



NORTH KOREA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE

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An Overview of North Korea's Strategic Culture:

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NORTH KOREA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE DESCRIBED

More than any other nation today, the strategic culture of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is the product of the personal dreams and ambitions of a single individual—Kim Il-sung. Kim was the world's longest reigning leader, having assumed power in the northern portion of the Korean Peninsula during 1948 and maintaining that position until his death in 1994. This has resulted in a worldview and strategic culture built upon six central and interrelated and overlapping principles,

- The survival of the Kim clan (i.e., “the center of the revolution”) and its power and influence. This is the primal principle to which all others are subordinate.
- Elimination of all internal threats to the power of the Kim clan by the establishment and ruthless maintenance of an extremely small, privileged and powerful military and power-holding elite—all of whom owe absolute allegiance to the Kim clan.
- Reunification of the Fatherland (i.e., the entire Korean Peninsula).
- Establishment and maintenance of overwhelming conventional military strength to facilitate the reunification of the Fatherland.
- Acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missiles.
- Deterrence of the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) by the maintenance of overwhelming conventional military strength and the acquisition of WMD and ballistic missiles.

These six principles are themselves processed through the DPRK's political ideology known as Chuche and what is termed as a “lens of self deception” composed of four elements,¹

- Historical world view
- Political indoctrination
- Hatred for the U.S.
- Authoritarian cultural rules

¹ See Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., *Information and the DPRK's Military and Power-Holding Elite* in Hassig, Kongdan Oh. *North Korean Policy Elites*, IDA Paper P-3903 (Alexandria: Institute for Defense Analyses, June 2004) , available at <http://www.brookings.edu/views/papers/fellows/oh20040601.htm>

The result of this “lens of self deception” is that it often distorts and misrepresents the reality of a situation.

Although he is better educated and better informed about world events than his father, Kim Chong-il—who assumed absolute leadership of the DPRK following his father’s death—has not significantly deviated from the worldview or strategic culture established by his father.² Despite minor efforts to address economic issues Kim Chong-il has vigorously emphasized the strengthening of the military and the continued development of WMD through his “military first” policies. He has proven himself ruthless and dispassionate in dealing with disloyalty of those individuals whom he perceives as a threat—including members of his own extended family.³

By all accounts Kim Chong-il is a workaholic, micromanager, “information junkie,” technologically savvy, impatient, quick-tempered, intelligent, and ruthless. By his own admission he surfs the internet daily, regularly watches NHK (Japan), CCTV (China) and CNN, and has foreign books and articles (especially anything written about himself) translated and summarized for him. He prefers to manage almost everything directly, down to the most minor of details. Without his personal approval, nothing of significance can be initiated or accomplished. He insists on numerous detailed reports from all organizations and then spends long hours at his office reading them. He doesn’t necessarily trust any single source for information but rather compares the information he receives from several different organizations and sources (apparently including the internet). It is not unusual for him to order specialists and technocrats from throughout the government to appear before him so that he might directly question them concerning a particular matter. Finally, he believes that the decisions and choices he makes are better than those of the people around him. It is towards Kim Chong-il that all important information streams, and from him that all power, significant orders and directions issue forth.⁴ Ominously, much of the information and analysis he bases his decision making

² Merrily Baird, *Kim Chong-il’s Erratic Decision-Making and North Korea’s Strategic Culture* in Schneider, Barry R. and Jerrold M. Post, editors. *Know Thy Enemy: Profiles of Adversary Leaders and Their Strategic Cultures* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: USAF Counterproliferation Center, July 2003, 2nd ed.), at www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/cpc-pubs/know_thy_enemy/cover.htm.

³ For two excellent analyses of the Kim family and power-holding elites see: Kenneth E. Gause, *The North Korean Leadership: System Dynamics and Fault Lines*; and Alexandre Y. Mansourov, *Inside North Korea’s Black Box: Reversing the Optics*, both in Kongdan Oh Hassig, *North Korean Policy Elites*, IDA Paper P-3903 (Alexandria: Institute for Defense Analyses, June 2004).

⁴ Peter Maass, “The Last Emperor,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 19, 2003; “Interview with defector Hwang Jong Yop [Hwang Jang Yop]: A Rare Portrait Of North Korea,” *Time [Asia]*, September 7, 1999, Vol. 152, No. 9,

upon is fundamentally distorted by the strategic culture that his father established and he operates within.

The net effect of these factors is a strategic culture that is rudimentary, familial and possess few, if any, objective internal checks and balances. It views the United States as the primary enemy, a duplicitous and deceitful enemy who, if it perceives any weakness, is likely to initiate a war of annihilation employing WMD against the DPRK. Internally it views any disagreement with policies or criticism of the Kim regime—no matter how insignificant—as a direct threat to Kim Chong-il and is dealt with harshly. Even loyal dissent amongst the highest levels of the military and power-holding elite is discouraged and constructive variations to the implementation of Kim Chong-il's thoughts on strategic issues are reported as being rare. In a very real sense Kim Chong-il's thoughts and desires are the DPRK's strategic domestic and international policies.

Profile of North Korea's Strategic Culture

Development

To understand the basis for the strategic culture developed by Kim Il-sung it is necessary to go back to the pre-Second World War period.⁵ Following Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, it became the dominant power in Asia and annexed Korea in 1911. Japan would rule Korea with a cruel and often inhumane hand until the end of the Second World War. The Japanese were then, and still are, viewed by the majority of Koreans as foreigners and oppressors.⁶ During the late 1930s, the Japanese military developed a small chemical and biological warfare (CBW) capability that it used against the Chinese. The Japanese also conducted an exhaustive regime of experimentation on Allied prisoners-of-war, Russians, and

www.time.com/time/asia/, "DPRK's Kim Chong-il's Position on Retaliation," *Choson Ilbo*, October 17, 1996, pp. 8-11, as cited in FBIS-EAS-96-231; "Defector to ROK on Kim Chong-il's Control of DPRK Military," *Win*, June 1996, pp. 161-167, as cited in FBIS-EAS-96-197; "Articles by Defector Kang Myong-to Reported," *Chungang Ilbo*, April 21, 1995, p. 5, as cited in FBIS-EAS-95-097; "North Korean Defectors 27 July News Conference," *Choson Ilbo*, July 28, 1994, pp. 3-4, as cited in FBIS-EAS-94-145; and "Newspaper Profiles Kim Chong-il's Supporters," *Sindong-a*, February 1994, pp. 421-439, as cited in FBIS-EAS-94-050.

⁵ Adrian Buzo, *The Guerrilla Dynasty* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999); Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il-sung: The North Korea Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and Sydney A. Seiler, *Kim Il-song 1941-1948* (New York: University Press of America).

⁶ These sentiment have been repeatedly expressed to the author in private conversations, during the past twenty-five years, with ambassadors, ministers, representative and private citizens from both the ROK and DPRK. It does, however, appear to be moderating amongst the younger generations in the ROK.

Chinese civilians.⁷ The general nature of these chemical and biological operations and experimentation were known to the Chinese government, the Allies, and, to a lesser degree, the general population. At that time Kim Il-sung and the majority of the DPRK future leadership were young peasant guerrillas who were sporadically fighting the Japanese, first with the Communist Chinese, and then with the Soviet Army. Although only fragmentary evidence is available, it is apparent that they were influenced by what they would learn of these chemical and biological operations.⁸ At the time of the U.S. nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, Kim and his fellow guerrillas had been fighting the Japanese for 5-10 years. As the reality and the rumors of the events at Hiroshima and Nagasaki spread throughout the world, the nuclear bomb was viewed as the ultimate “doomsday” weapon. This attitude was reinforced by the experiences of those Koreans returning from Japan who had been in Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the time of the bombing.⁹ This fear became even more pronounced among Communist guerrilla leaders such as Mao Zedong and Kim Il-sung. By the end of the Second World War, both Kim Il-sung and a number of soon-to-be influential Koreans had an uneducated appreciation of, and indirect exposure to, the effects of nuclear, chemical and biological warfare. This awareness shaped their developing views of the world, warfare, and politics.

Combined with these early appreciations of WMD four additional factors during the subsequent Fatherland Liberation War (i.e., Korean War) would help coalesce both Kim Il-sung’s worldview and form the foundations of the strategic culture then developing within the nation,

- The U.S. intervention in the Fatherland Liberation War was interpreted by Kim and his contemporaries as the prime reason the war of reunification failed. From this point forward the United States would be viewed as the primary enemy and as a bully “kicking the door in” and interfering in the purely internal affairs of nations of which it did not approve.
- During the war both the DPRK and People’s Republic of China (PRC) suffered from repeated, and to them, unexplained outbreaks of infectious diseases such as influenza, Dengue fever, and cholera. These outbreaks caused large numbers of civilian and military

⁷ Peter Williams and David Wallace, *Unit 731: Japan’s Secret Biological Warfare in World War II* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), p. 45; and Harris, Sheldon H. *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare 1932-45 and the American Cover Up* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 67-73.

⁸ Author interview data.

⁹ Peter Hayes. *Pacific Powderkeg* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1991), pp. 241-246.

casualties. While the leadership knew that it was untrue, they fabricated the story that the United States was employing biological, and to a lesser degree chemical, weapons against their units in Korea and against villages within the PRC itself.¹⁰ Furthermore, they claimed that former Japanese soldiers were cooperating with the United States in perpetrating these attacks.¹¹ For the uninformed masses of the DPRK it became a bedrock of “truth” and these claims are still repeated.

- The United States on numerous occasions (the earliest being President Harry S. Truman’s public statements on 30 November 1950) threatened to employ nuclear weapons against Korean People’s Army (KPA) and “Chinese People’s Volunteers” (CPV) units in Korea, and if necessary against the PRC proper, to end the war.¹² These threats struck a raw nerve since the leadership of both nations remembered the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and neither the PRC nor DPRK could withstand a nuclear attack or had the capability to respond in kind. In combination with other factors the desired effect was achieved and a truce agreement was reached, thus ending the hostilities.
- While appreciative of all the support received from the Soviet Union and PRC, Kim expressed disappointment with the Soviet Union’s pressure to sign the Armistice Agreement. This would provide a context for Kim to view future Soviet actions (e.g., the Soviets backing down during the Cuban Missile Crisis, etc.) and fostered the belief that the DPRK must become self-sufficient.

In the years that followed the Fatherland Liberation War, public statements by U.S. officials, the continued U.S. military presence on the Korean Peninsula, and the inclusion of the ROK within the U.S. nuclear umbrella, have contributed to peace. To the DPRK leadership, this U.S. presence has also reinforced the belief that the DPRK has little choice but to comply with the 1953 Armistice Agreement or face devastation from nuclear attack.

¹⁰ John Cookson and Judith Nottingham, *A Survey of Chemical and Biological Warfare* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), 57-63 and 297-308; and U.S. Army. “Bacteriological Warfare Charges Against the United States: A Strategic Weapon in the Communist Propaganda Warfare,” *FEC Intelligence Digest*, No. 32, 2 October 1952, 6-10.

¹¹ Author interview Data; *A Survey of Chemical and Biological Warfare*, 57-63 & 297-308; and U.S. Army. “Bacteriological Warfare Charges Against the United States: A Strategic Weapon in the Communist Propaganda Warfare,” *FEC Intelligence Digest*, No. 32, 2 October 1952, 6-10; and David Tharp, “The Brutal Secret of Japan’s WWII Unit 731,” *United Press International*, August 8, 1995.

¹² *San Diego Tribune*. “Papers Show Eisenhower Weighed Nuclear Attack,” March 26, 1988, A5; and *San Diego Union*. “Nuclear Attack Reportedly Would Have Taken Week,” March 29, 1988, A29.

In the immediate post-war years the DPRK possessed neither WMD, nor the capabilities to produce them. Combined with the perceived threat poised by the United States, this contributed to a DPRK belief that possession of such weapons was a requirement to deter U.S./ROK aggression and set the stage for reunification of the Fatherland.¹³

In a December 1955 speech Kim Il-sung set forth a new political ideology known as Chuche that would quickly change the nature of DPRK society.¹⁴ While generally defined as meaning “self-reliance and national identity” it has developed into a unique belief system that permeates every aspect of life in the DPRK. It has been used by both Kim Il-sung and Kim Chong-il to justify almost anything:

major policy initiatives, including eliminating factional enemies, widening diplomatic activities, neutralizing attempts by China or Russia to exert influence over Korea, questioning the legitimacy of the South Korean government, and relentlessly attacking U.S. imperialism.¹⁵

Today Chuche is a national ideology with distinctly religious overtones. With Kim Il-sung and Kim Chong-il at the center of the universe, being omnipotent and incapable of doing wrong. Because of its pervasiveness throughout society the DPRK’s strategic culture has become an emanation of the Kim’s Chuche thoughts.

Kim Chong-il was raised in and, since the 1970s, participated in the subsequent incremental evolution of the strategic culture established by his father. In this both he and his father were accompanied by a small group of military and power-holding elites. This group consisted of trusted friends and relatives (mostly men)—many of whom had fought either as partisans with Kim Il-sung against the Japanese during Second World War or as officers during the Fatherland Liberation War. Since Kim Il-sung’s death in 1994, the composition of this small group of older generation elites has changed considerably as members have died, become enfeebled with age or were gradually replaced by Kim Chong-il’s trusted contemporaries.¹⁶ To

¹³ John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai. *China Builds the Bomb* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1988), chapters 1 and 2. These two chapters present an insightful discussion of the origins and effect of the PRC’s fear of U.S. nuclear weapons usage.

¹⁴ Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig. *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2000), Chapter 2 provides an excellent and understandable explanation of Chuche (Juche). See also: Cummings, Bruce. “The Corporate State in North Korea,” in Koo, Hagen ed., *State and Society in Contemporary Korea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 197-230.

¹⁵ Defense Intelligence Agency. *North Korea: The Foundations for Military Strength—Update 1995* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, December 1995), p. 1.

¹⁶ For the most part this was done in a manner consistent with traditional Confucian values of respect and honor for

date, neither Kim nor his appointees have deviated significantly from the basic worldview or strategic culture established by Kim Il-sung. Notably, however, the majority of these new power-holding elites possess even less exposure to international arena than their predecessors, and none have experienced the realities of war. What long-term effect this will have on DPRK strategic culture, especially when Kim Chong-il is eventually succeeded by one of his sons, is unclear.

Even with the possibility of Kim Chong-il soon appointing one of his sons to succeed him, for the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that there will be any significant changes to Kim Chong-il's worldview or the DPRK's strategic culture.

Military and Power-Holding Elite

The “keepers” of the DPRK's strategic culture are a extremely small group of military and power-holding elites. All power within the DPRK originates with Kim Chong-il, who is simultaneously Chairman of the National Defense Commission, General Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP), and Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army (a unified armed force consisting of the ground, navy and air forces). Therefore what really matters within the DPRK is not so much an individual's schooling, personal achievements, employment, position within society, rank within the KPA, KWP, etc. but how close—physically and emotionally—that individual is connected to Kim Chong-il.

To implement their rule the Kim's have cultivated and mercilessly maintained a diminutive class of military and power-holding elites. The primary qualification for membership in this class is absolute allegiance to the Kim's. Such allegiance is rewarded by access to the Kim's and the attendant privilege and power that it conveys. Until the mid-1990s these elites were primarily contemporaries of Kim Il-sung who had repeatedly demonstrated their personal loyalties and shared his worldview. Since Kim's death in 1994 this older generation is being slowly supplanted—primarily through attrition—by contemporaries of Kim Chong-il. All current members of the military and power-holding elite owe their status, privilege and literally their lives and the lives of their families to the Kim clan. Any hint of disloyalty is dealt with harshly, with the offender—and often their extended family—being exiled from the capital P'yongyang to mountain work camps. In more extreme cases offenders are executed.

elderly and powerful individuals. See Paul S. Crane, *Korean Patterns* (Seoul: Hollym Corp., 1968).

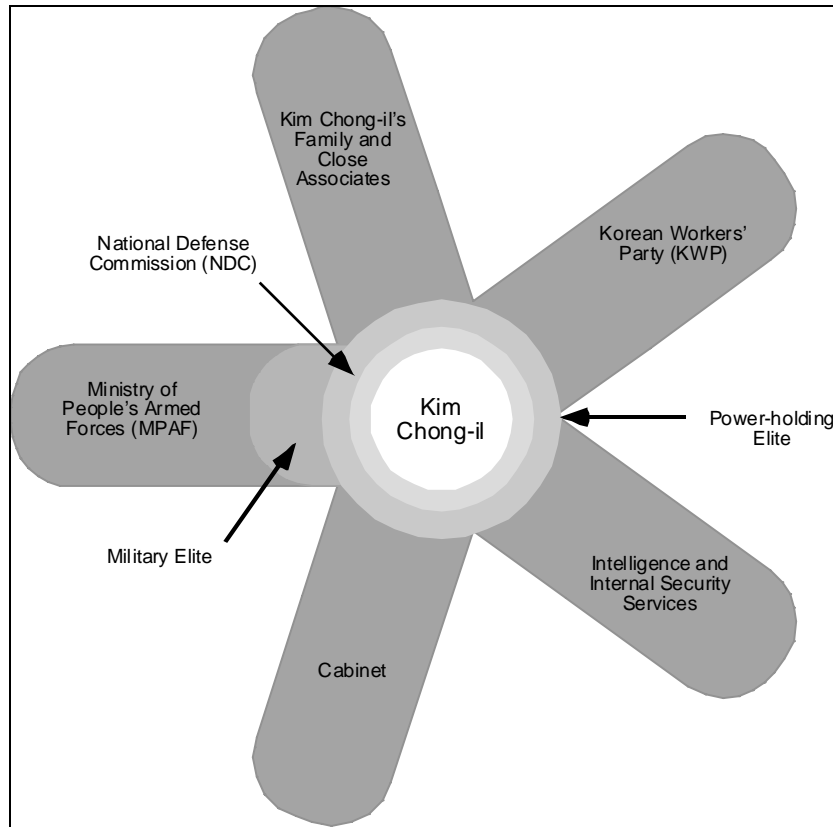


Figure 1: Military and Power-holding Elite

This power structure can best be illustrated by viewing Kim Chong-il as the center—physically, politically, and socially—of the DPRK, as shown in Figure 1. Immediately surrounding him are a group of individuals—primarily men—and their subordinates who come from five broad societal groupings: Kim Chong-il’s extended family and close confidants,¹⁷ Ministry of People’s Armed Forces (MPAF); KWP; Cabinet; and intelligence and internal security services. The convergence of these groupings represents the power-holding elite within the DPRK. The pinnacle of the power-holding elite is the National Defense Commission, which consists of approximately ten individuals, most of whom hold military rank. Therefore, the military elite within the National Defense Commission should be understood to be among highest power-holders within the DPRK.

¹⁷ Information on the Kim family may be found in Sarah Buckley, “North Korea’s Secretive ‘First Family’,” *BBC News*, October 29, 2003, accessed October 30, 2003, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/3203523.stm>; and Peter Carlson, “Sins of the Son; Kim Jong Il’s North Korea Is in Ruins, But Why Should That Spoil His Fun?,” *Washington Post*, May 11, 2003, p. D1. See also, Gause, Kenneth E. *The North Korean Leadership: System Dynamics and Fault Lines*; and Alexandre Y. Mansourov, *Inside North Korea’s Black Box: Reversing the Optics*, both in Kongdan Oh Hassig, *North Korean Policy Elites*, IDA Paper P-3903 (Alexandria: Institute for Defense Analyses, June 2004).

A noteworthy characteristic of the National Defense Commission specifically and the power-holding elite in general is that members occupy multiple leadership positions within the MPAF, KWP, and intelligence and internal security services. In fact, all the military members of the National Defense Commission are also members of the Central Military Committee. This cross-pollination and concentration of power within the hands of a few individuals enables Kim Chong-il, through the National Defense Commission, to easily maintain extremely firm control over all aspects of DPRK society and the flow of information. It also means that the decision-making process and poles of political power apparent in most nations are not present within the DPRK.

An additional aspect of the military and power-holding elite that has become an integral component of the DPRK's strategic culture is what would be termed in the West as corruption. In fact, this corruption should be viewed as being institutionalized and the means by which many of the military and power-holding elite have attained and maintained their positions. It is manifested in the access elites have to information, foreign manufactured goods, opportunity to have their children travel abroad for schooling, their own greater opportunities to travel, nepotism, etc. Thus, favoritism and cronyism are endemic among the elite. Given this vortex of institutionalized corruption, fear of displeasing Kim Chong-il and a convoluted flow of information, it is certainly within the realm of possibility that Kim Chong-il is at times being deceived or misled at some level by subordinates. Exactly how this occurs is unclear but it may manifest itself in a manner similar to the Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein.¹⁸ Thus this may be manifested by managers or leaders of program exaggerating the achievements or potential capabilities of their programs or systems. This may account for some of the stories related by defectors concerning Kim Chong-il's surprise at times concerning the true conditions in military units or factories and the excessive remedies that he initiates to address these conditions.

Within such an environment of corruption it would serve an individual's interest (and by extension those who ally themselves with that individual) to have higher quality and greater diversity of information than a political rival. The corollary to this is that limiting a rival's access to information is of significant benefit to a member of the military and power-holding elite.

¹⁸ James Risen, "Ex-Inspector Says C.I.A. Missed Disarray in Iraqi Arms Program," *New York Times*, January 26, 2004, <www.nytimes.com>, accessed January 26, 2004.

Lens of Self Deception

One of the more notable aspects of the DPRK's strategic culture is that it is processed through a "lens of self deception." In what may be viewed as either "circular verification" or "self-fulfilling prophecy" this lens is both a product of Chuche and the strategic culture that it is filtering. This "lens of self deception" is composed of four layers: historical world view, political indoctrination, hatred for the United States, and authoritarian cultural rules. This lens is so darkly colored that instead of focusing and illuminating, it most often misrepresents and distorts the reality of the information.

As noted above, until the mid-1990s the real power within the DPRK rested within the hands of Kim Il-sung and a small group of military and power-holding elites. As a group these individuals possess a narrow and distorted worldview that is based not upon the free flow of ideas, questioning of facts, and exposure to different cultures and philosophies, but rather upon their limited personal experiences, Communist ideology, KWP propaganda and Chuche. This worldview places world events and the actions of other nations within a distinctly historical context. In this view, Japan is not only a neighbor and important trading partner, it is also the nation that occupied Korea and brutally oppressed the Korean people for many years. Because of this, any actions undertaken by Japan, benign as they might be, are viewed with suspicion.

The DPRK has never attempted to conceal the fact that it believes the United States is its principal enemy and the ROK is its "puppet." In this view it was the United States that interfered in a purely internal dispute—the Fatherland Liberation War—and threatened to employ nuclear weapons. Since that time the United States has continued to both prevent the unification of Korea and threaten the existence of the DPRK with the use of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, it is the United States that "controls" the United Nations and directs world attention against the DPRK and other countries that it opposes. The DPRK leadership views U.S. actions in countries such as Grenada, Iraq, Panama, Somalia and Vietnam as analogous to their own situation, with the United States acting as a bully "kicking the door in" and interfering in purely internal affairs. Therefore all actions undertaken by the United States are viewed with distrust and as attempts to both prolong the division of the Korean people and directly threaten the existence of the Kim regime.

Korean society within both the ROK and DPRK has a strong underpinning of Confucian

philosophy.¹⁹ One notable aspect of this are stringent authoritarian hierarchal rules. Within government organizations this is expressed by the fact that subordinates will rarely, if ever, disagree with their superiors. In fact, they are encouraged not to. Therefore, if a superior is known to possess a particular view on a subject their subordinates—whether they believe the view correct or not—will tend to work new information into that view. These authoritarian rules are also manifested in deep institutional loyalty that results in a frequent refusal to share information and detrimental inter-agency competition. While such submission to superiors and institutional loyalty are witnessed in some form throughout the business, military and intelligence communities in the world it is quite evident within the DPRK they are taken to extremes under the umbrella of *Chuche*. The distinct possibility exists that this dynamic may manifest itself in a desire by the subordinates and support staffs to Kim Chong-il and the National Defense Commission to *not* present information that displeases them or is at variance to their stated opinions.

NORTH KOREA’S STRATEGIC CULTURE IN ACTION

Whether consciously or subconsciously the above characteristics suggest that the manner by which information is processed by individuals and institutions results in it passing through a lens of self-deception and exiting in a fundamentally flawed state. It is upon these assessments, however, that decisions within the DPRK are made. When combined with Kim Chong-il’s apparent beliefs, that he “knows better” and can arrive at better decisions than those around him, this often leads to ill-advised courses of action and unanticipated outcomes. A prime example of this was evidenced by Kim Chong-il’s 2003 public admission that DPRK intelligence agencies had kidnapped Japanese civilians over the past 30 years. Kim’s apparent analysis of the situation was that the Japanese would appreciate his magnanimous admission of guilt, view it as a sign of a new level of openness, and open themselves to the DPRK. It apparently never occurred to him that it would ignite deep emotions from a broad spectrum of the Japanese population and harden their feelings towards him and the DPRK. It should be anticipated that such a dynamic will be present during any future dealings with the DPRK—especially during times of crisis.

Within the military this dynamic can be illustrated by how the Military Training Bureau evaluated U.S. operations against Iraq during Operations DESERT STORM and IRAQI FREEDOM.

¹⁹ Paul S. Crane, *Korean Patterns* (Seoul: Hollym Corp., 1968).

According to defectors international news broadcasts concerning Operation DESERT STORM were taped and, “Videos of the Gulf War were watched everyday in the Operations Office, and assessments of the military power of the United States and the multinational forces, and studies of their strategy and tactics, were re-assessed from new angles.”²⁰

In one of those paradoxes resulting from a flawed strategic culture that are so common when dealing with the DPRK the same defector indicates that what they witnessed in the videos was shocking and disturbing, yet the final analysis was,

...the Gulf War was, in short, that it was “child’s play.” Should [the DPRK] face such circumstances, they concluded, it could easily deal with the United States and the multinational forces. The reasons for this were that: unlike in the past, a U.S.-led military block, even if it is formed, would be unable to act without the consent of its allies; in the event of another Korean war, neighboring powers would not go along with the U.S. position as they did in the Gulf War; [the DPRK’s] asymmetry in conventional and high-tech weapons; and [the DPRK’s] new confidence in electronic warfare.²¹

Other defectors recount that following Operation DESERT STORM officers above regimental commander were required to watch videotapes of the war to familiarize themselves with U.S. tactics. The videotapes, however, had a negative effect upon the commanders who realized that modern war depends on modern weapons and that the weapons possessed by the KPA were obsolete.

During the 2003 buildup to and early combat phases of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM Kim Chong-il is reported to have gone into seclusion for 50 days beginning in mid-February and extending to the end of March. He even missed the traditional opening ceremonies of the Supreme People’s Assembly in P’yongyang. The general assessment of this behavior was that Kim and the intelligence community interpreted media reports concerning U.S. attempts to decapitate the Iraqi leadership and the subsequent deployment of additional U.S. combat aircraft to East Asia, as indications that he might also be the target of a similar decapitation attack. Yet, no such attack was contemplated by the U.S.²²

A recent example containing many of the elements of the strategic culture established years ago under Kim Il-sung remains valid under Kim Chong-il can be seen in the 10 February

²⁰ “Ex-DPRK Major Unveils KPA Military Plan,” *Pukhan*, February 1, 2000, pp. 92-99; and “Anti-Kim Front: DPRK Military May Revolt,” *Chugan Choson*, December 2, 1993, pp. 32-34, as cited in FBIS-EAS-94-028.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² “Kim Jong II Reportedly Feared Being Next Target,” *Houston Chronicle*, May 12, 2003, p. 12.

2005 statement issued by the DPRK Foreign Ministry,

We have already resolutely withdrawn from the NPT and have manufactured nuclear weapons for self-defense to cope with the Bush administration's policy of isolating and crushing the DPRK, which is becoming stronger. Our nuclear weapons will remain a self-defensive nuclear deterrent under any circumstances. Today's reality shows that only strong power can protect justice and defend the truth. As the United States' imprudent rash acts and hostile attempts become more blatant, we only feel great pride in having strengthened, in every way from early on, the single-hearted unity of the entire army and all the people and self-defensive national defense capability while holding high the military-first banner.²³

SUMMARY

More than any other nation today, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is the product of the personal dreams and ambitions of single individual—Kim Il-sung. Kim was the world's longest reigning leader, having assumed power in the northern portion of the Korean Peninsula during 1948 and maintained that position until his death in 1994. The DPRK is an extension of Kim's thoughts, ideas, strengths, weaknesses and fears. The net effect of this is a worldview and strategic culture built upon six central and interrelated principles,

- Survival of the Kim clan
- Elimination of all domestic threats
- Reunification of the Fatherland
- Establishment and maintenance of overwhelming conventional military strength
- Acquisition of WMD and ballistic missiles
- Deterrence of the U.S. and ROK

These six principles are themselves processed through the DPRK's political ideology known as Chuche and what has been termed as a "lens of self deception." In what may be viewed as either "circular verification" or "self-fulfilling prophecy" this lens is itself a product strategic culture that it is filtering. The four elements of this lens are,

- Historical world view
- Political indoctrination
- Hatred for the U.S.

²³ "DPRK 'Manufactured Nuclear Weapons,' To 'Suspend' 6-Way Talks for 'Indefinite Period'," *Korean Central Broadcasting System*, 10 February 2005, as cited in FBIS.

- Authoritarian cultural rules

This “lens of self deception” is so darkly colored that instead of focusing and illuminating, it most often misrepresents and distorts real-world reality.

The repeated threats by the U.S. over the past 50-plus years have contributed to the maintenance of peace on the Korean peninsula, but they have also fostered a strategic culture within the DPRK that it must absolutely possess WMD (especially nuclear weapons) as a means of countering the U.S. nuclear threat and thus ensuring their national existence.²⁴ This belief is not only rooted in strong emotions, but also in years of political, military and intelligence analysis. Raised within the strategic culture developed by Kim Chong-il propagates this view. The 1994 statements by Kang Myong Do, a defector and son-in-law of then DPRK Prime Minister Kang Song-san, provide relevant insight into this conviction,

North Korea’s nuclear development is not intended as a bargaining chip as seen by the Western world, but for the maintenance of its system under the circumstances in which it is faced with economic difficulties and a situation following the collapse of Eastern Europe. ...There is a firm belief that the only way to sustain the Kim Chong-il system is to have nuclear capabilities.²⁵

According to defectors, Kim believes that if the KPA is weak, the state cannot exercise its power in international affairs and its survival will be in jeopardy. He emphasizes that, “...only when our military force is strong, can we take the initiative in a contact or dialogue with the United States or South Korea.”²⁶

The DPRK’s strategic culture not only views nuclear weapons as “decisive weapons” and its primary means of deterring U.S. aggression, but as also providing the DPRK with international prestige, allowing them to take their rightful place among a select few world powers with all the respect and political power commensurate to such a position.

From Kim’s perspective U.S. actions, unilaterally and through the UN, are attempts to impinge upon his ability to rule the DPRK, threats to his complete authority and autonomy, and are ultimately designed to overthrow him. These attempts directly affront the strategic culture

²⁴ Paul Shin, “Korea-Defection,” *The Associated Press*, September 13, 1991.

²⁵ “North Korean Defectors 27 July New Conference,” *Choson Ilbo*, 28 July 1994, 3-4, as cited in FBIS-EAS-94-145, 28 July 1994, 59-63; James Sterngold, “Defector Says North Korea Has 5 A-Bombs and May Make More,” *The New York Times*, July 28, 1994, A7; and Don Kirk, “Defector: N. Korea Eyes 10 A-Bombs,” *Newsday*, July 28, 1994, A14.

²⁶ “Defector to ROK on Kim Chong-il’s Control of DPRK Military,” *Win*, June 1996, 161-167, as cited in FBIS-EAS-96-197.

developed by his father and embraced by himself. The strategic culture that surrounds him fosters the idea that the DPRK is morally stronger than the United States and that by resolutely standing firm and threatening America he can outlast each administration.

The net effect of these factors is a strategic culture that is rudimentary, familial and possesses few—if any—objective internal checks and balances. It views the United States as the primary enemy, one that is deceitful in practice, and willing to use WMD against the DPRK. Internally it views any disagreement with policies or criticism of the Kim regime—no matter how insignificant—as a direct threat to Kim Chong-il and are dealt with harshly. No constructive criticism is allowed, even from loyal members of the military and power-holding elite.

Within such an environment the actions of the DPRK which are routinely evaluated by outsiders as “unpredictable,” “irrational,” “illogical,” or simply “crazy,” if viewed from within the context of its strategic culture can be understood as being quite rational and understandable.

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