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North Korea's nuclear neurosis

BY JACQUES E. C. HYMANS

Preserving our atomic heritage

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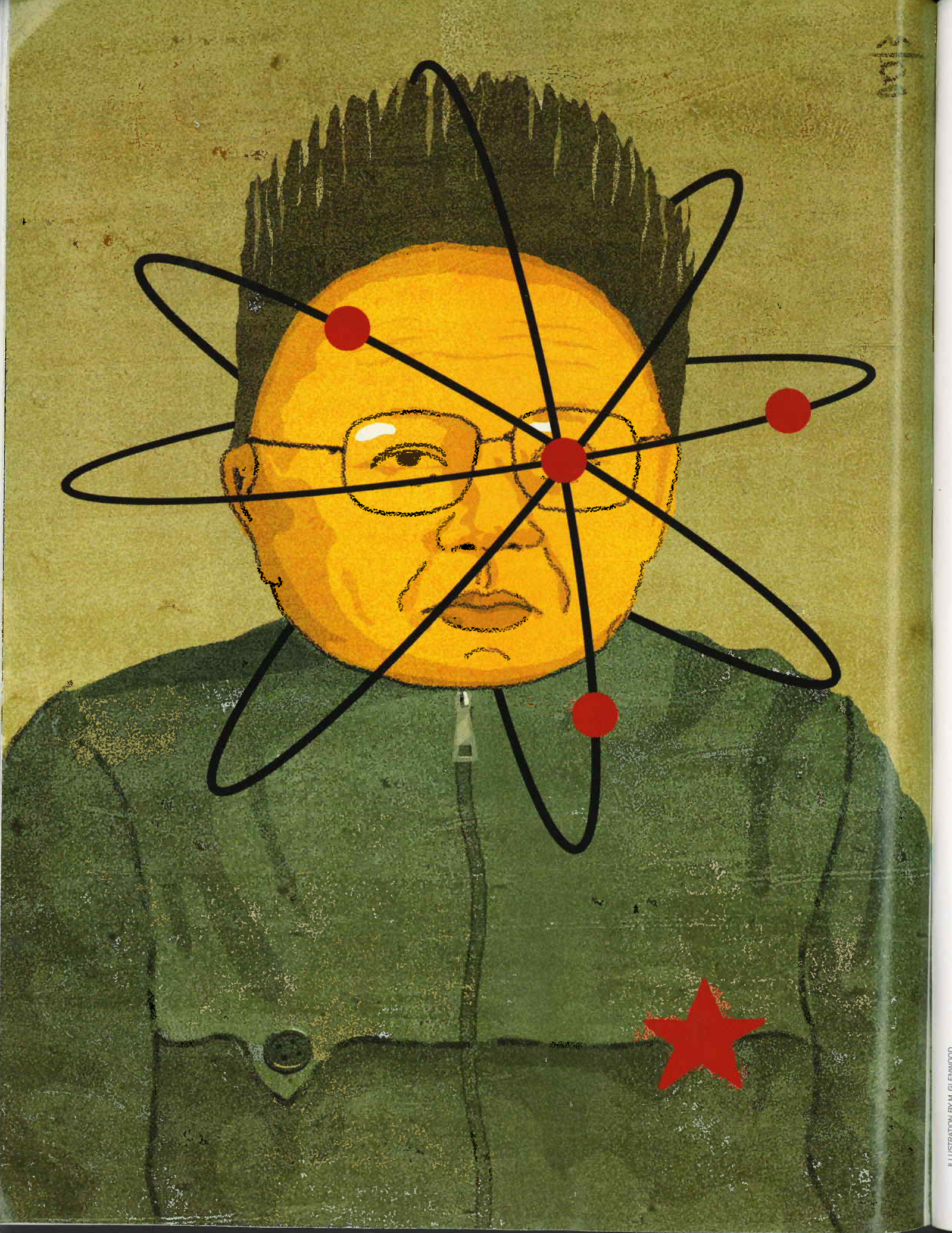
IT IS 5 MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT



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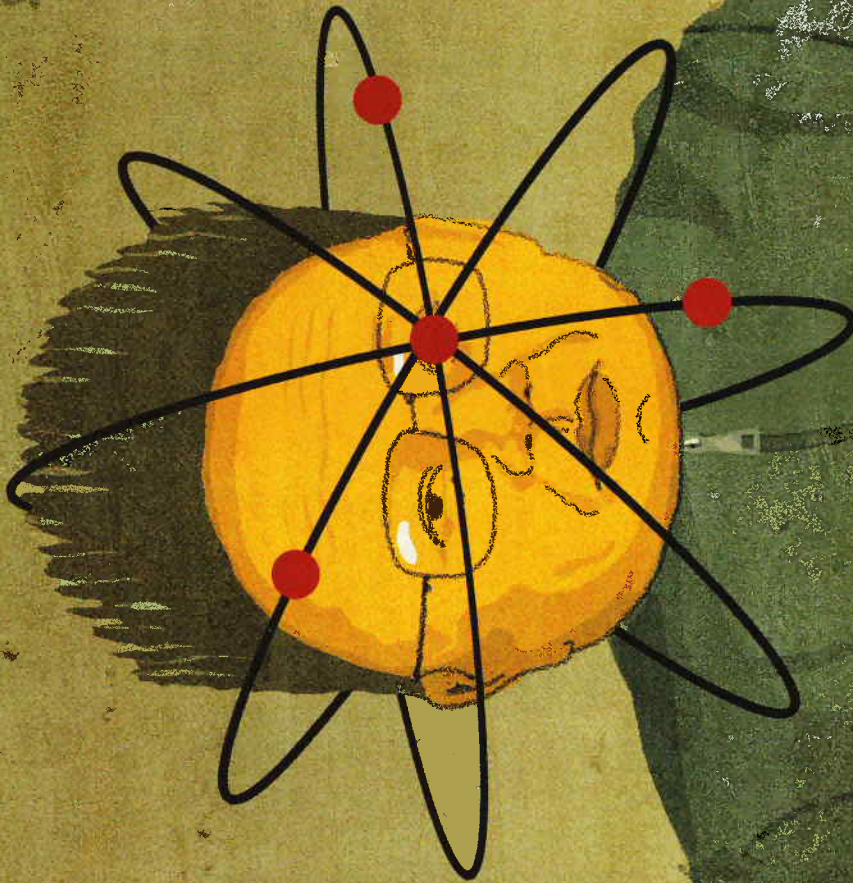


ILLUSTRATION BY M. GILFORD

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

that the deal would not be the end of the North Korean nuclear saga. Indeed, few observers are confident that it even represents the beginning of the end; the debate over how to handle the

Jacques E. C. Hymans is assistant professor of government at Smith College. He is the author of *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions, and Foreign Policy* (2006).

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

