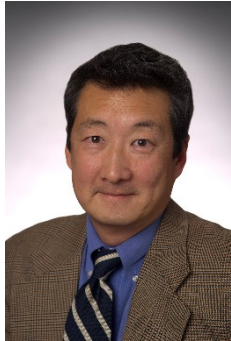


## KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

## Theories on Why North Korea Rejects the World

By Dr. Victor Cha

July 29, 2015



*Dr. Victor Cha is a senior adviser and the inaugural holder of the Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He is also director of Asian studies and holds the D.S. Song-KF Chair in the Department of Government and School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. From 2004 to 2007, he served as director for Asian affairs at the White House on the National Security Council (NSC), where he was responsible primarily for Japan, the Korean peninsula, Australia/New Zealand, and Pacific Island nation affairs. Dr. Cha was also the deputy head of delegation for the United States at the Six-Party Talks in Beijing and received two Outstanding Service Commendations during his tenure at the NSC. Dr. Cha holds a B.A., an M.I.A., and a Ph.D. from Columbia University, as well as an M.A. from Oxford University.*

North Korea last week rejected South Korea's invitation to attend the Seoul Defense Dialogue in September, denigrating the talks as "puerile." In the same breath, it also rejected a proposal by National Assembly speaker Chung Ui-hwa for a meeting with his northern counterpart to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Korean Peninsula on Aug. 15.

If you ask an Obama administration official about America's "strategic patience" policy of non-dialogue with North Korea, he or she will tell you that the problem is not an unwillingness on the part of the United States to have dialogue. On the contrary, the Obama administration has tried every channel possible, from six-party talks to personal communications to secret trips, to jumpstart a dialogue. But the regime in Pyongyang has rejected all of these.

The Chinese have also had no luck bringing the North back to the talks. Its efforts to send high-level envoys are rejected by Pyongyang. Russia looked as though they were making headway when Kim Jong-un accepted an invitation to attend May 2015 celebrations in Russia, but then he backed out at the last minute. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gave the North Koreans another chance to start a new investigation into the case of missing Japanese citizens, but this, too, produced no positive results.

On Tuesday, Pyongyang stated unequivocally that it is "not interested at all" in any dialogue with the United States like the deal just concluded with Iran. The North said the two cases were not comparable and that it is not interested in denuclearization: "The nuclear deterrence of the DPRK is not a plaything to be put on the negotiating table."

At the same time it has rejected dialogue, the North has been somewhat quiet. Contrary to expectations, there were no major ballistic missile tests or nuclear tests in 2014 or thus far in 2015.

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In addition, Pyongyang has not carried out a provocation like the Cheonan sinking or the Yeonpyeong Island artillery shelling since 2010.

So, what is going on? The North is neither in a provocation cycle nor in a diplomacy cycle. Its rhetoric remains fiery, but this neither masks a desire for dialogue, nor acts as a precursor to aggressive behavior.

There are several potential “theories” or explanations for what is going on in Pyongyang. One possibility is that the North’s rejection of dialogue is because it has “checked out” on both the Obama and Park governments. Both governments appear distracted by other issues.

Moreover, in Pyongyang’s view, past experience shows that it could probably get a deal with either administration, but that deal is likely to be undone once the incumbent is gone, since neither can be reelected. This is probably what the North sees in the Iran deal.

A second theory for North Korea’s quiescence is that Kim is having domestic problems. The recent purge of the defense minister is only the latest in some 90 high-level executions since Kim took power. Purges are nothing new in North Korea, but the pace of these after nearly four years in power and the fact that he is now executing the very people he brought in to be part of his coterie suggest that there still remains significant difficulties internally. But when there is churn inside the North Korean system, then this impacts external behavior. For example, when Kim Jong-il had a stroke at a critical time in the six-party talks, North Korea was unable to respond to proposals for moving the agreement forward in 2008.

A third explanation for the North’s “leave me alone” attitude may have to do with strength rather than weakness. Kim may be using the time while the United States is distracted by Iran, Cuba, ISIS and domestic problems and the South is distracted by boosting economic growth, to quietly but methodically build his capabilities. Washington and the United Nations have telegraphed clearly that the next provocation will draw a new set of financial sanctions, so a provocation now may not be advisable. And no one has made clear to Pyongyang what the benefits of diplomacy would be.

So, the North is biding its time, seeking to develop cyber capabilities and increase its missile arsenal. In this regard, the statement by Pacific Commander Scott Swift this week about the North’s submarine-launched ballistic missile demonstration was correct. Even though the demonstration in May was not a true launch, it is still threatening because it shows that the North’s asymmetric capabilities are not static. On the contrary, they are working actively to build a modern, sophisticated and survivable nuclear force during this interlude in diplomacy and provocations.

A fourth explanation is that the North is focused not on internal dissension but internal economic reform and rehabilitation. There are small signs of instituting private incentives in farming that could reflect reform intentions. This would eventually suggest a greater receptiveness to interaction with the outside world in contrast to the current hermit attitude.

Of course, we don’t know which of these is the right explanation. It may be a combination of all of them. Since the narrative of the North Korean state revolves around celebrations of the party,

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military and the family, the next two likely moments to gain insight on the situation is Liberation Day on Aug. 15, and Oct. 10, which marks the 70th anniversary of the Workers' Party.

*\* This article originally appeared in Korea JoongAng Daily on July 27, 2015 under the title "Leave me alone" available online [here](#).*

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