

## **The Soft and Hard Power Politics of North Korea in 2019\***

David C. Kang\*\*

*University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, USA*

Despite the media attention to North Korean missile launches and American shows of force in 2017, war was never a realistic possibility. Deterrence and the costs of war are far too high for either side to seriously contemplate using force to resolve the Korean Peninsula standoff. Deterrence will also continue to hold into the future, barring some unforeseen circumstance. In this case, when war is not an option, what do countries do? What role does soft power play in diplomacy? States resort to hard power rarely and with great caution, precisely because the stakes are so high. But just because countries are not going to war over an issue does not mean it is unimportant. In this sense, exploring how countries compete or engage in the push and pull of diplomacy below the threshold of hard and military power is a relatively understudied phenomenon. For North Korea, it is clear that a long-term strategy of focusing on diplomacy abroad and economic reforms at home is following a push to nuclearize. Only by understanding this emerging North Korean strategy can the United States and South Korea craft appropriate strategies for dealing with this intractable problem.

**Keywords:** soft power; diplomacy; South–North Korea relations; deterrence, ROK grand strategy

### **Introduction: Grand Strategy beyond War**

How do countries resolve conflicts that are important but do not threaten their existence? When war is not an option, what do countries do? What role does soft power play in diplomacy?

---

\* The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Laboratory Program for Korean Studies through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and Korean Studies Promotion Service of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2015-LAB-2250002) which supported part of this research.

\*\* E-mail: kangdc@usc.edu

The blending of cultural traditions, national identities, and foreign policies has proceeded in the 21st century in ways relatively unknown even a few decades ago. Citizens of countries—even citizens in authoritarian countries—matter more for political legitimacy, political survival, and the conduct of foreign policy than they did in previous centuries.<sup>1</sup> Countries in the 21st century routinely care as much about their reputation, prestige, and status as they do about their military might or their relative wealth. Culture and cultural flows are politicized in ways rarely seen in the past, although that perspective may be a bit anachronistic.<sup>2</sup> Countries have increasingly interacted and competed with each other in the cultural and social realms in ways not done before.

But competition over “soft power”—or non-military issues—also reveals the limits of that competition, as well. States resort to hard power rarely and with great caution, precisely because the stakes are so high. But just because countries are not going to war over an issue does not mean it is unimportant. In this sense, exploring how countries compete or engage in the push and pull of diplomacy below the threshold of hard and military power is a relatively understudied phenomenon. Soft power is usually only considered in the context of prestige, or culture. But soft power is used in hard politics and diplomacy, as well. North Korea’s participation in the 2018 Olympics was a clear use of soft power, as was the various summit diplomacy among the three leaders of North Korea, South Korea, and the United States in 2018.

For both North and South Korea, attention to soft power and cultural flows has meant navigating a new political and cultural terrain. In this paper, we take a traditional emphasis of the study of international relations and foreign policy—dealing with national security—and look at the lens of cultural boundaries and how that affects North Korea. The influence of soft power, cultural flows, and diplomatic competition has a consequential impact, but is also constrained by deterrence and other factors that keep competition from breaking into hard, military competition. Most importantly, symbolic and soft power are one way to communicate a preference without resorting to war.

After a tense 2017, leaders in all three countries—the United States, South Korea, and North Korea—have entered an unprecedented round of diplomacy. All three leaders are willing to contemplate a radical change to the status quo on the Korean Peninsula, and to contemplate actions and steps that were unthinkable before. The sitting U.S. president held two summit meetings with the North Korean leader; South and North Korea held three summits in 2018; and all sides are in an era of fragile, but so far enduring, *détente*. How this will play out in the future is unknown, of course—but the concept of soft and hard power are a useful framework for understanding the dynamics at play.

The U.S., South Korea, and North Korea have begun down a potentially remarkable path. Much is unclear, and the future is up for negotiation in ways seen once in a generation. Yet one thing is clear: no matter what happens in the future, deterrence has held and will continue to hold. Ever since the Korean War, North Korea, South Korea, and the United States have traded extensive costly signals about their willingness to fight. Yet the status quo of the past seven decades is potentially changing. It is also clear that economic factors within North Korea, and diplomatic relations with the outside

world, are centrally important for the regime.

This paper will argue that the North Korean actions of the past few years are indicative of a longer term trend. North Korea's leadership is seeking a long-term grand strategy that will allow the regime to survive indefinitely and one that signals a fundamental opening to the outside world. This has created expectations within North Korea of a change in the social contract between ruler and ruled. Managing—if not solving—the nuclear issue will allow North Korea and its adversaries to pursue a wide range of policies that could increase the stability in the region and between the two sides. If they manage to do so, it will be evidence that soft power can influence the possible use of hard power. To that end, the paper concludes by examining South Korea's strategic options. South Korean president Moon Jae-in and the South Korean government is caught in a middle negotiating role, playing a delicate role as middleman between these two sides.

### **Theory: Soft Power and Costly Signals**

The concept of “soft power” has existed since Joseph Nye coined the term almost thirty years ago.<sup>3</sup> A common definition is “influence that does not resort to military power.” Soft power is the ability to set the terms of debate, and to force other leaders and other countries to use the frameworks and ideas set by another. Symbols, rhetoric, and ideas become the terrain of contestation. Hard power is coercive, but soft power is persuasive. Closely related to soft power are ideas such as prestige, status, and reputation.

While it may appear easy to distinguish between hard and soft power, in reality the line is not so clear. Norms and beliefs are not epiphenomenal to material power; that is, they are more than a convenient velvet glove over an iron fist.<sup>4</sup> While legitimacy is a form of power itself, it derives from the values or norms that a state projects, not necessarily merely from its military might and economic wealth.<sup>5</sup> As Ian Hurd argues, “the relation of coercion, self-interest, and legitimacy to each other is complex, and each is rarely found in anything like its pure, isolated form...the difficulties attending to an attempt to prove that a rule is or is not accepted by an actor as legitimate are real, but they do not justify either abandoning the study...or assuming ex ante that it does not exist.”<sup>6</sup>

States, like individual leaders, negotiate and communicate with each other and their own citizens through a combination of bullying, bribing, and inspiring.<sup>7</sup> Although coercion can substitute for legitimacy in certain instances and for a short while, they are both intertwined, as well. Legitimacy is stronger when backed by coercive capacity, and coercion seen as legitimate is also more effective.<sup>8</sup> As Lake notes, “despite their clear analytic differences, political authority and coercion are hard to distinguish in practice...there is no ‘bright line’ separating these two analytic concepts, and I offer none here.”<sup>9</sup>

Soft power as a form of diplomacy has an interesting position with contemporary political science. Perhaps the “default” theory of international conflict is the “bargaining

theory of war.” When states truly care about an issue and are truly committed to fight for it, they will attempt to send a wide variety of signals to inform possible opponents about their willingness to fight. James Fearon argued over two decades ago that “one of the central dilemmas in international politics” is how a leader can “make a threat to use force credible when the leader would, in fact, be willing to use the military.”<sup>10</sup> The problem that resolved leaders face in making their threats credible arises in how to distinguish between bluffs, and how to communicate credible threats to use force in bargaining situations with adversaries.<sup>11</sup> Fearon argued that threats are rendered credible given “the act of sending [costly signals] incurs or creates some cost that the sender would be disinclined to incur or create if he or she were in fact *not* willing to carry out the threat.”<sup>12</sup>

The entire theoretical premise of costly signals rests on the inference observers can draw about the country that is sending them: “they must mean it.” *By definition*, costly signals are actions an unresolved leader would not take. The typical measures that Fearon identifies as costly signals include:

...building weapons, mobilizing troops, signing alliance treaties, supporting troops in a foreign land, and creating domestic political costs that would be paid if the announcement proves false.... To be genuinely informative about a state's actual willingness or ability to fight, a signal must be costly in such a way that a state with lesser resolve or capability might not wish to send it.<sup>13</sup>

This has implications for both soft and hard power. By the definition given by Fearon, soft power is inherently *not* a costly signal—but rather it conveys a country's preference, but not a hard position. Yet how does this affect relations? Not every dispute is worth fighting over. In fact, since any use of force causes deadweight losses, states use force actually very rarely. Some disputes might be important, but for whatever reason, the country decides it is not worth risking actual military action. In this case, using the lens of soft power is useful to help us sort through how countries deal with issues they care about, but are not willing to use force to resolve or adjudicate.

## **Deterrence: Hard Power on the Korean Peninsula**

The Korean Peninsula is a clear example of resolved countries sending costly signals to each other about their willingness to use hard power. National survival is at stake for both North and South Korea, and they respond accordingly. Both South and North Korea sink costs. They tie their hands. They build arms, deploy their military, and engage in economic competition with each other. Both sides make clear and repeated diplomatic and rhetorical pronouncements about their willingness to use force to defend themselves. Both Koreas use all the examples Fearon listed in his influential early articles defining costly signals, and the risk of major war is higher than anywhere else in East Asia.<sup>14</sup>

There is little ambiguity about North Korean costly signals and its willingness to

fight. The North Korean case demonstrates what costly signals look like empirically, and North Korea's actions are consistent with theoretical predictions that only a resolved state is willing to bear the high costs needed to send credible threats to potential challengers. North Korea continues to attempt to convince the rest of the world that it still cares about deterrence and is willing to fight. New leaders, a weak economy, and varying political considerations could have raised doubts about North Korean resolve over the decades. Yet North Korea consistently signals its resolve and its willingness to fight.

North Korea is a particularly important case not only because it sends a constant barrage of costly signals, but also because its adversaries believe those signals. North Korea has used hard power almost exclusively in its diplomacy for most of its existence. There is almost unanimous agreement in the scholarly and policymaking circles about the interpretation of North Korean actions. U.S. officials involved in extensive planning for contingencies on the Korean Peninsula have consistently and overwhelmingly noted that Americans believed that the North would respond if attacked, and indeed could respond with devastating force.

These traits were repeatedly on display during the crisis of 2017. From January to December 2017, North Korea conducted 59 missile tests. North Korea conducted its first intercontinental ballistic missile test in 2017, the Hwasong-14 revealing the ability to reach over 10,000 kilometers, which would cover much of the continental United States. It also conducted its sixth nuclear test, one much larger than they had previously tested. All told, Kim Jong Un has tested 88 missiles during his time in power, more than his father and grandfather combined.<sup>15</sup> North Korea tested missiles that could hit Guam, cover all of the Japanese islands, and of course that could target anything within the Korean Peninsula. These were all widely interpreted as provocative actions that not only revealed North Korean capabilities but also raised the chances of an inadvertent war by revealing North Korean resolve to fight.

This North Korean signaling its hard power is not new, and has been going on for decades. In addition, North Korean adversaries have generally believed North Korea's resolve to fight if it were attacked. Even at the height of the neocon interventionism of the early 2000s, the George W. Bush administration carefully assessed the options and concluded that North Korea would fight, and that the war would be devastating for both sides. Mike Chinoy points out that in 2004:

It was evident even to the most extreme hard-liners that a military strike against the North carried enormous risks....The mainstream view [in Washington] was 'If any kind of military strike starts against North Korea, the North Koreans will invade South Korea, and they will cause enormous destruction of Seoul. And we are not prepared to handle all this.'<sup>16</sup>

North and South Korea have regularly exchanged gunfire that killed both civilian and military personnel, their navies have attacked each other three times since 2000, and both sides recurrently have provoked each other with military posturing, forces,

tough rhetoric, and threats.<sup>17</sup> North Korea also often mobilizes its military, has forward deployed military units, and pursues nuclear weapon and intercontinental missile programs. North Korea is also far smaller than South Korea by many measures—population, economy, and modern weapons. Yet North Korea’s puny size compared to South Korea has not caused North Korea to capitulate or simply give up, as some theorists have suggested might happen when a smaller power faces a more powerful adversary. Rather, the weaker that North Korea has become relative to South Korea, the harder it has worked to send costly signals about its resolve and willingness to fight.

In 2019, North Korea reportedly has the proven—although rudimentary—capability to hit all of Japan, the Korean Peninsula, Guam, and even perhaps the continental United States. Yet North Korean resolve, the key insight from bargaining theory, moves us beyond simple material calculations of who is stronger. How resolved a country is—how much a country cares about an issue, and whether it cares sufficiently to fight—is far harder to judge than simply which country is bigger or stronger. As history has shown time and again, often smaller countries prevail over more powerful ones, simply because they care more about the issue. Deciding whether a country truly cares enough about an issue to fight, or whether it is simply bluffing, is thus a key task for political leaders.

To that end, the North Korean regime continually—and clearly—makes explicit public statements that vow to use force against South Korea and the United States. These statements are not meant to tie its hands with respect to its own citizens, but rather is aimed squarely at the United States and South Korea.<sup>18</sup> Much of the literature on bargaining theory sees rhetoric as creating *domestic* audience costs for the leader who makes claims—costs he will pay if he backs down from claims.<sup>19</sup> However, in the North Korean case, these rhetorical claims are clearly aimed at its adversaries and are claims to a willingness to use its hard power. What is also often overlooked when outside observers remark on North Korean rhetoric is that this rhetoric is almost completely defense and reactive in nature. That is, North Korean rhetoric almost never promises an unprovoked attack, but consistently emphasizes that if the United States or South Korea attacks first, North Korea will respond with force. Among many examples, in 2016, the United States flew nuclear-capable B-2 bombers over South Korea in a show of force towards the North. In response, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho said:

“Only a couple of days ago, the United States has again threatened the DPRK by flying the strategic bombers ‘B-1B’ over the military demarcation line on the Korean Peninsula and landing in South Korea. We will never remain onlookers at it and the United States will have to face tremendous consequences beyond imagination.”<sup>20</sup>

Whether the North truly feels it is being provoked is not the point—the point is that the North issues rhetorical statements consistently that threaten to fight back if provoked. While these undoubtedly do not tie the leader’s hands in North Korea, they certainly do communicate to the outside world that North Korea is not intending to back down. More importantly, these threats are taken seriously by the leadership in the United States and

South Korea.

In response, the United States clearly sends costly signals about its own resolve to use hard power if necessary. Both sides use hard power, and the United States has almost never truly attempted to use its considerable soft economic and persuasive power in dealing with North Korea. Even Barack Obama's initial willingness to negotiate was quickly dropped in favor of "strategic patience" and isolation.<sup>21</sup> The American response to the missile and nuclear tests of 2017 was particularly intense. On August 8, 2017, U.S. President Trump used Twitter to threaten North Korea with "Fire and Fury like the world has never seen," if it continued its provocations. The U.S. moved aircraft carriers off their regular deployments to the East Sea in a show of force in summer 2017; the United States flew nuclear-capable B-2 stealth bombers over the Peninsula in simulated bombing runs; and by autumn 2017, there was extensive discussion within the Washington Beltway about the possibility of a "bloody nose" strike that was aimed at punishing North Korea, but not starting a war on the Peninsula.<sup>22</sup>

Both sides interpreted the other's costly signals accurately: as indications of a willingness—and perhaps an eagerness—to fight. In so doing, both provoked the other into claiming yet more forcefully their willingness to fight and their refusal to be intimidated. Costly signals had become a security dilemma, in which moves by one side to increase their security provoked a response from the other side that left both sides worse off.

In response to North Korea's missile and nuclear tests, the United Nations unanimously passed resolution UNSC 2371 on August 5, 2017—which imposed severe sanctions on North Korea, especially targeting its exports. UNSC Resolution 2375, from September 11, 2017, further increased sanctions by banning export of textiles and other goods, as well. North Korea called the sanctions "acts of war" and vowed to respond in kind.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, despite the claims that 2017 was close to war, actual shooting never occurred. The U.S. military on the Peninsula did not increase its readiness level; and there were no particular moves that would indicate the beginning of a military strike, such as the repositioning of assets in the region or the evacuation of non-military personnel from Korea. Indeed, the explanation for seven decades of stability on the Korean Peninsula is actually quite simple: deterrence works. Given the tension on the Peninsula, small events have had the potential to spiral out of control, yet the occasional incidents on the Peninsula have been managed with care on both sides, as was the case throughout 2017. The North knows that a war against the South, or an attack on the United States—either through attacking the South or by lobbing a missile at the Aleutian Islands—would be suicide. The differential in capabilities is so vast that there can be no other conclusion, and given the obvious enmity with which the United States views the North, to attack the United States is to ask for certain and swift annihilation. Yet at the same time, the North Korean conventional forces retain the capacity to demolish Seoul and to inflict massive casualties on the South Korean people and the combined U.S.–ROK armed forces. Furthermore, over 250,000 American citizens live and work in South Korea as of 2018, and they would be vulnerable to any war that would occur on the Peninsula.

Despite the tension that has existed on the Peninsula, the balance of power has held. For almost seventy years neither side has attempted to mount a major military operation, nor has either side attempted to challenge the balance of power.

North Korea and the United States have been caught in a zero-sum, winner-take-all, mutual hostage situation. Both sides have wanted the other to lose; both sides can inflict enormous damage on the other.<sup>24</sup> The result has not been surprising: although tension is high, the balance of power has been stable. Far from being a tinderbox, both sides have moved cautiously and avoided major military mobilizations that could spiral out of control.<sup>25</sup> Thus, while it is possible to include 2017 in the category of “near miss” wars on the Korean Peninsula, the fact is, an actual general military mobilization and all-out war was far from occurring.

As both sides moved away from confrontation in 2018, the question has changed from concerns about war and hard power to questions about whether there is a possibility for diplomacy and soft power to change the status quo. Yet those moves to soft power have not eliminated deterrence and the potential for hard power. Deterrence still holds in 2019 as it did earlier. As the second Trump–Kim summit in Hanoi concluded without progress, concerns about the future increased. Yet deterrence will still hold, even if diplomacy is not successful. The issue is whether the leaders, their intentions, and the security environment have changed sufficiently to revise the status quo on the Korean Peninsula; or whether the events of the past two years are simply another false start but essentially no real change to the status quo.

### **North Korea: The Hard and Soft Sides of the “Byungjin” Line**

The events of 2017 reveal that, despite concerns, deterrence is solid. Both sides have clear and unambiguous willingness to fight. And both sides can clearly inflict devastating costs on the other. Despite the crisis, military action was not a realistic possibility at any time. Deterrence in the future will hold, as well—that is not the issue. The larger issue to ask is why the North began a strategy of reconciliation and engagement in 2018 and to ask whether it is enduring or not and whether there is room for diplomacy. Some have argued that North Korea moderated its policies and strategy in 2018 because the North Korean leadership did not anticipate the strong American response to its missile and nuclear tests in 2017, and was particularly surprised by the severity of the strict UN sanctions.<sup>26</sup> Combined with Chinese pressure on the North, this perspective argues that Kim Jong Un realized that the country needed to back down and seek relief from the pressure.<sup>27</sup>

Yet there is reason to doubt this interpretation. The most predictable U.S. reaction to the almost weekly DPRK missile and nuclear tests in 2017 was that the United States would respond with intense pressure. It is highly unlikely that North Korean planners did not anticipate severe economic sanctions and a response by the United States that would inevitably include military threats—if not actual hostilities. A North Korean decision to conduct over fifty missile and nuclear tests in a very short time was guaranteed to

provoke an intense reaction from the United States and world community.

Thus, the real question is how North Korea planned to deal with the expected American pressure? A likely scenario is that North Korean planners decided to conduct numerous tests knowing the United States would respond with intense pressure, and had decided that they could endure increased economic sanctions and military threats. It is also likely that North Korean leaders had a diplomatic strategy planned as an “off ramp” to alleviate pressure when they decided it was time to pursue diplomacy. To that end, the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics were an ideal use of soft power to lower tensions. A very clear North Korean strategy was to use the Olympics as a way to provide a gap—a pause—and potentially a new avenue, for diplomacy on the Peninsula. The North Korean decision was clearly planned long in advance—the athletes, the accompanying entourage, and the areas North Korea was willing to collaborate with South Korea were carefully thought through and reflected extensive preparations. Nothing about the North Korean Olympic delegation appeared hasty or rapidly conceived.

There is, in fact, considerable evidence that the decisions on the North Korean side that have led to the *détente* of 2019 had their roots neither in 2017 nor the actions of the United States such as economic sanctions. Rather, there is considerable evidence that North Korea has a long-term strategy that began in 2014 or 2015, if not earlier. This strategy consisted of a bold attempt to change the status quo on the Peninsula and to change North Korea’s focus within “Byungjin”—the simultaneous pursuit of nuclear weapons and economic development; to moving beyond nuclear weapons to focusing on economic development.

This strategy appears to be a coherent and long-term North Korean strategy aimed at sustaining a lifetime of rule for Kim Jong Un. Ever since the 1990s, North Korean policy had been to move in slow motion to nuclearize—to stand at the bottom of the hill and offer not to go up the hill if the United States met its demands. For three decades, that had led to the piecemeal steps towards developing a deliverable nuclear weapon capability. This strategy of “stop me before I go nuclear” led to the various negotiations over the past three decades. North Korea has taken a step towards nuclear weapons capability; paused; and waited. Then taken another step, paused, and waited. In contrast, when India decided to intensify its nuclear weapons capability in 1998, it conducted five tests in *one month* alone in May 1998. This North Korean “slow motion” strategy of nuclearization was consistent over decades, from at least the late 1980s into the mid-2010s.

Then, in 2017, the North decided to stop stalling, and instead clearly decided to nuclearize and then offer to negotiate from a position of strength. Instead of waiting at the bottom of the hill, North Korea marched up the hill, paused, and then offered to move partially back down the hill depending on what the United States did. For all of 2017, the North ignored American responses to its nuclear and missile testing. The U.S. used rhetoric, threats, shows of force, and even informal offers to talk—all of which the North ignored during that time.<sup>28</sup>

This was actually not a surprise. The North Korean leader clearly signaled his intentions. In the New Year’s Day speech of 2017, Kim Jong Un made two key points:

“I have spent the whole year with regrets and a guilty conscience, to see my ability failing to reach what I have planned for the people. This year, I have made up my mind to spur on to greater efforts and to devote all of myself to the people.” While later, Kim said that “North Korea is entering the “final stage of preparation for the test launch of intercontinental ballistic missile.”

Both of these are remarkable comments: Kim explicitly pledged to achieve their long-desired goal of a deliverable nuclear weapon. If North Korea decided to conduct multiple tests in 2017, the decision clearly came much earlier than that. Conducting dozens of missile and nuclear tests is not something that can be done easily. The preparations, planning, and organization for the numerous tests of different missiles at different sites would have had to begin in 2016, or even earlier. This was a long-anticipated and planned year of testing.

As Kim has repeatedly signaled to his people, he is changing the social contract. Kim has repeatedly made clear his intentions that the economy is important and North Korea is going to embark on a path that can increase the standards of living for its people. The Byungjin line—to be discussed next—is both economic as well as nuclear; but the outside world has fixed on the second part of Byungjin, overlooking the fact that for North Korea and for Kim, it appears that the economy is more important.

### ***Soft Power: The Social Contract in North Korea***

It actually appears that Kim Jong Un is looking to soft power both at home and in his foreign policy. Kim appears to be engaged in what Rosenthal and Wong call a “strategy of rule,” not a “strategy of conquest.”<sup>29</sup> A strategy of rule emphasizes domestic issues; a strategy of conquest focuses on foreign policy. Previous DPRK leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il had consistently told North Korean citizens that being Korean meant suffering, and they should be proud of it. For example, the famine of the mid-1990s was termed *gonan-ui haenggun*, or “march of suffering.” Kim Jong Un, in contrast, has repeatedly told his people that they have suffered enough. The question is not whether he means it, but rather that his rhetoric—his soft power—is being used to change the expectations of the North Korean people. This will have direct consequences. After all, to lay out expectations for people and then not meet them is to invite disappointment or worse; so this is not a costless empty rhetoric on Kim’s part. In the terms of bargaining theory discussed earlier, Kim is creating “audience costs” with his own people: costs he will have to pay if he does not live up to his rhetoric.

Viewing Kim as a young leader laying out his strategy for ruling his country allows a focus on the social contract in North Korea. All leaders and their subjects, even in authoritarian regimes, have a social contract—a set of expectations about how both ruler and leader will behave. No ruler uses only repression and bribery—all rulers need a vision or strategy that can convince, as well. To that end, leadership is central to any country’s stability and survival. An incoming leader, especially one entering a struggling country, must take control and lead. He must provide his country with a vision and guide

its implementation. A new ruler needs to motivate his people, explain to them where the country is going and why, and regularize processes of performance and evaluation so that expectations are clear—this is what a social contract is. The ruler needs to do this while also culling the ranks, eliminating dead weight and petty factionalism in the ranks of bureaucrats or the institutions of the state. An effective leader identifies the malcontents, fires, sidelines, or motivates them, and rewards and promotes those who share his or her agenda and can move his vision forward. In short, a good ruler is gets everybody marching in the same direction.

These are precisely the steps that Kim is taking. Kim has survived eight years as leader of North Korea while instituting a clear vision for the country's direction. He is apparently unthreatened by internal challenges to his rule, and indeed looks to be comfortably in charge. Kim reveals a fair amount of charisma, as well—and often is shown interacting with his people. The North Korean government shows no signs of collapsing and seems more stable now than under his father, Kim Jong Il. The debate about whether Kim is rational is harmful to U.S. foreign-policy-making because it diverts outsiders from addressing the real issues with North Korea—its active nuclear weapons program and horrific human rights abuses—and obfuscates Kim's proven ability to lead his country down a path that external pressure has been powerless to weaken.

Perhaps the most important task that a new ruler must do is to articulate a clear vision that serves as a metric and motivator for the rest of the country. Kim's vision for North Korea is clearly articulated in the Byungjin line. Adopted by the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) Central Committee in April 2013, Byungjin calls for the simultaneous development of North Korea's economy and its nuclear weapons, replacing the so-called military-first doctrine of Kim's father, Kim Jong Il.<sup>30</sup> By making economic development a key element of state ideology, Kim has signaled a break from the past.

Under Kim Jong Il and his predecessor, Kim Il Sung, North Korean propaganda emphasized the people's strength in the face of adversity and willingness to suffer for the sake of their country. This positive spin on hardship justified an enormous range of practices, from a campaign pressing North Koreans to eat two meals per day in 1991, when the country was struck by famine, to various worker mobilization campaigns.<sup>31</sup> Kim Il Sung had called for North Koreans to sacrifice for the sake of the country as far back as the *Chollima* campaigns of the 1950s, in which ordinary North Koreans were drafted into work units for mass construction and infrastructure projects; people were urged to "donate" their labor and work 18-hour days, and were even required to time their bathroom breaks.

Kim Jong Un, by contrast, has said that North Koreans "should no longer be hungry." Typical of this approach is a speech from 2015:

The most important task facing us today is to improve the people's standard of living at an earlier date. Our people have so far waged an intense struggle to build socialism... they have never enjoyed a plentiful life to their heart's content. Whenever I am reminded of my failure to provide a rich life to these laudable people, who, in spite of their difficult living conditions, have firmly trusted

and followed only our Party and remained faithful to their pure sense of moral obligation to the great Comrades Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, I cannot get sleep.... We should provide our people, who have entrusted their all to the Party and stood by it in braving all manner of trials and hardships together with the Party, with the most abundant and happiest life in the world.<sup>32</sup>

This focus on material comfort instead of endless sacrifice marks a clear change in tone from the past, and is a new social contract. Although it is rhetoric, this is consequential nonetheless—Kim cannot gesture at economic improvement without raising expectations among those from the top of the party to the bottom of the country's social hierarchy. Byungjin does not mean that Kim has embarked on wholesale economic reforms—far from it. But it does mean that Kim has explicitly linked his legitimacy to his ability to make good on the promise of both economic development and the pursuit of nuclear weapons. Under his direction, North Korea is moving forward on both. Given the West's near-exclusive focus on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, it is easy to overlook its economic initiatives.

Kim has increased the autonomy granted to state-owned factories over what they produce and how they find suppliers and customers, and North Korean farm workers can now sell any their surplus once they meet government quotas. For example, Western analysis of a parade held on April 15, 2017, was almost solely concerned with assessing the military hardware on display. Widely overlooked was the fact that in the two-and-a-half hour-long parade, the military segment lasted for only twenty minutes. The other two hours of the parade emphasized economic successes, such as the opening of new shopping districts and new government-approved markets (*Jangmadang*), as well as environmental challenges or simple celebrations of the Kim family. And when Kim was seen standing on a balcony to review the parade, standing either side of him were Hwang Pyong So, vice marshal of the Korean People's Army, and Park Pong Ju, premier of North Korea and most important official in charge of the economy. As Prime Minister Pak Pong Ju said in a speech opening a new shopping district in Pyongyang, "The completion of this street is more powerful than 100 nuclear warheads."<sup>33</sup>

One of the ways that Kim has begun to change his government's culture is by regularizing its bureaucratic processes. Kim has instituted reforms to expand the scope of the private economy and attempt to rein in military expenditures, for example.<sup>34</sup> But leadership is perhaps more important in large, symbolic actions. Under Kim Jong Il, there were no regular party meetings or New Year's Day speeches, and other organizational practices had fallen into disuse. Before May 2016, when Kim Jong Un held the Seventh Party Congress, the WPK had gone 36 years since its last official meeting, the Sixth Party Congress in 1980—this despite party rules stipulating that a congress be held every four years.<sup>35</sup> He has also suggested the Eighth Congress would be held in 2020, returning the WPK to its mandated schedule. All of this appears aimed at creating more consistent, systematized, and regularized bureaucracy.

In addition to the congresses, Kim has renewed the tradition of giving an annual New Year's Day speech. Kim's first speech, on January 1, 2013, was the first since

his grandfather's final address in 1994.<sup>36</sup> Significantly, Kim gave the speech from the KWP Central Committee building, emphasizing that he intends to cement the Party's preeminence over other institutions. And at the Seventh Party Congress, Kim announced the first five-year plan since the early 1980s.<sup>37</sup> The economist and North Korea-watcher Rüdiger Frank calls this suite of changes a "new normal," one that is reviving many elements of Kim Il Sung's rule.<sup>38</sup>

North Korea's ruler seems secure in his own power and unintimidated by outside threats. Donald Trump's inauguration as president of the United States set off an unprecedented flurry of commentary about whether Washington and Pyongyang were close to war, and has continued essentially unabated through the first two years of Trump's administration.<sup>39</sup> But North Korea, which has spent seven decades under threat from the United States, seemed quite comfortable with Trump's saber-rattling. Indeed, Washington is playing into Kim's hands, justifying his Byungjin line with its aggressive rhetoric and equal emphasis on nuclear weapons as well as economic development. The North Korean diplomatic strategy of 2018 appears to be the result of deliberate planning, not a rushed, *ad hoc* response to U.S. pressure.

The famine has ended and no imminent crisis looms. Reforms, halting as they are, continue to move forward. According to the research group Beyond Parallel, North Korean households now earn nearly 75 percent of their income from markets.<sup>40</sup> Kim is continuing down a path of economic reform as a central element of his leadership vision, despite the pressure of the past two years.

As leader, neither Kim nor his government appear threatened—indeed, both appear increasingly stable. Kim's rule is comprehensive and addresses issues beyond the U.S. threat to North Korean security, and he seems to be making progress on the economic aspects of his vision. This progress, moreover, has occurred despite tremendous external pressure put on the country.

### ***The 2018 Diplomatic Move to Soft Power***

In sum, North Korea has clearly decided to fully implement the Byungjin line: a nuclear weapons capability combined with economic reform. To that end, in Kim's New Year's Day Speech of 2018, after extraordinary tensions on the Peninsula, Kim made two significant claims. First, Kim said that North Korea had accomplished the "historic cause of perfecting the national nuclear forces." Second, that this "Great historic achievement" of perfecting the nuclear forces has "opened up bright prospects for the building of a prosperous country." Kim furthermore mentioned the 2018 Winter Olympics that were to be held in February in PyeongChang, South Korea, saying "We truly wish the South a successful Olympics."

The attention to the Ryomyong shopping street; the domestic propaganda that has focused on economic development, and Kim's own statements have pointed to the desire to turn the economy in the direction of economic growth, and perhaps even limited openness. This is not as shocking as it might appear. After all, decades of observers have claimed that North Korea was precariously close to failure, and thus economic reform

was urgently needed if not inevitable.

Kim's strategy appears to be precisely to open up the economy just enough to allow economic growth, but not to destabilize political control. To varying degrees, this is a strategy that has been successfully pursued by China, Vietnam, and Singapore. Indeed, as we have seen, Kim has been particularly active in engaging in domestic reforms. If North Korea did not collapse during the famine of 1994–1997, it is unlikely to collapse now. The economy is clearly in a better position than it was two decades ago. Indeed, one of the reasons the country is farther from collapse is precisely because of the limited economic reforms already underway.

Adroit use of soft power is also being suggested for the future. North Korea has also joined the South in a bid to co-host the 2032 summer Olympics. For the North to even consider such a possibility is to face the prospect of having tens of thousands of foreigners descend on the capital city of Pyongyang is significant—while tourism and travel to North Korea have increased over the years, a deluge of tourists for the Olympics would be completely unusual for the North Korean capital. Even though diplomacy between North Korea and the United States and South Korea has paused, Kim continued his diplomatic efforts with a first-ever summit with Russian president Vladimir Putin in April 2019. Perhaps more importantly as a sign of the North's continued decision to pursue diplomacy, at least for the time being, has been the absence of harsh rhetoric aimed at the United States, and the absence of any long-range missile tests. To the extent that North Korea continues to refrain from those two actions, it signals continued diplomacy.

In sum, it appears clear that North Korea under Kim Jong Un has begun to explore the possibility of moving towards embracing limited but increasing economic reforms and opening to the outside world. In combination with a proven nuclear weapons capability, the issue for North Korean leaders is whether they can manage to make this major change in North Korean domestic and foreign policy. This is a major and unprecedented change in direction for North Korea.

## **Conclusion: North Korea in 2019**

If the analysis presented in this paper is accurate, the current crisis has a clear solution. If North Korea wants to craft a long-term relationship with the United States and the world, then a policy of isolation will be ineffectual. Pressure will only make North Korea even more insecure, and North Korea has never shown signs that it would back down in the face of pressure. Indeed, the most consistent element of North Korea is that it meets pressure with pressure. Economic sanctions, or even using soft power such as economic engagement, is unlikely to be successful in convincing the North to abandon its weapons program. To dismiss North Korea's security fears is to miss the root cause of North Korea's actions.

At the same time, economic reforms can be slow to manifest themselves. But the economic changes underway in North Korea are consequential, and they are becoming

irreversible. It makes no sense to criticize the North for being isolationist and then refuse to trade with them. The North needs economic assistance—but far from being blackmail, the assistance North Korea needs will help open up its economy and ultimately its political system.

North Korea's behavior in 2019 appears set to continue to emphasize diplomacy and hold out the possibility of economic openness. In April 2019, Chad O'Carroll of the research group "*DailyNK*" used market data about prices to find that "most food types were at an all-time low in April 2019 (compared back to 2019). Energy, too, is also tracking notably low at the moment."<sup>41</sup> At the 4th plenum of the 7th Workers' Party of Korea Central Committee held in central Pyongyang on April 10, 2019, the emphasis on economic reforms also continued. The first agenda item was "holding higher the banner of self reliance in the socialist construction." At the plenum, Kim Jong Un gave a speech that emphasized "the need to more vigorously advance socialist construction by dint of the self-supporting national economy suited to the specific local conditions of our country based on our efforts, technology and resources."<sup>42</sup>

Within this context, South Korean president Moon Jae-in and the ROK government must deal with an almost impossible task: maintaining strong ties with the U.S. military and diplomatic corps and supporting the U.S.–ROK alliance while also dealing with rapidly changing security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula. The Moon government has focused on engaging North Korea and building confidence and finding ways to manage crises and tensions at a level lower than war on the Korean Peninsula.

Thus, a key, enduring question for the South Korean government and people has been how and whether to embrace or resist this somewhat rapidly changing North Korean and U.S. policies towards each other. The Moon administration has actively sought for ways to build confidence with the North, to reduce the chance of military skirmishes along the DMZ and Northern Limit Line, and to seek ways to be a buffer between the North and the United States.

Yet the failed Hanoi summit showed just how deeply the U.S. policymaking establishment still believes that pressure can force North Korea to completely denuclearize, and how skeptically the United States plans to actually interact with the North in negotiating smaller, stepwise moves that both sides can take.<sup>43</sup> For President Moon of South Korea, the task is to move in between the United States and North without becoming caught up in a losing battle of trying to get two sides to agree to impossible positions.

As to the role of soft power: a return to the crisis of 2017, and threats of hard power and shows of force, it is not inevitable. It is possible to avoid it with adroit diplomacy and leadership from all sides. That will involve soft power—adroit diplomacy from Moon Jae-in, careful attention to Trump and Kim, and a focus on being a stabilizing force that can help North Korea along the path that leads to greater economic openness and less fear of instability.

## Notes

1. Jessica Chen-Weiss, "Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (January 2013): 1–35.
2. Examples of soft power include the Bolshoi ballet visits from the Soviet Union in the 1970s to the United States, and Ping-Pong diplomacy between the United States and PRC in the 1970s, as well as New York Philharmonic visit to North Korea in 2008.
3. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (Autumn 1990): 153–71.
4. Andrew Hurrell, "Rising Powers and the Question of Status in International Society" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the ISA's 50th Annual Convention 'Exploring the Past, Anticipating the Future,'" New York City, New York, February 15, 2009), 2.
5. Jack Donnelly, "Sovereign Inequalities and Hierarchy in Anarchy: American Power and International Society," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 2 (June 2006): 142.
6. Ian Hurd, "Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics," *International Organization* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 389, 392.
7. Richard J. Samuels, *Machiavelli's Children: Leaders and Their Legacies in Italy and Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).
8. Ian Hurd, "Breaking and Making Norms: American Revisionism and Crises of Legitimacy," *International Politics* 44, no. 2–3 (March 2007): 194.
9. David A. Lake, "Escape from the State of Nature: Authority and Hierarchy in World Politics," *International Security* 32, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 53.
10. James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (February 1997): 69. Slantchev also writes: "The problem then is to find a statement that only resolved leaders would be willing to make." Slantchev, "Military Coercion in Interstate Crises," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 4 (November 2005): 534. For earlier works on the use of signals as mechanisms of information revelation about one's resolve, see Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1989).
11. Ibid.
12. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests," 69.
13. James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 396–97. See also Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests," 69; Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (September 1994): 577–92; and Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem," *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 174.
14. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," 396–97; Fearon "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests," 69; and Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes."
15. Gi-wook Shin and Rennie Moon, "North Korea in 2017," *Asian Survey* 58, no. 1 (January/February 2018): 38.
16. Michael Pillsbury, quoted in Mike Chinoy, *Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 161.
17. Terence Roehrig, "North Korea and the Northern Limit Line," *North Korea Review* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 8–22.
18. "North Korea Threatens to Turn South into a 'Sea of Fire' after Activists Use Balloons to Send Propaganda Leaflets over the Border," *Daily Mail*, August 14, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3198893/North-Korea-threatens-turn-South-sea-fire.html> (accessed April 26, 2019).
19. Chen-Weiss, "Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China."
20. Nicole Gauette, "North Korea at UN: U.S. Faces 'Consequences Beyond Imagination,'" *CNN*, September 23, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/22/politics/north-korea-un-asean/> (accessed April 26, 2019).

21. James Goodby and Donald Gross, "Strategic Patience Has Become Strategic Passivity," Brookings Institution, December 22, 2010.
22. Van Jackson, *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Jeffrey Lewis, *The 2020 Commission Report on the North Korean Nuclear Attacks Against the United States: A Speculative Novel* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2018).
23. Victor Cha and David Kang, *Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), chapter 3.
24. One estimate (Baek 1998) calculates that a war on the Korean Peninsula would cost the United States more than \$60 billion and result in three million casualties, including 52,000 U.S. military casualties.
25. B. C. Koh called North Korea a "tinderbox," B. C. Koh, "North Korea in 1976: Under Stress," *Asian Survey* 17, no. 1 (1977): 61–70; Young Whan Kihl in 1985 called North Korea a "powderkeg," Young-Whan Kihl, "Korea's North–South Dialogue Rests on a Powderkeg," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (October 12, 1985); and the *Economist* said "Sound the Alarm... North Korea is Preparing for War," on April 26, 1997.
26. Joseph Dethomas, "Are Sanctions Part of the Problem?" *38 North*, September 13, 2018, <https://www.38north.org/2018/09/jdethomas091318/> (accessed April 26, 2019).
27. Samuel Ramani, "China's Approach to North Korea Sanctions," *The Diplomat*, January 10, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/chinas-approach-to-north-korea-sanctions/> (accessed April 26, 2019).
28. Christopher Shepard and David Brunnstrom, "U.S. Can Talk to North Korea If It Stops Missile Tests: Tillerson," Reuters, August 6, 2017.
29. Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and R. Bin Wong, *Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 12–17.
30. Kim So Yeol, "Byungjin Lives as Kim Seeks Guns and Butter," *Daily NK*, April 1, 2013.
31. Jasper Becker, *Rogue Reime: Kim Jong Il and the Looming Threat of North Korea* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005).
32. The National Committee on North Korea, "2015 Guidelines Set Forth to Develop Nation's Animal Husbandry," <https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/publications/KJU-Agriculture-speech-2015-1-28.pdf> (accessed April 26, 2019).
33. Jonathan Kaiman, "Why a North Korean Leader Called a Gleaming New Neighborhood 'More Powerful Than 100 Nuclear Warheads,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2017.
34. Georgy Toloraya, "Deciphering North Korean Economic Policy Intentions," *38 North*, July 26, 2016.
35. Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea's Party Congress Explained: A Coronation for Kim Jong-un," *New York Times*, May 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/world/asia/north-korea-congress.html> (accessed May 2, 2019).
36. "Kim Jong-un Makes Rare New Year's Speech," *ABC News*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-01-01/kim-jong-un-makes-rare-new-year-speech/4449574> (accessed April 26, 2019).
37. Anna Fifield, "North Korea Announces Five-year Economic Plan, Its First Since the 1980s," *Washington Post*, March 8, 2016.
38. Ruediger Frank, "The 7th Party Congress in North Korea: A Return to a New Normal," *38 North*, May 20, 2016.
39. Jason le Miere, "U.S. Prepared to Launch 'Preventive War' Against North Korea, Says H.R. McMaster," *Newsweek*, August 5, 2017.
40. Marie DuMond, "Paradise Evaporated: Escaping the No Income Trap in North Korea," *Beyond Parallel*, July 24, 2017.
41. Chad O'Carroll, "Is There an Emerging Food Crisis in North Korea?" <https://twitter.com/chadocl/status/1123842194299867136> (accessed May 2, 2019).

42. Quoted in *NK Leadership Watch*, “4th Plenum of the WPK Central Committee Held,” <http://www.nkleadershipwatch.org/2019/04/11/4th-plenum-of-the-the-wpk-central-committee-held/> (accessed May 2, 2019).
43. Conor Finegan, “Pompeo, Bolton Deny Derailing North Korea Nuclear Talks After Regime Threatens to Restart Nuclear, Missile Testing,” *ABC News*, March 15, 2019.

## Notes on Contributor

**David C. Kang** is Maria Crutcher Professor of International Relations at the University of Southern California, with appointments in both the School of International Relations and the Marshall School of Business. Kang is also director of the USC Korean Studies Institute. Kang’s latest book is *American Grand Strategy and East Asian Security in the 21st Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). He has authored four other scholarly books, and has published articles in journals such as *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, and *International Security*. A regular consultant for U.S. government agencies and the military, Kang has also written opinion pieces in the *New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, and appears regularly in media such as *CNN*, *PBC*, the *BBC*, and *NPR*. A former Fulbright Scholar, Kang received an A.B. with honors from Stanford University and his Ph.D. from Berkeley.