



## **Decoding the Hermit: What Is Kim Jong-il Up To?**

by Aidan Foster-Carter

Decoding North Korea is not easy at the best of times. That in itself is a Pyongyang ploy. An aura of mystery and a reputation for unpredictability are useful: they keep the world guessing, and nervous of provoking such a maverick. Blood-curdling rhetoric too is par for the course; yet grows stale by repetition, making it hard to know when they really mean it. Brinkmanship, again, is a tried and tested tactic. Far from incompatible with a will to negotiate, North Korea tends to take a maximalist stance before entering talks - such that any slight concession from the extremes it has gone to is seized on with relief by its interlocutors, as a sign of progress.

Nor, despite appearances, should we view Pyongyang as a politics-free zone, united behind and driven by a single Leaderly will. As DPRK diplomats see their successful recent outreach ruined - the European Union is suspending aid; Australia has shelved plans to open an embassy - it is hard to posit them as behind the current nuclear chicken game. Rather, this suggests that, as indeed they whisper, the real power lies with a benighted and inbred military, who have much to lose if peace breaks out. For that matter, Kim Jong-il himself may be in thrall to his generals. Or again, creating a crisis could be a bid to stave off unrest at home, as hunger continues to bite.

Domestic factors apart, the DPRK's nuclear gambit has mixed motives, not necessarily either/or. There is no reason to doubt North Korea feels threatened: in general by its own weakness and isolation, and in particular by a Bush administration that calls it names ("axis of evil"), has an avowed doctrine of preemption, and has shown in Afghanistan that it means business. Hence it seems logical to Kim Jong-il to amass a vast arsenal, by fair means or foul, to ensure he avoids the fate of the Taleban, Slobodan Milosevic, or (putatively) Saddam Hussein. The truly safer alternative, collective security and mutual phased arms reduction, seems quite beyond his ken.

Equally, North Korea is desperately short of resources and has no other chips to bargain with. So at least some of this arsenal is negotiable, as in the 1994 Agreed Framework (which froze the Yongbyon nuclear site, now being reopened) and a similar deal on missiles which the U.S. sought under Clinton but Bush chose not to pursue. If paying off Pyongyang remains cheaper and arguably less risky than other options, it is politically impossible for the U.S. right now. If Kim Jong-il grasps anything, it is hard to see how he can imagine his old militant mendicancy game could still work, post-Sept. 11 and even after admitting to a new covert nuclear program.

That admission, in October, caused the KEDO consortium to suspend fuel oil shipments due under the Agreed Framework; which in turn - plus, perhaps, pique at December's brief U.S. seizure of a cargo of Scuds bound for Yemen - prompted North Korea to expel the International Atomic Energy Agency and restart Yongbyon. (Pace Pyongyang, power generation is a red herring; Yongbyon produces plutonium, but not electricity.) Tit for tat aside, the timing is tactically astute: the U.S. is obsessed with Iraq, while South Korea's new president-elect, Roh Moo-hyun, supports engagement and mistrusts Bush.

If the aim is to get U.S. attention, Pyongyang has yet more cards to play. One is to end its self-imposed ban on testing long-range missiles, or actually fire one - or prepare to do so, as it did in 1999 (after launching one in 1998), which led the Clinton administration into missile talks.

All this, needless to add, is alarming and perilous. Provoking the U.S. in its current mood - like a puppy knowing no fear of a tiger, to quote a favorite Pyongyang proverb - is risky, at best. Even if for the next two months at least the U.S. is preoccupied in Iraq, a swift victory there (a big if, admittedly) would embolden Washington's hawks to try to repeat the trick. It would be unwise to assume that South Korean and regional opposition is guaranteed to stay their hand.

Meanwhile, those who favor dialogue have a brief window to prove it still works. In 1994 an earlier North Korean nuclear crisis was defused when Jimmy Carter flew to Pyongyang for talks with the Great Leader, Kim Il-sung. Now, as then, a mediator might help ease tensions. This time at least three candidates share a clear interest in breaking the deadlock. A summit with Kim Jong-il would get Roh Moo-hyun's presidency off to a flying start. Vladimir Putin has met Kim Jong-il three times and is keen to build Russia's role as honest broker in Korea. China too wants the crisis reined in, and covets the U.S. role as the Peninsula's hegemon. The new Hu Jintao could prove his mettle in Korea, or send Jiang Zemin as an elder statesman.

But all this hinges on North Korea playing ball. This time around, nothing less than full and verified nuclear disarmament will satisfy the U.S., plus (probably) a package deal covering Pyongyang's long list of other threats: chemical and biological weapons, conventional forces, and more. Is Kim Jong-il ready to deal for real, at last? If not, Korea could be in for a frighteningly unhappy new year.

*Aidan Foster-Carter is Honorary senior research fellow in sociology and modern Korea, Leeds University. This article draws from an analysis originally commissioned by BBC Online.*