

## **NEGOTIATING ON THE EDGE**



# NEGOTIATING ON THE EDGE

North Korean  
Negotiating  
Behavior

Scott Snyder



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The views expressed in this book are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace.

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*For*

*Ellis Haguewood,  
Norman S. Thompson,  
Richard J. Smith, and  
J. Dennis Huston*

*teachers who challenged me to  
broaden my horizons and to  
express my ideas clearly*





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## Foreword

“**N**orth Koreans are crazy!” is a familiar response to the threatening behavior of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) that has so long characterized the enduring confrontation on the Korean Peninsula. In fact, they are not crazy; they are not even unpredictable. Their use of threats or violence is disorienting to Americans, and highly disturbing. But such behavior has an internal logic and repetitiveness to it. Dismissing the North Koreans, or other international actors, as “crazy” limits our ability to deal with their threatening behavior effectively. We need to understand their way of looking at the world and use the predictability of their behavior to better manage what are often difficult and crisis-driven confrontations with the DPRK and other such “rogue” states.

There is a special challenge in assessing the mindset of a leadership that, by its own choosing, has isolated itself from the outside world. It is with good reason that Korea has traditionally been characterized as a “hermit kingdom.” In this tradition, North Korea for decades has attempted to close off the country and pursue policies of “self-reliance” that keep even “allies” of the North such as China or the USSR at bay. During the depths of the Cold War, when the iron curtains of communist rule were drawn tightly around vast areas of Eurasia, no nation was more cut off from the rest of the world than North Korea. Today, in a world of economic and communications openness that even countries

like China have joined, North Korea's self-imposed isolation is all the more pronounced.

Very few outsiders are allowed to enter the heavily guarded state that Kim Il Sung built after World War II on the ruins of the Japanese occupation. Still fewer North Koreans are permitted to travel outside the restricted borders of their homeland. The current North Korean leader, Kim Il Sung's son Kim Jong Il, is especially reclusive. His voice has been heard only once by the people he rules. Nonetheless, as son and heir to "the Great Leader," Kim Jong Il's grip on power is, it seems, as all-encompassing as was that of his father. I say "it seems," for next to nothing about North Korea can be known with high confidence. We know that the country suffered from a terrible famine in the mid-1990s, but we do not know its full geographic extent, how many people have died, or the effects of malnutrition on an entire generation of North Koreans. We know, too, that North Korea has a missile program and that it sells its weaponry to several other countries, but we do not know the full capabilities of Pyongyang's weaponry, or if and how North Korea plans to use them. We know also that North Korea has nuclear capabilities, but we do not know how close it is to assembling a nuclear bomb, or to developing chemical or biological weapons.

Our ignorance of so many facets of life in North Korea and our uncertainty about the intentions of its government make the job of negotiating with North Korea highly problematic. This difficulty was not overly troubling for most of the forty or so years between the end of the Korean War and the end of the Cold War, simply because, with Kim Il Sung adamantly opposed to rapprochement with South Korea, there was little basis for negotiations with North Korea on other than a crisis management basis. In the 1990s, however, as nonproliferation climbed to the top of the U.S. government's international agenda, North Korea's announcement of its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty provoked a strong U.S. response and began a process of diplomatic engagement with officials from Pyongyang that has broadened to more fully include such players as Japan and the European Union. Diplomatic encounters with North Korea have also been spurred by the election in 1997 of a South Korean president prepared

to seek a more cooperative North-South dialogue. Another, although decidedly less positive, reason for increased contact with North Korean representatives has been the need to defuse crises engendered by one or another of their inflammatory acts—missile tests, for example, or incursions into South Korea by North Korean commandos. This is a regime that seems to thrive on self-created crises. Perhaps sensing the possibility of its imminent demise, the leadership appears to think it has little to lose by confronting its adversaries. For all these reasons, as well as its economic crisis, North Korea in the early 1990s became interested in dealing with the outside world, especially the United States.

Since then, U.S. and other Western negotiators have dealt with counterparts from a country about which they know very little except that it has a reputation for behaving aggressively, recklessly, and apparently irrationally. U.S. diplomats seem to have performed creditably in these challenging circumstances. Even so, missteps have inevitably been made, miscalculations or miscommunications have sometimes hindered the pursuit of U.S. interests, and North Korea has on occasion been able to use its military capabilities and reputation for violent behavior to gain negotiating leverage far beyond its political, military, and economic capabilities. There is much reason to learn about the negotiating tactics and behavior of the world's most idiosyncratic, least penetrable country.

*Negotiating on the Edge* is an important contribution to this learning process. Recognizing the shortfall in our understanding of how North Koreans negotiate, and recognizing, too, that much of what we do think we know is based on outmoded or misguided assessments made during the early years of the Cold War, Scott Snyder has sought to capture the essence of North Korea's negotiating behavior as exhibited in the 1990s in bilateral and multilateral encounters involving the United States and other countries. He has produced a remarkably insightful assessment.

Snyder studied Korean language and society during a year in Seoul conducting research through the Thomas G. Watson Fellowship program and subsequently spent time as an intern in the economics section of the U.S. Embassy in Seoul. He has visited North Korea four times, most recently in July 1999. With the existing literature on the subject conspicuously thin, Snyder has supplemented his direct exposure to Korean

society and the existing written record by conducting scores of interviews with negotiators from the United States, South Korea, Japan, and KEDO (the multilateral body created to oversee implementation of an agreement to furnish North Korea with proliferation-resistant nuclear reactors). He has also spoken—off the record—to North Korean diplomats themselves. Snyder's study also draws on the conceptual framework of the United States Institute of Peace's Cross-Cultural Negotiations project, of which this book is one in a series of country studies of states important to U.S. interests.

Drawing on all these resources, Snyder has written a clear, succinct, and highly readable analysis, one that supplements the lessons learned through hard experience during this decade with insights into recognizable patterns in North Korean negotiating style, and an assessment of this experience in terms of Korea's history and culture. As the reader will discover in the following chapters, Snyder carefully dissects the North Korean approach to diplomatic encounters: objectives and expectations, tactics and strategies, strengths and weaknesses. As the reader will discover, "crazy" North Korean negotiators do not operate according to the same logic and rules that guide Western negotiators: actions that may seem to westerners to be irrational or reckless have their own internal logic and purpose.

The key findings of this study are the degree to which North Korean diplomats are skilled in converting weakness, through threatening behavior, into leverage so as to gain favorable outcomes to negotiations with outsiders. That said, their tactical skills reflect an isolated society and a political leadership whose policies have led to great strategic failures, most notably in their international isolation and the associated failure of their economy (most evident in the great famine of the years 1995–98, as described in Andrew Natsios's *The Politics of Famine in North Korea*, a Special Report recently published by the United States Institute of Peace).

That said, the North Koreans persist in creating for themselves and the world the myth of "self-reliance" (when in fact they are heavily dependent on outside aid), the pretension of "genius" leadership, and a worldview of undiminished threats from all outsiders. This is a regime

that finds it difficult to sustain itself without enemies. The challenge for American diplomats and other outsiders is to deal with North Koreans without getting drawn into their mythology and pattern of crisis-driven brinkmanship as a framework for negotiations. Despite their unique political culture and self-imposed isolation, the North Koreans demonstrate very Korean characteristics of exceptional discipline, will power, and the determination to survive on their own terms and to overcome all challenges.

With its carefully balanced and nuanced assessment of the extent to which cultural factors affect North Korean negotiating behavior, *Negotiating on the Edge* is an excellent addition to the series of studies undertaken by the United States Institute of Peace on cross-cultural negotiation behavior. Designed to help diplomats and other negotiators better understand their counterparts, and thereby be prepared to reach mutually satisfactory political solutions to issues that might otherwise escalate into armed confrontation, the Cross-Cultural Negotiation project supports both wide-ranging research into the impact of culture on international communication and more tightly focused studies of specific countries. The former category of research is reflected in such Institute books as Raymond Cohen's *Negotiating Across Cultures: International Communication in an Interdependent World*; Kevin Avruch's *Culture and Conflict Resolution*; and Chas Freeman's *Arts of Power: Statecraft and Diplomacy*. In addition, three country-specific studies have now been published by the Institute: a revised edition of my own book *Chinese Negotiating Behavior: Pursuing Interests through "Old Friends"*; Jerrold Schecter's *Russian Negotiating Behavior: Continuity and Transition*; and the volume at hand. Two more country-focused studies, one on Japan and the other on Germany, are underway, and more will follow.

As we move ahead with the Cross-Cultural Negotiation project, we also intend to turn the spotlight on ourselves: to see how diplomats from other cultures regard the negotiating behavior of their American counterparts. In all these future endeavors, as in the projects we have supported to date, the Institute's intention is to provide both practitioners and scholars of negotiation with materials and training experience they can use to bridge cultural divides and so reduce the mutual

incomprehension that can foster violent conflict. With books such as *Negotiating on the Edge*—packed with reliable information, astute observations, and practicable recommendations—we are, I believe, helping to realize that intention.

Richard H. Solomon, President  
United States Institute of Peace



## Preface

**T**his book is truly an interim assessment, a snapshot of a work-in-progress. The subject of the book—the effort by the United States and North Korea to negotiate with each other following the end of the Cold War—is the result of a sustained endeavor by official and unofficial U.S. and North Korean interlocutors to bridge an enormous gap of distrust following more than four decades during which there was no direct political dialogue. The effort to overcome that distrust continues; in May 1999, for example, former Secretary of Defense William Perry visited Pyongyang to present ideas that may lead to a broadened process of negotiation between officials from the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

This book could not have been written without the help of Americans, Japanese, and South Koreans who have negotiated with North Korea and who have given generously of their time to the author. I hope that this compilation of experiences and lessons learned from the U.S.-DPRK negotiating process will be useful to future officials who find themselves building on this interim assessment by expanding our understanding of the nature of the negotiating process between these two very different states. A full list of those interviewed appears in appendix I.

This study is part of an ongoing project to develop a series of studies examining national negotiating styles, a project inspired and led by the

president of the United States Institute of Peace, Richard H. Solomon. I have benefited enormously from Dr. Solomon's encouragement and advice and from the example of his earlier study of Chinese national negotiating behavior, as well as from periodic sessions held at the Institute designed to grapple with the key variables that should be catalogued as part of any effort to explore the relationship of culture to national negotiating behavior. Needless to say, this book would not have been conceived, executed, or published without Dr. Solomon's unstinting support.

This book is a work-in-progress in terms of my own personal study of the Korean Peninsula, which began in 1987, when I was a senior at Rice University in Houston, Texas. Although I did not begin to focus my attention on patterns in North Korean negotiating behavior until 1995, my efforts to develop an understanding of the two Koreas extend back to my time at Rice University. The Thomas G. Watson Foundation provided me with my first opportunity to travel to Seoul following my college graduation, where I was introduced to Korean history and culture by Professors Lew Young Ick and Kim Key Hiuk. Professors Carter Eckert and Edward Wagner sustained my academic interests in Korean history during two years at Harvard University following my year in Korea. At the Asia Society in the early 1990s, I was able to travel to North Korea twice with K. A. Namkung and Professor Robert Scalapino, whom I am pleased to count along with so many others as a mentor and friend. While at the United States Institute of Peace, I worked closely with research directors Alan Romberg, Stanley Roth, and Patrick Cronin, who have provided unfailing encouragement and support to my professional development and who directly supported my work on this project. The final stages of this publication were finished while I was conducting research as part of the Abe Fellowship program of the Social Sciences Research Council, for whose support I am deeply grateful.

I have benefited during the course of my study from the advice, comments, and encouragement of many colleagues in the fields of Korean studies and international relations. Although it is impossible to name everyone who has provided me with deeper insights on North Korean negotiating behavior, several individuals have made concrete

contributions by reviewing and making comments on parts of the manuscript as it has developed over time, including Bob Carlin, Victor Cha, L. Gordon Flake, Roy Richard Grinker, Katy Oh, David Kim, John Merrill, C. Kenneth Quinones, Don Oberdorfer, Donald Gregg, Robert L. Gallucci, J. R. Kim, Steve Noerper, Stephen Linton, Moon Moohong, Park Chan Bong, Hajime Izumi, Kunihiko Yamaoka, Yang Chang Seok, Samuel Kim, Charles Armstrong, Joel Wit, and Philip Yun. I also benefited from assistance in setting up interviews in Seoul from Ahn Chung Shi, Kim Young Ho, and Chung In Moon and in Tokyo from Hajime Izumi and Shuji Shimokoji. And I have benefited from the encouragement of a wide range of experts on aspects of negotiation and inter-Korean relations, including Lee Chae Jin, Kihl Young Whan, Han Sungjoo, Ahn Byungjoon, Chas Freeman, Choi Kang, Kwon Jong Rak, Cho Tae Young, Chung Oknim, Paik Haksoon, Han Shik Park, Mark Barry, Ezra Vogel, Dong Wonmo, Paul Evans, Aiden Foster-Carter, Nicholas Eberstadt, Larry Niksch, Bates Gill, Ralph Cossa, Jim Kelly, Bruce Han, Hyun In Taek, Kim Kyung Won, Hyun Hong Choo, Kil Jeongwoo, Kim Changsu, Kim Djun Kil, Kim Joochul, Masao Okonogi, Tetsuo Murooka, Lho Kyungsoo, B. C. Koh, James Lilley, and David Timberman, among others.

I owe a debt to all the North Korean diplomats with whom I have had the opportunity to interact during the past eight years, many of whom have gone on to play central roles as part of the U.S.-DPRK negotiating process. Although I am not listing their names here, they know who they are, and I look forward to the day when I can read their own assessments of patterns in the U.S. negotiating style.

The United States Institute of Peace has provided an excellent intellectual atmosphere in which to conduct this project, and I owe a debt to the entire staff for their kind collegiality and friendship. Research and Studies colleagues Patricia Carley, William Drennan, and Lauren Van Metre provided excellent advice and suggestions, as did Lewis Rasmussen and Timothy Sisk. I am also indebted to Amina Khaalis, Jodi Koviach, and Donna Ramsey Marshall for a wide range of assistance. Although I knew the Institute's Publications Staff and occasionally saw them around the building at very odd hours, it was a pleasure to work with them firsthand. Publications director Dan

Snodderly and all of the publications staff have been a pleasure to work with, and I am truly fortunate in my first publishing experience to have worked with Nigel Quinney, a true professional whose editorial instructions imposed clarity and discipline on any red herrings I tried to pursue on the way from first draft to final.

Finally, I thank my family, Buck, Carol, and Joy Snyder, for their indefatigable support, love, patience, and occasional nagging to hurry up and get this book done. No one will take greater pride in this work or be more generous critics than they, even if others argue that I got it wrong after all!