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Creators	Smith, Hazel Anne

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# Bad, mad, sad or rational actor? Why the 'securitization' paradigm makes for poor policy analysis of north Korea\*

HAZEL SMITH

The analysis of north Korea's domestic and foreign politics is now something of a cottage industry—partly because more data are available than ever before and partly because the fear of military conflict on the Korean peninsula has focused minds and attention on this last Cold War arena of tension.<sup>1</sup> The data comes from the now numerous humanitarian organizations that have been resident in Pyongyang since the start of the food emergency in 1995 as well as from the literally hundreds of political and humanitarian delegations that have visited the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in that period.<sup>2</sup> Fear of conflict arises from unresolved tensions generated through the DPRK's suspected nuclear armaments programme and continues because of persistent international antagonism to the continuation of the DPRK's long-range missile development plans.<sup>3</sup>

There are different strands to the scholarly and policy analysis of north Korean politics but the dominant approach, and that which permeates the media coverage of the DPRK, remains heavily coloured by a security perspective which is, among other things, curiously old-fashioned in its reliance upon the use and potential of military force as the central analytical notion in foreign policy behaviour.<sup>4</sup> This dominant approach shapes much more than

\* This is a final, revised version of an article erroneously published in the January 2000 issue of *International Affairs*.

<sup>1</sup> Some of the more useful literature includes Young Whan Kihl, ed., *Korea and the world: beyond the Cold War* (Oxford: Westview, 1994); Han S. Park, ed., *North Korea: Ideology, politics, economy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996); Hazel Smith, Chris Rhodes, Diana Pritchard and Kevin Magill, eds, *North Korea in the new world order* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); Keun Lee, 'The road to the market in North Korea: projects, problems and prospects', Working Paper no. 139 (Helsinki: United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research, Aug. 1997); Samuel S. Kim, ed., *North Korean foreign relations in the post-Cold War era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Dae-Sook Suh and Chae-Jin Lee, eds, *North Korea after Kim Il Sung* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1998); Marcus Noland, ed., *Economic integration of the Korean Peninsula* (Washington DC: Institute for International Economics, Jan. 1998); David Reese, *The prospects for North Korea's survival*, Adelphi Paper no. 323 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of the presence of the humanitarian community in north Korea, see Hazel Smith, "'Opening up" by default: North Korea, the humanitarian community and the crisis', *Pacific Review* 12: 3, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> For detailed reporting of these concerns, see the almost daily bulletins from the excellent website at <<http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/dr/index.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> For a more sophisticated security studies approach, see the seminal contribution of Barry Buzan, *People, states and fear*, 2nd edn (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

analysis of straightforwardly security issues such as the threat of war, military policy, the potential use of both nuclear weapons and what are today known as weapons of mass destruction (WMD); it also forms the framework within which economic, welfare and humanitarian issues are conceived. In other words, these last issues are *securitized*. For this reason, I want to term this perspective the ‘securitizing framework’—and I want to argue that there are two sets of fundamental assumptions shaping this perspective. The first can be encapsulated by the image of the DPRK as ‘bad’; and it is often complemented by the second, a vision of north Korea as ‘mad’.

In this article I discuss how this paradigm shapes perceptions both of the DPRK and of the policy options open to the international community. I then evaluate the problems faced by international (humanitarian and other) policy-makers who have had to deal directly with the DPRK since the emergence of the food crisis in 1995 and whose frame of reference was, inevitably, shaped by this dominant perspective; and go on to evaluate the alternatives to the securitization paradigm, drawing on the experience of the elements of the international community that have been engaged with and in the DPRK since 1995. I trace two analytic alternatives, which I will call the ‘sad’ and the ‘rational actor’ perspectives.

I argue that the ‘sad’ category provides some illumination of DPRK policy and behaviour, but that the rational actor perspective is more fruitful in that it can assimilate the anomalies thrown up by the securitization perspective and, further, that it is able to offer a more appropriate base for policy analysis than the ‘mad or bad’ approach. This is so because it makes visible aspects of DPRK politics and behaviour which are obscured or made absent by the dominant paradigm. At the same time, the rational actor approach eschews the normative commitment entailed by the securitization paradigm, which views the regime as outside the international community of liberal capitalist states and which, implicitly or explicitly, holds the only solution to the ‘Korean problem’ to be the eradication of the DPRK regime. While that option may provide one answer, it is self-defeating in that it promotes what it ostensibly seeks to deny: namely, arms-racing behaviour and a belligerent attitude to the international community on the part of the DPRK.

I do not argue that the bad, mad, sad or rational actor approaches are mutually exclusive, but simply that they offer *analytic* alternatives for thinking about the DPRK. I argue, however, that alternative paradigmatic choices may help policy analysis towards more nuanced policy choices.

### **Kuhnian paradigms and north Korean politics: what’s the connection?**

Although the once pervasive epistemological notion of ‘paradigms’ has become a pretty old-fashioned idea in social science, it provides a useful analytical framework for the discussion here because it helps in the evaluation of how sometimes ‘irrational’ and often unexamined assumptions shape research questions

and research outcomes.<sup>5</sup> The Kuhnian argument is that within a scientific community dominant conceptual frameworks, which Kuhn calls paradigms, are constituted by sets of fundamental (that is, unquestioned) assumptions. A successful paradigm is one whose fundamental assumptions continue for some length of time to provide a fruitful base for problem-solving. Such assumptions are held to be true for as long as they consistently help solve research puzzles. Paradigmatic assumptions, by their nature, do not have to be either proved or falsified and can therefore be thought of as pre-theoretical.

Paradigms are incommensurable with one another. Scholars working within the confines of one conceptual framework simply cannot directly communicate with scholars utilizing alternative paradigms. They literally 'see' different things, with paradigms acting as a kind of scientific filtering or selection mechanism which decides what is significant or important, *prior to analysis taking place*. Kuhn argues that paradigms can cope with anomalies, including facts that do not 'fit' the framework, but that they fall into 'crisis' when there are simply too many anomalies for the paradigm to continue to be persuasive. Kuhn argues that after crises we sometimes see a 'paradigm shift' or a 'revolution' in which the dominant paradigm is replaced by an alternative which is more successful in puzzle-solving.

The intriguing and controversial nature of Kuhn's approach is its insistence that paradigms are sociological as well as purely rational constructs. At its crudest, the paradigm is true because the community of researchers believes it to be true. When they cease believing, the paradigm ceases to provide an acceptable scientific framework for analysis.<sup>6</sup> This does not mean, however, that any arbitrarily chosen set of assumptions can replace the previous paradigm. Paradigms do not arise as if by magic. There must be an alternative available, perhaps based on a body of research which, although starting from within the dominant paradigm, repeatedly throws up conclusions which, precisely because they do not fit paradigmatic assumptions, are ignored or sidelined by the broader scientific community. Paradigm change is not a common occurrence, however. This is because dominant paradigms are powerful and can last for longer than their apparent utility might warrant.

Given the Kuhnian framework, therefore, the argument in the present context would run as follows. The securitization paradigm for interpreting north Korean politics may have once been fruitful—for instance, during the Cold

<sup>5</sup> For the 'paradigmatic' work see Thomas S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Kuhn has been criticized for allegedly advocating the idea that scientific judgement is not strictly 'rational', and also for 'relativism'. The debate is in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds, *Criticism and the growth of knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Kuhn has refuted these criticisms in a postscript to *The structure of scientific revolutions*, 2nd edn, pp. 174–210. Irrespective of this debate, Kuhn's work has had an enormous influence on social science and international relations theory, implicitly and explicitly shaping the debates of the last fifteen years. See for instance Michael Banks, 'The inter-paradigm debate', in Margot Light and A. J. R. Groom, eds, *International relations: a handbook of current theory* (London: Pinter, 1985).

War—and it could hitherto cope with anomalies, including facts that did not ‘fit’ the overall framework. Now that these anomalies are both numerous and visible, the dominant paradigm is called into question as a useful and appropriate device for helping understand north Korean politics. There is now a substantial alternative body of literature underpinned by sets of assumptions different from the securitization paradigm, but this ‘paradigm in waiting’ has not yet replaced the securitization paradigm. The alternative conceptual frameworks (paradigms) available to the dominant ‘mad’ or ‘bad’ options are what I shall call the ‘sad’ or ‘rational actor’ options; either of these, I will argue, forms a better puzzle-solving framework than the ‘mad’ or ‘bad’ approaches. The argument demonstrates, however, that paradigm shift away from the dominant perspective is not an automatic or easy process. Sociological factors, including the relative visibility of the scientific community working within this perspective, can serve to give the securitization paradigm a life of its own long after its utility has been called into question. This is evidenced by the continued dominance of the securitization perspective in the literature, irrespective of both the numerous anomalies and the available alternatives.

### **The securitization paradigm: what it is and what it does**

The securitization paradigm differs from a straightforward security-based analysis because of the former’s overweening single-factor analysis and because of its heavy normative commitments. Although it accepts the classical security assumptions that military power and military instruments are ultimately the only significant factors of analysis in respect to Korea, it goes further than this by sublimating all other issues, including DPRK economic, cultural and humanitarian policies, within a military-based analysis. In addition, its inherent normative assumption is that the domestic and foreign politics of north Korea provide the root cause of all tensions on the Korean peninsula.

The securitization paradigm permeates the literature on north Korea to a greater or lesser degree. It is most visible in the US think-tank community, where analysis coming from the American Enterprise Institute, the United States Institute for Peace and the Institute for International Economics is most overtly shaped by the paradigm. Two articles emanating from these institutes have shaped the policy debates in the United States and have also articulated the ‘common-sense’ view held by the US and international media.<sup>7</sup> This ‘common-sensical’ view shapes all analysis of north Korea to the extent that scholarship representing a different position, however well supported by research, is sidelined or deemed questionable simply because it does not fit well with the sociological

<sup>7</sup> These are Nicholas Eberstadt, ‘Hastening Korean reunification’, *Foreign Affairs* 76: 2, 1997 and Marcus Noland, ‘Why North Korea will muddle through’, *Foreign Affairs* 76: 4, 1997. Eberstadt is a researcher with the American Enterprise Institute. Noland is Senior Fellow at the Institute for International Economics.

consensus of the research community.<sup>8</sup> These assumptions are so pervasive that they also creep into analysis which does not overtly share the world-view of the securitization prism, with the tendency to accept, unless proved otherwise, the securitization view of north Korea.

The securitization perspective portrays north Korean politics as mad in the sense of being irrational and unknowable and bad in the sense of the motivation and impetus for policy being ascribed to normatively unacceptable characteristics of the state and its leadership. That these two aspects of the paradigm are sometimes contradictory—if the state is mad, can it really be understood as bad in the sense of being consciously directed by an evil intent whose instigators could take responsibility for their actions?—is not a problem for the paradigm given that these are assumptions made prior to analysis. As long as these assumptions prove fruitful in solving research puzzles, at least within the Kuhnian theory of paradigms, they will continue to shape scientific enquiry. Nor do these paradigmatic assumptions need always to give rise to precisely the same conclusions. Kuhn informs us that paradigms shape research questions, acting as a filtering device to weed out assumptions which do not fit paradigmatic frameworks. They may thus narrow the theoretical agenda, but they also permit differing research outcomes *within the confines of the paradigm's fundamental assumptions*. Thus, within the securitization paradigm we can find different strands—what I will call the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ variants of the bad and mad perspectives.

### *The ‘bad’ thesis*

The ‘bad’ thesis assumes that the DPRK pursues alien objectives which are normative anathema to the rest of the ‘civilized’ international system. The assumption that the north Korean state and its leadership are fundamentally outside the pale of the global community underpins the terminology sometimes used to describe north Korea as a ‘rogue state’. From this perspective, the DPRK is motivated by malevolence and belligerence and its leadership’s foreign and domestic policies can be ascribed to evil intent. Internationally, north Korea is ready to make war upon its neighbours, perhaps even to attack the United States itself and, in pursuit of these offensive aims, is constantly engaged in a furtive arms buildup.

This perspective underlies much of the US foreign policy community and is exemplified in an unsourced November 1998 United States Institute for Peace publication.<sup>9</sup> The document’s style conveys an extreme picture. Hostility is

<sup>8</sup> An example of the sidelining of research findings may be found in the general lack of receptivity to the thesis, drawn from meticulously researched work, that cooperation is an option with north Korea. See Leon V. Sigal, *Disarming strangers: nuclear diplomacy with North Korea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). Marcus Noland, for instance, calls into question the merits of a position that directly challenges the dominant view. See Noland, ‘Introduction’, in Marcus Noland, *Economic integration of the Korean peninsula* (Washington DC: Institute for International Economics, 1998), p. 5, commenting on K. A. Namkung, ‘US leadership in the rebuilding of the north Korean economy’, *ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> *Mistrust and the Korean peninsula: dangers of miscalculation*, special report (Washington DC: United States Institute for Peace, Nov. 1998), p. 2.

'unremitting', diplomats 'demand', actions are 'all too clear' and north Korea is likened to the ultimate of US bogeymen, Saddam Hussein. The paper is premised on claims that the north Koreans were developing a clandestine nuclear site, claims which subsequent US inspections have found to be without foundation.<sup>10</sup> The north Korean state is also presented as immoral, as resources are 'diverted' to the military instead of to a population which is suffering from severe food shortages; but the fact that the humanitarian community has found no evidence of a direct diversion of food to the military is not acknowledged. There is no argument, of course, that the DPRK maintains a military capacity;<sup>11</sup> but whether it sees this capacity as defensive and whether or not it sees its missile exports as a source of hard currency in order to be able to purchase necessary inputs into its economy (as most arms-producing Western states like Britain do) is probably a matter for interpretation.<sup>12</sup> Russian analysts working with US colleagues have pointed out that while DPRK arms production and development are undesirable because they increase tensions due to possible 'disproportionate countermeasures by the United States and Japan', nevertheless international law permits the DPRK to develop missiles for defence purposes and to use space for peaceful purposes.<sup>13</sup> This is quite unlike the case of Saddam Hussein's Iraq which, as a defeated power in war, is subject to UN resolutions prohibiting and controlling arms development. And finally, the impressive conviction of the authors' beliefs brooks no acknowledgement of the existence of alternative interpretations of DPRK policy.

Much is also made within the 'bad' thesis of the militarily offensive posture of the north Korean armed forces, with '60–65 percent of those forces...close to the border, in a high state of readiness, well primed for an attack on the South'.<sup>14</sup> Only analytical Korean virgins or those wanting to deceive could unshamefacedly equate the former with the latter point of the pervious sentence. As others have pointed out, 'Pyongyang is only 120 kilometres from [the border with south Korea]. Thus it might be more accurate to say that 65 per cent of North Korea's troops are deployed in front of their capital.'<sup>15</sup> As the same author remarks, 'it would be far more surprising if the DPRK deployed its troops in the north, away from where potential conflict could occur.'<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Consequently on a US Department of State visit to Pyongyang, spokesperson James P. Rubin announced on 25 June 1999 that 'the [suspected nuclear] site . . . does not contain a plutonium reactor or reprocessing plant, either completed or under construction'. See <<http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/dr/index.html>>, Daily Report, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> For discussion see Smith, "'Opening up" by default'.

<sup>12</sup> Scholar David Kang argues that DPRK 'military and security policy is essentially defensive and realist'. See Kang, 'North Korea's military and security policy', in Kim, ed., *North Korean foreign relations*, p. 182.

<sup>13</sup> Center for Nonproliferation Studies of the Monterey Institute of International Studies and the Center for Contemporary International Problems at the Russian Diplomatic Academy, 'DPRK Report No. 16 (January–February 1999)', in *NorthEast Asia Peace and Security Network Special Report*, <<http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/dr/index.html>>, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick M. Morgan, 'New security arrangements between the United States and north Korea', in Suh and Lee, eds, *North Korea after Kim Il Sung*, p. 171.

<sup>15</sup> Kang, 'North Korea's military and security policy', p. 172.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



North Korea is, within the 'bad' perspective, a 'garrison state' and 'the most militarized society on earth', with its population ever ready, willing and able to wage total war against its peace-loving neighbours.<sup>17</sup> This is because it spends 30 per cent of its budget on defence and up to 30 per cent of its population of 22 million are either in the armed forces or in local militias.<sup>18</sup> This picture, however, leaves out what might be relevant data for any policy-maker interested in assessing, say, the comparative military strengths of south and north Korea. If, for instance, we refer to the International Institute of Strategic Studies' annual surveys of the military strength of the world's states, we find that the DPRK spent an estimated \$2.4 billion on its armed forces in 1998, compared to a south Korean military expenditure of \$10.2 billion. IISS data for 1998/9 informs us that the north has 300,000 more personnel in active service than the south and the same number of reserves. This means, of course, that north Korea's army, with its very low level of per capita spending compared to south Korea's armed forces, is liable to be operationally weak in terms of hardware and software support. Its comparative advantage lies in its 300,000 extra personnel in uniform; but this again is somewhat qualified by the much larger south Korean population which would be called on in time of war—44 million to 22 million in the north. Economically, north Korea's estimated GNP in 1997 (the most recent date for which figures were available) was just \$18 billion, compared to \$443 billion for south Korea.<sup>19</sup> These figures hardly suggest that north Korea is an overwhelming military threat to the south. Indeed, south Korean President Kim Dae-Jung argues that south Korean-US combined forces are enough to prevent any offensive action from north Korea.<sup>20</sup>

The stated threat derives not only from the relative funding of northern and southern armed forces, but from the efficiency and sheer volume of north Korean forces. Here the securitization paradigm both underestimates and overestimates north Korean military capacity. It does grasp the readiness for war of the DPRK's population. All the social organizations (women's, children's, business units) train their members on an annual basis so as to be prepared should war break out. The million or so adults who form the core of the 'permanent' army, however, remain in the armed forces for a maximum of five to eight years before they go on to be part-time members of the militias.<sup>21</sup> This is to ensure

<sup>17</sup> Edward A. Olsen, 'The conventional military strength of north Korea: implications for inter-Korean security', in Suh and Lee, eds, *North Korea after Kim Il Sung*, p. 147.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. More sober analysis can be found in the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) annual publication, *The military balance*. The IISS reports that for 1998/9, the north Korean army stood at just over 1 million. Its reserves were just under 5 million. This compares to south Korea's population of 46.5 million and armed forces at just under 700,000, with reserves at 4.5 million. See IISS, *The military balance 1998/99* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/IISS, 1998), pp. 185–7.

<sup>19</sup> IISS, *The military balance 1998/99*, pp. 185–7.

<sup>20</sup> Dong-won Lim, 'North Korean policy under the Kim Dae-Jung government', speech at breakfast meeting with National Reconciliation Council, March 11 1999, p. 3, quoted in Chung-in Moon, 'Understanding the DJ doctrine: the sunshine policy and the Korean peninsula', paper kindly sent by author through e-mail, Sept. 1999, pp. 5–6.

<sup>21</sup> For numbers of those in each armed service and their terms of service see IISS, *The military balance 1998/99*, pp. 185–7.



that most adults receive some training in the event of war. The north Korean military structure therefore functions as a giant 'Home Guard' where the entire population (not just 30 per cent of it) could be mobilized if necessary. Neither the militias nor the armed forces are separate from the 'economic' structure, in that much of their time is spent in construction of 'civilian' infrastructure and fulfilling national requirements such as harvesting food. The 30 per cent of GDP cited for military expenditure must therefore include this more straightforwardly 'economic' activity. That the military also takes part in non-military activity is recognized in some of the securitization literature, although there is little evidence of such information feeding back into the discussion of the global sums attributed to military expenditure.<sup>22</sup>

Domestically, the DPRK is perceived as a human rights violator of such magnitude that an unsubstantiated document from the US government published in 1999 could state without fear of contradiction that the DPRK 'state leadership perceives most international norms of human rights, especially individual rights, as illegitimate, alien social concepts subversive to the goals of the State and party'.<sup>23</sup> Unrest is such that 'an unsubstantiated Reuters report stated that following a March [1998] coup attempt against Kim Jong Il, authorities arrested several thousand members of the military'.<sup>24</sup> Individuals are routinely 'disappeared', tortured, subject to arbitrary arrest, detention or forced resettlement. No fair trials are permitted and there are no rights to privacy, with individuals constantly subject to surveillance at home and in the community. Needless to say, there is no freedom of speech, assembly, association, worship or movement.<sup>25</sup>

We do not know how much of the above can be substantiated, although, again, the activity of the humanitarian community is helping to deliver some solid information on some of these issues. For instance, we know that household surveillance exists for preventative health purposes and could possibly be also used for political surveillance. We know also that there is some freedom of worship for Christians but we do not know how much.<sup>26</sup> What we are beginning to find out suggests a more complex picture than that portrayed by the 'bad' thesis. Data made available from humanitarian community reports are also able to direct us towards more specific questions. Why is it, for instance, that we have seen a rise in numbers of children in the orphanages since the food crisis emerged?<sup>27</sup> Is it that there are simply more orphans due to increased mortality? Is it a sign

<sup>22</sup> Marcus Noland, for instance, speaks of a 'parallel' military economy and states that 'half of the army is engaged in what elsewhere would be civilian economic activities.' See Marcus Noland, 'Prospects for the north Korean economy', in Suh and Lee, eds, *North Korea after Kim Il Sung*.

<sup>23</sup> 'U.S. Department of State: Democratic People's Republic of Korea Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998', mimeo from Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 26 Feb. 1999, published on <<http://www.reliefweb.int>>, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> The report does not cite sources, although these are available to the US government. See for instance the thoughtful discussion based on interviews with north Korean defectors in Roy Richard Grinker, *Korea and its futures: unification and the unfinished war* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998). The problem with such unsourced reporting is that it is impossible to assess what is fact and what is interpretation.

<sup>26</sup> Author's interview, CARITAS Hong Kong representative, Pyongyang, April/May 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Author's interviews with UNICEF and WFP representatives, Pyongyang, May 1998.

that familial and community support structures are breaking down? Or is there more dissidence and are these children somehow being separated from their parents for more sinister reasons? We simply do not know the answers to these questions.

Conversely, one might not normally expect citizens suffering such extreme deprivation (the domestic aspects) to be able and willing to fight a total war involving every member of the population (the foreign policy aspect); but this contradiction can be absorbed by the paradigm. Citizens are so effectively brainwashed by the propaganda of the regime that they have lost their capacity for independent thought. Rather than a potential war providing the opportunity for liberation from an authoritarian leader (as, say, seems to be happening in Serbia since the Kosovo war), the north Korean people, according to this perspective, would be expected to operate as an undifferentiated mass in support of the north Korean leadership.

The hard version of this thesis argues that the north Korean state is unredeemable. Writing on nuclear issues in the context of reunification, for instance, but from within a framework which is meant to apply as a generalization about the nature of the DPRK, Nicholas Eberstadt writes that 'The North Korean regime *is* the North Korean nuclear problem, and unless its intentions change, which is unlikely, that problem will continue as long as the regime is in place.'<sup>28</sup> 'Western governments' should 'unflinchingly' assess whether they can change the north Korean state.<sup>29</sup> The inference is clear. Only eradication of the regime will do. The methods are not made explicit, but given north Korea's unwillingness to be bulldozed into a quick unification, the hastening of reunification as advocated by Eberstadt implies coercion which, in the circumstances of the Korean peninsula, would very likely mean war. If such a policy were to be implemented the result would be that south Koreans and US citizens (though not US policy analysts, of course) would have to 'unflinchingly' step forward to be called to fight and die (again) in Korea.<sup>30</sup>

The soft version of this thesis accepts the assumptions of the bad perspective. North Korea 'extorts' aid from the United States; it engages in 'blackmail efforts' and in 'provocative behaviour'.<sup>31</sup> The DPRK 'undoubtedly' would like to 'rule the entire Korean Peninsula' even though 'it knows that ... goal unachievable and foolish to pursue'.<sup>32</sup> The soft approach, however, does not view the DPRK as possessing overwhelming military capabilities or as totally intractable. The DPRK does not possess 'a plausible invasion capability against South Korea'.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Eberstadt, 'Hastening Korean reunification', *Foreign Affairs* 76: 2, 1997, p. 88, emphasis in original.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 89.

<sup>30</sup> The message of this approach uncannily mirrors that of an earlier US citizen with an interest in Korea. A US reporter wrote in May 1950, just prior to the outbreak of the Korean war, that John Foster Dulles was 'militantly for the unification of Korea. Openly says it must be brought about soon.' Quoted in Jon Halliday and Bruce Cumings, *Korea: the unknown war* (London: Pantheon, 1988), p. 65.

<sup>31</sup> Pedro Almeida and Michael O'Hanlon, 'Impasse in Korea: a conventional arms accord solution?', *Survival* 41: 1, Spring 1999.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Although this approach does not rule out the possibilities of negotiating with north Korea, as it still conceives of the DPRK as an inherently untrustworthy partner, it remains difficult to see how a deal based on such premises could provide the basis for the confidence-building and trust necessary for an agreement to be achieved and implemented.

### *The 'mad' thesis*

The mad thesis is essentially a subfield of the bad thesis, relying as it does on a notion of evil intent as one of its fundamental assumptions. The difference between the 'bad' and the 'mad' theses is that the former presumes a rational, instrumental actor, the latter an irrational actor, unknowable, unpredictable and dangerous because of the underlying presumed ill intent of its leadership. Another difference is that, while the 'mad' thesis implies something primeval and atavistic, with policy arising from a sort of primitive, chaotic and *fundamentally* unknowable polity and society, the 'bad' thesis assumes strategic intentionality on the part of DPRK authorities.

North Korean politics is viewed as 'mad' in the sense of a tendency to an often inexplicable non-compliance with international norms and because it is irrational in its apparent refusal to follow optimal preference-maximizing behaviour.<sup>34</sup> North Korea is therefore unpredictable in its domestic and foreign policy behaviour. For these reasons negotiating with north Korea is always fraught with danger as DPRK negotiators cannot be trusted to behave in the way that conventional diplomacy requires; nor can they be trusted to honour outcomes of agreements reached.

The extreme or 'hard' version of the madness thesis argues that terrible, inexplicable things which would be outside the pale of normal human existence go on inside north Korea—such as cannibalism, usually involving boiling up babies for the stewpot.<sup>35</sup> *The Economist* provided a classic example of the former approach in its July 1999 survey on Korea, with its front cover given entirely over to a suitably demonic-looking portrait of Kim Jong Il.<sup>36</sup> The accompanying commentary inside rounds off its analysis of north Korea in its conventionally unsubstantiated style: 'And there is madness. A family talking to a journalist for the first time since escaping to the mountains in China say they left because they had run out of hope. The mother, in her 50s, had visited a neighbour, who had been due to give birth. There was no sign of the baby. The woman had something boiling in a pot on the stove. She said it was a rabbit. It wasn't.'<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> One commentator notes that if north Korea had behaved as 'a rational regime' in its negotiations with Japan it could have achieved desirable outcomes in terms of economic support. See Aidan Foster-Carter, *North Korea: peace, war or implosion?* (Seoul: Jardine Fleming Securities Ltd, June 1997), p. 20. Another warns that north Korea should 'choose [its] policies rationally': See Kyongmann Jeon, 'The likelihood and implications of a north Korean attack on the south', in Noland, ed., *Economic integration of the Korean peninsula*, p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> There has not been a substantiated account of cannibalism in north Korea. This is not to say that such concerns should not be taken seriously, but it does mean that those who make these allegations have themselves a responsibility to undertake serious and systematic investigation of any such claims.

<sup>36</sup> *The Economist*, 10–16 July 1999.

<sup>37</sup> 'The Korea Survey', *ibid.*, p. 14.

The 'soft' version of the mad thesis simply asserts that north Korea is unknowable and therefore uninterpretable because, it is alleged, there is no reliable information about the country. Marcus Noland, for instance, in what has become a benchmark article on the DPRK, states baldly that 'there is an acute lack of information [about north Korea]' and, in the same article, that 'virtually all economic and social data are regarded as state secrets'.<sup>38</sup> Robert Scalapino points to the DPRK as a 'mystery' while at the same time arguing that it 'would be a serious mistake to assume that...we know nothing about the DPRK'.<sup>39</sup> The eighteen-page report on 'North and South Korea' in the *Understanding Global Issues* series states that in any discussion of north Korea 'lack of hard information is a constant problem' (before going on to present a perfectly adequate account of north Korean politics and the economy, along with source references in the document itself!).<sup>40</sup> This is not to say, of course, that the DPRK is an open polity with a Freedom of Information Act just around the corner. It is to say, however, that such a perspective denies *in principle* the knowability of north Korea and, more recently, has not acknowledged the successes of the aid community in achieving inroads into DPRK impenetrability.

Perhaps the least subtle accounts in this genre are those which argue that the DPRK is such an expert in deception that critical evaluation of DPRK politics is almost impossible. This assumption is largely based on the contention that even when the DPRK went so far as to plan a war against south Korea in 1950, absolutely no evidence could be found of a premeditated invasion of the south in captured Central Committee files when the US-led UN forces captured Pyongyang.<sup>41</sup> This shows the 'regime's devotion to strategic secrecy', even to the extent of hiding its intentions from its own senior officials.<sup>42</sup> Even, therefore, 'the formal evidentiary record of officially revealed DPRK pronouncements and actions...must be treated as problematic'. This is a state that is 'preternaturally secretive'. The DPRK, so the argument goes, has retained a commitment to

<sup>38</sup> Noland, 'Why north Korea will muddle through', quotes on pp. 105 and 107 respectively. Charitably, one could argue that Noland exaggerates to make the point. That this is so is borne out by his own research, where he uses available data in a rigorous manner to draw certain conclusions about the north Korean economy. See Marcus Noland, Sherman Robinson and Tao Wang, *Famine in north Korea: causes and cures*, Working Paper no. 99-2 (Washington DC: Institute for International Economics, 1999). What he probably wants to argue is that the data available are sometimes unsatisfactory and he would like more of them, something that could be argued about many countries of the world. This more nuanced message would not, however, help to build a picture of a singularly unknowable DPRK.

<sup>39</sup> Robert A. Scalapino, 'Introduction', in Suh and Lee, eds, *North Korea after Kim Il Sung*, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Buckley, ed., *North and south Korea: the last ideological frontier* (Cheltenham: Understanding Global Issues, 1998).

<sup>41</sup> Quotes in this paragraph are from Nicholas Eberstadt, 'North Korea's unification policy: 1948-1996', in Kim, ed., *North Korean foreign relations in the post-Cold War era*, pp. 236-9. That the lack of such evidence might warrant a different interpretation from the standard account is not acknowledged. For an authoritative account of the outbreak of the Korean war, see Bruce Cumings, *Korea's place in the sun: A modern history* (New York: Norton, 1997), pp. 260-4. The north Koreans have yet another view. See the self-explanatory title of Ho Jong Ho, Kang Sok Hui and Pak Thae Ho, *The US imperialists started the Korean war* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1993).

<sup>42</sup> Eberstadt, 'North Korea's unification policy', p. 237. The irony that the lack of reliable evidence does not seem to stop this author from drawing some very strong conclusions indeed about DPRK policy seems lost.

strategic deception throughout its existence as a state, right up until the present day. Then there is the ‘damned if you do and damned if you don’t’ mode of analysis. This is the approach that views north Korean compliance with an agreement as a sure sign of intended non-compliance. In an article published in 1998, for instance, Patrick Morgan notes that ‘although it has carefully fulfilled its obligations initially, North Korea will at some point make trouble over the implementation of the Agreed Framework’.<sup>43</sup>

### *Securitizing north Korea*

Cold War assumptions, for all that they are contradictory and often unsubstantiated, remain embedded in the post-Cold War literature about north Korea. That many of the very strong claims of the securitization paradigm remain unsupported by evidence does not imply a weakness for this perspective. If a government is so much beyond the norms of international society, it stands to reason that such a government would do everything in its power to prevent an independent assessment of the facts. Lack of corroboration, in a manner Orwell would have appreciated, becomes corroboration of those things needing to be corroborated.

### **North Korea and the international community: past and present**

The large influx of foreign visitors from 1995 onwards forced an opening up to alternative sources of information and opinion other than those propagated by the government and party organizations. There are three main groups of foreigners with access to north Korea that act as important sources of new ideas and practices for north Koreans.<sup>44</sup> The first group is the south Koreans organizing trade, cultural, political, industrial and social cooperation, as well as (but to a much lesser extent) the large numbers of south Korean tourists. The second is the resident and visiting international humanitarian community. The third group comprises the foreign economic operators attracted by the free trade zones in the north and the possibilities of gaining a foothold in what could be a dynamic market area should Korean integration (not necessarily full unification) be achieved. This influx of foreigners demonstrates an extraordinary change in north Korean governmental policy—which, partly because of necessity and partly out of design, has now permitted access to the country in a way which would have been inconceivable just five years ago. This does not mean that all foreigners are permitted to enter the DPRK. The Western media, with the major exception of CNN, is still more or less prohibited from

<sup>43</sup> Morgan, ‘New security arrangements’, p. 171.

<sup>44</sup> There have been other groups of resident and visiting foreigners in the DPRK since 1994. For instance, the US military has small groups of its soldiers living in Pyongyang in 1998 to help in the search for the so-called ‘missing in action’ (MIA) of the Korean war. I highlight in this section, however, those groups of foreign visitors that are likely to have a pervasive impact on north Korean society and culture.

reporting from north Korea and as a result is not in a position to report changes within north Korean society.<sup>45</sup>

The relatively large numbers of foreigners who have either become resident in the DPRK or who have visited regularly are imbricated in the DPRK's domestic and international politics in a quite different way from previous visitors. Today's foreigners legally accumulate data and material about north Korea, in cooperation with the north Korean government, and this material is openly conveyed back to Western governments—including old arch-enemies like the United States. One result of this new relationship has been to increase openness and trust between the DPRK government and representatives of the West, so as to lay the basis for potential engagement on the more sensitive areas of conflict such as the DPRK's missile development programme. This does not mean to say that the involvement of the international community in north Korea will necessarily lead to a resolution of the security impasse between the DPRK and the United States. It does indicate, however, that north Korea has, in very practical terms, moved to a policy of large-scale involvement with the international community already—even before any formal peace agreement has been signed. Among other things, this shows the north Korean government's ability to adapt to changing circumstances through what for the DPRK was a radical policy shift that occurred in a very short period of time.

*Past: The 'hermit kingdom'*

North Korea has been characteristically described as a 'hermit kingdom'. Its successful political socialization of its people has been attributed to its ability to shield its population from sources of information other than governmental and party-controlled output, through prevention of contact with foreigners either personally or through access to foreign media. Its *Juche* philosophy had stressed self-reliance and an abhorrence of what it called 'flunkeyism', which meant any form of subordination to foreign influence.<sup>46</sup> Nor had foreign trade provided a catalyst for foreign contact. This was mainly because the volume of external trade remained very low—at its height reaching a total of \$5.2 billion in 1988, but falling to \$2.1 billion in 1995 and \$1.98 billion in 1996.<sup>47</sup> Prior to the end of the Cold War, by far the majority of trade was with other communist states, particularly the former Soviet Union. Borders through which trade passed were situated on remote parts of the Soviet Union and China, with little physical opportunity for the import of foreign ideas along with the oil and industrial imports which came from abroad. In addition, trade was organized by

<sup>45</sup> Ted Turner, the owner of CNN, developed a *modus operandi* with the late President Kim Il Sung before the latter's death in 1994, which has enabled CNN to continue to report from Pyongyang.

<sup>46</sup> For background on north Korean history and culture see Smith et al., eds, *North Korea in the new world order*.

<sup>47</sup> The first two figures are from Lee, 'The road to the market', p. 23. The last figure is from Soogil Young, Chang-Jae Lee and Hyoungsoo Zang, 'Preparing for the economic integration of two Koreas: policy challenges to south Korea', in Noland, ed., *Economic integration of the Korean peninsula*, p. 253.

centralized governmental agencies with little direct contact between industrial and agricultural operators and foreign trade partners.

Although the DPRK had attempted to insulate itself from foreign influence, it had had a degree of contact with the international community. During the Cold War foreign residents included the diplomatic community, representatives of international organizations like FAO and UNDP, technical experts (usually from eastern Europe), foreign business representatives and researchers.<sup>48</sup> Apart from the resident community, the DPRK was often host to foreign visitors (scholars, art troupes, sports teams, Koreans living in Japan, tourists from eastern Europe, etc.) for periods of between a few days and several months. DPRK officials therefore have had more experience in dealing with foreigners than an image which views the DPRK as an isolated 'hermit kingdom' might suggest. In addition, DPRK officials had overseas experience, in Asia (particularly India), Africa, and the major international organizations.

*Present: the international community in the DPRK—who it is, why it's there and what it found*

It was the spectacular degeneration of the economy, among the symptoms and causes of which was the loss of historically dominant trading partners, which precipitated the humanitarian crisis that forced the engagement of the international community with north Korea from 1995 onwards.<sup>49</sup> It also forced a reconsideration of trade patterns, so that current trade options envisage partnership with the non-communist international community in such a way as also to make inevitable the permeation of north Korean society with alternative sources of information and opinion to those of the government.

*The south Korean presence* After the 1994 nuclear crisis, opening up came in the sense that the DPRK began to play host to south Korean nationals in a way which had never before been possible. Limited numbers of south Koreans had previously visited the DPRK, but after 1994 the influx swelled from a trickle to a deluge. South Korean visitors included cultural troupes, business representatives and politicians as well as engineers helping to build the new nuclear power station promised under the 1994 Agreed Framework. Chung-In Moon,

<sup>48</sup> By 1975 the DPRK was a member of 141 international organizations. As of 1989, the DPRK had diplomatic relations with over 100 states. For the former figure see Hazel Smith, 'North Korean foreign policy in the 1990s: the realist approach', in Smith et al., eds, *North Korea in the new world order*, p. 100; for the latter figure see '100 questions and answers: do you know about Korea?' (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1989), p. 114.

<sup>49</sup> This article is not the place to discuss the scale or the scope of the economic crisis of the 1990s, except to note its effects of the opening up of north Korea. However, there are several useful accounts. Jung Chang Yuoung notes, for instance, that the end of the Soviet Union as a reliable trading partner for north Korea 'had a devastating effect on the north Korean economy'. For detail see Jung Chang Yuoung, 'North Korea's trade policy', in Hong Yung Lee and Chung Chongwook, eds, *Korean options in a changing international order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); quote is on p. 157. See also Lee, 'The road to the market'; Young, Lee and Zang, 'Preparing for the economic integration of two Koreas: policy challenges to south Korea'.



a prominent south Korean analyst of north–south relations, has referred to what he has termed the ‘*phenomenal* growth in the number of visitors to the North [from south Korea]’.<sup>50</sup> Between 1988 and 1997 just 2,408 south Koreans visited north Korea; by comparison, in the sixteen months between February 1998 and June 1999, 5,600 visited the DPRK.<sup>51</sup> None of these visits were ‘casual’ or spontaneous trips. Instead, each of these individuals would be part of the effort to implement some project which would enhance and consolidate normalization and cooperation between north and south Korea. Probably the most spectacular example of north Korean ‘opening up’ to its former deadly adversaries was the admission, between November 1998 and August 1999, of 80,000 south Korean tourists to visit Mount Kumgan (Diamond Mountain) in the south-east of north Korea—in an operation jointly organized with the south Korean conglomerate Hyundai.<sup>52</sup>

*The humanitarian community* For all the great increase in their numbers, south Korean tourists were discouraged from mixing with north Koreans, and it was not tourism but humanitarianism which added a different dimension to the international politics of the DPRK between 1995 and 1999, as over 100 humanitarian staff took up residence in Pyongyang and the DPRK played host to hundreds more visitors from representatives of large and small humanitarian agencies.<sup>53</sup> Part of their mission was to elicit and to disseminate information about north Korean society in order that they could continue to justify to donor governments the necessity for humanitarian intervention and so that they could monitor the effectiveness of emergency and development programmes.

It is impossible to overstate the significance of the change in policy indicated by the DPRK government’s call to the international agencies for help in late 1995. Although there is no evidence that the DPRK perceived those organizations as simple instruments of US imperialism—indeed, the regime had worked with UNDP, FAO and UNICEF since the 1980s—there must have been a recognition that agency involvement would mean greater access to the DPRK by ‘non-friendly’ governments, if only because DPRK diplomats were well aware that the major UN agencies are primarily funded by the major Western powers. The DPRK also initiated contact with US non-governmental organizations in late 1995 when New York-based DPRK diplomats started directly calling NGOs like Mercy Corps to ask for help to combat the food shortages.<sup>54</sup> The lead operational organizations were the UN’s World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF. WFP has by far the largest humanitarian presence in the DPRK, with forty-six resident staff as at late 1998, most of whom are ‘aid monitors’ and

<sup>50</sup> Moon, ‘Understanding the DJ doctrine’, p. 13, emphasis added.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. See also text of the ROK Ministry of Unification’s report on *Important tasks in north–south reconciliation and cooperation*, NorthEast Asia Peace and Security Network Special report <<http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/dr/index.html>>, p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> See Smith, ‘“Opening up” by default’.

<sup>54</sup> Author’s interview, Mercy Corps, Washington DC, Nov. 1998.

whose job it is to track aid supplies from the ports to the recipients. NGOs including Oxfam, Concern Worldwide, German Agro Action, Médecins Du Monde (MDM) and Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) also set up programmes in the DPRK. This was the first time that the DPRK had ever worked with NGOs.

Relations with the international humanitarian community were originally very fraught, and evolved gradually through a process of mutual learning to a still contradictory but on the whole useful working relationship by 1999. I have detailed the evolution of this relationship elsewhere, and for the purposes of this article need only to summarize the *change* in the relationship between the international community and the government. This change came about through the process of negotiations which were often tough but resulted in visible gains including increased access to territory, individuals and data.<sup>55</sup> By 1999 the humanitarian community had access to about 75 per cent of the country and 80 per cent of the population.<sup>56</sup> As well as large amounts of information on facilities and institutions, the humanitarian community also gained access to good quality quantitative data about the scale of the crisis through the agreement with the government to permit scientific surveys which included both random sampling and UNICEF's multiple indicator cluster survey (MICS).<sup>57</sup> Information gained through the activities of these organizations was disseminated in reports to donors, and through press and publicity work. The cumulative impact of humanitarian community activity meant that, within the space of just four years, data which had never been available outside the DPRK in the history of the state became accessible to the wider international community. If the 'bad' perspective had been right about the Cold War, when all social data had been considered secrets of state, it was just plain incorrect to state that the DPRK maintained this view into the late 1990s.

It was not that the process of achieving a mutually acceptable *modus operandi* was trouble-free. The humanitarian organizations' early concern about the lack of reliable data had been so grave that in late 1997 the governmental and non-governmental organizations had met in Geneva to discuss, among other things, whether to pull out of the DPRK. MSF continued to believe that they could not organize in such a way so as to meet the needs of aid recipients to best effect, and this factor, combined with their inability to secure sufficient financial backing for their work in the DPRK, caused them to cease operations in 1998.<sup>58</sup> Other agencies, including a variety of NGOs, disagreed with MSF and remained in the DPRK, arguing that there was much evidence of 'a learning process of many [north Korean] people in dealing with foreigners...The authorities and the

<sup>55</sup> Smith, "'Opening up" by default'.

<sup>56</sup> Omawale Omawale, 'An exercise in ambivalence: negotiating with north Korea', *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* 3: 2, 1999.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.; Smith, "'Opening up" by default'.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, "'Opening up" by default', p. 11; *United Nations consolidated inter-agency appeal for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (New York: United Nations, Jan. 1998), p. 3.

people have opened up as far as normal life is concerned.’<sup>59</sup> In 1999, a Californian NGO confirmed the trend towards openness and mutual trust:

Although small in scale and technologically simple, our village wind power project was nonetheless politically and logistically challenging. Yet it was carried out successfully in less than a year by American and North Korean teams working side by side with a generally courteous, upbeat, and cooperative spirit. Perhaps the most important lesson we learned was simply that it is possible to ‘do business’ with North Koreans. Our counterparts signed an agreement and honored their written commitments, which included erecting buildings, providing competent personnel, allowing necessary access, and making adequate logistical arrangements.<sup>60</sup>

The major UN agencies also charted a learning curve both for themselves and for the government. Negotiations over the modalities of scientific surveys took place throughout 1998, and in the end went some way to achieving what both partners wanted: access to good quality information in a way which was not seen to infringe north Korean autonomy. Dr Omawale Omawale, the UNICEF Special Representative to the DPRK throughout 1998, argued that the international community had achieved much more in its relationship than it perhaps realized: ‘Much of the rhetoric surrounding relations with North Korea focuses on frustrations faced in bringing the country into “normal” relations with the rest of the world and in having the country’s practices coincide with established international norms. While these are justifiable goals, their achievement will only come with mature reflection and action based on an optimistic view that the glass is already half full.’<sup>61</sup>

The securitization paradigm provided the lens through which international organizations’ representatives received their initial information about the DPRK.<sup>62</sup> The image available to the humanitarian community was consequently of a country about which there was little or no reliable information, with a government that was either bad or mad or both; a country whose negotiators were unlikely to be trustworthy, truthful or reliable in the keeping and implementing of agreements. Consequently, humanitarian community policy-makers found that their experience could not be understood through the securitization lens. First of all, they found a society visibly in a process of change. Second, they found a more complex society and polity than that predicted by the dominant paradigm. Third, they experienced cooperation as well as (sometimes) intransigence. Fourth, their negotiating experience taught them that on the whole DPRK policy-makers, like policy-makers everywhere, were rational actors in

<sup>59</sup> Confidential German NGO report, Feb. 1999.

<sup>60</sup> Jim Williams et al., ‘The wind farm in the cabbage patch’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 55: 3, May/June 1999, p. 46.

<sup>61</sup> Omawale, ‘An exercise in ambivalence’, p. 62.

<sup>62</sup> This author participated in the briefing of some of the international aid organizations that placed resident workers in the DPRK—particularly Children’s Aid Direct and UNICEF—and has since worked with NGOs and the UN humanitarian community resident in the DPRK. Briefing prior to posting about the DPRK is often surprisingly perfunctory.

terms of seeking to satisfy interest and achieve objectives. These are not the disembodied rational actors of game-theoretic models, but historically and socially situated subjects.<sup>63</sup> For example, this was a society profoundly affected by a fairly recent experience of war and a recurrent threat of war, most recently in 1994, which did not have a peace treaty with its major adversary, the United States, and which was therefore initially reluctant to allow open access to information which could be perceived as useful to the 'enemy'.<sup>64</sup> Finally, the humanitarian community found DPRK policy-makers just as interested in meeting welfare needs as themselves—even if also just as aware of a potential security dimension to humanitarian activity.

*Economic operators* South Koreans are visiting north Korea to find ways of stimulating trade, and, partly as a result of such contacts, north–south trade has shown a significant increase in the first six months of 1999 compared to those same months in 1998.<sup>65</sup> Another sign of increased contact between the DPRK and the outside world is the increased activity in the Rajin–Sonbong free trade zone in the north-east of the country. In 1997, 111,500 foreign business representatives and leaders visited this region (compared to 43,000 in 1996). The vast majority came from China (111,080), but 100 were from the United States (compared to 15 in 1996) and 80 from Japan (compared to 20 in 1996).<sup>66</sup> DPRK overall trade levels are still plummeting, however, down nearly 40 per cent in the first half of 1999 from the same period in 1998.<sup>67</sup> This means, among other things, that a requirement for continuing activity by the resident humanitarian community is likely.

*The foreign media* Western journalists by and large did not, and still do not, have easy access to the country. There are some exceptions. The excellent six-part Thames television series, *Korea: the unknown war*, was organized with the input of the north Korean media.<sup>68</sup> CNN, the BBC, CBC and the *Washington Times* have in the post-Cold War period all had access to at least parts of the country and to interviews. Press output has, however, tended to reflect the cruder conceptions of the securitization paradigm, with the DPRK portrayed as mad, bad, predictable and unpredictable, all at the same time. Sometimes working on the premises that the normal rules of journalistic convention (checking sources, for instance) do not apply because the paradigm persuades them that there is no

<sup>63</sup> For such a perspective on north Korean nuclear issues see Bruce Cumings, 'Nuclear imbalance of terror: the American surveillance regime and north Korea's nuclear programme', in Raju G. C. Thomas, ed., *The nuclear non-proliferation regime: prospects for the 21st century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), ch. 10.

<sup>64</sup> Omawale, 'An exercise in ambivalence'.

<sup>65</sup> Moon, 'Understanding the DJ doctrine', pp. 14–15.

<sup>66</sup> For detail on the Rajin–Sonbong free trade area see the UNDP information available on <[www.tradp.org](http://www.tradp.org)>. For figures quoted here see Tumen secretariat, UNDP, <<http://www.tradp.org/htmls/tourdprk.htm>>, 1998.

<sup>67</sup> <[NAPSNet@nautilus.org](mailto:NAPSNet@nautilus.org)>, 26 July 1999.

<sup>68</sup> See the book of the series by Halliday and Cumings, *Korea: the unknown war*, which contains stunning pictorial images of the conflict.

reliable information about the DPRK, the 'quality' press have a poor record in analysing north Korea.<sup>69</sup> Bruce Cumings, for instance, in a detailed, historically informed and scholarly rebuttal of the common conceptions of north Korean behaviour during the 1994 nuclear crisis, has described the approach of US newspapers 'of record' as underlain by an 'ahistoricity [that] went hand-in-hand with assertions that failed a freshman logic class'.<sup>70</sup>

### **Securitization as a guide to international policy-makers in the DPRK**

The securitization paradigm no doubt captures elements of north Korean politics. DPRK policy-makers can be unpredictable (as the 'mad' thesis implies) but they can also, often, be very predictable indeed (as the 'bad' thesis asserts). The state does engage in practices that would not be acceptable in liberal polities anywhere, most starkly in its suppression of dissidence.<sup>71</sup> Yet this perspective does not tell the whole story about north Korea; and, worse, it distorts the complexities of north Korean politics and policies. This means that the perspective lacks utility for contemporary international foreign policy-makers (including the military, diplomats and the humanitarian organizations).

There are five major problems. The first is that the many of the paradigm's strongest claims are not supported by evidence. The second is that the perspective cannot assimilate change. The third is that the claims of the paradigm are so stark that they brook little qualification. The fourth is that the framework attempts to ignore data that do not fit within the framework yet which could be relevant for policy-makers. The fifth is that when data which do not fit the paradigm cannot be ignored, they are distorted to meet the requirements of the perspective—in other words, they are *securitized*.

The first problem is perhaps the easiest to deal with. Given increased access to the DPRK, one could expect to see more research backed up by the conventional rules of scholarly enquiry in the future. This is already happening with some of the work that is being carried out on economic options for north Korea's future.<sup>72</sup> Of course, the provision of more data (according to Kuhn) does not necessarily lead to a change in paradigm if the scientist working within the old paradigm still maintains its fundamental assumptions. For instance, the opening paragraphs of a serious economic analysis of north Korean futures

<sup>69</sup> See *The Economist*, 10–16 July 1999 for a review that tells us more about the predilections of the magazine than it does about north Korea. For a truly risible piece which purports to offer 'firm evidence of a society that after years of starvation has descended into medieval barbarism', see James Pringle, *The Times*, 4 Feb. 1999. How was this evidence gathered?—'through my binoculars'.

<sup>70</sup> Cumings, 'Nuclear imbalance of terror', p. 212. Bruce Cumings has studied and researched north and south Korea for over twenty years and is one of the world's leading authorities.

<sup>71</sup> Hwang Jang-Yop, the architect of the DPRK's ruling *Juche* ideology who defected to Seoul in February 1997, argued in 1991 that the DPRK would not liberalize in the sense of allowing other ideologies (as for instance Gorbachev had in the late 1980s). Author's interview, Pyongyang, August 1991. For further discussion see Hazel Smith, 'Defecting to snatch victory from defeat', *The World Today* 53: 3, March 1997.

<sup>72</sup> See Noland et al., *Famine in north Korea*.

nevertheless manage to use an anecdote about DPRK soldiers pulling bananas out of their rucksacks to impress upon readers the sinister nature of DPRK society.<sup>73</sup> The same article comes to the conclusion that if 'famine materializes, its roots will be in political decisions made in Pyongyang, not material resource constraints'.<sup>74</sup> This conclusion is interesting, since the vast body of economic analysis from international organizations operating within the country—analysis which has been generally supported by donor states including the United States, the European Union, south Korea and others—is that any famine is the product of both causes and that material resource constraints are a very major factor indeed.<sup>75</sup>

The last four problems are pertinent to two aspects of the intrinsic nature of paradigms and, if Kuhn is taken as a guide, more difficult to resolve. The first aspect is that, for Kuhn, the fundamental assumptions of a paradigm are constitutive of a paradigm. In other words, if these are called into question and found wanting, that paradigm fails. It can no longer operate as a guide for analysis. Thus it is much more problematic to challenge fundamental assumptions of a paradigm. These *must* be left in place if the paradigm is to continue to have any meaning at all. Second, Kuhn tells us that scientists working within fundamental assumptions of a paradigm discount as unmeaningful data that are not commensurate with its overall world-view. Paradigms can be perpetuated, therefore, even when data are available which, if analysed, might serve to force change or, at least, reconsideration of the paradigm.

One fundamental assumption of the securitization paradigm is that the DPRK has an unchanging *persona* in world and domestic affairs that cannot be altered unless the regime is eradicated.<sup>76</sup> Diplomacy or negotiation with DPRK policy-makers is fruitless as interests of the international community and the DPRK can never coincide and, furthermore, the DPRK's inherent belligerence means that it will always be an intransigent partner in negotiations. By definition, then, if the paradigm cannot assimilate change as a variable so it cannot help to inform negotiators when and why DPRK foreign policy behaviour is changing.<sup>77</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, the only choices available for policy-

<sup>73</sup> Noland, 'Why north Korea will muddle through', pp. 105–6.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>75</sup> A useful document is that prepared by UNDP and the DPRK government for the 'thematic roundtable meeting on agricultural recovery and environmental protection', known as the AREP plan (unpublished mimeo, May 1998). A report of the meeting is in the 'back-to-office report' of the World Food Programme (unpublished mimeo, May 1998). Many of the donors attributed responsibility to DPRK policies for the food crisis but all, even the harshest, acknowledged that lack of material resources was a problem and, furthermore, that since the crisis emerged in 1995, there has been evidence of change in DPRK policies. See UK presidency report, *European Union technical mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 9–16 May 1998*. A more widely available source which makes some mention of the causation of the food crisis is United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *United Nations consolidated inter-agency appeal for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*.

<sup>76</sup> Eberstadt, 'North Korea's unification policy'.

<sup>77</sup> In an article published prior to the emergence of the food crisis, I argue that there had been clearly discernible changes in DPRK foreign policy orientation and practices. See Smith, 'North Korean foreign policy in the 1990s'.

makers using this perspective are *paralysis* (nothing can be done with the DPRK) or *confrontation* (nothing should be done with the DPRK).<sup>78</sup>

A second fundamental assumption of the securitization paradigm is that the DPRK is such a singularly bad or mad entity that only the starkest descriptors are appropriate. Thus, for policy-makers, should some of those stark descriptions be called into question, questions are raised about the verisimilitude of any other fundamental assumptions of the paradigm. Third, the securitization perspective (by its nature as a paradigm) filters out facts and conceptions that do not fit its fundamental assumptions so that evidence of contrary behaviour is not analysed. Given the stark nature of the DPRK portrayed by the paradigm, this means that much of the more nuanced information gathered by the humanitarian community since 1995 would simply be judged 'out of court'—inadmissible as evidence. And fourth, if data are assimilated through the lens of the paradigm they are sublimated to the fundamental assumptions so that their meaning and import are interpreted as confirmation of those assumptions. A good example is Noland's view of the soldiers pulling out two bananas from their rucksacks. They could have been stealing an unauthorized snack break; but the interpretation is of 'a surreptitious trade in bananas'.<sup>79</sup> In this way data are 'securitized' to fit the message of a normatively unacceptable and bizarre system and society that is the DPRK.

Combined, these problems can contribute to dangerous decision-making. Any decision-maker operating wholly within the thrall of either the 'mad' or the 'bad' approach—and often these are combined—would have few options other than to make war or to remain isolated from contact with the DPRK. Both those options would likely have unacceptable political, humanitarian and strategic consequences. Less starkly, this perspective leads to a failure of the imagination in terms of diplomacy. If, for instance ex-US President Jimmy Carter had really thought nothing could be done with the DPRK in 1994, he would not have made the visit which helped to break the nuclear deadlock on the peninsula and helped to prevent war.<sup>80</sup>

### Changing the paradigm?

As Kuhn tells us, changing a dominant paradigm is not easy. First there has to be an available body of knowledge with alternative assumptions which can absorb the anomalies thrown up by the 'old' paradigm. Second, there must be a crisis such as to enable a 'revolution' in thinking. Below, therefore, I outline the knowledge available that could form the basis of a 'new' paradigm. I analyse two such possible paradigms—the 'sad' and the 'rational actor' perspectives. I conclude by speculating about the possibilities of revolution in our thinking about the DPRK.

<sup>78</sup> Hazel Smith, *Policy reforms in the DPRK: limits and opportunities* (Rome: World Food Programme, 1999).

<sup>79</sup> Noland, 'Why north Korea will muddle through', p. 105.

<sup>80</sup> See Robert A. Manning, 'The United States in north Korean foreign policy', in Kim, ed., *North Korean foreign relations in the post-Cold War era*, pp. 153–5.



*The 'sad' thesis*

All in all, given the scale of need found by the humanitarian community, one way to conceive of the DPRK is as a very 'sad' society indeed. All its children under ten years old have suffered from lack of food and 62 per cent, according to the surveys, are malnourished.<sup>81</sup> An entire generation is growing up in north Korea damaged physically and mentally by inadequate and insufficient nutrition. One way to conceive of north Korea, then, would be through a development studies paradigm. North Korea needs assistance to modernize and integrate itself within the world economy, and international policy objectives should direct themselves to this objective. This is what I want to term the 'sad' paradigm. The core of this approach could be located in the studies made by the international humanitarian community. Commentary by US-based analysis which is shaped by this 'developmental' perspective is already available and is founded on detailed knowledge of north Korean society obtained by observation of and engagement with post-1995 DPRK society.<sup>82</sup>

*The 'rational actor' thesis*

Yet, because there are still real security tensions on the Korean peninsula, we need to find an interpretative framework for north Korean politics that is security-conscious but can help analysts differentiate negative from positive stimulus as far as potential security threats are concerned. The securitization paradigm cannot do this because, as I have shown, it interprets all DPRK actions (even those in contradiction with each other) as constituting evidence of a challenge to international security. By contrast, a useful and standard approach, but one that has not been utilized in the north Korean case, is Graham Allison's 'rational actor model' of international politics.<sup>83</sup> Devised partly to help analyse the Cuban missile crisis, it posits an interpretative model which suggests that states (even revolutionary states) can be understood as being led by unitary governments engaged in more or less purposive acts in international politics.<sup>84</sup> Governments, in this model, pursue goals and objectives through choosing alternative policies and behaviours, to which are attached potential 'utility' or consequences. Rational choice in this scenario consists therefore in selecting alternatives that maximize utility, that is, which achieve the government's goals and minimize unpleasant consequences.

Although this is not the place to extrapolate the model fully, if we take Allison's approach as a base we can then explore the utility of interpreting DPRK behaviour through what I want to qualify as a *historicized and contextualized* rational actor framework. This approach assumes that the DPRK,

<sup>81</sup> World Food Programme, *Nutritional survey of the DPRK* (Rome: World Food Programme, undated [1998]).

<sup>82</sup> See Omawale, 'An exercise in ambivalence'; Williams et al., 'The wind farm in the cabbage patch'.

<sup>83</sup> Graham Allison, *Essence of decision: explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (London: HarperCollins, 1971).

<sup>84</sup> For detailed discussion on the rational actor model see *ibid.*, pp. 10–38.

as an actor in international relations, is hugely conditioned by its late twentieth-century experience of war and threats of war and, equally importantly, its sense of self-directed Korean nationalism. It also assumes an in principle knowable DPRK even if it acknowledges the real difficulties of researching the country. This approach has produced some of the most credible literature on north Korea, much of which is informed by hard empirical observation and some of which has been cited in this essay as a counterpoint to the more obvious failings of the dominant paradigm. Bruce Cumings, who has spent many years studying Korea, is the leader in this field.<sup>85</sup>

Almost paradoxically, it is the security (as opposed to securitization) literature where we can see emerging a body of work that argues for a 'rational actor' approach to the DPRK. Former *New York Times* editorial board member Leon Sigal, for instance, in what has become the standard account of United States negotiations with north Korea during the 1994 nuclear crisis, shows how Cold War presumptions of north Korean politics brought the United States to the brink of war in 1994. War was prevented at literally the last minute by ex-President Jimmy Carter's 'track two' diplomacy in Pyongyang.<sup>86</sup> Carter's shuttle diplomacy to the north Korean capital was itself underpinned by personal intervention from US scholar Selig Harrison, who has persistently argued that the DPRK is a knowable entity.<sup>87</sup>

A new research agenda for north Korea could borrow from classical security studies literature, for instance balance of power theory; but the new security studies approach which looks at economic instruments as means of achieving security goals is also relevant.<sup>88</sup> Another direction of research could build on those aspects of Sigal's work in which he has demonstrated the consistent failure of US intelligence and foreign policy communities to read what he argues is both a predictable (and rational in Allison's sense) negotiating strategy.<sup>89</sup> An alternative agenda might ask the question, for instance, how the north Koreans achieved what could be considered a diplomatic success in securing a treaty-based agreement whereby its major adversaries—the United States and south Korea—would finance the development of its nuclear power programme.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>85</sup> For an accessible and scholarly introduction to Korean politics and society (south and north), see Bruce Cumings, *Korea's place in the sun* (New York: Norton, 1998).

<sup>86</sup> Sigal, *Disarming strangers*. Carter interrupted a White House 'Council of War' discussing military action against the DPRK in a telephone call from Pyongyang outlining the deal that had been agreed with Kim Il Sung. See *ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>87</sup> See the seminal Selig S. Harrison, 'Promoting a soft landing in Korea', *Foreign Policy* 106, Spring 1997.

<sup>88</sup> For a security analysis which avoids the trap of securitization discourse see Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan's economic power and security: Japan and north Korea* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>89</sup> Sigal outlines a list of north Korean diplomatic moves as direct and logical responses to US, ROK and International Atomic Energy Agency actions between 1991 and 1994. See Sigal, *Disarming strangers*, pp. 257–9.

<sup>90</sup> The major source of funding for the new nuclear power reactors is south Korea. Other states including the US, Japan and the European Union have pledged support. South Korea has agreed some \$4 billion for the actual construction of the light water reactors, although most of the spending will be in the south on materials and inputs for the north Korean reactors. See Joel Wit, response to policy forum online (#23B), <NAPSNet@nautilus.orh>, 9 Dec. 1998. Japan has agreed to provide \$1 billion to help build the light water reactors. This funding is by no means certain, as the Japanese government has threatened

More practically, policy-makers need to have available to them accurate information which can assist in the pursuit of successful negotiating outcomes. An analysis of the DPRK which attempts the difficult task of sifting through the evidence to assess and separate out negative and positive signals from Pyongyang will likely make for more effective and less costly policies than one which ignores the difference. Such an approach would also allow for the possibility of cooperation to achieve goals, as opposed to the coercion implied by the securitization paradigm.<sup>91</sup>

### *Crisis and revolution*

The dominant paradigm has proved inadequate as a framework from within which decision-makers could operate in north Korea. It also faces crisis as the empirical work produced by and through the presence of the humanitarian community in the DPRK has called into question the rigour and rationality of the approach. Some signs of a revolution in thinking about the DPRK are evident, particularly in the 'sunshine' policy of the south Korean government. This policy seeks engagement with the north and is implementing an ambitious set of policy directions designed to deal with an entity it treats as a rational actor, motivated by interest and context. There is also some sign of these alternative assumptions being accepted as more appropriate by those who formerly worked within the dominant paradigm. In 1992 for instance, one analyst argued that 'further research...[on north Korea is] impossible under present circumstances'.<sup>92</sup> By 1998, the same analyst was acknowledging the increasing availability of data emanating from the humanitarian community as well as admonishing observers not to treat the DPRK as 'a strange planet, beyond our ken or control'.<sup>93</sup> The literature provided by the humanitarian community and new security studies framework provides a solid research base for a revolution in thinking about the DPRK. Such research can also provide the foundations for more successful international policy options.

### **Rational policy options**

An obvious rational approach would be to support the south Korean policy of engagement with north Korea. Another option for US policy-makers would be

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to suspend support as a reaction to DPRK satellite launch over Japanese territory in 1998. See Hughes, *Japan's economic power and security*, pp. 153–4. The United States agreed funding 'not to exceed' \$35 million. See excerpt from House–Senate Conference report for HR4328 (Omnibus Appropriations Bill), 19 Oct. 1998 Congressional record, obtained from <NAPSNet@nautilus.org>, 29 Oct. 1998.

<sup>91</sup> Sigal, *Disarming strangers*. This is also the message of Michael J. Mazarr, *North Korea and the bomb: a case study in nonproliferation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).

<sup>92</sup> Aidan Foster-Carter, 'North Korea in retrospect', in Dae Hwan Kim and Tat Yan Kong, eds, *The Korean peninsula in transition* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 127.

<sup>93</sup> Aidan Foster-Carter, 'North Korea: all roads lead to collapse—all the more reason to engage Pyongyang', in Noland, ed., *Economic integration of the Korean peninsula*; quote on p. 29. For acknowledgement of the impact on data availability of 'famine relief work' see *ibid.*, p. 30.

to adopt an approach which is informed by the view that cooperation with north Korea would serve the US national interest—helping to achieve stability in East Asia in a way which coercion cannot.

In terms of specific policy proposals, some of the more imaginative being floated inside the south Korean policy establishments (but outside the dominant paradigm) are very likely to be greeted by the DPRK with much more of a willingness to cooperate than is countenanced by the securitization perspective. For instance, a peace deal which replaced US troops with a peacekeeping force that *included* US troops along with other nationalities is a policy position which could provide a successful way out of the current negotiating impasse at the four-party talks, if it is approached seriously and constructively. The idea of including north Korea in a security pact for East Asia *along with* the United States, Japan, south Korea and possibly China should be given some serious thought. If the Pentagon balks at equal membership of such an East Asian Pact—as might north Korean generals—an option of associate membership for north Korea could be sought.

Economically, development organizations could fund small export-oriented industries (textiles, tourism) in north Korea. Export orientation will of itself propel north Korea into the terrain of liberal capitalism with its external market disciplines which inevitably feed back into an already changing north Korean socio-economic landscape. North Korean business is already much more geared towards foreign markets—in terms of concerns over quality of goods, meeting deadlines, etc.—than again is perhaps generally realized by economic analyses shaped by the securitization lens.

## **Conclusion**

The securitization paradigm provides a poor guide for policy-makers because it fails to grasp the complexity of north Korean politics and their rapidly changing nature. An alternative approach would accept a rationality on behalf of the DPRK and seek to explore the context and motivation for changes in DPRK policy. Alternative approaches do not have to be normatively committed to either the continuance or the demise of the north Korean regime. They can, however, be committed to supporting moves towards peace, stability and freedom from hunger on the Korean peninsula.

Retaining the dominant approach does not just reflect a crisis of the diplomatic imagination. Securitizing perspectives shape thought so as to make coercion the option of choice in dealing with north Korea. In this way securitization perspectives could well lead to war that would actively involve China and the United States in direct military conflict with each other. The choice then is between securitization/war and rationality/diplomatic engagement. Only those who would never set foot upon the Korean peninsula in the case of a modern war could choose the former.