

Ten Misperceptions about North Korea

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In July 2005, after a 13-month boycott, North Korea returned to the 6-nation multilateral talks on nuclear disarmament. Was its return just the latest in a long series of diplomatic feints and frauds, or was it an honest move to engage in earnest dialog? Citing North Korean secretiveness and eccentricity, many experts claim it is almost impossible to know the country's true intentions. Dunn, President of the National Defense University and a former lead negotiator at Panmunjom, disagrees. He offers the following "10 misperceptions" to demystify North Korea and expose its aims.—Editor

1. North Korea is run by a government.

The country is actually run by a brutal dictator and his close personal friends and family. The measure of one's stature in the "government" is how loyal one is to the "Dear Leader." A better way to refer to the "North Korean (NK) Government" is to call it the Kim Family Regime (KFR), which operates more along the lines of an organized crime family.

2. North Korea's economy has failed.

North Korea has a plantation economy—or better said—a slave economy. This is an economy where the elite live in the "big house" and the slaves live on starvation wages to produce the goodies consumed by the elite. Last year the NK economy produced about \$1 billion hard currency. It could have used \$200 million of this to feed its population. Instead it spent \$100 million on Mercedes Benzes, imported wine and cognac, and French china for the elite, and relied on the world to give it free food—70 percent of which went to the NK Army.

3. North Korea needs nuclear weapons because _____ (fill in the blank).

In reality, North Korea has never foresworn its objective of reuniting the Korean peninsula. It does not want nuclear weapons for bargaining tools, to gain leverage, or any of tens of other reasons listed by pundits. It wants them to be able to respond or fight to achieve its military objectives. It will not "negotiate away" these weapons.

4. North Korea just wants to talk.

North Korea has not kept *any* of its agreements. Within 72 hours after it signed the Armistice Agreement, North Korea broke it. KFR uses negotiations as a lever to secure long-term objectives. Negotiations are part of the NK information operations (IO) campaign. Interestingly, because of Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine Policy, that IO campaign has succeeded in swaying Republic of Korea (ROK) public opinion toward North Korea, running the risk of dividing the ROK-U.S. alliance.

5. North Korea is a closed society, and we do not know what its leaders are thinking.

North Korea is a communist society that must "pelt" its population with the party's line. Its leaders use information to build a powerful image of the State and to glorify themselves. North Koreans believe in the holy trinity with the Father being Kim Il Sung, the Son being Kim Chong Il, and the Holy Spirit being the *juche* (self reliance) philosophy. North Korea frequently tells us what they are planning—as long as one understands the "coded" language in which they speak. North Korea's press announcements are beyond the bounds of normal decency, referring to various ROK-U.S. leaders as

bastards, cannibals, criminals, stooges, militants, and puppets. They use adjectives such as imperialist, babbling, fascist, murderous, war mongering, colonial, and perfidious.

6. Events occur randomly inside the North Korean structure.

Random events, while possible, seldom occur in North Korea. The KFR choreographs almost every move. Military rehearsals have occurred before each major provocation. North Korean negotiators always come with large sheaves of papers and respond to our points with prepared talking points. We have indications that discipline is ironclad, each event is wargamed, and *all* important actions are approved at the top of the regime.

7. The KFR is changing and is willing to change.

The KFR's survival depends directly on its ability to control its population and reward the elite. Kim is acutely aware that a breach of these controls will doom the regime. Since the elite understand that their survival and success depend on unquestioning allegiance to Kim, they create an environment of unquestioned loyalty, obedience, and compliance. The best way to think about changes in North Korea is to look at their effects: Meetings, family meetings, and sending athletes to the Asian Games are not changes that have any effect on the KFR. Yet, they are often cited as showing that North Korea has radically changed. To quote Marcus Noland, "On a scale of change (one being no change, 100 being massive change), North Korea is a 7. They used to be a 4, thus they have changed a great deal. But they are still a 7."

8. Because North Korea's economy has failed, it cannot fight a war against the ROK.

Sometimes a corollary of this is that North Korea could never defeat South Korea because it cannot sustain itself. We know little about NK readiness or sustainability. When North Korea agreed to permit tours of Mount Kumgang, it demanded the ROK pay to relocate stocks of munitions hidden in the mountain. The ROK was amazed at the

massive tonnage stored there. North Korea has concentrated on low-tech ways to defeat ROK-U.S. advantages—100,000 special operations forces troops, mini-sub, ballistic missiles, chemical and biological weapons, and so on. From early 1999 to early 2001, North Korea embarked on one of the largest military buildups we have seen: 100,000 extra troops were deployed close to the Demilitarization Zone (DMZ), artillery along the DMZ was increased by one-third, long-range artillery (that can range Seoul) was increased by 75 percent, and more training was conducted than at any time in the past. North Korea cannot feed its population, but it has production lines running to produce tanks, artillery, aircraft, subs, surface ships, and missiles.

9. Time is on our side: North Korea will eventually fail.

This is true in the macro sense, but it leaves the impression that we do not have to address North Korea and that the failure would be peaceful, like the former Soviet Union. The KFR has been skillful in "provocating" to gain attention and has been steadfast in its goal to dominate the peninsula and clever in devising counters to ROK-U.S. technologies. I would argue time is *not* on our side, as North Korea can spread weapons of mass destruction and missile technology to a receptive world. In 1990 we predicted North Korea would collapse by 1995. We were wrong then. I believe North Korea's slave economy can last for many more years.

10. The KFR is desperate for international assistance: Its people are starving.

Kim repeatedly fails to demonstrate concern for his people. To the contrary, he is more focused than ever on securing benefits for the core elite and the Army. The KFR's hard currency comes from sale of illicit drugs, counterfeiting, ROK bribery, resale of international aid, remittances from abroad, and the sale of military equipment. To the extent that Kim is focused on aid, it is to ensure the Army and elites are well-fed. He has directed triage of various segments of his society to keep himself and his cronies in power, and he feels no compunction about running one of the largest gulags left on Earth. **MR**

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