

A North Korean soldier in a black uniform and hood salutes with his right hand. He is standing next to a large portrait of Kim Il-sung, which is part of a military display. The soldier's uniform features several medals and a red star emblem. The background shows a blurred cityscape.

Karl H. Stinger

Case Study: North Korea

How predictable is the regime?

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Karl H. Stingeder

Case Study: North Korea. How predictable is the regime?

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Foreword

The state of North Korea deviates in many respects from Western norms regarding an institutional framework, or what Oliver Williamson has termed the “rules of the game in a society”. But does this make North Korea “different”? Such an assumption would be fatal in many regards, since it ignores the many options and tools for understanding this society. Moreover, to claim that these do not apply to North Korea would be nothing less than to seriously question the relevance of all social science theories. Last but not least, it would mean denying the people of North Korea the condition of humanness. This would not only be factually wrong, but also highly cynical.

This book by Karl Stinger is therefore an enormously important analytical step as it sets out to look at North Korea based on standard theories such as structural realism. Conflicting interests, power perceived as a zero-sum game, misperceptions – these are the keys by which to understand North Korea’s foreign policy behavior, including the nuclear gamble that has attracted so much international attention.

While this sounds almost too simple, the devil is, as usual, in the detail. Interests compete against each other; they differ according to whom we look at (the leader, the ‘upper’ 10,000, or the people), and there are priorities that seem to make little sense when judged by the standards of the outside observer. It is therefore highly laudable that the author has done what is often neglected: he has tried to consider the unique culturally and historically-determined environment that shapes the perceptions of North Korean decision-makers in their options for action and the consequences thereof.

To properly appreciate the mindset in Pyongyang, we must go back a few decades in history. An agrarian and largely static society with an elite that took pride in perfecting its emulation of Neo-Confucian Chinese patterns was caught off guard when the West, and later its model student Japan, aggressively knocked at the door of this ancient society. Trade and diplomatic concessions were demanded and extorted, and, perhaps

more significantly, the centuries-old world view was damaged when China, the long-standing ideal, suffered severe humiliation by barbarians who were not even able to read the classics. Korea had little time to recover from this shock, as it soon became a colony of the disdained neighbor Japan by the early 20th century. For Koreans such as Kim Il-sung and his followers, who were born and grew up during this phase (until 1945), the experience of Japanese colonialism proved formative.

Xenophobia was already present, as the Chosŏn Kingdom had from the 17th century in self-protection resorted to a policy of isolation that included killing shipwrecked foreigners and abandoning coastal settlements. Korean nationalism, however, was only born during the turmoil in the late 19th century and became stronger during the colonial period. Today, Koreans on both sides of the Military Demarcation Line perceive themselves as innocent victims of Great Power politics. National independence is actively promoted as the highest good, and the division of Korea since 1945 is regarded as the biggest national tragedy.

The Korean War (1950-1953) not only brought about the dreadful suffering typical of military conflicts between fellow countrymen, it also increased pressure on the regimes of both sides to look aggressively for *raisons d'être* for sources of legitimacy. Nationalism was the dominant theme both north and south of the 38th parallel. Seoul discovered economic development as the means to translate this into actual policy; Pyongyang initially followed a similar path and was at first relatively successful, building on its inheritance from the colonial period and on massive inflows of assistance from the Socialist Bloc. However, the typical inefficiencies of state socialism eventually produced the expected result – a chronic shortage economy. This worsened as most of the more or less voluntarily friendly states collapsed after 1990. All that was left for the North Korean leadership to substantiate its claim for legitimacy and distinguish itself from the increasingly successful foe – the South – were pride, nationalism, and military might.

Kim Il-sung, founder and long-term leader, had early on attempted to acquire nuclear weapons as these would make up

for the disadvantages of a small and economically weak country. Yet both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China denied him access to what he perceived as the only sustainable key to (North) Korea's independence; the USA did the same in South Korea in the 1970s. But while the latter could make up for the lack of nuclear arms by its position under the nuclear umbrella of the United States and its hyper-modern conventional military, the North increasingly came to see itself as defenseless. Under such conditions, and if seen from a structural realist standpoint, the decision to push ahead with the development of a nuclear arsenal may indeed appear rational. History seemed to prove Kim Jong-il right when shortly after 9-11 the USA embarked on their "War Against Terror" and first invaded Afghanistan, then Iraq. Being designated a member of the "Axis of Evil" sounded like a real threat to North Korea.

After the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994, we find increasing evidence to support the North Korean leadership's drive to develop and possess nuclear weapons. Kim Jong-il, the eldest son, took over power as had been planned since the 1970s and which was officially announced in 1980. Yet he faced a difficult inheritance: a country that had been weakened by decades of classic socialism was hit by the collapse of economic exchanges with the disbanded Socialist Bloc. But things got even worse. While South Korea, the biggest competitor, became the 29th member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1996, North Korea around the same time suffered a harsh famine in the years 1995-1997, a period that is often referred to as the "Arduous March". Kim Jong-il desperately needed a success, and decided that attaining nuclear status would be the mark he left on the history of his country. Not only would this, in the logic of deterrence and balance of power, guarantee North Korea's independence, it would also be something that neither his father nor the South Koreans had achieved.

This is the setting against which we need to interpret North Korea's behavior on the international scene, as well as its ideology and domestic developments. A nationalist and xenophobic country that feels surrounded by enemies, does not trust any-

one (including China), cannot forget the traumatic experience of colonization that is kept alive in history books and art, faces a threateningly successful counterpart in the South, suffers from a malfunctioning economy (including food shortages) and now seems to be entering a leadership crisis – what do we expect from such a state if it had the slightest chance to acquire the most powerful military deterrence? What else than defensive nationalist pride, if not outright racism, can it emphasize in its ideology?

North Korea's other options are severely limited. Experiments with economic reforms à la China since 2002 have produced results that shocked leaders in Pyongyang and led to a move to reinstall orthodox socialism North Korean-style. The risks of liberating the economy are regarded as too big under the current conditions of a hostile environment and unclear prospects for the top leadership. The perceived safety of socialist neo-conservatism is the response of a deeply worried regime.

It is more than naive to expect that under such conditions, Pyongyang would let itself be talked into giving up the main, if not the only, reason why the world takes notice of this country (and why readers buy this book). In particular, the case of Iraq is often cited in North Korea to explain that unilateral disarmament and compliance with the West's demands would do nothing but leave the country defenseless. As long as there is no reliable guarantee of North Korea's independence and no alternative source for Kim Jong-il's legitimacy, the leadership will do what it can to retain its nuclear deterrent.

Last but not least, it is helpful to remember that from a regional point of view, all this is far from a purely Korean question. Rather, Korea is – once again – the field on which powerful external opponents face each other. This is the reason why, as Stinger correctly claims, neither Washington nor Beijing are at the moment seriously interested in bringing about a regime collapse in Pyongyang. As long as it is not undisputedly clear to which side a unified Korea would belong, it is better to avoid a conflict over the dominance of the peninsula that nobody wants by maintaining the status quo i.e. a divided Korea with a pro-US South and a North dependent on aid from China.

The North Korean people are the ones who suffer from such strategic considerations of the international community and the policy of their leadership. It is for their sake that a quick and peaceful resolution ought to be hoped for, despite all appropriate pessimism. Being at the heart of the world's most dynamic economic region, East Asia, only about 200km away from both Japan and China, developments in and around Korea also affect the world at large. A proper understanding of the problem beyond mere propaganda and stereotypes is therefore highly important. It is hoped that the book by Stingeder will thus contribute to improving knowledge about North Korea and pave the way for realistic solutions.

Vienna, February 2010

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Ruediger Frank

Chair of East Asian Economy and Society

1 Introduction

The relevance of this topic has largely to do with the undiminished reality of political and military tensions on the Korean peninsula. Despite some signs of relaxation and a possible opening up to the world, North Korea remains isolated and with significant military potential.

Drafting this work has been a very complex challenge. From a scientific point of view, the following questions are pertinent:

- What function does the Juche Idea have for the regime's purposes?
- How important is military strength for the regime's plans?
- What relevance do the rival powers' mutual perceptions have in the conflict?
- What conclusions can be drawn from the military potential for the regime's political aspirations?

This report is designed to bring together three highly important dimensions:

1. The isolation of North Korea, its history and the regime's totalitarianism
2. Illumination of the military line-up on the Korean peninsula
3. Exploration of future prospects with a focus on the reciprocal relations of the powers involved and their tense political friction

To sum up, this study shall cover the following aspects: an analysis of the regime's strategic political intentions, which shall be reflected critically from the perspectives of structural realism and constructivism, whereas the Juche Idea will be analyzed from a Marxist and Leninist view; based on this discussion the second part will debate the military situation on the North Korean peninsula, followed by an analysis of North Korea's relationship to other countries in the third part.