



**IS THE KIM FAMILY REGIME RATIONAL  
AND WHY DON'T THE NORTH KOREAN PEOPLE REBEL?**

**By David S. Maxwell**

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With the death of Kim Jong-il and the ensuing temporary focus on North Korea, I was recently asked some questions that I think are worth considering. In light of the negative reaction of the South Korean stock markets to the rumor that the North had conducted a nuclear test, I was asked whether the North would ever carry out the irrational act of using its very limited nuclear weapons against the South when such an action would cause the end of the regime? In addition, given the horrendous suffering of the North, many rightly question why North Koreans do not rebel against the tyrannical and criminal dictatorship -- arguably one of the worst violators of human rights in modern history -- of the Kim Family Regime (KFR)? This paper will provide some thoughts on the answers to these separate but inter-related questions.

**IS NORTH KOREA RATIONAL?**

The political entity North Korea, or more specifically the Kim Family Regime, is very rational in the sense that it knows what it wants and works tirelessly to achieve it. The regime's operating strategy can be broken down as follows:

**Vital national interest:** survival of the Kim Family Regime (not the nation-state but the regime).

**Strategic aim:** reunification of the Peninsula under the control of the DPRK (the only way to ensure the long-term survival of the KFR -- because anything else means that it will not survive)

**Key condition to achieve its strategic aim:** get US forces off the Peninsula (or in Sun Tzu terms "split the alliance").

**International political aim:** to be recognized as a nuclear power.

Why does the North want (or need in its calculus) nuclear weapons? First and foremost it believes that it needs its nuclear program as a necessary deterrent. We should understand that the lessons that the regime has learned from Iraq and Libya are that their downfalls were a result of their not yet having developed nuclear weapons. Of course if anything happens to limit Iran's development of such weapons (like what happened to Syria's covert reactor several years ago) that lesson will only be reinforced.

Second, the nuclear program has proved to be an extremely useful strategic instrument in its diplomatic toolkit that has resulted in a range of political and economic concessions over the years and it will exploit that tool for as long as the regime is in existence.

Third, in my opinion, the regime is not suicidal at all and everything that it does and will do is focused on protecting its vital national interest. However, as irrational as it may seem to us that could include launching a war (particularly if the regime believes it is threatened and has no other alternative). And what is really dangerous to the region is that by the nature of the system no one is going to tell Kim Jong-un that his military is not capable of winning and the information that he receives from people around him (who have to act like sycophants in order to survive) can make a very irrational decision to us seem

very rational to him.

Fourth, deterrence has been effective against the North. Hwang Jong Yop's debriefings suggest that the North has never initiated an attack on the ROK because it knows that it cannot win a nuclear war with the US and it believes that the US would use nuclear weapons against it.<sup>1</sup> This calculation drove its need for its own nuclear deterrent, which the regime had been trying to develop since the 1950's. Ironically, the very effectiveness of our deterrent drove the North to possess its own.

Lastly, I think an examination of the regime's actions over the past 60 years shows that it has been very rationally following its own "play book" to protect its vital national interests based on its understanding of the international and peninsula security situation. It has been singularly focused on its vital national interest and achieving its strategic aim as well as using provocations to gain political and economic concessions.

Of course on the flip side there are myriad reasons to judge the North as irrational: Is it rational to think it can win a war with the ROK, let alone with the ROK-US alliance? Is it rational to use provocations up to and including either the use or sale of nuclear weapons or capabilities? Is it rational to starve some 23 million people to allow the regime to survive? Was it rational to attack and hijack the Pueblo? Is it rational to attempt multiple assassinations to kill the South Korean leadership (at least twice in Seoul and once in Rangoon) and to use terrorist action against the South and international community? Is it rational to trade in myriad illicit activities to include being one of the world's largest and most proficient counterfeiters (to include that of US currency but also cigarettes and drugs such as Viagra and methamphetamines)? Is it rational to turn down Chinese help for economic reform (because such reform would likely end the regime)? Of course from our perspective the answer to my rhetorical questions is no but we cannot just view the problem from our perspective or even through the eyes of South Koreans, who are now vastly different than the North Korean regime. From the Kim Family Regime's perspective, it has acted in a very rational way and, if we look at things carefully, we should see it has acted in a very predictable way over the past 60 years.

But to the irrationality question and the reaction of the ROK financial markets response to the rumor, I think the question has to be focused on the market rationality. Surely the "market" must think the North is irrational which is why the rumor of a nuclear test might affect decisions to buy and sell. It is difficult to explain the North's rationality to the market -- though if we could make the "market" understand the regime and its decision making we would be on our way to being able to attack a key part of the North's strategy, which is to be able to stir up fear of it.

#### WHY DON'T THE PEOPLE REBEL?

The answer is actually three fold. First, there is a belief system in place that is far worse than that of the Japanese prior to and during the Second World War and it is called Juche. Some have even called it "Kim Il Sungism" or as the father of Juche himself called it "Dear Leader Absolutism." Juche is all about the cult of the Kim Family, taking on a religious dimension. Kim Il Sung took on a deity-like status when he died; his body remains on display and he remains the leader of North Korea for eternity (which is why the regime is working so hard to connect Kim Jong-un to Kim Il-sung notably in his looks, dress, and mannerisms). Since 1993 the Juche ideology has taught that to die for your country means you will achieve immortality.

Juche, although popularly called "Self Reliance," can be summarized this way: "Man rules all things; man decides all things," the man being Kim Il-sung or the regime leadership. "The Kim Il-sung Juche ideology is based on these precepts: In ideology Juche (autonomy); in politics, self-reliance; in economics, independence; and in National Security: self-defense."<sup>2</sup>

As Hwang Jong Yop, who has spoken out about the Juche ideology after he defected in 1997, puts it:

The fundamental reason for human rights being trampled in North Korea lies in the 'Dear Leader Absolutism' dictatorship. There can be no human rights for the people in North Korea where the greatest morality and absolute law is giving one's mind and body to the Dear Leader; and living as a slave who obeys completely and unconditionally the Dear Leader - it is the only life permitted the North Korean People.<sup>3</sup>

Second is that Kim Il-sung established a security and control system that would have made Joseph Stalin blush. From the "rule of threes" (anyone found to be disloyal in word or deed will have three generations "expunged" -- at best all three generations go to the gulag and at worst all three are totally expunged, as in execution) to the establishment of a personal loyalty system -- i.e., you get promoted or get ahead or are simply allowed to exist by demonstrating personal loyalty to the regime and not by merit -- means that there is a system of control that is totally focused on protecting the regime from rebellion. This personal loyalty system has the added benefit of preventing coups because anyone who says a word against the regime must be reported both by regulation but also because by reporting it one further demonstrates one's loyalty to the

<sup>1</sup> Based on the author's personal knowledge from serving in South Korea at the time.

<sup>2</sup> Kukpang Ilbo, March 1999.

<sup>3</sup> "North Korean Human Rights/HwangJong-yop," *Chosun Ilbo*, 2 DEC 99, [www.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/199912/19991202034.ht](http://www.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/199912/19991202034.ht).

regime and allows that person to “get ahead.”

At the same time the personal loyalty system explains why the bureaucratic systems within the regime are so broken and inefficient -- loyalty does not mean competence of course. It further sows the seeds of distrust as people even report others for such simple things as forgetting to wear the pin of the Great Leader on their jackets and shirts -- as it must be displayed at all times (as an aside most people will wear the pin of the Great Leader [Kim Il-sung] vice the Dear Leader [Kim Jong-il]). Even family members report on other family members (the dirty little secret is that while the rule of threes still applies the family member who reports on his or her family will be initially rewarded, but usually suffers from some quiet but catastrophic accident some months later such as a swimming accident in the winter or a traffic accident or perhaps poisoning by a piece of lead the size of 7.62 millimeters). This system is probably the best at preventing coups and conspiracies from within, both among the elite and at the grassroots level.

Many of our defector friends have informed us about the "paralysis" of the people in the North because they cannot reconcile their sixty years of indoctrination with the increasing knowledge that they are gaining of the outside world. A simple explanation can actually be seen in works like Ted Gurr's *Why Men Rebel*, such as this from the summary of his book:

People can become inured to a bad state of affairs, even one that offers so little access to life-sustaining resources that members of the group are starving or dying of remediable diseases or exposure.

## CONCLUSION

I still hold out some hope for the North Korean people. Principally, I strongly recommend an aggressive influence campaign to get information into the people to conduct the psychological preparation necessary to mitigate the challenges in a post-regime collapse or post-conflict North. In addition, we need to target the second-tier leadership to be able to coerce and co-opt them when the time comes. But I am under no illusion that an influence campaign will cause a *popular uprising* for reasons more than the people just having access to social media and cell phones in large numbers. While I know that there are some who say that if there is no chance of a popular uprising then why bother with an influence campaign? Still, we really need to invest in one for the long-term reasons I mention above. And we should remember that regime collapse will only occur when it loses its central governing effectiveness and the coherency of its military and security forces. As long as those two conditions exist the regime will remain in power with the people sufficiently oppressed (and their horrendous suffering continuing).

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