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# Aggression, Information, and Economics: Reinterpreting the Hermit Kingdom in the Era of Kim Jong-un

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AGGRESSION, INFORMATION, AND ECONOMICS:  
REINTERPRETING THE HERMIT KINGDOM IN THE ERA OF KIM JONG-UN

Margaret Pence  
APS 650: MAPS Capstone Seminar  
Professor Brian Komei Dempster  
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## Abstract

North Korea has been the most isolated country on the planet for the past sixty years. Due to its isolation, the Hermit Kingdom has naturally become mysterious, resulting in a common narrative that describes Pyongyang as aggressive and driven by nuclear weapons. Missing from this narrative is what motivates North Korea and its young leader, Kim Jong-un: survival. However, Kim Jong-un has a lot more than the outside world to contend with, as the North Korea he has inherited is much different than that of his predecessors. In response, Kim Jong-un has subtly shifted away from the state ideology of self-reliance (*juche*) towards one of "simultaneous advancement" (*byungjin*), placing heavy emphasis on military defense and economic development. To better understand this shift in Pyongyang policy under Kim Jong-un, my research asks: *What is the motivation behind the Kim Jong-un regime's simultaneous advancement policy of defense and economic strength and what impact does this have on the future of the DPRK?* In order to answer this question, my analysis first examines the history of North Korea during the Korean and Cold War era, and then during the nuclear negotiations of the 1990s and 2000s. It then surveys the internal changes that are happening in the DPRK under Kim Jong-un's rule before addressing Kim's geopolitical changes with South Korea. Through this analysis, my research concludes that while Kim Jong-un appears motivated to improve the quality of life in North Korea, this goal will always be secondary to his priority to protect the North Korean state and the legacy of his family's regime. Absent of a more accepting and understanding international community, Kim will likely opt for maintaining the DPRK's nuclear defense instead of seeking economic integration with the international community, undermining the prospects of peace on the Korean peninsula and a resolution to North Korean nuclear discussions.

**Keywords:** North Korea, Kim Jong-un, *juche*, *byungjin*, *jangmadang*, Korean Peninsula

## The Mysterious Kim Jong-un Regime

The Supreme Leader of North Korea is one of the most mysterious figures on the planet. When Kim Jong-un came to power in 2011, the common belief was simple: he was seen as young and politically weak. Many predicted that Kim Jong-un would either be pushed out of power or destabilize North Korea due to his young age. To the surprise of many, Kim Jong-un has been able to purge his enemies, while also navigating the changing dynamics in his country and pressure from the international community.<sup>1</sup> There are few who now question his control in North Korea. After a series of nuclear and missile tests during 2017, the international profile of Jong-un began to rise. However, the mystery around Kim and the attention on North Korea's nuclear weapons often prevents a closer look into what is happening in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

Kim Jong-un has made major departures from his predecessors. Most notably, he has deemphasized the state ideology of *juche* (self-reliance) and has introduced *byungjin* ('simultaneous advancement'), pursuing the goals of military defense and economic development. While the DPRK's nuclear weapons program continuously makes news headlines, what has been ignored by the media is the impressive development regarding the country's economy, which has been growing around 4% annually under Kim Jong-un.<sup>2</sup> Also astounding is the fact that Kim Jong-un is embracing the youthful spirit of his country-individuals who have been shaped by extreme famine and disillusionment-instead of maintaining the power of the

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<sup>1</sup> Fyodor Tertitskiy, "Fourteen Days Which Shook the County: Kim Jong-un's Rise to Power," *NK News*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.nknews.org/2018/04/>.

<sup>2</sup> Jeppesen, Travis, "Shopping in Pyongyang, and Other Adventures in North Korean Capitalism," *The New York Times Magazine*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

DPRK's elites.<sup>3</sup> These are just some of the many ways that Kim Jong-un is a different type of North Korean leader.

Why is Kim Jong-un charting a new course for North Korea? The simple answer is survival. The answer, however, is not as straightforward as first perceived, as we consider the deeper question regarding Kim Jong-un's motivation and whose survival he hopes to secure: the people of the DPRK or that of his family's legacy? Or does he have the ability to secure both? To better understand this shift in Pyongyang policy under Kim Jong-un, my research asks: *What is the motivation behind the Kim Jong-un regime's simultaneous advancement policy of defense and economic strength and what impact does this have on the future of the DPRK?* As an outsider to North Korea and a non-Korean speaker, my research will heavily depend upon the scholarship of others; however, the isolation of North Korea means that outside scholarship is not always the most accurate, while sources from within North Korea are not always dependable. In order to accurately assess Kim Jong-un's motivation, I must draw from diverse source material and, at the same time, must consider: *What are the biases and inaccuracies surrounding North Korea in current scholarship and media and how does this impact our perception of the country?* Asking these research questions is imperative to gain a clear picture of Jong-un and how changes within the Hermit Kingdom could impact the broader global community in terms of economics and security, particularly in the context of the ongoing summits between South Korean president Moon Jae-In and American president Donald Trump.

If the international community ever hopes for a resolution on the Korean Peninsula, it needs to reexamine its history in order to understand the present and build a new cooperative future. In order to answer these questions and address the current gaps in North Korean

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<sup>3</sup> *Kim Jong-un: The Unauthorized Biography*, directed by Anthony Dufour, 2016, <https://www.amazon.com/Kim-Jong-unauthorized-Anthony-Dufour/>.

scholarship, my research will assess the history of North Korea by addressing misconceptions regarding the Korean War, Cold War era, and ongoing nuclear negotiations to understand how these events shape Kim Jong-un's global outlook. I will then examine the internal reforms enacted by the Kim Jong-un regime and analyze how these reforms are impacting the DPRK's global relations, particularly those of South Korea. Through this analysis, my research concludes that while Kim Jong-un's actions indicate he's motivated to improve the quality of life in North Korea, this goal will always be secondary to his priority to protect the North Korean state and the legacy of his family's regime. Absent of a more accepting and understanding international community, Kim will likely opt for maintaining the DPRK's nuclear defense instead of seeking economic integration with the international community, undermining the prospects of peace on the Korean peninsula and a resolution to North Korean nuclear discussions.

### **Caricature vs. Reality: Understanding the Kim Regime**

When it comes to analyzing North Korea, there are often more questions than answers. The perception the DPRK is based largely on the events of the Korean War, Cold War and nuclear negotiations. Media coverage of North Korea often blends these two elements together to create the image of North Korea we think of today. The lack of reliable local resources complicates the perception of the Hermit Kingdom.

Due to its isolation, the depiction of North Korea is often that of a poor, starving country with a cartoonish dictator hellbent on building nuclear weapons and destroying the United States. This caricature is rooted in truth: as Tudor and Pearson (2015) point out, Korean propaganda has long focused on the evils of the United States and how the DPRK is threatened by the

imperialistic goals of America.<sup>4</sup> And it's no secret that Pyongyang has increased its nuclear weapons capacity over the past few years. However, beneath the surface, there are hidden complexities to the actions of the Kim family. For instance, Cummings (2003) points out that American intelligence has long depicted the Kim family as madmen, but this view was challenged when former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met with Kim Jong-il in 2000. Sources who observed the meeting described Kim Jong-il as "well informed . . . well read . . . practical, thoughtful . . . He's not the madman a lot of people portrayed him as."<sup>5</sup> More recent scholarship has pointed out that American policymakers choose to promote this caricature of North Korean leaders, as it enables the U.S. to maintain its military presence in Asia. Hyo (2016) explains that the Kim family allows for this depiction to continue, as it creates a sense of unpredictability when dealing with Pyongyang.<sup>6</sup> The perception of North Korean leaders is clouded due to how both the DPRK and U.S. manipulate perceptions, making it difficult to fully understand their motivations. Where does the caricature end and reality begin?

Another complexity regarding modern North Korea is Kim Jong-un himself. The Kim family has long been worshiped as god-like due to the personality cult that has been carefully constructed by Kim Sung-Il and Kim Jong-il; through propaganda, the history of North Korea and the Kim family has been carefully weaved together to become indistinguishable.<sup>7</sup> According to Richardson (2015), this personality cult legitimized the Kim family's power for two generations, but the power of this deity-status is beginning to fade away.<sup>8</sup> This illusion initially started to dissolve due to a famine that plagued North Korea during the 1990; North Koreans

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Tudor and James Pearson, *North Korea Confidential* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2015), 45-46.

<sup>5</sup> Cummings, Chapter 2, "The Nuclear Crisis: First Act and Sequel."

<sup>6</sup> Hyo Sung Joo, "The One Enduring Agreement with North Korea: Kim Jong-un is Crazy," *Journal of International Affairs*, December 3, 2016. Online Article. <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/>.

<sup>7</sup> Cummings, Chapter 3; Tudor and Pearson, 78-71

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Richardson, "North Korea's Kim Dynasty: The Making of a Personality Cult," *The Guardian*, February 16, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world>.

began to realize that the government could not also provide the necessities needed for survival. The political power of the Kim was also undermined due to the elite bureaucracy that formed under the Kim Jong-il regime. As Tudor and Pearson point out, after Kim Jong-il's death, there was much uncertainty regarding who *really* held power in North Korea and if Kim Jong-un would be able to maintain control. One figure who gained significant power was Jang Song Thaek, a high-level military official and Kim Jong-un's uncle. Due to his accumulated wealth, Jang had established a patronage network, a challenge to young Jong-un's power. Shortly after being named the new president, Kim Jong-un stripped Jang Song Thaek of his position and later ordered his execution.<sup>9</sup> Since taking power in 2010, Kim Jong-un has purged an estimated 421 North Korean officials. Many of these individuals had the ability to challenge Kim Jong-un's authority.<sup>10</sup> Even if he is no longer considered a god, purging these officials has allowed Jong-un to consolidate power and now none openly question his power.

Beyond having to demonstrating his authority due to the decline of the Kim name, Kim Jong-un's background also greatly differs from his father and grandfather. He was educated in Switzerland, making him fully aware of the prosperity of Western nations. In Dufour's documentary on Kim Jong-un (2016), sources close to the chairman report that Kim's education and exposure to the West has left him distressed with the dire conditions of his own country; he privately acknowledges that North Korea's development is far behind the rest of the world. This background has set the foundation for Kim to abandon his forebearers' *juche* ideology (주체), for his own policy of *byungjin* (병진). The concept of *juche* in-itself is hard to define, as it multi-faceted. On one hand, it's an economics principle promoting the Hermit Kingdom's independence

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Tudor and James Pearson, *North Korea Confidential* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2015), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Eugene Whong, "Report: Kim Jong-un has Purged a Confirmed 421 Officials," *Radio Free Asia*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/>. Note that "purge" refers to banished or executed;



from outside powers.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, it's almost a religion, calling for Koreans to revere their Great Leader.<sup>12</sup> For Kim Jong-un, *juche* is a policy of his forebearers, one that is not feasible in his modern DPRK. Instead, he has begun replacing *byungjin* with *juche*. Kim's *byungjin* focuses on two branches: military defense and economic development. While military strength has always been a priority of the Kim regime, economics is a new priority for this young leader. This new focus was emphasized by Kim's former confidants, stating that his goal is to not "sleep until his people had an adequate standard of living."<sup>13</sup> As a leader of a communist country, Kim has shown remarkable tolerance towards market centers, a radical change in policy that will be discussed further in this paper. Western exposure may also explain another fundamental shift



Figure 1. North Korean propaganda posters. Featured on the left is an older propaganda photo, calling for the destruction of the United States. The middle poster calls for peace and unification on the Korean peninsula. On the right is a poster promoting science and technology advancements.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cummings, Chapter 5, Kindle Edition.

<sup>12</sup> Travis Jeppesen, *See You Again in Pyongyang: A Journey into Kim Jong-un's North Korea* (New York: Hachette Books, 2018), Chapter 12, Kindle Edition.

<sup>13</sup> Dufour, 2016.

in how he deals with propaganda: the posters that once demonize the United States have been replace with ones promoting economic prosperity (see Figure 1).<sup>14</sup>

Who then exactly is Kim Jong-un? The first few years of his rule have painted a multidimensional portrait of Kim Jong-un, one with blue skies of compassion and pink hues of dawning peace creating a vibrant mosaic of a new beginning for North Korea; however, this image is stained with streaks of ruthlessness. What the global community sees are the red stains of blood from the Korean War, nuclear weapons, purges, and famine, never casting a glance at softer shades of pink and blue. Following the first summit between Trump and Kim Jong-un, Gallup (2018) reported that 46% of Americans view North Korea as the enemy, while 25% of Americans view the DPRK as an immediate threat. While Gallup acknowledges that these figures are down from the height of North Korean-U.S. tensions in 2013, under the Bush administration, the American public is wary of Kim Jong-un.<sup>15</sup> If Kim Jong-un is truly different from his forebearers, he not only has to make an impact with his own people, but overcome a complicated history with the international community. My research addresses the current misperceptions regarding North Korea through examining the motivations of the Kim Jong-un regime through both historical and contemporary narratives in order to better understand what the future holds for the DPRK.

### **Immoral Aggressor or Justified Victim: Reexamining the Korean War**

The first step to understanding the motivations of Kim Jong-un and his regime is to address the perception of North Korea—one that often limits the country to being an aggressor

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<sup>14</sup> Tudor and Pearson, 67; Andrew Illmer; "North Korea Propaganda Changes its Tune," *BBC News*, June 23, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/>.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, "Americans' Opinions of U.S.-North Korea Relations Less Negative," *Gallup*, July 12, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/237125/>.

and military-focused regime. Even though over half a century has passed, this narrative involves complicated relations between North Korea and the outside world, which plays into the political calculus of Kim Jong-un as he engages on an international level. The establishment of this narrative stems from the Korean War. While called the "forgotten war," there are some aspects of the Korean War that are etched into memory and have had a significant impact on global relations. To be sure, history portrays North Korea as an aggressor because of its invasion of the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea). History portrays South Korea as an innocent because of the destruction caused by the DPRK. History portrays the United Nations as a savior because of its defense of South Korea. Missing from this historical portrayal is what happened after South Korea was liberated.

When the UN finished its mission of liberating South Korea, General Douglas MacArthur and his forces proceeded to invade North Korea, completely occupying the DPRK by the end of 1950. Some of the worst atrocities of the war occurred during the occupation of North Korea but are frequently left out of the historical narrative. As Cummings points out, many scholars have stated that since North Korea invaded the South, the only atrocities that mattered during the war were those committed by the communist DPRK. Statements such as these imply that the UN forces had the moral high ground when it came to the Korean War.<sup>16</sup> It also establishes the narrative of a moral, capitalistic United States versus an immoral, communist North Korea. However, taken out of this Cold War mentality, the actions of South Korea would be deemed as atrocious as—if not worse than—those of the communist North. Eyewitnesses would later describe the actions of South Korean soldiers similar to the genocide in Cambodia, telling stories of how political prisoners were lynched in the streets of Seoul, communist collaborators were

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<sup>16</sup> Cummings, "North Korea," Chapter 1, "An Atrocious Occupation."

forced into slave labor, and the remainder of the population were forced to dig their own graves. This was not just limited to North Korean soldiers, but to women and children as well.<sup>17</sup>

The U.S. forces also contributed to the war crimes during the Korean War. When the Chinese entered the war, MacArthur ordered the air force to “destroy ever means of communication...and factories and cities and villages.”<sup>18</sup> This resulted in hundreds of tons of napalm, a purple chemical that sears off the skin of its victims, to be dropped on high profile areas in North Korea. By 1952, millions of North Korean civilians had been killed and the entire country was destroyed, with those surviving living underground in caves. One of the final acts of American forces was to destroy irrigation dams that supported “75% of the North’s food production,”<sup>19</sup> resulting in floods that took out supply routes and rice fields, as well as killing a countless number of civilians.

The Korean War was a monumental event that shaped Cold War policy on the Asia continent, and led to the continuing perception of North Korea as a rogue nation due to its invasion of the South. However, this invasion does not give the United Nations, United States, or South Korea the moral high ground: in retrospective, their actions should be condemned as much as the DPRK's aggression. To this day, the Korean War is a scar reminding the Hermit Kingdom what could happen if their country were to be invaded again. This scar also serves as the starting part for the first part of Kim Jong-un's *byungjin* policy: he has placed a significant emphasis on military defense to "safeguard him and his regime" from the outside world.<sup>20</sup> The questionable yet assumed *morality* of capitalistic nations is a lesson that the Kim family has likely not

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<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 1, “Burning Memories.”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Andrei Lankov, "Is Byungjin Policy Failing?" Kim Jong-un's Unannounced Reform and its Chances of Success," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 29, no. 1 (March 2017): 35, <http://www.kida.re.kr/kjda>.

forgotten, which could explain why this young Korean leader has taken drastic measures to protect his country from foreign aggressors, doing all in his power to avoid becoming a victim once again.

### **Nuclear Weapons: Aggressive Tactics or Defensive Measures**

By placing a heavy emphasis on military defense, Kim Jong-un has found himself further ostracized by the world. A primary issue has created this dynamic: North Korea's nuclear program. Since the early 1990s, containing North Korea's nuclear program has been a concern of the global community. The nuclear program has drastically changed under Kim Jong-un, who has made the development of this nuclear program the cornerstone of his defensive military policy. The actions of Kim Jong-un, particularly in 2017 when he conducted several missile tests, have exacerbated the view that North Korea is an aggressor. These tests resulted in the passage of three United Nations economic sanctions by the end of 2017.<sup>21</sup>

If a nuclear program condemns the DPRK internationally, why do North Korean leaders have ambitions of developing a nuclear program? Because of the United States. Having an atomic weapon is a means of survival for countries that fear retaliation by the United States.<sup>22</sup> As Cummings explains, declassified documents indicate that at numerous times during the war, there were plans to use an atomic bomb against North Korea. After the armistice, nuclear weapons were installed in South Korea to use against the North as the first line of defense in the event of another war. This differed from the American Cold War approach in Europe. The

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<sup>21</sup> These sanctions include Resolution 2375, which increased the prior sanctions; Res. 2371, banning coal and iron exports; and Res. 2397, banning oil imports, and metal, agricultural, and labor exports. Eleanor Albert, "What to Know about Sanctions on North Korea," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/>.

<sup>22</sup> Priyanka Boghani, "The U.S. and North Korea on the Brink: A Timeline," *Frontline*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/>.

European strategy relied on ground troops and would delay the use of nuclear weapons as much as possible since "the other side [USSR] had them."<sup>23</sup> Based off the Cold War policies of the United States, it seems rational why North Korea would want nuclear weapons: defense. As the director of the National Committee on North Korea, Keith Luse, surmises: the goal of Kim is to "put North Korea in a position so no one in the world would dare attack."<sup>24</sup> Developing a weapons program would ensure that the U.S. would have to change its tactics regarding the DPRK.

Long before North Korea was thinking about defense, however, it was concerned with energy security. During the Kim Il-sung era, North Korea's energy resources were limited due to the global influence of the U.S. on coal and oil.<sup>25</sup> Luckily, with North Korea's substantial number of uranium resources, nuclear energy was preferable.<sup>26</sup> Yet, this energy focus of the North Korean nuclear program was misconstrued by the outside world through the lens of the post-Cold War landscape. With the conclusion of the Cold War, the U.S began to transition from nuclear weapons to smart bombs, subsequently demonizing other nations that possessed nuclear material. This became a major goal of the George H.W. Bush administration following the Gulf War, where it became apparent that parts of Iraq's nuclear program had been overlooked.<sup>27</sup> With the secrecy surrounding the Hermit Kingdom, it became the convenient new target of American attempts to be the world's protector.

Over the past three decades, North Korea and the United States have been tiptoeing around nuclear negotiations with no end in sight (see figure 2). The closest the U.S. and DPRK

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<sup>23</sup> Cummings, Chapter 2, "American Nuclear Threats."

<sup>24</sup> Dufour, *Kim Jong-un*.

<sup>25</sup> Note: U.N. Resolution 2371 bans coal and oil imports

<sup>26</sup> Cummings, Chapter 2, "American Nuclear Threats."

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

were to implementing an agreement was in 1994, when former president Jimmy Carter went to North Korea and negotiated the Agreed Framework, an agreement in which North Korea would stop construction nuclear reactors and the United States, and its allies would provide aid and fuel resources. However, the end of the Clinton administration resulted in a breakdown of the Agreed Framework. Instead of a resolution between the DPRK and U.S., there were the September 11<sup>th</sup> terror attacks, resulting in more scrutiny of North Korea's nuclear program. While a new round of negotiations would begin in 2003, they would fall apart in 2009 with the beginning of the Obama administration.<sup>28</sup> A program that began with an energy focus has resulted in 120 missile launches, 89 of which occurred under the direction of Kim Jong-un.<sup>29</sup> Instead of these negotiations leading to the end of hostilities, they seem to have created more.

### North Korean Nuclear "Crisis" 1991-2009

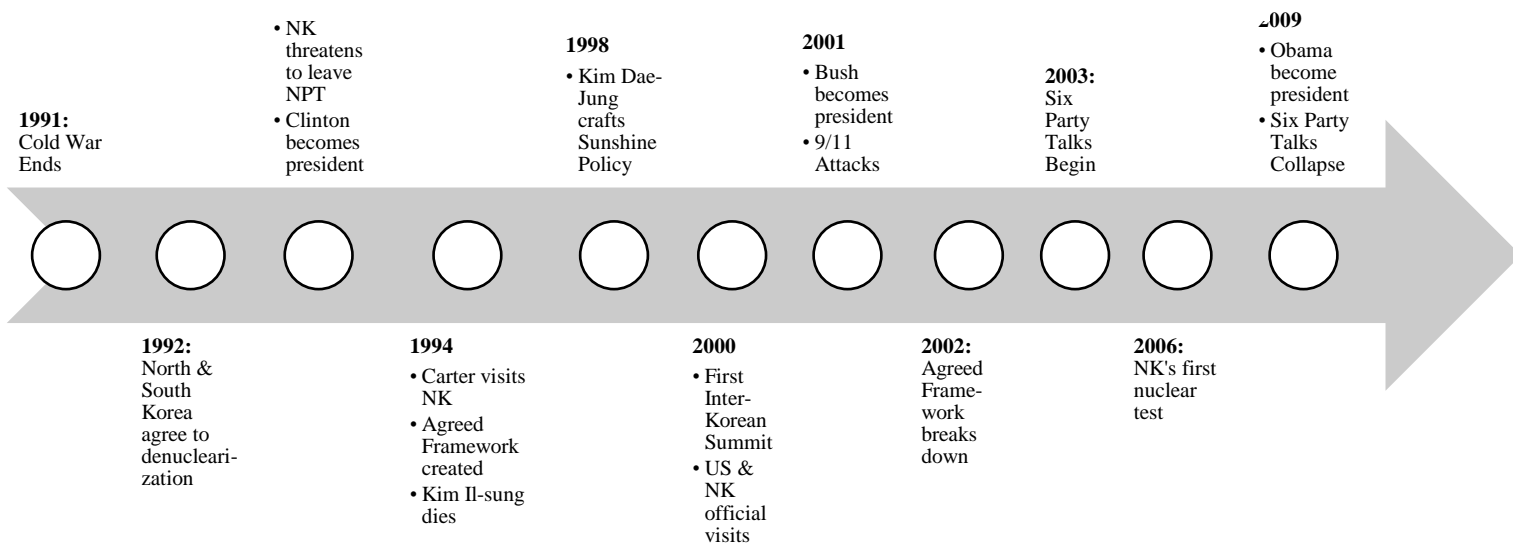


Figure 2. North Korean Crisis Timeline. Derived from *Foreign Policy*, the *Council on Foreign Relations*, and Cummings.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Robbie Gramer & Emily Tamkin, "Decades of U.S. Diplomacy with North Korea: A Timeline," *Foreign Policy*, March 12, 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/12/>.

<sup>29</sup> Statistics as of November 29, 2017. Albert, "What to Know About," 2019.

The recent failure of the Hanoi summit between Trump and Kim is just the latest instance of how far apart these two countries are in reaching a settlement regarding nuclear weapons. Throughout these negotiations, distrust has been sown between the U.S. and DPRK. The United States fears the secrecy of the Hermit Kingdom and what they may be developing behind closed borders. North Korean leaders are wary of allowing foreigners to inspect their facilities and report back to the United States. Since the breakdown of the Agreed Framework, neither side has moved from their initial position, but has dug in deeper. Having nuclear weapons made North Korea a credible threat at the negotiating table, a position that it has been angling for since its annihilation during the Korean War.

When it comes to his political calculus, Kim Jong-Un undoubtedly weighs the failure of these past negotiations when dealing with international players, particularly the United States. From the perspective of North Korea, there is no reason to trust the United States because historically, negotiations have been ineffective. Probably the most pressing issues is continual leadership changes and ideological changes that occur within the American presidency (i.e., the breakdown in the Agreed Framework from Clinton to Bush administrations). The best-case scenario for Pyongyang would have been a similar deal that Iran received during the Obama administration; however, President Trump's cancellation of the Iran nuclear agreement highlights what the future could hold for North Korea's nuclear program, while also making America's current president untrustworthy.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, denuclearization is not a possibility. Kim Jong-un only needs to look at what has happened with Muammar Ghaddafi in Libya, the invasion of Iraq,

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<sup>30</sup> Jayshree Bajoria, and Beina Xu, "The Six-Party Talks on North Korea's Nuclear Program," *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 30, 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/>; Gramer & Tamkin, "Decades of U.S. Diplomacy with North Korea: A Timeline."; Cummings, Chapter 2, "American Nuclear Threats."

<sup>31</sup> Motoko Rich, "Trump's Iran Decision Sends North Korea a Signal. Was It the Right One?" *The New York Times*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/09/>.



or Iran's current situation under Donald Trump to know what a future without nuclear weapons could hold.<sup>32</sup> Presently, global conditions mean that negotiations do not favor North Korea. Condemnation by the global community does not need to matter to Kim Jong-un if he is able to protect his Kingdom through *byungjin*.

### **Capitalism and USBs: Decrypting the Hermit Kingdom**

Now that he has his nuclear defense system in place, Kim Jong-un has turned to the second branch of *byungjin*: economic development. Due to its socialist structure, as well as its former dependence on the USSR, North Korea is not known for having a robust economy. But the invisible hand is now present in the Hermit Kingdom, and it is far from a country that Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong-un would recognize. Kim Jong-un has had to take a much different approach with the new North Korea in order to ensure the survival of his regime the most radical change is happening on an economic level.

One of the constructs of the DPRK is that it is a desolate, third world nation. While this was the case during the 1990s, visitors and defectors are now sharing a different story about life in North Korea. Granted, the Hermit Kingdom is not some hidden, Asian Wakanda, but the depiction of destitute and famine is not quite accurate either. The changes within the DPRK began with the loss of Soviet Union support, resulting in the failure of the government handout system, and the famine of the 1990s. These events devastated North Koreans, who had been reliant upon government handouts for almost two generations. With no alternative means of supporting families, these changed conditions resulted in the death of millions.<sup>33</sup> This also forced

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>33</sup> Tudor and Pearson, 11.

Koreans to find new means of survival, resorting to informal trading centers and forever changing communist North Korea.<sup>34</sup>

What emerged were the *jangmadang* (장마당), trading centers that are nicknamed "gray markets" due to their quasi-legal status in North Korea. Due to the extreme hunger and lack of government support, people had to be creative in order to survive. One young defector describes how she would sell "leftover soybeans from the chaff of factory."<sup>35</sup> While the government initially tried to crackdown on these markets, eventually so many people were partaking in trading activities that it became impossible for authorities to stop the *jangmadang*. Instead, the government has found certain means to exert control: for traders to operate, they must pay a stall tax to the government. Most authorities take bribes to look the other way when it comes to smuggling.<sup>36</sup> The *jangmandang* are so deeply engrained into society that the government has no choice but to allow their existence; in fact, scholars believe that getting rid of "capitalism in North Korea would greatly increase the possibility of another famine."<sup>37</sup>

The *jangmadang* are not just impactful because of the introduction of capitalism into North Korea, but due to the exchange of new goods and ideas. At the *jangmadang*, just about every good imaginable is available to purchase. North Koreans describe these markets as a place where you can "buy anything . . . other than a cat's horn;" meaning as long it exists, it can be purchased.<sup>38</sup> Some of the most sought-after items, especially for the younger generations, are foreign media and clothing. Easily found and accessible to North Koreans are brand names such

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<sup>34</sup> The famine years (1994-1998) are also called the *Arduous March* in North Korea, portrayed as a wartime campaign the Kims tried to fight; *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Chad Vickery and Sokeel Park, *The Jangmadang Generation*, Liberty in North Korea, 2017, <https://www.nkmillennials.com/>.

<sup>36</sup> Tudor and Pearson, 19-24.

<sup>37</sup> Vickery and Park, *The Jangmadang Generation*; Tudor and Pearson, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Tudor and Pearson, 119; Vickery and Park, *The Jangmadang Generation*.

as Rayband and Burberry.<sup>39</sup> Smuggling between China and the northern parts of the DPRK has resulted in an infusion of foreign media, first on videotapes, then DVDs, and now USB drives which have large memory banks and are easily accessible. Now, it is easy for North Koreans to gather and watch foreign films and television shows and later trade these USBs on the market.<sup>40</sup>

The trading of USBs is affecting the mindset of North Koreans. Defectors describe how exposure to these films changed their perception of the outside world; for years, they had been taught to believe that North Korea was the wealthiest nation in the world but watching South Korean dramas and Hollywood films made them realize that this was not the case. Foreign films were also more relatable to North Koreans, as these movies focused on a real person, not a member of the Kim family.<sup>41</sup> After watching Hollywood movies, Koreans no longer believe that the U.S. is evil or that South Korea is merely a puppet of America; instead, these nations also contained real people, people often more relatable than their own leader. Beyond relatability, these films depict a world much different than the DPRK, one that displayed the wealth of nations through tall building, cars, and airplanes. This exposure has even promoted curiosity of the outside world, leading some of the bravest of young North Koreans to defect.<sup>42</sup>

What does this mean for the Kim Jong-un regime? The rise of the *jangmadang* have essentially forced Kim Jong-un to rule the country differently than his predecessors; the government handout system has completely broken down. Yet, instead of merely tolerating these markets like his father did, Kim Jong-un has gone further to keep the markets entrenched in the North Korean economy, lifting most of the restrictions on market activities.<sup>43</sup> According to those

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<sup>39</sup> Jeppesen, Travis, "Shopping in Pyongyang, and Other Adventures in North Korean Capitalism," *The New York Times Magazine*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

<sup>40</sup> Vickery and Park, *The Jangmadang Generation*.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Tudor and Pearson, 44-46; Vickery and Park, *The Jangmadang Generation*.

<sup>43</sup> Jeppesen, "Shopping in Pyongyang."

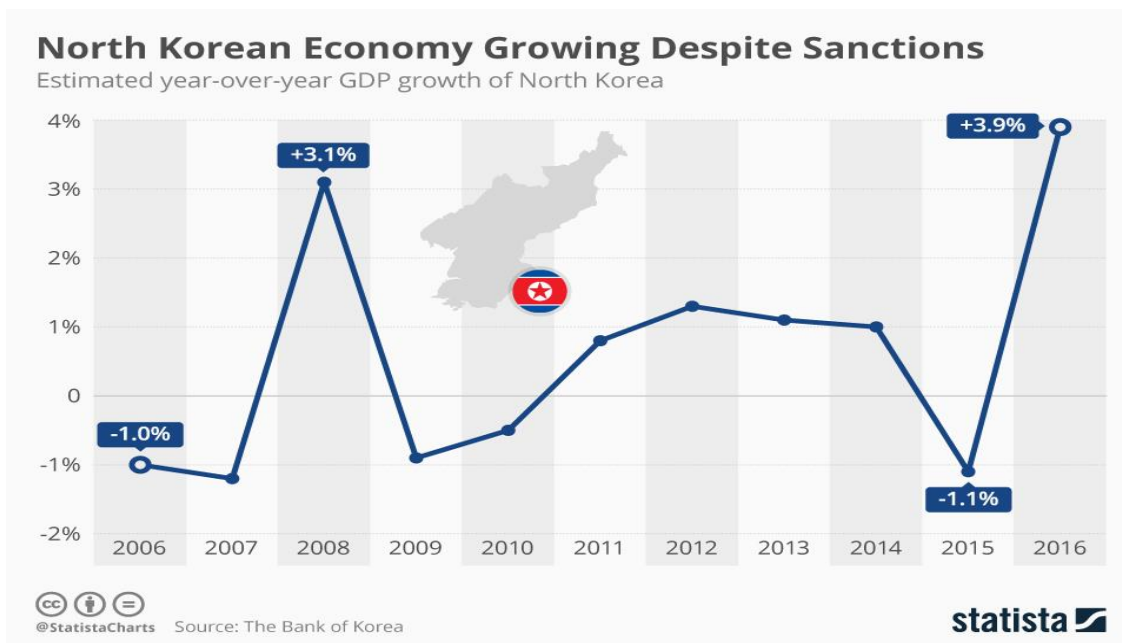


Figure 3. Isobel von Kessel, "North Korean Economy Growing Despite Sanctions," *Statista*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.statista.com/chart/>.

who operate the marketplaces-known as "masters of money" or *donju* (돈주)-harassment from authorities has almost disappeared while the number of *jangmadang* have doubled from 200 to 406 during the first five years of Jong-un's rule.<sup>44</sup> His commitment can also be seen through his decision to send scholars abroad to study the basics of business, global economics, and how to transition from a planned economy to a free-market.<sup>45</sup> These ventures seem to be successful so far. As previously mentioned, up to 2017, the North Korean economy was growing around 4%-this, despite having no formal market economy (see figure 3).<sup>46</sup> In comparison, the U.S. economy has grown 2.3% annually since the Great Recession.<sup>47</sup> Embracing market activity instead allows Kim Jong-un the opportunity to take North Korea into a new future, one where the economy can continue to expand through *jangmadang* activity. However, undermining economic growth is the tense dynamics that have resulted from the regime refusing to acknowledge these

<sup>44</sup> Lankov, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Dufour, *Kim Jong-un*.

<sup>46</sup> Jeppesen, "Shopping in Pyongyang." Data collected before the 2017 sanctions on North Korea.

<sup>47</sup> *World Bank*, "Public Data," Created by Google, July 6, 2018, <https://www.google.com/publicdata/>.

markets due to the socialist nature of the DPRK. For instance, while the *jangmadang* are no secret in the Hermit Kingdom, public discussion of the markets is off-limits, especially with foreign tourists. More concerning is that the *jangmadang* are still classified as part of the informal economy, and most of the vendors still have to pay bribes to officials in order to operate; high levels of corruption tend to undermine economic growth because it takes money away from the economy.<sup>48</sup> If Kim Jong-un is truly committed to improving the economy, Pyongyang must be willing to abandon its socialist nature and fully embrace capitalism. This would allow for markets to be incorporated into the formal economy of North Korea and decrease corruption expenditure, allowing more cash stimulus into the DPRK economy. Therefore, until the Kim regime can navigate its position on *jangmadang*, North Korea's economy will never be able to reach its fullest potential.

Kim Jong-un's readiness to handle a new future as the deity-status of the Kim family is being questioned. Exposure to foreign media has shown that the propaganda sponsored by the government is false. As many defectors explain, Koreans are feigning obedience in the name of survival, but do not believe in the government line anymore.<sup>49</sup> During his early rule, a book about the childhood of Kim Jong-un was "withdrawn following criticism that it 'distorted and exaggerated the leader's grow-up years' and a new book was to be released, one that was "revised . . . so ordinary people could accept it."<sup>50</sup> Yet, while awareness means that the Kim's family role has changed, it does not necessarily mean that a revolution is on the horizon. For more Koreans, foreign media is seen more as a form of entertainment, not political

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Vickery and Park.

<sup>50</sup> Sung Hui Moon, "New School Textbook on Kim," trans. Ju Hyeon Park, *Radio Free Asia*, February 9, 2013, <https://www.rfa.org/english/>.

disobedience.<sup>51</sup> What North Koreans are yearning for is the world that has been shown to them, a world that is so much bigger than the borders of the Hermit Kingdom, and a leader who is similar to them, not a god. A former advisor to the Kim family believes that Kim Jong-un road to success lies with connecting "with people who remember the great famine from their childhood,"<sup>52</sup> as the relationship between the elites in North Korea and leadership is being challenged. What motivates Kim Jong-un is also what drives his people: survival and a better tomorrow for North Korea. So far, embracing the entrepreneurial spirit of the famine generation has benefitted Kim Jong-un's *byungjin* plan. The next logical step to realizing the full potential of the North Korean economy is opening the economy—and country—to the outside world.

### **Trump and Sunshine: *Byungjin* on a Global Scale<sup>53</sup>**

Kim's pivot to his policy of *byungjin*, the focus on military strength and economic development, is an acknowledgement that North Korea cannot sustain itself on *juche*, or self-reliance. While Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il advocated for *juche*, North Korea has historically not been self-supporting. During the Cold War, it was heavily dependent on the Soviet Union and since then, Pyongyang has relied upon the patronage of China, though the Sino-Korean relationship has been strained during the Kim Jong-un rule.<sup>54</sup> The rejection of *juche* is the beginning of the Kim Regime negotiating the Hermit Kingdom's place on a global scale.

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<sup>51</sup> Tudor and Pearson, 47.

<sup>52</sup> Dufour, *Kim Jong-un*.

<sup>53</sup> Note: While China plays a significant role in North Korean relations, the emphasis on this section is on the United States and South Korea, as the relationship between these three countries have changed the most under Kim Jong-un's rule

<sup>54</sup> Sukhoon Hong and Yunyoung Cho, "North Korea's Transition of its Economic Development Strategy: Its Significance and the Political Environment Surrounding the Korean Peninsula," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 30, no. 4 (December 2018): 502.

One of the most telling signs that "self-reliance" has ended is Kim Jong-un's attempts to rebuild a relationship with South Korea. Kim's ability to reach out to South Korea has been the outcome of happenstance: the foreign policy decisions of Donald Trump combined with the resignation of former South Korean president Park Geun-Hye, leading to the election of Moon Jae-In. Trump has proven to be an unreliable ally, particularly in East Asia, resulting in American allies seeking new international relationships. At the same time, the election of liberal Moon Jae-In allowed South Korea to pursue warmer relationship with North Korea, one potentially more secure than the current partnership with the United States. Moon's political reputation is built upon the late 1990s Sunshine Policy, an objective that focused on using soft power exchanges to build a new relationship with the DPRK.<sup>55</sup> Moon's ability to relaunch the Sunshine was initially undermined in 2017, as tensions on the Korean Peninsula escalated due to back and forth provocations between Trump and Kim Jong-un. The tides completely reversed in 2018, with a new emphasis on a summit between the two leaders. Setting the stage for this summit was Moon's invitation to North Korea to participate in the 2018 Winter Olympics, which were held in South Korea.<sup>56</sup> Throughout the rest of the 2018, the two Korean leaders continued to connect, engaging in three summits, setting the stage for a joint bid for the 2032 Olympics and even taking steps to demilitarize the border (ironically known as the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> S. Nathan Park, "Moon's Secret Weapon is Sunshine," *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/19/>.

<sup>56</sup> Lawrence Freedman, "Moon Jae-In's Diplomatic Dance," *New Statesman*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.newstatesman.com/>.

<sup>57</sup> *BBC Sport*, "North and South Korea Agree to Joint 2032 Olympic Bid," September 19, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/olympics/45571727>; Hyung-Jin Kim, "Koreas to Verify Removal of Border Guard Posts Newt Week," *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/>.

The Moon government has made major concessions to help establish a relationship between the two Koreas over the past year, which has been reflected in his most recent budget. Moon made huge budget increases to increasing economic cooperation, inter-Korean summits, and more separated family exchanges (see figure 4).<sup>59</sup> While there are clear cultural and historical connections between the two countries, economics seems to be the driving factor behind inter-Korean engagement. For the South, Moon's initiatives have been supported by business and financial sectors, with 90% of South Korean traders believing that "a stable environment... between the North and the South" will create new opportunities.<sup>60</sup> However, economic investment has come at the cost of supporting civil liberties initiatives in North Korea, as the funding going towards economic programs comes from human rights organizations. Defunding human rights groups could also be a positive for Kim, as these groups are allegedly focused on the collapse of the Kim regime.<sup>61</sup> Continuing this relationship has the potential to enhance North Korea's economy, in alignment with Kim's *byungjin* policy.

#### 2019 Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund Budget<sup>58</sup>

	Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation	Inter-Korean Separated Family Exchanges	Inter-Korean Talks	North Korean Human Rights Foundation	Assistance for North Korean Defectors
2019 Budget*	\$447.7 million	\$18.2 million	\$1.4 million	\$2.2 million	\$34.4 million
Change between 2018-2019	+46.6%	+58.6%	+104.3%	-80%	-31.6%

Figure 4. Note: \*\$1 = 1,126.49 as of December 11, 2018

<sup>58</sup> Lee Yong-Soo, "Seoul Slashes Budget for North Korea Human Rights," *The Chosun Ilbo*, August 29, 2018, <http://english.chosun.com/site/data/>.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Mena Report*, "Korea, Republic of: 90% Trade Companies, Improved Inter-Korean Relations Will Help Economy and Business," *Academic OneFile*, July 2, 2018, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/>.

<sup>61</sup> Lee, "Seoul Slashes."



Of course, this momentum is more likely to come to a sudden halt due to the many obstacles impacting this relationship. As much as Moon may want to interact with North Korea, he is limited by United Nation sanctions that will not be lifted until an agreement is reached between the U.S. and the DPRK. The longer these sanctions are enacted, the more damage may be inflicted upon the DPRK's economic growth.<sup>62</sup> Sanctions have already impacted numerous construction projects, such as the Wonsan-Kalma beach tourist site due to lack of material imports.<sup>63</sup> This construction site was a major component of Kim Jong-un's initiative of boosting tourism to North Korea. Finding a resolution and sanctions relief would be the best-case scenario for Kim's economic endeavors. However, the rhetoric from the failed Hanoi summit highlights how Trump and Kim have two different goals in mind: either a denuclearized North Korea with a U.S. presence on the Peninsula, or a nuclear power DPRK with no American military.<sup>64</sup> Under the current international environment, Kim Jong-un's *byungjin* policy is producing two competing objectives: he cannot have his nuclear weapons and develop his economy, too. As he continues to navigate Pyongyang's position on a global scale, Kim will have to decide if defense or economics will keep the Hermit Kingdom on the map.

### **On the Issue of Survival: Nukes or Economics**

As a leader, Kim Jong-un's actions point to motivations that go beyond the ideology that his predecessors established. By abandoning *juche* and moving towards an initiative that isn't predicated on reverence towards the Kim family, he has enabled significant changes within

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<sup>62</sup> Sukhoon Hong and Yunyoung Cho, "North Korea's Transition, 505.

<sup>63</sup> Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "The North Korean Economy in April 2019: Sanctions are Pinching-But Where and How Much?" *38 North*, April 19, 2019, <https://www.38north.org/2019/04/>.

<sup>64</sup> Elliot Waldman, "Can South Korea's Moon Revive Stalled Nuclear Talks with North Korea?" *World Politics Review*, April 15, 2019, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/>.

North Korean society and globally. North Korea is undeniably a nuclear power. A sitting American president has met with the DPRK's chairman not once, but twice. Capitalism has found a home in the *jangmadang*. Kim Jong-un's ambitions have centered on improving the lives of his people, leading to the adoption of *byungjin*. However, now that outside forces are calling for North Korean denuclearization in order to have economic sanctions lifted, Kim has a significant choice to make: how can he best protect his country and regime?

The clear choice is nuclear weapons. Before shifting his focus to the economy, Kim Jong-un spent the early years of his rule building up the defense of the nation, ensuring that his country would be safe from outside forces. It wasn't until North Korea became a credible nuclear threat that Kim turned his attention to economic activity. Now that his economic plans are being hindered by international sanctions, Kim must realize that his ambitions will have to become a long-term project. For Kim Jong-un, his economic plans can be paused while the Hermit Kingdom waits for international community to change. Kim holds the advantage: his reign will last until his death, while Donald Trump and Moon Jae-In are limited by presidential terms.

Kim Jong-un has demonstrated the numerous ways in which he is a different leader than his father and grandfather. By implementing a more tolerant policy towards economic activity, he has shown he is attuned to the discontent of North Koreans. While waiting for a more ideal international environment may seem contrary to the goals of *byungjin*, for Kim this calculation is the best for the survival of his country, family legacy, and regime. He is surely motivated by the survival of the DPRK and has used history to be his guide. What he knows that his country can survive: North Korea is not unaccustomed to suffering: his people have already survived the famine and it learned how to prosper in its aftermath.<sup>65</sup> What Kim Jong-un should want to do is

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<sup>65</sup> Albert, 2019.

avoid another Korean War and do everything in his power to keep the moral outsiders from invading. That is why denuclearization is not an option.

Are Kim Jong-un's actions correct? Unfortunately, the answer depends on the perspective you are subscribed to. Kim Jong-un is most likely motivated by what he deems to be best for the survival of his country, which is at odds at what is best for the security of the United States and its allies. However, this has always been the problem with understanding the DPRK. Journalist Suki Kim summarizes the opinions of South Koreans hoping for a resolution with the North: "It is not right to judge according to the American way . . . this was why U.S. foreign policy on North Korea always failed. In America's perception, it's always Good versus Evil, them being right and others wrong."<sup>66</sup> As long as the good versus evil narrative dominates our worldview, North Korea's motivations will always be deemed wrong. However, by moving beyond this simplistic narrative and analyzing the interconnected picture of military history, economic development, and geopolitical relations, we can begin to decipher what is motivating the young Kim Jong-un, to create his new mosaic for the Hermit Kingdom.

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<sup>66</sup> Suki Kim, "The Deal Maker," *The New Republic*, October 22, 2018, <https://newrepublic.com/>.

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