



HYPOTHESIZING KIM JONG-UN: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING NORTH KOREAN BEHAVIOR

By Bryan Port

Abstract

A coherent North Korea strategy must proceed from a theory of North Korean politics, strategy, and decision-making. Structured analytic techniques, particularly the analysis of competing hypotheses (ACH), are instrumental in developing a theory and strategy. North Korea's nuclear and missile programs serve a blend of internal and external purposes. A successful strategy that renders North Korean denuclearization must account for both types of purposes, determining which of the two are predominant. Applying ACH can assist in making such an assessment, setting a level of confidence, designing a strategy, and determining measures to assess the analytic foundation of the strategy and the measures used in executing the strategy. This paper tees up four potential hypotheses intended to explore North Korean intentions and assist in developing strategy. However, the intention of the paper is not primarily to make a case for a given hypothesis, but rather to explore the method in the hope that others may find the method useful and apply it to the important undertaking of North Korean denuclearization.

Key Words: *North Korea; Kim Jong-un; structured analytic techniques; analysis of competing hypotheses; denuclearization*

Introduction¹

A coherent North Korea strategy must proceed from a theory of North Korean politics, strategy, and decision-making. Structured analytic techniques, particularly the analysis of competing hypotheses (ACH), are invaluable in developing a theory and enabling the design of U.S. strategy.² The many uses of theory in the design and execution of strategy include identifying and

examining assumptions. In American strategy toward North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK) one of the primary assumptions holds that the Kim Jong-un (KJU) regime pursues nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) primarily to service external security requirements. Although many Korea watchers acknowledge there are internal drivers behind Kim's nuclear and missile programs, it appears as though they consider external objectives, not internal aims, are the predominant driver in regime decision-making. By extension, American strategy is predicated on raising the full gambit of the costs of these capabilities to convince the Kim regime that these programs do not provide sufficient security benefits to warrant the costs. Unfortunately, this conception fails to account for the domestic dimensions of security served by these programs and can lead to distortions in the formation of hypotheses, theories, and the design of U.S. strategies. For decades Washington has executed strategies premised on the predominance of external drivers in Kim regime decision-making. Reassessment, and potentially redesign, is required. The United States will benefit from a structured approach to identifying and testing hypotheses regarding DPRK decision-making in order to develop a holistic, effective DPRK strategy.

KJU's 2018 diplomatic offensive took many by surprise. After mounting concerns in 2017 about American military action, the summitry of 2018 allowed the world to breathe a sigh of relief. While the U.S.-led pressure campaign may have been a driver in DPRK decision-making, it is likely only part of the story. Regardless, it is premature to determine whether an apparent pause in the DPRK nuclear and ICBM programs is an actual pause, let alone reversal that will result in comprehensive

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denuclearization. The regime may not be engaged in additional overt development, but that does not mean it is not working on advancing its capabilities. Korea watchers and government officials are well-served to consider developments in 2018 and future strategies through the identification and exploration of a range of hypotheses and theories regarding DPRK decision-making. Effective strategy benefits from a falsifiable “theory of why” North Korea behaves as it does. This imperative is even more critical after the unsuccessful U.S.-DPRK summit in Hanoi summit and recent DPRK weapons tests.

Theory and Assumptions

In his landmark book “Psychology of Intelligence Analysis” Richard J. Heuer Jr. explored structured analytic techniques, including the analysis of competing hypotheses (ACH).³ ACH involves creating hypotheses to facilitate a thorough exploration of an issue and to combat cognitive bias. Analysts compile evidence for or against each hypothesis, emphasizing the “diagnosticity” of evidence. For a piece of information to have diagnostic value, it cannot serve to support all hypotheses, at least not equally. This is not to say confirmatory evidence is without value. On the contrary, we may be unable to falsify one or more hypotheses and thus rely on building the strongest confirmatory case possible to support strategy design and execution. Still, we must be on guard when relying on confirmatory approaches due to our susceptibility to cognitive bias, particularly confirmation bias—the tendency to seek and place greater value in information that conforms with our existing beliefs.⁴ The best diagnostic evidence negates, or at least substantially weakens, one or more hypotheses, leaving a more manageable number of hypotheses to consider in rendering an assessment. The best approach is to accept the risk of using hypotheses that have not been falsified, choosing from the strongest amongst them, to form a theory of North Korea supporting the development of an effective, coherent strategy.

Despite shifts in the strategic environment and domestic context over its 70-year history, the sources and instruments of the Kim regime’s internal political power and control have remained consistent. There is an uncommonly coherent social contract in the DPRK. The regime relies on the elites to remain cohesive and responsive to orders from the center on the issues of greatest importance, particularly detecting and suppressing dissent. Elites rely on the regime to maintain their security, privilege, and relative prosperity.

Ideology serves as one instrument to maintain cohesion and control with platforms like *byungjin* (the pursuit of nuclear weapons and economic development) serving as the outward face of ideology, with a more important inner core of ethnic nationalism.⁵ Much analysis of *byungjin* considers it a call to simultaneously, and with equal priority, develop nuclear weapons and the economy. Some Korea watchers, however, see *byungjin* in sequential terms, with the regime first focusing on nuclear weapons development in order to shift focus to economic development at a later point in time. Under such a construct, the nuclear capability backstops the subsequent focus on economic development, and can be partially, perhaps completely, negotiated away to facilitate economic efforts.⁶

Consistent with ethnic nationalism, the regime uses the nuclear and missile programs to provide status, stability, and relative prosperity to a cross section of elites; drawing on nuclear weapons to portray power internally and assure ruling elites that the regime can hold and preserve elite privilege and power. The elites rely on the regime to sustain the system that provides security, status, and sustenance. The nuclear and missile programs have come to play an increasingly important role in the DPRK’s social contract for four reasons. First, the programs reassure the elites that the regime can deter external attacks and handle large-scale subversion. Second, the programs support pride and regime legitimacy. Third, the regime uses the programs to selectively empower and reward segments of the elites. Finally, the regime uses the programs to message and modulate the status, relative power, and priority of its domestic institutions and initiatives.

Kim’s conundrum is that he has nothing ready to replace a nuclear/missile complex, the existence of which blocks the regime from acquiring the resources and international access needed for economic rejuvenation. Even if Kim had a replacement, the impacted elites would need to be confident that the replacement is viable well in advance of a concerted move toward denuclearization. Absent an alternative to the nuclear/missile complex, denuclearization would create a population of well-connected, smart “elite-losers” capable of, and perhaps motivated to, challenging the regime—if not outright, at least in terms of eroding the regime’s internal control to create greater space to pursue their own interests.

Under DPRK founder Kim Il-sung, nuclear weapons were intended for external security. The need for nuclear weapons heightened with the end of the Cold War and the patronage



Table 1. Hypotheses: Number, Descriptor, and Narrative Statement

Number	Descriptor	Narrative Statement
Hypothesis 1 (H1)	External Security	Diplomacy is a stratagem to throw external actors off balance and stymie U.S. military action
Hypothesis 2 (H2)	Buttress Status Quo	Seek minimum deterrent capability, albeit unaccepted by international community, while obtaining some relief from pressure
Hypothesis 3 (H3)	Pakistan Option	Use diplomacy & prospect of denuclearization to gain Chinese & Russian acquiescence to confer “Pakistan Status” to DPRK
Hypothesis 4 (H4)	Systemic Change	Alter the foundations of internal political power to ensure long-term survival balance military/nuclear/missiles with economics

of the Soviet Union, as well as the death of Kim Il-sung and assumption of power of Kim Jong-il. However, the succession saw a diminishment of the regime’s legitimacy and doubts about its longevity. This was compounded by the onset of a famine and expansion of the gap in the balance of power between the DPRK and South Korea (Republic of Korea or ROK). Nuclear weapons and missiles provided a way to demonstrate Kim Jong-il’s potency and success in order to buttress legitimacy. Thus, the main role of nuclear weapons and ICBMs serves a crucial internal political role. External security and strategic shaping remained important. However, the nuclear and ICBM programs became even more important to internal power, politics, and patronage. Kim Jong-il adopted a *songun* party line (military first politics) and the nuclear and missile programs became the key plank in the regime’s strategy and social contract.

KJU had far less time than his father to prepare to assume power and took charge of a country that was a shell of what Kim Jong-il inherited. The international environment and the domestic context were profoundly different. The rising generation of Koreans, north and south, have a unique set of formative experiences compared to any preceding generation in Korean history. They lack the visceral perspectives that come through first-hand experience of colonization, war, famine, and dramatic domestic political turmoil. It bears asking whether KJU holds a different set of principles and ideas about the foundations of his power and the future of the DPRK, and correspondingly how this informs his perspective on the DPRK’s nuclear and ICBM programs.

While it is possible that KJU is drawing from the traditions of North Korean strategic culture and statecraft, the manner and extent to which he is drawing from these traditions is worth questioning. It is possible that he is leading from a different perspective. We should consider that desiring to die in his sleep having led the DPRK for decades, as his father and grandfather did before him, gives KJU cause to question whether his regime, as currently structured and operating, can endure. While he might conclude that nuclear weapons and ICBMs are important, for reasons internal and external, that does not mean that he is committed to a program in excess of a minimum deterrent capability. It is also worth considering whether KJU is embarking on more fundamental change to alter the foundations of his power for greater resilience and endurance, and perhaps out of a “positive” desire to transform the DPRK into some version of an authoritarian-elite market state.⁷ The key question becomes how do these different possibilities relate to KJU’s diplomacy in 2018? It is to this question that the study now turns by delineating a series of hypotheses.

Hypotheses

There are at least four hypotheses that may explain Kim’s diplomatic engagement (Table 1). Not all of the hypotheses are mutually exclusive and hence they are considered from the perspective of a given hypothesis being the dominant driver in Kim’s decision-making. The notion is that prompting a change in the Kim regime’s decision-making requires a strategy focused on addressing the dominant driver (hypothesis).



External security (H1) may be prompting Kim to draw from the traditional DPRK playbook: seeing nuclear weapons as essential to his regime's survival, engaging in summitry to disrupt the U.S.-ROK alliance, throwing international actors off-balance, and stymieing potential U.S. military action. Hence, the regime is in the initial to middle phase of a military-diplomatic campaign to ward off international pressure and military action so that it can keep a substantial nuclear weapons capability.⁸ Kim will not halt, let alone reverse, the nuclear or missile programs. H1 represents mainstream assessments regarding the regime's perspective on nuclear weapons and missiles, and corresponds with standard assessments in the United States that emphasize the role of external drivers in North Korean decision-making, particularly North Korea's perceived need for nuclear weapons for deterrence and defense.

Buttressing the status quo (H2) contends that Kim will verifiably downsize his nuclear and missile programs while maintaining a minimum nuclear deterrent. This approach enables Kim to balance internal and external sources of regime legitimacy and power, gaining some relief from sanctions while positioning the regime for long-term survival and dynastic transition, in part by using partial relief from pressure to enable domestic economic growth. The diversification and shift of prioritization from the nuclear/missile complex to oligarchic-capitalism allows the regime to accommodate changing internal imperatives (e.g. generational change), along with external drivers (e.g. shifting balances of power). Internal timing and sequencing are a key challenge. Kim will have to avoid going too far too fast, alienating elements of the elite favoring the nuclear/missile complex, and critical to near-term internal control and security. But he will have to move fast enough to appeal to future elites that may be unconvinced that the structure and strategy of the regime can hold over the long-term and see an alteration of the economic system as essential and desirable.

Obtaining "Pakistan status" (H3) considers that Kim may go far enough in limiting, and selectively reversing, his nuclear program to gain Chinese and Russian support for the DPRK to maintain a deterrent capability, with a gradual lifting of sanctions as was the case with Pakistan and India. Kim may be banking on the idea that if the international community accepted a nuclear-armed Pakistan, with its history of coups and vulnerability to Islamic fundamentalists, it is not a stretch for the international community to accept his regime as maintaining a deterrent force. The diplomacy of 2018 is the first installment of prompting a change in Chinese and Russian positions. Kim might believe that

the Chinese are flexible based on their preference for stability and desire to check U.S. influence. Kim might also believe that other actors, particularly the United Kingdom and France (United Nations Security Council permanent members and nuclear powers) may be pragmatic enough to accept a minimally nuclear armed DPRK as the price of reducing the prospects for military conflict in a critical region, drawing focus from more important issues closer to home.

H2 and H3 overlap considerably but hold key differences. In H2 Kim is willing to accept the long-term continuation of international sanctions by much of the international community as the price for maintaining a nuclear deterrent. In H3 Kim takes a longer-term perspective betting on the ultimate acceptance of a minimal nuclear deterrent that accompanies significant relief from international sanctions and pressure. In H2 Kim accepts the risks and costs of remaining a pariah but believes that by reducing his nuclear and missile programs he can reduce the prospects of U.S. military action and halt the addition of new measures to pressure the regime and reduce the enforcement of existing measures. In H3, Kim is playing the long game to obtain opportunities and resources to tackle internal challenges and gain in internal and external legitimacy. Obtaining international acceptance as a nuclear armed nation, by at least several key members of the international community, will pay substantial internal dividends for the regime that play well to ethnic nationalism.

Systemic change (H4) centers on Kim moving to alter the foundations of his regime's internal power. In H4, Kim is playing the long game, positioning to engage in systemic reform, shifting his internal power base from one predicated primarily on the military/nuclear/missile complex to one centered on market-based economic opportunities that appeal to rising elites, in some form of oligarchic-capitalism. Kim may be taking a longer-term view that recognizes that the songun of his father cannot sustain his regime.⁹ Kim's initial intent may not be complete denuclearization, but he may be open to modifying his intent. Regardless, H4 holds open the possibility of drastic reductions of the nuclear program and strategic stability.

Kim may also consider changing generational perspectives in North Korea, sensing that rising elites wish to transition their base of internal power from the military/nuclear/missile complex to oligarchic-capitalism. Kim may seek to alter the system, sustaining his power by giving rising elites economic opportunities through a restructured system. There is a delicate



balancing act involved in reconciling the perspective of the older, and still ruling, generation, with the perceived need for change in the rising generation. It is debatable, and even doubtful, whether the North Korean system can weather systemic change without fraying or imploding, but Kim may have decided that the regime can change and hold. For now, H4 holds that Kim, having opted for long-term systemic change, recognizes the necessity of denuclearization over time. Hence, Kim is negotiating in good faith based on a new grand strategy that seeks to preserve the regime by altering the internal foundations of its power.

Analyzing Hypotheses

Ideally, ACH seeks to falsify hypotheses to reduce the number of possibilities, preferably eliminating all but one hypothesis to yield an accurate assessment. Falling short of falsification, ACH relies on evaluating the diagnosticity of a given piece of evidence and applying it to support a hypothesis, or hypotheses, provided the piece of evidence is not universally applicable. Although, shifts in the strategic environment or domestic circumstances might warrant the reevaluation of evidence previously discarded. Admittedly, determining diagnosticity is an analytic judgment, but one that ACH renders transparent. More importantly, ACH legitimizes questioning the value of evidence, assisting in countering bias and other human cognitive limitations. There may be instances where a hypothesis can be completely discarded, but these instances are rare, and may be temporary, when the main issue is long-term strategic intent. When considering strategic intentions in particular, we may be able only to falsify a hypothesis for a period of time, needing to reexamine it if circumstances shift. More likely, when applying ACH to political

issues and decision-making, the closest we will come to falsifying a hypothesis is by the accumulation of strong, but not decisive, disconfirming evidence. Still, despite the qualifications discussed above, ACH enhances the quality and transparency of analysis.

Applying ACH can also guide intelligence collection, including engaging in actions to test a hypothesis. Testing hypotheses enables the isolation of independent variables like timing and sequence, as well as potentially establishing causality versus correlation. Testing H1, in particular, is promising in that it can expose North Korean malign intent, should it exist. More generally ACH enables deliberate steps to test one or more of the hypotheses, seeking to falsify them, or at least obtain strong, diagnostically relevant confirming evidence.

In seeking the gold standard of falsification, we might consider the following list of developments as disconfirming a given hypothesis. This list is not comprehensive, but does illustrate the types of evidence we should seek. H1 could be removed from consideration by verifiable reductions in nuclear and missile capabilities, for example the elimination of fielded mobile ICBMs. H2 could be falsified by moves in the opposite direction, the large-scale fielding of nuclear armed ICBMs. H3 could be strongly counter-indicated by North Korea disregarding Chinese preferences causing additional strains in Chinese-DPRK relations. H4 could be falsified through large-scale purges of key economic officials or economic elites in charge of new economic initiatives (the *nouveau riche* or *donju*), or through large scale regressive economic moves. Regarding the former, the purge of KJU’s uncle Jang Song-taek comes to mind, and an example of the latter can be found in Kim Jong-il’s reevaluation of the DPRK’s currency in 2009.¹⁰

Table 2. Hypotheses: Title, Narrative, and Falsification Example		
Hypothesis Title	Hypothesis Narrative	Falsification Example
H1 – External Security	Use diplomacy as a stratagem to throw external actors off balance and stymie U.S. military action	Substantial and verifiable reduction of nuclear or missile capabilities
H2 – Buttress Status Quo	Seek minimum deterrent capability, albeit unaccepted by international community, while obtaining some relief from pressure	Large-scale fielding of nuclear armed mobile ICBMs
H3 – Pakistan Option	Use diplomacy/prospect of denuclearization to gain Chinese & Russian acquiescence to confer “Pakistan Status” to DPRK	DPRK embarrasses the Chinese government, compromising broader Chinese diplomatic initiatives
H4 – Systemic Change	Alter the foundations of internal political power to ensure long-term survival balance military/nuclear/missiles with economics	Large-scale purge of key economic figures or major regressive economic policy



Shifting gears, the following are examples of diagnostically relevant confirming evidence. The examples below are mostly notional, but plausible. H1 would be supported by the large-scale fielding of nuclear armed ICBMs, or significant testing. H2 would be buttressed by measured, but altered, testing and production efforts that shift from creating new models of missiles to enhancing quality and reliability of existing models, to create a small, but reliable, second-strike capability. H3 would be supported should the Kim regime engage Pakistan, India, Israel, or nuclear threshold states. Finally, H4 is enhanced along the lines of the Kim regime taking significant and irreversible (or not reversible in tactical timeframe at strategically acceptable cost) steps to reduce fielded military/nuclear/missile capability or production capability that is also acknowledged to internal DPRK audiences.

To further illustrate understanding how to apply ACH, consider the December 20 Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) announcement on denuclearization and the Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA), as well as two potential developments—KJU visit to Seoul and inter-Korean projects.¹¹

An article titled “North Korea sounds the death knell for denuclearization” says it all. Or does it?¹² If one assumes that North Korea’s 2012 constitution declaring the DPRK is a “nuclear state” trumps its rhetoric, then there is only a very low possibility of denuclearization.¹³ The KCNA statement calls for the removal of the sources of nuclear threat from the north, south, and areas neighboring the Korean Peninsula. This is hardly a death knell. The KCNA statement does not negate any of the hypotheses. It may, however, offer greater support to H1 and H2 than to H3 and H4, assuming that the DPRK position would require Chinese, Russian, and American actions that these nations are unwilling to take. Kim may understand this and be banking on the unwillingness of other nations to meet what seems like a legitimate request—removal of all sources of nuclear threat. It is unclear what the DPRK would consider with regard to the sources of U.S. nuclear threat. Perhaps it is only extended deterrence guarantees, or perhaps something considerably more extensive. The DPRK may try to trade on the refusal of the United States to “remove the sources of its nuclear threat” to substantiate its external security arguments or insist that it should only need to go part way down the pathway of denuclearization in order to obtain relief from sanctions, at least on the part of China and Russia.

A KJU visit to Seoul would be symbolically significant and a risk to Kim in the context of internal DPRK messaging and politics. Kim would not take such a risk lightly and presumably would

visit Seoul with specific objectives in mind. Such a development works against H1 as it undermines the regime narrative of external threat and could be portrayed as the DPRK providing concessions to the ROK. There is some potential that KJU would visit Seoul with the goal of obtaining relief from pressure, at least in the form of forging ahead with inter-Korean economic projects. Considering ongoing progress on these projects, should KJU visit Seoul in response to complications with the projects, this would offer low support to H2. But it is otherwise difficult to see how KJU visiting Seoul benefits efforts to buttress the status quo. The potential pursuit of a Pakistan option is unlikely to be negatively impacted by a summit in Seoul. A KJU visit to Seoul offers the largest amount of support to H4. The risks that KJU incurs by visiting Seoul would need to be in pursuit of ambitious aims. Through such a visit Kim might share some of his broader aims to prompt more generous assistance from the ROK ranging from aid to diplomatic support in holding the United States and others at bay. The ROK might also be induced to take steps useful to Kim as he seeks to not only adjust his internal hard power foundations, but also the internal narrative. Kim might see the move as creating breathing room, neutralizing an independent variable so as to allow him room to maneuver, and he might also find the trip useful as an opportunity to warn the ROK against trying to take advantage of the situation.

Inter-Korean projects involving significant access into the DPRK are diagnostically relevant. Individually these projects are significant, and they are also important in terms of their impact through the accumulation effects over time, particularly if they result in dependencies. For example, dependencies can result should the regime rely on a project for the resources or ability to maintain internal control, or if the removal of a project undermines key internal political relationships or elite groups. The 2016 closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex might have been a data-point supporting decisions by KJU to embark on his current path. However, its use as a current piece of evidence is complicated by the passage of time. If one considers byungjin as meant to operate sequentially, not simultaneously, then Kim may have seen it as important to make progress on the nuclear front before he could embark more boldly on economic initiatives. These assumptions inform the evaluation of inter-Korean projects in the context of the four hypotheses that form the basis of this paper.

The ROK railway survey in the DPRK is significant.¹⁴ While the results are pending, and it remains to be seen whether additional practical steps are taken, for a nation paranoid about



external access to its interior, allowing a South Korean train to travel extensively into the interior of the DPRK is a big step. The temptation is to rate this as strong evidence in support of H4, but it is just a survey, and thus rated as moderately supporting H4. It strongly counter-indicates H1, and is neutral in terms of H3.

For the DPRK, the Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) represents a pattern break in Inter-Korean diplomacy, as opposed to the Panmunjom Declaration which covered similar ground to past agreements.¹⁵ In some areas the agreement does not go far enough. For example, it could have included plans to draw artillery back from current positions. There are some significant activities (removal of land mines), but mostly the actions are symbolic, though still important. While not falsifying H1 or H2, the CMA is significant evidence against the validity of each of these hypotheses. The moves risk offending senior North Korean military leaders and will prompt sparking cognitive dissonance and, potentially, concerns amongst broader segments of the elite about the future direction of the regime.

The accumulation of inter-Korean projects is meaningful in terms of quality and quantity. The normalization of inter-Korean projects so they can be started and sustained without presidential level summity is an item of evidence in itself. Quantity has a quality all its own; however, this point has not been reached. Although difficult to delineate a number of projects or an average length or a required scope and duration to qualify, the ROK budget of \$890 million for projects in 2019, including railway projects, family reunions, and forestry initiatives, is a significant step.¹⁶

Should the ROK execute the full budget and projects, then 2019 should provide indications as to whether this point could be reached in 2020.

A more extensive discussion and analysis of each of these developments is warranted and I may well alter my viewpoints about the implications of each piece of evidence upon deeper reflection. Certainly, in a real-world analytic setting significant debate should be the norm. This paper, however, is about the technique more than substantive conclusions. Based on extensive experience with the subject matter, the author, as is the case with many others with significant Korea background, is disposed toward skepticism. That makes the application of ACH even more valuable. Despite the inability to draw on existing evidence to falsify one or more hypotheses, the method does point to the need to consider, and even strategize and plan with respect to KJU moving toward systemic change regarding the foundations of his regime’s power and domestic political-economic structure.

Implications and Applications

Skepticism regarding North Korean intentions is warranted, but we are not justified in dismissing possibilities based on our past experience, unless the complete absence of evidence and need for action requires a judgment call. The point of this paper is not to make a specific prediction, but rather to provide methods that can inform strategy and policy development, execution, and evaluation.

Table 3. Hypotheses and Evidence Evaluation

	KCNA Statement on Nuclear Threats	CMA	Railway Survey	Seoul Summit	Accumulation
H1 – External	Moderate Support	Significant Negative	Significant Negative	Moderate Negative	Significant Negative
H2 – Status Quo	Moderate Support	Significant Negative	Low Negative	Low Support	Significant Negative
H3 – Pakistan	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
H4 – Systemic	Moderate Negative	Moderate Support	Moderate Support	Moderate Support	Significant Support



Applying ACH gives us a framework through which to test KJU's intentions, particularly by engaging in actions designed to negate a given hypothesis. Testing intentions requires the United States to determine minimum standards that the Kim regime must meet to continue prioritizing diplomacy. We can think of it in terms of the earnest money a prospective home buyer puts forth for the seller to forestall considering other offers while the deal is made. How much must the DPRK move down the path of denuclearization for the United States to sustain diplomacy and relax pressure? With this determination the administration can generate initiatives to test KJU's intentions by offering specific inducements tied to obtaining the equivalent of earnest money.

Through ongoing dialogue with North Korea, the U.S. could determine something of high value to the North Koreans, confirmed by KJU himself, that the United States can offer in exchange for a significant denuclearization act on the part of the DPRK. For example, the United States could offer an official visit, perhaps even a state visit, to KJU provided he declares two previously unknown sites and allows a site visit to each, perhaps by a neutral third party or private party. This would offer the United States an opportunity to learn about sites it might not have been tracking, and at a minimum allow it to confirm suspicions about suspect sites. This could all be handled in a low-profile manner so as to not generate internal political risks to KJU. His rejection of such a proposal would provide strong disconfirming evidence for H4.

It is also worth exploring which of the hypotheses provides the greatest opportunities to the United States in pursuing its interests. If the U.S. assesses that KJU is seeking systemic change and is willing to use time to its advantage, it could draw on DPRK diplomatic openings and indications of intent to denuclearize to engage segments of the DPRK elite in order to inform them of alternative perspectives and possibilities to begin to change DPRK internal incentive structures. The costs of focusing on H4 is no greater than focusing on other hypothesis, assuming that the DPRK does not bolt from the blue and launch a nuclear strike on the U.S. or its allies. The primary identifiable risk from a focus on H4 centers on a longer acquiescence to North Korea as a nuclear power, where H1 and H2 carry their primary risk in the form of a large-scale military conflict if the United States insists on denuclearization and moves to military options. Moving to test H1 and in the interim designing a strategy based on H4 offers the most productive course for the United States.

Conclusion

Assessing the intentions and strategy of Kim Jong-un's North Korea is amongst the thorniest analytic challenges faced by the United States. Whether the intelligence community, other elements of the U.S. or other governments, or the broader Korea watchers' community, all will benefit from the use of structured analytic techniques.

Endnotes

- ¹ The author would like to thank Dr. Katrin Katz for her encouragement, editing expertise, and analytic suggestions. Her assistance was invaluable in writing this article and more broadly has greatly assisted the author in refining his thinking. Additionally, Troy Stangarone provided valuable guidance and encouragement.
- ² Richard J. Heuer, Jr., *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Novinka Books, New York, 2006). See Chapter 8, accessible at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/psychology-of-intelligence-analysis/PsychofIntelNew.pdf>.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Thomas Gilovich, Dale Griffin and Daniel Kahneman (eds.), *Heuristics and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Judgement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- ⁵ Email correspondence between author and Dr. Andrei Lankov, 20 December 2019.
- ⁶ Amongst analysts who considered this possibility is Robert Carlin. The author is indebted to Robert for many discussions about North Korea over the course of years.
- ⁷ I draw on the work of Phillip Bobbitt in considering a distinction between a nation state and a market state. While I would not see KJU seeking to transform the DPRK into a true market state as defined by Bobbitt, I find there is utility in considering the construct from the vantage point of leader like KJU seeking to transform their system for long-term durability based on a new arrangement in terms of how elites will maintain power and privilege. See Phillip Bobbitt, *Terror and Consent* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2008), 44-46.
- ⁸ I use the term “military-diplomatic campaign” to connote a deliberate effort to use military and diplomatic instruments of power in conjunction and sequentially to pursue national interests. The term has additional utility to differentiate this approach from a political-military campaign executed with an internal focus. On military-diplomatic campaigns see Narushige Michishita, *North Korea’s Military-Diplomatic Campaigns, 1966-2008* (London: Routledge, 2010).
- ⁹ I translate “Songun” as “military first politics” based on the thinking of Mr. Stephen Bradner. Mr. Bradner served for the better part of five-decades as the Special Advisor to multiple U.S. four-star commanders, and was an astute observer of the DPRK, prominent among government experts in both the U.S. and ROK.
- ¹⁰ Jeong Yong-soo, Kwen Yu-jin, Kim Ji-a, and Shim Kyu-seok, “Donju are princes of North Korean economy,” *Korea Joongang Daily*, October 10, 2018, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3054069>; Dick K. Nanto, “The North Korean Economy After the 2009 Currency Reform: Problems and Prospects,” *International Journal of Korean Studies* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2011), Accessed 12 January 2019 at http://icks.org/data/ijks/1482460255_add_file_5.pdf.
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