

North Korea Viewed Through Another Lens

Er-Win Tan

Presented at 'Security on the Korean Peninsula'; A Conference hosted by the University of Wales Swansea, 1 June 2007

For most people, the very mention of 'North Korea' conjures images of megalomaniacal militaristic dictators scheming to build a nuclear arsenal as part of a master plan to reunify the Korean peninsula by force. When movies such as 'Die Another Day' and 'Team America' form part of popular culture, such an opinion is perhaps understandable. As with much of Hollywood, however, such an image of North Korea is only skin-deep. Scratch that surface, and we find a rather more complex story, as examined during a conference hosted by the University of Wales Swansea on 1 June 2007.

We may begin by reflecting on the humanitarian catastrophe in North Korea resulting from floods, droughts, famine and internal political repression. Taken together, it may be helpful to view North Korea not solely as a traditional security threat, à la Hitler, to be deterred, but one that involves non-traditional security issues as well, or what is referred to as 'human security' – the security of people from famine and political persecution by their own government. Furthermore, the increasing support in South Korea for denuclearisation through engagement (the 'Sunshine Policy') rather than coercive diplomacy involving sanctions and threats of force strengthen the case for an alternative to viewing North Korea's nuclear program as a security threat to be deterred. Given South Korea's proximity and strategic vulnerability to the North Korean's conventional, missile and nuclear forces, it may be possible to view South Korea's Sunshine Policy as an attempt to address Pyongyang's security concerns and hence achieve denuclearization of the Korean peninsula through dialogue and negotiation, rather than through confrontation and coercive diplomacy. Similarly, the increasing role played by China in facilitating the Six Party Talks as a forum for dialogue and exchanges of diplomatic assurances suggests that strategic engagement and negotiation are a viable and effective alternative to coercive diplomacy in seeking the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. At the same time,

however, this in no way changes the fact that the North Korean government's nuclear weapons program runs the risk of increasing regional tensions, particularly with Japan and the US.

With its in-depth examination of the human insecurity situation in North Korea, the process of engagement with Pyongyang and the North Korean nuclear weapons program, the discussions held at the Conference at the University of Wales Swansea on the 1st of June 2007 provided participants and attendees alike with a significantly different alternative to viewing North Korea as a security threat to be deterred. Although this does not in any way exonerate the North Korean regime from its human rights record, nor its renegeing on its obligations to the nuclear non-proliferation regime, it nonetheless suggests that it is possible to view the North Korean nuclear weapons program as being driven by their defensive security concerns. Thus, in closing, it may be helpful to remember the words of US President George H.W. Bush (and father of the current US President), "Don't confuse 'soft' with seeing the other guy's point of view."

Er-win Tan is a doctoral candidate in the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth researching the security dilemma and United States-North Korean security relations

Further Reading

Bleiker, Roland, *Divided Korea: Toward a Culture of Reconciliation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005)

Harrison, Selig, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and US Disengagement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002)

McCormack, Gavan, *Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Nuclear Catastrophe* (New York: Avalon Publishing Group, 2004)

Oberdorfer, Don, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Perseus Books, 2001)

Pritchard, Charles, *Failed Diplomacy: The Story of How North Korea Got the Bomb* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2007)

Sigal, Leon V., *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998)

Wit, Joel; Poneman, Daniel; Gallucci, Robert, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004)