

The Kims' Obsession: Archives Show Their Quest To Preserve the Regime

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The Kims' Obsession: Archives Show Their Quest To Preserve the Regime

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by Robert S. Litwak and Kathryn Weathersby

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I. Introduction

Robert Litwak, a National Security Council staff member in the mid-1990s and director of international studies at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, and Kathryn Weathersby, a senior associate of the center's Cold War International History Project and coordinator of its Korea Initiative, which obtained the documents cited in this article, wrote: "The Bush administration cannot ground its negotiations with North Korea on the assumption -- or vain hope -- that the regime is in danger of imminent collapse. Despite economic implosion and famine, that regime has proved

far more durable than anyone expected."

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II. Report by Robert S. Litwak and Kathryn Weathersby

-**"The Kims' Obsession: Archives Show Their Quest To Preserve the Regime**
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The anger and irony dripped from the mouth of North Korea's foreign minister: "The Americans have a large stockpile, and we are forbidden even to think about the manufacture of nuclear weapons?" The question was put to a Soviet ambassador more than 40 years ago -- in August 1962 -- but it sends a powerful message today to U.S. officials grappling with the acute security challenge of North Korea's mature nuclear program.

We've learned of that decades-old diplomatic encounter -- and others that reveal much about the North Korean mindset regarding nuclear weapons and what motivates the father-son regime that has ruled that country for more than a half-century -- through a remarkable set of documents recently collected from the archives of North Korea's former Soviet-bloc allies by researchers associated with the Woodrow Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project. They involve contacts between North Korean officials and their Soviet and East European counterparts from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Perhaps no other nation remained as closed to Western eyes as North Korea under the leadership of Kim Il Sung, who ruled the country from 1948 until his death in 1994. Since then, his son, Kim Jong Il, has engaged in an on-again, off-again series of diplomatic negotiations with the United States and others. The country's scant diplomatic history with the West has often left analysts in the noncommunist world operating largely in the dark in assessing North Korea's intentions.

The documents have come to light at a particularly sensitive and important time in the discussions over North Korea's nuclear ambitions. The Bush administration has adopted a get-tough stance in its effort to persuade North Korea to dismantle its nuclear program; six-party talks, which include China, have been stalled for a year. Just last week, North Korea issued a statement suggesting that it is willing to resume negotiations. But as is often the case, Western diplomats aren't sure on what basis: In late March, a North Korean foreign ministry spokesman said the agenda must include "the nuclear threat posed by the United States."

Of all the revelations in the documents, two seem especially telling: North Korea's effort to acquire nuclear weapons has been driven by deep-seated fear of both a U.S. military attack and abandonment by the communist great powers. What's also telling, if less explicitly, is how the regime's near-obsession with its own survival colors its political decision-making.

The papers make clear that, as far as the Pyongyang regime is concerned, the Korean War has never ended. After the uneasy ceasefire reached in 1953, Kim Il Sung expected a renewed American and South Korean attack. The North had sustained three years of heavy U.S. bombing and had been threatened with the use of atomic weapons.

This experience initially produced an unrealistic confidence that North Korea could survive a nuclear attack. In February 1963, Kim Il Sung told the Soviet ambassador that "geographical conditions . . . give a certain advantage to [North Korea] in case of an atomic war, for the mountains ward off the

explosions to a substantial extent. A lot of such bombs would be needed to wreak large-scale destruction in the country."

By the 1980s, both U.S. nuclear weapons technology and Kim's views had evolved. Still charging the United States with sinister ulterior motives on the Korean peninsula, Kim said to East German leader Erich Honecker in May 1984, "It is very plain that we are not militarily superior to them. But they use the pretext that we are stronger militarily [on the Korean peninsula] to build up their weapons even more. . . . This is all just a pretext for them to continue to occupy South Korea. South Korea is nothing more to the Americans than a colony. [They] never intend to leave."

But Kim appeared more resigned than defiant, suggesting that the U.S. nuclear policy of deterrence was working. Speaking again to Honecker two years later, in October 1986, Kim stated that North Korea "does not intend to attack South Korea, nor could it. More than 1,000 U.S. nuclear warheads are stored in South Korea, ostensibly for defense, and it would take only two of them to destroy the [country]."

For most countries, a record of conversations from decades past would be regarded largely as history -- fascinating in its own right, but not necessarily valuable in today's diplomatic world. No one would dream of analyzing the thinking behind the Bush administration's current foreign policy by looking at what was said during Dwight Eisenhower's time or even the more recent administration of Ronald Reagan. American journalists might talk of Bush 41 and Bush 43, but as often as not, they do so to contrast the policies of father and son.

North Korea, however, has been ruled by only two men, Kim I and Kim II, and the archival records reveal a striking continuity on security issues and the pursuit of nuclear weapons.

North Korea's efforts to acquire nuclear know-how from its Soviet-bloc allies began in the early 1960s but were consistently rebuffed. In 1963, the East German ambassador informed his Soviet counterpart that the Koreans were seeking "any kind of information about nuclear weapons," while Soviet uranium specialists working in the North reported that the Koreans, "despite all odds, want to develop the mining of uranium on a broad scale." The Kim Il Sung regime repeatedly pressed for the construction of a nuclear power plant, which the Soviets suspected would be used to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons. In 1976, angered that the Soviets had rejected yet another request for nuclear technology as "inopportune," the North Korean deputy premier charged the Kremlin with not making appropriate "allowances" for his country's "front-line situation."

The Soviet leadership even tried to convince Kim Il Sung's regime that the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty was in its interest. According to a 1969 cable by the Hungarian ambassador to Pyongyang, Soviet diplomats asked the North Koreans about Japan obtaining nuclear weapons. In this particular case, the Koreans found ample justification for nuclear nonproliferation, though it was not something they generally favored in other contexts.

The archives provide fascinating insights into Kim's complicated relationships with the two great communist powers. During the Korean War, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin sharply restricted the role of the powerful Soviet air force as Kim's country suffered devastating bombing from U.S. forces. Yet, according to the archival records, Kim clearly preferred to rely on Soviet aid rather than accept direct military involvement by the Chinese.

Even though China was then a fraternal communist country and had aided Kim in the Korean War, Kim acted as a Korean nationalist highly sensitive to his country's history of occupation by imperial China and fearful of Beijing's potential for domestic interference. This wariness toward China in the heyday of international communism is particularly significant given the current pivotal role that

China plays in the Bush administration's strategy to induce, or coerce, North Korea to abandon its nuclear program.

Kim had another reason for concern: We learn from Russian documents that Nikita Khrushchev tried to extend his sweeping de-Stalinization policy to North Korea. Kim survived a serious political challenge instigated by the Soviet leader, which stalled only when the Hungarian uprising in October 1956 distracted the Kremlin. A feeling of betrayal, fed over the years by events such as the Sino-American rapprochement and the collapse of the Soviet Union and communist rule in Eastern Europe, led the Pyongyang regime to conclude that it could not rely on any other country -- even a communist one -- for protection. Do these documents truly portray perspectives and attitudes that continue to shape North Korean policies? A strong case can be made that they do. The conditions that define North Korea's strategic position -- external isolation and internal economic crisis -- remain unchanged since Kim Jong Il took over in 1994. Kim Il Sung's cult of personality (once criticized as "idolatry" by a Soviet party official) was extended to his son and perpetuated through inheritance. That transfer of power is perhaps the most conspicuous sign of how North Korea's past resonates in the present.

Has North Korea made an irreversible decision to acquire nuclear weapons? The new information does not answer that fundamental question. But it does help explain the core motivation behind Pyongyang's nuclear saber rattling: Regime survival. Almost 50 years ago, Kim Il Sung complained bitterly about U.S. intentions. So it comes as no surprise that his son's first reaction to President Bush's rhetoric about North Korea -- that it's part of an "axis of evil" -- would be fear and belligerence.

The Bush administration appears to be wrestling with the mixed message of its North Korean policy. Do we want to change the regime, or do we want to change merely the behavior of the regime? The statements of U.S. officials can be read both ways. During the Iraq war, Kim Jong Il evidently believed that the United States was also planning decapitating air strikes against his regime and disappeared into a bunker for 50 days. The new archival materials strongly suggest that the North Koreans would perceive and respond to a U.S. attack on their nuclear infrastructure not as a limited "counterproliferation" action but as the beginning of a general war on the Korean peninsula meant to bring down the regime.

The Bush administration cannot ground its negotiations with North Korea on the assumption -- or vain hope -- that the regime is in danger of imminent collapse. Despite economic implosion and famine, that regime has proved far more durable than anyone expected. However unpalatable we may find the prospect of this regime's survival, the documents suggest that the crux of any nuclear deal may be a credible assurance from the United States that the regime itself is not in danger.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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