





## **NORTH KOREA: CRAZY LIKE A FOX?**

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## **JCSP 43**

# Exercise Solo Flight

## **PCEMI 43**

# Exercice Solo Flight

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#### EXERCISE SOLO FLIGHT – EXERCICE SOLO FLIGHT

## NORTH KOREA: CRAZY LIKE A FOX?

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#### INTRODUCTION

The expression "crazy like a fox" is an Old English metaphor that is used to describe a clever person. An individual who is called "crazy like a fox" is considered foolish, but is in reality extremely cunning. This expression was derived when hunters observed foxes circling back to their own earlier trail and running backward on it for a while to throw their pursuers off the scent or at least create confusion. This seemingly irrational behavior was actually the fox's means for survival. One might conclude based on this description that North Korea has acted crazy like a fox over the past sixty four years as the world has waited, threatened, and even used coercion in an attempt to bring the dictatorship to an end.

North Korea has responded to this persistent extensional threat mostly through seemingly irrational demands, offers, and threats, but it has ultimately survived the ever increasing pressure to abandon its dictatorial ways. For example, the world committed to preventing North Korea from obtaining nuclear weapons, yet the North Koreans have still managed to covertly develop the technology and hardware necessary to successfully create and test nuclear weapons. On more than one occasion, North Korea has committed to giving up its nuclear weapons program in exchange for aid, or promised to give up ballistic missile research in exchange for better diplomatic relations. Even under constant pressure from the world, North Korea has been oddly effective at not just surviving the pressure, but also in developing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles in defiance of the world's demands.

With Kim Jung-un firmly in control of North Korea, the world needs to determine if a different approach is required with this unusually ruthless and apparently unstable dictator. In

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> English Language & Usage, "Where does the phrase 'Crazy like a fox' originate?" Last accessed 7 May 2017, https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/241994/where-does-the-phrase-crazy-like-a-fox-originate.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Tae-hwan Kwak and Seung-ho Joo, *North Korea's Foreign Policy Under Kim Jong II: New Perspectives*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 79.

order to determine if a new approach is required, previous approaches will be discussed, a comparison of previous regimes to the current one will be addressed, and an evaluation on next actions to pursue will be proposed. What will be shown is that while North Korea has not changed its approach to dealing with the outside world, the current opportunity for limited regime change is probably the best it has ever been.

## **CONTEXT**

"The North Korean nuclear weapons conflict today is the latest nasty consequence of the failure of the Korean War over fifty years ago to settle the matter of rule on the Korean peninsula." In 1950, North Korean forces invaded South Korea with the support of the Soviet Union. The Truman administration perceived this conflict as an act of communist aggression and quickly committed forces under the aegis of the UN, which restored the status quo ante by 1953." When the Soviet Union collapsed, and China moved slowly away from pure communism, North Korea felt more isolated than ever before, losing the only important "friends" it had in the world. "If ever a country needed an ultimate deterrent, it was North Korea, and hence the apparent drive to speed up the acquisition of nuclear weapons." As "North Korea found itself diplomatically isolated, politically alienated and impoverished, ... South Korea was experiencing dramatic economic expansion." Kim Il-sung, the first North Korean dictator, began the process of acquiring a nuclear arsenal as a deterrent to what it felt was an existential threat.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Terence Roehrig, Jungmin Seo, and Uk Heo, *Korean Security in a Changing East Asia*, (London: Praeger Security International, 2007), 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Christoph Bluth, Crisis on the Korean Peninsula, (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2011), 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Joseph Bermudez, Kenneth Brower, and Gerald Segal, "North Korea a Potential Time Bomb," *Janes Intelligence Review*, Special Report No. 2 (April 1994): 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Linus Hagstrom and Marie Soderberg, *North Korea Policy: Japan and the Great Powers*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 39.

It is no secret that North Korea feels existentially threatened, but it is important to remember the constant source of this threat is self-created. North Korea invaded the south in order to reunite the peninsula under its own terms 25 June 1950, and since then it has persistently committed acts of aggression against South Korea. "It engaged in various attacks on South Korean soil and abroad to kill South Korean leaders, committed acts of terrorism, and dug tunnels underneath the DMZ in order to be able to smuggle soldiers into the South." An expert on North Korea, Christoph Bluth, dramatically stated, "The actions of North Korea were not a rational response to any external threat, but rather stem from the "evil" nature of the regime, a totalitarian dictatorship that brutally oppresses its own people, proliferates WMD, and still harbors ambitions for unification on its own terms." While there may be truth to his declaration, I would suggest that this statement might be a bit of an overstatement due to the ideology of the two guiding principles of North Korea.

The two principles that guide North Korean politics account for some of this seemingly irrational behavior. The first is "Juche", the ideology of self-reliance or the essence of self-rule, and the second is "self-reliance in defense" under the heading of "Songun", understood as "military-first" politics. In fact, "article 3 of the DPRK constitution states that the country 'is guided in its activities by the Juche idea…" Through the lens of these two guiding principles, North Korea's actions, although perhaps evil, do appear to be rational in the sense they serve their foreign policy strategy, and have been most effectively executed through brinksmanship. These principles are important to keep in mind as previous approaches are discussed, a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Christoph Bluth, Crisis on the Korean Peninsula, (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2011), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Tae-hwan Kwak and Seung-ho Joo, *North Korea's Foreign Policy Under Kim Jong Il: New Perspectives*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 15&35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> William E. Berry Jr., *Global Security Watch Korea: A Reference Handbook*, (London: Praeger Security International, 2008), 51.

comparison is made of the previous regimes to the current one, and an evaluation on where we go from here is proposed.

## PREVIOUS APPROACHES

While the United States has frequently flexed its military muscles in response to North Korea, "since 1994, U.S. presidents have consistently ruled out the use of military force against North Korea, due to the effectiveness of North Korea's conventional deterrent." <sup>11</sup> The Department of Defense analysis of a war with North Korea confirms victory for the United States and South Korea, but at the cost of 30,000 United States military casualties, 450,000 South Korean military casualties, one million civilian casualties, sixty billion dollars, and an estimated one trillion dollars in damage to the South Korean economy. 12 With each new administration in the United States comes a new approach to North Korea to avoid such a catastrophic war. Three approaches have been attempted, but all of the approaches have had similar shortcomings that ultimately categorize them as failures. First, political engagement through discussion was attempted during the 1990's. Second, coercion through the flexing of military might was attempted in 2002 when the nation was listed as part of the "Axis of Evil." Finally, "strategic patience" was attempted starting in 2009, which basically amounted to ignoring the problem. Each of these approaches involved the use of all aspects of the DIME model of national power, Diplomatic engagement, Information, Military, and Economics, but the varying approaches put more emphasis on one aspect over another. While the goal of the United States has been mainly containment, China and South Korea have been primarily concerned with stability on the Korean peninsula.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Christoph Bluth, *Crisis on the Korean Peninsula*, (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2011), 15. <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 128.

In the early 1990s, political engagement through discussion was the preferred method, and the United States endeavored to create some form of engagement with North Korea. Under the Clinton administration "there was a central belief that bilateral negotiations with North Korea held the promise of better relations and provided at least the chance to resolve the nuclear weapons and missile programs in a manner favorable to the United States and its allies in the region." 13 The "Agreed Framework," an approach of diplomatic engagement, was designed to offer rewards for North Korean good behavior, and threatened punishment for bad behavior. <sup>14</sup> This method of engagement was partially successful at slowing North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile program down for two reasons. First, North Korea was experiencing extreme famine and desperately needed foreign aid in order to prevent the collapse of the country as a whole. Second, by engaging North Korea in bilateral negotiations, it fed the ideology of Juche, or self-rule. North Korea felt as though it was being taken seriously as a sovereign nation as opposed to a rouge dictatorship. Unfortunately, as conditions within the country economically improved, North Korea launched an ICBM, violating the terms of the "Agree Framework." It seemed as though North Korea was just biding time, and was fully intent on the developing its military capability to fulfill its responsibility of Songun politics.

The era of discussion ended, though, when the Bush administration took office, and it revealed to the world that North Korea was covertly advancing technology for producing highly enriched uranium as well as technological advances in its ballistic missile program. North Korea at first denied these allegations. However, it ultimately not only acknowledged them, it also defended its right to become a nuclear power. The Bush administration adopted a new foreign

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> William E. Berry Jr., *Global Security Watch Korea: A Reference Handbook*, (London: Praeger Security International, 2008), 100.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Ibid., 101.

policy approach, and "assumed that North Korea could be coerced into dismantling their nuclear programs." The Bush administration labeled North Korea as a part of the "Axis of Evil", and discontinued any form of political engagement with North Korea. "The hawks in the U.S. administration who believed the serious saber rattling and the demonstration of military might against Iraq would intimidate the North Koreans and cause them to quietly dismantle their nuclear program were mistaken." <sup>16</sup> If anything, the North Koreans likely observed that Iraq was an easy United States target because it did not have a nuclear deterrent, and it became clear that this capability "was of critical importance for their security." This form of coercive engagement fast tracked the nuclear aspirations of North Korea, and towards the end of office for the Bush administration, a form of dialogue was reattempted with little success.

The Obama administration foreign policy was one of "wait and see, to let North Korea take the diplomatic initiative, a policy that Secretary of State Clinton called 'strategic patience." The Obama administrations new approach did very little to slow North Korean nuclear ambitions. During this period of time, North Korea became a space power by successfully putting a satellite in space, and conducted several nuclear tests, one of which they claimed to be a hydrogen bomb. The foreign policy of "strategic patience" amounted to nothing more than ignoring the problem in hopes that it would go away.

The Chinese and South Korean approach only differs in style and level of direct engagement with North Korea. The end state of both China and South Korea is the same, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Christoph Bluth, Crisis on the Korean Peninsula, (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2011), 154

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Ibid., 156. <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Ibid., 174.

that has been to prevent North Korean collapse. 19 Both countries fear the humanitarian crisis that would ensue on the Korean peninsula should North Korea collapse. The reunification of Korea has been at times compared to Germany, but the cost to South Korea would far surpass the cost to West Germany based on the extreme differences in comparative gross national product. <sup>20</sup> Due to this extreme cost, South Korea adopted the "Sunshine Policy" in order to "separate economic and political policies between the two Koreas and to encourage the United States, Japan, and others to assist with the economic development of [North Korea]" to help gradually reduce the difference in comparative gross national product. <sup>21</sup> South Korea hopes for reunification through interdependence with North Korea to provide the population of North Korea a softer landing should the regime collapse. The hopes of South Korea are to increase economic cooperation without necessarily increasing political cooperation. China continually offers aid and economic development to North Korea because stability is its' top priority. <sup>22</sup> When it comes to negotiations with North Korea, "China has tremendous economic leverage over the North. This gives China the ability to press the North to trade its nuclear capability for security guarantees and economic assistance, and to enforce such an agreement by means short of military force."<sup>23</sup> Both South Korea and China "believe that North Korea can be deterred, and instead are worried about the economic and political consequences of a collapsed regime. Should North Korea collapse, the number of refugees could potentially exceed the entire global refugee population of 2004."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Hazel Smith, *Reconstituting Korean Security: A Policy Primer*, (New York: United Nations University Press, 2007), 147.

William E. Berry Jr., Global Security Watch Korea: A Reference Handbook, (London: Praeger Security International, 2008), 143.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ibid., 101

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Hazel Smith, *Reconstituting Korean Security: A Policy Primer*, (New York: United Nations University Press, 2007), 147.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Terence Roehrig, Jungmin Seo, and Uk Heo, *Korean Security in a Changing East Asia*, (London: Praeger Security International, 2007), 31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Ibid., 55.

That potential humanitarian disaster is enough for its neighbors to be highly apprehensive about a military engagement in North Korea that may cause sudden regime collapse.

## **REGIME COMPARISON**

If a new approach to foreign policy is to be seriously considered now that Kim Jong-un is in power, a quick comparison of regimes would be prudent. An evaluation of similarities and differences of the current regime to the previous regimes will help establish a wise foreign policy response to this new dictator. While there are several things that remain similar to previous regimes, three things should be emphasized, and there are two important differences that will be highlighted.

The first and most important thing that has not changed is the perceived necessity of a nuclear weapon. "The DPRK considers its nuclear programs to be a valuable negotiating asset that provides them important leverage in dealing with the rest of the world, especially given the increased tensions on the Korean Peninsula of late." Aside from the opportunistic approach of North Korean officials to turn from one benefactor to another for aid based on the suspension or dismantlement of their nuclear threat, the regime sees the nuclear deterrent as imperative for its continued existence. <sup>26</sup>

Second, the ideology of Juche and Songun politics that guided foreign policy decisions has not changed. "Kim Jong-un maintained the strategic foreign policy line he inherited from his father without making any major adjustments." The ideology of self-reliance and military first

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Korean Military Balance: Comparative Korean Forces and the Forces of Key Neighboring States*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2011), 104.

Kyung-Ae Park, New Challenges of North Korean Foreign Policy, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 84.
Alexandre Mansourov, "Kim Jong Un's Foreign Policy Record: The Juche Revolution Continues," 38 North. Last accessed 7 May 2017, http://38north.org/2013/02/amansourov020113/.

politics continues to be the keys to maintaining power within North Korea, and that is not likely to change anytime soon.

Third, the frustration of China is nothing new when it comes to dealing with North Korea. Under the Kim Jong-il regime, it was said that, "Though China has the closest relationship with North Korea, it remains frustrated and perplexed by Pyongyang's behavior. Despite numerous efforts to coax North Korea to an agreement on its nuclear weapons program, Beijing has been unsuccessful." Now under Kim Jong-un, "[China's] control of North Korea wanes, [and] so does its patience. Kim has repeatedly embarrassed China in the short amount of time he's been in power." There is nothing new to China's perplexity and exasperation with North Korea's determination to chart its controversial path.

The first difference between the Kim Jong-un regime and previous regimes has been his leadership style. He has been characterized as bold and aggressive by some and an outright brutal dictator by others. One thing that is certain, he has a penchant for gruesome executions which "has built [him] a reputation for ruling with an iron fist when needed." Kim Jong-un has been attributed with executing 340 people, of which 140 were senior officers, since he has assumed leadership of the country, and the execution of his uncle by anti-aircraft gun was the most notable. By executing his uncle Jang Song-Thaek, a fixture of the Pyongyang elite, just two years after assuming power, Kim cut off China's primary channel to the North Korean

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Terence Roehrig, Jungmin Seo, and Uk Heo, *Korean Security in a Changing East Asia*, (London: Praeger Security International, 2007), 110.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Theresa Lou, "Is China Finally Fed Up with Kim Jong-un's North Korea?" *The Diplomat*, 9 March 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Alexandre Mansourov, "Kim Jong Un's Foreign Policy Record: The Juche Revolution Continues," 38 North. Last accessed 7 May 2017, http://38north.org/2013/02/amansourov020113/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Erik Ortiz, "North Korea's Kim Jong Un: What to Know About the Hermit Kingdom's Dictator," *NBC News*, 1 May 2017.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Euan McKirdy, "North Korea Executed 5 Security Official, South Korea Says," CNN, 28 February 2017.

leadership."<sup>33</sup> Essentially, in solidifying his power over North Korea, he has also severed his primary link to his most important ally. While his harsh leadership of the country may have helped him solidify his position, it has caused his only ally, China, to take a step back.<sup>34</sup>

The second difference between the Kim Jong-un regime and others is the reality of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Previous regimes threatened the creation of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, and most of the negotiations revolved around foreign aid in return for ceasing research and development. Now, the existence of nuclear weapons is known, and the ballistic missile program continues unimpeded. Whereas previous regimes threatened to make these weapons, Kim Jong-un threatens to use them, and in light of his aggressive leadership, this is the most significant difference.

## FOREIGN POLICY OPTIONS

"In the face of economic disaster and political isolation, the nuclear arsenal is the DPRK's only bargaining chip and one it can be expected to continue to use both skillfully and effectively." While previous administrations dealt with this bargaining chip by attempting to prevent the creation of nuclear weapons, according to a senior White House official, it is now focused on the "denuclearization" of North Korea. The current administration is now seeking to apply "maximum pressure" on Pyongyang while at the same time reaching out directly to Kim John-un. Unfortunately, in light of the Juche ideology and Songun politics, this will once again be a failed solution. Kim Jong-un will never voluntarily give up the very weapon that gives him a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Theresa Lou, "Is China Finally Fed Up with Kim Jong-un's North Korea?" *The Diplomat*, 9 March 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Theresa Lou, "Is China Finally Fed Up with Kim Jong-un's North Korea?" *The Diplomat*, 9 March 2016

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Josh Rogin, "Trump's North Korea Policy is 'Maximum Pressure' but not 'regime change," *The Washington Post*, 14 April 2017.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Joseph Bermudez, Kenneth Brower, and Gerald Segal, "North Korea a Potential Time Bomb," *Janes Intelligence Review*, Special Report No. 2 (April 1994): 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Josh Rogin, "Trump's North Korea Policy is 'Maximum Pressure' but not 'regime change," *The Washington Post*, 14 April 2017.

seat at the negotiating table. Engaging North Korea in negotiations has been tried, and to expect a different outcome would be foolish.

A long term solution to North Korean nuclear weapons is limited regime change, and if ever there were a time for limited regime change, it is now. According to a defector from the ruling elites, "There's fear among high officials that at any time, they can be targets." Kim Jong-un has actually created the perfect circumstances for his removal by purging the elites and likely weakening their loyalty. The defector suggested that the threat to Kim Jong-un may come from within his inner circle, but he also correctly stated "that North Korea will not collapse as long as Kim Jong-un is alive." As North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile technology advances rapidly, the longer the United States waits to remove Kim Jong-un from power, the more dangerous the situation becomes. It is important to consider that limited regime change can be as simple as removing Kim Jong-un from power to allow his ruling elite a chance to change the course of the country. Extreme care would have to be taken to allow the next set of North Korean leaders to step up in order to avoid total regime collapse and a humanitarian crisis on the peninsula.

## **CONCLUSION**

Juche ideology and Songun politics have been instrumental in equipping North Korea with a nuclear capability, which clearly has provided the country a status in the international arena as well as bargaining leverage at the negotiating table. If the priority is a denuclearized Korean peninsula, then a look back at what has been previously tried is imperative. It is clear that discussion, coercion, and strategic patience equated to foreign policy failures. Since very little is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Kyung Lah, "North Korean Defector: Kim Jong Un's Days Are Numberd," *CNN*, 2 September 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Kyung Lah, "North Korean Defector: Kim Jong Un's Days Are Numberd," CNN, 2 September 2015.

different with the new regime's foreign policy, there is not much hope that dusting off a previous foreign policy response to North Korea will change anything. By severely damaging his relationship with China, and by purging his inner circle, Kim Jong-un has not only further isolated himself from the world, but has also isolated himself from his inner circle. Kim Jong-il never allowed himself to become as isolated as his son has, and perhaps he was crazy like a fox for his shrewd approach to leadership. Kim Jong-un's aggressive and somewhat reckless leadership style may be exactly what is needed for the world to make a permanent change in North Korea. If ever there was a good time for limited regime change in North Korea it is now.

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