

**Understanding North Korea After  
Kim Jong Il**

By

C. Kenneth Quinones, Ph.D.  
Dean of Research  
Akita International University – Japan

April 2012

## Table of Contents

### **Introduction:** Some Preliminary Thoughts

### **I. Change**

- A. The Kim Dynasty
- B. *Songun jongji* - Military First Politics
- C. Aggression or Deterrence?
- D. After the Famine – Food and Agriculture
- E. The Economy – Communism or Socialism?
- F. Beyond Isolation

### **II. Continuity**

- A. Common Ancestor, Shared Culture
- B. *Juche* Ideology and Policy Priorities
- C. Society – Preserving the Past
- D. Perceptions of the Past – History is Politics
- E. Dealing with South Korea and the “Imperialists”

### **III. The Future**

- A. North Korea’s Choice – Change or Continuity?
- B. Our Choice – Crush It or Change It?

## Chronology

- February 1993 – Kim Yong-sam inaugurated as president of the Republic of Korea.
- June 1993 – US-DPRK nuclear negotiations begin in New York, are moved to Geneva, Switzerland in July.
- August 1993 – US-DPRK nuclear negotiations are suspended.
- September 1993 – February 1994 – US-DPRK “working level” talks held in New York.
- February 12, 1994 – US-DPRK agreement opens the way for nuclear negotiations to resume.
- March 1994 – US-DPRK New York accord fails, tensions escalate.
- June 1994 – After North Korea refuels its nuclear reactor, the US prepares for war with the DPRK.
- - Former US President Jimmy Carter visits the DPRK, meets Kim Il Sung and the Stage is set for the nuclear negotiations to resume.
- July 4, 1994 – Kim Il Sung dies, age 83, of a heart attack at his Myohyang-san mansion, son Kim Jong Il inherits his father’s positions.
- July 12, 1994 – US-DPRK Nuclear negotiations resume in Geneva, Switzerland
- September 1994 – US-DPRK Technical Talks in Berlin
- October 21, 1994 – US-DPRK Agreed Framework signed in Geneva, Switzerland
- November, 1994 – US nuclear scientists visit DPRK’s Nyongbyon Nuclear Research Center.
- December 1994 – US-DPRK Liaison Office talks held in Washington, DC.  
----- - DPRK Korean People’s Army (KPA) shoots down US Army Helicopter north of the DMZ, one US pilot killed, another captured.
- January 1995 – US scientists and author work for one month at Nyongbyon.
- March 1995 – Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) is established by the US, Japan and ROK to supply heavily fuel oil to the DPRK and to build two light water nuclear reactors (LWR) in the DPRK.  
----- - DPRK informs US it will delay opening a liaison office in Washington, DC.
- Spring 1995 – evidence of severe food shortage becomes increasingly apparent in the DPRK.

June 1995 – US technicians begin the “Spent Fuel Canning Project,” the process of placing 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods in long term storage at Nyongbyon.

----- - KEDO signs pledge with DPRK to supply heavy fuel oil (HFO) on a regular basis in agreed upon amounts to facilitate DPRK storage and use but KEDO fails to fulfill its pledge which causes perpetual tension between the US and DPRK.

August 1995 – Torrential rains cause widespread and severe damage to crops in northwest DPRK.

September 1995 – Famine begins in North Korea.

----- - a DPRK submarine carrying more than 30 heavily armed commandoes runs aground on South Korea’s east shore, South-North tensions intensify, but eventually all the commandoes are killed except for one who is captured.

December 1995 – US hosted talks between the ROK and DPRK succeed in getting the DPRK to apologize to the ROK for its commando raid.

----- - US negotiators representing KEDO and DPRK counter-parts agree that KEDO’s partner the ROK’s Korean Electric Power Company (KEPCO) will supply and build in the DPRK a South Korean designed LWR.

January 1996 – Talks between the US and DPRK Korean People’s Armies commence in Honolulu, Hawaii regarding the initiation of joint recovery operations of US military remains left behind by the retreating US military in North Korea during the Korean War. The talks end without results.

## Introduction

### Some Preliminary Thoughts

It is indeed difficult to understand North Korea. I have been struggling to so do since my assignment in August 1992 as the US Department of States' North Korea Affairs officer. I had never wanted to go either Korea but when I qualified to study at the Defense Language Institute in 1962, my aim was to continue my study of French. The US Army instead assigned me to study Korean! There were no options so I studied Korean for one year, learned how to break codes and arrived in South Korea Christmas eve 1963.

Actually I have been striving to understand Korea, north and south, ever since. Small country thought it is, one would be hard pressed to find a more complex historical record and political reality. But I have been fortunate in my quest for understanding. First, I lived in South Korea for a total of more than ten years. Helping me during these years has been my wife, a native of Seoul, Korea who has lived longer in the United States than in her homeland.

Numerous trips to North Korea between 1992 and 1910 as a diplomat, humanitarian worker, scholar and tourist broadened and deepened my knowledge of that half of Korea. I helped negotiate the first US-North Korea agreement, the Agreed Framework of 1994, which "froze," at least until 2000, Pyongyang's nuclear weapons development program. I lived in Pyongyang and at North Korea's Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center, negotiated the return of the US Army to North Korea, introduced North Korean farmers and scientists to new agricultural methods, debated members of Pyongyang's Academy of Social Sciences at international conferences in Pyongyang, London and Vancouver, introduced North Korean officials to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. My wife and I even hosted them at our home in Virginia.

These experiences gave me access to all levels of North Korean society, from the first "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung, the current Prime Minister Kim Yong-nam, numerous diplomats and military officers and ordinary soldiers, party officials from the local to central echelons, farmers, hotel waitresses, airline stewardesses, students (grammar to university levels), scholars, bureaucrats, drivers, shop keepers, etc.

I can claim the same regarding my years of living and working in South Korea, but I must also give credit to my years of studying East Asian history and languages, first at the University of Arizona and then at Harvard University. Gaining a Ph.D. at Harvard taught me that the pursuit of "*Veritas*," Harvard's motto which means the "truth," would be a lifetime undertaking. This book is but one more effort on the path toward *Veritas* regarding the two Koreas.

My many encounters with Koreans, north and south, have taught me that Koreans are indeed one people with a shared ancestry, culture, language and desire – national unification. If so, what is the problem? Why has Korea remained divided for more than a half century?

Frankly speaking, some Koreans are keeping Korea divided. The superpowers at the end of World War II, specifically the United States, the former Soviet Union (USSR) and the People's Republic of China contributed significantly to Korea's division and the perpetuation of that division. However, a small, politically powerful minority of Koreans who rule either half of divided Korea prefer preservation of their favored form of government over national unification.

These two political factions since their formation in the late 1940s have engaged in an intense rivalry ever since. It began before the Korean War, intensified during that war, and has persisted ever since. One aspect of this Korean "Cold War" is the continuing effort of both sides to manipulate the superpowers and other members of the international community to support their political agenda and to champion their regime as the single government of a united Korea. Thus the two Koreas remain engaged in an intense, often dangerous rivalry over who should rule all Koreans.

One consequence of this rivalry is that neither, not the north and not the south, tell the full truth about themselves and the other side. Both Korean governments have intentionally distorted history. In East Asia, one's virtue and benevolence has long been determined by the record of one's actions. In short, for all East Asians, the axiom that "actions speak louder than words" is indeed the only way to determine who and what is good or evil. This is because the Chinese, lacking the equivalent of a Bible or the Quran, turned to history to distinguish between good and evil.

For centuries the Confucian ideology has dominated thinking and political conduct on the Korean Peninsula. The introduction of Christianity, dictatorship and democracy, communism, capitalism and socialism have all profoundly influenced contemporary thinking in both Koreas. Underlying these recent imports remains a viable Confucian legacy that remains the foundation of Koreans' values. In other words, for all Koreans, the historical record continues to define what is "good" or "evil."

The governments of North and South Korea thus remain engaged in an intense propaganda war designed to show one Korea as virtuous and the other as evil. Toward this end both governments produce impressive amounts of propaganda, i.e. a carefully crafted version of the truth that depicts one as good, the other as bad.

This war of words greatly complicates outsiders' efforts to understand North Korea. Those of us who live in the so-called "Western democracies" view North Korea with a prism of highly distorted images, many that originate in South Korea and are then broadcast by the international press to all parts of the world. At the same time, North Korea is attempting to do the same thing, but lacks the skills and resources necessary to match South Korea's efforts.

Of course North Korea's rulers are guilty of many evil deeds and have broken numerous promises to their South Korean cousins as well as to the international community. But once we have accepted this as fact, we need to move to a broader plain of analysis. We need to look beyond the question of which side is more moral and virtuous. If we, the international community, are to repair the damage our ancestors did to Korea in 1945 and earlier, we need to

understand North Korea rather than to merely judge it. Only then will we be better equipped to lead it toward reconciliation and possibly reunification.

Otherwise, there will be a second Korean War. The first Korean War benefitted no one. Millions of Koreans died or were injured. All Koreans who survived endured terrible trauma. Families were destroyed and divided. Fortunately for the world, the superpower chose to limit the war to the Korean Peninsula. The same, however, cannot be said if there is a second Korean War. North Korea will be armed with weapons of mass destruction. US military based in Japan make Japan a target for such weapons. Russia and China could not avoid being drawn into the war. It would disrupt the entire world economy because now East Asia is at the center of the global economy.

We need to find a way to deal more effectively with North Korea. That quest must begin by improving our understanding of North Korea.