

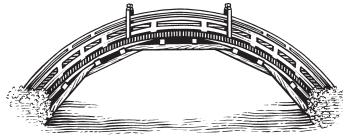
## BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Jonathan D. Pollack

*No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security*

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*Toby Dalton*

*Jeffrey Lewis*

*Sue Terry*

*Sung-Yoon Lee*

*Jonathan D. Pollack*



## Kims, Kims, and Nothing But the Kims

*Toby Dalton*

Jonathan Pollack's *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security* is an excellent addition to the literature on North Korea's nuclear program. While most of this literature is aimed at the international diplomatic process and policy options to disarm North Korea, Pollack focuses almost exclusively on the why and how of North Korea's nuclear development, to the exclusion of policy analysis. *No Exit* is nonetheless a timely reminder to policymakers that the depth of North Korea's commitment to nuclear weapons augurs poorly for those policy options currently on the table and for the prospects of denuclearization in the future.

Pollack meticulously traces the parallel political and nuclear developments in North Korea, including Kim Il-sung's early interest in a nuclear program and his efforts over the decades to parlay relationships with Moscow and Beijing into nuclear assistance. The picture that emerges is one of an unshakable commitment by the North Korean leadership to a nuclear weapons capability wrapped in the guise of a civil nuclear power program. At the outset, Pollack posits that the driving force behind the nuclear enterprise was the personal conviction of first Kim Il-sung and subsequently Kim Jong-il in the importance of nuclear weapons for North Korea's security. This Kim-centric account situates Pollack's work clearly on the psychology-oriented "demand" side of the proliferation literature. In particular, he cites work by Jacques Hymans, who theorizes that "oppositional nationalist" leaders, such as the Kims, "develop a desire for nuclear weapons that goes beyond calculation to self-expression."<sup>1</sup> It is a compelling account. But there are some issues with placing leadership psychology at the center, not least of which is the removal of agency from other actors in North Korea, as well as responsibility on the part of North Korea's international benefactors for abetting its behavior.

As a theoretical matter, Pollack's account does offer a great deal of support to the notion that the personal commitment of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il to nuclear weapons was critical, as Hymans's theory predicts, though it is not clear that this commitment developed out of a particular leadership

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques E.C. Hymans, "Theories of Nuclear Proliferation," *Nonproliferation Review* 13, no. 3 (2006): 459.



psychology. Though *No Exit* is clearly not intended to be a theory-driven case study, by noting one theory up front Pollack creates an expectation that he will use that theory to illuminate his argument, or at least return to it at the end. But he does not carry out this line of thought through the book. Readers are thus left to draw their own conclusions about the centrality of the Kim family psychology to the nuclear enterprise and the extent to which this is consistent with Hymans's own assessment of North Korea's nuclear program.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Pollack's account also offers copious plausible evidence for realist theories of proliferation, particularly given deep North Korean security anxieties after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the entwined nature of North Korea's civil and military nuclear programs. For instance, he argues that "even if Kim [Il-sung] was momentarily reassured of Chinese and Soviet strategic intentions, any such assurances were at best conditional" (p. 83). This sounds less like "self-expression" than strategic insecurity.

Undoubtedly, North Korea's opacity makes research on bureaucratic and military elements of the country's decisionmaking a very difficult undertaking, and Pollack's use of archival material is impressive. On occasion, Pollack cites the "powerful domestic constituencies closely identified with the weapons program," and he writes at length about the political importance of North Korea's "military-first" policies (p. 101). These constituencies, however, are largely missing from his story of why North Korea developed nuclear weapons. This absence may be less perplexing in the Kim Il-sung era, given his centralization of political power, but is more so under Kim Jong-il. If one accepts, as Pollack does, the assessment of Adrian Buzo that Kim Jong-il had "left no mark or trace of influence on major state policies independent of his father" (p. 87), then it seems a stretch to conclude that his drive alone led to the decision to proceed with development and testing of a nuclear explosive device after Kim Il-sung passed from the scene in 1994. Indeed, one suspects the military has been a significant but unseen protagonist throughout this saga, particularly given the greater reliance of Kim Jong-il on the military for legitimacy and political support. Several questions go begging for answers: What has been the military's role in nuclear decisionmaking, and what will its role be with regard to nuclear weapons going forward? Is North Korea committed to nuclear weapons under the control of the military, or does it have a more political conception of deterrence? And how much of the inertia for the nuclear weapons effort is due to other constituencies, such as North

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques E.C. Hymans, "Assessing North Korean Nuclear Intentions and Capacities: A New Approach," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (2008): 259–92.



Korea's nuclear scientific establishment? Pollack's Kim-focused account would be more compelling if he could demonstrate that other actors involved in the nuclear program were not instrumental in the decisionmaking.

One of the strengths of the book is Pollack's careful tracking of the personal relationships between Kim Il-sung and his counterparts in Beijing and Moscow, and in particular Kim's efforts to play one against the other. As a Sinologist, Pollack is at his best in dissecting the difficult relationships Kim Il-sung maintained with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping and his deep distrust of China's intentions. But his account of North Korea–China relations lets Beijing off the hook, at least more so than it deserves. On the one hand, the prevailing assumption inside the beltway is that China can and should do more to restrain North Korea's dangerous activities. Pollack's narrative shows this assumption to be more hopeful than realistic. On the other hand, Pollack argues that Beijing is without options, that “it has no more of a solution to the nuclear issue than any other power” (p. 204). China's behavior, especially its increasing investment in North Korea and history of looking the other way on illicit shipments to and from North Korea, suggests that Beijing has leverage it is politically indisposed to use and is thus at least partially responsible for abetting North Korean proliferation. This reluctance was made abundantly clear with China's overly restrained response to North Korea's highly provocative sinking of the *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010. It is reasonable to conclude that Beijing has more options—falling somewhere between containment and “buying time indefinitely”—than Pollack is willing to admit (p. 204).

In the end, readers of *No Exit* are left with a compelling description of North Korea's inexorable march toward nuclear weapons, punctuated by negotiated pauses but no real change in intent. For those contemplating policy approaches to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, Pollack's account serves as a warning that options are few and messy. With nuclear weapons a strategic necessity for Pyongyang and central to its identity, it is unlikely that North Korea previously was serious about using them as a bargaining chip. This is even truer today. Pollack pointedly concludes that denuclearization is not probable without regime change, until there is “a different type of system in which leaders do not believe that the survival or prosperity of the state depend on continued possession of nuclear weapons” (p. 209). Many in Washington (and presumably Seoul, Beijing, and Tokyo) have hoped for regime change for years, but hope is a poor basis for policy. If one reads between the lines, Pollack suggests that containing the dangers that North Korea might inflict on its neighbors and itself is the only real option in the interim. He is very likely correct, as unsatisfying a conclusion as that is.



## *Huis Clos: The Limits of Understanding North Korean Decisionmaking*

Jeffrey Lewis

When the Institute of International Strategic Studies transformed its venerable Adelphi Papers into a series of book-length monographs, I had my doubts. However, Jonathan Pollack's *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security* is a wonderful book that demonstrates the upside of such an approach.

Pollack opens with a damning picture of the U.S. policy debate over whether or not to engage the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). This debate is dominated by what Pollack calls an "if only" approach to policy, with advocates for differing policy approaches convinced that their respective approaches have not been pursued fully enough to succeed. Such an approach necessarily reduces the DPRK to little more than an automaton that responds mechanically to U.S. provocation or weakness, depending on the policy of choice.

Pollack sets for himself the difficult but ultimately rewarding goal of painting North Korea back into the picture as a strategic actor in its own right, with its own perceptions and motivations. To this end, he has assembled an impressive—and diverse—array of sources to access Pyongyang's strategic motivations. Pollack has done a masterful job of attempting to peer inside the North Korean regime despite its opacity. He cites interviews with diplomats who met Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, as well as documents from the archives of former Communist governments in Eastern Europe. He twice traveled to North Korea for Track 2 dialogues with North Korean officials. Even his acknowledgements have three footnotes.

Pollack has an eye for anecdotes that advance the narrative, which is essentially chronological, while also illuminating constant features of the regime. His description of how Kim Il-sung sought to avoid dependence on either the Soviet Union or China, frequently playing one against the other, is eye-opening, particularly as North Korea elicited economic assistance and security guarantees during the Cold War from reluctant partners in Moscow and Beijing. Among the profoundly misguided bits of conventional wisdom that distort discussions about North Korea's nuclear weapons, none is more pernicious than the view that Pyongyang is simply a Chinese puppet. Pollack

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provides a careful and accessible account of North Korean diplomatic activities to demonstrate the full complexity of relations between Beijing and Pyongyang.

Yet despite his impressive scholarship, which exceeds that of any comparable study, *No Exit* still reads like a particularly impressive piece of Soviet-era Kremlinology. It is insightful, provocative, and stimulating, but the actual object of discussion remains tantalizingly out of reach. Pollack explains his choice of title, appropriated from Jean-Paul Sartre's play *No Exit*, in terms of its ambiguous rendering in Korean. It is perhaps worth noting that the original title of Sartre's work in French is *Huis Clos*, which is the French administrative equivalent of "in camera"—a proceeding held behind closed doors. If there is a shortcoming of this book, it is that despite Pollack's considerable ingenuity, the decisionmaking in Pyongyang remains "huis clos."

It is hard to fault Pollack, who has demonstrated considerable perspicacity in seeking new sources of insight. North Korea is simply a difficult subject. The lack of insight into the formal decisionmaking process means that time and again the reader is asked to understand a decision by the DPRK in terms of the outlook of Kim Il-sung and, to a lesser degree, Kim Jong-il. At the outset, Pollack takes note of Jacques Hymans's *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation*.<sup>1</sup> This comment, made in passing, is telling. Much of the implicit methodology of *No Exit* reflects what Hymans would call psychology—questions of how leaders conceive of their national identity. Later, Pollack describes the North Korean regime as based on a system of "adversarial nationalism"—an echo of Hymans's notion of "oppositional nationalism" (p. 184).

Often this approach is extraordinarily revealing. In 1956 the Soviet Union and China forced Kim Il-sung to stop a purge of North Korean officials, many of whom had long-standing ties to Moscow and Beijing. When the Hungarian revolution broke out shortly after, in October 1956, Kim took advantage of events to resume the purge, according to Pollack, using show-trials, imprisonments, and executions over the next year. Having ruthlessly eliminated Moscow's influence in Pyongyang, Kim used his newly consolidated position in September 1959 to pressure Khrushchev into expanding nuclear assistance to the DPRK. Khrushchev told Mao, "Both you and we have Koreans who fled from Kim Il Sung. But this does not give us grounds to spoil relations" (p. 40). It is difficult not to conclude from this event that one has learned something very important about the man who would lead North Korea toward a nuclear-weapons capability.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques E.C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).



At other times, however, Pollack presumes an intimacy with his subjects, particularly Kim Il-sung, that seems inappropriately familiar. We are, for example, told that a perceived slight by Khrushchev “reinforced [the elder] Kim’s determination to pursue an independent course” (p. 41). In another instance, he discusses the “principal considerations that shaped Kim’s thinking,” describing Kim in turn as “momentarily reassured” by Chinese and Soviet moves, “envious and fearful” of South Korea’s covert nuclear efforts, and “concerned” about the issue of succession (p. 83). In another case, “Kim no doubt recognized that his enduring strategic nightmare was at hand” (p. 105). Although such journeys into Kim Il-sung’s inner mental life are not the norm in the text, when they do occur, they are jarring.

Any author must make judgments about the motivations of essential strategic actors. In most cases, Pollack shows impressive scholarship in documenting his assessments. For example, Kim Il-sung expressed his concern about succession to Romanian leader Nikolai Ceaușescu, and Pollack cites a document from the Romanian archive recording this exchange. In other cases, however, the interpretation belongs to secondary sources or is, implicitly, the judgment of the author based on the totality of evidence.

Such liberties would be more an issue of style than substance were it not for the stark conclusion that Pollack draws: “North Korea does not treat nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip, and instead views these weapons as central to its identity and security planning. Periodic hints by the North that it might be prepared to exchange its nuclear capabilities for economic aid cannot be taken seriously” (p. 207). This conclusion appears largely justified on the basis of the considerable information Pollack has assembled. It happens to be very close to my own view. But despite Pollack’s impressive scholarship and my own intuition, one must admit that this hypothesis is based on an incomplete picture of the DPRK that lacks much basis in the inner workings of the regime in Pyongyang.

It is tempting to use “North Korea” interchangeably with “Kim Jong-il” or, for the Cold War period, “Kim Il-sung.” Yet one simply does not know whether either leader’s preferences have been determinative within the North Korean system. We can be sure that not all North Koreans view their place in the world in exactly the same way—if only from Kim Il-sung’s expressed concern about whether younger cadres might not appreciate the dangers from the West as he did. Are there politics in North Korea? Do they matter for the nuclear weapons program? Toward the end of the book, Pollack quotes one source describing the DPRK as “riven with internal fault lines that often inhibit major decisions,” but he does not pursue this line of inquiry further (p. 193).



The truth is that we simply do not know. Here, a return to Hymans is helpful. In his essay on North Korea, which offers a similarly grim assessment of the prospects for progress with Pyongyang, Hymans cautions readers that his innovative analysis of the psychological aspects of nuclear decisionmaking in North Korea may depend on the “possibly questionable empirical claim” that “when it comes to setting strategic objectives in the nuclear area, Kim Jong Il’s word is the law.”<sup>2</sup> Hymans then points to the work of Patrick McEachern, who argues that North Korean statements hint at limited political competition within the DPRK. McEachern’s book *Inside the Red Box: North Korea’s Post-totalitarian Politics* scrutinizes official statements to reveal how the party, military, and cabinet “compete to shape the information and options available to Kim Jong Il and the ways in which his decisions are implemented.”<sup>3</sup> Hymans concludes with a cautionary note that “because real evidence is in short supply, alternative claims are certainly plausible. And since they are plausible, the theory presented in this article is not inconsistent with an eventual decision by Kim Jong-il to end the DPRK’s nuclear effort.”<sup>4</sup>

*No Exit* requires similar caution. Pollack has done a tremendous service in attempting to understand Pyongyang as a strategic actor in its own right. Moreover, he has done so with an impressive survey of the real evidence that is in such short supply. Pollack’s advice for policymakers is balanced and sober. He is careful to state that denuclearization is not a fool’s errand, and there is little to disagree with in his recommendation that policymakers emphasize risk minimization for the foreseeable future, while waiting for the stars to align for denuclearization. If we add only a word of humility about our insight into the celestial mechanics of the DPRK, we can best appreciate Pollack’s contribution: *No Exit* is the beginning of a change in how we understand the challenge posed by North Korea’s nuclear weapons rather than the end of a futile discussion with Pyongyang about eliminating its nuclear weapons programs.

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques E.C. Hymans, “Assessing North Korean Nuclear Intentions and Capacities: A New Approach,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (2008): 259–92.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Red Box: North Korea’s Post-totalitarian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). The description of McEachern’s work is taken from Andrew Nathan’s review in *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3 (2011): 165–66.

<sup>4</sup> Hymans, “Assessing North Korean Nuclear Intentions and Capacities.”



## No More Illusions of Denuclearization

Sue Terry

Much has been made of the motivation behind the United States' development of nuclear weapons during World War II and the strategic implications of its unprecedented nuclear status in the war's immediate aftermath and the postwar international order. Less attention has been paid, however, to the specifics of subsequent states' paths toward the possession of nuclear weapons. The only notable exception is North Korea, the newest and most secretive member of the nuclear club, whose journey to that coveted status has been closely chronicled for two decades. Nuclear diplomacy vis-à-vis Pyongyang since the 1990s has been a mainstay of international politics, headlining international news and triggering heated debates in both policy and academic circles. And while few have presumed that diplomacy could entice other nuclear weapons states—Russia, Britain, France, China, India, Israel, and Pakistan—into giving up their weapons, the notion that North Korea's far more powerful neighbors could and should persuade the aid-dependent North Korean leadership to bargain away its nuclear weapons program has persisted.

Jonathan Pollack's new book on the history of North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons—*No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security*—should finally put that myth to rest. The author demonstrates with ample historical evidence and rigorous analysis that the North Korean leadership “does not treat nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip, and instead views these weapons as central to its identity and security planning” (p. 207). Most North Korea watchers, except for the most optimistic assessor of U.S. negotiating skills (or the most patronizing assessors of North Korea's), came to adopt this view in the wake of the North's second nuclear test in May 2009. Pollack also makes a strong case that Pyongyang crossed the nuclear Rubicon in 2009 by chronicling the sequence of events following the breakout of the second North Korean nuclear crisis in October 2002 and leading up to the May 2009 test. But Pollack does much more than simply draw the conclusion that a nuclear North Korea is here to stay. He presents a comprehensive history of how and why the North Korean leadership secretly pursued nuclear weapons,

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going as far back as the germination of Kim Il-sung's nuclear aspirations in the 1940s and 1950s.

Chapter 2, dubbed "Nuclear Memories and Nuclear Visions," is especially good in laying out the historical events that alerted Kim Il-sung to the charms of nuclear weapons. Pollack points out that during World War II, when Japan was the colonial master in Korea, "major chemical and industrial facilities linked to Tokyo's clandestine nuclear-weapons programme were located in northern Korea, and Japan was...exploring for uranium and various rare earth metals in the northern half of the peninsula." He goes on to write that "Moscow undertook uranium mining in northern Korea as early as 1946, presumably relying on Korean labour" (p. 44). During the Korean War, faced with intermittent nuclear threats by the United States, Kim Il-sung showed interest in nuclear science: "The DPRK National Academy of Science was established in 1952, with uranium exploration, basic research in nuclear physics and the training of nuclear scientists identified as early priorities." In the postwar recovery period, Kim called for a "ten-year plan for science and technology...for a comprehensive survey of North Korea's natural resources including uranium, and advocated an active programme of research in atomic energy, the training of scientific personnel, and pursuit of nuclear applications to the DPRK's economic development" (p. 48).

Of course, statements of interest in nuclear science do not equal the technical ability or the concerted effort to develop nuclear weapons, and the author is careful not to read too much into these early signs of nuclear aspiration. Pollack dates North Korea's serious nuclear development efforts to the mid-1970s—unlike some South Korean experts who see the 1960s or even the 1950s as the genesis of its nuclear program. As Pollack notes, there is no "documentary evidence to substantiate this assertion," just defector testimonials (p. 48). At the same time, Pollack does describe in detail Pyongyang's cooperative agreements with Moscow in the 1950s on the "peaceful uses of atomic energy and on research collaboration in nuclear science," including the planning for the Yongbyon nuclear facility (p. 50). In describing Kim Il-sung's relentless efforts throughout the 1960s and 1970s at the militarization of the entire nation and acquisition of nuclear technology by seeking aid from Moscow and Beijing, and simultaneously playing the two rivals off one another, Pollack builds a strong case for what should have been clear even at the onset of the North Korean nuclear crisis in the early 1990s: North Korea did not embark on the nuclear path on a whim.

Pollack brings the North Korean nuclear issue up to date in his concluding chapter with a highly informed and balanced discussion of contemporary North



Korean interests and the strategic outlook on North Korea among regional powers. His observation merits extensive quotation:

The North Korean nuclear issue is also a misnomer. It is the history of North Korea and of Kim Il-sung, who built a system premised on exclusivity and adversarial nationalism and dominated it for nearly a half century; the leaders and institutions loyal to him; and of Kim Jong-il, who inherited power and has sustained the system following his father's death. Regardless of the precise number of North Korean nuclear weapons, their technical characteristics, or the size of the country's fissile-material inventory, the DPRK's nuclear capabilities are part of the legacy that Kim Jong-il plans to bequeath to his son, much as his father mandated the building of a nuclear infrastructure that he then passed to Kim Jong-il. (p. 184)

In effect, *No Exit* should put an end to the propensity among some North Korea watchers to find foreign scapegoats for the Kim family regime's relentless and systematic pursuit of nuclear weapons. The nature of the Kim regime, its strategic calculus, and the nature of nuclear weapons all made nuclear diplomacy with Pyongyang a very tall order. But over the past twenty years, depending on the political mood of the times, critics have looked for answers to the impasse in nuclear negotiations by blaming everyone except for the Kim regime: Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, or South Korean Presidents Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Lee Myung-bak. Some might still find comfort in this practice; and on an important level, analyses of "what went wrong" certainly are integral to an understanding of this intractable issue. But upon reading Jonathan Pollack's impressive book, we should all be able to accept now, at the very least, that the North Korean nuclear problem begins and ends with the North Korean state. As Pollack recommends (p. 209), this sobering realization should prompt policymakers in Washington, Seoul, and Japan—and, in an ideal world, even Beijing and Moscow—to do all they can to contain the spread of North Korea's nuclear arsenal beyond the isolationist country's own borders and, in the long run, to accelerate the decline of a regime that views nuclear weapons as essential to its own preservation.



## Build It, and They Will Recompense: North Korea's Nuclear Strategy

*Sung-Yoon Lee*

There is the moment when three or more North Korea watchers come together and see eye-to-eye on the North Korean nuclear problem. Jonathan Pollack, with his latest book *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security*, may have achieved that rarest of feats: creating a consensus among those interested in this deeply polarizing issue. The consensus here may not necessarily be Pollack's main conclusion, which, using the author's own words, can be summarized thus: "North Korea does not treat nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip, and instead views these weapons as central to its identity and security planning....The leadership thus remains locked in a nuclear mindset; it is unprepared to envisage longer-term survival of the extant system without retention and enhancement of its nuclear capabilities" (p. 207). The consensus would instead be that Pollack's *No Exit* is the most comprehensive and detailed account of the decades-old North Korean nuclear issue in any language—in other words, the best.

Pollack begins with the formation of the North Korean state under Kim Il-sung in the 1940s and ends with a first-rate analysis of the current strategic environment in which the key players—North Korea, South Korea, China, and the United States—find themselves. He traces the historical, ideological, and political backdrop against which Kim Il-sung built his unique and defiant regime; presents the major milestones in Kim's political dealings with his patrons and adversaries alike; and guides the reader through the tortuous cycles of North Korean provocations and compensatory nuclear negotiations over the past two decades.

The result is a tantalizing array of original analysis and rich detail. The generalist will find North Korea's defiant edge and success in building a nuclear arsenal at the cost of a dysfunctional economy curiously fascinating. The specialist will find that the book's cogently presented historical details and insights make it a must-read for both personal gratification and research. And

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**NOTE** ∞ The title is borrowed from a remark—"Build them, and they will pay"—by Joshua Stanton, who writes for "One Free Korea," <http://freekorea.us/>.



for anyone teaching a college-level course on Korean politics or U.S.–East Asia relations, the book should be required reading.

In chronicling the North Korean leadership's dogged pursuit of nuclear weapons capabilities over nearly four decades, Pollack accomplishes something he may not have intended, which is implicitly to undermine the “negotiationist” school of thought—that is, those who believe that negotiations would effect North Korea's denuclearization. Pollack explicitly endorses neither the “collapsist” nor the “reformist” school thinkers—those who believe, respectively, in the eventual collapse of the North Korean regime and in the possibility of the regime adopting genuine economic reform and opening. With his analysis of North Korea's past actions and strategic imperatives, Pollack effectively buries the notion that the United States and its partners, with the right mix of incentives and coercion, could achieve the complete dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Given the ample evidence presented, it would be folly to argue against Pollack's assessment of the current state of nuclear negotiations or his reading of the North Korean regime's intentions: “Despite pursuit of nearly every imaginable approach to denuclearisation by the U.S. and others, this goal is now farther from realization than at any point since the signing of the Agreed Framework” (p. 190). He further explains: “The leadership...posits a ‘no landing’ scenario—that is, the perpetuation of the existing system based on the unquestioned power and authority of the Kim family and of the ruling elites that support it, retention of its nuclear weapons capabilities, and a measure of economic recovery” (p. 192).

Pollack ends the book with a sober call for efforts to contain North Korea's existing nuclear weapons capabilities: “The ultimate goal remains nuclear abandonment by the North, but a more practicable objective is risk minimisation, both in relation to the DPRK's extant weapons and in any potential transfer of technology and materials beyond North Korea's borders” (p. 209). Some may find Pollack's prescription a bit too passive and ultimately unsatisfactory. Yet it is hard to argue against the historical record—the apparent failure of nuclear negotiations with North Korea and the folly of pouring more blandishments into the pipeline that feed only Pyongyang's palace economy.

A cursory reading twenty years ago of the nature of nuclear diplomacy and the basic dynamic of the Korean Peninsula should have produced the same conclusion. The former is international politics played, save for waging war or securing peace, at the highest level. The latter is the reality of a totalitarian regime incapable of economic self-sufficiency competing for pan-Korean legitimacy against a wealthy democratic government. That it is only in the past two years, in the wake of North Korea's nuclear breakout, that such a view has finally become



prevalent is the product of treating nuclear diplomacy like negotiating fishing quotas and, more pointedly, presuming that the impoverished North Korean regime, lacking a clear agenda of its own making, would be responsive to the positive stimuli bestowed on it by bigger powers. Historically, the United States has repeatedly made the mistake of underestimating ethnic nationalism and taking a patronizing view of East Asian dictators, only to regret it later—from overestimating Chiang Kai-shek in the Chinese Civil War to underestimating Kim Il-sung and Ho Chi Minh in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. This book should remove all doubt that the North Korean nuclear issue is nearly coeval with the history of the North Korean state and essential to the state's "defining imperative" of "system preservation" (p. 188).

No book is perfect, and Pollack's is at times sketchy on historical detail. For example, the section on Khrushchev's less than cordial relationship with Kim Il-sung (p. 41–42) is occasionally misleading. Noting that the Soviet leader never visited North Korea despite scheduling a visit in the late 1950s and another in 1960, Pollack goes on to observe that none of Khrushchev's "successors as CPSU first secretary" ever did, either, and that "Vladimir Putin's 2000 state visit to Pyongyang remains the only instance of a top Soviet or Russian leader travelling to the DPRK." This may be true on the surface, but it also makes light of Premier Alexei Kosygin's visit to Pyongyang in 1965 and the implications of that visit for Pyongyang-Moscow relations. In fact, Pollack does later note: "In the aftermath of Prime Minister Kosygin's visit to Pyongyang in early 1965, Soviet arms deliveries began to increase, and a three-year trade agreement with Moscow was also signed" (p. 67). Kosygin may not have been the first secretary, but in the mid-1960s he was in a power-sharing arrangement with Leonid Brezhnev and active in handling top affairs of the state.

On p. 59, Pollack writes that "the treaties of alliance signed with Moscow and Beijing just weeks apart in July 1961 presumably provided Kim the external security guarantees that he had long sought from the Soviet Union and China." Yet these two treaties, which heavily favored North Korea, were respectively signed in Moscow on July 6 and Beijing on July 11, just five days instead of "weeks" apart. The close proximity of time is not a matter of insignificance, as it reflects the complex trilateral maneuverings among Kim Il-sung and his two Communist patrons, similar to what took place in the spring and autumn of 1950—that is, in the lead-up to North Korea's invasion in June and in the wake of its retreat following the Inchon landing in September. In fact, Pollack himself takes note of such manipulative dealings among Kim, Khrushchev, and Mao Zedong (p. 42).



Further, referring to North Korea's seizure of the USS *Pueblo* in January 1968, Pollack writes that the event took place "only days after North Korean commandos came within several hundred metres of the Blue House in a failed assassination attempt against President Park [Chung-hee]" (p. 64). The seizure of the *Pueblo* took place on January 23, and the shootout near the Blue House between North Korean commandos and South Korean guards on January 21. Here, the author may have noted that both events in late January occurred on the eve of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam and the definite turn of tide for the United States in that war. Pollack also notes that North Korea shot down a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft "in April 1969, which killed all personnel on board." He may also have elaborated that the event took place on April 15, Kim Il-sung's birthday, the most important date in North Korea. In view of Pyongyang's propensity to provoke on major holidays—conducting its first nuclear test on the eve of the Korean Workers' Party Founding Day on October 9, 2006, testing seven missiles on U.S. Independence Day in 2006, or conducting its second nuclear test on U.S. Memorial Day in 2009—taking note of such points is not a mere matter of triviality.

Last, on p. 14 Pollack asks, "Why and how has the *nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula* reached this point, and what are the consequences?" [italics added]. "Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" is a term favored by North Korea, intended to mean, as North Koreans often explain, the abrogation of the U.S.–South Korea alliance and the end of the U.S. nuclear security umbrella for the South. Whether one speaks of the history of North Korea's nuclearization or the prospects for Pyongyang's denuclearization, referring to the subject at hand as "North Korea" rather than "Korean Peninsula" (except in specifically intended cases) would eliminate ambiguity.

Despite these small quibbles, and in view of the very real challenge posed by the absence of access to North Korean archives, Jonathan Pollack's book on the nuclearization of North Korea is as good as it gets.



## The Kim Dynasty and North Korea's Nuclear Future: Will History Still Rhyme?

Jonathan D. Pollack

I am gratified by the appraisals of the four reviewers, all of whom express ample praise for *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security*, while also posing questions that require some elaboration. However, none could have anticipated the abrupt death of Kim Jong-il in December 2011. Kim's passing provides an opportunity to revisit some of the book's principal judgments. In her review, Sue Terry quotes one of my study's essential arguments. As she notes, I attribute North Korea's decades-long pursuit of nuclear weapons primarily to Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il and the political-military system the two leaders sustained through a combination of highly militarized nationalism, unfettered power and internal control, and racial exclusivity. As she also notes, I observe that "the DPRK's nuclear capabilities are part of the legacy that Kim Jong-il plan[ned] to bequeath to his son, much as his father mandated the building of a nuclear infrastructure that he then passed to Kim Jong-il." What future awaits Kim Jong-un's nuclear inheritance if he is able to consolidate power, and (even more important) what if he cannot?

Kim Jong-il's death thus presents an opportunity to subject a specific hypothesis to a real-world test. Might a different leader (albeit from the same ruling family) alter North Korea's long-standing strategic course, or will this only be possible if the present system either ceases to exist or undergoes an almost unimaginable transformation? In addition, at the time of Kim's death the United States was close to preliminary agreement with Pyongyang, presaging a significant effort to resume nuclear diplomacy that largely ceased in late 2008. Most analysts expect that bilateral discussions between the United States and North Korea will resume after a period of official mourning in the North, possibly to be followed by resumption of the six-party talks. But would the outcome of renewed negotiations prove appreciably different from past episodes of frustrated (and deeply frustrating) diplomacy?

All four reviewers note that *No Exit* does not focus on policy options or negotiating strategies, and I do not propose to assess either issue in this essay.

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My book instead concentrates on how Pyongyang's development of nuclear weapons is inextricably intertwined with the history of the North Korean state. Though North Korea's nuclear development also reflects the tortuous history of the Cold War in Northeast Asia, the singular strategic convictions of the Kim dynasty were paramount in this process. Absent the determination of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il to be answerable to no outside power and to develop and sustain their unique system, it is highly unlikely that the program could have continued indefinitely. If the North's pursuit of nuclear weapons is attributable principally to the Kims and the scientific and military constituencies they supported, then the passage of power to a third-generation leadership will not necessarily diminish the commitment to a nuclear weapons program and might even increase it. But an appreciable de-emphasis on the program would suggest that the convictions of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il did not automatically transfer to the next generation, and would require reconsideration of one of my principal arguments.

There has been very little commentary in the immediate post-Kim Jong-il period on the nuclear weapons program, even as the first major editorial following Kim's death declared that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) would remain a "strong nuclear state."<sup>1</sup> Most of the prevailing debate among specialists and commentators has focused on whether political succession will result in a collective leadership that redirects the system's internal and external priorities (i.e., the reform hypothesis), or on whether Kim Jong-un will prove unable to consolidate power, leading to intense factional rivalry that could abruptly spell the end of the system (i.e., the collapse hypothesis). To an extent, these arguments are virtual articles of faith among their respective proponents. In one form or another, they have been debated ever since the Korean nuclear impasse emerged in the early 1990s as an issue in U.S. foreign policy.

Few, however, seem prepared to contemplate a third possibility: the persistence of the extant system for the foreseeable future. I do not believe that the DPRK is as prone to abrupt meltdown as many predict, but I also doubt that the post-Kim Jong-il leadership will prove capable of undertaking internal changes that many regard as essential to the survival of the system. If anything, domestic change could result in the erosion of internal control on which the system's durability has depended. In the immediate aftermath of Kim's death, the senior leadership seems intent on conveying that nothing has changed. But

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<sup>1</sup> "Kim Jong-il Will Always Live in Hearts of People," *Rodong Sinmun*, December 22, 2011, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>.



much remains unknown and perhaps unknowable about the configurations of power within North Korea, so external actors must prepare for unanticipated possibilities and potential surprises. The death of only the second leader in the history of the state and the elevation of a young, unproven son to top leadership could reveal fault lines that have been suppressed for decades, and old age will progressively take its toll among the elderly figures still occupying senior positions atop the system. (Tellingly, Kim Jong-il was the third-youngest member of the Korean Workers' Party Politburo named in September 2010. His death thus slightly increases the average age of this body, though another much older member has also died in the interim.) In addition, North Korea has yet to recover from the widespread famine and deindustrialization of the mid and late 1990s, with ever larger portions of the population forced to eke out livelihoods outside the centrally administered economy. The possible spread of information within the North Korean population is an additional factor that could undermine loyalty to the regime. How these factors might influence the country's evolution in the coming months and years takes me somewhat afield from the purposes of this essay, but they bear very careful observation and assessment.<sup>2</sup>

I had three principal objectives in undertaking my book: to avoid writing yet another U.S.-centric account of the North Korean nuclear issue; to provide a more fully grounded understanding of the system's political history, a history underappreciated by many strategic analysts; and to assess how and why North Korea proved able to sustain nuclear weapons development in the face of opposition and pressure from adversaries and allies alike. My research drew primarily on Cold War archival materials, interviews with individuals knowledgeable about and experienced with North Korea, an abundance of recent literature on North Korean political history, detailed documentary analysis, and an understanding of nuclear technology. But several of the reviewers pose questions about my approach and analytic judgments that warrant additional discussion.

### *Is My Argument Too Kim-Centered?*

Jeffrey Lewis and Toby Dalton assert that my account is overly "Kim-specific." Their arguments reflect a difference between those with strategy and policy expertise and those viewing North Korea through the prism of its profoundly idiosyncratic history. Lewis and Dalton are nonproliferation

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<sup>2</sup> See, in particular, Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea* (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2011).



specialists, whereas the other reviewers (Sue Terry and Sung-Yoon Lee) concentrate on Korean leadership, culture, and politics. I endeavored to bridge these two constituencies in *No Exit*, and in my view the differences between them are not necessarily all that great.

For those (including myself) immersed in the story of the North Korean state, the assumption of a Kim-based system is not particularly fanciful, even if it seems implausible. North Korea's history is the history of the Kim dynasty and the organizations working on its behalf. There is no other state in the international system where a single family and those loyal to it have imposed their own personal vision as pervasively and as successfully as the Kims. If there is an alternative rendering of North Korean history, it remains invisible and unknown. Some observers, for example, doubt the expressions of grief on display in Pyongyang in the days following Kim Jong-il's death; I do not. If anything, this emotional outpouring represents a more tempered version of what occurred following the death of Kim Il-sung, whose imprint on the DPRK was genuinely determinative and who possessed charisma and godlike authority that his son did not. Outsiders are often incredulous about the extent of the Kim family's dominance, but the wealth of evidence from Cold War archives has moved scholarly understanding well past the hagiography dispensed by the regime. As I note in my opening chapter, North Korea is "a system like no other," and this helps explain history that would otherwise be unimaginable.

### *Are There Unexamined Sources of Variation within the System?*

Jeffrey Lewis and Toby Dalton both raise questions about whether my analysis omits possible alternative explanations of North Korea's nuclear behavior. To a lesser degree, Sung-Yoon Lee argues that my discussion at times glosses over some important historical details. I appreciate Lee's clarification of the sequence of several key events and of how the DPRK has often timed its actions to correlate with significant dates on the North Korean political calendar. His observations add to our understanding of the North's capacity for highly orchestrated actions. However, I would still assert that the unwillingness of any leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) to travel to North Korea during the entire history of the Soviet Union reveals much about Moscow's acute suspicions of the North Korean leadership.

Dalton also argues that there was (and is) an underlying geopolitical logic to North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons. Given that the DPRK is a small state surrounded by far more powerful neighbors, this argument has had undoubted resonance within the North Korean leadership, and the two



Kims often employed this rationale to justify their actions, including the acute privation imposed on the populace, especially under Kim Jong-il. But the system's vulnerability and isolation derived from policy choices made by the Kims and their immediate circle. As I argue throughout the book, Kim Il-sung had an abiding distrust of the outside world, but this also reflected his deep suspicions about the loyalties of those within the North Korean system. Such suspicions inhibited Kim from sustaining lasting relationships even with his closest allies, and this trait was even more pronounced under his son, who appeared to lack a capacity for manipulation and sheer audacity equivalent to that of his father. I also believe that these traits led inexorably to the pursuit of a nuclear capability, which in the eyes of both Kims denied any outside actor control over the system's fate.

Wading into the morass of intention and action can be problematic in all historical accounts, and not just for a system as hermetically sealed as North Korea. *No Exit* draws on an abundance of materials from former Soviet and East European archives. Information from Chinese archives remains very limited, though this is beginning to change, albeit selectively. For example, new research findings have yielded additional insight into Kim Il-sung's long manipulation of his Chinese allies, as well as Deng Xiaoping's persistent efforts to curb North Korean risk-taking, seldom with lasting effect.<sup>3</sup> Though Kim Il-sung's words and actions often emerge from these archival materials, we are left with a necessarily incomplete picture. But the gaps in understanding on North Korea's nuclear history and strategic calculations have diminished, and will most likely be further reduced as new materials become available. (The Cold War International History Project of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars plays a particularly vital role in this regard.) Nonetheless, Lewis's argument that I presume undue familiarity with the "inner mental life" of Kim Il-sung is an important point. Though my conclusions derive from cumulative knowledge of Kim's convictions and actions over nearly a half century in power, these are still judgments from the outside looking in. As Lewis notes, neither I nor anyone else has firsthand knowledge of the "inner workings of the regime in Pyongyang." But it is not a large inferential leap to attribute North Korean behavior to either Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong-il, even in the absence of a detailed understanding of the inner workings of the system.

Dalton also raises the issue of agency. Since I assert that Kim Jong-il was an imitative rather than an innovative leader, he argues that I have not fully

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<sup>3</sup> See, in particular, Sergey Radchenko, "North Korea and the End of the Cold War, 1985–1991" (paper presented at an international conference on "China-DPRK Relations during the Cold War," Shanghai, October 14–15, 2011).



considered the role of the North Korean military as “a significant but unseen protagonist throughout this saga.” But it is unimaginable in a system dominated so pervasively by the Kim family that North Korean military or scientific personnel were not operating at the Kims’ behest. It is entirely plausible that military R&D personnel pressed vigorously for support of the nuclear program, but they were pushing through a door that had already been opened for them.

Without question, Kim Jong-il sought to expropriate military symbols and power to buttress his claims to legitimacy. His “military first” strategy may have been his one claim to innovation beyond what his father bequeathed to him; to that extent, I would slightly modify my assertion that he followed his father’s lead in all circumstances. But the centrality of military power throughout the entire history of the regime is beyond dispute. One leading authority on North Korean politics, Ruediger Frank, argues that the Korean Workers’ Party began to reassert its prerogatives during Kim Jong-il’s final years, a judgment Frank believes is further substantiated in the aftermath of Kim’s death.<sup>4</sup> To the extent that such a trend is fully confirmed and persists, it would suggest a potential realignment of institutional forces within the system. But the incongruous designation of Kim Jong-un and Kim Kyong-hui, Kim Jong-il’s sister, as four-star generals in fall 2010 and the appearance of the latter’s husband, Jang Song-taek, in a four-star uniform days following Kim Jong-il’s death underscore the symbiotic relationship between the Kim family and the officers under its command.<sup>5</sup>

### *What Comes Next?*

As several of the reviewers note, *No Exit* does not offer any grand policy recommendations, nor is it particularly grounded in theory. My reference to Jacques Hymans’s important work reflects my appreciation for the keen insights of his book, which has undoubted relevance to the North Korean case.<sup>6</sup> But I did not seek to apply his theory, only to cite it as a highly apt characterization of nuclear policymaking under both Kims. Reconstructing the technical and political history of North Korea’s nuclear development and telling this story in a volume of relatively modest length (albeit one with ample primary source references, lest anyone challenge the basis for my judgments) seemed

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<sup>4</sup> Ruediger Frank, “The Party as the Kingmaker: The Death of Kim Jong Il and Its Consequences for North Korea,” 38 North, December 21, 2011, <http://38north.org/2011/12/rfrank122111/>.

<sup>5</sup> Chico Harlan, “A Week after N. Korean Leader’s Death, Signs of Smooth Transition,” *Washington Post*, December 25, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques E.C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).



a sufficiently daunting project. Moreover, beyond a brief reference to policy options for addressing the uncertainties and risks should North Korea sustain nuclear weapons development in future years, I do not weigh the dangers and unknowns in any detail.

North Korea's disclosure of uranium enrichment activities introduces a potentially very ominous change in its nuclear future. Pyongyang vociferously denied any involvement with enrichment for nearly a decade, until it publicly declared its interest in centrifuge technology in spring 2009 and then revealed the existence of an enrichment facility (purportedly to produce low-enriched uranium for an experimental light-water reactor) to Siegfried Hecker and his colleagues in late 2010.<sup>7</sup> North Korea has since intimated its possible willingness to suspend enrichment operations at Yongbyon, which would be an essential prerequisite to any renewed denuclearization agreement. However, Hecker and Olli Heinonen, a former senior official from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), are both convinced that the DPRK has one or more undisclosed facilities that are producing highly enriched uranium, unobserved and unmonitored by outside powers.<sup>8</sup> Nor has any Western expert been allowed to return to Yongbyon since the visit of Hecker and his colleagues in November 2010.

To describe North Korea's nuclear conduct as defined by opacity is a huge understatement. Any presumptive nuclear agreement that fails to address the possibilities of a second means of fissile-material production would be fatally flawed. Even though most nuclear scientists deem plutonium-based weapons as technologically superior to a highly enriched uranium design, the latter materials offer a more predictable path to an operational weapons capability. Any additional production of weapons-grade plutonium would require North Korea to restart its decrepit gas graphite reactor. That reactor is also subject to inherent limitations, with its maximal production of fissile material approximating the amount needed for one weapon per year.

Is it possible that North Korea will refrain from additional nuclear tests? In Hecker's view, if the DPRK intends to pursue an operational capability, an additional test or tests are unavoidable. Should a third test utilize highly enriched uranium, North Korea's weapons potential would no longer be limited to the output of the reactor at Yongbyon. The DPRK would then have the means

<sup>7</sup> For additional details, consult Siegfried S. Hecker, "Extraordinary Visits: Lessons Learned from Engaging with North Korea," *Nonproliferation Review* 18, no. 2 (2011): 444–55.

<sup>8</sup> See Hecker, Chaim Braun, and Robert L. Carlin, "North Korea's Light-Water Reactor Ambitions," *Journal of Nuclear Materials Management* 39, no. 3 (2011): 18–25; and Olli Heinonen, "North Korea's Nuclear Enrichment: Capabilities and Consequences," 38 North, June 22, 2011, <http://38north.org/2011/06/heinonen062211/>.



to produce fissile material in far greater quantities. A nuclear test utilizing highly enriched uranium would also reinforce North Korea's stated claims to notional equality with the major nuclear powers, all of whom have tested bombs employing both kinds of fissile material.

North Korea's future nuclear decisions will necessarily reflect political as well as technical considerations. In fall 2011, informed Chinese experts intimated that North Korean officials (presumably including Kim Jong-il) had provided assurances that the DPRK would forgo additional nuclear and missile tests. A binding commitment to Beijing would thus reflect a "return on investment" for China's heightened economic and political support of the Kim regime since fall 2009. But will Beijing's guarded optimism be validated? Pyongyang's past pledges of nuclear restraint have been conditional and reversible. Kim Jong-il never offered an unequivocal commitment to denuclearization, and nearly all claims about Kim's supposed willingness to resume nuclear negotiations were based on remarks quoted by Chinese and Russian officials, not direct statements by Kim Jong-il or any other North Korean leader. The history of the regime is littered with examples of both Kims acting in defiance of Moscow and Beijing. Is there any reason to believe that a successor leadership drawn exclusively from Kim Jong-il's circle of close subordinates will prove more trustworthy?

Chinese officials argue that, in the immediate succession to Kim Jong-il, Pyongyang will focus on Kim Jong-un's consolidation of power and continued preparations for the one hundredth anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth, which will presumably still be observed on April 15, 2012. For added measure, North Korea's hopes for the election next December of a South Korean president more aligned with Pyongyang's preferences could be seriously undermined by another nuclear test. These expectations, though plausible, are necessarily conjectural. Should the DPRK yet again defy China and test another weapon or long-range missile, such an act might well answer the questions that Dalton feels I do not satisfactorily address: whether Beijing has options between the partial containment of the North's nuclear pursuits and the buying of time, and whether China would be prepared to employ more direct pressure to constrain the North Korean program, including heightened collaboration with the United States and others. Given China's risk aversion and its own impending political succession, it is far from certain that Beijing would be prepared to contemplate more coercive measures in response to renewed defiance by Pyongyang. Though China's leaders are deeply vexed by North Korea's nuclear pursuits, other fears (including what Beijing views as the unpredictable consequences of directly pressuring an embattled North Korean leadership) have thus far assumed higher precedence in Chinese calculations.



All four reviewers acknowledge that nuclear weapons constitute an indelible part of the legacy of both Kims. Has the program reached a stage of development where it is essentially irreversible? What are the strategic consequences in Northeast Asia and for the nonproliferation regime should there be no exit? These are disquieting but crucial questions as North Korea's leadership contemplates the next phase of the system's improbable, disturbing history. There is no evidence that there are forces within the system prepared to envision a future without a nuclear identity, even if we cannot be certain about the extent and form of this identity. Regardless of North Korea's nuclear future, the echoes of the past are certain to reverberate. They are the constant, painful reminders of North Korea's profound alienation from the international system, all in the name of a regime that Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il were determined to build and sustain, no matter what the costs and consequences. ◆