Books

Northern Exposure

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What is North Korea’s game? Months of belligerent moves, then a series of conciliatory gestures over the summer, were capped off with the September announcement that Pyongyang was back to enriching plutonium. To find out what it all means, and what the U.S. should do, *Columbia*’s Michael B. Shavelson spoke to Charles K. Armstrong, the Korea Foundation Associate Professor of Korean Studies in the Social Sciences and author of the forthcoming *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea*

and the World, 1950–1990.

The nuclear test in May. The missiles fired in July. The arrests of journalists Euna Lee and Laura Ling. Their release after Bill Clinton's intervention. The relaxing of some North-South travel restrictions in August. Are these events part of the same story?

They're all connected inasmuch as they reflect the pattern of how North Korea has been dealing with the world, and particularly with South Korea and the United States, over several years. The North Koreans have learned that the best way to get the attention of the U.S. and the outside world is to rattle their sabers. Unfortunately, it has tended to work, because when North Korea isn't instigating such provocations, it tends to be ignored.

In June President Obama said, "There has been a pattern in the past where North Korea behaves in a belligerent fashion, and if it waits long enough is then rewarded. . . . [W]e are going to break that pattern." Is Obama ready to break that pattern?

Obama has not said a lot about North Korean policy. He's been understandably focused on other issues, and he has not made North Korea a priority. That's unfortunate because it is an issue that warrants attention. Part of the problem is that the administration has not put the kind of focus on North Korea that it could have in order to continue the momentum that had been building since the last year or so of multiparty talks. The administration's position is that North Korea has to come forth with verification of its nuclear program before Pyongyang can continue in the six-party talks, which is at the moment the sole venue for negotiating.

Those talks ended last December. Why?

The North Koreans and the Americans have very different priorities. The U.S. wants nuclear disarmament and the prevention of proliferation. The North Koreans want a peace agreement with the U.S. and a guarantee of their security. It's not clear how that can really be achieved, but those are the essential starting points. This leads to the issue of timing. The U.S. has said since the Bush administration that it wants verification that North Korea has shut down its nuclear program completely before it can move forward. But the North Koreans have argued that they've given the

information that was expected of them about their nuclear program, and that the peace talks should move to the next stage of economic assistance and cooperation.

North Korea would prefer bilateral talks to the six-party talks.

Right. They've never been terribly enthusiastic about any kind of multiparty talks. They have stated repeatedly that the main problem is between themselves and the United States, and problems have to be solved at that level. When Obama was campaigning, he said that he would be willing to talk to anyone, including Kim Jong Il, face-to-face, to resolve pressing issues of foreign policy. The North Koreans seem to have taken him at his word and were expecting, rightly or wrongly, that the U.S. would engage in bilateral talks with North Korea. They have expressed disappointment that this hasn't happened.

Could Bill Clinton's recent trip help in that regard?

I think the North Koreans are very pleased that Bill Clinton met with them, even though the release of the journalists was theoretically not related to the other issues. Clearly, this visit was a significant breakthrough in contact between the U.S. and North Korea.

Do we know anything about Clinton's debriefing?

The Obama administration said repeatedly that Bill Clinton was going as a private citizen, and that his visit had nothing to do with administration policy. But there is no way we can believe that Clinton's conversations with Kim Jong Il stuck simply to the issue of the imprisoned journalists. What Clinton has said to the administration has been kept very quiet, but obviously he could bring back some useful information. Among the most important is about Kim Jong Il's health and his hold on power.

The North Koreans seem to feel comfortable with Bill Clinton.

Yes, Bill Clinton went the furthest toward developing a bilateral relationship with North Korea. Under Clinton, the U.S. and North Korea for a time reached an agreement over North Korea's nuclear program in 1994 and again toward the very end of his second term, the U.S. and North Korea came very close to negotiating a deal on North Korea's missile development. As the North Koreans see it, Clinton's visit last month picked up where he left off at the end of his presidency.

Kim Jong Il is portrayed in the West as being a bit mad. Is he?

There is a rationality to what he does, and there is a pattern that has developed over the last 15 years of North Korean provocation and brinksmanship. But the provocations get more intense, the stakes get higher each time, and there's always a danger that circumstances could get out of control. It's a very volatile situation on the Korean peninsula.

Has that brinksmanship benefited North Korea?

Let's go back to the beginning. In October 1994, the U.S. and North Korea signed an agreement for North Korea to freeze its nuclear program and the U.S. to lead a consortium to give energy aid to North Korea. Things stalled after that, until North Korea staged missile tests in '97 and '98, which created a defensive crisis and panic. This spurred the administration to return to negotiations and to work on the missile deal, which made considerable progress in the second Clinton administration. So, yes, it has worked to an extent, but it occurs within a very risky pattern of behavior.

What is life like today in North Korea?

It's difficult to get a clear picture of everyday life of ordinary people in North Korea. Even the NGOs and the humanitarian agencies that visit North Korea have limited access, although access is much better now than it was 10 years ago. The general sense we get is that life is quite spartan. People are not starving as they were at the end of the 1990s, although malnutrition is still a problem, especially in the more remote areas. The 10 percent or so of North Koreans who are privileged to live in Pyongyang lead a pretty good life, relatively speaking. They have enough to eat, and adequate housing, but outside of that, life is pretty grim.

The industrial infrastructure has largely broken down. Food production is still far from sufficient to feed the people. North Korea is still dependent for perhaps a third of its food on outside aid from China primarily, and also from Western donors. The state distribution system collapsed for much of the country in the late 1990s, though it has picked up to some extent. In the past the citizens were primarily dependent on a ration system to get their food, but now many citizens, most of them in the countryside or towns, get their food from markets. The informal bottom-up marketization of the North Korean economy began in the early 1990s because there was simply no other way for people to survive other than to sell goods on the

market.

Does the government tolerate this informal market economy?

It did for 10 years. Then in the summer of 2002, the authorities decided to formalize it and put into place laws that allowed people to buy and sell on the markets. A lot of large ones were set up in Pyongyang and elsewhere, where farmers could bring their goods. Prices were lifted on certain staples, such as rice. This had positive and negative consequences. It allowed for much more freedom of flow of goods, and access to more people, but it also created inflation and a dramatic rise in prices for ordinary people. Also, the North Korean government allowed for certain goods to be purchased in foreign currency, including dollars, so people who had access to foreign currency — members of the elite — were able to do better. That went on for a while, and then in 2005–2006, the government started clamping down. A year or so ago, for example, the government instituted a law that no woman under the age of 59 could work in a market. This meant that there were no more of those young, energetic, entrepreneurial people staffing markets. So, the government is very ambivalent about economic reform. Officials see the advantages of greater production and access to consumer goods, but they don't want to open the country up to foreign influences, corruption, and what they think is excessive materialism.

What about human rights?

The human-rights situation is one of the worst in the world. People do not have the freedom to say anything critical of the government. For example, if you deface the image of Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong Il in a newspaper by cutting it up or wrapping your garbage in it, you can go to jail. It's reminiscent of the Japanese emperor worship of the 1930s.

Including the spiritual dimension of that?

It's all couched in quasi-Marxist language. But there's a strong emphasis on Korean nationalism and the perfection and glory of the great leaders, Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong Il, his son. It is a strange sort of political religion.

We do not know much about the heir apparent, Kim Jong Un. What little we know does not suggest that he will be a serious leader. What are the possibilities of a collapse after the death of Kim Jong Il, of a coup, or even

of an overthrow?

Anything is possible, but I think that the window of opportunity for that would have been in the early 1990s. The country was starting to fall apart, there was a ripple effect from the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the first great leader, Kim Il-Sung, died, and there was a famine.

Today the situation is more stable and it seems unlikely to me that you would have a revolution, or even a coup. On the other hand, the North Korean people do have more access to outside information now than they did a decade ago. Despite strong government controls, there are broadcasts from the South and China on radio and television that North Koreans are getting access to, a lot of movement back and forth across the border with China, so North Koreans aren't as isolated as they once were.

The military and the Kim Jong Il family have come to be codependent. The family has been ruling for 60 years, and anyone who wants to achieve power in North Korea has to work through the Kim family. I would guess that if Kim Jong Il were to die some time soon, then Kim Jong Un, if he is indeed not ready to be a hands-on ruler, would probably be a figurehead, through whom people within the party and military leadership would work.

Are we likely to see unification in our lifetime?

Korea was a unified state for over 1000 years before it was divided in 1945, so there is a strong historical basis for unity. But the question is what will happen to North Korea. The North and South have talked for decades about some sort of cooperation, even a confederation of the two systems. But they're so different that it's hard to imagine how that could happen. After Germany was unified in 1990, a lot of people speculated that a similar thing would happen in Korea, that North Korea would collapse and be absorbed. That could still happen, but the South Koreans don't want it. Younger South Koreans don't feel that strong an emotional attachment to the idea of a unified Korea, especially if it's going to come at a great economic cost. It would be enormously expensive to absorb the North into the South.

What may happen, if there is a change in North Korea, is that the two sides might come together to increase cooperation, and eventually achieve unity. That was the hope of South Korean president Kim Dae-jung, who recently passed away. He tried

to encourage cooperation between the two Koreas, and economic reform within North Korea.

I'm confident that there will be unification, and it might happen quite suddenly and unexpectedly, but we really can't predict when or how that will take place.

On September 3, after a month of conciliatory gestures, North Korea announced that it was in the final stages of enriching uranium and that "plutonium is being weaponized."

If the Obama administration wants to put a stop to North Korea's nuclear program, both plutonium production and uranium enrichment, it had better take advantage of the window of opportunity opened up by the Clinton visit and begin intensive negotiations with Pyongyang. Past experience has shown that threats and sanctions only push North Korea toward more aggressive behavior, whereas focused negotiations have led to positive outcomes.

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