

# *The Hermit Kingdom's Quest for Nuclear Weapons Blackmail or Security Concerns?*

Gabriela Zina Fulop

*Gabriela Zina Fulop is a student at the International University Bremen, Germany*

**ABSTRACT:** North Korea's disclosure in October 2002 of its nuclear program based on uranium enrichment and its withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in January 2003, have led to an acute international crisis. The North Korean crisis is not new; the world has witnessed a similar crisis in 1992, when North Korea threatened to withdraw from the NPT and which eventually led to the 1994 Agreed Framework.

The United States does not have a clear policy on North Korea to date. Due to a high degree of mistrust and to limited and confusing information coming from Pyongyang, two different views have been developed on North Korea. The first view is that North Korea does have real security concerns and Kim Jung Il is merely trying to assure his position as a leader and to safeguard against a U.S. attack. The second view which seems to be embraced by the majority of American politicians is that North Korea is using its nuclear weapon program to blackmail the U.S. and to receive such benefits as oil and food.

In this paper I will try to explore the two opposing views and try to come to a conclusion on the whether North Korea's security concerns are grounded or not.

## *Introduction:*

An effective foreign policy usually requires two preconditions: accurate information about the politics, economics and society of a foreign country and a clear understanding of the interests, perceptions and objectives of its government. In the case of North Korea both these preconditions are hard to achieve due to North Korea's closed society, and also to a limited effort from the side of the U.S.<sup>1</sup>

North Korea, through its foreign policy has isolated itself and its people. North Korean citizens have very limited contact to the rest of the world and thus it is very hard to obtain reliable information on the real situation inside country. "Only eight scheduled

flights and seven trains entered North Korea in a week in 1991, making it one of the most reclusive and mysterious nations on earth"<sup>2</sup> And even those who received permission to enter the country were not allowed to go about freely and explore it, they were accompanied on each of their trips and allowed to visit only places approved by the Party. The country is not only socially but also economically isolated. Its economic strategy of self-reliance and the U.S. economic sanctions have truncated business as well as cultural and educational contacts.

In their paper "Seeing North Korea Clearly", Daniel Pinkston and Phillip Saunders state that the lack of information and the secret nature of the Pyongyang regime have led many

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Pinkston and Ph. C. Saunders: Seeing North Korea Clearly, pp.79

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<sup>2</sup> D. Oberdorfer: The Two Koreas. A Contemporary History, pp. 232

people to mistrust North Korea and see it capable of irrational actions that might lead to war. The authors argue that the regime in Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) is not irrational but rather it is misunderstood by the rest of the world due to five factors: "linguistic barriers, ideological barriers that distort interpretations of developments in North Korea; intellectual constructs that conceal important information; lack of imagination and a reluctance to acquire a deeper comprehension of the North Korean mindset, and deliberate misrepresentations for political or policy convenience".<sup>3</sup> By taking into account the development since the beginning of North Korea's nuclear program and based on the factors mentioned above, I will attempt to explore North Korea's intentions and point out that Pyongyang's security concerns seem to be justified, even if they are not necessarily the sole reason for its nuclear weapon program.

### *Background*

North Korea's desire for nuclear capability originated during the Korean War, as a consequence of discussions in the United States to use nuclear weapons to end the war, if the deadlock in negotiations persisted. The U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower and his Vice President Nixon claimed that the threat of a nuclear attack played a major role in bringing about peace.

After the end of the war North Korea and Russia started cooperating in nu-

clear research. A number of North Korean scientists went to the Soviet Union for specialization and research and the Soviet Union provided a small experimental nuclear reactor, which was placed at Yongbyon. Here in 1980 North Korean began the construction of a much larger reactor, which was completed in 1986. The reactor was photographed by U.S. intelligence cameras in the spring of 1982, but Pyongyang officials claimed that the new facility was intended just for peaceful purposes. Under American pressure, the Soviet Union was able to persuade North Korea to accede to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which it did in 1985, but refused to sign an agreement placing the Yongbyon facility under IAEA inspections. Under the treaty North Korea agreed "not to receive or manufacture nuclear weapons and to accept international inspections of all its nuclear activities to verify that weapons were not being produced".<sup>4</sup>

In the period between 1989 and 1990 low-level diplomatic meetings took place between the U.S. and North Korea. The U.S. government announced four unilateral actions: "to open diplomatic contacts, to encourage non-governmental DPRK visits to the U.S., to facilitate American citizens' travel to the DPRK and to allow exported goods to North Korea that meet basic human needs".<sup>5</sup> These policies had as a result some positive actions from Pyongyang's side. In September 1990 the North – South dialogue was picked up in Seoul, and then later on the DPRK announced its willingness to

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<sup>3</sup> D. A. Pinkston and Ph. C. Saunders: Seeing North Korea Clearly, pp.81

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<sup>4</sup> Oberdorf: The Two Koreas. A Contemporary History, pp.254

<sup>5</sup> Rock: Appeasement in International Politics, pp. 131

enter the UN with South Korea, thus recognizing its legitimacy. Also in 1991 Pyongyang renounced international terrorism and declared its intentions to cooperate to control it. No further progress was made though on the IAEA safeguard agreement and the DPRK declared that two conditions would have to be met for them to sign it: the U.S. must allow North Korean inspections of its nuclear base in South Korea or remove it and an assurance that U.S. nuclear weapons won't be used against it.

In December 1991 the United States and South Korea announced that they would allow North Korea to inspect any military installation in South Korea if North Korea would grant them the same right. Also through some informal statements from South Korean President Roh it was made clear that American nuclear weapons had been withdrawn from South Korea. And as a last attempt to please Pyongyang on January 7<sup>th</sup> 1992 South Korea and Washington announced the cancellation of the annual Team Spirit joint military exercise. As a result on January 30<sup>th</sup> 1992 North Korea signed the IAEA safeguards agreement and inspectors were allowed into the country.

Inspections to some additional nuclear installation revealed in the summer/fall of 1992 that contrary to Pyongyang's statements, it had been engaged in the reprocessing of spent fuel and that it possessed more plutonium than it had admitted. In October 1992 the U.S. announced the resuming of Team Spirit military exercise in 1993, since there had been no progress in the North-South relations especially with regard to bilateral nuclear inspections. North Korea described the threat to

resume Team Spirit maneuvers as a "criminal act", and soon cancelled all North – South contacts, and threatened to refuse to continue the IAEA inspections.

The Team Spirit military exercise was held in March and a few days after its start North Korea declared its intentions to withdraw from the NPT, effective June 12<sup>th</sup>. The major concerns with the withdrawal were: the possibility that North Korea would produce nuclear weapons; the possibility that the U.S. and other nations would react in such a manner to this that war would break out on the peninsula; the expected demand from inside South Korea for it to match the North Korean nuclear program, starting up an armed race that could sour Japan and South Korea to become nuclear powers and destroy ~~the NPT~~.<sup>6</sup> Between March and June 10<sup>th</sup>, little or almost no negotiations took place between the United States and North Korea. But as the date for the withdrawal neared American officials expressed their willingness to conduct negotiations and make some concessions. On June 10th and 11th, the American and North Korean representatives met and drafted a six-paragraph joint statement. The key points were the American security assurances, an agreement to continue their official dialogue, and in return a North Korean decision to "suspend" its withdrawal from the NPT for "as long as it considered necessary".<sup>7</sup> The joint statement did not resolve the issue of "special inspections" at the suspected nuclear sites. Since the United States feared that a

<sup>6</sup>Oberdorf: *The Two Koreas. A Contemporary History*, pp. 255

<sup>7</sup> Oberdorf: *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, pp.285-286

coercive, punitive strategy would not yield results, and in the absence of acceptable military strategies, it agreed upon a “stick and carrot approach”. The “stick” would be provided by potential UN Security Council sanctions, while the “carrot” would include the cancellation of Team Spirit military exercises, security guarantees and other inducements to cooperate with the international community. Between December 1993 and October 1994 U.S. and the DPRK officials worked together to arrive at a “package deal” that was acceptable to both sides. The North Korean’s put forward their proposal which states that the DPRK had undertaken a peaceful nuclear program using natural uranium which is mined in the country and gas – graphite technology which was widely available and that they were willing to shift their nuclear program to a less proliferation prone one if the international community would provide them with light – water reactors (LWRs) to fill their energy needs. In return the DPRK agreed to open up its nuclear facilities to international inspections and to stop its plutonium reprocessing plant. On October 21<sup>st</sup> 1994 the United States and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework. Tensions between the DPRK and the U.S. escalated again in 1996 when U.S. intelligence agencies reported of an underground nuclear facility at Kumchangri. At the end of 1997 the Defense Intelligence Agency prepared a report which concluded that the facility at Kumchangri could become a nuclear facility in the future and that “The function of this site has not been determined, but it could be intended as a nuclear production and/or storage

site”<sup>8</sup> In August 1998 the New York Times and Washington Post published the findings of the Defense Intelligence Agency. In response to this disclosure the U.S. government pressured North Korea to allow for inspections at the mentioned site. In 1999 an agreement was reached that would allow U.S. inspections of the site in return for at least 500,000 tons of food aid. The first visit to the site took place in May 1999 while the second one in May 2000; administration officials declared that no evidence of nuclear activity was found.

On June 6 2001 President Bush stated that if North Korea took positive steps in response to U.S. policy, the United States will expand its efforts to help the North Korean people and ease sanctions. On January 29<sup>th</sup> 2002 in his State of the Union speech President Bush declared that North Korea, Iraq and Iran formed an “axis of evil”, of states that produced and proliferated weapons of mass destruction.

The crisis between North Korea and the United States was set off in October 2002 with the DPRK admitting to have violated the 1994 Agreed Framework and engaged in secret program to produce nuclear bombs based on the process of uranium enrichment. Another important step in the escalation of the crisis was the withdrawal of North Korea from the NPT on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003. Pyongyang explained its withdrawal as follows: “To cope with the grave situation where our state security and national sovereignty are being threatened due to the United States and forces following the United States and the U.S. tyrannical nuclear crush-

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<sup>8</sup> CRS Issue Brief for Congress; L. Niksch: North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons Program, April 5<sup>th</sup> 2002, pp.3

ing policy toward the DPRK, the DPRK Government took an important measure to immediately withdraw from the NPT”.<sup>9</sup>

It has been a slow process in the negotiations between the two countries and almost no progress has been made in the effort to reach an agreement. Both countries seem to stand strong and show little willingness to compromise; North Korea demanding a binding non-aggression agreement from the United States, while the U.S. requests that North Korea abandons its nuclear program before any further negotiations can be concluded.

#### *Agreed Framework*

The Agreed Framework signed by the United States and North Korea, on October 21<sup>st</sup> 1994, was designed to resolve the dispute over North Korea’s nuclear program. The central point of the Agreement is a deal under which North Korea will halt the operations and infrastructure development of its nuclear program in exchange for nuclear, energy, economic and diplomatic benefits from the United States. The key policy objective of the U.S. government was to secure a freeze of North Korea’s nuclear program, and prevent the “emergence of a significant regional security threat”.<sup>10</sup> The main weakness of the Agreement is the fact that it does not resolve the question of North Korea’s existing achievements in the quest for nuclear weapons, thus allowing it to maintain the stockpile they produced in the pre-

vious years. This would allow North Korea to manufacture a nuclear bomb in one of their hidden laboratories if they managed to extract the necessary quantity of plutonium in the previous years.

North Korea’s main obligation under the framework of the Agreement, is to freeze its nuclear program. Another clause in the Framework is that: “When a significant portion of the LWR [light water reactor] project is completed, but before delivery of key nuclear components, the DPRK will come in full compliance with its safeguards agreement with the IAEA, including taking all steps that may be deemed necessary by the IAEA, following consultations with the Agency, with regard to verifying the accuracy and completeness of the DPRK’s initial report on all nuclear material in the DPRK”.<sup>11</sup> This clause has been the cause of discussion between the two governments, since North Korea does not consider this clause to compel it to allow special inspections at the suspected nuclear sites.

The two governments have also agreed on the disposition of fuel rods from the five megawatt reactor. The initial step in the process was the safe storage of the rods in a hard encasement, which has been fully completed in 1999. The second and final step involves removing the rods from North Korea to a third country. This will begin when the significant components of the first light water reactor have been delivered. And lastly Pyongyang agreed to completely dismantle the graphite – moderated reactors and re-

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<sup>9</sup> KCNA (Korean Central News Agency), Detailed Report Explaining NPT Withdrawal

<sup>10</sup> CRS Issue Brief for Congress; L. Niksch: North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons Program, April 5<sup>th</sup> 2002, pp.8

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<sup>11</sup> CRS Issue Brief for Congress; L. Niksch: North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons Program, April 5<sup>th</sup> 2002, pp.11

lated facilities, when the LWR project is completed.

In return for the abandonment of its nuclear program North Korea received a number of benefits. First the DPRK will receive two light water reactors with a generation capacity of approximately 2,000 megawatts. The initial target date for the delivery of the reactors was set for 2003, but a much later date is predicted. The U.S. agreed to the delivery of the two LWR's, since plutonium created this way is technologically more difficult to use for the manufacture of nuclear weapons and because they asserted that North Korea would have to secure enriched uranium fuel for the reactors from outside the country, thus leaving the U.S. the option to control and even halt the supply of fuel.

To compensate for the freeze of the nuclear facility, the United States agreed to provide North Korea with 500,000 metric cubes of heavy oil annually, starting in 1996, until the first of the two light water reactors became operational. The Agreed Framework states that the heavy oil provided is for heating and electricity production.

Another major benefit for North Korea is the stipulation in the Agreed Framework, that within three months from its ratification, the two sides will reduce barrier to trade and investment, including restrictions on telecommunication services and financial transactions. Some of the measures that resulted from this clause were: "the permission of telecommunication links with North Korea, permission for U.S. citizens to use credit cards in North Korea, permission for media organizations to open offices in North Korea, permission for North Korea to use U.S. banks in financial transactions

with third countries and permission for U.S. steel companies to import magnesite from North Korea".<sup>12</sup> And lastly, the two countries agreed to open liaison offices in each other's capital and establish full diplomatic relations if progress is made on issues of concerns to both sides.

In October 2002 Pyongyang admitted to have violated the terms of the Agreed Framework, which has triggered an international crisis and the stall of the construction of the two reactors and the delivery of heavy oil. North Korea's actions have basically nullified the Agreed Framework, since its continuation in the initial form is impossible. If the negotiation between the U.S. and the DPRK will be successful a new agreement will be needed, that will be adapted and shaped by the latest crisis between the countries.

The 1994 Agreed Framework was an attempt by both countries to build a sense of trust. Long before October 2002, and the revealing of North Korea's nuclear program, many of the agreed steps in the Framework were not fulfilled, thus "the framework was essentially dead long before the nuclear revelations".<sup>13</sup> The accepted view is that the collapse of the Agreed Framework is due to North Korea's restarting of its nuclear program. It is important though to point out that the U.S. administration has also violated the spirit of the Framework. One example would be the established target date for the light water reactors of 2003, which was clear a few years ago that it won't be possible to be kept,

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<sup>12</sup> CRS Issue Brief for Congress; L. Niksch: North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program, April 5<sup>th</sup> 2002, pp.10

<sup>13</sup> Kang: North Korea Has a Point

due to “U.S. reservations and hesitancy”<sup>14</sup>. Another example of U.S.’s lack of trust in the Agreed Framework and its effectiveness was the inclusion of North Korea in the “axis of evil”. Even though the formal abrogation of the Agreed Framework came only in 2002, the clauses agreed upon were never fully kept by either side.

#### *Blackmail vs. Security Concerns*

The recent North Korean crisis was set off in October 2002, when during a visit of James A. Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, to Pyongyang, the North Korean government admitted to have conducted a secret program to produce nuclear weapons. This revelation basically put an end to the 1994 Agreed Framework, and to the little level of cooperation that was provided by the Framework, between The United States and North Korea.

New policies are needed to solve the current nuclear crisis, but the United States has proved to be reluctant to even start a dialogue with Pyongyang. The conflict is between the United States and North Korea, thus what matters is their willingness to negotiate, and third countries have little influence over the outcome of the conflict. They can only promote and encourage talks, but as we have seen the six – country (the United States, North Korea, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan) multilateral talks that took place in August 2003, have not been too successful. The current state of affairs is that “the United States refuses to give security guarantees to North Korea until it proves it has dis-

mantled its weapons program; the North refuses to disarm until it has security guarantees from the United States”.<sup>15</sup>

As in 1994 the United States is faced with the same dilemma, whether to trust or not the Pyongyang regime, whether to negotiate or not and whether the military option is a viable solution. And similar to 1994 there are two prevailing views on North Korea and its intentions. One view, the more hard-line view, sees North Korea as “attempting to blackmail and extort concessions from the United States through threats and brinksmanship”.<sup>16</sup> The adherents to this view see no reason for the United States to negotiate or engage in dialogue with North Korea and consider a more confrontational strategy as the best option to end the crisis on the peninsula.

The other view, perceives North Korea as “essentially a victim of great – power politics”.<sup>17</sup> This view states that North Korea does have security concerns, and that one needs to overlook the faults of the Pyongyang regime, and focus on the imminent needs of the North Korean population. Thus they argue that “carrots as more worthwhile than sticks”.<sup>18</sup>

I will start by analyzing the view of the hard – liners, that argue that North Korea is blackmailing the United States and that the American government should not give in to pressure from the international community and let itself be blackmailed again.

On June 1<sup>st</sup> 2002 in a speech held at West Point Military Academy, President George Bush stated that: “The

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<sup>14</sup> Kang: North Korea Has a Point

<sup>15</sup> Kang: The Avoidable Crisis in North Korea

<sup>16</sup> Kang and Cha: Nuclear North Korea, pp. 5

<sup>17</sup> Kang and Cha: Nuclear North Korea, pp. 5

<sup>18</sup> Kang and Cha: Nuclear North Korea, pp. 5

gravest danger to freedom lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology. When the spread of chemical and biological and nuclear weapons, along with ballistic missile technology – when that occurs, even weak states and small groups could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations. Our enemies have declared this very intention, and have been caught seeking these terrible weapons. They want the capability to blackmail us, or to harm us, or to harm our friends – and we will oppose them with all our power”.<sup>19</sup> In this short quote, although no direct reference is made to North Korea, President Bush affirms his intention to prevent any hostile government to acquire nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction that could impose a threat to the United States and its allies. The United States considers North Korea to be a threat to the stability on the Korean Peninsula, to the lives of the 37,000 American troops stationed in South Korea, and to the United States itself. Thus President Bush made it clear that he will not tolerate a nuclear North Korea. North Korea has realized that nuclear weapons are maybe the only method by which it can guarantee the regime’s survival. Pyongyang’s main reason for negotiations has been to address the most severe problems that are affecting the regime: to maintain control over its people, to restructure and boost up its disastrous economy and to enhance the regime’s survival by maintaining and developing an army capable of threatening foreign rivals. In line with these problems, North Korea manages the negotiations with the

U.S. to achieve three objectives: “to give esteem and power to the regime thereby strengthening its oppressive control over its people; to obtain economic benefits that the regime’s Socialist economy is unable to produce; and to buy time and obtain resources for the development of threatening military capabilities”.<sup>20</sup>

Another important point in the argument for the blackmailing policy of North Korea is the timing of the disclosure of its secret nuclear weapon program. Kim Jong Il has conveniently chosen to reveal his secret nuclear program at a time when the United States was involved with diplomatic and possible military operations in Iraq. This was in a sense a perfect timing to win concession he could not otherwise from the U.S, since the American government was too involved in the Iraq crisis and was unable to concentrate on both issues at the same time. Pyongyang hoped that the United States would be eager to settle the crisis and would easily agree on a compromise.

From a quite different perspective the Director of the IAEA, Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei, argues that the United States and the international community should not allow North Korea to use its nuclear weapons program as a “bargaining chip”<sup>21</sup>, since it could set precedence and encourage other countries to recur to the same course of action to receive benefits and achieve their goals. Dr. ElBaradei’s refusal to allow for such a nuclear blackmail does not necessarily stem from his view that North Korea does or does not have real security concerns, he is

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<sup>19</sup> The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, September 2002

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<sup>20</sup> Bernaldez: North Korea’s Blackmail Game

<sup>21</sup> ElBaradei: No Nuclear Blackmail



primarily concerned with the message such a bargaining method could send to the world. "It is vital – not simply for North Korea, but for the other countries watching closely as the scenario unfolds – that "nuclear blackmail" does not become a legitimized bargaining chip. We must not send the message that threat of acquisition of nuclear weapons is a recognized means of achieving political or security objectives, or that it affords special status or preferential treatment".<sup>22</sup> Therefore he concludes that it is important that North Korea makes the first step by accepting its obligations for nuclear nonproliferation. Only after Pyongyang has proved to adhere to its commitments can further negotiations and settlement take place. Dr. ElBaradei's view is important since it acknowledges North Korea's blackmailing policy and addresses the possible consequences of its success. Quite different from the other proponents of this view, Dr. ElBaradei leaves aside the issue of whether Pyongyang has real security problems, making it almost irrelevant. Other hard – liners consider North Korea's security concerns to be unreal and having no substantial ground. Victor Cha argues that it is viable that the presence of U.S. military at its borders might be perceived as very threatening by a small country like North Korea. At the same time, North Korea possesses "a very credible conventional deterrent with its artillery and ballistic missile threat".<sup>23</sup> North Korea's missile capabilities if employed against either South Korea or Japan could cost the lives of about 1 million people and

produce damages of an estimated of one trillion dollars. North Korea has a warning time for an artillery shell to hit Seoul of 57 seconds and for a ballistic missile to hit Japan of 10 minutes.<sup>24</sup> Victor Cha points out that North Korea's missile capabilities and its army of 1.1 million people are strong guarantees against aggression from the U.S. or any other country, and therefore its security concerns are to a great extent unreal.<sup>25</sup>

The other prevalent view on the North Korean crisis is that the Pyongyang regime does have security concerns, due to the continuous hostility that the United States has shown towards it. North Korea is worried that if it agrees to abandon its nuclear program and completely disarm, the United States will use the opportunity and destroy it. The United States and North Korea are technically still at war, since the 1953 armistice that ended the Korean War was never replaced by a peace treaty. The reason for the lack of a peace treaty has been the United States' unwillingness to negotiate with Pyongyang or to normalize the relations. "With the United States openly belligerent toward it, labeling North Korea a terrorist nation, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld discussing the possibility of war, it is no surprise that North Korea feels threatened".<sup>26</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction I will explore this view on the basis of the five factors that Daniel Pinkston and Phillip Saunders mention as reasons for North Korea being misunderstood by the rest of the world. These

<sup>22</sup> ElBaradei: No Nuclear Blackmail

<sup>23</sup> Kang and Cha: Nuclear North Korea, pp.84

<sup>24</sup> Kang and Cha: Nuclear North Korea, pp.85

<sup>25</sup> Kang and Cha: Nuclear North Korea, pp. 2

<sup>26</sup> Kang: The Avoidable Crisis in North Korea, pp.2

five factors are: linguistic barriers, ideological barriers, intellectual constructs, lack of imagination and deliberate misrepresentations.

The first factor that is mentioned as a possible cause for misunderstandings is the linguistic barrier. Mistakes in translation and interpretation of North Korean statements have often led to an unnecessary escalation of the crisis. One example would be that during the October 2002 meetings the North Korean delegation had told Americans that it possessed something “stronger than nuclear weapons”.<sup>27</sup> This revelation triggered confusion in the United States, and analysts concluded that the North Koreans must have been referring to weapons of mass destruction. However, after consultation with the South Koreans and with analysts more familiar with the North Korean rhetoric they realized that what Pyongyang was referring to, was the special affection of the Korean people for the army-first policy, united behind their leader. It took months for Washington to unveil the real message behind the statement, and the result was an unnecessary escalation of the crisis and the damaging of the credibility of the American government in assessing real threats. Thus a very important factor in dealing with North Korea is to rightly assess and interpret their statements, especially since many times statements released by Pyongyang could be deliberately distorted so that they would leave room for maneuvering.

The second concept, ideological barriers, refers to Washington’s constant refusal to cooperate with Pyongyang

and support its efforts for economic reform. Don Oberdorf argues that the real problem with the North Korean regime is not that much its proliferation of nuclear weapons, or its militarism and collapsed economy, but that “the principles that the Kim regime pursues, in its domestic and foreign policies are incompatible with the principles of the dominant Western states”.<sup>28</sup> The policies that the Pyongyang regime pursues are perceived as a threat to democracy and thus hostility and refusal to cooperate are the best course of action. The continuous resentment that the United States has shown towards authoritarian regimes in general, and towards the Kim regime in particular, have triggered feelings of uneasiness and fear that Washington won’t back down and eventually will manage to remove Kim Jong Il from power. In trying to prevent this outcome and ensure the survival of his regime, Kim Jong Il resorts to harsh totalitarian measures intended to keep the people isolated and under control. In a world that is increasingly hostile to oppressive regimes, the Pyongyang regime has realized that military strength and security guarantees, in which other countries pledge not to attack North Korea, might be the only option to keep the regime from falling. Don Oberdorf thus concludes that: “the likelihood of establishing a genuine cooperative relationship with the current DPRK government is remote: the gulf between the values and assumptions of the Kim Jong Il government and of democratic governments, compounded by a legacy of distrust

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<sup>27</sup> Oh Young-hwan: North Continued Nuclear-Arms Project

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<sup>28</sup> Oberdorf The Two Koreas, pp.185

built up since the Korean War are insurmountable obstacles”.<sup>29</sup>

A very important aspect that is usually ignored when talking or dealing with North Korea is its economic situation and its efforts to open up the economy. Washington has refused to cooperate on an economic level with North Korea and has constantly overlooked and ignored its effort for economic reform. David Kang brought up an interesting point that reveals a paradox in Washington’s policy. There is a widespread view among political science scholars that economic development brings about democratic ideas and eventually democracy. Now if the United State’s ultimate goal is to bring democracy to North Korea than shouldn’t it promote economic reform and not try to isolate it even more?

North Korea has become an isolationist state not only because of its own policies but also because of the refusal from the United States to cooperate with it on economic matters. The North Korean economy has been in serious problems due to famine, electricity shortages, structural economic problems and lack of foreign assistance. Kim Jong Il realized that it is vital for the survival of his regime to improve the economic situation in the country, and thus a number of reforms have been initiated and are under way to be implemented. In the two months before the secret nuclear program revelation, “North Korea had, with remarkable speed, undertaken an important series of positive initiatives that seemed the polar opposite of its posturing on the nuclear issue... [rep-

resenting] the most promising signs of change on the peninsula in decades”.<sup>30</sup>

In July 2002 the government formally abrogated the command economy and introduced a pricing system under which most prices are set by the market. North Korea has also changed a number of laws and amended the constitution in order to provide the legal framework for foreign investment. In September 2003, the Sinuiju Special Administrative Region was created, a free – trade area with its own laws and taxes, that would promote foreign investment.

There is also growing evidence that North Korea is interested and serious about opening up to the West and that it wants to normalize its political and economic relations with the rest of the world. North Korea has attempted to join the Asian Development Bank in 1997, but was unsuccessful and it recently expressed an interested in joining the IMF. North Korea has also successfully tried to set up relations with a number of countries such as Australia, Italy, Canada and the Philippines.

These changes, although very small, reveal the progress that North Korea has undergone in the past, a process that once started will be almost impossible to be reversed. These actions show that North Korea is trying to move away from its isolationist policy and become an actor on the international scene.

The third factor mentioned by Daniel Pinkston and Phillip Saunders is the misleading intellectual constructs that although created by a desire for policy clarity and consistency have an influ-

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<sup>29</sup> Oberdorf *The Two Koreas*, pp. 202

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<sup>30</sup> Laney and Shaplen: *How to Deal With North Korea*, pp. 16-17

ence on how the countries under the respective label are perceived. The authors focus in their article more on the concept of “rogue state”; I will discuss the implications of the concept of “axis of evil” and its impacts on North Korean policy.

In his State of the Union Address on January 29<sup>th</sup> 2002, President Bush labeled Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the “axis of evil”, affirming that: “States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, aiming to threaten the peace of the world.

By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic”.<sup>31</sup>

A notable point about the “axis of evil” is the heterogeneity of the countries included. The link among the three countries is very weak; they do not share any kind of religious, ideological or strategic goals. It seems that the only viable link is the adversarial relationship to the United States. It is true that North Korea has sold missile technology to Iran, Pakistan and Egypt, but there is no link between North Korea and Al Qaeda, and the Pyongyang regime has not engaged in any kind of terrorist activity for the past 16 years. What makes North Korea a member of the “axis of evil” is its pursuit of nuclear weapons, its authoritarian political system and the threat it poses to South Korea. And as member of the “axis of evil” North

Korea remains high on the list of potential targets.

Another label that has been attributed to North Korea has been that of a terrorist state. The DPRK is still on the U.S. State Department’s list of states sponsoring international terrorism, although North Korea has not engaged in any kind of terrorist activity for the past sixteen years and has made substantial progress in trying to come in line with the international laws on terrorism. In 2000 North Korea and the United States held three rounds of anti-terrorism talks and issued a joint statement on international terrorism. The North Korean government renounced terrorism and agreed that terrorism in all its forms, chemical, biological or nuclear, should be opposed. In November 2001 North Korea signed two UN anti-terrorism conventions and expressed its willingness to sign five more.

These definite positive steps that Pyongyang has made in the war to combat terrorism are a proof for North Korea’s efforts to place itself on the right side of the war and to improve its relations with the United States. In spite of these actions, President Bush included North Korea in the “axis of evil” and continued its hostility policy towards it. It seems that any action taken by the Kim regime to improve its relations with Washington is not met by an adequate response from the United States, thus supporting Kim Jong Il’s fear that only the fall of his regime will appease Washington.

The fourth factor, failure of imagination, refers to the American officials’ difficulty of understanding how any reasonable state could view U.S. power as threatening, since they perceive their motives of genuinely good.

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<sup>31</sup> President G. Bush: State of the Union Address

The United States tends to view any effort by a regime that they perceive as hostile, to improve and acquire military capabilities as solid evidence for the offensive and aggressive intent of that regime. The United States' own efforts to improve their military capabilities are considered as benign and for a good purpose. Washington's assumption about the hostile regime's intent for the acquisition of more military power might be correct but there is also a possibility of them being wrong and the hostile regime wanting just to safeguard itself against foreign aggression. As Pinkston and Saunders argue: "North Korea's situation can be understood through the prism of the security dilemma, where U.S. efforts to enhance its security are viewed by Pyongyang as highly threatening actions that require efforts to enhance the regime's military capabilities".<sup>32</sup>

The American government has expressed its wish to find a diplomatic solution to the North Korean crisis, but since the beginning of the crisis, the military option has always been a viable solution and was never fully abandoned. The United States perceives North Korea as a threat and lists it as a potential target of a pre-emptive attack. "The Nuclear Posture Review" is a secret report that was released to Congress in January 2002 and that was partially leaked to the media a couple of months later. "The Nuclear Posture Review" is a document released by the Department of Defense that reexamines the American nuclear policy and lays out a roadmap for the next five to ten years. The document makes direct reference to

North Korea and to the possibility of an attack in the immediate future. "In setting requirements for nuclear strike capabilities, distinctions can be made among the contingencies for which the United States must be prepared. Contingencies can be categorized as immediate, potential or unexpected. Immediate contingencies involve well-recognized current dangers...Current examples of immediate contingencies include an Iraqi attack on Israel or its neighbors, a North Korean attack on South Korea, or a military confrontation over the status of Taiwan. North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Libya are among the countries that could be involved in immediate, potential, or unexpected contingencies. All have longstanding hostility toward the United States and its security partners; North Korea and Iraq in particular have been chronic military concerns. All sponsor or harbor terrorists and all have active WMD and missile programs".<sup>33</sup>

These excerpts support Pyongyang's view and fears about a possible future attack on North Korea and thus sustains their argument that they have security concerns and that a binding non-aggression treaty is necessary for the abandonment of its nuclear program.

The last factor is the deliberate misrepresentation or distortion of facts by the U.S. government with the purpose of gaining public support for its policies and actions. Joel Wit in his article "Does North Korea Have Nuclear Weapons?" warns us that any information provided by the government, even if it is secret or public, should be re-

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<sup>32</sup> Pinkston and Saunders: Seeing North Korea Clearly, pp. 91

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<sup>33</sup> Nuclear Posture Review 2002, pp.16, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm>

garded with a certain degree of skepticism, since in the past and more recently in the case of Iraq, it has been proven that “the world of intelligence is not always black and white”.<sup>34</sup> The inclusion of North Korea in the “axis of evil” and the affirmation that the regime is an active sponsor of terrorism are perceived by Pinkston and Saunders as “a serious misrepresentation”.<sup>35</sup>

There are many other points and arguments that can be brought in support for either view on North Korea’s intentions. Nonetheless, the evidence that the Kim regime has reasons to feel threatened by the United States is overwhelming. There have been direct and indirect threats of military action against North Korea, and therefore I would conclude that it is not unreasonable for a regime that tries to survive, to ask for a binding non-aggression treaty.

### *Conclusion*

One of the toughest challenges for American policy makers and for the world as a whole is to understand and assess North Korea’s real intentions. This task is rather difficult due to the closed nature of the Pyongyang regime but also to the limited efforts from the American policy makers to understand the Kim regime and its continuous hostile policy towards it. Developments in the past years have led to a complete lack of trust between the two regimes. Thus a very important step in the normalization of the U.S. – North Korean relations would

be the development of trust; through diplomatic talks and cooperation between the two regimes.

In this paper I have tried to present both sides of the argument, one stating basically that North Korea does not have real security concerns and is trying to blackmail the United States in order to receive more financial and food aid and the other one claiming that even if North Korea is trying to blackmail the United States, its security concerns are grounded.

The evidence that exists for North Korea’s security concerns stems mainly from the hostile policy that the United States has carried out since the end of the Korean War. The United States has refused to cooperate with Pyongyang and to try to influence and change the regime through diplomacy, economic cooperation or cultural and educational exchanges. The most common methods in dealing with North Korea have been threats and further isolation of the regime. With one of the most powerful, if not the most powerful countries in the world threatening him, it comes as no surprise that Kim Jong Il fears an attack, and in the case of such an attack his fall. A binding non – aggression pact seems a viable tool for Kim Jong Il to secure the survival of his regime.

It is true that North Korea cannot be trusted, and even if a binding non-aggression pact is signed by the United States, it is impossible to predict whether Pyongyang will actually abandon its nuclear program. The possibility that North Korea is using its nuclear program just as a blackmail does exist and is also feasible, since as I stated before it is very hard to assess Pyongyang’s real intentions.

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<sup>34</sup> Wit: Does North Korea Have Nuclear Weapons?

<sup>35</sup> Pinkston and Saunders: Seeing North Korea Clearly, pp. 92

The primary and still unresolved question that policymakers have to face is: what is the best way to deal with North Korea? The answer to this question is very complex due to the difficulty in assessing North Korea's real intention and in anticipating its actions, thus policymakers are reluctant to adopt a course of action.

I believe that in light of recent developments, such as an apparent willingness to open up economically, and the fact that its major demand, the non-aggression pact is sustained by facts, engagement and diplomacy are still the most appropriate policy.

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