How does North Korea signal to other regional actors?
Gilberto J. Algar-Faria

Abstract
The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea signals to regional actors using its brinkmanship technique not because it is incompetent, but because it is a rational actor with an astute understanding of how, given its circumstances, it can best pursue its ultimate goal: regime survival. Specifically, it raises regional tensions in order to protect itself from the United States of America and its allies while at the same time pushing China for concessions. The events of 2010 and 2011 show that North Korea continues to pursue concessions from other regional actors, employing the very same methods as it has used previously.

Disclaimer: This article was completed prior to the death of Kim Jong-il on 17 December, 2011. While this has not in any way affected the validity of the argument made in this paper, the author has decided not to alter the wording to accommodate the succession of Kim Jong-un, as this would distort the wording of the published edition too far from that of the original dissertation on which this is based.
Introduction

This paper will answer two questions: firstly it will evaluate the various methods employed by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK; also referred to as North Korea or Pyongyang) in order to influence the international community. This will involve drawing upon theoretical work on diplomatic signalling which will be substantiated with examples describing the DPRK’s behaviour on the international stage. It will argue that the DPRK employs ever more violent methods of diplomatic coercion which feature harsh words and grand displays of power but always fall short of actual mobilisation of forces or firing of missiles. This is arguably the main method by which the DPRK consistently punches significantly above its own weight on the international stage; a method known as brinkmanship. This tactic is defined by Vineyard as:

…the practice, especially in international politics, of seeking advantage by creating the impression that one is willing and able to push a highly dangerous situation to the limit rather than concede. (2006: 21)

This paper will also argue that the DPRK signals as it does in order to perpetuate the Kim regime (defined as the autocratic rule of the DPRK by dynasty established by the late Kim Il-sung—also known as the ‘Great Leader’—and currently maintained by his son the incumbent Kim Jong-il — hereinafter also referred to as the ‘Dear Leader’). Arguably this is the foremost motivation behind the DPRK’s policy of brinkmanship and from this aim to perpetuate the Kim regime spring related goals including great power status, self reliance (Habib 2010a: 2831) and a guarantee of non-intervention by other states (Bluth 2010: 241). Moreover, this paper poses that its signalling techniques are not only a tool to keep the international society away from its sovereignty but also to keep its domestic audience at bay.

Methodology

The methodology of this paper will involve the use primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are mainly derived from the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA – the DPRK’s state media) and the Korean Friendship Association (KFA). The latter is an organisation supported by the DPRK government with the purpose, amongst others, of ‘building international ties with the [DPRK].’ (KFA 2007a) As a result, there will be inherent limitations in the quality of data provided by these sources. They do not, for
example, provide any form of analysis on any given issue. Rather, their utility lies in that they can provide an indication of the North Korean perspective on issues and, additionally, will give evidence of North Korean costly signalling. Of course, this paper’s analysis will be informed by a selection of secondary literature which will be contained in the literature review, which is located within this section. This will include some of the key books, chapters in edited volumes, journal articles and commercial news articles utilised by this paper. This will conclude the first section.

The second section of this paper will contain the theoretical basis behind its arguments. It will begin by giving a brief overview of the relevant history of the Korean Peninsula. The section will then identify basic North Korean negotiating behavioural trends, noting that its main strategy of coercion hinges on its possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). It will be argued that North Korea is rational in its negotiating techniques and in particular, reputation will be highlighted as a factor that explains the actions of the DPRK as a state under global scrutiny.

The third section will offer explanations as to why the DPRK behaves as it does. Arguably, Pyongyang negotiates in the only way it can in order to coerce the PRC into providing it with essential aid while simultaneously protecting it from encroachments from other regional actors such as the United States of America (US; also referred to as America) and the Republic of Korea (ROK; also referred to as South Korea or Seoul). These dual aims contribute, according to this argument, to the ‘holy grail’ of North Korean politics: the perpetuation of the Kim regime.

The fourth section will apply what has previously been discussed to the case study of the year 2010, during which the DPRK sank the ROK Navy ship the Cheonan before going on to shell the South Korean islands of Yeonpyeong later in the year, all under the umbrella of a pending regime change. Here, it will be argued that the DPRK continued its policy of brinkmanship in order to sustain its regime in a challenging year and allow for the transfer of leadership to take place between Kim Jong-il and his youngest son, Kim Jong-un. This was arguably evidenced with an attempt to return to the negotiating table in early 2011.

The final section of this paper will conclude that the DPRK employs a multitude of seemingly very harsh and dangerous forms of signalling as a part of its brinkmanship diplomacy technique in an attempt to influence the international community, particularly the abovementioned regional actors, to assist in perpetuating the Kim regime. Said regime is
entirely bent on preserving itself by means of maintaining a constant state of crisis within its borders and this explains its consistent threat of the employment of WMD in order to obtain what it requires for survival. As a result, a number of recommendations and predictions for the future will be made which will mainly focus on addressing worst-case scenarios of regime collapse in Pyongyang.

Previous research

There is a growing body of research on North Korea’s diplomacy. Previous research includes that of Martin (2004) and also of Bluth (2008, 2010). Bluth gives observations about events up to and including the Cheonan incident. However, his research does not at this time extend to explain the Yeonpyeong incident and the aftermath. Others such as Demick (2010) will focus overly on the human security issue within the DPRK’s borders while Eberstadt (1995) provides a detailed but ultimately outdated historical account of the DPRK.

At the other end of the spectrum, a number of articles have addressed the events of 2010 but these have generally lacked quantitative testing and historical context (Cha and Kim 2010a, b; Cossa and Glosserman 2010; Foster-Carter 2010a, b, c; Kang and Lee 2010a, b; Snyder and Byun 2010a, b). This paper will fill a void in this respect: it will address the backing-down of the DPRK during December, 2010, as it arguably realised it had raised tensions to their optimum point for negotiation before they passed into relative diseconomies of scale. This argument is supported by Snyder’s (2002) remarks on the crisis-goading the DPRK generally employs in order to achieve maximum concessions (pp.76-78). The lack of information absorption during bargaining, as highlighted by Snyder (2002), will be explained, uniquely, in the context of organisational learning (Amin and Cohendet 2000; Wang and Ahmed 2003). Hence this paper will argue that Pyongyang, in its actions over the year 2010, was acting entirely rationally.

Pyongyang’s nuclear capability is arguably the focal point of its negotiation strategy. Here, the knowledge of Sigal (2002) is useful although it is limited in its historical context and willingness to map potential future events on the Korean Peninsula. The established idea that the DPRK uses ‘nuclear extortion’ in order to obtain aid from other states (Byman and Lind 2010: 65) will be built upon and an argument will be formed posing that Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il have been strong, rational leaders. This is similar to that posed by Kang (2003) who argued that the DPRK wishes above all else to perpetuate its regime indefinitely.
However, Kang argues that the DPRK will be willing to ‘trade its nuclear and missile programs in return for security guarantees.’ (p.314) This paper argues that there is no evidence to support this argument and that it is much more likely that the US will be able to achieve a temporary pause in the DPRK nuclear programme than to end it forever. (Gallucci 2003) This relates back to Bluth’s (2010) argument that the DPRK will never give up its nuclear weapons or ballistic capabilities, for they are the only way for it to assure its own security. Arguably, rather, the DPRK will hope to maintain and build upon its ballistic and nuclear capabilities. Here, on the topic of rationality, the quantitative analyses conducted by Davies (2007a, b, 2008) will be utilised in order to demonstrate the case for the DPRK being both aware of global issues and responding to them based on reason.

The question over whether or not it is possible to engage the DPRK will be a central question to be addressed by this paper. This issue has been investigated by Cha and Kang (2004a, b; Cha 2002). This paper agrees with the idea that the DPRK is deterred from ‘lashing out’ by other regional powers. However, this paper would also limit those with influence to the PRC, the US and the ROK, as quantitatively demonstrated by Davies (2007b: 149). The influence of the PRC is doubtlessly vital in this situation, as argued by Kim (2010a) who inspects the change and continuity in Sino-DPRK relations throughout the presidency of Hu Jintao. This article details its own limitations: it shows the view of North Korea from a Chinese perspective and details only the interactions between the two states.

This paper will specifically argue that the DPRK will maintain and continue to grow its weapons capabilities in order to deter the threat it perceives from the US. Its argument will utilise previous research but also use evidence from more recent times from 2010 onwards. (Habib 2010a, b) One explanation of why the DPRK behaves as it does is arguably given by the fact that audience costs influence the leadership to some extent. A large body of literature exists to argue the possibility of audience costs affecting state leadership’s decisions (Axelrod 1981; Fearon 1997; Guisinger and Smith 2002; Jentleson and Whytock 2006; Sartori 2002; Tomz 2007; Weeks 2008). These can be further grouped according to the arguments they pose. The Jentleson and Whytock (2006) article is unique amongst this group of articles in that it focuses on a case study of Libya, which began dismantling its weapons programmes following the US-led invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan (p.48). This is a unique case and this paper will discuss why this would not happen in the DPRK under similar circumstances.
The work of Axelrod (1987), Guisinger and Smith (2002) and Sartori (2002) argues that states maintain their reputations by committing only to actions they know they will be able to carry out, in order to avoid losing their credibility. This paper argues that this is not in fact the case with the DPRK, which instead arguably utilises its tactic of brinkmanship to blur outside perceptions of its sincerity and destabilise any certainty over whether such theories apply to it. These articles also contrast with the arguments given by Fearon (1997), Tomz (2007) and Weeks (2008) which are largely concerned with audience costs and argue that states may mobilise their domestic audiences behind their decisions in order to appear resolute and genuine on the international stage.

Uniquely among the latter group of articles, Weeks (2008) argues that autocracies are also subject to audience costs from their political elites, but also suggests that the DPRK is immune to this as the Kim regime retains ultimate power (p.36). This would be somewhat supported by Escribà-Folch and Wright (2010) who note that so long as a regime can pass costs on only to those not included in the domestic audience, it may remain in power. This paper perceives this argument as insufficient, leaving a gap in the accepted knowledge; the DPRK arguably does suffer from audience costs of a different sort which require it to maintain its proliferation of nuclear weapons and culture of war. This evidently differs from normal audience costs and will be discussed further later in this paper. Thus, in sum this paper applies audience cost theory directly to the case study of North Korea and also argues that the DPRK is an exceptional state which will behave differently to others.

A general theme running through this paper is the argument that the DPRK is not ‘insane’, but instead acts rationally given its position in international society. This is certainly not the first paper to address such an issue (Byman and Lind 2010; Cha 2002; Habib 2010a; Smith 2000). Those supporting this paper’s argument that the DPRK is a rational actor include Davies (2007a, b, 2008), Smith (2000) and Snyder (2002). However, these articles do not give a rounded explanation of the different factors contributing to the DPRK’s signalling techniques in a more general sense, specifically taking into account the events of 2010. This gap is remedied in this paper, which draws on a wide range of sources to make informed arguments regarding the DPRK’s behaviour and signalling to the wider international community in the first decade of the 21st century.
**Theoretical basis**

This section will argue that the DPRK fights a battle to maintain its reputation on the international stage as any state would. However, this reputation it seeks to uphold is one of an unpredictable, dangerous state which should be appeased and approached with caution. The DPRK arguably perpetuates its position in the international system through its brinkmanship technique, which sees its diplomatic negotiations soar to seemingly dangerous and stressful levels in between periods of relative calm. Even the periods referred to as ‘calm’ are in fact plagued by uncertainty, with escalations raising tensions to the brink of crisis. It follows that the wide perception of the DPRK is of an ‘irrational’, ‘crazy’ and unpredictable regime that is constantly at risk of collapsing (Cha 2002: 46). However, this is arguably not at all the case in reality as North Korea in fact harnesses its image of unpredictability in order to gain greater concessions from regional actors.

This section will begin with a basic explanation of the origins of the division of the Korean Peninsula, arguing that the divide is entirely artificial and that differences have been created through years of segregation. The second section of this section will argue with the support of examples from the 1990s and 2000s that the DPRK creates tensions which are later relaxed in exchange for concessions. The third section will focus on the DPRK’s reputation, arguing that North Korea specifically works towards gaining a reputation as an unpredictable and dangerous state in order to maximise its ability to gain concessions. Finally, this section will conclude that the DPRK’s foreign policy is unique and designed entirely to gain maximum concessions from regional actors.

**Background**

Formed in the embers of the Korean War in 1953 without a peace treaty (Bluth 2008: 20-21; Demick 2010: 23), and so still technically at war with the US (Cha and Kang 2004a: 240), the DPRK is one of the last bastions of true communist personalist regimes left in the world today, cut-off from international negotiations and secluded from the global public eye. Led by the Kim dynasty, beginning with Kim Il-sung in 1945-6 (Martin 2004: 56) and continued by his son, Kim Jong-il from the 1980s onwards (officially appointed in 1993) (Bluth 2008: 28-29), the DPRK domestically revolves around the cult of the leader.
One of the most oppressive regimes in the world (Freedom House 2010, 2011: 12-16), North Korea houses a leadership that, according to Demick (2010), survives domestically through the restriction of information and the detention of non-compliers (pp.174-175). The population is bombarded with propaganda claiming that life in the DPRK is better than in any other state and warning that the population must always be ready to lay their lives down in order to protect the leadership (pp.12-13). Domestic conditions are desperate for the wide majority of the population (Parry 2010a, b) and as such it is important to observe the ‘othering’ qualities often associated with Western states (Jamieson and McEvoy 2005: 514-515) of what might be termed North Korean exceptionalism. This exceptionalism, encouraged from an early age in North Korean citizens (Lee 2010) is designed to persuade the domestic population of the DPRK that they are somehow different and superior to all other races (Myers 2010). In line with other models of exceptionalism, the DPRK portrays its rivals as barbarous and immoral regimes, reducing them to a sub-human status—referring interchangeably to the US, Japan and even their neighbour the ROK with phrases such as ‘warmongers’, ‘imperialist aggressors’, ‘puppet groups’ and ‘ultra-right forces’ (KCNA 2010k, l).

It should be noted that there is arguably no historical justification for the division of Korea; ‘it is not based on language, culture, ethnicity or natural geography.’ (Dosch 2006: 126) Indeed, as Demick (2010) writes, the north-south divide was imposed by foreign leaders. The traditional divide that in fact existed was between ‘the east gravitating naturally toward Japan and the west to China.’ (p.22) However, although it is often theorised by both North and South Korea that the Korean Peninsula contains a population of one people (p.248), arguably in reality sixty years of political division has caused the two Koreas to develop different, distinctive identities and opposition to one another (Bleiker 2001: 121). Demick (2010) notes that technologically, the ROK is far more advanced and physically, the average South Korean 17-year-old male is approximately five inches taller than a North Korean defector of the same age and gender. Additionally, they have developed different ways of talking, with North Koreans speaking like the South Koreans did in the 1960s (p.248) and with a more guttural accent (p.270).
Pyongyang’s methods

The central pillar of the DPRK’s 21st century bargaining tactics has arguably been its highly visible proliferation of WMD. However, it is important to understand, as Cha and Kang (2004a) note, that the DPRK was deterred before it had nuclear weapons and it is still deterred now (p.245). What the DPRK does with its WMD is compensate for its general lack of resources for negotiating purposes; by ‘confessing’ that it possesses WMD, it brings to the table something to bargain with (Sigal 2002: 12). Thus the DPRK is able to punch far above its weight in diplomatic negotiations (Walt 2009) and Pyongyang knows this, focusing its attention on nuclear weapons as an almighty bargaining tool (Pollack 2007: 108). Moreover, combined with its associated bureaucracy, the DPRK’s nuclear fuel cycle is integral to ‘economic survival, political stability and ideological legitimation of the Kim regime.’ (Habib 2010a: 2826)

As a general trend, the DPRK accepts economic concessions from other states and responds to them by not adhering to the conditions tied to those concessions (Davies 2007a: 491). On the other hand, the raising of sanctions or the failure to provide economic dispensations can be expected to lead to escalation by the DPRK. This hypothesis is supported by events throughout the 1990s and 2000s, for example the 1992 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) crisis and the 1994 crisis show the DPRK going through its basic mechanism of brinkmanship whereby tensions are raised to an unacceptably high level and the DPRK is ultimately tempted back to the negotiating table in return for concessions (Habib 2010a: 2832). This process is well-documented by Snyder (2002) who maps out a predictable set of stages in North Korean negotiation which is complemented by brinkmanship and other related coercion techniques (pp.50-63, 69-91). Specifically, he notes that Pyongyang achieves maximum concessions from other states through ‘demands for unilateral concessions, bluffing and threats, manufacturing deadlines, and threats to walk away from the negotiating table.’ (p.78)

As Pyongyang does not generally reciprocate in its dealings with other states (Snyder 2002: 78), the DPRK is effectively rewarded for bad behaviour. This point is supported by Davies (2007a) who, following a quantitative test of North Korean behaviour between 1994 and 2000, concludes, ‘neither bilateral nor triangular reciprocity increased North Korean cooperation.’ (p.491) This could be explained by the highly centralised and hierarchical bureaucratic structure of Pyongyang, under which:
information travels from the contact point to the center but is not disseminated to other parts of the bureaucracy, even if sharing of knowledge might strengthen the North Korean position. (Snyder 2002: 45)

This lack of information absorption by the bureaucratic structure demonstrates a poor level of organisational learning, namely insofar as it functions as a ‘processor of information’ not a ‘processor of knowledge’, but moreover because it fails to focus on ‘collectivity of individual learning’ and continuous improvement (Amin and Cohendet 2000: 93; Wang and Ahmed 2003: 9). Despite this, even if the US ever refuses to give concessions for this type of behaviour, as was the policy of the Bush administration (Carroll 2003), another regional actor will likely take its place. For example, following North Korea’s withdrawal from the NPT in 2003, the People’s Republic of China (PRC; also referred to as China or Beijing) jumped into action in order to engage the DPRK positively (Kim 2010a: 64). Meanwhile, the Agreed Framework and the Six-Party Talks demonstrated to onlookers that the DPRK would breach the terms of negotiations, simultaneously blaming the other side for doing such, in order to exit talks before any concessions were made on its part (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs 2010). This reputation sticks with the DPRK and more specifically with the Kim regime; a reputation which arguably benefits the state in its negotiating technique.

Reputation and rationality

Contrary to Cha’s (2002) argument that ‘reputational concerns do not appear to factor into Pyongyang’s policy calculations,’ this paper argues that the DPRK very carefully crafts its reputation and international image. Here, Guisinger and Smith’s agent-contingent reputation (ACR) model whereby the reputation of the leadership is synonymous with the reputation of the state they head (2002: 185) is instructive; the Kim ‘dynasty’ is recognised for its relentless self-perpetuation and it is expected that if and when the Kim line falls, so too will the regime. Hence, when the DPRK is referred to, this is arguably tantamount to speaking of the Kim regime as the two are effectively one and the same. It should be noted at this stage that the DPRK subverts the usual rules of reputation theory. Under normal conditions, a state that has a reputation for bluffing will suffer from ineffective diplomacy (Sartori 2002: 131). However, North Korea arguably achieves its demands consistently and this may be attributable to the scale of its threats.
While the DPRK’s brinkmanship process may be predictable, the threats made by Pyongyang are so dire that other states are arguably unwilling to test whether or not it is sincere. This leaves the DPRK’s reputation subject to simplistic views attempting to explain its reasons for acting in the ways that it does – namely whether it portrays a ‘bad’ (evil), ‘mad’ (irrational) or a rational state (Smith 2000).

The ‘bad’ thesis assumes that the DPRK pursues alien objectives outside of the ‘civilised’ international system and underpins the terminology sometimes used to describe it as a ‘rogue state’ (Smith 2000: 115). An arguably simplistic view, it infers that the DPRK is an evil monolithic entity by reputation and that this is a suitable reason for it to be detested. Such a viewpoint laid the foundations for North Korea’s temporary inclusion in the US’s ‘axis of evil’ (BBC 2002; Page and Parry 2008), an element of America’s own exceptionalism (Koh 2005: 123). Proponents of this view will argue that the DPRK is a dangerous, barbarous sponsor of terrorism, nuclear proliferation, drug smuggling and currency-counterfeiting (Economist 2010h). This view is arguably exaggerated; amongst other overstated charges, that of nuclear proliferation suggests that North Korea is developing nuclear weapons in order to gain the ability to make a first strike against other states. However, in reality, the DPRK was deterred prior to revealing its nuclear weapons and has remained deterred from attacking other states ever since (Cha and Kang 2004a: 245).

Given its position of relative weakness compared to the combined US-ROK forces (Cha 2002: 46), arguably the DPRK cannot be expected to wage war against the ROK; it would be illogical or even insane. This gives rise to the ‘mad’ thesis, the general line of this argument being that North Korea is ‘unpredictable in its domestic and foreign policy behaviour.’ This ranges from a ‘hard’ version suggesting that ‘terrible, inexplicable things beyond the pale of normal human existence go on [domestically],’ to a ‘soft’ version locating the said unpredictability within the lack of ‘reliable information about the country.’ (Smith 2000: 120)

It is true that the DPRK is unpredictable in some sense; its 11,000 artillery tubes mobilised along the demilitarised zone (DMZ) only allow approximately 57 seconds for targets in the ROK to react (Cha and Kang 2004a: 247) and the unpredictability of when it will make such an attack was exemplified in its 2010 shelling of the ROK’s Yeonpyeong Island (BBC 2010f). However, in the wider sense the DPRK is arguably very predictable and this may be because it in fact acts rationally. Specifically, the DPRK’s use of brinkmanship allows it to mimic a tried-and-tested method in order to gain concessions while remaining unpredictable and
nonsensical during the process. For example, on 14 December, 2004, the KCNA released two statements regarding the Six-Party Talks. The first blamed Japan for the stagnation of the talks and threatened the violent escalation of tensions, stating:

…we will seriously reconsider the issue of taking part in the six-party talks together with Japan as long as such premeditated and provocative campaign of the ultra-right forces against the DPRK goes on… (2004a)

The second statement, again delivered in the usual convoluted English of the KCNA, pinned the blame for the stalling of the talks on the US, adding confusion to the matter of what exactly the DPRK wanted, claiming:

…the U.S. is seeking to exploit the process of the [six-party] talks as a lever for forcing the DPRK to renounce first all its programs including peaceful nuclear development, not showing still any willingness to make a switchover in its policy toward the DPRK. Should the U.S. persist in this wrong stand, it would be hard to resume the talks. (2004b)

These contrasting statements show how difficult it can be to predict the precise actions the DPRK will take to achieve its method of brinkmanship. However, the overall process that is taking place can be easily foreseen and mapped-out. Indeed, Cha notes that he had a conversation with a US government official in January 2003, following the DPRK’s supposedly drastic actions with regards to the NPT and nuclear proliferation in December 2002, in which the official observed, ‘[W]e made a list of all the things the North Koreans might do to ratchet up a crisis for the purpose of negotiation. They went through that list pretty quickly.’ (Cha and Kang 2004a: 248)

That US officials could accurately predict North Korean actions in order to encourage negotiations suggests that the DPRK in fact may act rationally. This assumption is backed by quantitative work carried out by Davies (2007b) who concludes that North Koreans are aware of the US political environment. Furthermore, he finds that ‘Pyongyang alters its behaviour in response to the diversionary incentives that the US President may have.’ (p.149) In order for a US official to predict broadly what the DPRK is likely to do in a crisis situation, there must be key motivators for North Korea to act in specific ways, the general pattern of which is betrayed by its reputation. This reputation is likely to be crafted by the DPRK’s mandarins who in fact specifically aim to make the DPRK appear irrational and dangerous, thereby
enhancing its negotiating tactics, making larger concessions available to it when it goes to the bargaining table.

The DPRK’s foreign policy therefore arguably serves to retain North Korea’s separation from South Korea and alienate itself from the international stage. It uses a specific tactic known as brinkmanship in order not only to gain immediate concessions but also to ensure that its reputation remains as that of a state which acts unpredictably. However, the suggestion that the DPRK in fact acts rationally in order to appear irrational with what might be termed ‘controlled aggression’ invites further discussion into why it behaves as it does, which will be addressed the third section of this paper.

**The reasons behind the DPRK’s signalling**

This section will argue that the DPRK signals to regional actors primarily for the purpose of regime perpetuation. This, in turn, arguably derives from an obsession possessed by Kim Jong-il himself who prizes the perpetuation of his dynasty above all other objectives. As a result, the DPRK’s signalling techniques provide some defence against US and other regional aggression while at the same time coercing the PRC into supplying it with regime-sustaining aid.

This section will open with a section arguing that the DPRK employs its brinkmanship strategy in order to coerce the PRC into providing it with political and economic support, preventing the US’s ‘strategic patience’ tactic from breaking the Kim regime. The second section will argue that brinkmanship serves an additional purpose of protecting the DPRK from regional actors, most of all from the US and even turns the tables to gain concessions from these states. In its third section, this section will argue that the greatest motivation for the DPRK’s actions is that of regime perpetuation. Here it will also be argued that the DPRK acts not out of desperation but instead in a calculated manner in order to achieve exactly what it requires from others. This section will conclude stating that the DPRK employs brinkmanship ultimately in order to sustain the Kim regime under Kim Jong-il’s vision.

**Coercion of the PRC**

To some extent, the DPRK may behave as it does towards regional actors in order to coerce China into giving to it support and aid. Before a case study is analysed, two important factors must be established. Firstly, the DPRK relies heavily on the support of the PRC for its
survival. This is because China provides it with the majority of its trade as well as blocking multilateral sanctions in the United Nations (UN) Security Council and easing the blow of lesser sanctions by supplementing its economy with aid. Secondly, despite claims in Wikileaks cables to the contrary (BBC 2010c) the PRC is arguably terrified by the concept of the collapse and take-over of the DPRK. This is because an exodus of North Korean refugees into China would most probably ruin its economic growth. Additionally, while Beijing may no longer see itself and Pyongyang as ‘lips and teeth’, neither is it likely that it sees the possibility of sharing borders with a US-influenced or occupied Korea as acceptable (Parry 2010c: 5). Thus, with this in mind, the case of the 2003 NPT withdrawal and the following Six-Party Talks can be useful in explaining why the DPRK behaves as it does.

Kim (2010a) notes that while those under the dominant school of thought in Beijing are afraid of the prospect of their economic development being marred by friction with the US, the ‘consequences of entering into another Korean War would be unbearable’ (p.61). The DPRK is aware of this and exploits the PRC’s worries, drawing its attention by causing trouble. Thus, following the resumption of nuclear development in late 2002, China leapt into action, mediating 50 messages between the DPRK and the US during early 2003 before endeavouring to bear the political and economic burdens of hosting the Six-Party Talks. Notably, North Korea’s trade dependence on the PRC more than doubled from 32.7% in 2003 (p.64) to over 80% by 2011 (Kang 2011). Hence, here the DPRK learned an important lesson: bad behaviour would be rewarded by the PRC. This was again rewarded in 2006 when North Korean brinkmanship earned its masters massive quantities of aid in exchange for their return to the Six-Party Talks (Kim 2010a: 65). Therefore, it can be said that one reason why the DPRK behaves as it does towards regional actors is because it finds that the more friction and tension it causes, the more the PRC will try to pacify it with offerings of aid, trade and dialogue. However, the DPRK arguably has an additional use for the PRC: it is a bastion against the prospect of US aggression towards Pyongyang.

Along with the incoming Obama administration in 2008 was a new US policy towards the DPRK: what is known in the present day as ‘strategic patience.’ This policy essentially ‘waits for North Korea to come back to the [negotiating] table while maintaining pressure through economic sanctions and arms interdictions.’ (Chanlett-Avery and Taylor 2010: 4) The theory here is one of slow strangulation: the US can survive without the help of trade from the DPRK economy, but if the DPRK is isolated from foreign trade while tensions from annual military exercises escalate, the domestic audience is likely to eventually remove the
Kim regime from power. However, this is arguably unlikely to be successful for as long as the tactic is effectively subverted by the PRC which provides Pyongyang with enough aid to make isolation tolerable. This therefore reinforces the need for the DPRK to remain a burden to the PRC, for as long as Pyongyang is quiet and poses no threat to Beijing’s economic growth, China will not see any need to assist them out of a crisis. By creating crises, the DPRK attracts support from the PRC and thus mitigates against US pressure for its collapse. However, without the threat of isolation or aggression from regional actors, particularly the US, Pyongyang’s reliance on Beijing would probably not be so dire.

Protection from the US and other ‘outsiders’

It is important when assessing the DPRK’s motivations to try to get inside the psyche of the North Korean leadership. In order to think from a ‘North Korean’ perspective, a few fundamental facts must be considered. The DPRK is an incredibly impoverished state (Demick 2010; Parry 2010a: 4; CIA 2011a) surrounded by relatively more powerful ones. It may be that the only way out of this situation for North Korea is reunification with the South. However, the ROK and Japan particularly require convincing that this is in their best interests (Bluth 2010: 243), both of whom have been sceptical of Pyongyang’s commitment to negotiations following the 2010 Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents (BBC 2011c). While not being so obviously involved as it is on a separate continent, Japan is still at risk from North Korea’s ballistic missile technologies and has been angered by DPRK abductions of Japanese citizens during the 1970s and 1980s (BBC 2004a; Williams and Mobrand 2010: 507-508). However, despite the power and hostility of geographically proximate states, the DPRK reserves a proportionally larger concern for the threat it faces from the US.

The fundamental and most dire fear which drives North Korean foreign policy is arguably that of the US. This is because, as Kang puts it:

Even paranoiacs have enemies. The U.S. is hostile to Pyongyang, and it is not accurate to pretend that the U.S. only wants to be friends and that North Koreans are merely paranoid… the ultimate U.S. goal is the transformation or even the obliteration of their way of life… (2003: 320, emphasis in original)

The DPRK has good reason to be highly afraid of a hostile US. Firstly, as of 2009 the DPRK had a GDP (PPP) of USD $40billion and a GDP per capita of $1,800 (CIA 2011a), compared
to the US’s $14.33 trillion and $46,700 respectively in the same year (CIA 2011b). This means that the US’s economic growth is almost 360 times higher than that of the DPRK and that the average American earns on paper 26 times more the average North Korean. Meanwhile the US rightly considers itself to have the ‘strongest military on the planet.’ (Spillius 2008) Thus the applicable cliché that might be said to the US is the same as that told to children who are scared of insects: ‘they are more afraid of you than you are of them.’ An additional fact to consider is that, as aforementioned, although the Korean War was suspended in 1953 with an armistice, at the time of writing there has never been a peace treaty to formally end the war (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs 2010). Therefore, from the North Korean point of view, the armistice is a ‘mere scrap of paper’ and the DPRK has made the firm statement that it is ‘by no means a guarantee for a lasting peace.’ (KFA 2010b) While this is easy to interpret as North Korean hatred for any agreements with America, it is more likely to be a sign of Pyongyang’s frustration at the lack of a peace treaty which would remove the risk of it being attacked and effectively wiped out by the US, the single most powerful state in the world. This suspicion was exacerbated by the US’s actions in other states, including the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The aforementioned NPT withdrawal of 2003 was to some extent influenced by the US-led invasion of Iraq in March that year. The invasion led the DPRK to piece together a comparison between Iraq’s pre-war situation and its own situation following the Iraq invasion. Specifically, Iraq was previously investigated by IAEA inspectors and despite nothing being found in the way of WMD, the invasion went ahead under the doctrine of pre-emption. Additionally, the DPRK’s membership alongside Iraq on the US-imagined ‘axis of evil’ would have been likely to raise questions of whether war would be coming to meet Kim as it did Saddam. As a result, the DPRK itself since that time has likely been concerned that the US will at some point also use the doctrine of pre-emption to justify toppling the Kim regime by military force. Indeed, following the Iraq invasion the DPRK Foreign Ministry stated:

This highhanded action of the U.S. against Iraq and the war preparations now being made by the U.S. and its followers in the Korean Peninsula compel the DPRK to do all it can to defend itself and help it clearly know for what it should do more. (KCNA 2003a)
This statement, though delivered in slightly confused English, shows that the DPRK genuinely felt that it needed a capacity to deter a US attack. It was, therefore, that after a session of the North Korean Supreme People’s Assembly in September the same year, a decisive factor in the DPRK’s decision to produce a nuclear device was the perceived need to deter a US attack reminiscent of the Iraq invasion (Bluth 2010: 238).

The situation caused by the invasion of Iraq, which Pyongyang saw as a gross infringement upon Iraqi sovereignty (KCNA 2003a), was also exacerbated further by the coinciding annual joint military exercises around the Korean Peninsula between the US and the ROK (KCNA 2003b). This reaction has been measured quantitatively by Davies (2008) who notes that the invasion of Iraq led to a decline in North Korean cooperation levels with the US (p.396). Additionally, he notes that the initial ‘axis of evil’ speech caused a similar drop in Pyongyang’s cooperation levels, but that further aggressive speeches can actually have a coercive effect on the DPRK (p.395). This is indicative of a wider trend in DPRK diplomacy. Namely, it will only be uncooperative up until the point where it deems its regime’s safety is at risk, after which it is likely to resume cooperation and this is of course, as aforementioned, because it is arguably a rational actor which is motivated above all by the goal of regime perpetuation.

**Regime perpetuation**

Arguably regime perpetuation is the overriding motivation for the DPRK’s behaviour towards regional actors. This is because, everything taken into account, the pressure on the PRC, the militant stance against the US and the general brinkmanship policy altogether are ultimately designed to keep the Kim regime in power without the state collapsing. In other words, if there were more efficient ways for Pyongyang to maintain the current North Korean regime as it is, they would be sought instead of the abovementioned methods currently exercised. On the contrary, evidence shows that the DPRK is bent on indefinite survival above all else (Noland 1997; Kang 2003). As Cha puts it:

> Dissatisfied with the status quo, Pyongyang engages in limited disruptive acts that are not severe enough to start a war but are dangerous enough to attract attention and precipitate a crisis. (2002: 63)
However, Kang (2003) argues that the North has a ‘repeated and clear desire to trade its nuclear and missile programs in return for security guarantees.’ (p.314) This paper would contest that view, conceding that the DPRK is willing to take great steps in reform in order to survive, but arguing that it will draw the line when it comes to weaponry. The DPRK is aware of the case of Libya surrendering its nuclear capabilities but there is a fundamental difference between the two cases: Libya had a programme of nuclear development, whereas North Korea already has nuclear weapons (Cha and Kang 2004b: 105; Jentleson and Whytock 2006: 83). Thus, Ambassador Robert Gallucci argued that one can ‘rent’ a temporary slow-down in the DPRK’s weapons programmes but cannot put a halt to them altogether. Rather, Pyongyang is likely to be willing to trade weapons technologies with clients such as Pakistan and Iran for a profit but is unlikely to ever give away its production capabilities (2003). This is doubtlessly because Pyongyang is aware that the proliferation of nuclear technologies coupled with ballistic missiles is the only way for it to be certain that it possesses a deterrent against the US and Japan while its artillery remains a major threat to South Korea’s security. Additionally, in 2011 it became apparent to Pyongyang that, if it went along with US’s wishes and disarmed, its fate might well be regime termination as it was taught by the case of Libya. (KCNA, 2011).

Nuclear weapons provide the DPRK with three main advantages for its own survival: a ‘pretext to divert the nation’s resources to the military’, a *raison d’être* for the DPRK’s bureaucratic institutions and ‘the defining symbol of North Korea’s unique anti-American nationalism.’ This symbolism is arguably the only ideational pillar the regime preserves (Habib 2010a: 2833); a specific form of North Korean exceptionalism or *Juche* which might be taken to mean self-sufficiency in economics (Kim 2001: 386). However, North Korea’s nuclear programme arguably remains a first and foremost a deterrent; it is unlikely that Pyongyang sees it as anything more than a means to prevent its collapse for the time being and even more unlikely that they would be utilised offensively as anything more than a bargaining tool.

The desperation theory is one that must be addressed as it has been argued by Cha that the DPRK is not unlike a gambler in its foreign policy calculations. He argues that, as the DPRK’s position in the region deteriorates, it will become more prone to making a risky attack against other regional actors. Hence, like a foolish gambler who has lost almost all of his earnings on a game, it will make calculations akin to a ‘double or nothing mentality’ as it becomes weaker (1998: 481). This argument has drawn criticism from Kang who notes that
it is based on ‘scarce—and largely speculative—data about North Korea.’ (2003: 313) This is certainly correct, but more fundamentally it would seem wrong to ever suggest that the DPRK would be willing to accept a high risk of regime collapse even for higher gains.

The Kim regime has never pushed the boundaries far enough for war to take place. To this, Cha might argue that the danger ‘is not that the regime would commit suicide knowingly, but that it would regard “lashing out” as its only option’ (2002: 47), thereby bringing about its own collapse unintentionally. However, this argument treats the DPRK like a state with no understanding of international relations. It is isolated from the rest of the world and the North Korean leadership has relatively little experience in what Western liberal democracies might term ‘normal’ diplomacy, but arguably it is well-read in its own technique of brinkmanship. This paper would suggest that North Korea is fully aware of the implications of its actions. Despite its use of heated language, it seems that the DPRK remains somewhat cooler under the collar than its adversaries and knows where the limits lie in the crises it creates. An example of this can be seen in the case study of the events of 2010, which will be discussed in more detail later. Ultimately, therefore, its policy of brinkmanship is designed to make maximum gains for the DPRK coupled with minimum concessions, but unlike a desperate gambler North Korea knows when to stop and leave with its winnings.

It would be beneficial at this stage to note that North Korea is not only dissimilar to a desperate gambler, but moreover it is arguably unlike any type of gambler at all. It would never risk regime collapse through its actions and indeed, brinkmanship is the arguably in fact the least risky method Pyongyang to invoke in order to ensure regime survival. This hypothesis is arrived at because, although the DPRK appears cautious during a crisis, there is no evidence to suggest that it has ever taken any particular risk when initiating a crisis. It appears to choose carefully when calculations suggest that a situation can be exploited, but it never gives its adversaries enough reason to justify a declaration of war under just war theory (JWT), the criteria for which are detailed by Orend (2005). Under jus ad bellum (effectively the just initiation of war), an aggressor might be able to claim ‘just cause’ due to the widespread reported human rights abuses within the DPRK (Demick 2010). ‘Public consent’, if the Wall Street Journal editor’s (2010) poll on South Korean military drills on a disputed island is anything to go by, would not be much of a problem either. However, satisfying ‘proper authority’ – the need for a UN mandate – plus the additional criteria of ‘last resort’
and ‘proportionality’ becomes troublesome for those hoping to find an excuse to declare war against the DPRK.

North Korea’s threats to descend into nuclear war, taking it self out and at the very minimum turning Seoul into a ‘sea of fire’ (Demick 2010: 92) make justifying war under the clause of ‘proportionality’ extremely difficult. The prospective resultant deaths and widespread damage would preclude any chances of a war satisfying this clause. Neither would the ‘last resort’ clause be met, so long as North Korea did not strike first. It may be observed that the DPRK raises tensions through the use of weapon production, tests and launches, violent language and direct minor attacks which are either denied or claimed as retaliatory force by Pyongyang. Arguably this is no coincidence but rather a specific and well-calculated tactic of the DPRK designed entirely to gain concessions in order to sustain the regime on the one hand while on the other, minimising the chances of an attack against it (this also applies to the events of 2010).

Arguably the outward foreign policy tendencies displayed by the DPRK are telling of the nature of its leadership. Bearing in mind the dire domestic conditions extant in the DPRK (BBC 2004b; Demick 2010) coupled with the relative weakness of North Korea compared with its regional neighbours, it cannot be denied that its behaviour is well calculated for the purpose of regime perpetuation. As Kang notes:

> …both Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-II have been very capable leaders. All the evidence points to their ability to make sophisticated decisions and to manage palace, domestic, and international politics with extreme precision. (2003: 311)

Indeed, the DPRK was the only one of Asia’s communist states (including the USSR) to avoid famine in the course of its collectivisation of agriculture (Eberstadt 1995: 132) and, even following the death of Kim Il-sung, all coup attempts have been prevented (Bluth 2008: 31-32). Together, these facts all support the assertion that the Kims have so far been entirely in control of their state’s calculated actions on the international stage. If they are rational, then, what can be the motivation behind these actions?

Pyongyang’s actions are obviously not in the immediate sense designed to maximise the standard of living for the regime’s domestic population. Neither are they what any ‘conceivable North Korean leader’ (Kang 2003: 312) would choose to do. Rather, these actions are arguably most accurately related to a basic desire or obsession initially coined by
Kim Il-sung but misinterpreted and taken to a new level by his son. Specifically, Kim Il-sung was said to have expressed wishes to abandon the DPRK’s emphasis on military affairs and was aghast to find out how poor living conditions became under Kim Jong-il’s rule while he was still alive (Bluth 2008: 30). Indeed, Kim Jong-il appears to have selected his heir apparent based almost entirely on his ability to groom them for the position and their prospective ability to be ruthless. As Confucian tradition dictates, the eldest son should be the successor to the leadership. In this case, the eldest is Kim Jong-nam but his chances of succession were dashed in 2001 when he tried to enter Japan illegally. The next eldest son, Kim Jong-chul, has allegedly been ruled out by Kim Jong-il as ‘no good [as a successor to the leadership] because he is like a little girl.’ In contrast, Kim Jong-un has been described as ‘resembl[ing] his father in every way’ and so despite being the youngest he is expected to succeed Kim Jong-il as the next leader of North Korea (BBC 2010d). What implication does this bear for the reasoning behind North Korean actions towards regional actors?

The choice of Kim Jong-un as the heir apparent implies that Kim Jong-il is indeed the central pillar of an ideology that dictates the view that his own interpretation of Kim Il-sung’s ideology must be perpetuated at all costs. This is not a motivation that would fall naturally on any given leader of the DPRK; Kim Jong-nam was arguably seen as too untrustworthy to continue the leadership in the eyes of his father and indeed does not appear to believe in the regime himself (Chosun 2010; CNN 2010). Meanwhile, Kim Jong-chul was not chosen apparently because he was too weak to sustain Kim Jong-il’s framework of leadership. This is certainly not surprising given the Dear Leader’s apparent ruthless elimination of perceived weakness originating from influential characters even from within his own family. The aforementioned death of Kim Il-sung may be attributed to Kim Jong-il (Martin 2004: 507) when the former appeared to be attempting to show interest in genuine peaceful reunification with the South and the relaxing of military tensions. Thus, the motivation for the DPRK’s actions derives from the all-important personal ideology of Kim Jong-il. What is yet to be seen is whether this will continue, following a transfer of power to an heir, presumed in this paper to be Kim Jong-un. The events of 2010 may shed some light on this matter.

Case study: the events of 2010

Arguably, despite the supposedly extraordinary violence of North Korean actions in 2010 which precipitated an apparent power shift from Kim Jong-il to his youngest son, Kim Jong-un, the same brinkmanship tactics were used in this year as were used throughout the 1990s
and 2000s. By examining the DPRK’s actions over an entire year, this section will argue that the tactics employed by North Korea during 2010 and into 2011 were a means to an end, the end being a continuation of the Kim legacy in the vision of the Dear Leader.

This section will argue that the sinking of the Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong respectively were mere components of a planned and drawn-out brinkmanship strategy that began with Pyongyang’s abstinence from the Six-Party Talks and was seen drawing into its concluding stages in early 2011 with North Korean offers of negotiation. The argument will go on to detail the background domestic political situation that unfolded during the same year, giving further insight into motivations for the DPRK’s use of its most overt brinkmanship policy yet. The argument that Kim Jong-il is the primary driver behind the policy is maintained throughout. It is concluded that the events of 2010 were in no way unusual or out of character for the DPRK’s usual brinkmanship strategy, but had an additional driving force behind them which was the leadership transfer from father to son.

The events of 2010: a sequence of means to a leadership change

Arguably the sinking of the ROK ship the Cheonan and the fierce denial of culpability by the DPRK in the aftermath (KFA 2010a; KCNA 2010e, f, g, h, i) displayed a willingness to raise tensions by the latter. Giving rise to numerous conspiracy theories (Lee and Suh 2010; Hankyoreh 2010; Nature News 2010; Sakai 2010; McGlynn 2010), the event caused great amounts of hassle and frustration for regional actors, especially the US and the ROK who produced in response reports of clarification about the incident containing definitive evidence of the damage to the Cheonan being inflicted by North Korean submarine torpedoes (Republic of Korea Civil-Military Joint Investigation Group 2010). The DPRK’s denial of guilt can be seen as an unusual but effective method of brinkmanship which caused outrage followed by indignation towards the DPRK as it refuted claims of its answerability for the sinking. This stubbornness served to sever communications between the DPRK and the ROK which formed an important stage in the brinkmanship continuum.

The events of March, 2010, served to close communications with some states and open them with others. The sinking of the Cheonan specifically was used to coerce the PRC and remind Hu Jintao that the DPRK was still, as aforementioned, a problem for China that could not simply be ignored or brushed aside. A comparison of the reporting by the two states’ official media agencies of the surprise meeting between Kim Jong-il and Hu Jintao in China in
August, 2010, following the incident, is instructive. For example, on 30 August, the KCNA published a long article filled with language suggesting amity between the DPRK and the PRC and specifically employing the word ‘friendship’ 22 times (2010d). This compares starkly to the equivalent report on the same day by the Chinese state media which published a much shorter article. This was by no means a negative article but it limited its use of the word friendship to two occurrences, instead focusing on the need to strengthen exchange and cooperation with the DPRK (Yang 2010). Next to the single article published by Xinhua, the KNCA published ‘transcripts’ of speeches exchanged between Hu and Kim (2010a, c) and suggested the PRC had an obligation to support the DPRK due to historical and traditional ties between Chinese and North Korean elders (2010b). This evidence supports the theory that the DPRK is primarily concerned with maintaining relations with and pressuring the PRC for concessions whereas the latter sees the former as a burden that for strategic reasons must still be addressed and appeased.

The shelling which took place on 23 November, 2010, was arguably more than anything else an act of brinkmanship. It was doubtlessly North Korea’s most diplomatically offensive action in over half a century – killing South Korean civilians for the first time since the end of the Korean War (BBC 2010f). It is important to bear in mind that in terms of numbers it was not the most damaging act of all; the sinking of the Cheonan in March, 2010, created ten times the number of casualties (BBC 2010e; Strother 2010). However, in the case of the Yeonpyeong shelling, there was no place for question over whether or not the DPRK was implicated; it certainly was. Instead, North Korea excused itself, accusing Seoul of triggering the attack by allowing the trajectories of its shells to travel into, under Pyongyang’s definition, DPRK waters. However, the ‘return’ of fire by North Korea, while unprecedented and disproportionately aggressive, was arguably very much within the same category as the other provocations it had made prior to 2010.

Bearing in mind that a shell from scheduled annual military exercises reaching a disputed area of Korean waters was considered a massive breach of North Korean sovereignty, it is interesting that it failed to return fire once ROK shells hit its own land (BBC 2010a). That the DPRK failed to return fire, instead warning against further breaches of its defined territory, suggests that it is not and has never been interested in an all-out military conflict. Additionally, the targeting of DPRK fire is instructive: its decision to attack the islands of Yeonpyeong, with a mere population of about 1,200 (Naver 1999, author’s translation), suggests that it did not wish to start a real war with the ROK. This is because, if it had
wished for the latter, it arguably would have preferred to attack the capital Seoul which with its artillery it could reach within a minute of firing (Cha and Kang 2004a: 247), giving the tactical advantage and the element of surprise to the DPRK. It can be inferred from DPRK statements that if it really wished to go to war, it would aim to inflict maximum damage on the ROK in the process, turning Seoul into a ‘sea of fire’ (Wit, Poneman and Gallucci 2005: 149). This being the case, it can be concluded that on 23 November, 2010, North Korea shelled the South Korean Yeonpyeong in order to achieve goals other than war.

Arguably the proportionally greatest motivator behind the increase in aggravating, aggressive behaviour from the DPRK, particularly during the year 2010, is the allegedly impending transfer of state leadership from Kim Jong-il to his youngest son Kim Jong-un (Economist 2010c, e, f; Macintyre 2010). It should be noted that Kim Jong-il is suspected of being in poor health (Economist 2010g: 65, 2010h) and it may be that Kim Jong-un is already *de facto* in control of the state as his father was in the closing years of the rule of Kim Il-sung (Bluth 2008: 28). Conditions within North Korea for the domestic population are said to be almost unliveable under most recent accounts (Demick 2010: 289) and it could be expected in such circumstances that the creation of state-level crises are targeted at two main objectives. Firstly a large crisis achieves a ‘rally-around-the-flag’ effect, thereby preventing state collapse during the change-over (Belfer 2010) and secondly it creates material which can be used as propaganda in order to consolidate Kim Jong-un’s image as a deft military and state leader.

The DPRK regime in 2010 arguably committed its abrasive actions as part of a wider propaganda campaign to create a ‘rally-around-the-flag’ effect which, Belfer notes, in North Korea means rallying around the Kim dynasty (2010). This would be in-line with the theory of the diversionary use of force which has four main utilities according to Sobek (2007). Specifically, successful actions abroad are likely to bring prestige to the leadership while diverting attention from domestic failings at home and allowing the government to distinguish between in-groups and out-groups and eliminate the latter (p.31). This theory is easy to apply to the DPRK; it is a state in economic crisis with chronic food shortages and a resultantly unhappy population (BBC 2010b) and arguably therein lays a motivation to divert attention from the poor domestic situation. It would also make sense that the regime would wish to shore-up support for Kim Jong-il and particularly Kim Jong-un; the scheduled October, 2010, exhibition of Pyongyang (KFA 2010c) witnessed parades with the Kim father and son present. However, Western journalists present noted that many did not join in the
‘long life, long life’ cries and that there was a general lack of fervour at the events (Economist 2010g: 65).

It is likely that the DPRK regime is aware of the apparent discontent festering within its own population and of the trickle of information returning to the families of defectors and slowly permeating neighbourhoods across North Korea. Hence, the crises of 2010 have been portrayed by the state media as the systematic persecution by foreign aggressors against the DPRK (KCNA 2010a, g, h, i, j, k, l, m; KFA 2010a). It follows that assessments of the military provocations of 2010, as discussed below, would do well to avoid media hype regarding escalations towards war.

The DPRK has drawn an experience of brinkmanship which arguably trumps that of any other state. Like its other actions, the events of 2010 are deemed by this paper to be examples of aggression high enough to scare and aggravate other states but too low to justify a full-scale war as a retaliation. They may instead serve to divert attention from domestic hardship within the DPRK. However, Kim Jong-il has famously defied the odds and stayed in power despite the tough conditions in the state. While only speculation is possible here, it would seem that the 2010 round of DPRK-ROK crises had an additional utility: to facilitate a change in leadership while avoiding regime collapse. It should be noted that to pass-down the leadership of a state from grandfather to father and then again to son is unprecedented and this is probably because it is nigh-on impossible.

Arguably much of the reason for the 2010 crises in particular may be the need to put weight behind Kim Jong-un’s new position as vice-chairman of the DPRK’s military commission and rank of general—weight lacking that would usually be made up by age and military experience, neither of which the ‘young general’ has much of (Economist 2010g: 65). It might be speculated that particularly the Yeonpyeong shelling incident would be portrayed within the DPRK as a decisive and successful military strike in self-defence against the ‘imperialists’. It should be understood that, under the circumstances, there are very few other methods available to the North Korean leadership in order to reel-in opposition and convince the domestic population and to some extent, the international audience, that Kim Jong-un will be just as strong (or just as fierce) as his father has been.

If it is singularly Kim Jong-il who influences the DPRK to engage in brinkmanship, it would be assumed that he would need to appease the military in order to protect himself from a coup
attempt. However, the DPRK’s ‘military first’ policy is not necessarily as firmly in place as it possibly once was; soldiers are said to be poor (Demick 2010: 188; Parry 2010b: 5). This begs the question: how does the Kim regime avoid being ousted by the military? There are two possible viable answers to this question, neither of which can be confirmed due to the clandestine nature of the North Korean state. The first hypothesis is that Kim, quite contrary to facing opposition, is supported by the ruling elite for the same reason that Fay Chung, previously education minister in Zimbabwe, has claimed that Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe has retained power for so long. In response to a question during a lecture, Chung stated:

Mugabe remains in power because he is forced to by the Zimbabwean elite. He himself does not wish to remain in power… but he is persuaded to stay by those who have benefited under his regime and stand to lose their positions of power. (2008)

While it is unlikely that Kim has ever been forced to remain in power by the elite, the reason why any domestic audience would have a motivation not to depose a leader is inferred by this comment. In the case of the DPRK, the regime elite are said to live in relative luxury (Habib 2010b: 399), far from the suffering and extreme poverty that exists as part of day-to-day life for the wide majority of the North Korean population. It is highly unlikely that the elite would be willing to accept such a dramatic fall from their standard of living. Additionally, the risks involved in organising a coup would be highly risky for the individuals involved; the execution of high-level officials is far from uncommon in the DPRK.

Even if a coup were to be successful and the livelihoods of elites and their families were guaranteed, there is still an additional ominous factor to be considered and that is the possibility of reprisals in the aftermath. High-level officials have no guarantee that the collapse of the Kim regime would by any means guarantee their security; they may just as well be likely to be attacked by those they previously oppressed or held to account for human rights abuses as Nazi officers were during the Nuremberg trials (Tusa and Tusa 1985). Hence, no matter what the outcome of their attempts, the potential ousters in the case of a successful or failed regime overthrow could face reprisals from any number of different sources. However, it cannot be assumed that the domestic elite would in fact be interested in conducting a coup in the first place and this may well be due to the Kim regime’s avoidance of passing costs on to the elite.
It is difficult to tell exactly how the power structure works in the DPRK: whether Kim Jong-il is pushed to continue his regime by the elite or whether he pressures the elite to submit to his dynasty’s continued rule. Weeks (2008) provides an insightful account of the complexities of ousting a leader for an elite in an autocracy. Firstly, it is important to realise that under the Kim regime, top offices are filled with ‘relatives and other loyal associates’ who themselves have ‘no independent base of support or power’ thus requiring Kim to remain in office in order to survive themselves (p.41). If disloyalty among the leadership is prevalent then the extent to which the elite are willing to play the ‘coordination game’ should be investigated. Effectively this means each individual must find out from one another whether or not their peers are interested in ousting the leader. However, to admit such a preference would have dire consequences and nobody wishes to be the ‘odd one out’. Hence under regimes with strong monitoring capabilities, strict controls and harsh punishments, such as the DPRK, it can be expected that those who would otherwise speak out will be silent (p.39).

The reality that this paper argues to be the most likely is that Kim Jong-il is able to perpetuate his own rule through mass oppression which is succinctly explained by Cha and Kang, who argue:

> The masses are preoccupied with basic subsistence, and the elite seek only to ensure their relative share of the sparse gains that could be had from the system rather than contemplating its overhaul or replacement. (2004b: 94)

Additionally, any aid flows into the DPRK are offset by ‘cutting commercial food imports and allocating savings to other priorities’ (Habib 2010a: 2832), thereby turning it effectively into finance for the elite. Thus it is fair to assume that, so long as Kim continues to divert costs away from the domestic elite and onto the masses (Escribà-Folch and Wright 2010: 355), the regime faces no credible internal opposition against its strategy of brinkmanship. Therefore the reason behind the DPRK’s actions can indeed be said to be derived from a basic desire or obsession of Kim Jong-il himself to perpetuate his family’s own dynasty.

To sum up the events covered in this section, the aforementioned mechanism of brinkmanship can arguably be seen in the period of 2010-11. It is important to understand that, despite attracting relatively large amounts of media attention and claims by US Defense Secretary Robert Gates that Pyongyang grew ‘more lethal and more destabilising’ (BBC 2011d), the events of 2010 were simply a stage in a well-rehearsed and drawn-out process by
which the DPRK achieves negotiation for favourable outcomes. In this case, the process might have been seen to begin in 2009 when the DPRK carried out a series of measures to leave negotiations and isolate itself while raising tensions. In that year, it withdrew from the Six-Party Talks, launched a Taepodong-2 missile and a series of short-range ballistic missiles over the Sea of Japan and announced that it had conducted a second nuclear test and reprocessed 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs 2010). These were obvious signs that a build-up of tensions was to begin and arguably it was highly predictable that North Korea was to take further action in order to complete the transition from isolated tensions to an unbearable crisis situation. This came about firstly in March 2010 when the sinking of the Cheonan brought DPRK-ROK relations down to an all time low (Foster-Carter 2010a, b, c) and then again in November 2010 when the shelling of Yeonpyeong raised tensions to an unbearable level.

The events of 2010 can be regarded as the escalation and testing of the level of regional tensions, as following the shelling of Yeonpyeong the North threatened further military force (BBC 2010a) until it saw that it had raised tensions as high as they could be without provoking war, at which point it ceased to raise tensions (Ramstad 2010). The process reached the reconciliation stage at the beginning of 2011 whereby the DPRK firstly called for ‘unconditional talks’ (BBC 2011a) and then restored the North-South military hotline as a gesture of goodwill (BBC 2011b), something that has been seen in the past as part of its rapprochement tactics (BBC 2009). Pyongyang for its part has played its role in facilitating the various stages of the brinkmanship process and signalling its willingness to return to the negotiating table; it remains for other regional actors to re-enter negotiations with the DPRK and give concessions in order to complete the process. Thus it can be concluded that the events of 2010 were not different to any other tension raising exercises conducted in the past. They were arguably conducted for the same reasons as any other – to gain concessions and keep both the domestic and the international at bay, in line with Kim Jong-il’s personal ideology – with the added aforementioned motivation of achieving a successful transition of power to Kim Jong-un.

Conclusion

The DPRK uses a well-developed and carefully executed method of coercion known as brinkmanship, which as has been established serves many purposes simultaneously. Not only does it persuade the PRC to give aid, it also attracts concessions from otherwise hostile
regional actors while deterring the latter group of states from being overly hostile towards North Korea. These objectives, however, all boil down to one central goal which is regime perpetuation.

Brinkmanship achieves economic concessions and a certain level of political security that allows the Kim regime to continue its existence without making any major reforms to its own state. What exactly is the goal of this exercise is unclear, but it seems that Kim Jong-il’s ideology is the driving force behind this strategy. It is likely that he believes in his father’s own dream to reunite the Korean Peninsula under the North’s terms, but is willing to allow his people to endure much more suffering than the Great Leader would have allowed. This ideology which has been developed primarily by the Dear Leader appears to have been passed on to Kim Jong-un, the heir apparent, under a back-drop of crises unfolding in 2010. It is important to view the sinking of the Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong simply as a method of raising tensions and nothing more.

Ideas of North Korean madness or irrationality should be deferred to the concept that the events of 2010 fall perfectly in line with the standard, even predictable pattern of brinkmanship which was established earlier in this paper. That they appeared more violent arguably reflected a need of the DPRK leadership to avoid the collapse of the Kim dynasty during the transfer of the reigns of power from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un whilst opening-up possibilities for concessions following a period of negotiating inactivity. The DPRK brinkmanship strategy remains unchanged from the 1990s and 2000s and arguably can not be expected to change in the next decade.

In the near future the DPRK can be expected to continue to utilise the technique of brinkmanship in order to gain concessions and protect itself from the regional actors around the Korean Peninsula. The regime therefore can be expected to continue to call for negotiations, particularly for a resumption of the Six-Party Talks, with a view to gain concessions from the PRC and protect itself from others around the region. It follows that the US’s current policy of ‘strategic patience’ is likely to remain ineffectual against the DPRK for as long as the latter is supported by the PRC. Hence, regional actors hoping to encourage a modification or even collapse of the Kim regime would arguably be best placed to achieve this by lobbying the PRC to cease supplying the DPRK with aid undercutting sanctions. However, this is an unrealistic goal for two reasons. Firstly, the PRC could never be expected to allow the DPRK to collapse; as aforementioned, the former would likely be
unwilling to suffer a massive refugee influx resulting from a collapsed regime and neither could it be at home with the political realities of sharing borders with a US-influenced Korea. With the PRC primarily concerned with its economic growth remaining largely unhindered and projecting an ever-more assertive foreign policy stance, it can not be expected what Beijing will be coerced into cutting ties with the DPRK in the near future. Meanwhile, inside the DPRK while conditions may be desperate, the Kim regime has survived this far and so cannot be expected to simply collapse spontaneously, as long as elite interests are satisfied and strong tools of observation and punishment are maintained over a population ever-more preoccupied with the most immediate issue of their own daily survival.

The Kim regime can be expected to continue to perpetuate and exert the tactic of brinkmanship. With Kim Jong-un successfully installed into a position of authority over the year 2010 and the elite apparently not interested in conducting a coup, it can be anticipated that neither the Kim family nor the elite circles will have any motivation to change their tactics or abdicate power any time soon. The continued production of nuclear materials by the DPRK provides a deterrent to any outside state that wishes to attempt to upset this situation and so, bearing in mind that the DPRK currently aims only to survive without being wiped-out, other states would be best advised to continue to observe and wait until a time when Pyongyang does something other than its usual process of brinkmanship. If there was ever a chance of persuading the DPRK to surrender its nuclear technologies, this was dashed by the 2011 intervention in Libya (KCNA, 2011).

It is clear from the relatively brief view of North Korean negotiation provided by this paper that the thinking behind Pyongyang’s foreign policy signalling decisions are numerous and highly complex. Although this paper has established that the Kim regime is motivated more than anything else by regime survival, this does not indicate any clear strategy for engagement and, ultimately, elimination of the threat posed by this highly confusing state. Indeed, it does not seem to be in any regional actor’s interest at this time to attempt to topple the Kim regime. The commitment of diplomatic and economic resources especially by the US, the ROK and the PRC would appear dwarfed by the potentially dire costs of a refugee crisis or worse, nuclear fallout.

That Pyongyang is motivated more than anything else by the successful transfer of power to Kim Jong-un and perpetuation of the Kim regime suggests that, regional actors cannot expect a diplomatic endgame. The tireless and yet tiresome process of negotiation, crisis and
returning to the bargaining table is commonly seen as a step towards the eventual engagement and cooptation of North Korea. This is not the case; these efforts at negotiation fit into a looping process, no matter what their results may indicate. Within this loop (the possibility for negotiation with the DPRK) fit a number of modules (attempts at negotiation by regional actors). If filled, this loop would signal the possibility of a solution to the security dilemma of the Korean Peninsula. However, as Pyongyang controls the size of this loop and is able to sustain its size thanks to assistance from Beijing, there is no reason to believe that it will ever be allowed to reach capacity with negotiation attempts.

Bearing in mind the conclusions drawn above, should regional actors cease to negotiate with North Korea? The answer to this question is, most certainly not. While the situation is dire, it is certainly better to play Pyongyang’s game than to irritate and isolate it. Continued engagement and negotiation may well eventually see the collapse of the Kim regime and if this happens, a refugee crisis will ensue. However, for regional actors the perceived costs of such a crisis are far outweighed by the potential costs of a nuclear crisis. This situation should be accepted and accordingly, future research could be well placed to err on the side of caution by investigating the political and economic effects of a refugee crisis on the ROK and the PRC. From this, contingency plans for the support of these states and the rebuilding of the Korean Peninsula could be formulated. If there is any chance of avoidance of any crisis in the long-term, however, then the PRC must seriously engage the DPRK posthaste with a view to restarting the Six-Party Talks. The PRC is truly the only state of the regional actors that can alone influence the DPRK to make any change in its policy and as a result, the other actors would do well to consider collaborating with it on plans for the engagement of Pyongyang as well as contingency plans for North Korean state collapse.

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