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Introduction to the Special Issue

Strategic Insights, Volume V, Issue 7 (September 2006)

by [Edward A. Olsen](#)

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Introduction

This month's special issue of *Strategic Insights* focuses on North Korea and the problems the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) policy agendas are causing for some of its neighbors in Northeast Asia and for the United States' relationships with them. Given the timing of this special issue, readers may logically assume it was generated by the massive attention being paid worldwide to the 4th of July missile test launches carried out by the DPRK and the repercussions they continue to cause.

While most of the analysts in this issue focus in part on those missile launches, that was not the genesis of this project. It originated as a by-product of the Center for Contemporary Conflict's "research program on Korean unification and security studies" which was started in 2005 to replace the Center's former program in Northeast Asian studies. Both the current research program and its predecessor drew significant attention from South Korean government-linked research programs, leading to a sequence of Visiting Researchers since the early 1990s who have engaged in productive research while on sabbatical from their home institutions.

Since this year's Visiting Researcher who departed at the end of June, Dr. Kim Myung Jin, from the Korean Institute for Defense Analysis (KIDA), was the first participant to be fully part of this refocused research program during his stay, it was decided to organize a panel of analysts capable of focusing on the challenges posed by North Korea from various perspectives that would complement Dr. Kim's research project on South Korean security which will eventually yield a book to be published in Korea. These issues are very salient to inter-Korean relations and to the prospects for Korean reunification. Before providing an overview of what is contained in this special issue of *Strategic Insights*, and an estimate of how the Center for Contemporary Conflict might be able to play a constructive role in the international debate over how the United States and all the other countries with a stake in North Korea's future are likely to be successful, it is useful to provide a brief survey of North Korea drawing on a spectrum of perspectives.

North Korea is among the least well understood countries in the world despite the fact that the DPRK's nuclear weapons agenda and the massive counter-proliferation efforts that agenda spawned have led to a major proliferation of articles and books. For better or worse, deserved or undeserved, the great majority of these publications are decidedly critical of North Korea and use

a factual base that it is safe to assume the North Korean leaders being analyzed would contend is not very factual according to DPRK criteria and reflects blatant biases. To be sure most of these critical analyses—several of which are cited in the evaluations footnoted in this issue—have sound reasons to be critical and utilize the available information about North Korea in a productive manner. However, it is important to note that there are several survey studies of North Korea that are less likely to be harshly criticized by the Pyongyang leadership, but also are seen as objective by relatively balanced non-North Korean observers of North Korea.^[1]

The core issues involved in assessing North Korea and its policies are the nature of the North Korean state, its heritage, the leaders' motives and how all these factors shape the nature of the DPRK's policy agendas and how those agendas can evolve in the contexts of a proactive DPRK vision and a reactive contextual setting that continually reshapes that vision. Anyone who attempts to get a handle on the essence of North Korea and what drives it to behave as it does in the international arena is certain to confront numerous stereotypes. The causes behind these stereotypes encompass a spectrum of factors ranging from a paucity of accurate information emanating from a hyper-secretive state to many analyses which reflect critical biases emanating from various authors' ideological proclivities. All of the authors who have provided the analyses presented in this special issue have had to deal with this complex environment in trying to get a handle on what North Korea represents and what its intentions are.

The analysts in this issue represent a diverse spectrum. As explained above, Dr. Kim Myung Jin is not a Naval Postgraduate School faculty member, but was a "Visiting Research Scholar" at the Center. All the other analysts have some level of faculty status at the Naval Postgraduate School's Department of National Security Affairs. Two are China specialists: Christopher P. Twomey (Assistant Professor) and Lyman Miller (Senior Lecturer). And two are Korea specialists: Daniel A. Pinkston (Adjunct Professor at NPS in addition to his cited position at the Monterey Institute of International Studies) and Edward A. Olsen (Professor). All of the above analysts have conducted extensive research in their fields and have solid publication records. Two of the above (Miller and Olsen) also held other analytical positions formerly in their governmental careers. Each of their analyses shall be briefly summarized here to provide a contextual setting for what they prepared.

Dr. Kim's contribution draws on his military background as a retired officer in the ROK Navy. His focus is on why and how South Korea became a player in the U.S.-backed Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) intended to constrain North Korea's potential for reckless behavior. Most of Dr. Kim's analysis reflects an objective level of support for the PSI's goals and provides a historical overview of the PSI's creation and evolution. It assesses the problems it has confronted on the political, economic, diplomatic, and strategic fronts. Against that background it assesses the impact the PSI has had on the North Korean regime's viability and U.S. interest in that impact. Dr. Kim concludes with an assessment of how all of these factors may influence South Korea's policy options regarding North Korea and how those options may influence the ROK's broader international relationships. Dr. Kim's analysis of North Korea's objectives from a South Korean moderate's perspective sets the stage for two analyses of PRC-DPRK relations and two of U.S.-DPRK relations.

The analyses of China-North Korea relations by Professors Twomey and Miller intentionally approach the common issues from different perspectives. One stresses bilateral issues; the other emphasizes more multilateral issues. In doing so, however, each must address the influence of the factors focused on in the other analysis. Less intentionally, in terms of the organization of this special issue of Strategic Insights, the two analyses reflect the way one of the analysts (Twomey) has extensive background in international relations theory while the other (Miller) draws on his background as an historian of China and overall East Asia.

The Twomey analysis assesses North Korea's importance to China and how Beijing copes with that importance and evaluates the legacy of past relations bilaterally and regionally. The analysis

closely examines China's approaches to various aspects related to North Korea's quest for nuclear weapons, the PRC's roles in guiding North Korea toward positive socio-economic change, and alternative options that may be viable for Beijing. This analysis concludes with observations about the consequences of the degree to which China copes successfully with the challenges posed by North Korea's agendas.

The Miller analysis assesses the ways in which evolving issues stemming from North Korea's nuclear and missile agendas are influencing the PRC's approach to the DPRK and both countries' relationships with all the other countries that have a major interest in what North Korea does. It provides an assessment of the importance of the Six-Party Talks for China regionally and for its ties with North Korea. The issues are addressed in a balanced manner, providing useful insights into how Japan and Russia interact with China and the United States, as well as with both Koreas. Based on that background the motives behind Beijing's approach to North Korean issues are evaluated in ways that explain China's role in a moderate manner. The analysis concludes with an estimate of how China's presently moderate approach is likely to evolve.

The Pinkston analysis of North Korea's policies toward the United States draws on his background as a U.S. Air Force Korean language linguist. He provides background on North Korea's roots as a state and how those roots shaped that state's structures. Emphasis is placed on the DPRK's Foreign Affairs and Defense institutions and how they evolved as they shaped DPRK policies. Against that background the analysis examines with specificity the nature of North Korea's policy agendas regarding the United States and how North Korea reacts to U.S. policy toward the DPRK. It concludes with an evaluation of the prospects for North Korea attaining its goals.

The last analysis is by the author of this introduction (Olsen) on U.S. policy on North Korean issues. Just as the other analyses do, it provides background on the historical context of U.S. relations with North Korea and how that shaped each country's views of the other in a manner which still influences policy makers in Washington and Pyongyang. The roles of a succession of leaders on both sides are evaluated. The ways in which the post-Cold War era and War on Terrorism proved to be turning points for U.S. approaches to North Korea are assessed, with special attention to how Pyongyang's nuclear agenda and brinkmanship strategy exacerbated the circumstances. Against that background the ways in which the current Bush administration's approaches to South Korea, as well as North Korea, have complicated the effectiveness of U.S. policy toward the DPRK nuclear and missile agendas, compounded by other hard line policy issues on the U.S. side. The analysis examines how the United States and North Korea make use of each others' geopolitical postures and suggests ways the United States could improve the soundness of its policies toward North Korea in the context of U.S. approaches to the entire Korean peninsula.

Because these analyses are relatively concise they do not contend to be definitive. However, they do summarize the issues at stake in a concisely comprehensive manner. Moreover, although the roles of Russia and Japan are addressed, they were not singled out for presentations by design because the panel's focus was basically on how the PRC and the United States are coping with North Korean issues in the context of each country's ties with the two Koreas.

To conclude this introductory overview and move on to the analyses, it is worth noting that all these analyses help in underscoring the importance of avoiding the stereotypes frequently attached to North Korea's identity and motives. The more North Korea can be evaluated in an objective manner the easier it is to try to be impartial in judging its successes and failures.^[2] As valid as that point is today, it is even more likely to gain importance if North Korea is pressed to conform to standards it resists or rejects. One way that can be done far more than it is today in the United States would be to get analysts from North Korea involved in U.S. surveys of the issues addressed in this special issue.

Although it stretches the boundaries of current bureaucratic realities to visualize the Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Contemporary Conflict having a Visiting Researcher from North Korea in residence while on leave from an institution such as Kim Il Sung University, it is reasonably credible to visualize faculty from the Naval Postgraduate School and other U.S. government educational institutions being able to interact with such researchers from the DPRK in non-governmental academic settings either in the United States, China, South Korea, Japan, or Russia. Along those lines, one can visualize a future Visiting Researcher at the Center for Contemporary Conflict from South Korea who is a specialist in DPRK reforms as part of the inter-Korean reconciliation process playing the role of a catalyst in creating such an academic conference or workshop in the future. The more Americans and North Koreans can interact in such scholarly exchanges with other members of the Six-Party Talks countries, the more likely their understanding of all the involved countries' interests will become sound.

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References

1. Two liberal examples are: John Feffer, *North Korea, South Korea; U.S. Policy At A Time Of Crisis* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); and Bruce Cumings, *North Korea, Another Country* (New York: The New Press, 2004). For a very different form of balanced assessment, see C. Kenneth Quinones and Joseph Tragent, *The Complete Idiots Guide to Understanding North Korea*, New York: Alpha Books, 2003.
2. The author undertook such an effort in a study on North Korean socio-economic issues for a German research institute that publishes its findings without linking the analytical country studies to the author's name, institution, or country. See: [Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2006](#).