

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE HERMIT

The Origins of North Korea's Quest for the Bomb

What prompted North Korea to begin building nuclear weapons remains far from clear. Baya Harrison details how recently released documents authored by Soviet and Hungarian envoys living in North Korea shed new light on North Korea's first steps toward building a nuclear industry. These documents, Harrison suggests, reveal that North Korea had long sought nuclear weapons as a deterrent against anticipated attacks by the United States.

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The penchant for secrecy that has earned North Korea the title of “Hermit Kingdom” has also hindered many attempts to understand the motives that led the country’s leaders to develop nuclear weapons. The release in May 2005 of several previously confidential documents therefore provides a rare glimpse into the Hermit Kingdom during the initial steps of its nuclear program.¹ The documents, authored by Soviet and Hungarian envoys living in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) between 1962 and 1986, recount conversations with North Korean engineers, officials, and Kim Il Sung himself, North Korea’s “Great Leader,” from 1948 until Kim Il Sung’s eventual death in 1994. The personal reflections of North Korea’s leaders lend credence to the hypothesis that North Korea’s leaders originally sought to obtain nuclear weapons as a deterrent against a nuclear attack by the United States. It was this expectation of an attack by the US that motivated Kim to spare no effort in building massive bomb shelters, to seek the transfer of nuclear weapons into North Korea by his allies, and to build an indigenous nuclear

industry of his own.

These documents reveal the extent to which North Korean leaders believed the US would initiate a nuclear war. The US had threatened to use nuclear weapons against North Korea several times during the Korean War (1950-1953), and had continued to bring new weaponry into South Korea as late as 1967.² From these documents, it appears that Kim Il Sung thought that an attack was not only possible, but inevitable. Even as the US became bogged down in the Vietnam War in 1967, Kim expected the US to reignite the conflict on the Korean peninsula.³ In preparation for such a possibility, the North Korean military staged exercises to test its ability to maneuver effectively in the event of an attack.⁴ In February 1976, two decades after the signing of the armistice that ended the Korean War, Hungarian Deputy Ambassador István Garajszki observed that senior officials of the DPRK were already prepared for war with the conviction that “[i]f a war occurs in Korea, it will be waged by nuclear weapons, rather than by conventional ones.”⁵ Although North Korean officials often seemed

eager to resume open conflict on the peninsula, Kim himself appeared to feel constrained so long as American soldiers were stationed in the South. When speaking with East German Ambassador Schneidewind in 1962, he stated that “American forces will not leave the South any time soon, and one must have patience and time [to tolerate] that.” His weapon of choice was thus patience, “so as not to let the imperialists provoke a war.” Instead of risking a showdown on unfavorable terms, he would temporarily compete with his adversaries in the pursuit of material wealth. As long as the US protected the South, he thought, “[w]e (North Korea) do not need a war.”⁶

Kim’s patience was in part informed by his allies’ unwillingness to antagonize the US. During visits to Beijing and Moscow in the summer of 1975, he expressed his desire to support pro-communist forces in South Korea and “create the kind of military situation in South Korea that had come into being in South Vietnam.”⁷ Both China and the Soviet Union strongly opposed Kim’s intention of meddling in South Korea. Without their support, Kim did not have the resources to wage such a campaign on his own. Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Soviet Union, told DPRK President Ch’oe Yong Gon that “the United States does not intend to increase tension in this region, and that nothing points to the conclusion that [the US] really aims at starting a new Korean War.”⁸ Brezhnev cautioned Ch’oe that it would be a mistake to seek reunification of the Korean peninsula through armed struggle, since the US and South Korean militaries were far superior.

By 1986, Kim echoed the more pragmatic view that he expressed two decades earlier. He made the

observation to Erich Honecker, Secretary General of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), that a military solution to the division of the peninsula was momentarily impossible. American forces in South Korea at that time possessed over one thousand nuclear bombs, and it was believed that only two of them would be required to destroy the DPRK.⁹

For fear of a US attack, Kim erected massive bomb shelters beneath the streets of Pyongyang and in the mountains of the Korean countryside. Initially, he took comfort in the belief that the country’s mountainous terrain would limit the devastation of a nuclear blast. In 1963, he stated that “a lot of such bombs would be needed to wreak large-scale destruction in the country.”¹⁰ Not yet content to entrust his individual security to the whims of geography, however, Kim undertook extensive construction projects to shelter the North Korean leadership. By 1963, North Koreans could boast of a nation-wide network of caves and tunnels equipped to provide their inhabitants with “everything that they needed.”¹¹ By 1976, officials claimed that the subway tunnels of Pyongyang could shelter the city’s entire population. A Hungarian Deputy Ambassador summarized the spirit and the extent of Kim’s construction projects when he wrote: “the country has been turned into a system of fortifications, important factories have been moved underground... even airfields, harbors, and other military facilities have been established in the subterranean cave networks.”¹²

Although bomb shelters could mitigate the damage of a nuclear strike, they alone could not prevent an attack. Kim initially hoped to

buy nuclear weapons directly from his allies, but he found China and the Soviet Union unwilling to do anything more than talk about his proposal. A Hungarian chargé d'affaires later reported in July 1975 that China had considered acceding to Kim's request so that North Korea could offset US forces in South Korea, but the idea never reached fruition.¹³

Unable to purchase nuclear weapons, Kim instead sought transfers of technology and scientific knowledge from his Soviet bloc allies. In August 1963, DPRK officials inquired of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) "whether they could obtain any kind of information about nuclear weapons and the atomic industry from German Universities and research institutes."¹⁴ A delegation from North Korea visited the GDR in December 1967 and requested cooperation on the development of nuclear technology. The GDR agreed to transfer knowledge, but deferred requests for equipment until the DPRK had received permission from the Soviet Union.¹⁵ The following year, a delegation of DPRK nuclear experts again visited East Germany, this time also asking for equipment to build a nuclear reactor, but was again deferred for a similar reason.¹⁶ Appeals to the Soviet Union were much more fruitful, however, when the Soviet Union began constructing a nuclear research center with a reactor at Yongbyon in 1965.

Any technology that Kim could secure from his allies would be devoted to developing an indigenous nuclear industry in North Korea. Two Soviet nuclear specialists working in the DPRK at that time reported that North Koreans were intent on mining uranium ore in their own country, despite the more economical option of purchasing

uranium from abroad.¹⁷ One engineer involved in the uranium mining boasted that the poverty of his country would not stop progress toward becoming a nuclear power, because workers "will agree to work free of charge for several years toward such a noble and patriotic end."¹⁸

Kim's purpose in seeking nuclear technology was clear to his allies. In February 1976, the Hungarian Ambassador reported almost nonchalantly that North Korea wanted to construct nuclear reactors "in order to become capable of producing atomic weapons in the future."¹⁹ The same ambassador later noted that North Korea had appealed to China and the Soviet Union for help in constructing nuclear reactors to catch up with South Korea's energy production, "with the hidden intention that later North Korea may become capable of producing an atomic bomb."²⁰

Kim's insistence on maintaining absolute secrecy, however, hampered his efforts to acquire more advanced technology. Soviet specialists who constructed the experimental reactor at Yongbyon were required to give fingerprints and provide the names of relatives and friends. As a DPRK official once explained, "if we cannot get you for some reason, we will get your relatives."²¹ Consequently, the General Secretary of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev, refused Kim's request for the construction of a large nuclear power plant on the grounds that North Korea had blocked the flow of information from the reactor, which the Soviet Union had constructed at Yongbyon only a year and a half ago.²²

North Korea subsequently found the Soviet Union unwilling to provide additional assistance. In February 1976, at an inter-governmental meeting

in Moscow, Korean officials again requested Soviet assistance for building a nuclear power plant. The Soviets refused, citing the substantial investment that would be required as well as the Soviet Union's previous commitments to build reactors elsewhere.²³ Angered by the Soviet Union's refusal to aid North Korea's "front-line situation," the leader of the DPRK delegation, Deputy Premier Kang Chint'ae, threatened to break economic ties.²⁴

Yet North Korea's continual attempts to seek help from its allies in building a nuclear reactor over the ensuing decades belied the fact that it had already acquired the equipment and technology that would allow it to upgrade its facilities at Yongbyon on its own. Kim Il Sung had laid the foundations of a nuclear industry, founded upon the technology transfers from its allies. The construction of the Yongbyon reactor and the influx of foreign experts allowed the development of a self-sufficient industry. With Kim's death in 1994, the responsibility fell to his son, Kim Jong Il, to bring the nuclear program to fruition. This culminated in North Korea's first successful nuclear weapon test on October 9, 2006.

The bomb provides Kim Jong Il a bargaining chip in negotiations with the US and is a source of national pride for an impoverished country that can boast few other accomplishments. In the half-century following the Korean War, little has been done to abate tensions between the US and North Korea. Kim Jong Il has reason to fear for the security of his country, convinced as he is that North Korea is on the US "hit list." In the 2002 US Nuclear Posture Review, for example, the United

States Department of Defense named North Korea a potential target for attack if the situation on the peninsula deteriorated. President George W. Bush branded the DPRK a member of the "axis of evil," and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice labeled it an "outpost of tyranny." The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 also demonstrated to North Korea that the US would be willing to go to war to prevent certain states from acquiring nuclear technology. Yet to Kim, the situation in Iraq may very well have underscored the necessity of possessing a nuclear deterrent to prevent just such an intervention.

If fear of an attack has been the primary reason for North Korea's pursuit of nuclear capability since the 1960s, what options exist for a peaceful resolution to the US-North Korean conflict? Without any sign that a friendlier government will come to power in North Korea for the foreseeable future, the two nations must strike a pragmatic bargain in which the US renounces demands for regime change in exchange for a compromise on North Korea's part regarding its nuclear industry. This would require that the US accept the current North Korean regime in return for North Korea agreeing to reopen its nuclear facilities for inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency, and even to the possibility of their eventual dismantlement. This tit-for-tat bargain is a necessary first step, without which there is little hope for easing tensions between the two belligerents. In the absence of a resolution to the current deadlock, the specter of war will continue to hang ominously over the horizon.



ENDNOTES

- 1 The Korea Initiative of the Cold War International History Project, May, 2005, "*The History of North Korean Attitudes toward Nuclear Weapons and Efforts to Acquire Nuclear Capability*," <<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm>>.
- 2 Robert S. Norris, Hans M. Kristensen and Joshua Handler, "North Korea's Nuclear Program, 2003," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 59, no. 2 (2003), 74.
- 3 The Korea Initiative of the Cold War International History Project, May, 2005, "Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, November 25, 1967," in "*The History of North Korean Attitudes toward Nuclear Weapons and Efforts to Acquire Nuclear Capability*."
- 4 Ibid., "Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, May 8, 1967"
- 5 Ibid., "Memorandum, Hungarian Foreign Ministry, February 16, 1976"
- 6 Ibid., "Conversation between Soviet Ambassador in North Korea Vasily Moskovsky and German Ambassador Schneidewind, September 20, 1962"
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- 10 Ibid., "Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, February 15, 1963"
- 11 Ibid., "Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, May 27, 1963"
- 12 Ibid., "Memorandum, Hungarian Foreign Ministry, February 16, 1976"
- 13 Ibid., "Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, July 30, 1975"
- 14 Ibid., "Conversation between Soviet Ambassador in North Korea Vasily Moskovsky and the German Ambassador, August 26, 1963"
- 15 Ibid., "Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, November 25, 1967"
- 16 Ibid., "Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, February 29, 1968"
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- 18 Ibid., "Conversation between Soviet Ambassador in North Korea Vasily Moskovsky and Soviet specialists in North Korea, October 16, 1963"
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- 20 Ibid., "Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, February 18, 1976"
- 21 Ibid., "Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, January 11, 1964"
- 22 The Korea Initiative of the Cold War International History Project, May, 2005, "Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, March 13, 1967," in "*The History of North Korean Attitudes toward Nuclear Weapons and Efforts to Acquire Nuclear Capability*."
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- 24 Ibid., "Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, April 15, 1976"

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