



## **THE LAST LIVING FOSSIL OF THE COLD WAR**

THE TWO KOREAS, THE DRAGON AND  
THE EAGLE: TOWARDS A NEW REGIONAL  
SECURITY COMPLEX IN EAST ASIA?

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DIIS REPORT 2012:10

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Cover photo: North Korean soldiers watch the South Korean side from lookout tower near Panmunjom in the demilitarized zone (AP/Wally Santana, Pool)

Layout: Allan Lind Jørgensen  
Printed in Denmark by Vesterkopi AS

ISBN 978-87-7605-507-3 (print)

ISBN 978-87-7605-508-0 (pdf)

Price: DKK 50.00 (VAT included)

DIIS publications can be downloaded  
free of charge from [www.diis.dk](http://www.diis.dk)

Hardcopies can be ordered at [www.diis.dk](http://www.diis.dk)

*This publication is part of DIIS's Defence and Security Studies project which is funded by a grant from the Danish Ministry of Defence.*

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## **Abstract**

The divided Korean peninsula is a flashpoint in the regional security complex in East Asia. The central issue is the threat posed by North Korea and how to meet it. After a review of North Korea as an international actor and of two important incidents in 2010 (the sinking of the South Korean naval ship *Cheonan* and North Korea's shelling of the South Korean coastal island of Yeonpyeong), the rationality underlying the country's military efforts is considered. South Korea's *Nordpolitik* is reviewed and the rise and decline of its *sunshine* policy and the role of its alliance with the United States is described. Two non-Korean great powers, China and the United States, are important actors in the region, and their relations with North Korea, goals and priorities, and implementation strategies are outlined. The report concludes with reflections on the potential for changing the present security complex, which is marked by a fear of war, into a restrained security regime, based on agreed and observed rules of conduct.

This *DIIS Report* is an elaborated version of a presentation, 'The Korean peninsula between China and the United States,' made to the 2011 Asian Conference of the 'Harvard Project for Asian and International Relations' (HPAIR), Seoul, South Korea, 19-23 August 2011. I thank other speakers on the panel as well as the audience for useful comments. Also, I thank Jonas Parello-Plesner, European Council on Foreign Relations, and members of the 'Defence and Security' research unit at DIIS for useful comments on a later version.

The official names of the two states on the Korean peninsula are the 'Democratic People's Republic of Korea' (DRPK) and the 'Republic of Korea' (ROK). This publication uses the names North Korea and South Korea.

## I. Introduction

The divided Korean peninsula is a flashpoint in East Asia and one of the most volatile areas in the region. The two Koreas are separated by a demilitarized zone (DMZ) that runs across the peninsula along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel north, 250 km long and approximately 4 km wide. The DMZ is the most heavily militarized border in the world and symbolizes 'the last living fossil of the Cold War' (Gong, 2009: 116). The DMZ was created by the 1953 armistice agreement that ended the fighting in the Korean War (1950-53), but the war has never been officially ended by a peace treaty. Focusing on the situation on the peninsula as a threat to international security, the most troublesome problem is the threat that North Korea poses to other countries, in particular South Korea, and the problems they face when they have to meet the challenge. North Korea's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) have been an urgent issue since the early 1990s, and the danger has become imminent after two nuclear tests, in 2006 and 2009. Earlier, in the 1970s and the 1980s, North Korea perpetrated various terrorist outrages and rogue acts. The most lethal occurred in 1987 when a bomb placed by two North Korean agents blew up a South Korean civilian airliner en route from Baghdad to Seoul, killing 95 passengers and 20 crew members on board; the bombing probably served as a warning to those planning to take part in the Seoul Olympics a year later (Nanto, 2003: 10; Oberdorfer, 2001: 183-5). North Korea also engages in missile tests and naval violations of South Korean waters, all seemingly designed to extort concessions from South Korea and draw the United States into direct bilateral negotiations without prompting all-out war (Cha, 2002: 63-5).

During the last ten to fifteen years, concurrently with attempts by South Korea to prepare a new *Nordpolitik* aiming at reconciliation and developing comprehensive engagement between the two Koreas, a number of incidents at sea have illustrated the volatility of the situation on the peninsula. In the summer of 2002, an incident occurred off the west coast of the peninsula that appears to have been intentionally planned by North Korea, but not to spiral into a full-scale war (Bechtol, Jr., 2007: 69-85). After two dramatic sea-related incidents in 2010, especially the latest in November 2010, both Koreas put their armed forces on high alert, mobilized for further action, and got close to actual war. One problematic aspect of the incidents at sea concerns the Northern Limit Line (NLL) which separates the two Koreas off the west coast of the peninsula. Unlike the land border between the Koreas, the delimitation of the sea border is disputed. So, after years of relative quiescence, the dispute has been the occasion of an escalation of the conflict on the peninsula. The critical point in this

is that, as North Korea's ability to wage a full-scale conventional military conflict has ebbed considerably since the 1980s, the potential for a range of low-intensity conflicts to break out has increased, bolstered by the country's WMD program, which provides North Korea with a nuclear deterrent (Chung, 2005: 165f.).

Studying the conflict potential on the Korean peninsula includes a closer study of the roles of the two non-Korean great powers, China and the United States, which have ties of alliance with the two Koreas respectively. After the Korean War, China and North Korea formalized their alliance in 1961 with a Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty; it was renewed in 1981 and again in 2001 for twenty years. North Korea is China's only formal military ally, and today it is questionable what China's alliance obligations to North Korea mean in practice. The US-South Korean alliance was formalized just after the Korean War, when a mutual defense treaty took effect in 1954; like the simultaneous security treaty with the Republic of China (Taiwan), its rationale was not only to deter an attack from outside, but also to constrain America's 'rogue ally', that is, a rabidly anticommunist dictator who made no secret of his desire to reunify the country by force. Today there are about 25,400 American troops in South Korea to enhance the credibility of the American obligation to defend the country, and the alliance is part of the American 'hub and spokes' system of discrete, exclusive alliances with countries in East Asia (Cha, 2009/10). Many in South Korea still support the alliance with the United States, but since the end of the Cold War more people than before have been questioning whether the country's involvement with the great power beyond the Pacific Ocean isn't really the cause of the continuing Cold War on the Korean peninsula, increasing the danger of South Korea becoming trapped in a conflict against its interest. These divergent Korean attitudes reflect the classical security dilemma of alliance policies: fear of abandonment versus fear of entrapment (Snyder, 1984).

This *DIIS Report* presents an introductory study of the dynamics of the conflict potential on the Korean peninsula as part of the regional security complex in Northeast Asia. A regional security complex is an analytical concept, defined as a set of states whose security problems are closely interdependent and cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 40f. and 491). As a security complex, the actual relations between the two Koreas, China and the United States exemplify a *conflict formation*, that is, durable patterns of enmity and amity shaped by the fear of war and expectations of the use of violence in political relations. If the actual fears and expectations can be restrained by agreed sets of rules of conduct and if these rules will be observed, the security complex centering on the

Korean peninsula will change into a *security regime* (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 53f., 174-5 and 489-92). Thus in analysing the actual quadrilateral security complex in Northeast Asia, it has to be noted that it consists of three overlapping and entangled triangles, all focusing on North Korea: China-North Korea-South Korea, the US-South Korea-North Korea, and China-North Korea-the US, each generating various triangular dynamics in the regional security complex that have been important in relation to various developments (Kim, 2005: 181-4; Seongji, 2003; Snyder, 2009: 163-82). The report aims at elucidating the potential for changing the tense conflict formation on the Korean peninsula, shaped by a fear of war and of violent North Korean actions that has become stronger since the two incidents in 2010, into a more restrained security regime, based on agreed rules of conduct that will be observed. The timeframe is the last ten to fifteen years, that is, the period since President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) initiated the so-called *sunshine* policy.

To elaborate dynamics of the security complex in Northeast Asia and the special role of the conflict on the Korean peninsula, Section 2 reviews different aspects of North Korea as a security issue. Section 3 considers continuous goals in South Korea's *Nordpolitik* and the rise and decline of the *sunshine* policy. Sections 4 and 5 outline the relations with North Korea of the two non-Korean great powers, the *dragon* (China's) and the *eagle* (the United States'), and describe their goal priorities and implementation strategies. Section 6 develops the main conclusions of the study, focusing on the potential for promoting a transition from the actual conflict formation on the peninsula toward an observed security regime.

## 2. North Korea as a security issue

North Korea poses multiple security challenges to the outside world (Fitzpatrick, 2011). In identifying North Korea as a security issue, I adopt three complementary angles: first, a review of North Korea as an international actor; second, a review of the two major incidents in 2010; and third, the question of whether North Korea behaves as a rational actor?

### North Korea as an international actor

As a secretive and totalitarian state, North Korea is one of the most enigmatic societies in the world. It seems to be the black box *par excellence*, the eternal or ultimate black box. Several questions are natural, but the answers elude one. How are decisions made? Is there normally unity at the top, or are there occasional differences of opinion regarding policy? How stable is the regime? (Helgesen, 2005; Scalapino, 2007). However, the black box metaphor shouldn't be overdone: North Korea's history and the leadership's goals, many of its policy measures and strategic calculations are neither unknown nor impossible to fathom. There is no doubt that North Korea poses a variety of traditional and non-traditional security problems to other countries in Northeast Asia as well as countries outside the region, but claims to definitive knowledge, especially definitive forecasts, should be met with scepticism.

First of all, North Korea is heavily armed and the most militarized country on earth. Military and security organizations are by far the dominant institutions (Fitzpatrick, 2011). The army enjoys a highly privileged position. The conventional military threat from North Korea to South Korea is obvious, and the former has a full array of weapons of mass destruction or ABC weapons: atomic, biological, and chemical weapons, but the actual range of the arms supplies is obscure (Pollack, 2011). Also, North Korea has exported Scud missiles to countries like Iran, Libya and Syria. As both Pyongyang and its clients are outside the missile technology control regime, which was established in 1987 – mainly by Western countries and today including 34 countries, including South Korea – to restrict the export of components for weapons of mass destruction, it is hard to restrain the proliferation caused by North Korea (Ong, 2007: 83). Also, North Korea has developed extensive illicit economic activities and transnational smuggling networks which have provided the regime with desperately needed hard currency. However, its control over these networks has decreased over time, as there has been a major shift from a state-operated network



to private criminal networks, some of which involve terrorist groups (Bechtol, Jr., 2007: 87ff.; Chestnut, 2007).

What are the basic goals and considerations that govern the extremely closed and heavily armed state's foreign policy? North Korea's most important goal is undoubtedly regime survival. The North Korean leadership has a clear, stable and consistent primary goal: survival. From this it follows that a bolt from the blue, all-out attack on South Korea makes no sense, as the regime could not survive a war; however, continuing minor attacks can be expected as attempts to win concessions, interrupted by recurrent periods of reconciliation. As mentioned above, North Korea's disposition to engage in low-intensity conflicts may have been bolstered by its nuclear weapons programme. In 1993-94 North Korea became the first country to announce its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the nuclear safeguards regime administered by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). But actual withdrawal did not take place until 2003, after a lengthy bargaining process with the United States (cf. Section 5). North Korea's nuclear program has become vital for regime survival and the country's identity. North Korea is wrapping itself up with its nuclear status and seeks to be recognized by the world, particularly by the United States, as a nuclear weapon state, and it long rebuffed South Korean efforts to raise the issue in inter-Korean channels (Snyder, 2005: 97). The important point is that without these weapons the country would be considered merely a shoddy 'basket-case' hold-over from the once powerful and orthodox communist world. In the domestic context, the nuclear programme is helping to win and cultivate the support of a key constituent, the military leadership (Byman and Lind, 2010; Nanto and Manyin, 2010: 9; Pollack, 2011: 207), and there are good reasons to expect new nuclear tests. To most countries outside the region, North Korea's nuclear programme constitutes a major proliferation risk as the regime possesses both the capabilities and motivation, particularly the profound need for hard currency, to transfer or engage in nuclear smuggling (Chestnut, 2007: 80-1). At the same time it has to be noted that North Korea's nuclear programme has often appeared effective in winning concessions and especially American attention, thus proving its foreign policy value to the North Korean leadership. This is a real dilemma for the outside world that cannot be avoided. It is also worth noting that North Korea's perception of the United States is dominated by a genuine fear (Scalapino, 2007) – a fear which is a built-in part of the regime, not a fear which can be wiped out by some conspicuous American gesture. It is a continuing paradox in North Korea's view of the United States that repeated accusations of American hostility are mixed with cravings for American affirmation and acceptance through bilateral negotiations.

## Two Incidents

*The first incident* in 2010 occurred on March 26 with the sinking of a South Korean warship, the *Cheonan*, in the Yellow Sea, after a torpedo attack which killed 46 of its 104 crew. Initially the South Korean government reacted cautiously to avert a catastrophic escalation, and South Korean officials downplayed suggestions that North Korea was responsible. Three weeks later the government established a Joint Civilian-Military Investigation Group composed of experts from South Korea as well as Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Sweden and the United States. After a month-long investigation, on May 20 the Group released a summary of its report which stated that the evidence overwhelmingly pointed to the conclusion that the torpedo had been fired by a North Korean submarine, and the South Korean government officially declared that there was no other plausible conclusion than that Pyongyang had deliberately torpedoed the South Korean naval ship. The release of the interim report took place less than two weeks prior to local elections in South Korea and left the impression that the ruling Grand National Party was attempting to use the issue as a domestic political lever, with the result that public opinion was polarized. Opposition politicians expressed deep scepticism about the government's assertion, and academic experts in South Korea also pointed to inconsistencies in the interim report, arguing that the 'critical evidence' did not support the allegedly unambiguous conclusion (Snyder and See-Won, 2011: 75).

In early June South Korea referred the sinking to the UN Security Council, calling for direct condemnation of North Korea. The South Korean position was supported by Washington, which described the sinking as an act of aggression. China, however, repeatedly called for 'calm and restraint' and the need to deal with the crisis 'in an objective and fair manner', and it refused to accept the results of the investigation as 'unchangeable scientific and objective proof of the incident' (Snyder and See-Won, 2011: 76). President Obama declared that China was guilty of 'wilful blindness' and confirmed that South Korea could count on American support. North Korea responded that the evidence was fabricated and called the investigation team's conclusions 'reckless' and part of South Korea's 'smear campaign'; if new sanctions were imposed, it threatened all-out war and a 'merciless strike' that could turn Seoul into a sea of flame' (Lee, 2010a; Strategic Survey, 2010: 357-8). The full report was released on September 13, and there were enough ambiguities and inconsistencies in it that many South Koreans remained sceptical of the government's conclusion (Beck, 2011: 34; You, 2011: 28). It was evidently very difficult for China to accept the conclusion of the Investigation Group, among other things because it would mean that the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il, had lied to Chinese President Hu Jintao when they met

in Beijing after the incident. China also feared that punitive actions against North Korea could cause Pyongyang to take further provocative actions that could result in conflict on the peninsula (Glaser and Glosserman, 2010). Later in the summer a UN Security Council resolution identifying who the attacker might have been was blocked by China, and it protested loudly when the US and South Korea announced plans to stage joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea in response to the attack. When the location of the exercises was moved to the Sea of Japan, on the eastern side of the peninsula and not that close to China, this raised concerns in South Korea about American accommodation of an increasingly assertive China (Snyder, 2010; Snyder and See-Won, 2011: 77; Strategic Survey, 2011: 371-2).

*The second incident* occurred on November 23, when North Korea shelled the South Korean coastal island of Yeonpyeong, killing four people, injuring nineteen, setting more than sixty houses ablaze and sending civilians fleeing in terror. Around 1,600 people, as well as a garrison of 1,000 South Korean sailors, live on the island, which is located in the Yellow Sea near the sea border between the two Koreas, which, as noted, and unlike the land border, has never been agreed upon (cf. previous comment on the NLL). Inter-Korean naval skirmishes, involving the loss of lives, have often taken place near the island, which was claimed by North Korea in the 1970s. However, this attack was the first artillery strike on South Korean soil since the 1953 armistice and the most serious act of aggression against civilians since the bombing of a South Korean airliner in 1987. Moreover, to grasp the workings and internal dynamics of the Pyongyang regime, it is worth noting that the attack came just after South Korea had shipped rice and cement as relief aid to flood victims in North Korea and after North Korea had asked for more rice and fertilizer. As a justification for the attack North Korea stated that it had responded to South Korean shells fired into its territorial waters; South Korea had indeed conducted military exercises in the area, but live firing was directed in the opposite direction from North Korea. Contrary to the first-mentioned incident in 2010, there was never any doubt about the origin of the attack on the South Korean coastal island, an attack that was watched avidly across South Korea live on television (Lee, 2010b; Strategic Survey, 2011: 374-5).

Thus North Korea's attack could not be ignored, and the reaction from members of both the ruling and opposition parties was much stronger than after the sinking of the *Cheonan*. Public opinion surveys revealed a much stronger sympathy than was usually the case for the alliance with the US. Even though President Lee warned that South Korea would respond with 'enormous retaliation' to further attacks, many South Koreans saw their government's response to North Korea's attack as wholly

inadequate, and two days later the South Korean minister of defence resigned. The new defence minister stated that Seoul would respond to future provocations with air strikes, thus marking a significant tightening of her rules of engagement. A growing number of South Koreans, including prominent politicians, reacted to North Korea's provocations by calling for the reintroduction of American tactical nuclear weapons, which had been based in the country prior to 1991, as a lever to pressure North Korea into genuine, verifiable steps toward denuclearization, while yet others advocate South Korea developing its own independent nuclear capability to match North Korea's (Beck, 2011: 34; Cossa, 2011; Strategic Survey, 2011: 375).

The US responded by announcing joint exercises with South Korea in the Yellow Sea within a week of the attack, both to deter further North Korean attack and to 'send a message' to China. President Obama called Chinese President Hu Jintao to urge China to work with the US and put pressure on North Korea. China's first response to the shelling was to call for an emergency meeting of the Six-Party Talks, an idea that the United States dismissed. In December, in the UN Security Council, China blocked any resolution condemning North Korea for the artillery shelling and urged 'both sides' to exercise restraint. While China shrank from direct criticism of the North Korean attack, it expressed concern about military exercises in response to it. The effect of all this was a growing belief in Seoul that China's behaviour both enabled and encouraged North Korea's aggression, meaning that it could not be an 'honest broker' in talks with North Korea. In Washington too there was growing irritation and frustration that, by turning a blind eye to North Korean actions, China had given North Korea a 'blank cheque' to pursue provocations with impunity. At the same time, Washington continued to recognize the critical importance of cooperation with China for restraining North Korea, and it recognized the Chinese sensitivities that limit such cooperation (Snyder and See-Won, 2011: 78-9; Strategic Survey, 2011: 375-6).

The two incidents proved a tough test for China and the United States, particularly for China, which is North Korea's formal ally. In some ways North Korea's behaviour shared similarities with a scenario put forward by analysts ten years earlier: a weak, isolated and desperate North Korea, in possession of weapons of mass destruction, is 'lashing out' in a conventional attack against South Korean military and civilian targets (Cha, 2002: 47; Goldstein, 2002: 122-3). Moreover, there are reasons to expect continuous attempts by North Korea to intimidate South Korea, especially in light of North Korea's nuclear deterrent, which may make South Korea and its American ally hesitate to produce strong responses to new provocations, and regardless of

what combination of factors shaped the decisions behind the two incidents in 2010, analysts agree that the next provocation is just a matter of time (Beck, 2011: 35). After these incidents North Korea engaged in a new diplomatic offensive, and from the beginning of 2011, North Korean newspapers promoted the idea of an inter-Korean dialogue, albeit mixed with traditional venom towards Seoul. Colonel-level talks between the two Koreas at Panmunjom in February led to nothing, however, among other things because South Korea stated that higher-level talks could not take place until Pyongyang took responsibility for the sinking of *Cheonan* and the attack on Yeonpyeong (Strategic Survey, 2011: 376). To explain North Korea's behaviour, it had already been suggested by an American analyst before the second incident (Bush, 2010) that North Korea's aim was to keep serious negotiations out of reach, and the sinking ensured that South Korea, Japan and the US would oppose resuming the stalemated Six-Party Talks with new talks. If it is a correct interpretation that, through the sinking of the *Cheonan*, North Korea deflected a risk that it could become deeply embroiled in a process with still stronger demands to restrain its nuclear program, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington played their roles according to Pyongyang's script! On a more general note, the question is if North Korea is following a carefully choreographed cycle of incursions and probes, followed by charm offensives and requests for aid, and then a return to provocations (Nanto and Manyin, 2010: 2). Such questions lead to a consideration of the rationality of North Korea's behaviour.

### **Does North Korea behave as a rational actor?**

Evaluating the character and stability of the North Korean regime and the relationship between goals and means in the country's foreign policy, particularly its military efforts and its acquisition of nuclear arms, it is often asserted in the media that North Korea's leadership is irrational or crazy. Indeed, since North Korea's status as a nuclear power became an issue in the early 1990s, there has been a 'madman' theory shared by many of Pyongyang's adversaries, especially the then South Korean government and South Korean scholars, who described the Pyongyang regime as illogical, unpredictable, erratic, inconsistent, uncivilized or animal-like (Roy, 1994: 308; Roy 2010: 112-6; Tae Hwan, 1994). That issue is extremely important for evaluating the security situation on the Korean peninsula and the measures applied by South Korea as well as by China and the United States.

North Korea's leaders show clear signs of acting rationally. In fact, given their goals and constraints, their military policies seem quite rational. The behaviour of the regime has been ruthless, amoral and despicable, but not irrational; the North Koreans may

be weird, but they are not crazy (Cha, 2010; Roy, 1994: 309-10). Thus North Korea has actually obtained the concessions sought by their nuclear tests: after the first test in 2006, the Bush administration agreed to the bilateral talks it had previously ruled out, and the president wrote a personal letter to Kim Jong-il, addressing him as Excellency. As for China, after the second test in 2009 it offered to upgrade economic cooperation (Roy, 2010: 127; You, 2011: 29). Of course it is possible to be both rational and belligerent as part of a calculated effort to obtain prestige and political recognition as a nuclear power and to win concessions of food and fuel. From this it follows that the world should not expect a 'bolt from the blue' nuclear or conventional assault against, for instance, Seoul, which would be suicidal; but the notion of holding Seoul hostage is clearly part of the image North Korea would like to project on to the outside world, even though North Korean spokesmen like to intimate that its missiles are aimed at American bases in East Asia and Japan, not their southern 'brethren'. Pyongyang has certainly learned the rationality of appearing irrational, the essence of brinkmanship.

However, North Korean leaders also make miscalculations, and reflecting on the rationality of North Korea's policy, it is certainly bounded rationality, that is, they are limited by their world view and level of information about the outside world (Roy, 2010: 112-6). When it concerns levels of information and the clear-sightedness of leaders of totalitarian states, observers and political leaders from democratic countries have often exaggerated the farsightedness of their totalitarian adversaries and assert that, because they aren't restrained by a legitimate domestic opposition, totalitarian governments are free to make the 'necessary' decisions about the use of effective measures of power vis-à-vis democratic societies. The preliminary conclusion from this is that the specific character of North Korea's bounded rationality cannot be determined with certainty, but it is easy to exaggerate their degree of awareness when it comes to evaluating the long-term effectiveness of their military efforts. It would clearly help if the North Korean decision-making process lost some of its 'black box' character, but observers and analysts are always left with some uncertainty. Everything being considered, the real danger is that although the conventional military balance on the peninsula has changed in favour of South Korea, an uncertain and vulnerable leadership in Pyongyang could still choose to initiate violence short of all-out war as a wholly rational policy, even though that choice might ultimately end in their ruin (Cha, 2002: 44).

### 3. South Korea's Nordpolitik

As the neighbour of a deeply antagonistic North Korea, South Korea is the country with the most to lose if tensions escalate to military conflict and war. Since the country's foreign policy goal is not only to preserve the peace, but also to realize distinct values in peacetime, it faces a highly difficult and complex decision calculus (Kang, 2010). In other words, South Korea really faces a challenging squeeze play (Snyder, 2005).

#### Continuous goals and new strains

Outlining how South Korea has met the challenge, it must be emphasised that its *Nordpolitik* has displayed obvious elements of continuity for more than two decades (Glaser and Snyder, 2010: 7-10). Five goals are important:

- peace between the two Koreas;
- avoid collapse in North Korea with strong repercussions in South Korea;
- peaceful reunification of the two Koreas on the basis of democratic principles;
- denuclearization of the peninsula;
- maintenance of the alliance with the United States.

Some of these goals have mostly been mere aspirations or hopes, especially peaceful reunification on the basis of democratic principles, while others are goals of vital interest, in particular upholding inter-Korean peace. Identifying continuous goals in South Korea's *Nordpolitik*, however, it must be emphasised that there have been dramatic differences between the political parties and deep cleavages in South Korean society over the approach to take to North Korea, especially over the substance of the alliance with the US, which is included in the list as a continuous pillar of South Korea's *Nordpolitik*. But even though the alliance came under considerable strain in the first years of this century as the perception of a threat from North Korea abated and anti-American sentiments increased strongly, particularly after two fourteen-year-old schoolgirls were fatally run over and killed by a US armed vehicle in the summer of 2002 (Feinerman, 2005: 204-8), no government in Seoul has seriously considered abandoning the alliance with the US. Characterizing the alliance as an element of continuity is therefore a valid description of South Korea's policy (Glaser and Snyder, 2010: 7-10; Heon, 2010; Jae, 2007: 102-7). While domestic support for the alliance with the US in South Korea has remained relatively high since the

country's democratization, many South Koreans have demanded greater autonomy and more equality in the alliance, with clear legal arrangements to handle accidents and limited immunity for American soldiers committing crimes on Korean territory. But the crux of the matter is that Americans expect all South Koreans to be grateful to the United States for having saved South Korea twice during the past century; many older Koreans are still grateful, but for younger Koreans the Korean War is history, and they more easily recall American support for past Korean dictators instead. Added to this is the fact that, outside the North Atlantic region, the US has jealously guarded American prerogatives provided by host country, probably as a legacy of America's 'rogue allies' (Feinerman, 2005: 196-204, 211-12).

The result is that various presidencies in South Korea have prioritized specific goals differently, and often the adoption of a new approach toward North Korea has been based on perceived lessons learned from the fruitless efforts of a previous administration. The most evident rearrangement of goals and means in South Korea's *Nordpolitik* occurred in the late 1990s under President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003).

### **The rise of the sunshine policy**

Kim Dae-jung was a long-term opposition leader against the military dictatorship, and since the early 1970s he had been an outspoken advocate of easing North-South tensions and initiating contacts with the North. Like Václav Havel and Nelson Mandela, Kim had journeyed from prison in a dictatorship to the presidency of his country. As president he initiated the *sunshine policy*, which was a clear innovation compared to the traditional Southern policy of the diplomatic isolation of the North and non-dialogue with it. Rather than pressuring North Korea, the new administration would seek to encourage it to become a member of the international community. For Kim the great danger was North Korea's paranoid sense of insecurity, and his idea was to induce changes in North Korea by initiating a policy of comprehensive engagement and strongly increased inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation. In his inauguration address in February 1998, which mainly dealt with domestic issues and the then East Asian financial crisis, Kim declared the end of containment, but he also vowed to defend South Korean territory against North Korean aggression. His administration would actively work for reconciliation and cooperation between South and North, and to reassure the other Korea he emphasised that he had no intention to undermine or absorb North Korea (Glaser and Snyder, 2010: 11; Oberdorfer, 2001: 407-8). The new administration would establish a programme of engaging the North through positive gestures. An important element in the new *Nordpolitik* was to separate politics



from economics, meaning that businessmen from South Korea could pursue deals with the North, even if there was little or no progress in intergovernmental relations, because this too could prepare the way to broader contacts. A specific economic point was that, by providing low-interest, long-term loans to companies to participate in inter-Korean exchanges, the government in Seoul would encourage them to stimulate inter-Korean economic cooperation (Chun, 2002: 5).

Different elements of Kim's new *Nordpolitik* were clearly based on a neo-functional view of international connections, including the ambiguities of integration theory as regards the distinction between the intended and unintended effects of the first steps towards integration (Chun, 2002). Most importantly, the idea was to *separate* economics and politics today in order for economic changes to *elicit* political changes in North Korea tomorrow. In the coming years, this ambiguity not only meant that the *sunshine* policy became shrouded for other countries directly involved in Korean affairs, especially North Korea and the United States, but in the absence of quick results it was difficult to establish success criteria for political parties and groupings in South Korea. This meant that the peculiar 'separation-between-yet-hoped-for' connection between economics and politics could end up either as a powerful political weapon or as a highly vulnerable idea, depending on the reaction of the other Korea and a relatively frictionless inter-Korea process.

The first high-level exchange between the two Koreas was the summit between President Kim Dae-jung and National Defence Commission Chairman Kim Jong-il of North Korea that took place in Pyongyang on 15 June 2000. The Joint Declaration after the summit talks first noted the importance of 'promoting mutual understanding, developing South-North relations and realizing peaceful reunification'. The South and the North agreed to 'resolve the question of reunification independently and through the joint efforts of the Korean people, who are the masters of the country.' It was noted that there was 'a common element in the South's concept of a confederation and the North's formula for a loose form of federation', and the two sides agreed to promote reunification in that direction. Also, the two leaders agreed to 'promptly resolve humanitarian issues such as exchange visits by separated family members and relatives on the occasion of the August 15 National Liberation and the question of unswerving Communists serving prison sentences in the South.' Moreover, they agreed to consolidate mutual trust by promoting 'economic cooperation and by stimulating economic exchanges in civic, cultural, sports, health, environmental and all other fields'. Finally, the South and the North agreed to hold a dialogue between their respective authorities in the near future to implement the agreements expeditiously (<http://>

[www.usip.org/filesfile/resources/collections/peace\\_agreementsn\\_skorea06152000.pdf](http://www.usip.org/filesfile/resources/collections/peace_agreementsn_skorea06152000.pdf)).

The summit pointed to the 'Koreanization of the Korean issue'. Immediately after the summit there was a rapid series of developments on the divided peninsula. Before the end of 2002 the two Koreas had held four rounds of ministerial talks to authorize different cooperative arrangements, including agreements to repair the severed North-South railroad, establish the Kaesong Industrial Park ten kilometres north of the DMZ with direct road and rail access to South Korea, and a meeting between the two ministers of defence. Among the most emotional and memorable moments were temporary reunions of long separated families and athletes from North and South marching together under a single peninsula flag at the 2000 Sydney Olympics three months after the summit. During the year after the summit, North Korea's relations with Asian regional economic and security organizations increased, and the country established diplomatic relations with several countries, including in Europe, and moved toward opening relations with others (Oberdorfer, 2001: 433-5). However, later progress in inter-Korean relations was marred not only by numerous controversies on the implementation of the Joint Declaration and cooperative arrangements, but also by the revelation in 2003 that, through the Hyundai Corporation, Kim Dae-jung had secretly authorized a payment of up to US\$500 million to a North Korean-controlled Macao-based company the day before the summit; actually, Kim Dae-jung's departure date from Seoul was postponed because North Korea required confirmation of the cash being received before proceeding to welcome South Korea's president in Pyongyang (Snyder, 2009: 122).

Kim Dae-jung's successor, President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-08), was a long-standing supporter of Kim's *sunshine* policy of comprehensive engagement with the North. His tight election victory in December, 2002, over the candidate of the opposition Grand National Party, marked a stronger turning point in South Korean politics than Kim's victory five years earlier. Roh reaffirmed the importance of the alliance, but he campaigned for office on a largely anti-American platform, appealing to the strong anti-American sentiment after unprecedented anti-American demonstrations and the deaths of two South Korean girls earlier in 2002 (cf. above), and he vowed to create a greater distance between Washington and Seoul (Feinerman, 2005: 214-6). Like his predecessor, Roh sought to engage North Korea in economic cooperation and political dialogue, with South-North reconciliation as a major policy objective. A concerted effort to push a comprehensive 'post-Cold War mind set' to reach out to North Korea and to build an enduring 'peace system' on the Korean peninsula was

driven by Korean nationalism, a strong desire to build a self-reliant defence capability, and the idea that South Korea could play the role of 'balancer' in the power politics of Northeast Asia, rather than merely being 'protected' by the mighty US against the greedy communists to the North (Chung, 2005: 160-5; Seong-Ho, 2009: 140-7). After years of propaganda by their own authoritarian regimes about American altruism in fighting the communist dictatorship to the North, many Koreans didn't accept the notion of a mutuality of interests between their countries as a basis for preparing a foreign policy. Images of the United States in South Korea fluctuated between *banmi* (anti-Americanism) and *sungmi* (worship of the United States) (Chung-in, 2005). One paradoxical consequence of all this is that, when the Bush administration saw the invigorated *sunshine* policy as appeasement, it strengthened the feeling in South Korea that North Korea was the vulnerable ethnic 'brother'; actually, many American messages designed to induce public support in the United States for getting 'tough' with North Korea often yielded divergent effects in South Korea and the United States (Jongryn and Hahn, 2005). While for many years the US had been seen as a security guarantor and ally against the North, it was now seen as an 'impeder' and the primary obstacle to improvements in inter-Korean relations (Cha, 2005).

At a second summit on 2-4 October 2007, the two leaders signed a 'Declaration on the Advancement of South-North Relations, Peace and Prosperity' in which they reaffirmed the spirit of the 15 June 2000 Joint Declaration. They agreed to transform inter-Korean relations into 'ties of mutual respect and trust, transcending the differences in ideology and systems', and agreed 'not to interfere in the internal affairs of the other and ... to resolve inter-Korean issues in the spirit of reconciliation, cooperation and reunification.' Also, they agreed to 'proactively pursue dialogue and contacts in various areas, including the legislatures of the two Koreas ... in a way that meets the aspirations of the entire Korean people' and to 'work together to put an end to military hostilities, mitigate tensions and guarantee peace on the Korean Peninsula.' The two ministers of defence would hold talks to discuss military confidence-building measures. The South and the North recognized the need to end the armistice regime and to build a permanent peace regime and agreed to work together to have the leaders of the 'three or four parties directly concerned' to convene on the peninsula and declare an end to the war. Several projects of economic and practical cooperation were reconfirmed, including the establishment of a special economic zone and the creation of joint fishing zones, and they agreed to boost exchanges in social areas such as history, language, education, science and technology, culture and arts, and sports to 'highlight the long history and excellent culture of the Korean people'. Finally, reunions of separated family members would be expanded, and they would actively cooperate in cases of

emergencies, including natural disasters, according to the ‘principles of fraternal love, humanitarianism and mutual assistance’. Inter-Korean prime ministers would hold talks on the implementation of the declaration ([http://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/North-South%20Declaration.doc/file\\_view](http://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/North-South%20Declaration.doc/file_view)).

The expression the ‘three or four parties directly concerned’ gave rise to guesses and controversies that are worth noting as a thorny issue in the developing connections between the two Korean states and their relations with their non-Korean allies, particularly in the case of China and North Korea. If it was ‘four parties’, the two Koreas obviously belonged to those ‘directly concerned’, and China and the United States would be the other two. But if the parties were limited to three, which of the two non-Korean allies would be excluded, China or the US? Reportedly, the ambiguous expression had been suggested by North Korea, and it naturally aroused sensitivities in Beijing. China was quick to respond, as its ambassador to North Korea, speaking at an international conference in Seoul, stated in unambiguous terms that China should and would be involved in any peace-making process. Two weeks after the summit, President Roh confirmed that, besides the two Koreas, both China and the United States would be involved (Ren, 2008: 181-2). The possibility – seemingly raised by Pyongyang – was closed by Beijing.

### **And its decline**

The incumbent administration of President Lee Myung-bak pursues a policy that is less interested in comprehensive engagement with North Korea which had nonetheless been combined with substantial economic assistance without accountability for how the aid was spent. Reflecting widespread public frustration with what is seen as lack of reciprocity in inter-Korean relations, Lee rejects unconditional reconciliation with North Korea and insists that Pyongyang first has to demonstrate an unequivocal commitment to denuclearization. In brief, Lee’s policy has been closer to the traditional goals of South Korea’s *Nordpolitik* since the country’s democratization twenty years earlier. In his inaugural speech in February 2008, Lee briefly vowed to develop and further strengthen South Korea’s traditional friendly relations with the United States into a ‘future-oriented partnership’, and he reiterated that reunification of the two Koreas was the ‘long-cherished desire’ of the seventy million Korean people. To prepare the foundations for unification, Lee repeated his initiative for ‘Denuclearization and Opening up North Korea’ once it abandons its nuclear program and chooses openness to the world. The idea is, together with other countries, to provide assistance to North Korea so that her per capita income can be raised to US\$3,000 within ten years,

that is, a rise of about 60%. That, Lee emphasised, would both benefit ‘our brethren’ in North Korea and advance the way to unification, and he added that the leaders of the two Koreas should meet whenever necessary and ‘talk openly, with an open mind’ ([http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/271850.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/271850.html)). Through the years that followed, President Lee insisted on the ‘denuclearization first’ approach to North Korea, but the other Korea again and again refused to accept any kind of conditional aid. Moreover, after holding back in the first months of the Lee administration, Pyongyang launched extreme personal and political criticism of South Korea’s president, and in 2010 this criticism descended into low-intensity military attacks. As for the alliance pillar of South Korea’s *Nordpolitik*, Seoul returned to a close alignment and policy coordination with Washington, and the attempt to ‘Koreanize the Korean issue’ was abandoned (Glaser and Snyder, 2010: 12-3; Pollack, 2011: 197-9).

That is, after ten years of unconditional *sunshine* policy and three and a half years pursuing strict conditionality, neither policy has brought evident results. Neither the rise nor the decline of the *sunshine* policy has, so far, had a major impact on North Korea’s behaviour and the character of the security complex in the region.

## 4. The Dragon: stability-plus

### China–North Korea relations: far-reaching changes

Since China initiated the reform and opening up policy in the early 1980s, and especially after the end of the Cold War, North Korea has been a truculent and troublesome ally. Old-time ideological affinity may still play a role for some in China's leadership, but today negative feelings mark attitudes on both sides, and the two countries are clearly not as close to each other as might be assumed for fellow communist regimes. Since the late 1990s, many public Chinese statements about relations with North Korea have gradually replaced the stylized language of the 'friendship sealed in blood' with the strongly downgraded concept of 'traditional amicable ties' (Jae, 2004: 12-3). Privately, Chinese leaders are very negative about North Korea's economic and political system, and they have often encouraged their North Korean counterparts to apply some of the ideas behind China's economic reforms and opening themselves up to the world – as expressed by an American-Chinese scholar, China 'whispers' several messages 'in North Korea's ear' (Wu, 2005). In fact, China disapproves of every aspect of North Korea's political and economic system, particularly the dynastic succession and its self-destructive economic isolationism. As for North Korea, it is often prickly towards China and keen on pursuing a foreign policy that is independent of Beijing, and North Korean spokesmen intimate that they do not trust China (Scalapino, 2001: 118). The Chinese leadership was given advance notice of only half an hour of North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, one reason for the short notice probably being that China's president had warned them not to go ahead with the test (Chung, 2010: 23). This mistrust has been evident since China established official diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992, and South Korea, as a prosperous and dynamic economic partner in a strongly developing East Asia, is much closer to China's economic ideals than the poor, stagnating and old fellow communist ally.

Yet, both sides have good reasons for striving to maintain a favourable relationship, and China has handled relations with North Korea with great care. It is debated how much influence China actually has on North Korea, and Chinese leaders seem unsure of the extent of their leverage. They were for long unwilling to be more assertive in testing the limits of their influence and preferred to exercise it in a non-coercive and reactive manner, playing for the long term and focusing on co-optation and persuasion (Nanto and Manyin, 2010: 7; Shambaugh, 2003: 54; Snyder, 2009: 174-6; Sutter, 2010). It has to be remembered that, in Beijing's policy hierarchy, Taiwan clearly

receives more attention and resources than North Korea, and today China's policy towards its old-time close ideological friend on the Korean peninsula connotes a spirit of 'not broken, no need to fix' (You, 2011: 6). It all means that, in laying down a policy toward North Korea, the Chinese leadership realizes that it has to grapple with a number of dilemmas, contradictions and uncertainties which have to be handled by pursuing a low-profile and cautious, risk-averse, status-quo oriented and ambivalent policy that often has a bifurcated quality (Snyder, 2009: 141-9).

Noting these characteristics of China's 'amiability' toward Pyongyang, it can be asked whether there is any 'red line' for its patience, for instance, North Korea selling nuclear material to Al Qaida (Byman and Lind, 2010: 71). Which goal priorities lie behind China's circumspection?

### **Goal priorities and implementation**

China's most important priority in relation to the Korean peninsula is to avoid a disruptive collapse of the North Korean state. Other priorities are also important to Beijing, especially avoiding North Korea acquiring nuclear weapons, among other things because China is aware that a nuclear-armed North Korea could lead to Japan, South Korea and other neighbours in East Asia developing nuclear arms and missile defence capabilities (Nanto and Manyin, 2010: 8). But as North Korean nuclear weapons do not directly threaten China, denuclearization is secondary to averting the chaos that will follow a collapse and force Beijing to divert its attention and resources away from its domestic economic priorities, which have been paramount for more than thirty years. China shares a common border of 1,416 kilometres with North Korea and has put up a massive concrete and barbed wire fence along parts of the border and the Yalu river to block a possible influx of refugees. Occasionally, China has applied extraordinary measures, as in the autumn of 2003, when it was reported that China sent 150,000 troops to guard the border with North Korea, possibly as a signal to Pyongyang to move towards an agreement to halt its nuclear weapons programme (Roy, 2004a: 3). North Korea has also built a fence along parts of its border with China to prevent North Koreans fleeing the country. What China fears is a North Korean collapse and the prospect of a massive flow of starving and potentially violent refugees crossing the border into China's two northeastern provinces bordering on North Korea, Jilin and Liaoning. An estimated 300,000 North Koreans already live illegally in China, mostly in these provinces, and new refugees would increase the pressures on economic and institutional capacities and could stir nationalist passions among the area's ethnic Korean population. In the event of

a breakdown of border control, North Korean soldiers might bring their weapons across the border and engage in banditry and violent activities (Bennett and Lind, 2011: 97-8; Gill, 2007: 147-8; Roy, 2004a).

Another reason for prioritizing stability on the Korean peninsula is North Korea's strategic significance as a buffer state and a bulwark against a country allied to the United States, which could be the leading edge of a broader strategy to encircle China (Shen, 2006; Snyder, 2009: 146-7). China's worry is the orientation of a unified Korea, which it fears would seek alliance with the United States as a security guarantee, possibly bolstered by a continued American military presence, against China as the overwhelming regional great power. For China, its enormous sacrifices during the Korean War still deepen the sense that it holds an important stake in developments on the Korean peninsula, and for that historical reason too the prospect of an adversary controlling the Korean peninsula is highly worrying (Roy, 2004b). At the same time it is worth noting that Chinese thinking about this aspect of the Korean problem has become more pluralistic in the latest decade, and a new view seems to be gaining ground in Beijing among the younger generation of Chinese leaders, in particular those not associated with the military. There is a growing conviction that, as China is no longer in serious danger of a military invasion, she no longer needs a buffer state and could come to accept a unified Korea under Seoul's control if it could take place gradually and well into the future. That would be at least as favourable to Chinese interests as the present situation in which China has a paranoid and decaying neighbour on its border with the Korean peninsula (Nanto and Manyin, 2010: 3; Roy, 2004a: 2).

The new thinking is related to the unusual debate among Chinese scholars on China's North Korea policy in which analysts have raised new issues and begun questioning the priorities of that policy. During the last ten years, especially after North Korea's first test in 2006, many Chinese scholars have seen North Korea as a liability that should be abandoned, and they question the rationale of the buffer zone notion (You, 2011: 8-11). Some Chinese observers actually view North Korea as similar to China in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and it is questioned whether the 1961 China-North Korean Treaty should be maintained or revised; some argue in favour of cutting back ties with this dangerously unpredictable ally before its adventurism leads to a crisis on the peninsula that threatens China (Yahuda, 2011: 109-10). Also the possibility of a rapid development in US-North Korean relations leading to a separate deal between the two arch-enemies that is not embedded in the six-party process, and how that possibility will affect China's interests, have been raised by Chinese experts. Other scholars express concern about special developments in the



South Korean-US alliance, particularly the actions the two countries might take in the event of instability in North Korea (Glaser, Snyder and Park, 2008; Pollack, 2011: 201). The publication of such divergent views and the presentation of such scenarios indicate that the debates on North Korea and China's policy are sanctioned by the Chinese leadership, maybe because of differences at higher levels or because the leaders see publication as a way of putting greater pressure on North Korea. Still, there are limits to the criticism allowed of North Korean leaders: one article, in 2004, strongly criticizing Kim Jong-il, was banned after protests from North Korea (You, 2011: 9). The critical issue is whether the goal priorities in China's policy towards North Korea can continue without a basic change. Obviously, some Chinese analysts think the answer is no, because China's choices will become increasingly narrow in the years to come. China's leaders certainly realize this, but they cannot see any other option. They know that China has leverage over North Korea, but they are afraid to use it in an effective manner for fear of instability in North Korea (Cha et al., 2010: 11-12). From 2006 to 2009, China adopted a line that was more critical of North Korea, but since then it has returned to emphasising risk-aversion above all else (Parello-Plesner, 2012).

Pursuing a very cautious policy toward North Korea, primarily aimed at maintaining stability, China applies a combination of bilateral economic assistance to avoid social and political collapse and multilateral diplomacy to curb North Korea's nuclear programme. Generally China's implementation strategies are marked by their cautiousness, even though they have been tightened in later years; however, at the same time a special *limit* to China's influence appears. China's economic aid to North Korea probably includes about 70% of all food needs and up to 80% of its energy needs, crude oil constituting the bulk, but, as both countries lack transparency in reporting their transactions, it is difficult to assess accurately the scope and composition of China's assistance. The special limit to China's ability to project its power over Pyongyang, based on North Korea's dependence on Chinese aid, is that North Korea can employ asymmetric tactics to exploit China's fear of collapse: 'Don't push us too hard, or we may be forced to cause instability in the region'. In that way, North Korea's dependence on economic assistance from the much bigger China may turn the 'big power' into a hostage to the 'small power' – a case often seen of the 'power of the weak' (Lee, 2009, 48-65; Snyder, 2009: 201-3; You, 2011: 31). Still, on a few occasions China seems to have been more active in cutting off its supply of oil for a few days, for instance, in the spring 2003, when this ostensibly happened for technical reasons, though the real reason was probably to signal to Pyongyang that it should move toward an agreement to halt its nuclear weapons program (Roy, 2004a: 3).

As to the application of multilateral measures in attempts to curb North Korea's nuclear programme, since 2003 China has been the primary organizer, coordinator, mediator and broker in the Six-Party Talks (SPT) between China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea and the United States. The terms 'mediator' and 'broker' indicate the cautious approach adopted by China as the initiator and organizer of the SPT. After North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, however, the attitude stiffened, as China released a Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement that condemned the test by using the word 'outrageously', a term previously used during the Cold War to condemn 'American imperialism' (Ren, 2008: 177). Moreover, after both nuclear tests, China has taken a more active role by showing a greater willingness to condemn the tests publicly in UN Security Council resolutions (Pollack, 2011: 163-8).

## 5. The Eagle: denuclearization-plus

The United States and North Korea have no formal diplomatic relations and share a basic mutual distrust that has been obvious since the Korean War. However, since North Korea's WMD programme appeared as an issue in the early 1990s, the two countries have often negotiated bilaterally or in a multilateral context on implementing the primary American goal priority in relation to North Korea.

### Goal priority and implementation

The most important American priority on the Korean peninsula is the denuclearization of North Korea; to implement that goal, all three administrations in this period have followed different versions of a containment-*cum*-negotiation strategy. Stating that denuclearization is the top-priority, the United States also has an obvious interest in avoiding collapse in North Korea, as this could result in the loss of command and control over North Korea's nuclear weapons and increase the risk of proliferation. Hence, even if the American goal priority is more unambiguous than the Chinese one, it can still be termed 'denuclearization-*plus*'.

After US intelligence photos in early 1993 revealed North Korean nuclear facilities, US-North Korea talks began in the summer of 1993 that led, with from the aid of former President Carter, to the 'US-North Korea Agreed Framework', introduced by the Clinton administration in October 1994 as a measure to stop North Korea developing nuclear arms. For North Korea the Agreed Framework was primarily a means to achieve diplomatic recognition by the United States, and so it agreed to freeze its plutonium enrichment program, to be monitored by the IAEA (Oberdorfer, 2001: 351-9; Pollack, 2011: 111f.). The two sides also agreed to move toward a full normalization of political and economic relations, to work together for a nuclear-free Korean peninsula and to strengthen the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. However, the Republican opposition in the United States did not support the agreement, and having won control of the American Congress a month later, they turned the Agreed Framework into a political orphan within weeks of its signature. After various more or less successful attempts to implement the Agreed Framework later in the 1990s, its final collapse in the autumn of 2002 was followed by North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT and the resumption of its weapons programme in early 2003, which led to the first nuclear test in 2006 (Pollack, 2011: 131-55). Before that, a new administration in Washington proclaimed a deeply contemptuous

view of the Pyongyang regime, stigmatizing North Korea as part of the 'axis of evil' and dismissing the Agreed Framework as worthless at best. Yet, even the Bush administration combined, in the end, its stigmatization of the Pyongyang regime with talking to it.

The distinctive feature of a containment-*cum*-negotiation strategy is that the North Korean nuclear programme is seen as a problem to be managed while paying at least some lip service to denuclearization as a long-term goal. Deterrence and negotiation are not alternatives but complementary (Pritchard and Tilelli Jr., 2010: 12-4; Przystup, 2009: 2). Implementation of this strategy can take different forms. One form upgrades the negotiation part by applying diplomatic and economic inducements to facilitate North Korea's economic opening up and to promote various exchange and information dissemination programmes for the country's integration into the international community to change North Korean behaviour in more cooperative directions ('containment-plus-engagement'). Another form plays down the negotiation part and upgrades deterrence and defence capabilities aimed at rolling back the North's nuclear arms programme through diplomatic and military pressure ('containment-plus-coercion') (Cha, 2002: 43f.; Pritchard and Tilelli, Jr., 2010: 18-9 and 49-50).

Including a negotiation-inducement element in attempts to implement the denuclearization goal entails two problems, a normative question and an effectiveness question. North Korea is clearly a 'rogue' regime, with the general population suffering extreme poverty, devastating famines and appalling concentration camps – agonies which leaders in Pyongyang could alleviate on their own initiative. Attempts to negotiate or engage with a morally repugnant regime risk appearing as rewarding bad behaviour and sending the wrong message to other 'rogue' nations, maybe reinforcing a view that democratic countries are weak. However, it can also be argued that 'rogue' regimes should be regarded, not as moral deviants to be reprimanded, but as security problems to be managed and maybe solved in a complex world where the consequences of a choice are often uncertain (Cha, 2002: 70-1). If so, seeing negotiations simply as a reward easily becomes a self-made trap. This publication is based on the second view: important choices in international politics are often made in circumstances of uncertainty. To take one epoch-making choice, when Nixon travelled to Mao's China in 1972 – truly a 'rogue' regime – and pursued rapprochement with China, the benefit of hindsight allows us today to conclude that Nixon's historical handshake with America's old 'rogue enemy' contributed to the Soviet defeat in the Cold War. The crucial point here is that negotiation and engagement, combined with deterrence and defence, can be an expedient strategy for different persuasions – hawks as well

as doves – both because it is a good way to build a coalition for later punishment and because it may give North Korea a stake in developing relations with the outside world which may eventually lead to regime transformation (Cha, 2002: 71-4; Parello-Plesner, 2009). But even if isolation sustains the domestic political control of the current leadership in Pyongyang, the expectations of a negotiation strategy should never be exaggerated. Also, a containment-*cum*-negotiation strategy is defective, and its success depends on factors which can never be controlled by decision-makers in Washington (or Beijing).

It can be argued that, if the United States concedes failure and acquiesces in North Korea's nuclear status, it would seriously threaten the sustainability of U.S. alliances in East Asia, as Japan, South Korea and even Taiwan might reconsider their nuclear options, setting off a regional arms race. In a broader international context, it would be an embarrassing admission of defeat for non-proliferation efforts and would make attempts to dissuade other nuclear hopefuls in tension-ridden regions around the world even more difficult (Pritchard and Tilelli, Jr., 2011: 11-2). In the United States, an administration's open acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state would provoke a political firestorm, especially if it were a Democratic administration that did this. Maybe a right-wing Republican president with a reputation as a 'hawk' might be able to perform a turn like President Nixon's rapprochement with China in 1972. However, the longer North Korea continues to assert its status as a nuclear weapons state, the more difficult it will be to realize denuclearization (Przystup, 2011). The question is whether the US and other countries have a choice? What are the alternative options?

### **Alternative options**

Alternative US options to a containment-*cum*-negotiation strategy may be summarized as three: (1) a pre-emptive military strike; (2) a concerted effort to realize regime change; (3) a go-it-alone, conditional diplomatic offer to establish normal diplomatic relations in return for rolling back the nuclear programme. The three alternatives can be combined and implemented in various ways, and the following only outlines and discusses some aspects of the three options.

The first is a pre-emptive military strike aimed at destroying North Korea's nuclear weapons installations. One problem is that successful air strikes require comprehensive and near-perfect intelligence, but intelligence about North Korea's nuclear weapons programme is exceedingly limited, and air strikes cannot destroy hidden materials

and production facilities. Another problem is that, given the likelihood of North Korean nuclear retaliation, South Korea, China and Japan would strongly oppose a pre-emptive strike, and even a seemingly effective wipe-out strike could result in a conflagration in North East Asia and a breakdown in US-China relations, as well as the American alliances with Japan and South Korea. In South Korea, an attempted pre-emptive strike would cause demonstrations that would reduce all former anti-American demonstrations to minor skirmishes. That is, from an American point of view, a pre-emptive military strike is a highly risky strategy, and only in an extremely tense situation, with the expectation of an immediate North Korean attack, would it appear to be a risk worth taking (Przystup, 2009: 2; Ramberg, 2009: 16). However, it has to be noted that, by intimating the very possibility of a pre-emptive military strike, Washington may put extra pressure on Beijing to pressure Pyongyang. In the end, the question is whether countering North Korean brinkmanship requires American brinkmanship!

The second action strategy is regime change in North Korea, applying military, economic and/or subversive measures to undermine the incumbent leadership in order to effect denuclearization. Analyses suggest that military operations against North Korea undertaken with the goal of inciting a coup or popular revolt are unlikely to succeed, among others because, with or without help from the North Korean propaganda machine, they will easily increase the military's loyalty to the incumbent leadership. The alternative is a large-scale invasion of North Korea, and this option suffers from problems at least as severe as all more or less limited military strikes, even if North Korea's military effectiveness is lower than often assumed (Bymans and Lind, 2010: 73-4). Focusing on economic measures such as implementing still more intense economic and financial sanctions against North Korea, a first necessary condition is the complete cooperation of China. However, the consequence of the ending of all Chinese economic aid (cf. above) might be the collapse of North Korea, followed by the unification of the two Korean states under a South Korean government, possibly allied to the United States, and it is very difficult to imagine China running this risk. But also South Korea has traditionally been cautious about imposing regime change on its neighbour for fear that a sudden collapse would mean extensive violence in the North and flows of refugees trying to escape the chaos. That fear undoubtedly still plays a role after the two incidents in 2010, at least until a new North Korean provocation may shake its foundations. In the end, the United States could not disengage itself from sorting things out after a collapse either, and so it would hesitate to go openly for regime change (Pritchard and Tilelli Jr., 2010: 17-8; Przystup, 2009: 2; Wit, 2007: 57).

The third option is a go-it-alone American diplomatic strategy aimed at separating denuclearization from regime change. The US withdraws from the Six-Party Talks, arguing that the talks are totally deadlocked and a blind alley, and offers normal diplomatic relations with North Korea on condition that the latter surrenders its nuclear weapons and allows the United States to verify termination of the programme (Przystup, 2009: 2-3). The offer could be combined with the suggestion of a grand civilian aid package. It is hardly unprecedented for Washington, sometimes 'holding its nose', to initiate and maintain partnerships with odious regimes around the world; indeed, this may be seen as a consequence of the pluralistic and state-centred nature of international politics. There is always a possibility that the North might not respond favourably to such a dramatic initiative, looking upon it with incredulity and rejecting it as just another American attempt to mislead the world. A special reason for this is that the momentum behind North Korea's nuclear weapons programme has strengthened the position of individuals and groups in Pyongyang who are unwilling to give up the country's only foreign policy weapon (Pritchard and Tilelli, Jr., 2010: 32-3; Wit, 2007: 66f.). Further scrutinizing this option, the problem is that the basic mistrust between the two 'new partners' would lead to all kinds of implementation hurdles. Moreover, this strategy would strongly damage America's standing, both with its two allies in East Asia, Japan and South Korea, and also with China. Actually, China and South Korea are both very concerned about a bilateral rapprochement between the United States and North Korea that will marginalize the two countries.

The preliminary conclusion is that the three options offer no viable alternatives to the containment-*cum*-negotiation strategy, with all its enduring built-in problems. Still, it is worth noting that at an ASAN Institute round table in Seoul in late December 2010, the notion of separating regime change from the denuclearization of North Korea, that is, an idea close to the third option, was mentioned as one of the most important potential ways of moving forward (Cha et al., 2010: 6).

## 6. Conclusion: transformation processes

Applying the analyses in this study to evaluating the prospect of transforming the actual conflict formation on the Korean peninsula into an observed security regime, a first question concerns the impact on North Korea's arms policy of a changed security environment in the region. This question has several aspects, one of which is the role and influence of the two non-Korean powers, China and the United States. Clearly, the two great powers have different but overlapping interests in progress toward a less conflictual regional security complex which might provide the basis for strongly enhanced cooperation between them in trying either to incite or to put pressure on North Korea to abandon its nuclear programme and military assertiveness. Ignoring for a moment indications that one or both powers may reject specific suggestions, one may imagine the effect of one or other change on North Korea. For instance, as much of the logic behind North Korea's programme is internal, it is easy to exaggerate the meaning of American security guarantees as parts of attempts to reduce North Korea's nuclear incentives; North Korea's capacity for endurance should caution policy-makers and analysts about the allure of easy and simple solutions. Also, new sanctions aimed at weakening North Korea's economy still more are unlikely to have much effect. As noted above, many arguments and views on how to change North Korea's behaviour have been advanced, but the conclusion seems natural: given their actual goal priorities, China and the US have limited influence in either pulling or pushing the existing regime in Pyongyang toward markedly more cooperative behaviour. Focusing on South Korea's policy toward the North, ten years of *sunshine* policy seem equally devoid of major impact. Altogether, the conclusion is that changing the external security environment in Northeast Asia may have only a limited influence on North Korea's military assertiveness.

Focusing on internal changes in North Korea and their impact on the character of the regional security complex in the region, different scenarios have been formulated and discussed (Bennett and Lind, 2011; Clemens, 2009; Goldstein, 2006: 139-43; Pollack, 2011: 192-5). The different futures can be simplified into three broad versions: collapse, muddling through, and reform. As for collapse, the transition from a seemingly stable muddling through to collapse can be swift – better be prepared, as South Korea, China and the US all realize (Glaser and Snyder, 2010: 26-30). The order among the three futures can vary, one resembling the downfall of the Soviet Union: first many years of muddling through, followed by hectic but futile attempts at reform, and ending up with collapse. Actually, the possibility of an implosion from



unpredictable or unknowable elements is ever present in North Korea (Kissinger, 2011: 497). As noted above, a collapse in North Korea could unleash a series of catastrophes on the peninsula with potentially far-reaching effects, especially in South Korea and China. However, one cannot simply dismiss the possibility of a gradual and peaceful change – North Korea *is* a closed society, and invisible undercurrents could come to unleash processes that nobody imagines today. In that situation, an accommodating security environment, that is, a cooperative South Korean, Chinese or American policy could help change the transformation towards an observed security regime. But as the critical point is that the origin of a radical transformation process in East Asia's conflict-laden security complex has to be a change *within* the North Korean regime, it is always difficult to know if the situation is appropriate for cooperative steps; the outside world can never be sure whether accommodating measures do not actually strengthen the Pyongyang regime.

Ten years ago, an observer stated that the world must be prepared to wait out North Korea in the expectation that internal political and economic weaknesses will eventually be the main catalysts of change (Miles, 2002: 40). It still seems the smartest strategy to wait (Bandow, 2010) – totalitarian states can be transformed, as we learned at the end of the Cold War. However, this does not mean that the outside world should just remain passive. Today there is an urgent need to prepare a policy to counter local conventional provocations like the two incidents in 2010, as well as a less illusory *Nordpolitik* than the ten years of *sunshine* policy. Is South Korea destined to swing between extremes?

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