

North Korean Threats Could Lead to Apocalypse

By [Ian Buruma](#)

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Nobody would care much about North Korea — a small and isolated country of 24 million people, ruled by a grotesque dynasty that calls itself Communist — if it were not for its nuclear weapons. Its current ruler, Kim Jong-un, the 30-year-old grandson of North Korea's founder, is now threatening to turn Seoul, the rich and bustling capital of South Korea, into "a sea of fire." U.S. military bases in Asia and the Pacific are also on his list of targets.

Kim knows very well that a war against the U.S. would probably mean the destruction of his own country, which is one of the world's poorest. His government cannot even feed its own people, who are regularly devastated by famine. In the showcase capital, Pyongyang, there is not even enough electricity to keep the lights on in the largest hotels. So threatening to attack the world's most powerful country would seem like an act of madness.

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But it is neither useful nor very plausible to assume that Kim and his military advisers are mad. To be sure, there is something deranged about North Korea's political system. The Kim family's tyranny is based on a mixture of ideological fanaticism, vicious realpolitik and paranoia. But this lethal brew has a history, which needs to be explained.

The short history of North Korea is fairly simple. After the collapse in 1945 of the Japanese empire, which had ruled quite brutally over the whole of Korea since 1910, the Soviet Red Army occupied the north, and the U.S. occupied the south. The Soviets plucked a relatively obscure Korean communist, Kim Il-sung, from an army camp in Vladivostok, and installed him in Pyongyang as the leader of North Korea. Myths about his wartime heroism and divine status soon followed, and a cult of personality was established.

Worshipping Kim, and his son and grandson, as Korean gods became part of a state religion. North Korea is essentially a theocracy. Some elements are borrowed from Stalinism and Maoism, but much of the Kim cult owes more to indigenous forms of shamanism: human gods who promise salvation. (It is no accident that the Reverend Sun Myung Moon and his Unification Church came from Korea, too).

But the power of the Kim cult, as well as the paranoia that pervades the North Korean regime, has a political history that goes back much further than 1945. Wedged awkwardly between China, Russia and Japan, the Korean Peninsula has long been a bloody battleground for greater powers. Korean rulers only managed to survive by playing one foreign power off against the other, and by offering subservience, mainly to Chinese emperors, in exchange for protection. This legacy has nurtured a passionate fear and loathing of dependency on stronger countries.

The Kim dynasty's main claim to legitimacy is *juche*, the regime's official ideology, which stresses national self-reliance to the point of autarky. In fact, both the current Kim and his father were typical Korean rulers. They played China against the Soviet Union, while securing the protection of both. Of course, this did not stop North Korean propagandists from accusing the South Koreans of being cowardly lackeys of U.S. imperialism. Indeed, paranoia about U.S. imperialism is part of the cult of independence. For the Kim dynasty to survive, the threat of external enemies is essential.

The fall of the Soviet Union was a disaster for North Korea, as it was for Cuba. Not only did Soviet economic support evaporate, but the Kims could no longer play off one power against another. After the Soviet collapse, only China was left, and North Korea's dependence on its northern neighbor is now almost total. China could crush North Korea in a day just by cutting off food and fuel supplies.

There is only one way to divert attention from this humiliating predicament: propaganda

about self-reliance and the imminent threat from U.S. imperialists and their South Korean lackeys must be turned up to a hysterical pitch. Without this orchestrated paranoia, the Kims have no legitimacy. And no tyranny can survive for long by relying on brute force alone.

Some people argue that the U.S. could enhance security in northeast Asia by reaching an agreement with the North Koreans — specifically, by promising not to attack or attempt to topple the Kim regime. The Americans are unlikely to agree to this, and South Korea would not want them to. Apart from anything else, there is an important domestic political reason for U.S. reticence: a Democratic U.S. president cannot afford to look "soft." More important, even if the U.S. were to provide such guarantees to North Korea, the regime's paranoid propaganda would probably continue, given the centrality to *juche* of fear of the outside world.

The tragedy of both Koreas is that no one really wishes to change the status quo. China wants to keep North Korea as a buffer state and fears millions of refugees in the event of a North Korean collapse. Meanwhile, South Koreans could never afford to absorb North Korea in the way that West Germany absorbed the broken East Germany when the Iron Curtain fell. And neither Japan nor the U.S. would relish paying to clean up after a North Korean implosion, either.

And so an explosive situation will remain explosive, North Korea's population will continue to suffer famines and tyranny, and words of war will continue to fly back and forth across the 38th parallel. So far, they are just words. But small things — the proverbial gun shot in Sarajevo — could trigger a catastrophe. And North Korea still has those nuclear bombs.

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