japan should be guaranteed, Korea's peaceful unification should be achieved through North-South dialogue, the nuclear threat should be eliminated from "all regions on the globe", government-to-government talks should begin by November 1990, and the three political parties (LDP, JSP and KWP) should strengthen their mutual cooperation "in the interest of peace in Asia and the world."

Five weeks later, official discussions on establishing diplomatic relations between the DPRK and Japan got under way in Beijing on November 11, 1990. After eight inconclusive rounds of discussion, however, the talks were suspended in November 1992 when Japan expressed concern about North Korea's nuclear intentions. The talks finally resumed in September 1997 in Beijing, but once again proved inconclusive when the DPRK objected to Japan's inquiry about missing Japanese citizens reported by the Japanese press to have been abducted by North Korean agents in the late 1970's.

Success in these government-to-government talks, Pyongyang had hoped, would have enabled Tokyo to fill the commercial void left after the Soviet Union's collapse. As with Vietnam, Japan's private business sector was prepared to expand its engagement with North Korea and economic cooperation with greater access to Japan's market, technology and capital. Pyongyang hosted in October 1991 a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) conference to consider economic development of the Tumen River region. In addition to the DPRK delegation, representatives also attended from Japan, the ROK, China, the USSR and Mongolia. Subsequently, Pyongyang announced that it would establish a free trade zone in the northeastern most corner of the country at the twin ports of Najin-Sonbong.

The following summer, a sixty member private trade mission from Japan arrived in Pyongyang on July 14, 1992 to seek out possible joint venture opportunities in North Korea's light industries and mining sector. In anticipation of normalization of relations with Japan, the DPRK followed up the issuance of several laws designed to facilitate investment in joint ventures in North Korea. But eight rounds of diplomatic talks ultimately fell short of expectations, and the laws still out number new Japan-DPRK joint ventures established since 1992. All of this proved premature, at least regarding Japan.

Toward Reconciliation with Seoul

Paradoxically, as North Korea's former allies distanced themselves from Pyongyang and reached out to Seoul, Kim Il Sung did the very same thing. All through 1991 and until September 1992, North Korea engaged its arch rival the ROK and foremost enemy the United States. The first high level South-North talks were held in Seoul on September 4, 1990. While these continued, the two Koreas entered the United Nations together with little commotion on September 18, 1991. North-South dialogue subsequently yielded astonishing results beginning in December 1991 and continuing well into 1992.

South and North Korea at the end of 1991 formulated what has now become known as the Basic Agreements. The first was the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation. It was followed on December 31, 1991 by the Declaration of Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula which, if fully implemented, would ensure that both countries are free of nuclear weapons. These Basic Agreements went into effect on February 19, 1992. Four joint North-South Commissions were established to formulate guidelines for implementation of the agreements. These were in the areas of: military issues, nuclear inspections, economic cooperation and social and cultural exchanges. In separate, parallel talks, the two nations' Red Cross officials agreed on June 12 to begin arranging exchange visits between separated families beginning on August 25, 1992. But then came the discovery of suspicious activity at North Korea's nuclear research center, and a spiral of mistrust soon halted North/South dialogue. Efforts at reconciliation gave way to a revival of Cold War rhetoric and confrontation by October, 1992. For the next four years, the United States assumed the lead in dealing with Pyongyang while the two Koreas postured with one another.

The US: From Containment to Engagement

The thawing of US-DPRK relations dates from October 31, 1988, but did not gain momentum until 1992. The cautious beginning in 1988 came to be known in the State Department as the "modest initiative". In support of South Korean efforts to move North Korea away from confrontation and toward reconciliation, the US announced its willingness to encourage unofficial, non governmental exchanges, to allow limited commercial exports of humanitarian goods from the US to the DPRK, and to permit US diplomats to again hold substantive discussions with DPRK officials in neutral settings. Occasional meetings in Beijing led to the opening of the so-called "Beijing channel", a formal process where by each side could pass messages between one another but only through their embassies in Beijing and only in writing. But little else happened until 1991 when the US evangelist Billy Graham visited Kim Il Sung in April 1991. Kim Il Sung during an April 12 interview with a Washington Times correspondent proclaimed his desire to normalize relations with the US. A month later, on May 13, the North Korean People's Army returned to the UN Command the remains of fifteen military personnel believed to be Americans who had been missing since the Korean War.

The thaw continued in 1992. US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Arnold Kantor held the first-ever high level US-DPRK political discussions North Korea's Workers Party International Affairs Division Director Kim Yong-sun. Both sides took turns stating their governments' respective positions of divisive issues. There were no negotiations, but the precedent had been set for future dialogue between the two, long time enemies. The US government permitted the export of large amounts of wheat and corn to North Korea. The year ended with the first visit of a US Senator to North Korea, Bob Smith of New Hampshire. But prospects for further improvement of US-DPRK relations, like North-South dialogue, collapsed at the end of 1992 on the eve of President Kim Young Sam's election in South Korea.

REVERSAL OF DIRECTIONS - 1993

In four short years, after four decades of relative continuity, North Korea had radically altered its international relations. The DPRK's relations with its primary allies, Russia and China, had become frigid while relations with its arch enemies, the U.S. and South Korea, had warmed. But then, just as quickly, North Korea's relations with its former enemies again cooled because of intensifying suspicions over Pyongyang's intentions regarding its nuclear development program despite commitments both to Seoul and the international community not to develop nuclear weapons. Immediately after the North-South Prime Ministerial talks in Pyongyang in September, 1992, progress in North-South dialogue and US-DPRK stalled, then seemed headed toward war by the spring of 1993.

On March 12, 1993, Kim Il Sung captured the world's attention, and incited considerable concern, when his government proclaimed North Korea's intention to withdraw from the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (N.P.T.). A global crisis ensued. The causes for this reversal are unclear. His diplomatic realignment initiated in the early 1990's had gradually enmeshed the DPRK in a network of commitments and obligations, something he possibly had not foreseen or believed incorrectly that he could manage. Once he had initiated a policy of diplomatic engagement with international organizations, South Korea and the United States, he discovered that his ability to control the situation began to slip away because of the reciprocal obligations and mutual responsibilities of seeking the benefits of affiliation with the international community.

Membership in the United Nations, for example, had a price - some limitations on national sovereignty. Before UN agencies were willing to establish programs in North Korea, they insisted on information, which collided with Pyongyang's preference for secrecy. As a signatory to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (N.P.T.), the DPRK was called upon to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to its most secret facility, the Nyongbyon Nuclear Research Center. The same was true of the Basic Agreement Seoul and Pyongyang signed in 1992. Growing discomfort with these entangling obligations may account, at least in part, for North Korea's rather impulsive and counterproductive decision to try to disengage from the N.P.T. and related commitments beginning late in 1992.

Then equally abruptly, Kim Il Sung again reversed directions in June 1994 during his history making meeting with former U.S. President Carter. Their talks set the stage for a resumption of the US-DPRK nuclear talks, and restored North Korea's pursuit of integration into the international community.

Continuity Preferred Within

The external stimuli for change set in motion a complete alteration of Pyongyang's foreign relations during the early 1990's, but internally, diplomatic realignment appears to have been of limited political consequence. For example, Kim Jong Il since July 1994 has gradually, smoothly assumed his father's role. Soon the process will be completed with his anticipated election by September 9, 1998 as the DPRK's president.

To be certain, North Korea has never been noted for its dynamism and continuity has traditionally been preferred over change. The DPRK continues to be ruled by an authoritarian, centralized bureaucratic state headed by a single person, Kim Jong Il. All indications point to continued public support for Kim Jong Il, despite the deteriorating condition of the economy and widespread malnutrition. *Juche* is unrivaled as the state ideology and its principles uncontested. Backing Kim Jong Il is a huge army with awesome destructive capability. In all probability, although one can neither be certain given the DPRK's persistent preference for secrecy, the Korean People's Army (KPA) and the Ministry of Internal Security remain powerful advocates of

continuity.

The *Juche* system does not accommodate individual rights, only responsibilities to the state. There is no room for dissent or criticism. The flow of people and information into and out of the society, while somewhat loosened relative to five years ago, remains under the control of the Ministry of Internal Security. Underlying this focus of loyalties on ruler, state and ideology is an intense nationalism fed by a distrust of the outside world and a hatred of “the imperialists”, namely the United States and Japan. The list could be lengthened indefinitely, but the reality of North Korea remains one of a highly centralized and regulated society ruled by a single individual and his father’s ideology.

Economically, however, North Korea has undergone a transformation. The productivity of its once vigorous industrial and mining sectors have plummeted in recent years, and along with it the production of food. The public distribution system or PBS, a crucial social control mechanism once used by the government to distribute food to those who served the state in urban schools, offices and factories, no longer functions. Instead, people, at least those with money or something to trade, obtain their food from “farmers markets”. Social controls like restrictions on domestic travel have been loosened to allow people to search for food. In places, corruption has become a way of life among internal security personnel responsible for regulating travel in and out of cities and into China. Surely these adverse economic changes have diminished the combat readiness of the million man Korean People’s Army.

The DPRK’s Goals Redefined

Despite appearances, the visually tranquil period 1992 to 1994 may have been a time of contention in Pyongyang as its ruling elite sought to redefine the nation’s priorities. Yet how was it possible that North Korea could achieve so much change so quickly since 1992? What is driving this change if the government opposes change? How could the politically feeble Foreign Ministry in Pyongyang seemingly effortlessly break the nation’s lengthy legacy of secrecy and almost xenophobic dislike and distrust of the United States and its ally South Korea to gain their admission into North Korea to work at the Nyongbyon nuclear facility, the KEDO light water reactor site at Sinpo and to search for Korean War missing in action in North Pyongan Province?

Surely the mighty ministries of Internal Security and the People’s Armed Forces had profound reservations about allowing this. What are North Korea’s long term goals? Does it seek to transform itself into a new society? Does its present leadership seek to emulate the so-called Chinese economic model as suggested by the Najin-Sonbong Free Trade Zone? Or is the change of the past few years a charade designed to draw into the country the resources it needs to restore Kim Il Sung’s system to its prior vitality and to preserve the *juche* system unaltered?

Again we must rely more on impressions than empirical evidence, but we have learned from our dealings with the North Koreans, and increasing access to their country, that two general schools of policy exist in Pyongyang. One, which we will call the “traditionalists”, champion maintaining a closed society and which interprets *juche* literally to be “self determination” in thought and deed. Quite possibly, they oppose North Korea’s diplomatic realignment, or at least argued against it initially, and found the entangling commitments of the N.P.T., UN membership and the North-South Basic Agreements distasteful because they eroded the nation’s sovereignty and the leadership’s ability to determine without external obligations the future course of the DPRK. The “traditionalist” probably include the leadership of the KPA, Internal Affairs Ministry, and many in the Korean Workers Party (KWP), including the majority of the rank and file. Politically, membership in the “traditionalist” school is safe, and ensures continuing access to the usual benefits of membership in the KWP and the KPA.

The “progressives”, of course, are the antithesis of the “traditionalists”, a dichotomy essential Marx’s explain human progress from one historical phase to another as history movements inevitably toward communism. The existence of a “progressive” political element in Pyongyang’s politics should not be a surprise since this is quite consistent with Marxism and the *juche* system’s ideology. Such an element, in other words, is readily justifiable to the “traditionalists” as an ideologically acceptable and necessary requirement. The surprise is that Pyongyang’s apparent “progressives” have as much influence as they appear to assert.

The Food Crisis - Domestic Engine for Change

North Korea’s food crisis dates from at least 1992, if not earlier. The production of rice and corn had peaked in the 1970’s, but then began to steadily decline during the 1980’s. Apparently excessive use of inappropriate fertilizers depleted soil fertility. Resources needed to maintain the irrigation system, and to produce tractors and other farm machinery were invested instead in the defense sector. By the middle 1980’s, North Korea was supplementing its domestic grain production with low cost imported grain from the Soviet Union and China. But then the Communist Bloc evaporated and with it Pyongyang’s ability to obtain low cost grain from abroad. Coincidentally, China in 1992 declared that it would put its trade with the DPRK on a cash basis, ending their traditional barter trade.

By 1992, the DPRK’s declining ability to purchase and to produce sufficient food required that the government initiate a two meals per day campaign. Major cities like Pyongyang and Wonsan were not affected, immediately, but according to North Koreans, malnutrition was a reality in some northern regions of the country by the fall of 1992. That same year, domestic grain production was adversely affected by a wet September and earlier than usual cold weather.

Significant purchases of grain from the United States began in 1991. The U.S. government’s so-called “Modest Initiative” of October 1988 allowed for the first time American firms to export basic human needs like food to North Korea. The first license to do this went to a retired U.S. Navy admiral and his Korean-American partner, joint owners of Nikko of New Jersey. Between 1991 and 1994 they exported almost \$75 million of corn and wheat to the DPRK. But when Pyongyang proved unable to keep up with payments, the shipments were stopped in 1994.

Then the rains came in the summer of 1995. By the time they had ended in early September, the corn and vegetable crops of the DPRK’s two northwestern provinces had been devastated. Excessive rain in the rice growing areas of North and South Hwanghae and south Pyongan provinces destroyed upwards of twenty percent of the rice crop. Houses, storage facilities, roads and bridges were washed away, and along with them the ability to distribute food. Coal and other mines were flooded, temporarily putting people out of work and washing away the country’s ability to earn hard currency from one of its primary exports - minerals. Then too, without coal, there would be little fuel for heating and cooking.

This convergence of human shortcomings and natural disaster created an engine for change within North Korea, despite government policies to the contrary. Kim Jong Il could have kept his nation closed, and as a consequence possibly risk its demise, or plead for assistance and open his domain to the outside world in the hope of preserving it. The unthinkable began to unfold in September 1995 when the proud, once virtually xenophobic regime in Pyongyang asked the international community for food aid. It did so by going to the United Nations, the organization that had waged war against it. With the trickle of food aid that arrived beginning in October 1995 came demands from UN organizations that it be allow to venture into the country side to assess the extent of the flood damage and food shortage. The process gained momentum all that winter, and by the spring of 1996, representatives of the World Food Program (WFP) had taken up residence

in Pyongyang and were traveling daily into areas of the country previously closed to all foreigners.

For example, while touring flood damaged areas in North Pyongan Province in late August and early September, my guides barred me from taking any photographs explaining that doing so would reveal to the outside world just how weak North Korea had become. I explained that no one in Washington would believe what I was seeing and consequently would reject the idea of sending food aid to North Korea. One month later in October 1995, the same guides urged me to take as many photographs as I wished to better equip me for convincing Washington of the need for food aid. Today we take for granted the ability to photograph much of North Korea, including its starving children..

Leverage for the Advocates of Opening

The food crisis further bolstered the political influence of Pyongyang's "progressives". Only the Foreign Ministry and the External Trade Committee could quickly respond to the crisis by appealing to the United Nations for urgent humanitarian relief. Seoul and Tokyo also responded promptly and with substantial amounts of aid. But then, unfortunately for the "progressives" in Pyongyang, Seoul and Tokyo began to attach political strings to their food aid, making it less appealing. As a consequence, Pyongyang responded in kind by rejecting the aid on political grounds. Some private aid from Seoul and Tokyo was accepted, but the strained political relations between the governments complicated the arrangements for the delivery and distribution of this food.

Although the Americans were slow to send aid, their's appears to have had a very beneficial impact on North Korea. For the most part, American humanitarian relief organizations were preoccupied with crises elsewhere in the world. Also, they shared with many in the U.S. government doubts about the credibility of Pyongyang's claims that it did had a serious food shortage. Many Americans, not to mention South Koreans and Japanese, believed that the North Korea army was hoarding huge stocks of grain for possible use during war which the army was reluctant to release even if there was famine in the land. Cautiously, and with conditions the US government and private voluntary organizations began to send food aid.

The United States, by channeling its aid through the World Food Program, enhanced the political position of Pyongyang's "progressives" since they could counter their "traditionalist" critics at home that the aid was a benefit free of political strings granted in recognition of North Korea's membership in and good standing with the international community. The impact of the US endeavor could have been further magnified, and the position of Pyongyang's "progressives" significantly strengthened had Seoul and Tokyo not attached political strings to their food aid.

The international community's requirements, especially those of the WFP, of North Korea to receive food aid became a catalyst for change within the DPRK. The WFP and the US Congress insisted on having foreign monitors watch the distribution of food aid within North Korea in the hope of minimizing any going to the military. Persistent effort on their part has achieved significant results, despite lingering frustrations with North Korea's bureaucratic red tape and clinging to as much secrecy as possible. In two short years, the number of World Food Program (WFP) monitors has increased from half a dozen to more than forty. They not only have access to all of North Korea's provinces, the WFP has been allowed to establish field offices in several locations outside of Pyongyang.

The shroud of secrecy began to be pulled back in selected areas of the society. International experts from UN agencies, and numerous private voluntary organizations have engaged their North Korean counterparts in substantive discussions about how to improve North Korea's agricultural production, and about the outside world. North Koreans are learning the

value of international trade and the earning of hard currency to purchase food, and their government has even allowed a small but increasing number of young North Koreans to study business administration and management abroad. For example, the U.S. based Asia Foundation pay for the transportation of seven North Koreans to student business at the Australian National University. Even Pyongyang “traditionalists” apparently see value in such “adjustments.”

An even more profound change brought about by humanitarian assistance is the moderation of North Koreans’ extremely negative perceptions of the outside world. Since the Korean War, everyone in North Korea has been taught to hate the members of the United Nations, particularly the “imperialist” United States. The intensity of this hatred, fostered by the extensive American bombing during the war and North Korean government claims ever since, is second only to hatred for the Japanese because imperial Japan colonized the Korean peninsula for nearly half a century.

But now, because of food aid and the developmental efforts of the UN Development Program and other UN agencies, the UN flag has come to symbolize hope instead of war to the people of North Korea. This radical, profound alteration in just two years of perceptions embedded in memories for half a century was possible because of the international community’s humanitarian assistance. A similar, albeit more gradual transition is under way concerning America’s image. There is no doubting that changes in government policies must be preceded by changes in public perceptions. Absent a free press, humanitarian assistance is accomplishing this result at a cost much less than the price of determining war or repairing damage caused by war.

Adjustment and Change in North Korea’s Policy

The need to realign North Korea’s diplomatic relations and the urgency created by the floods of 1995 have done much to alter North Korea. For the advocates of opening -- the Foreign Ministry and the Committee on the Promotion of External Trade -- the resources necessary to strengthen the *juche* system were best found abroad. But when the Soviet Union and China after 1990 were no longer able or willing to provide for the DPRK’s needs, Kim Il Sung came up with a radical solution. He turned to the international community beginning with United Nations, South Korea and the United States. Engaging each, however, had a price.

The critics of this open door policy may well have seized on the requirements of the N.P.T. and of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections of the DPRK’s nuclear facilities as too high a price for the apparent benefits of membership in the N.P.T. and the IAEA. But withdrawal from the N.P.T. ultimately proved to have a less appealing consequence - the lose of access to the international community, particularly the possibility of normalizing relations with the United States and Japan.

Subsequently, Kim Jong Il sanctioned the Agreed Framework because it addressed two of his nation’s primary goals: enhanced security in the form of US assurances regarding the DPRK’s security, and economic revitalization in the form of heavy fuel oil and two light water nuclear reactors. In Pyongyang, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Committee for the Promotion, the leading advocates of opening and change in 1994, were congratulated by Kim Jong Il. Eventually the Atomic Energy Bureau would join these “progressives”, once its leadership recognized the political benefits of cooperation with the Korea Energy Development Organization (KEDO) and the US Department of Energy concerning the safe long term storage of the nuclear spent fuel at (N)yongbyon.

Undoubtedly, the change we are witnessing in the DPRK is occurring most likely because it is officially condoned for the purpose of revitalizing the *juche* system, not to fundamentally alter or to replace it. At the same time, however, the torrential rains of July and August 1995 accented

the shortcomings of previous agricultural policies and created the need for immediate change if the people of North Korea and the *juche* system was to survive. Then too, just as nature had compelled Kim Jong Il to act, nature's excesses also afforded him an apolitical explanation for his decision to sanction "adjustments" to his father's legacy. The political influence of the "progressives" consequently increased relative to the conservatives.

From the vantage point of Washington, Seoul and Tokyo, such extensive change in North Korea's foreign policy and domestic situation was not visible in 1992. To be sure, Pyongyang's cloak of secrecy prevented us from being able to see clearly developments within the DPRK. But even as the secrecy has faded and the society become increasingly visible, our comprehension of it remains blurred. Quite possibly, it is our own slowness to adjust our image of the DPRK that is now blurring our comprehension of it more than its ability to hide its reality from us. We have seen its weaknesses, its rusting industrial infrastructure and starving people. Yet we cling to our past image of the DPRK, its goose-stepping military hoards of soldiers, ballistic missiles and fear that it has hidden in some secret cave a nuclear arsenal. These contradictory images confuse our assessment and when all is said and done, we prefer to favor the Cold War image to one that suggests that Pyongyang is seeking to leave the Cold War behind and venture into the international community.

North Korea remains dangerous, to be certain. But the source of this danger is not its armed forces, submarines and missiles, and possible possession of weapons of mass destruction. After all, China has all of this in quantities far greater than North Korea. Yet we do not consider China as dangerous as North Korea. The source of danger in North Korea is our assessment that it could abruptly lunge from peace to war given its commercial and diplomatic isolation from the international community. Certainly, we need to maintain a formidable military posture on the Korean peninsula to deter possible irresponsible conduct by Pyongyang. At the same time, however, we need to intensify our efforts to convince it that responsible membership in the international community, not coercive diplomacy and the threat of war, it's the best way to promote one's national interests. It is we who must quicken the pace toward ending the Cold War on the Korean Peninsula.