

North Korea's Two Faces

By

Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones

Washington, D.C.

For

Sanyo Shimbun

January 2005

Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of essays written in the hope of improving our understanding of North Korea, and thus our ability to anticipate and to influence the behavior of North Korea's leaders. The author acquired his knowledge for these essays over the past forty years. He began in the classroom by studying the Korean language. He then shifted to living and working in South Korea for a total of ten years, first as a soldier, then student, scholar and eventually a diplomat. For the past ten years, he has engaged in numerous diplomatic negotiations with North Korean officials, met hundreds of North Koreans, and lived and worked in North Korea as a diplomat and a humanitarian worker. His frequent contact with North Koreans and visits to North Korea continue. He has also lived and worked in Japan which he visits regularly.

The series will examine key aspects of North Korea, its political and economic systems, military prowess and international relations. It will assess North Korea's leaders and the motives behind their decisions and conduct. It will look at politics in Pyongyang, the state of North Korea's economy, assess the potency of its military might and review its changing network of international relations. The series will conclude by setting forth options for dealing with North Korea and evaluate each option's potential impact on the Kim Jong Il regime. **End of Note.**

North Korea will continue to be a serious international problem in 2005. The Japanese people are not alone in their distrust and dislike of North Korea. The American people share very similar views. So do the South Korean people. Americans and South Koreans also have been the victims of North Korea's previously outrageous misconduct. No one outside North Korea trusts its leaders. We all dislike its authoritarian government and see North Korea as a direct threat to our national security.

Seeking revenge will not promote progress toward what Japanese, Americans, South Koreans as well as Chinese and Russians ultimately want – peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia. All the governments and people of these nations appear intent upon achieving their common goal without war. Our common problem, therefore, is how best to achieve our shared goal of ending North Korea's threat to peace and prosperity.

Despite how we feel about North Korea, we cannot ignore it. On the contrary, we should try to better understand North Korea. This does not mean that we should develop sympathy for it nor accept its point of view. On the contrary, North Korea's authoritarian government is not worthy of sympathy or respect. But better understanding North Korea

will improve our ability to advise our governments about how to deal with North Korea. This is an essential responsibility of all citizens living in a democratic society.

Most of us believe that North Korea is a monolithic society ruled by a single individual, Kim Jong Il. We see him as a same times irrational leader who is the source of all political power in North Korea. Actually, however, North Korean society and politics are much more complex, as we will be discussed in future essays.

Our distrust of North Korea is rooted in its two faces. On the one hand, North Korea seems intent upon presenting a “good face” by embracing the international community and respecting international law. But all too frequently, North Korea’s leadership contradicts this by reverting to its “bad face” of isolation and coercive diplomacy. For example, since 1985, North Korea has repeatedly promised to respect the requirements of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. But each time it eventually reversed this pledge and returned to developing a nuclear weapons capability. Similarly, since 2002, Pyongyang has first promised to resolve the issue of the abducted Japanese but later failed to keep its promises.

North Korea’s vacillation between its two faces remains a source of keen frustration for the governments of the United States and Japan. They have tried various strategies unsuccessfully to halt Pyongyang’s contradictory conduct. Between 1990 and 2000, they tried combinations of diplomacy, economic inducements (including large amounts of humanitarian aid) and armed deterrence to achieve the normalization of diplomatic and commercial relations with North Korea. After some initial success, each effort ended in frustration and failure.

President Bush shifted to a much more strident strategy beginning in 2001. His administration has repeatedly condemned North Korea’s contradictory conduct and demanded that Pyongyang fulfill its earlier promises and unilaterally disarm. President Bush refuses to negotiate with North Korea and stopped the relaxation of economic sanctions on it. He has also halted humanitarian aid to North Korea.

Now North Korea’s contradictory conduct regarding the abduction issue confronts Prime Minister Koizumi with the same choice that President Bush faced in 2001. Koizumi can either continue his previous strategy that has accented diplomacy or shift to a harder line strategy similar to that of President Bush. For Japan, this would mean the Diet’s approval of Japanese economic sanctions on North Korea. Such a move could convince the Bush Administration to intensify its diplomatic and economic pressure on North Korea. One way to do this would be to urge the United Nations Security Council to pass a resolution that either condemns North Korea’s failure to fulfill its nuclear non-proliferation pledges or propose that the United Nations impose economic sanctions on North Korea.

Frankly speaking, fifty years of US sanctions have not convinced North Korea to submit to US pressure. Neither Japanese nor UN sanctions are likely to do so. On the contrary, North Korea has already warned that it would consider such steps to be acts of war.

At this point, we need to recall the purpose of this series of essays. Our aim is not to argue for or against our governments' policy decisions. Instead, we want to better understand North Korea's likely reaction to such policies. In the next essay, we will discuss North Korea's national priorities and explain why it considers economic sanctions to be an act of war.