

Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists

North Korea's nuclear neurosis

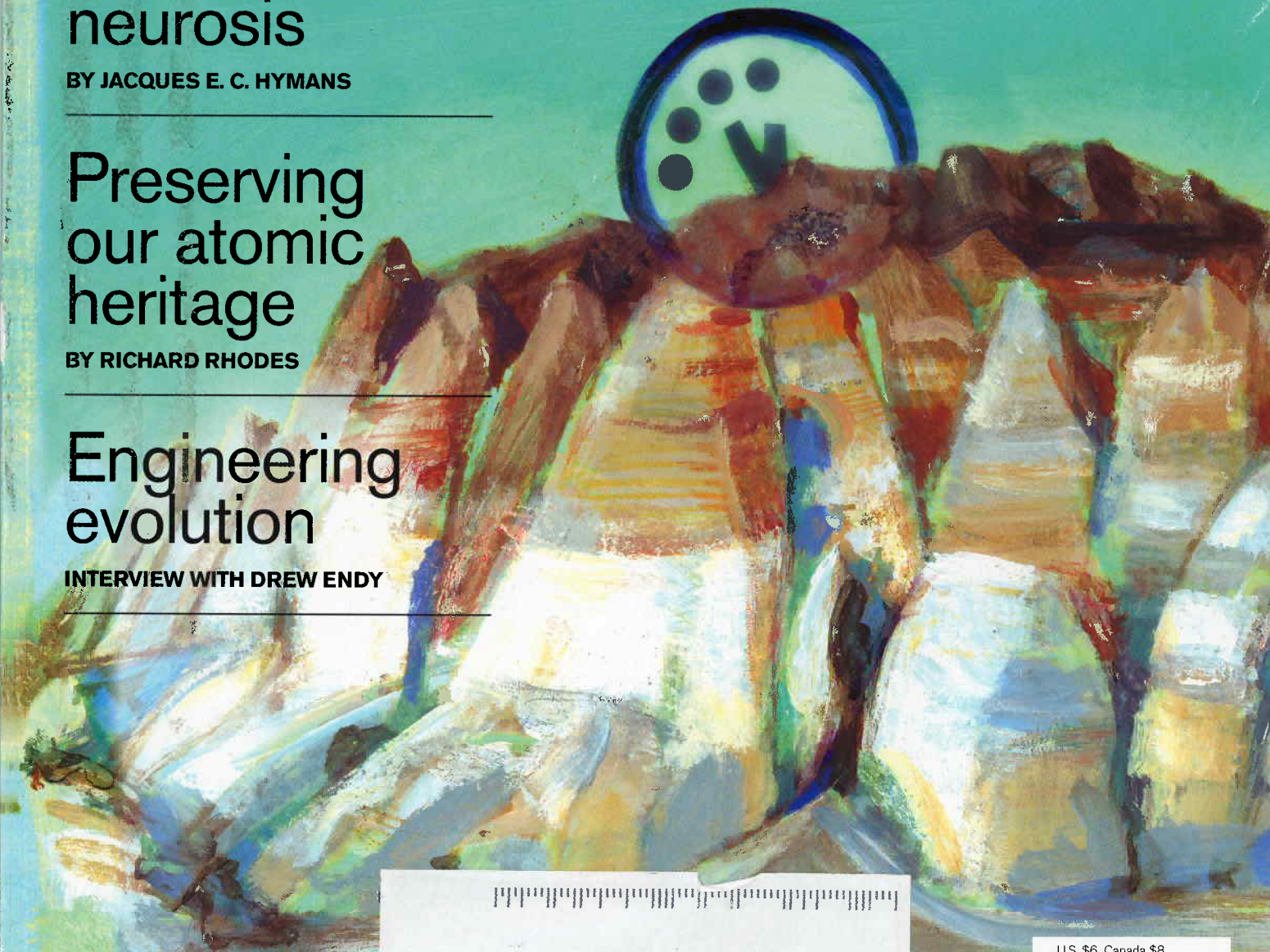
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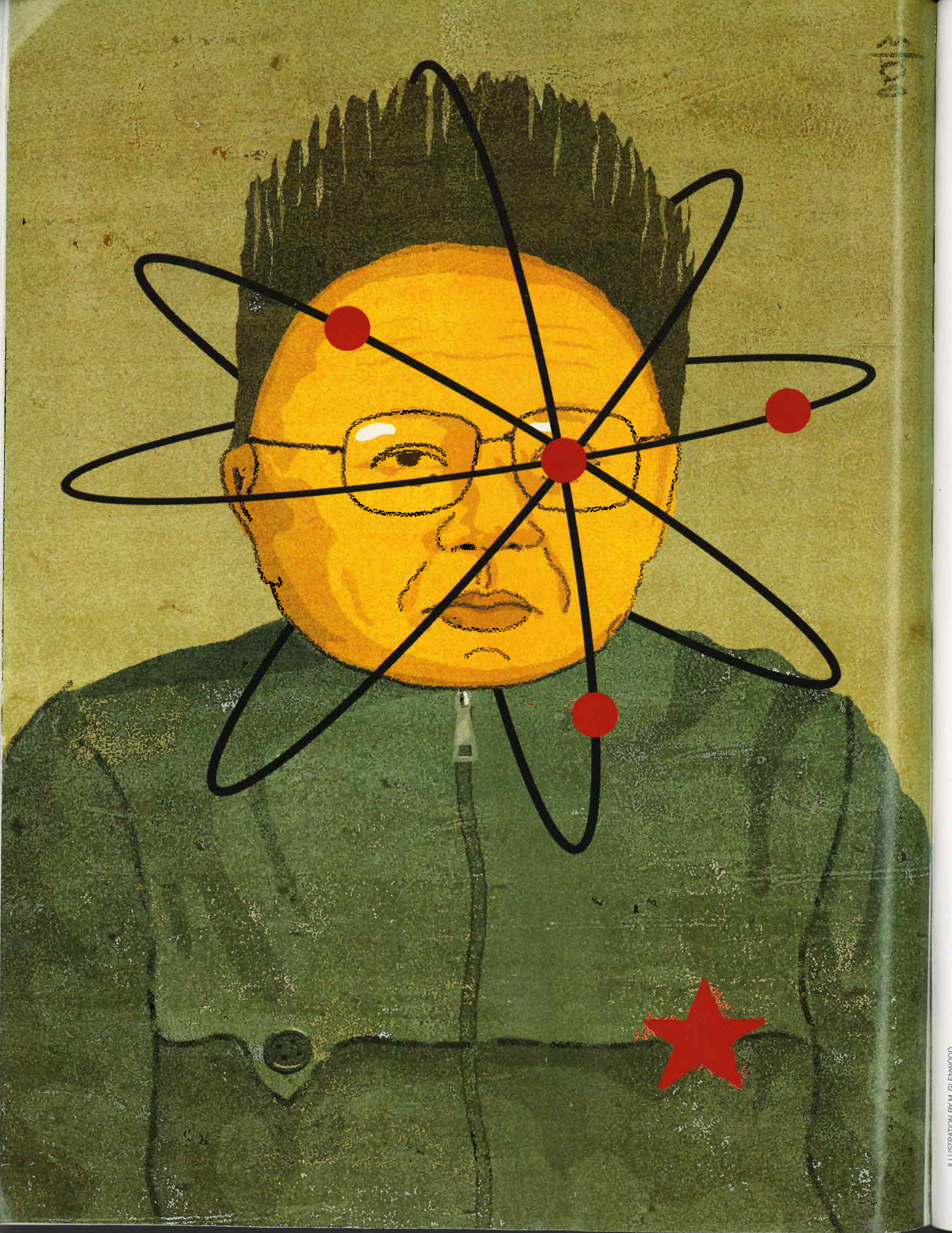
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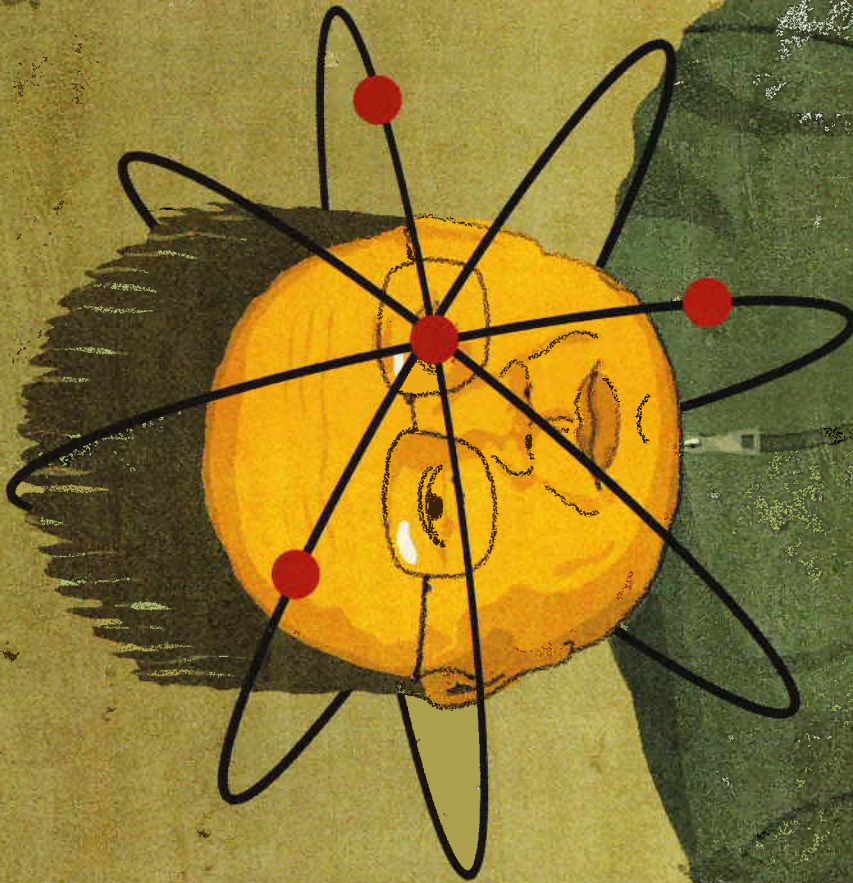


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Building the Bomb is a form of national self-expression—and that's especially the case for Kim Jong Il.
By Jacques E. C. Hymans

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NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR TEST OF October 9, 2006 shook the world—or at least lightly jostled it. The moribund six-party talks awoke from their slumber. On February 13, North Korea and its five negotiating partners (South Korea, China, Russia, Japan, and the United States) reached an agreement that foresees a modest transfer of heavy fuel oil to the poverty-stricken country within 60 days, in exchange for an initially provisional freeze on plutonium production and reprocessing at its Yongbyon nuclear facility. The deal also sketches the broad outlines for a more comprehensive arrangement to be hammered out in the future.¹

Though the fate of the February 13 agreement was unknown at the time of this writing, it was nevertheless clear

never declared nuclear weapon state is far from over. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated, "This is still the first quarter."²

In the United States, the debate has long been stuck between two broad camps. On one side stand the proponents of engagement who say "let's make a deal"; on the other stand the proponents of confrontation who say "let's make 'em squeal." Neither side is particularly enthralled with the six-party talks framework.

According to the let's-make-a-deal proponents, the October nuclear test was yet another indication that North Korea longs for respect—which it measures in hard currency. Distasteful though Pyongyang's behavior may be, given the great dangers posed by its nuclear program we simply have no choice but to enter into intensive bilateral negotiations that set the price for peace. As the Naurilus Institute's Peter Hayes wrote after the North announced its forthcoming

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test, "Koreans have a saying: 'Sword to sword: rice cake to rice cake.' It is time to throw away the sword and hold up the ricecake."³ And in a comment offering thin praise for the February agreement, Hayes chided the parties for the "measly" good-faith down payment they offered the North. In his view, the rice cake will need to be at least \$4 billion—\$5 billion.⁴

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The let's-make-'em-squeal proponents agree that North Korea is using its nuclear development in a bid for aid and respect, but they argue that giving Kim Jong Il what he is asking for now will merely increase his appetite for more later. From this vantage point, the February agreement is a step in the wrong direction, a cave-in to the North's aggressive posturing. The only way to rein in Kim's nuclear ambitions, in the words of Aaron Friedberg, Vice President Dick Cheney's former national security adviser, is to make him "an offer he cannot refuse": Either dismantle the nuclear program verifiably, "or face a steadily rising risk of overthrow and untimely death."⁵

Despite the heated arguments between the proponents of these two points of view, they actually start from the same basic assumptions: Pyongyang can be viewed as a unitary, rational actor; it knows how to build the Bomb; and its nuclear weapons drive is a function of the external incentive structure it faces. The major difference between the two camps simply concerns the relative sizes of the carrots and sticks they think will convince Kim Jong Il to throw in the towel on his nuclear adventure. But what if their shared basic assumptions were wrong?

It's not that Washington has missed the point about North Korea per se. Indeed, the idea that North Korea is uniquely incorrigible—a rogue regime led by a "malignant narcissist" who allegedly killed his brother as a young boy—is another old warhorse of the policy debate.⁶ The particularities of Kim Jong Il's personality should certainly be taken seriously, but the main source of U.S. diplomatic frustration lies in the failure to understand the *general* issue of nuclear proliferation, *wherever* it occurs. (After all, as 130,000 soldiers stationed in Iraq today will tell you, Korea is hardly the only place where the U.S. analysis and response to proliferation threats have proven flawed.) And the first step toward understanding the general issue of nuclear proliferation is to recognize

that leaders decide to go nuclear more with their hearts than with their heads.

National identity, emotions, and the Bomb

The list of leaders who have sought to thrust their nations into the nuclear club includes the powerful and the weak, the democratic and the dictatorial, the religious and the secular, the Western and the Eastern, the Northern and the Southern. These leaders share little in common, with the crucial exception of similar basic conceptions of their nations' identities.⁷

Most leaders' national identity conceptions do not pull them toward a definitive decision for the Bomb, because that is a revolutionary act with unpredictable consequences both externally and internally. Indeed, clear nuclear weapons ambitions have historically been much less common than is often assumed. For instance, the United States totally misinterpreted Argentina's nuclear efforts of the 1970s and 1980s. Archival research has revealed that the Argentine military junta, distasteful though it was in many respects, not only made no Bomb drive but did not even contain a significant Bomb lobby. The usual suspects for such a lobby—military strategists and geopolitical thinkers—concluded that the country's tense relations with the United States, Britain, and neighboring Brazil reflected a limited conflict of interests, not an existential one. As such, they believed that launching a nuclear arms race would be a "strategic absurdity."⁸

But whereas most leaders prefer to sidestep the question of going nuclear, such is not the case for leaders who are "oppositional nationalists"—individuals who possess intense fear of an external enemy combined with an equally intense pride in their nation's natural capacity to face down the enemy. The effect of these identity-driven emotions of fear and pride is to replace the typical hesitations with an unshakable determination to get the Bomb at any cost, no matter what

the consequences. Indeed, oppositional nationalists want the Bomb not just as a means to an end, but as an end in itself—as a matter of national self-expression.

Consider, for instance, the French decision to go nuclear. Prime Minister Pierre Mendès-France was no "malignant narcissist." He agonized over the choice to endanger the world by bringing another nuclear weapon state into being. Yet confronted with the (strictly conventional) rearmament of Germany, he launched his nation's drive for the Bomb on December 26, 1954. This hasty decision came years before France was technically ready to implement it and left many loose ends—including the crucial question of strategic delivery systems. Mendès-France's controversial choice was the product of his twin emotions of oppositional fear of Germany and nationalist pride in France. Years later, Bertrand Goldschmidt, a former Manhattan Project scientist who became a key player in France's nuclear program, tried to convey the deep sources of the pro-nuclear sentiments of the day: "We had just been occupied by Germany. . . . It was a kind of revenge, if you want, from this humiliating occupation. We had to have . . . differentiation."⁹

There are strong parallels between the French decision of 1954 and the Indian decision of 1998. Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the author of a moving poem about the tragedy of Hiroshima. Yet he took less than a month after arriving in power before deciding to conduct the tests that marked India's definitive, explosive entry into the nuclear weapons club. Again, oppositional nationalism—in this case Vajpayee's controversial Hindu nationalist antagonism toward Muslim Pakistan—lay at the root of his nuclear leap of faith. Indeed, so certain was Vajpayee in the rightness of his choice that he told anxious aides during the run-up to the tests, "There is no need for much thought. We just have to do it."¹⁰ Naturally, it turned out that more thought was needed, as the South Asian region entered a

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period of great instability marked by a series of tense nuclear standoffs.

But for Vajpayee, these mundane concerns were essentially beside the point: "The greatest meaning of these tests," he told *India Today* in their immediate aftermath, "is that they have given India *shakti*, they have given India strength, and they have given India self-confidence."⁹

Koored as they are in oppositional fear and nationalist pride, definite nuclear ambitions harden quickly in leaders' minds and are subsequently very hard to dislodge, whether via threats or inducements. Moreover, once the order comes from on high, dedicated nuclear weapons efforts tend to put down deep institutional and psychological roots within the state and are thus typically revocable only at times of severe regime disillusionment, if not complete dissolution. The case of North Korea needs to be seen in light of these general proliferation patterns.

Fear and pride, North Korea-style

North Korea's leaders, first the father Kim Il Sung and now his son Kim Jong Il, have always been dyed-in-the-wool oppositional nationalists. This national identity conception probably solidified over the course of the Korean War. As historian Kathryn Weathersby has put it, "The experience of having survived sustained bombing by U.S. planes for nearly three years created the dangerous, if paradoxical, combination of a profound sense of threat and a faith in the country's ability to prevail in a future military conflict."¹⁰

Oppositional nationalists want the Bomb, and the oppositional nationalists of Pyongyang are no exception.

As the archives of former Communist states make clear, North Korea's nuclear intention was there very early on. It is simply historically inaccurate to view Pyongyang's nuclear weapon desires as a recent development, however many diplomatic blunders the Bush administration may have made. For instance, consider the recently unearthed 1962 statement of North Korean Foreign Minister Pak Song Chol to the Soviet ambassador in Pyongyang: "Who can impose such a that do not have nuclear weapons, but are perhaps successfully working in that direction?"¹¹ Pyongyang eventually did consent to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1985 but without abandoning its drive for the Bomb—an indication of its capacity for fixed tactical flexibility in pursuit of great strategic ends.

Pak's outburst to his Soviet "comrade" is revealing in another important way: Pyongyang's oppositional nationalism is not directed solely against the United States. Rather, the North Korean regime sees history as ceaseless combat by the Korean nation against existential threats that have come from every direction—from the United States and Japan, of course, but also from Russia and China. The regime has even made a great point of embracing (and embroidering) the legacy of the "Korean" Goguryeo Kingdom that long waged war against Imperial China until finally succumbing in 668 A.D. One can also discern this racial, Korea-versus-the-world attitude in the country's nuclear diplomacy, and not least in Kim Il Sung's secret 1972 offer to South Korea to jointly develop the Bomb.¹²

There is a lesson for policy makers here: If North Korea's leadership is oppositional nationalist in general, then its nuclear program is likely also directed more broadly than just at the U.S. imperialists—and therefore even a bona fide reconciliation with the United States would probably not be enough to shake it from its ultimate nuclear objective.

Why now?

A fear of enemies on all sides coupled with intense national pride was on display for all to see in Pyongyang's official statement on its test, which vaunted this "great leap forward in the building of a great, prosperous, powerful socialist nation," dubiously claimed that the test was the result of "indigenous wisdom and technology, 100 percent," and pointedly warned that this "powerful self-reliant defense capability" would "contribute to defending the peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the area around it."¹³ But why did Kim end up testing the Bomb when he did?

Many analysts have attempted to discern the "message" that Pyongyang meant to send this past October. Some speculated that it was in response to the U.S. crackdown on North Korea's international bank accounts. Others saw it as a strategy to hurt President George W. Bush in the midterm elections. Still others saw it as a desperate attempt to regain the spotlight at a time when Washington had suddenly become more interested in the nuclear crisis with Iran. Some of these hypotheses may have merit. But they all share a common, yet debatable assumption that North Korea was simply waiting

to test until it felt it was necessary to make some political point.

That assumption would be more credible if the test had been a technical success, but it can hardly be counted as such.¹⁶ Kim wanted a loud bang but ended up with a fizzle: perhaps 10 percent of the 4-kiloton yield he was apparently expecting. True, the test's yield was far bigger than even the largest conventional bombs, but it does not spell Hiroshima. Moreover, it is well to remember that Kim's previous strategic weapons foray had been a long-range missile test in July 2006 that failed less than a minute after launch. North Korea thus ended the year with greatly reduced deterrence credibility compared to when it was simply leaving things up to the outside world's imagination.

In light of the nuclear test fizzle, rather than asking why North Korea finally tested, perhaps we should ask instead, why did it jump the gun? What led it to test a device that was so unbelievably bad that people started speculating it might be some kind of fraud?

Again, consider the impact of Kim's oppositional nationalism. Oppositional nationalists are not satisfied with "latent" or "opaque" nuclear arsenals. Their fear and pride drive them to covet the real thing. So, far from waiting for just the right moment to test, Kim may well have been actively pushing his weapons program officials for months or even years to throw caution to the wind and get the device ready to test. Such behavior would also fit the larger pattern of North Korean industrial development efforts. To increase productivity, the regime relies heavily on "speed battles" reminiscent of Chinese leader Mao Zedong's "great leap forward." The cumulative effect of decades of speed battles is an economy that cannot even get the lights on at night. The sorry result of Kim's speed battle for strategic weapons in 2006 was a missile that exploded spectacularly and a Bomb that hardly exploded at all.

History suggests that, despite its technical difficulties and acceptance of the February 13 agreement, North

Korea's motivation to build and maintain a working nuclear arsenal remains high. Even vocal critics of the Bush administration's previous confrontational posture toward Pyongyang have expressed concern that Kim may be using the six-party talks simply to play for time "until the international community is accustomed to its being a declared nuclear state."¹⁷ But although North Korea is indeed a "declared" nuclear state, saying it does not make it so.

The mouse that squeaked

The paltry recent test results indicate a level of technical incompetence in North Korea's strategic weapons programs that few analysts would have dared to suggest in years past. Just as we need to question the mainstream assumption that Pyongyang's desire for the Bomb stems from a rational strategic calculation, we also need to question the assumption that the regime is capable of rationally organizing itself to achieve its nuclear ends.

North Korea is a prototypical "sultanistic" regime, wherein authority is concentrated entirely in the hands of a single individual whose legitimacy claims rest heavily on a cult of personality.¹⁸ These regimes tend to be terrible at running nuclear development programs. This is because building the Bomb is not just about money or access to high technology. It is also about the ability to instill an ethic of scientific professionalism and a long-term planning perspective. Such an undertaking is nearly impossible for sultanistic regimes, hampered as they are by arbitrary decision making, palace intrigues and sycophancy, and above all, a generalized and radical level of personal insecurity.

The historical contrast between the nuclear programs of sultanistic and other types of regimes is striking. Consider that, in the era of the slide rule, the first Soviet, British, and French nuclear tests each came after merely six years of dedicated effort—and the United States did it in three. By contrast, Saddam Hussein's Iraq

spent an entire decade and more than \$1 billion without succeeding in producing any weapon-grade highly enriched uranium by the time of the first Gulf War.¹⁹ And Iraq was, relatively speaking, a near miss. Despite three decades of effort and a mountain of equipment supplied by A. Q. Khan, Libya's program was in an utter state of shambles when Muammar Qaddafi finally gave it up in late 2003.²⁰

Then there's the experience of Communist Romania, probably the closest historical parallel to North Korea in terms of its basic nature—a Stalinist state run like a family business. The tyrant Nicolae Ceausescu's nuclear dreams failed to come true despite the great willingness of the West at the time to provide him with financial credits and advanced nuclear technology.

What went wrong? As with other major industrial development projects that the regime initiated, the basic problem was managerial. At the top of the country's science policy ladder stood Ceausescu's wife Elena, who doggedly replaced professional scientists with political hacks who were willing to promote her candidacy for the Nobel Prize in chemistry. At the bottom of the ladder, the construction of a planned series of Canadian-designed CANDU nuclear plants relied on masses of forced laborers—a strategy that the on-site Canadian engineer later suggested would have been more appropriate to a potato harvest than to high-technology construction. And in the middle, the hapless project managers made great efforts to hide the growing mess from their political masters with tactics that would have made Potemkin blush.²¹

When seen in the context of the basic similarities between its regime type and that of Communist Romania, North Korea's spectacular technical failures of 2006 start to seem more than a mere hiccup. They instead suggest that Kim's Bomb effort may well suffer from many of the same systemic ills that plagued Ceausescu's program. The Romanian analogy casts doubt on the

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widespread claim that if we do not do something drastic, then the North will start turning out nuclear weapons like sausages. Indeed, it isn't even good at turning out sausages.

For more than a little skeptical about the notion of North Korea becoming the world's nuclear Wal-Mart. However much it would like to peddle its wares in exchange for hard currency, Pyongyang's first objective for its nuclear program is undoubtedly to deter its adversaries. And recall the basics of deterrence theory: Acquisition of a mere handful of bombs is not a deterrent; it is a provocation. To achieve deterrence, North Korea needs to be able to boast a credible second-strike capability—

against no less an opponent than the United States. If Kim does not understand that yet, he surely soon will. Yet North Korea's plutonium production has been achieving slow.²⁰ As a result, Kim is highly unlikely to part with any of his precious plutonium at this time. He probably also will try to wiggle out of his pledge to negotiate the "abandonment" of Yongbyon. Indeed, if I were in charge of U.S. intelligence, I would be as much on the lookout for North Korean attempts to import as to export fissile material in the coming years.²¹

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Getting the big things right

However incomplete or puny it may be, the developing North Korean nuclear arsenal is a matter of grave concern. So, what's to be done? Even if negotiations stall, the United States should exclude the option of a

"preemptive" military strike both in private and in public. This irresponsible idea somehow continues to attract people who really should know better. The (non-nuclear) North Korean response to such a strike could easily claim 100,000 casualties—among them U.S. forces—in Seoul and its environs within just a few days.²² And such a strike would undoubtedly create a lasting and dangerous rift between the United States and China.

Direct, broad-ranging bilateral negotiations between the United States and North Korea that leave the other four parties far in the background are also highly unlikely to produce the definitive disarmament breakthrough that engagement advocates expect. As noted earlier, Pyongyang's behavior is not driven by the tense relationship with Washington alone, but by its us-against-the-world mentality.

That leaves the option of staying the course—engaging in the complicated, slow-going six-party talks for as long as there is a regime in North Korea to engage with. Proponents of engagement and confrontation alike have maligned this approach as lacking a proper degree of urgency; they advocate either immediately dangling more carrots or wielding a bigger stick. But the most likely result of infusing our selves with such urgency is frustration. Furthermore, by virtue of its poverty and managerial incompetence, North Korea cannot muster a full-scale nuclear breakout. So, in fact, tomorrow likely will not be much worse than today.

Meanwhile, the six-party talks are yielding tangible benefits by serving

as a forum for all the states to better appreciate each other's interests and threat perceptions. After all, the greatest threat Pyongyang poses to East Asian peace and security lies not in what it itself might do. Rather, the greatest threat lies in the potential of this crisis to play the role that the Balkan crises played in Europe in the run-up to 1914—exacerbating pre-existing regional rivalries and ultimately fomenting a great power war.

The six-party talks framework can help avert that potential disastrous outcome. Indeed, North Korea's off-the-charts obduracy presents not just a challenge but also an opportunity for the region to develop a sense of common interest that so far has been sorely lacking. The October nuclear test actually was perfectly timed to help Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Chinese President Hu Jintao place their two countries' relations on a more productive path. Washington should do everything it can to support the continuation of this positive trend in the relations among the region's heavyweights.

Ultimately, North Korea's behavior will be largely driven by internal factors. We cannot expect simply to bend it to our will. However, by continually promoting regional and global cohesion—not only on proliferation, but also on the other critical security problems of our time—we can maximize the chances that Pyongyang's actions will never truly shake the world, but only lightly jostle it. *

FOR NOTES, PLEASE SEE P. 74