NORTH KOREA AND IRAN: Drawing Comparative Lessons

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Reasoning by analogy can be a dangerous analytical strategy, at times misguiding more than guiding. However, it can also enhance one's perspective and allow one to evaluate information previously considered outside the realm of relevance. Analogies and comparisons have risks and rewards, and one must first establish the limits of the analogy by recognizing core similarities and differences. In this case, area specialists focused on Northeast Asia or on North Korea alone risk restricting themselves to a single commonly accepted set of data and interpretations, potentially making it more difficult for them to bring new ideas to the table. In the course of researching this working paper, I found that many arguments about North Korea policy have been reiterated multiple times over the last two decades. North Korea experts are generally familiar with a certain version of history, and by virtue of their specialization will seldom professionally follow developments in other regions. The policy literature on Iran suffers the same weaknesses of redundancy and parochialism. Try as they may, one camp is unlikely to persuade the other to adopt its view of recent history that provides the data on which policy preferences are formulated, but there may be greater room for incorporating out-of-region data points into these discussions.

This article seeks to leverage a common comparison between Iran and North Korea made by high-level policymakers of all political stripes in the United States. At a superficial level, the reasons for making such a comparison are readily apparent. Iran and North Korea pose similar challenges to U.S. interests in that both nations are developing nuclear weapons and long-range missile systems, expound official ideologies radically hostile to the United States, have relatively little power in the international system but manage to defy Western hegemony in regions it values highly, and have grossly objectionable records on both human rights and political freedom. Add to this the missile trade and possibly even nuclear cooperation between the two countries and the comparison begins to seem compelling (Niksch 2003; Niksch 2010; Chaim and Chyba 2004; Wellman and Frasco 2010).[1]

Both North Korea and Iran are led by non-democratic governments with substantial problems in their human rights records. Unfortunately, these characteristics are hardly uncommon in today's world. A deeper examination of the two countries' governments exposes differences in ruling ideology, domestic government functions, and scale of human rights problems. Iran's revolutionary theocracy is built upon an idea of rule by virtuous scholars (in this case, scholars of religious precepts). The founding ideology is a particular form of Shi'i Islam with its traditions and ingrained justifications for the use of authority. The ideology of North Korea's revolutionary polity lacks the theoretical and theological foundation of a world religion on which to stand. Instead, the state has sponsored efforts over the last six decades to enhance the *Juche* ideology's foundation and in recent years, has attempted to promulgate a "military-first" political ideology; however, these ideas remain highly

fluid concepts that build on intense nationalism and anti-imperialism, with socialist economics mixed in almost as a historical afterthought.[2]

North Korea and Iran are also located in different regions. Although it is easy to point to obvious similarities between these globally important regions, the differences between them in terms of economic, security, and political issues quickly stand out. Northeast Asia has five major political players: the United States, China, Japan, and the two Koreas. The first three are the three largest economies in the world, South Korea the thirteenth-largest, and North Korea the clear outlier as the region's poorest state (CIA World Factbook 2010). The relationships between these players are complicated by long-standing historical grievances, territorial disputes, overlapping alliances, deep trade relationships, and a variety of political regime types. The region has been free of large-scale militarized interstate conflict since the Korean War despite high conscription rates in the Koreas, high defense spending in absolute terms in the United States and Japan, and large numbers of men and women under arms in China.

Iran's neighborhood is quite different. The region is more difficult to define, but the U.S. Department of State counts 18 countries as part of "Near East Asia," or the Middle East. These states are generally weak in the sense that they do not have a monopoly on the means of coercion within their borders; international terrorism poses a major challenge to regional stability, domestic and foreign policy initiatives, and even the stability of individual governments. Relations between states in the Middle East have been problematic, with relatively frequent interstate war. While Iran's economy is far from healthy, it is not the type of economic outlier in its region that North Korea is in Northeast Asia.

These similarities and differences are important, because states' foundational ideals and domestic political realities, as well as the international dimension of economic, security, and international political concerns, form the structural backdrop upon which national leaders form strategy. The primary concerns of American foreign policy in these cases—including the development and proliferation of nuclear and missile technologies, conventional military behavior that undermines regional stability, issues of political freedom and human rights, and humanitarian challenges—are outgrowths of a political process. They are symptoms of a disease but not the disease itself. Treating the symptoms of influenza, for example, may produce temporary relief but does not deal with the underlying problem of the influenza virus; likewise, a brute effort to physically excise a virus is likely to fail and to do more harm than good. This working paper's task is to contribute to studying this disease in its integral form rather than as a collection of symptoms, in the hope of finding better treatments than currently employed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign policy and defense policy bureaucracies as well as think tanks are often organized along regional or functional lines. There are North Korea experts and Iran experts. The North Korea experts may also focus on South Korea, Japan, or even China. The Iran experts may spend more of their time on Iraq or even Israel. These

people know a great deal about the political structure, goals, and surrounding regions of the countries they follow or study, but one would be hard pressed to find a "North Korea/Iran" expert who possesses a comprehensive knowledge of both countries and their respective regions. Someone focused on nuclear or missile development and proliferation or on illicit finance may regularly follow both of these countries, but their work is likely to be limited by the boundaries of that single issue. And while governments and research institutes can establish positions for special advisors on North Korea and Iran to help bridge this gap, these positions are exceptions rather than the norm and exist outside of the normal production of analysis and scholarship. Perhaps as a result, the literature on the relationship between Iran and North Korea and the comparison between the two countries is sparse, and formal attempts to analyze North Korea and Iran together tend to take the form of edited volumes with separate discussions of the two countries and little active effort to leverage one country's experience against the other.

Academic researchers are often better placed to carry out comparative studies of two or more countries in different regions with a focus on meaningful themes, but the professional study of contemporary foreign policy challenges has disappeared from the agendas of most political scientists today (George 1993; Walt 2005). Consequently, despite the fact that Iran and North Korea are regularly grouped together in high-level policy pronouncements, little has been published on the comparison between them (Kaplan 2009; Wolfowitz 2010; Sanger 2010). The review of literature on this important topic is therefore brief and offers substantial opportunities for scholarly improvement.

There are exceptions that provide a useful background for the present study. Patrick Cronin (2008) compares the "Double Trouble" that Iran and North Korea represent for the international order. Arguing primarily from a security perspective, Cronin contends that these two states pose a major threat of interstate conflict at a time when this type of war is being replaced as a major security concern by intrastate (civil) wars and transnational terrorism. The pursuit of nuclear weapons by Iran and North Korea creates specific problems, especially in their respective regions, and presents general challenges to the nonproliferation regime. But with the exception of Shahram Chubin's chapter on Iran's efforts to obtain nuclear weapons in order to enhance its prestige and as a function of its domestic politics, the analysis remains at the symptom level. The reader is left with a sophisticated understanding of how the actions of Iran and North Korea threaten regional order and of past efforts to suppress this particular behavior, but the focus is on these states as holistic actors and little attention is given to how these regimes could be influenced from the inside out. We are still left with the task of providing new perspectives and ideas on how to address these problems.

Bruce Cumings, Ervand Abrahamian, and Moshe Ma'oz (2006) focus on American foreign policy towards North Korea, Iran, and Syria respectively and present a liberal argument for greater diplomatic rapprochement with these states. Alexander Lennon and Camille Eiss's edited volume, *Reshaping Rogue Regimes*, provides insightful articles on the countries designated by the George W. Bush administration as the "Axis of Evil," which are "generally recognized as underdeveloped countries pursing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and supporting terrorism" (Lennon and Eiss 2004: vii). The authors ground their analysis in U.S. policy and questions of high politics, rather than in an understanding of the regimes and the populaces that they seek to

govern, and how those groups may be influenced. These states are linked together because they pose security challenges to the United States and its allies and because stronger countries have largely failed to rein in these relatively weak countries using methods short of war. The theoretical essays discuss preemption, regime change, counterproliferation, and cooperative security as strategic options, and the drawbacks of these options. Ultimately, however, the editors leave it to the reader to make the comparison: "we hope that you can also discern parallels among the threats and regime behavior of the three [Iran, Iraq, and North Korea] as well as international reactions to available policy options to help draw your own conclusions about the direction for future strategy" (Lennon and Eiss 2004: xii). While this has an educational advantage for a reader marketed for classroom use, it may also reflect the simple lack of comparative and genuinely integrated scholarship on North Korea and Iran.

APPROACH

In order to draw relevant lessons for understanding and influencing North Korea from the study of Iranian motivations, limitations, and policy actions and responses, a rigorous methodology is required. Classic comparative politics methodology teaches the best way to do so is to make sure the researcher has at least one more case than the number of variables in the study. Thus, if a researcher wished to compare two cases with distinct outcomes and these two cases differ in more than one area, then it would be impossible to determine empirically which of the variables accounted for the difference in outcomes; however, given a sufficiently large number of cases, it is relatively easy to isolate the variable that causes the different outcome (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). But North Korea and Iran are complex entities that differ from each other in many respects, and expanding our study beyond the two states risks transforming our conclusions into something too abstract to be useful in formulating policy. A researcher could decide to study another question with greater methodological rigor or attempt to address the question posed by this working paper and be content with producing tentative conclusions that seek to broaden our perspective and provide new ideas on an important issue where both new ideas and new data are at a premium.

In order to broaden perspective and provide North Korea watchers with a greater understanding of the Iranian case and the lessons to be learned from it, I briefly discuss the contemporary history and political ideology of Iran. I concentrate on the areas that contribute to today's policy choices in an effort to expose some of the reasons that Iran (and possibly North Korea) may decide to pursue policies so out of step with the rest of the world that they have been labeled "rogues." I evaluate Iran's domestic politics and integrate a comparison with North Korea. I reject the notion that either country operates as a single, unitary actor at all times; instead, Iran and North Korea should be understood as a group of interests that align on many but not all issues. In other words, I advocate that the two states should be viewed as complex political systems with particular ideologies, internal politics, and even differing elite opinions and interests. I evaluate policy choices by Pyongyang and Tehran that affect the Northeast Asian and Middle Eastern regions and beyond as a function of each state's domestic politics. I highlight the strategic goals of each state, which I contend are outgrowths of their political ideologies and domestic political arrangements. In evaluating the actual policy choices made by Iran and North Korea, I note how these two states are capable of pursuing policies the United States and other nations find objectionable

in order to satisfy their own inward-looking domestic demands or as part of outward-looking foreign policy strategies.

In the concluding section, I attempt to bring this together, highlight the relevance for U.S. foreign policy, and refocus on my thesis that achieving meaningful and lasting diplomatic solutions with these relatively weak states, which nonetheless maintain sufficient power to resist both decades of American and allied coercive efforts and the lure of incentives, requires political choices in Tehran and Pyongyang. Reaching that point will require moving beyond a narrow focus on the end result of these nations' internal political processes, to a broader engagement with the political ideas and domestic political demands facing Iran and North Korea. Thus, the approach taken in this paper is not simply to highlight similarities and differences between these two states and their policy approaches to issues important to Washington, but to focus on areas that can influence the short- and long-term direction of these nations' policy choices and strategies. My hope is that experts on North Korea and Iran policy can learn something from the experiences of their counterparts.

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Iran's experience with European colonialism and the Great Game, coupled with its national sense of historical greatness, reinforced xenophobia and uncertainty about its proper place in the current world politics. Also, the Great Game gave the Iranians experience in playing the European powers against one another to maintain their national identity. Likewise, the Koreans opposed European and Japanese meddling in their internal politics, viewing it as an affront to their great ancient civilization. More specifically, the ease with which the British and Russians deposed Iranian opposition factions in the early 1900s convinced many Iranians of the need for a unified nationalism (Pollack 2004: 4–24). Likewise, Koreans' response to European colonial ambitions and Japan's annexation of Korea essentially created Korean nationalism (Ekert *et al*. 1990).

Both Iranians and Koreans have good reason to rue their early experiences with foreign powers. The British government's conversion to an oil-driven navy substantially increased its demand for petroleum during the First World War. Russia's need to feed its forces in Iran's northern breadbasket region, as well as the practice of pulling peasants from the fields to fight in the war, precipitated a famine that killed up to two million Iranians of a population of ten million at the time (Pollack 2004: 24–25). While North Korea also suffered a devastating famine much later in its history, its cause is more directly linked to its own government's policies than to those of a foreign country (Haggard and Noland 2007). The Japanese occupation, under which sustained efforts were made to eradicate Korea's national identity, imposed material and physical hardship on the Korean people.

The current North Korean and Iranian regimes were both born out of revolutions with at least some anti-imperialist element, but these were very different revolutions. The northern part of Korea was home to a variety of small group leaders who fought against the Japanese occupation; Kim Il Sung's band of roughly 300 guerrilla fighters was just one of those groups. But the Japanese defeat in the Second World War left a political vacuum in which Kim Il Sung and his followers gained an important place, eventually winning Soviet backing (Armstrong

2004). Like Korea, Iran found itself in a state of poverty in the wake of the Second World War. Unlike Korea, however, Iran quickly sought to rid itself of Soviet influence. The Shah preferred to rely on the United States, which went so far as to remove a quasi-constitutionalist Iranian leader from power in 1953 and Iran became the largest recipient of American foreign aid by 1956 (Gasiorowski and Byrne 2004). Meanwhile, North Korea defined itself as anti-Japanese and anti-American, even as its rival Korean state in the south became a recipient of massive foreign aid from the United States.

In the 1950s, the United States encouraged Iran to reform its government and sought to support Iranian moderates; its aid relationship gave it a certain amount of leverage to push the Shah's regime in this direction. Washington used a contrasting approach with Kim Il Sung's government. Seen through the lens of Cold War geopolitics, North Korea was simply aligned with the Soviet bloc and the aggressor against an American ally in the South, so it did not receive economic aid but rather economic sanctions. American leverage in Iran realized some modest movement on political reform with the Shah's government. Political change in Kim Il Sung's government, on the other hand, was in the direction of greater political control. Kim Il Sung consolidated his power and by the early 1970s was at the head of a fully fledged totalitarian regime (Scalapino and Lee 1972).

During this critical postwar period, the Shah's Iran and Kim Il Sung's North Korea were far apart on virtually every meaningful social, economic, and political measure. North Korea's government was an intensely anti-American and socialist state with an industrializing economy; it was committed to reunifying the Korean nation and maintained firm state control over society. The Shah's government relied heavily on the United States and on a traditional nexus of a landed aristocracy and a strong army; Iran built an extractive, oil-based economy, did not need to worry about national reunification like the Koreans, and developed a very different state-society relationship. Iran has a history of social mobilization, of which the summer 2009 post-election protests were the latest example (Maloney 2009). Iran has a relatively active civil society, various centers of power with readily identifiable interests, and a powerful and politically active clergy. In short, comparing the regimes of Kim Il Sung and the Shah would be an exercise in authoritarian contrasts.

It is important to understand these histories as they occurred in time in order to see the effect of critically important global forces, such as the reshaping of power relationships in the aftermath of the Second World War. But the Iranian and North Korean revolutions did not occur at the same time. The 1979 Iranian revolution was not a product of a major global event like the Second World War, which altered the international order more than any other event at any other time in the twentieth century and created an opportunity for significant political change. Instead, it was a product of forces operating primarily in and around Iran in the 1970s.

Iran suffered from the paradox of oil wealth. The sudden influx of much greater oil revenues resulting from the sharp increase in oil prices during the 1970s distorted Iran's economy, government, and social structure. While North Korea's revolution came out of the deprivation caused by the Japanese occupation, the Iranian revolution was prodded along by excesses of oil wealth. The Shah spent wastefully and extravagantly on defense and on modern civilian goods, but his efforts to buy modernity and modern conveniences outpaced Iranian infrastructure and Tehran experienced frequent blackouts due to an overtaxed electrical grid while much of the countryside still did not have electricity (Pollack 2004: 109). The Shah's squandering of Iran's newfound wealth

not only deprived Iranians of real development, but actually created new hardships. The Shah's spending crowded out the civilian economy, driving up prices as his demand for goods outpaced increases in supply in a classic inflationary case. It was easy to view the Shah's economic mismanagement as wasting an important opportunity for the nation.

Rather than shift course, the Shah attempted to silence the resulting dissent by relying increasingly on his secret police and terror. He also formed a single political party in 1975 reminiscent of truly totalitarian regimes like Kim Il Sung's North Korea, effectively banning the political opposition, to ensure that dissenters lacked a political vehicle with which to threaten his control. His plan failed. As more Iranians flocked to Tehran from the countryside in search of economic opportunity, they often found themselves with upturned lives and turned to religion to find some grounding. Though the Shah espoused secularism and unleashed his terror on clerics as well, clerics retained an independent power base. The Shah could not completely intimidate this group, and by removing alternative political parties in 1975, he enhanced the importance of the mosque as a center of political opposition. The Shah's attempt to repress the clerics ultimately was unsuccessful in preventing them from forming a tenuous alliance with several social actors in order to come out into the streets in force and start the Iranian revolution.

One such cleric was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was committed to two core principles: opposition to the Shah and opposition to the Shah's backer, the United States. Khomeini was a charismatic figure with support from a network of radical clerics in mosques around the country. He sought a utopian political order, but one very different from Kim Il Sung's vision for North Korea. Khomeini supported the idea that Islamic scholars should effectively operationalize divine law to create a moral order, while Kim Il Sung talked of the need for a reunified nation and for his countrymen to follow his personal sage guidance. Iran's revolution was primarily a domestic revolt against the Shah and his American backers, while the North Korean revolution was the product of a nationalistic fight against a foreign colonial power. These distinct revolutionary foundations would produce very different regimes. The two leaders did, however, share an intense anti-Americanism.

The North Korean and Iranian regimes not only used the United States as a convenient scapegoat for domestic problems in their respective countries but also seemed genuinely convinced that the United States threatened their security (Takeyh 2006: 15–20). The Iranians remembered the 1953 coup backed by the CIA, while the North Koreans remembered the American role in the 1950–53 Korean War. These events were different, but both stylized memories followed the same pattern: the Americans meddled in their internal affairs and frustrated a great national goal. The Iranian clerical government's narrative holds that the U.S.-sponsored 1953 coup ended the constitutionalist reform movement of the hated Shah regime, while the North Korean government's narrative explains that only the American intervention in the Korean War prevented national reunification. Both governments trace the origins of many of their contemporary problems back to these foundational developments and worry—with an inflated sense of national self-importance—that the Americans naturally are plotting against them even now.

REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY

The outcome of the Iranian revolution of 1979 was the establishment of a new political system which put into power a government guided by Shi'i Islamic principles. Ayatollah Khomeini, a key figure in the Shiite hierarchy, led the revolution against the Westernized Shah and enabled the Shiites to step onto the stage of world politics. Khomeini pursued a political plan aimed at the fundamental Islamization of Iranian society. Following the revolution and a national referendum, Iran officially became an Islamic republic on March 30, 1979 (Küng 2007: 442).

While Shi'i Islam had historically been the state religion of Iran, it was not until the revolution that the clerics took on the role of directly conducting the affairs of the state (Bill and Williams 1987: 130–31). The constitution, ratified in December 1979, institutionalized clerical power and created a theocracy (Gettleman and Schaar 2003: 259). In 1982, Khomeini insisted that Iran's courts strictly base their decisions on Islamic regulations rather than on secular legal codes (Cleveland 1994: 411). In Islam, all just law derives from God. *Shari'a*, the sacred law of Islam, "is an all-embracing body of religious duties, the totality of Allah's commands that regulate the life of every Muslim in all its aspects; it comprises on an equal footing ordinances regarding worship and ritual, as well as political and (in a narrow sense) legal rules." (Schacht 1982: 1). Thus, a legal framework was developed that stressed the preeminence of eternal and divine law. Furthermore, Khomeini asserted that since only jurists could authoritatively interpret the texts that establish the normative legal custom (*sunna*), only the jurists were qualified to lead the affairs of the nation.[3] Members of the Shi'i *'ulama* began to serve as cabinet ministers, parliamentary deputies, and in many other powerful government roles (Riddell and Cotterell 2003: 208).

Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran remains the quintessential example of Shi'i political rule. According to academic scholars James A. Bill and John Alden Williams (1987, 2002), the essence of Shi'i political rule can be summarized by the following ten characteristics:

1. All power and authority emanates from God, and therefore there is no distinction between mosque and state, between the secular and the religious;
2. The entire community of the faithful (the *umma*) takes precedence over any constituent parts thereof, whether they be individuals, families, tribes, or nation-states;
3. The divine law that has been revealed to mankind through the prophet and the imams takes precedence over all human law;
4. All social, economic, and political affairs are guided by this divine law, known as *shari'a*;
5. The interpretation and implementation of the *shari'a* is to be entrusted to the guardianship (*velayat)* of learned jurisprudents (*fuqaha*), who are leading members of the *'ulama*;
6. A special leader (*faqih*) oversees the political system; he is the authoritarian leader at the center of the state. This leader must be learned, righteous, and accepted by the people;
7. Within this context, political participation is an important right and obligation of citizens;
8. The principle of political participation is enshrined in an Islamic constitution that provides for a national representative body known as the Islamic Majlis;

9. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a system of Islamic populism in which ultimate power resides in God and His representatives (*fuqaha*) on earth, while important residual power rests with the people who have an important role both in accepting the *faqih* and in electing their political representatives;
10. The cardinal principles of justice and equality demand that the masses of the poor and the deprived (*mustaza'fin*) be accorded special consideration within the Islamic Republic.

Thus, the Islamic Republic of Iran can be characterized as a system of Islamic populism in which "the ultimate authority resides in God and His representatives (*fuqaha*) on earth, while important power rests with the people, who participate in elections and the ongoing business of politics" (Bill and Williams 1987: 132). Scholars of Iran and Shi'ism have not only described the Islamic Republic of Iran as a system of Islamic populism, but have argued that Khomeini was a populist rather than a fundamentalist (Abrahamian 1993: 17; Dorraj 1990; Moqhissi 1994). A populist is a politician or political leader who claims to represent the interests, views, or tastes of the common people, particularly as distinct from those of the rich or powerful. The term is often applied to someone with demagogic tendencies. Khomeini was such a political leader.

Khomeini mobilized the people of Iran using a religious political philosophy that stressed equality and justice. He often spoke in terms of class conflict and emphasized the unjust plight of the oppressed (*mustaza'fin*), who were the victims of the arrogant (*mustakbarin*).[4] Ayatollah Khomeini's statements and writings are filled with references which stress the preeminence of divine law over human law. Because human law is subject to the whims and passions of man, Khomeini argued, only *shari'a* can be the guide to the straight path.[5] Although the learned clerics and jurists have a special authority and significant influence in the Islamic Republic as guides and guardians of the faithful, there remains room for popular participation. Khomeini emphasized the National Islamic *Majlis*, a legislative body chosen by the Iranian people in national elections, as an institution through which the people could exert influence (Bill and Williams 1987: 96).

Despite the prevalence of the North Korea-Iran comparison, at the ideological level the comparisons are quite abstract. Both regimes were formed and led by a charismatic demagogue and had some level of rhetorical commitment to class conflict. But Khomenei's religious motivations and justifications cannot be found in North Korea. Khomenei launched his revolution against the material mismanagement and secularism of a domestic leader, while Kim Il Sung rallied support from nationalists committed to ejecting hated foreign colonialists. Khomenei was a religious scholar with a well-formed idea of government, while Kim Il Sung was a largely uneducated guerrilla fighter who was only required to think about governance after the defeat of Japan. Khomenei tapped into religious zeal (especially during the Iran-Iraq war) to justify his policies and to rally domestic support, while Kim Il Sung used naked nationalism to achieve similar domestic political goals. Kim Il Sung created an ideological system familiar to this readership based on this anti-imperialist sentiment and incorporated socialist economics, but ultimately did not have the benefit of a great world religion to justify his role or to enable him to make transcendental promises of rewards in the next life. He had to invest even more in efforts to promote ideological indoctrination and suppress dissent in order to secure his rule.[6] These differences have produced two political systems with different foundations and, as we will see, distinct modes of rule.

REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS

Iran's revolutionary government was and is made up of a variety of different interests and groups. Khomeini managed to unite these interests during the revolution to overthrow the Shah, and subsequently incorporate some into his ruling circle while removing others (Maloney 2008: 6–7). Despite the "big tent" of Khomeini's initial political campaign, his personal political goals were more limited and focused. Khomeini sought to bring about national rule by Islamic scholars in order to create the ideal political order. That country would express a distinctly anti-Shahist and anti-American outlook, and seek the only moral foreign policy of exporting the revolution. The Supreme Leader's first target for exporting the revolution was his own backyard, which entailed removing the United States from the region and opposing the Mideast peace process. Khomeini's goals were ambitious but rather focused for a revolutionary.

Revolutionary leaders often face difficulties when they are called to actually govern. Ideas and ideals do not always translate easily into practice and policy. The Iranian government's multitude of power centers meant that institutions opposed to certain policies often could block them and, on less central issues, manage to take unauthorized actions. The broad contours of such an arrangement are not novel to bureaucratic politics, but Iran's specific political make-up and history of an active civil society made this issue more pronounced. Consequently, Khomeini tried to curb these tendencies, first by eliminating some institutions and later by creating an additional layer of bureaucracy above the institutions to mediate disputes. However, these councils created additional power centers with their own interests and simply complicated the political picture.

The existence of a similar situation in North Korea presents important lessons for understanding the role of the National Defense Commission (NDC). After Kim Jong Il established a system of "divide and rule" to check powerful interests within his regime, he eventually elevated the NDC to a new height of prominence. The role of the NDC is not entirely clear today, but the Iranian experience suggests that if the institution has grown real support to deal with a broad array of policy questions in an expert manner, then it should take on an institutional life of its own. On the other hand, it may simply remain a senior-level advisory group, relying on the bureaucracies to do the staff work and channel and mold much of that information into policy formation and execution decisions.

Nevertheless, a similar divide between ideologues and pragmatists arose in both Iran and North Korea, with familiar arguments. Iran's pragmatists presented the value of foreign aid and investment, while the radicals advocated a self-help approach to solving the nation's economic problems. Beyond (but clearly related to) economic matters, the pragmatists argued for easing tensions with the United States. For Khomeini, who defined the core principles of the revolution as anti-Shahism and anti-Americanism, this reformist plank was simply unacceptable (Takeyh 2006: 31–44; Pollack 2004: 238–40). North Korea's pragmatists and ideologues carry out the same debate on the relative value of economic opening and trade liberalization that requires a less hostile international relationship with the United States and ideological opposition to "selling out the nation" in accommodating the hated imperialists (Carlin and Wit 2006).

Even before Khomeini died, the rise and fall of revolutionary and pragmatic elements in Tehran on

specific policy matters produced swings in policy choices (Takeyh 2006: 2–5, 31–35). The clerical establishment proved to be not without differences of opinion, much like North Korea's elite establishment, on questions of the greatest importance for the state (McEachern 2010). For example, Iranian pragmatic mullahs favored ending the Iran-Iraq war, while the radicals (especially the leaders of elite *Pasdaran* units) argued that the conflict was a holy war that could not be abandoned. When the Saudis offered to broker a peace deal in 1982, Iraq's Saddam Hussein accepted. Iraq would pay $70 billion in reparations, which the pragmatists argued could be used to repair the colossal damages from the revolution and the first two years of the war. But Khomeini sided with the radicals and refused, noting that Iran's goals included liberating Karbala, Baghdad, and Jerusalem. Khomeini and the radicals sought to export the Iranian revolution. The war dragged on for another six years, during which time Khomeini continued to purge internal opponents as Kim Il Sung has used the Korean War to purge his internal rivals.

Khomeini relied on the radical loyalty of the *Pasdaran* units as well as Hizballah to suppress street protests in Iran after Iraq started bombing Iranian cities. A similar pattern of pragmatic versus revolutionary debates would emerge, with the pragmatists arguing that Iran should export the revolution by example and repair relations with the United States to fix Iran's economy, while the revolutionaries stressed the need to export the revolution in the near term to develop a more powerful bloc of countries able to resist American pressure. Debate would even emerge on important tactical decisions like whether to attack Basra or engage in risky naval clashes in the Persian Gulf (Pollack 2004: 193–225).

Yet Khomeini was not immortal, and revolutionary Iran faced its first leadership succession process when he died in 1989. His successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, voiced his early support for a degree of reform, but Khamene'i would prove to be no Khruschev. He moved to the hardline camp after assuming his duties as the Supreme Leader. Khamene'i lacked strong *bona fides*, much like Kim Jong Un in the third succession apparently underway in North Korea (Nasr 2009: 66–75). Left to moderate between radicals and pragmatists, Khamene'i signaled his newfound preference for the former. Likewise, aside from an increasingly distant bloodline to his grandfather, who North Koreans have long been taught was a revolutionary hero, the 28-year old Kim Jong Un lacks real legitimacy to run the state.

In both states, allegiance with the radical faction offers a clear ideological justification for the leader's rule as well as the backing of those with the zeal and weaponry to cause trouble in the short-term. Pragmatic policy experts may be able to help the state address some of its problems on the ground, but such people do not pose a threat to the leader's position. And one must first be able to rule before selecting a policy platform. In essence, the leader at the top may in theory have the freedom to select the nation's fundamental direction, but the structural characteristics of the political systems they inherit point them in one direction, at least until they are able to secure their power. If Khamene'i's experience is a solid precedent, then Kim Jong Un, too, should be expected to reside in the hardline camp, at least until he can establish his rule.

Indeed, the logic of the Iranian hardline opposition is the same argument put forth in North Korean publications:

> Iran's supreme leader appreciates that engagement with the United States is subversive and could undermine the pillars of the Islamic state. Dialogue, trade and cultural exchanges could, he understands, expose Iran to the unrelenting pressures of modernization and transform the revolutionary republic into another state that sacrificed its ideological heritage for the sake of profits and commerce. The politics of resistance and nuclear empowerment, on the other hand, affirm Iran's identity as a Muslim nation struggling against American encroachment. Economic sanctions can hardly disabuse Khamenei of such well-entrenched animosities…. In the end, the only path out of this paradox is to invest in an Iranian political class that is inclined to displace dogma with pragmatism. And that still remains the indomitable Green movement (Takeyh 2010).

The critical difference is the role of an identifiable Green movement in Iran. Many North Korea scholars still disagree on whether there is any meaningful elite-level disagreement within the regime, and there is certainly nothing identifiable in North Korea as a social movement. In this regard, Iran provides greater hope for internally led change than North Korea at present.

In the same year that Ayatollah Khomeini died and Ayatollah Khamene'i took the position of Supreme Leader, Iran elected a moderate reformer, Hashemi Rafsanjani, to the presidency. While Khamene'i would continue to support many of the revolutionary policies of his predecessor in a bid to enhance his legitimacy, Rafsanjani would embark upon a moderate reform plan. Iran's president is subordinate to the Supreme Leader but has some real authority. Even more important than formal authority, though, the Iranian president enjoys popular legitimacy and can channel Iranian popular views into policy priorities within bounds acceptable to the Supreme Leader.

After his 1989 election and 1993 reelection, President Rafsanjani attempted to address Iran's economic decline and repair the damage that had been done to the country by the disastrous 1980–1988 war with Iraq. Like North Korea's reformers, Rafsanjani advocated a mix of economic reform through marketization and a less confrontational approach to the outside world, especially the United States. Iran sought greater trade liberalization, requiring an ideologically difficult trade-off to achieve a less hostile relationship with the United States. And while Rafsfanjani's policies produced some benefits in the agricultural sector, the improvements ultimately did not satisfy popular demands (Keddie 2003: 263–68). Furthermore, Rafsanjani was not a pure reformer by any stretch of the imagination. He was a moderate who increasingly relied on the radicals for political support, and during the later part of his presidency, Iran became more aggressive outside its borders.

In response, U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich in 1996 publicly pushed for extra funding for covert action against Iran by the United States Central Intelligence Agency, and the Clinton administration imposed new sanctions. With Iranian hardliners in power, Tehran demonstrated that it had coercive options of its own beyond the development and proliferation of nuclear and missile technologies and supporting terrorism to derail the peace process. Iran enhanced its support for Hamas, Hizballah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to target Israel with terrorist attacks, and it created trouble for Arab nations friendly to the United States. Bahrain, which had just accepted a newly upgraded U.S. Fifth Fleet headquartered in its country, announced the discovery of an Iranian conspiracy to overthrow its government. Iran also seems to have created the Saudi Hizballah terrorist organization that detonated a bomb outside the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, which housed American military personnel; the

explosion killed nineteen Americans and wounded 372. A bomb manufactured in and shipped from Iran with only the ability to target civilians was even intercepted on its way to Germany (Pollack 2004: 278–86). All of these actions demonstrated the political will and capability of Iran's leadership to create near-term havoc on American interests.

Yet there is a limit to this type of Iranian (and North Korean) action. Hardliners can pursue these provocations to the point that they fear real reprisal, overt or covert, from the United States. Ultimately, they do not want to invite an American invasion or attack. After the Khobar Towers bombing, Washington seemed to be contemplating more robust countermeasures and by 1997 the Iranians had ceased their aggressive behavior temporarily. Iran stopped its aggressive surveillance of American personnel, kept a greater distance from American naval vessels in the Persian Gulf, and pursued a rapprochement with the Saudis. Again, Iran demonstrated its ability to oscillate between different policies and different levels of aggression abroad.

In 1997, Iran elected a different type of pragmatist, Mohammad Khatami. President Khatami advocated greater political freedoms, less dogmatism, and more pragmatism, and most boldly, a rapprochement with the Americans. Iran had failed to diversify its economy beyond oil exports and U.S. sanctions made trade more expensive for the Iranians. Corruption remained a real challenge, and inflation and unemployment continued to dog the Iranians, producing social challenges like drug use and crime. Khatami's pragmatic followers recognized these problems, but they proved less successful in actually solving them (Takeyh 2006: 44–54).

Iran's reformist experience went a good deal further than North Korea's flirtation with economic reform in the early 2000s. Unlike Iran, North Korea lacks meaningful elections that can produce even limited policy changes. Nevertheless, the North Korean economic reformers managed to win control of a limited agenda for roughly three years from the initiation of price and wage reforms in 2002 to the rollback of marketization with the reintroduction of the Public Distribution System in 2005. Iran's experience provides a useful lesson on the downstream consequences of possible future economic reforms in North Korea. The political victory of establishing a reformist agenda is not enough. Technocrats living in a revolutionary country have relatively few opportunities to develop their skills, and these countries face very serious social and economic difficulties. It is important to remember that while a shift towards pragmatists is a notable advance, these individuals need to be armed with the knowledge and skills to actually address the many challenges in their countries. If they do not provide empirically demonstrable progress quickly, then the whole basis of their political argument—that they can deliver results—quickly fades.

Khatami's government also boldly pursued a "Dialogue Among Civilizations" to consider improved relations with the United States (Keddie 2003: 71–72; Takeyh 2006: 110–16). To demonstrate their seriousness of purpose, Iran started keeping its warships at a distance from American naval vessels in the Persian Gulf and cut off the smuggling of Iraqi oil through its waters. The Clinton administration responded with a series of measures to demonstrate Washington's interest in improving relations. It eased visa restrictions to allow some Iranians to visit the United States and promoted people-to-people exchanges, added an anti-Iranian terrorist organization to the terrorist list, promoted cultural exchanges, provided Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) waivers to Europeans willing to cooperate on counterterrorism and nonproliferation, dispatched Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to

deliver a speech that called on Iran to develop normal relations with the United States, and removed Iran from the "Majors List" of states producing and allowing transit of narcotics; President Clinton even remarked publicly that the West must recognize its historical role in Iran and "find some way to get dialogue." Simply put, there was a flurry of activity, especially on Washington's side, to get relations on a more productive track. But the response in Tehran was troubling, and provides a cautionary lesson for engagement with North Korea.

The Iranian reformists proved brave in advancing such an agenda in face of only temporarily quieted hardline opposition. But the hardliners did not sit by idly for long. Despite Khatami's overwhelming election, they targeted the reformist government not only with bureaucratic opposition but with thuggish physical attacks in the streets. Hizbollah even joined in the fray, firebombing media outlets that supported the reformist agenda. An Iranian investigation revealed that Iran's intelligence services had assassinated at least 50 Iranian dissidents (Pollack 2004: 303–31).

The Iranian reform movement advanced further than one can really imagine North Korea moving in the near future. North Korean hardliners do not need to worry about the firebombing of opposition media outlets in their country, because opposition media outlets simply do not exist. They do not need to try to shut down communication with the outside world that they oppose, because very little seeps into the country. And most notably, North Korea lacks Iran's civil society and elections. Despite these differences, the events in Iran demonstrate that even if North Korea moves down the road towards greater openness and participatory government, entrenched hardline interests will likely at least attempt to repress even authoritarian views that are different than their own as long as they remain powerful politically or militarily.

LESSONS LEARNED

The main task of this essay still remains. What lessons can be learned from the Iranian experience to provide new perspective to dealing with North Korea? Moreover, the secondary question of what lessons can be learned from North Korea for Iran also remains to be elucidated.

1. American Domestic Political Vulnerabilities

The regimes of North Korea and Iran are widely despised in the West, especially in the United States. "Going soft" on these regimes is never a popular move with the American people or the United States Congress. The simple notion of good versus evil has a certain appeal, and justice requires that one punish evil to deter others from doing the same, to correct this behavior, and to simply act in a moral, just way. Consequently, active engagement with these regimes poses certain domestic political vulnerabilities before one even moves to the question of whether such difficult negotiations can bear fruit.

But the domestic political problem of engagement goes further. The United States is the most powerful nation in the world in military and economic terms. Americans widely understand this and rightfully take pride in it. Countries like Iran and North Korea simply are no comparison, so it is natural to a certain degree that

Americans expect their government to be able to convince or coerce these regimes into not challenging core American interests. The continued failure of the United States to impose its will creates a sense of powerlessness that was most vividly seen during the Iranian hostage crisis. An American president concentrated on a single issue out of a broad set of challenges in a single bilateral relationship, and yet this issue plagued his presidency for over a year and was only resolved after his electoral defeat.

It is tempting to draw the political lesson that no American president should touch these issues with a ten-foot pole. The engagement process is generally unpopular, the possibility of success is low, and administrations generally have higher priorities in other areas of domestic and foreign policy. Yet choosing not to actively address these issues is in itself a policy choice—and one that can only, at best, buy time to deal with other priorities. The real lesson of these experiences is that the problem does not generally remain unchanged while Washington concentrates elsewhere. Some diseases get better on their own; others fester without treatment.

2. Difficulty in Empowering Moderates

The limits of U.S. power vis-à-vis Iran and North Korea are also frustratingly apparent in attempts to empower moderate factions within the regimes. Any significant gesture toward the pragmatists by the United States or other foreign powers is immediately noticeable, and in light of the powerful anti-American sentiment that dominates both regimes, such overtures are seen to tarnish their internal images. In the case of Iran, well-meaning contacts did more to undermine these internal centers of pragmatic power than to support them, which should stand as a tactical warning to those who seek to empower North Korea's moderates. The Iranian pragmatists are much more clearly defined and identifiable, which may explain why there have been some American outreach to these groups. Yet none has seemed to work well. The Iran-Contra debacle was the result of one such overt effort to reach out to these pragmatists. Although the United States recognized the role of certain moderates like Rafsanjani who showed there was a faction in Iran interested in a new relationship with the United States, Washington ultimately decided it could not negotiate with a faction (Pollack 2004: 246–47).

This last point—that the U.S. government cannot negotiate with a faction—seems simple enough. But perhaps it is more accurate to note that it is difficult to figure out how to utilize this knowledge of factional politics to diplomatic advantage. Of course, it *is* possible—and common—to negotiate with factions. However, it is normally the *ruling* faction with whom governments negotiate and discuss outstanding issues. But regular diplomacy constitutes maintaining channels of communication with both ruling factions and opposition groups, inside and outside of governments, with the understanding that today's opposition may be tomorrow's rulers. It is well understood that opposition groups in democratic governments influence policy choices, but opposition groups in non-democratic governments do so as well, albeit often in a less direct and clear manner. So, the issue is not the impossibility of dealing or negotiating with a faction, but how knowledge of a divided regime and/or a divided society with specific interests can be most effectively leveraged to achieve diplomatic objectives.

Washington can attempt to take into consideration the internal politics of these states when formulating policy. It is wise to be wary of investing in individuals rather than in a broader bilateral relationship, and to bear in mind that knowledge of a country's internal politics tends not to be actionable directly or as the basis of a foreign

policy strategy. Rather, this knowledge should be seen as important background that improves understanding if Iran or North Korea make significant overtures that can potentially alter the relationship or facilitate progress on core United States goals.

Furthermore, we should be cognizant of the likely technical limitations of pragmatists. In 1963, the Shah embarked on a reform program known as the White Revolution that granted greater economic and political freedom and required greater administrative competence in government. The ambitious plan included land reform, worker profit sharing, factory privatization, new electoral laws to expand representation of workers and farmers, and efforts to improve employment options, public health, and education, among other measures. In either Iran or North Korea, such a move today would be a very significant development. Iran had individuals who advocated for such reforms at a strategic level, but a Bureau of the Budget report revealed that the country simply lacked the economic and administrative structure to implement and effectively execute these changes; as a result, the land reform gave peasants land but not enough that they could even eke out a subsistence. The calculations required to ensure such a program can be successfully implemented should be relatively simple, but apparently they either did not take place or did not make their way into the final decisions (Pollack 2004: 88–89). The capacity to sustain reform programs is a critical element of any political choice for reform.

Hoping that internal change in North Korea at the elite level might gradually change the way the regime does business requires not only a great deal of faith but confidence in the reformists' ability to deliver on political promises. The pragmatists' best argument is that running the state in a more rational and technocratic manner will bring better results. While the ideologue can emphasize the moral foundation of their endeavors, the pragmatist is judged solely on the ends. A North Korean reform effort that came anywhere close to the Iranian experience would be extraordinarily significant given the difficulties of change on these types of areas in the North, but that momentum would have to be sustained by more than pragmatic zeal—it would require technical skills not widely used at present. International capacity-building projects can and are slowly helping to prepare for this possible future, but the technocratic challenges are immense and will likely remain even if the opportunity for sustained political and/or economic reform comes to North Korea.

3. Speculating about a Nuclear Iran

This "lessons learned" section focuses more on the lessons Iran provides for North Korea policy for two reasons. The first is audience. As a U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS Working Paper, the objective of this essay is first and foremost to bring perspective to the primary readership. The second reason is that on areas where parallels between Iran and North Korea can be drawn, the North Koreans are simply in a worse position. North Korea's economy is more backward, its people more repressed, the scale of human rights and humanitarian problems greater, and the politics and nature of civil society far more restricted. Sad as it may sound, any movement by North Korea in the direction of Iran in the areas of political and civil society would be completely insufficient, but progress nonetheless. North Korea serves as a reminder to Iran watchers that the situation with regards to politics and civil society can indeed get worse, and provides an empirical example of what such a general idea would look like in practice.

North Korea also provides Iran watchers with some insight into what a nuclear-armed Iran might do. There has been a great deal of speculation about the consequences of a nuclear Iran that mirrored concern about North Korea's crossing the nuclear threshold. Analysts logically feared a nuclear North Korea could deter military retaliation for an increasingly aggressive foreign policy, including attacks on South Korea, Japan, or even the United States, or could transfer nuclear weapons wholesale to other states or groups hostile to the West (Albright 2010: 247). One could even worry that these weapons might be used in a crisis scenario. Likewise, the speculative scenarios for an Iranian nuclear capacity are very worrying. Iran might feel more secure from large-scale invasion and be more inclined to cause trouble in the Persian Gulf, intimidate its neighbors, or support terrorism to disrupt the peace process.

But North Korea has tested nuclear weapons, and Iran has not. North Korea's experience provides some (admittedly imperfect) empirical data with which to test the theory that a nuclear Iran would be more assertive. Since its nuclear test, North Korea has indeed developed a more assertive foreign policy, especially towards South Korea,[7] but it is difficult to source this development to the North's nuclear capacity. North Korea still maintained relatively warm relations with the South after its 2006 nuclear test, and relations only cooled following the move to the right in South Korea's policy towards the North with the 2008 inauguration of a new conservative South Korean president. North Korea's reported sinking of a South Korean naval vessel in early 2010 does not indicate a break from the country's hostile and violent interactions with its rival. In fact, today's North Korea remains much less aggressive than the North Korea of the past that sent commandos to South Korea's presidential office to assassinate the South Korean leader and killed several cabinet ministers with a bomb in another assassination attempt. These actions took place when North Korea did not have nuclear weapons, and before the United States withdrew its tactical nuclear weapons from the Korean peninsula. More recently, North Korea has transferred nuclear know-how and production capacity to Syria and possibly Iran, but it demonstrated a willingness to undertake such an action even before its nuclear test. This is not to detract from the importance of denuclearization, but only to suggest that the empirical evidence to date does not support the otherwise persuasive theoretical contentions about the specifics of the risks of a nuclear Iran.

The one area where North Korea's behavior seems to have changed the most after testing its nuclear capability is in the denuclearization negotiations themselves. North Korea no longer seems willing to accept the same terms it accepted in the past, when its nuclear program was merely a theoretical possibility. Now that the country has demonstrated its ability to actually produce nuclear weapons, the price for giving them up has increased. The situation has created a general perception that the North is uninterested in denuclearization on any terms, rather than that it is uninterested in denuclearization at the old price and while the government is embroiled in the succession process. These two characterizations are critically different in that the first implies that denuclearization is impossible and the latter does not. It is difficult to determine which is correct while negotiations remain at an impasse. Nevertheless, the lesson for Iran watchers is rather simple. As difficult as denuclearization efforts are now, they will become more difficult if Iran completes its bomb or gets close enough that the political leadership considers it a *fait accompli*. Despite the temptation to see time as "on our side" given possible internal political changes in these regimes, from the denuclearization perspective, it is not.

4. Diplomatic Presence

By the late 1960s, foreign journalists stationed in Tehran mentioned that there was no longer any reason to talk to the American diplomats there about internal developments in the country. The U.S. embassy's decision to not meet with civil society leaders and instead focus only on government-provided information limited and skewed its reporting and understanding of events in the country (Pollack 2004: 95–96). Though the point may seem obvious, often the most obvious are the most important to remind ourselves about, even if only briefly. If the United States ever opens a diplomatic facility of some form in Pyongyang, the mere opening will not be enough. It should not be a political expression but an effective mechanism to provide information and perspective on the country. Since other Western embassies in Pyongyang are largely relegated to meeting with Cabinet pragmatists, a diplomatic presence offers the added advantage of arming moderates with critical ammunition in bureaucratic debates: information. A diplomatic presence is not a gift to a foreign state but a tool to influence the regime and to better inform policy choices at home. A lower status of such a diplomatic or quasi-diplomatic facility may limit its effectiveness to some degree in Pyongyang, but the alternative is the status quo (no presence) as the American Congress and American electorate would likely have little enthusiasm for a diplomatic mission, especially in the current atmosphere of succession-related tension.

CONCLUSION

We must recognize that North Korea and Iran are substantially different states. They pursue several important foreign policies of equal concern to the United States, but they exist in different regions with divergent security needs, have tremendously dissimilar economies and ideologies, and have very different conceptions of religion and politics. While the analytical judgment that these two diseases have similar symptoms may be clear, the policy conclusion that they should be treated with the same medicine is not warranted. It is the proverbial treatment of the symptoms rather than the disease.

North Korea and Iran remain difficult cases for American foreign policy. Making progress on either of these issues not only requires an in-depth understanding of the internal politics, economies, ideologies, and regional and global security concerns of these states, but demands a broader perspective on historical and recent events. The North Korea-Iran comparison is often thrown around lightly or with specific reference to nuclear and missile proliferation issues, but a diplomatic solution to each of these problems requires a deeper approach. It requires not only treating the symptoms but the disease. Empowering moderates is a noble but difficult goal. Washington cannot directly support moderate leaders and enhance their positions within their own governments, but it can keep these domestic politics and particular ideologies in mind when crafting policy. A diplomatic solution requires a political decision in Tehran or Pyongyang, and any action will be seen through a unique Iranian or North Korean lens. Understanding policy choices is not condoning them, but is the first step in managing these difficult relationships and making lasting progress.

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[1] For a discussion of North Korea-Iran nuclear cooperation, see Niksch (2003) and Niksch (2010).
[2] For more in-depth discussions of North Korea's ideology, see Park (2002) and Myers (2010).
[3] Esposito (1998: 233) notes that Ayatollah Khomeini took this argument a step further, considering a government ruled by the jurist-scholar to be "the best form of government prior to the return of the Hidden Imam."
[4] See for example Khomeini (1989: 28).
[5] See for example Khomeini (1981: 56): "Islamic government is a government of law. In this form of government, sovereignty belongs to God alone and law is His decree and command." See also Rajaee (1983: 54).
[6] For further discussion of North Korean ideological thought, see Park (2002) and Myers (2010).
[7] For the sake of simplicity, I refer to North Korea's policy towards the South as "foreign policy." However, neither Korea considers its inter-Korean policy as "foreign," since both governments claim authority over the entire Korean peninsula.

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