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Review by **Sung-Yoon Lee**, Kim Koo-Korea Foundation Assistant Professor of Korean Studies, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University

Beyond supplying detailed facts and interesting tidbits on top level discussions in the Richard Nixon White House on questions related to Korea during a critical period in the Cold War, this *FRUS* volume on Korea, 1969-1972, should put to rest one pervasive misperception among academics regarding contemporary North Korea: that Pyongyang's periodic provocative actions like limited attacks on South Korea or nuclear and long-range missile tests are 'reactions' or 'self-defensive measures' against a threatening Seoul and Washington. In other words, it should put to rest the idea that North Korea's provocative actions are less manifestations of Pyongyang's strategic goals than reactions to external stimuli.

The copious assemblage of highest-level policy debates on and assessments of North Korea's intentions and capabilities contained in this volume clearly shows that U.S. policymakers in the late-1960s and early-1970s believed the North Korean leader Kim Il Sung to be rational, calculating, and actively pursuing a policy of strategic provocation against the U.S. and South Korea. For example, to CIA Director Richard Helms' statement to President Nixon that Kim Il Sung "is vain but not irrational," Secretary of State William Rogers added, "He is smart as hell." (90, fn 3). The volume also reveals the decision-making process behind the Nixon administration's policy of non-retaliation against Pyongyang's repeated deadly attacks during this time, presaging the pattern of North Korean aggression and U.S. passivity that has endured to the present day.

This volume (or, technically, "Part I" of a single volume) explicitly addresses three foreign policy issues concerning the Korean peninsula between 1969 and 1972. The most serious and, to the present generation of scholars of North Korea, relevant, is the first—the EC-121 incident, in which the North Korean air force shot down and destroyed a U.S. surveillance airplane in international airspace over the Sea of Japan on April 15, 1969, the 57th birthday

of North Korea's founding dictator, Kim Il Sung. President Richard Nixon, incensed by North Korea's attack on a U.S. aircraft early in his term as he was preparing for the Vietnamization of the war in Indochina, at first called for military retaliation and other punitive measures. As National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger told Nixon, "This plane had been doing the same thing for 15 years without protest...the closest point was 15 miles and it was attacked 100 miles out." (18).

Yet, after talks of selective air strikes (17-22), submarine ambush tactics (27), blockade of North Korean ports (17), and the seizure of a North Korean ship sailing under a Dutch flag (21), in the end none of these actions were taken, for it was determined that such actions carried far more risks than the potential pay-offs "by a substantial margin." (42)

The other two issues addressed in this compilation are the Nixon administration's withdrawal of 20,000 U.S. servicemen from South Korea in the early 1970s and the deployment of South Korean combat forces to Vietnam and the concomitant force modernization support by the United States. These secondary historical issues may shed light on the transfer of wartime operational control from the Republic of Korea to the U.S. that is scheduled to be completed in 2015 as well as other aspects of the bilateral alliance in the future. But it is clearly North Korea's shooting down of the U.S. spy plane that has the greatest implications for contemporary North Korean issues of the highest concern: the intentions of the North Korean hereditary leadership in resorting to periodic deadly attacks against its two main adversaries.

In regard to the North Korean attacks addressed in this *FRUS* compilation, Pyongyang's oft-stated claim that it is merely taking a defensive measure against a "hostile U.S. policy"¹

¹ "Hostile U.S. policy" (sometimes termed "U.S. hostile policy") is a staple term that surfaces in most North Korean statements on the United States and the North's purported need to develop nuclear weapons. From Pyongyang's written proposal to negotiate with the U.S. on the nuclear issue in 2003 to statements in recent months, "hostile U.S. policy" is mentioned over and over again—despite the fact that the U.S. has never attacked North Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953, while the North has attacked South Korea and U.S. troops in and around South Korea hundreds of times in the meantime. See Li Gun, trans. Sung-Yoon Lee, "Requisites for Resolving the Nuclear Issue," <http://cnponline.org/index.php?ht=d/ContentDetails/i/548>;

Official North Korean statement in August 2012, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2012/201208/news31/20120831-21ee.html>;

Official statement in October 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-10-02/north-korea-says-hostile-u-s-policy-could-spark-a-nuclear-war.html>; Korea Central News Agency, *US Termed Arch Criminal Posing Nuclear Threat*, October 24, 2010, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2010/201010/news24/20101024-10ee.html>;

Or from January 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/14/north-korea-vows-to-bolst_0_n_2471516.html

And, most recently, from an official North Korean statement on January 24, 2013, in "North Korea Turns Its Threat to the South," the New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/26/world/asia/north-korea-turns-its-ire-on-south-korea.html?ref=asia&r=0>.

stands at odds with the impressively clear-headed CIA assessments made in the immediate aftermath of North Korea's destruction of the U.S. spy plane and killing of all thirty-one U.S. servicemen onboard. These assessments draw the conclusion that Pyongyang's deadly attack was a deliberate and calculated act, based on the assumption that the U.S., as distracted as it is with the war in Indochina, was highly unlikely to retaliate, while the potential benefits of bolstering Kim Il Sung's domestic and international stature, disrupting the South Korean government, and influencing U.S. public opinion on the danger of maintaining U.S. troops in South Korea are clearly identified:

The North Korean shootdown of a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft over international waters has all the earmarks of a deliberate attempt by Pyongyang to revive a high level of tension with the United States....Qualified observers in recent years have perceived in Kim an extreme and growing egotism, expressed in a craving for self-assertion and the limelight, and a proclivity toward wishful thinking. By incidents such as this one, Kim effectively upstages Moscow and Peking, and scores points for his personal and national self-assertion....A major theme of North Korean propaganda, particularly since the *Pueblo* incident, is that a determined small nation can defeat a "mighty imperialist." (23)

The "*Pueblo* incident" mentioned above refers to North Korea's forcible seizure of the eponymous U.S. spy vessel in January 1968. North Korea held its crew of 82 (one died in the seizure itself) in captivity under torturous conditions for 11 months before releasing them only upon receiving an apology from the Lyndon Johnson administration. This incident set the tone for North Korea's provocations and consequent U.S. concession in the EC-121 incident the next year and for the next several decades—down to the present day. In fact, according to a transcript of the telephone conversation between National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger and President Nixon in the late afternoon of April 15, 1969, Kissinger informed Nixon that "there was an intelligence report of [Egyptian President] Nasser's conversation with [Jordanian King] Hussein to the effect, 'After all, it isn't so risky to defy the United States—look at North Korea and the *Pueblo*.'" (18)

The CIA also assessed North Korea's intentions in calling for talks in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the U.S. airplane:

Within hours after the destruction of the reconnaissance aircraft, Pyongyang called for a meeting of the Military Armistice Commission at Panmunjom on Friday, April 18....Their aim will be to portray North Korea as the aggrieved party, offer a conference table to reduce the likelihood of U.S. retaliation, and use the meeting as a propaganda forum to expand on their charges of U.S. "aggression" (24).

What is noteworthy here is not necessarily the revelation that the CIA had a good grasp of North Korea's intentions behind its provocation-negotiation strategy as early as 1969, but that despite such awareness on the part of the U.S., North Korea was able to strike with impunity in this and subsequent incidents during the same year. For example, on August 17, North Korea shot down a U.S. helicopter on a training mission that had inadvertently

flown into North Korean airspace over the Demilitarized Line. Its three injured crewmen were captured at the scene of the crash. North Korea released the helicopter crew on December 2, only “after receiving an official apology...that the United Nations Command side had committed a ‘criminal-act’ by ‘infiltrating’ the helicopter ‘deep’ into the territory under the control of North Korea.” (44). Meanwhile, on October 18, “four American soldiers were ambushed and killed in the DMZ.” (115, footnote 2). What’s even more noteworthy is that this pattern of North Korea’s unilateral aggression and U.S. passivity has endured in the intervening decades and still remains in place today.

The following CIA assessment could be applied to any one of North Korea’s timely provocations, from the long-range missile test on July 4, 2006, and its first nuclear test on October 9 the same year (the eve of Party Founding Day, one of the most important national holidays in North Korea) while the Bush administration was overextended in the war in Iraq, to Pyongyang’s long-range missile test on April 5, 2009, and its second nuclear test the next month on May 25) while the new Obama administration was grappling with an economic crisis and two unpopular wars:

The Kim Il-sung regime almost certainly planned this move in advance calculating that the potential advantages in taking this risk far outweighed the dangers of possible US military reprisals. This judgment, and North Korea's evaluation of future US initiatives, probably are strongly influenced by the Korean's interpretation of the US response to the seizure of the *Pueblo*. Kim Il-sung evidently has persuaded himself that the US is overextended in Vietnam and elsewhere and that North Korea therefore can engage in such deliberate acts of defiance with relative impunity. The North Koreans probably made the decision to attack the reconnaissance aircraft on the assumption that there would either be no US military response or at the most only a limited one, in the nature of a one-time retaliatory action....Kim, moreover, evidently believes his long-term ambitions regarding South Korea require a high level of tension with the U.S. Periodic provocations, he hopes, will contribute to the disillusionment of the American public with overseas burdens and bring about a reduction and eventual withdrawal of US forces from South Korea. (32-33)

Hence, North Korea’s strategic provocations in the late-1960s bear a remarkable resemblance to those some 40 years later.² Contrary to the popular view that North Korea is unpredictable, its cycle of strategic provocation-negotiation-reaping concessions over the past five decades makes North Korea quite predictable. The North Korean hereditary dictatorship is a living testament to the dictum that history repeats itself. Over the past year alone, North Korea has threatened to turn the South Korean presidential mansion into

² See Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’ statement on North Korea’s repeated provocations in “U.S. Weighs Intercepting North Korea Shipments,” the New York Times, June 8, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/08/world/asia/08korea.html?_r=0; or the following timeline of North Korean provocations: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/0c4d68e2-f6e7-11df-8feb-00144feab49a.html#axzz2IhwZcKLp>

a “sea of fire,”³ launch precision strikes against several South Korean media outlets—even citing the map coordinates of their respective head offices in Seoul⁴—and threatened to launch a “merciless military strike” against South Korean activists attempting to send balloons filled with anti-North Korean leaflets into the North.⁵ Such threats by Pyongyang against South Korean civilians fit the clinical definition of international terrorism.⁶

This *FRUS* compilation shows that U.S. policymakers, even in the fog of the Cold War more than forty years ago, had it right when it came to assessing North Korea’s intentions. As CIA Director Richard Helms told President Nixon at a National Security Council meeting on August 14, 1969, North Korea’s terrorist attacks had three main objectives: “1. to get support for Kim-Il Song [*sic*]; 2. disrupt, strain South; 3 exploit disenchantment in U.S., stimulate U.S. withdrawal.” (90)

This compilation lays out clearly and detail the Nixon administration’s reading of North Korea’s strategic objectives behind its repeated provocations. It should be required of all U.S. policymakers working on North Korean issues today.

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³ See “North Korea Threatens of ‘Sea of Fire’ on South over Island Military Drills,” the Guardian, November 24, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/24/north-korea-asia-pacific>

⁴ See “Refworld,” UNHCR, June 4, 2012, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4fcf5f4ac.html>

⁵ See “North Korea Threatens South over Balloons,” Reuters, October 19, 2012, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4fcf5f4ac.html>

⁶ For example, Title 18 of the United States Code defines “international terrorism” as “activities that...appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.” See 18 U.S.C., Section 2331, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2331>

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Special Report (November, 2006). In Fall 2005 Lee launched at the Korea Institute, Harvard University, a new seminar series, the “Kim Koo Forum on U.S.-Korea Relations.” He has taught Korean history and politics at Bowdoin College, Sogang University, and Seoul National University.

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