Talking to North Korea

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—Andrei Lankov, author of *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia*

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Ending the Nuclear Standoff

Glyn Ford

PLUTO PRESS

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Contents

1
Introduction: The Pyongyang Paradox

Pyongyang is trapped in a paradox. The very measures it has felt essential to ensure its long-term survival are precisely those that put it in short-term jeopardy. Kim Jong Un's *byungjin* line – which gave equal weight to building the nuclear deterrent and developing the economy – was designed to provide the security, time, and space to allow the economy to grow. The ultimate intention was to transform the country into an unattributed variant of Vietnam or China. Yet the nuclear strand of the policy threatens to precipitate a 'preventive' strike by Washington and its 'coalition of the willing', triggering a second Korean War – with devastating consequences.

Washington sees North Korea as an undeveloped Communist state in hock to Beijing, led by an irrational playboy with an odd haircut – and thus as a dangerous pariah that is unsusceptible to the normal political leverage of cause and effect. It would be more accurate, however, to see the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) – as it prefers to be known – as constrained in a situation where its choices are narrow. With a failed industrial economy rather than an emerging one, its ruling regime has legitimate reasons to distrust the outside world and is desperate to ensure its survival in the face of clear existential threats. From Pyongyang's perspective, its actions are the inevitable corollary of this struggle for survival. Here the political stratigraphy of North Korea is revealing: the base feudal layer overlaid by the deep lessons of brutal Japanese colonialism (Japan occupied Korea from 1910 to 1945), then the careless division imposed by the United States in the aftermath of World War II. All followed by initial victory in a civil war, converted into a surrogate

clash of civilisations that ended in a half-century stalemate, before it was in danger of being buried under the rubble of a collapsing Soviet empire. North Korea's recent behaviour is less a war cry than a cry for help.

There have been numerous attempts to explain North Korea, some less successful than others. Among the most risible is John Sweeney's *North Korea Undercover,* which parleyed a standard week's holiday into a heroic feat of daring and deserves marks for chutzpah, if nothing else. Victor Cha knows his stuff, without question; nevertheless, his *The Impossible State* reveals much about America's outdated misperceptions of the North. Yet Pyongyang hardly welcomes contemporary cutting-edge analysis. James Pearson and Daniel Tudor's *North Korea Confidential,* which illuminates the further shores of Pyongyang's market reforms, sufficiently irritated the North that Seoul felt it necessary to place the authors under round-the-clock protection.

For sheer encyclopaedic knowledge of the road to war, Bruce Cumings's two-volume *The Origins of the Korean War* is unsurpassed, but is matched page for page by Robert Scalapino and Lee Chong-sik's *Communism in Korea,* charting the regime's first decade. For something to challenge the West's more recent received wisdom, Andrei Lankov's collection of books does exactly that. For those who like to cut fact with fiction, the pseudonymous James Church's early 'Inspector O' stories serve.

I first visited North Korea in 1997, during its darkest days since the war, at the height of the famine. I have been back almost fifty times since then, under a variety of guises. I served on a series of ad hoc delegations dispatched by the European Parliament consequent upon my visit in 1997 and in 2004 I successfully proposed the establishment of a standing delegation with the Korean Peninsula that still exists. Early on in my peregrinations it became clear where power lay in Pyongyang. Like in China, it was the Party, not the Ministries, that makes its mark.

Thus the majority of my visits have been under the auspices of the Workers' Party of Korea's (WPK) International Department.

In 2012 I was asked if I could set up a dialogue with politicians from the European Union. This I did, with Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's former chief of staff and founder of the mediation charity Inter Mediate. Since then we've had an ongoing series of track 1.5 meetings; our current host is a member of the Politburo's Executive. In parallel, Pyongyang's perspective on the South is delivered by the Korea Asia-Pacific Peace Committee (United Front Department). In the twelve months leading up to this book's publication, I have been back to Pyongyang five times. This unique access has opened doors, from the White House to the Blue House, the Japanese cabinet office to the Chinese foreign ministry, the United Nations to the US Pacific Command, the EU's External Action Service to the National Security Councils.

One thing I have learnt is that the North is steeped in history and precedent. For them, history matters. They imbibe from birth a national narrative that shapes their comprehension of the world and their adversaries. Unlike in the West, where 'vision' means thinking beyond the next electoral cycle, North Koreans think long-term. The past is the key to the present. Thus any attempt to understand the DPRK and its people needs the vision to at least glimpse reality through their eyes. I hope this book will help you do that.

First, let us begin by dispelling the fabulous. The five biggest myths about the DPRK are that:

(1) **It's a Stalinist state run on the basis of Marxism-Leninism**. No, it's a theocracy with communist characteristics whose catechism is Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism.
(2) **Beijing and Pyongyang are like 'lips and teeth'**. No, the regime deeply distrusts and resents China. For the last decade they have barely been on speaking terms; Pyongyang is prepared to fight if necessary.
(3) **Pyongyang wants early unification**. No, the North's leadership is all too well aware that with its GDP at barely more than 2 per cent of the South's, early unification would only be assimilation by another name.

(4) **It's a command economy**. No, since the famine in the late 1990s it has increasingly become a malformed market economy. The future of the Peninsula is 'Two Countries, One System' until Pyongyang's 'tiger economy' and wealth of mineral resources allow it to catch up to Seoul.
(5) **Lifting American sanctions is the key**. No, the North has never exported or imported goods from the US. What they want from Washington is sufficiently robust security guarantees that liberate them to take the road to denuclearisation and allow China and South Korea to lift their sanctions.

North Korea's twentieth century was a turbulent one, as Chapter 2 explains in detail. Occupied by the Japanese from 1910 to 1945, the Korean Peninsula was divided after World War II by an arbitrary line of convenience drawn on a map to realise the promised Soviet and American zones. Neither North nor South was content with half; both wanted the whole. Seoul sought national unification and Pyongyang national liberation. The outcome was civil war (1950–53) that turned into a surrogate conflict between the world's two superpowers and a crusade against Communism by a US in the embrace of McCarthyism. After the end of the Korean War, North and South Korea continued to send informers, spies, and terrorists across the demilitarised zone (DMZ) to infiltrate and undermine their alter egos, but in the absence of their Cold War partners they were largely a threat only to each other.

North Korea had no history of democracy to fall back on, and its political architecture was constructed according to the 'people's democracy' paradigm used across the Soviet empire. After Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin and Stalinism in 1956, Kim Il Sung was under threat for the first time since the end of the war. He got his retaliation in first, purging the Party of those menacing him, leaving him and his fellow partisan generals to shift the country's focus from Stalinism to autarkic nationalism with the wand of Juche (self-reliance) ideology. Crucially, as Charles Armstrong points out in *The North Korean Revolution 1945–50* (2003), Kim fused Soviet

socialism with indigenous Korean traditions and culture to create a state ideology that has outlived all the West's predictions.

Moscow and Beijing wooed Pyongyang simultaneously and the post-war economy, with its foundation of heavy industry, boomed. The North was global Communism's poster boy. By the late 1960s, however, the economic motor was beginning to stutter as the promised transition from heavy to light industry and increased delivery of consumer goods failed to materialise. Kim borrowed billions from the West in the early 1970s, but the turnkey projects he bought failed as the 1973 oil crisis spun the global economy into recession. Throughout the 1980s, from its acme as the world's 34th-largest economy, it slid. With the collapse of the Soviet Union it went from bad to worse. Aid from Moscow stopped and aid from Beijing braked.

Abandoned, the North looked to develop its own nuclear deterrent, but the economy went into a tailspin and the population went hungry. Millions died. So did Kim. For Kim it was biology, but the rest were the victims of failed policies and natural disasters. They became nameless victims of the worst humanitarian tragedy in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Washington knew, but there was no Live Aid eager to put their plight on the world's TV screens. They starved slowly, in silence.

After a three-year hiatus, Kim was succeeded by his son Kim Jong Il, who retained his father's innate distrust of reform but was forced to acknowledge that survival depended on kick-starting the stagnant economy. While his reforms were only partial and did not always succeed, they laid the groundwork and provided the legitimation for wider changes after 2010. Under Kim Jong Il, 'kiosk capitalists' began to emerge on the streets, along with embryonic multi-sectoral conglomerates in the model of those that had helped other Asian economies take off, such as Zaibatsu in Japan and Chaebol in South Korea. In Pyongyang, state-run shops started advertising medicines and motorbikes made by groups such as Pugang, Daesong, Sungri, and Rungra 88. Air Koryo moved into taxis and tinned food. The Rason Special Economic Zone and later the Kaesong Industrial Complex delivered economic paradigms and hard cash.

The fates of other leaders and countries targeted by Washington are deeply burnt into the regime's psyche. They understand the problems of Iraq, Libya, and Syria as resulting not from their possession of weapons of mass destruction but from their lack. When Libya formally renounced its nuclear programme in 2003, a sceptical North Korea rejected the invitation to give up its own nuclear ambitions and join Tripoli in the embrace of the global community of nations. Not much more than a month before Kim Jong Un succeeded his father in 2011, the video of Muammar Gaddafi's brutalisation and death was released: proof positive, from Pyongyang's perspective, of the perils of trusting the 'international community'.

The North's leadership believe that, while US hostility endures, regime survival necessitates an independent nuclear umbrella and economic growth. However, their efforts are hindered by the mutual incongruence of these goals: the first precludes the second. But the nuclear defence has other motives. Industrial and economic growth require labour power. Unlike in China, there is no vast pool of peasant labour awaiting induction into the discipline of the factory. Instead, workers have been sequestered in Pyongyang's million-strong army. This reserve army of labour needs demobilising.

Downsizing and going nuclear is a sign of weakness, not strength. North Korea has long lost the conventional arms race. Despite spending a quarter of its gross domestic product (GDP) on the military, the North is outspent by the South – which has an economy 50 times larger – by a factor of five year on year. Every time there is a naval clash along the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the disputed maritime boundary between North and South, the comparative casualty figures reflect this disparity. The gap yawns when Pyongyang's military budget is set against the combined military spending of Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul: it's barely 2 per cent of their expenditure. The nuclear deterrent thus has a double rationale, ensuring the safety of the regime and freeing labour power and resources to be decanted from the army into industrial and economic development.

Yet all of this is rendered moot by the economic embargo. Kim Jong Un has intensified and fully articulated his father's economic reforms and military developments. Early in 2013, once his authority was assured, he saw to it that the Party adopted the *byungjin* line of simultaneously developing the economy and the nuclear deterrent. Under Kim Jong Il the economy had slowly begun to open up and the first nuclear tests had taken place, but Kim Jong Un has driven both further and faster. The ride has been a rough one, but getting to the summit may just have made it all worthwhile. Now the question is whether he can barter a completed nuclear deterrent for a peace agreement and security guarantees, the lifting of sanctions, and an economic development package.

North Korea has been a 'country of concern' for almost 70 years. Initially it was one of many 'Communist' satellites, of which all but five have now crashed and burnt. Since the September 11, 2001 attacks and the ensuing 'war on terror', American foreign policy has taken on a hard unilateral edge. North Korea became a third of the 'axis of evil', a 'rogue state', and 'an outpost of tyranny', branded by the Bush administration as a clear and present danger to world peace.

Even though North Korea's last terrorist act had been in the 1980s, the US continued to classify it as a state sponsor of terror until 2008. Its reasons included an assassination attempt against President Chun Doo-hwan in October 1983. North Korean agents planted a bomb at the Martyrs' Memorial in Rangoon, Burma, that left 21 dead, including four ROK cabinet ministers. Chun escaped. Running behind schedule, he had yet to arrive when the bomb went off. The attack triggered worldwide condemnation and mass demonstrations in the South. Pyongyang had again misread public opinion. Although Chun had seized power in a military coup d'état in 1979 and was culpable of the deaths of up to 2,000 protestors in the 1980 Gwangju Massacre – as the US military watched – the population of South Korea didn't want him removed by Pyongyang.

Another reason was the Korean Air bombing. In 1987 a South Korean plane flying from Abu Dhabi to Bangkok exploded over the Andaman Sea, killing all 115 passengers and crew. The attack was

designed to disrupt the preparations for the Seoul Olympics. When the two North Korean agents responsible were arrested in Bahrain, they both attempted suicide with cyanide capsules. The older male agent died, but his female partner, Kim Hyon Hui, survived. Under interrogation in Seoul, she confessed to implicating Kim Jong Il. Her death sentence was commuted and in 1993 she published a contrite memoir.

But it's a two-way street: North Korea was a victim of airline terrorism long before it became a practitioner. In 1976, a CIA-funded Cuban exile group blew up the Cubana de Aviación flight 455, killing five senior North Korean officials, including the vice-chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly's Foreign Relations Committee. Seventy-three people died in the explosion; there were no survivors. (George H.W. Bush was the director of the CIA at the time. The ringleaders were never punished.)

The US also cited North Korea's harbouring of members of the armed group Japanese Red Army. The 'terror state' designation was lifted by Barack Obama but re-instated in 2018 by Donald Trump, citing the 2017 assassination of Kim Jong Nam in Malaysia using a nerve agent.

Kim Jong Il introduced economic liberalisation out of necessity as the country's supply of energy and raw materials dried up. But it was the son who put 'the Plan' to the sword – motivated by aspiration rather than need. He wanted 'socialist enterprise management methods in which all enterprises carry out their management activities independently with initiative'.[1] In 2014 he introduced reforms allowing factory managers to set wages, hire and fire, and source spare parts and raw materials in the market. This was less than a complete success: the bottlenecks caused by erratic energy supplies and the lack of raw materials limited the beneficial impact of the reforms. Nevertheless, as Andrei Lankov argues, Kim Jong Un is 'the most pro-market leader North Korea has ever had'.[2]

Economic and social changes, catalysed by the famine at the turn of the century, accelerated under Kim Jong Un. The public distribution system (PDS), which had fed and clothed the population, still

formally exists in Pyongyang but has a limited function, so inhabitants are forced to rely on the market. Elsewhere, it continues to have a limited and fitful existence. The most obvious development is the 'kiosk capitalists' who have sprung up on every street corner and the multiplication of formal markets in Pyongyang, spreading the availability of consumer goods like watches, high-heeled shoes, TVs, and smart-phones.

Pyongyang is the nation's theme park, with its stelae, monuments, and memorials paying homage to Kim Il Sung. It is the stage for military parades and civilian rallies. It is ideology in corporeal form. Since Kim Jong Un took power, a new social contract has given its inhabitants their reward. After all those touted satellite pictures of a dark North Korea at night, Pyongyang is now lit up like a Christmas tree. The capital's famously photogenic traffic women would nowadays actually have traffic to direct had they had not suffered technological redundancy at the hands of traffic lights. There are 3 million people signed up for the North's mobile network – although many have two phones, as it is cheaper to use a second phone than to recharge.

And the selfie-stick has well and truly landed.

In 2016 there was nearly 5 per cent growth, driven by trade rather than manufacture. Enterprise, rather than the Party, is increasingly

Figure 1 Traffic jams in Pyongyang.
Photo © Marialaura De Angelis.

the ticket to the future, yet Party membership remains a bonus. Amongst the entrepreneurs, the ones that endure are those sheltered in the lee of joint ventures with ministries, military units or party sections – trafficking protection for profit. *Ronin*[3] kiosk capitalists who were lucky enough a decade or so ago to get rich, and had the temerity to flaunt their wealth and engage in conspicuous consumption were brought back into line by December 2009's monetary reform, which rendered their hidden wealth worthless (even if this was not the reform's primary purpose).

Outside of Pyongyang too, in regional hubs such as Wonsan and Hamhung, living standards are creeping up. Yet a chasm remains. Outside the capital, if you're lucky, drinking water does not come through the taps but is bought for small change in 'water shops' – constructed with British and European aid – which pipe drinkable water from the mountains. Hungnam, Kimchaek, and Chongjin, cities deep in the North's 'rustbelt', remain hungry – though not starving.

The first wave of agricultural reform came in 2002, when targets for delivery to the centre were lowered and farmers allowed to sell the surplus. Within a couple of years, ministers claimed this had been more effective at boosting productivity than fertiliser. The second wave of reforms in 2012 reduced work teams to family units of four to six people and allowed farmers to retain 30 per cent of production – a variant of Deng Xiaoping's agricultural reforms of the late 1970s, when he introduced the 'household responsibility system' that effectively de-collectivised agriculture and boosted productivity by 25 per cent over a decade. Pyongyang's industrial and agricultural reforms, taken together, mean that you really don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows. It's only the interference from sanctions, floods, and drought and the myopia of Western commentators that allows reality to stay hidden.

One of the centrepieces of North Korea's search for economic success has been its special economic zones (SEZs). There were two sharply different models. The first is epitomised by Rason, an area the size of Singapore that abuts both China and Russia, with a