

**Universidades Lusíada**

Fernandes, Vítor Ramon, 1960-

**Juche, national identity and culture in a nuclear North Korea : implications for US North Korean Policy**

<http://hdl.handle.net/11067/7722>

<https://doi.org/10.34628/HB68-S704>

**Metadados**

**Data de Publicação**

2024

**Resumo**

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**Editor**

Universidade Lusíada Editora

**Palavras Chave**

Identidade social - Coreia (Norte), Comunismo - Coreia (Norte), Coreia (Norte) - Relações externas - Estados Unidos, Estados Unidos - Relações externas - Coreia (Norte)

**Tipo**

article

**Revisão de Pares**

Não

**Coleções**

[ULL-FCHS] LPIS, n. 29 (2024)

Esta página foi gerada automaticamente em 2025-02-23T19:06:51Z com informação proveniente do Repositório

**JUCHE, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND CULTURE IN  
A NUCLEAR NORTH KOREA:**

**IMPLICATIONS FOR US NORTH KOREAN POLICY**

**JUCHE, IDENTIDADE NACIONAL E CULTURA  
NUMA COREIA DO NORTE NUCLEAR:**

**IMPLICAÇÕES PARA A POLÍTICA NORTE-AMERICANA EM RELAÇÃO  
À COREIA DO NORTE**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34628/HB68-S704>

*Data de submissão / Submission date: 12.07.2024*

*Data de aprovação / Acceptance date: 13.10.2024*



**Abstract:** This article analyses how a nationalistic historical discourse was constructed in North Korea – a country that has possessed nuclear weapons for some time – interconnecting with stating a cultural identity that shapes the ideology on which the regime is based – that is, *Juche* – and its implications for US policy towards North Korea. North Korea is a singular country, with very specific characteristics and an ideology that is essential in the organization of its society. This ideology is intimately connected to arts and culture, with practices that are dominated and controlled by the state, and with a logic of propaganda in support of the regime. The understanding of the defining principles of this doctrine, the historical reasons at its origins, and the role that art and culture play in the context of this regime allow the recognition of the relation between that historical nationalism, art and culture, and the affirmation of a North Korean identity based on that ideology. However, at the same time, the north Korean regime has invested massively in the possession of nuclear weapons for its own protection and to ensure its survival. The main arguments are that the contemporary historical context of Korea is crucial for an understanding of the establishment and development of the current regime; understanding arts and culture in North Korea is fundamental in order to seize how the ideology on which the regime rests is shaped; that it is the existence of *Juche* that has allowed the regime to survive for so long. These elements are essential and full of challenging consequences for US policy towards North Korea.

**Keywords:** North Korea; *Juche*; Identity; Art; Culture; US Foreign Policy.

**Resumo:** O presente artigo analisa como se construiu um discurso nacionalista histórico na Coreia do Norte – um país que possui armas nucleares desde há vários anos – interligando com a

afirmação de uma identidade cultural que enforma a ideologia que serve de base ao seu regime — *Juche* — e as implicações que resultam para a política externa norte-americana em relação à Coreia do Norte. A Coreia do Norte é um país singular, com características muito específicas e uma ideologia que é essencial na organização dessa sociedade. Essa ideologia está intimamente ligada à arte e à cultura, com práticas dominadas e controladas pelo Estado, e uma lógica de propaganda política de apoio ao regime. A compreensão dos princípios definidores dessa doutrina, as razões históricas que estão na sua origem, e o papel que a arte e a cultura assumem no contexto deste regime permitem reconhecer a relação entre esse nacionalismo histórico, a arte e a cultura, e a afirmação de uma identidade norte-coreana baseada nessa ideologia. No entanto, e simultaneamente, o regime norte-coreano tem investido massivamente na aquisição e no desenvolvimento de armas nucleares para sua proteção e para assegurar a sua sobrevivência. Os principais argumentos do trabalho são que, o contexto histórico contemporâneo da Coreia é crucial para a compreensão da criação e o desenvolvimento do atual regime; a compreensão das artes e da cultura é fundamental para entender como é moldada a ideologia sob a qual o regime assenta; e que é a existência de *Juche* que tem permitido a sobrevivência do regime durante tantos anos. Todos estes elementos são essenciais e têm implicações repletos de desafios para a política externa norte-americana em relação à Coreia do Norte.

**Palavras-chave:** Coreia do Norte; *Juche*; Identidade; Arte; Cultura; Política Externa Norte-Americana.

## 1. Introduction

North Korea — the official name is *DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA* — is considered by many observers as one of the most mysterious countries in the world due to its political regime and its lifestyle. It is a harsh dictatorship that exists since 1948. Over the years it has witnessed two dynastic changes in its leadership. Apart from the repressive rules and measures that help sustain the regime, one of the main factors that sets North Korea apart from all the other countries is its ideology named *Juche*. *Juche* plays a major role as to how the political regime and the North Korean society are organized. Furthermore, its nature and origins are considered crucial for understanding the sustainability of the regime that has been able to survive for well over seventy years.

In this article, I argue that the contemporary historical context of Korea is an essential element to understand the establishment and development of the current regime. Second, that an understanding of arts and culture in North Korea is fundamental in order to seize how the ideology on which the regime rests is shaped. Thirdly, I argue that it is the existence of *Juche* that has allowed the regime to survive for so long. Lastly, I argue that the existence of nuclear weapons in a regime with such characteristics produces significant challenges to US foreign policy towards North Korea.

North Korea's history has helped create the conditions for Kim Il-sung to implement *Juche*, which can be interpreted as following from a controlled and uncontested process of collective memory that has evolved towards becoming an ideology. Collective memory shapes politics both in the domestic and the international realms (Jo, 2022). By taking advantage of the circumstance that North Korea is a small country that was subjected to outside aggression an intersubjective process of grievances about the Japanese colonial

period developed since. This led to a sentiment of suspicion relative to all foreigners and of a need for the country to become self-sufficient. Over time, this process of collective memory – seen as an understanding of a certain past – became intertwined with North Korean history and identity. It became completely encrusted in every aspect of the political, economic, and the social life.

It also helps explain why there have been so many predictions of a regime fall although that never materialized. *Juche* has helped to legitimize the North Korean regime and the maintenance of control over the country and its population. It also has shaped and influenced the country's domestic and international politics in a way that become somewhat self-reinforcing. The regime has also invested in nuclear weapons for its own protection and to ensure its survival. All in all, the nature of the regime, together with the possession of nuclear weapons, creates several challenges to US policy towards North Korea and has major implications in so far as the options that can be considered.

The article proceeds as follows: After a brief introduction, I review the Korean struggle for independence during the Japanese invasion, which is followed by the period of Soviet influence on North Korea. Here, I underline the differences between the two situations and show the importance of these two different moments in Korean history for the establishment of the current regime. Next, I lay out the main characteristics of *Juche*, and how it has evolved over time. I then describe some of the control measures adopted by the regime and show how *Juche* has become intertwined with culture and arts providing support to the adoption of some of the repressive measures by the North Korean regime. After that, I recall some of the predictions of a regime fall since the first change in the country's leadership, and the threats and challenges that repressive regimes generally face in order to underline the regime's resilience. Here, I also consider the present situation of North Korea under Kim Jong-un, the current leader, with regard to recent developments. I then argue that the nature of such a regime with the possession of nuclear weapons creates serious challenges for US foreign policy towards North Korea. The article ends with a brief conclusion.

## 2. A History of Struggle for Independence

One of the important factors affecting North Korea is geography. The geographical location of the Korean Peninsula between regional powers clearly complicates its geopolitical role. Regional powers, old and new, have been a source of danger and tensions to Korea over the years. The Korean Peninsula was subjected to a strong and direct influence of some countries that had a very negative impact and left dire and lasting consequences. Those consequences shaped the spirit of North Koreans with a strong cultural impact that paved the way for many of the developments that have taken place in North Korea after the end of World War II.

Historically, the biggest influence came from China, through its culture, values, and religion, most notably, Buddhism and Confucianism. This outside influence was generally well-accepted by Korean emperors who also had the habit of paying tribute to the Chinese emperor in exchange for protection and compensation. Despite that, Koreans never gave up their independence, of which they were always very conscious. They were always ready to resist outside intruders and they never accepted, unless forced to it, any loss of autonomy. Attempts of interference were always met with fierce opposition (Seth, 2011, p. 5). In fact, the only period when China exerted direct control over Korea was when Emperor Wu launched an invasion of Korea in 109-108 BC during the Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD) (Seth, 2011: 17-18). That control lasted for about four centuries and Korea was incorporated into the Chinese Empire.

The case of Japan's influence in Korea deserves special attention because of its profoundly negative mark left on the Korean population. Japan's invasion of Korea occurred after Japan won the war against Russia in 1904 during the Meiji Restoration providing the necessary conditions for Japan to fully control Korea at a later stage (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 2014: 5). The consequences for Korea were its complete annexation by Japan in 1910. The Japanese colonial rule in Korea until 1945, was extremely harsh and cruel on Koreans. During that period many people were killed, such as was

the case on 1 March 1919, when 7,500 protesters were executed by the Japanese colonial police in just one day (Lind, 2008: 28). There were also very traumatic experiences involving the displacement of about 750,000 men to serve as forced labour and also of approximately 200,000 women as sex slaves, many of whom were savagely beaten and perished as a result. During the thirty-five-year occupation, Japan even changed the names of some Korean cities in order 'to japanize' them (Sandler, 2003: 21). For instance, Pyongyang became Heijo, the city of Wonsan had its name changed to Genzan, and Seoul became Keijo. The sentiment during that period was that there was a need to fight vigorously against the Japanese oppression, much like what had happened in 1905 with the establishment of Korea as a Japanese protectorate and part of the Japanese empire (Kim, 2012: 321-322). All in all, the Japanese occupation of Korea fuelled and nurtured not only a sentiment against Japan but also against any foreign country. It was an extremely traumatic experience for Koreans as the overall population was completely brutalized during that period (Cumings, 1984).

Nevertheless, it was under those circumstances that a close relation between some Korean and Chinese communists developed towards the end of the Japanese occupation. Several resistance groups were created in China and in Korea forging a relation between those two countries. Many Koreans considered communism a political ideology that offered hope against misery and poverty, and that would free them from the occupiers. That led many Korean Communists in exile to fight alongside Mao Zedong against the Chinese Nationalists and the Japanese invaders (Sandler, 2003: 21). The guerrilla against the Japanese Army became one of the central pillars for the creation of North Korea. It is also during this period that Kim Il-sung became somewhat of a legendary hero of the guerrilla fight against the Japanese Army in Manchuria, with a strong personality cult created around him (Buzo, 2007: 52).

There was also an important Soviet influence, which began years before the establishment of North Korea. Already in the late nineteenth century several Koreans began to move north and to establish communities in the Russian Far East (Bartlett, 2021). This

further accelerated during the Japanese invasion of Korea. However, many of them ended up being deported to Central Asia, to countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which were part of the ex-Soviet Union, under very harsh and inhospitable conditions and many of them died during that period. Nonetheless, once the Cold War began the Soviet Communist Party decided to send ethnic Koreans from those countries in Central Asia to the northern part of the Korean Peninsula to spread communism with the establishment of several institutions and a government for North Korea. These Soviet Koreans are even today known as Koryoin, or Koryo saram, with most of their descendants living in Kazakhstan and in South Korea after Kim Il-sung decided to purge their ancestors with the objective of consolidating his power and diminish foreign influence. This can also be considered to some extent a prelude to the *Juche* ideology (Lee, 2018).

When World War II and the Japanese occupation ended the Korean Peninsula was divided and subjected to two very different spheres of influence. One by the US on the Southern part and another one by the ex-Soviet Union on the Northern part following an agreement to divide the country with the establishment of a boundary close to the 38th parallel. The decision of the US and of the ex-Soviet Union to share the administration of Korea in 1948 for an unlimited period was taken without consulting Koreans and had, in fact, already been taken on August 15, 1945, when Emperor Hirohito declared the surrender of the Empire of Japan (Meyers, 2018: 18). In fact, by that time the ex-Soviet military forces had already began their headway into Korean territory. The Red Army occupied the Northern part of the country, with their headquarters in the old part of Pyongyang, while US military forces settled on the Southern part of the country in Seoul.

Kim Il-sung's intentions from the very beginning were to reunify Korea under the communist ideology and, with that purpose, ordered the invasion of South Korea, on June 25, 1950. The Korean War that followed suit changed the relations between North Korea and other communist countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, but also with the ex-Soviet Union. Significantly, during the period between

1945 and the death of Stalin in 1953 and following the proclamation of the North Korea on September 9, 1948, there was a sentiment of subservience and of acceptance of the ex-Soviet Union as a more developed country. However, that acceptance did not happen on all accounts, and most importantly, not on a moral point of view (Myers, 2018: 24-26). North Koreans viewed themselves as morally superior to the Soviets. They believed that they were an innocent and virtuous people and that, as a result, they were vulnerable to oppression and humiliation by foreigners because the latter could eventually help North Korea at times, but they could also be evil. That led North Koreans to mistrust all foreigners. It is also one of the reasons why Kim Il-sung, as well as his successors, have always focused so much on the issue of independence, self-reliability, and self-sufficiency, which are notions that are subjacent to the *Juche* ideology.

### 3. The North Korean Regime and the *Juche* Ideology

*Juche* was first proclaimed publicly on December 28, 1955, by Kim Il-sung in a speech attempting to assertively establish the notion of independence relative to outsiders and, on the back of the cult of personality around Stalin, to establish his own cult of personality (Khil, 2005: 8). The fact that this occurred following the death of Stalin is no coincidence. There were several criticisms against Stalin and several denunciations relative to his actions while in power during the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956, where many of Stalin's actions were considered wrong and excessive (Pucek, 1996: 53-54). These denunciations did not please Kim Il-sung, whose main objective was to consolidate a totalitarian and autocratic regime in North Korea, very similar to what Stalin had done in the ex-Soviet Union. Kim Il-sung also sensed that relations between East and West were becoming less tense, and that did not fit with his intensions and objectives. In his view, it became necessary to ensure that North Korea would acquire total self-sufficiency and did not become vulnerable to any unwarranted interference from the outsider world.

The concept of *Juche* can be seen as emanating from several factors, but it is certainly related to the history of a small country that faced foreign aggressions and interference from neighbouring foreign powers. It means, or can be translated as, self-confidence and/or self-sufficiency (Kim, 2010: 2). These notions are essential pillars in every aspect of North Korean politics, and it is through the above-mentioned indoctrination of the population that the regime has been able to legitimate itself and ensure the support of a significant portion of the population on what concerns policy actions and all decision-making (Park, 1996: 10). It is also in this spirit that, in April of 1965, Kim Il-sung established in a more direct and objective way the three main principles of *Juche*: “Independence in politics” (*jaju*), “Self-sufficiency in the economy” (*jarip*), and “Self-confidence in national defence” (*jawu*). As such, *Juche* also symbolizes a rejection of all the politics of de-Stalinization that were taking place in the ex-Soviet Union (Park, 2015: 6).

The fact that it has worked so far is probably one of the main justifications for each leader to pursue the same strategy as his predecessor over the years without any motivation to carry out significant policy changes, namely, reforms, such as in the case of China with Deng Xiaoping or in the case of Vietnam. The perceived benefits of staying on the same path continuously increase compared to the potential costs of alternative policies in a process that can be characterized as path-dependency (Park, 2015: 4). Nevertheless, the notions of self-confidence and of self-sufficiency were at some point in time reinterpreted as being centred around man as a human being (Park, 1996:12-13). That is, man is considered as the sole responsible for his destiny and should not be subjected to domination or subjugation by others in any form, be it political, economic, military, or other. This may seem surprising given that there is no positive valuation on any individualism in the sense of individual interests and motivations being of paramount importance from an ethical point of view, unlike what happens in the Western world. Differently, North Korea promotes a collectivist view relative to the relationship between society and individuals. The way to interpret this would seem to be that the importance of the individual with

respect to his unique characteristics only make sense and finds its *raison d'être* in society as a whole, and that, naturally, in the terms defined by the North Korean leadership.

What seems even more surprising is that this appears to be in opposition to Marxist principles, as a theory of change and transformation, which is surprising given that North Korea is most often regarded as a communist country as a result of its history. That is, a theory based on the idea that society is in permanent movement and evolution, and where the dynamics is the concept of class struggle. Differently from Marxist principles, *Juche* is not at all oriented towards the issues connected to production and the productive forces but instead towards the issues of political thought linked to the political leader of North Korea and in connection with the political regime. In that respect, it seems to distinguish itself quite clearly from the principles associated with historical materialism. Furthermore, the North Korean regime is based on the Confucian tradition that asserts an entire set of principles that guide the relations between the individual and the family, but at the same time enlarging that same concept of family (Kim, 2010: 6). The notion of family is extended well beyond what is traditional and in its more restrictive sense, particularly in the Western sense. In North Korea, the notion of family may extend to include the state and also linking it to race. More specifically, one may consider that there are five elements that regulate social and interpersonal relations in Confucianism that are themselves regulated according to their nature, with its respective virtues: ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, brothers, and friends (Park, Rehg & Lee, 2005: 390). However, the North Korean regime has tried to weaken the relations within the traditional notion of family in order to enlarge and consolidate a broader notion of family, making room for the inclusion of the state, and even newer and broader concepts, such as, the socialist 'big family', in other words, (*taegajong*) (Kang, 2011: 69).

The North Korean leadership has always been surrounded by a personality cult from its very beginning to secure power. Personality cults have existed for many years, such as in the cases of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, to name some of the most well-known. However,

the stories that are told about the birth of the North Korean leaders defy all imagination and bear no comparison to any other. They tend to be associated with heroic events and also to be filled with a mystical and a spiritual dimension that resembles a religious cult. Ultimately, the logic that sustains the regime has a Confucian perspective that renders power legitimate but also that facilitates the perpetual transmission of power between successive generations in order to perpetuate the regime (French, 2014: 72-75). As such, the *Juche* ideology can be considered as a mixture of Soviet Marxism, associated with Leninism, Maoism, Confucianism, and Korean nationalism. Some also argue that *Juche* contains the influence of Confucianism and the *Cheondogyo* religion, in support of the idea that *Juche* conforms to traditional Korean values and norms (Kurbanov, 2019: 8). Because of all this, North Korea is truly a country with characteristics that bear no resemblance with any other, not even being comparable to any other communist country. Nevertheless, in essence, Korea is “Much less communist than nationalist, and less nationalist than Korean” (Cumings, 2007). All these values and principles have been used by the North Korean elites to exert control of the country and its population.

#### 4. The Importance of Information, Art, and Culture in North Korea

*Juche* is also encrusted in all the cultural activities, performing arts, and even dissemination of information in North Korea under the government’s control. In fact, in all the political, economic, and social areas. And this despite the fact that article 53 of the Constitution of North Korea stipulates that the country’s citizens enjoy freedom of expression and of the media. Differently, all cultural practices, independent of their nature, cannot be undertaken without the government’s supervision and control so that they can be used to the regime’s advantage. Most importantly, they are used to pursue the development of the leader’s cult of personality. Access to newspapers, radio and television is, therefore, very limited and restricted (North Korea profile – Media, August 24, 2017; Savada,

1993; Tudor & Pearson, 2015: 155-158). The regime uses the dissemination of ideas with the objective of engraining a certain type of sentiments and way of thinking to provide support to the survival of the regime. Much of this is also exerted through constant propaganda, using methods such as arts and entertainment, the control of information, the cult of personality, and the education system (Byman & Lind, 2010: 51-52).

The North Korean official newspaper of the Korean Workers' Party is the *Nodong simmun* – Workers' Daily<sup>1</sup> – which is also the most well-known in North Korea. It is destined to carry out all the propaganda activities in favour of whichever Kim is in power and all the regime's activities. Most of the propaganda towards the outside of the country takes place through the *Choson-ui Sori* – Voice of Korea<sup>2</sup> – that publishes in various different languages, such as Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Japanese, Russian, Spanish, and also in Korean. The information displayed tends to focus of matters concerning internal affairs, but also on activities carried out by foreign countries that the North Korean leadership consider hostile, in particular, the US and South Korea. With respect to television and radio, there are two main networks, the *Korean Central Broadcasting Station* and the *Korean Central TV* – a radio station and a television network, amongst several other, but they all exist to basically promote the regime and its leadership. There is also an official news agency, the *Korean Central News Agency*.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of literature, there have been some developments that may be considered as mildly positive but, in essence, what stands out is its negative influence (Pucek, 1996: 52). One positive consequence that may have diminished illiteracy was the abolition of Chinese Characters and the establishment of linguistic norms through the Korean alphabet, which has also helped the development of a popular art. However, that also bodes well to enhance the regime's control and influence over its population given that all literary production needs to reflect the realities of North Korean

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.vok.rep.kp/index.php?CHANNEL=6&lang=>

<sup>3</sup> <https://kcnawatch.org/>

society in accordance with the government's viewpoint. This is required to promote loyalty towards the political regime and contribute to a sentiment of unity (Pucek, 1996: 56). The regime considers that all efforts to avoid outside influence, both cultural and ideological, should be forcefully undertaken. Consequently, all that is related to culture is analysed as to its value from an aesthetic point of view but very much so from its educational contribution in the sense of contributing to the same shared moral values, principles and ideas that are promoted by the regime.

There are cultural expressions that have been privileged relative to others in different points in time. For instance, filming assumed a primary role during the time of Kim Jong-il because of his attachment to filming, often times under his direct control and supervision. There are also other forms of hybrid artistic expressions, such as, theatre, music, dance, and revolutionary opera that should not be underestimated. Most significantly, is the use of both genders in the creation of representations based on images that suit the interests of the regime. More specifically, the image of a certain kind of woman can be created, namely of an idyllic, pure, and innocent kind while men and masculine representations are more likely to play secondary roles with the view to reduce the importance of their role as men, in comparison with the North Korean leader (Kim, 2010: 9-10). This amounts to image constructions with utilitarian purposes for the regime in contrast to the usual image of both genders as "material subjects of history" (Kim, 2010: 10). All these artistic expressions have been used to misrepresent both history and specific events in favour of the regime from the very beginning in connection with the *Juche* ideology. That also occurs with respect to locations of birth of the leaders as well as historical deeds. Within that context, it is worth underlining the fact that, for instance, there is a reconstruction of the past to link the personal history of Kim Il-sung, and indeed his date of birth, with the official creation of the state (Kim, 2010: 61). The idea seems to be to associate his birth with the liberation of the North Korean people from all past oppression.

Significantly, over the years, particularly when Kim Jong-il was in power, several texts concerning the norms and principles

of *Juche* were produced and distributed since the years 1960 that illustrated the connection between *Juche* and culture. This was often done in such a way that, as a theory, *Juche* became much more associated with literature and art as a means to sustain and legitimize the regime at the time, replacing Marxist-Leninist theory (Pucek, 1996: 60). However, to some extent this has become much less obvious in the more recent years, particularly since Kim Jong-un raised to power.

## 5. Expectations of an End to the Regime

Over time, many observers predicted that the North Korean regime would collapse or disintegrate, particularly soon after the death of the founder of North Korea, Kim Il-sung, in 1994. Nicholas Eberstadt, an American Enterprise Institute expert, was apparently the first to announce it back in 1990, but there have been many others, namely, Gen. Gary Luck, commander of US forces in Korea in 1997 and Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defence, in 2003 (Cumings, 2004: 199). They were all proven wrong.

Close to Kim Jong-il's sudden death in December 2011, similar predictions were made (Bennett & Ling, 2011: 84-119; Byman & Lind, 2010: 71-72; Snyder, 2010). Many considered that the dire economic situation of the country at the time and the lack of preparation for a smooth transition would lead to power struggles that in turn would bring an end to the regime. But again, that did not happen. When Kim Jong-il died Kim Jong-un – son of the latter and grandson of Kim Il-sung – was only in his late twenties at the time and without much political experience and preparation for facing the economic challenges that the country was undergoing and to carry out the much-needed reforms. In addition, he was considered too young and immature in the West to be in charge of a country with a nuclear arsenal – one of the main legacies of his father along with the economic hardship.

In fact, although Kim Jong-un was politically endorsed in North Korea as someone with superb qualities. But many in the

West continued to believe that the regime would likely fall because Kim Jong-un did not have the same legitimacy as his predecessors, not least because time tends to dilute power from one authoritarian rule to his successor, particularly in the absence of economic improvements (Lee, 2013: 178). To many, the most likely scenario seemed to be that the end of the regime would soon occur (Joo, 2012: 1-9). The reality is that the regime has survived all these years in spite of the changes in leadership and irrespective of the conditions under which they occurred.

This does not mean that the North Korean regime will last forever. Authoritarian regimes are constantly threatened, either by peaceful or violent internal revolutions, with or without the support of foreign powers, and despite all the actions taken to ensure its survival (Slocpol, 1979; Tille, 1978; Eisenstadt, 1992: 21-41). Of course, they may also be toppled by a foreign power, although in the case of North Korea that seems unlikely given its current nuclear capabilities. Still, it seems difficult to accept that a severe dictatorial regime is capable of sustaining itself for so long, particularly when there have been several periods of economic hardship. No doubt, the repressive measures help sustain the regime but without *Juche* that probably would not have happened. Indeed, in light of the difficult and deteriorating economic conditions, and as more resilience on the part of the population will be needed, reforms will have to take place, which will imply some opening of the economy that may eventually lead to a regime change at some future point in time (Bang, 2020: 150).

Until recently, the policy of Kim Jong-un has not been very different from his predecessors in the sense that they share as a common feature the legitimisation and maintenance of the political regime (Park, 2014: 10). Each has followed the steps of his predecessor with respect to education, the arts, literature, and culture in general. And *Juche* has been the basis of the regime in accordance with the ideas and guidelines established by Kim Il-sung (Bosch, 2013). Nevertheless, Kim Jong-un has also been giving priority to increasing nuclear capabilities to ensure a stable deterrence, most notably against the US (Panda, 2020). The intention is to force the

US to deal with North Korea as a nuclear power for international security reasons and to discourage any attempts to interfere with North Korea's internal affairs. These authoritarian and repressive policies have also played a very important role in allowing the regime to survive.

On the economic front, Kim Jong-un has not undertaken significant changes since he took power in December 2011, despite several announcements, notably in 2013-14 (Kim, 2017: 55-56). The regime has become less repressive against market activities, with a few industrial, agricultural and tourism projects being announced. But much of that was either not realized or simply turned out to have no significant impact in the economy. A large amount of the consumer goods sold in North Korea are either imported or smuggled from China and the informal economy provides many opportunities to make money. In fact, much of the informal economy is considered to raise overall productivity and has been increasingly tolerated by the regime because it provides a buffer that lessens the impact of the economic hardship (Kim, 2017: 276). Notwithstanding, the North Korean system continues to operate essentially as it always has, that is, a socialist type planned economy with a state ownership of the means of production, and where all the economic decisions are centralized (Lee & Seo, 2019: 3). As a result, it continues to suffer from all the expected inefficiencies, lack of investment and modernization, as well as low productivity.

Noteworthy, Kim Jong-un has declared during his New Year's messages in early 2022 that the country was facing "a great life-and-death struggle" to overcome economic hardship, while he also referred to the need for additional military capabilities to face external threats (Bernal, 2022). It also appeared that Kim Jong-un wished to change the country's ideology and name it after him—the expression "Kim Jong Un-ism" has been mentioned in the Western media—in an effort to further solidify his authority. It would not be the first time that a new strategic policy is announced in North Korea after Kim Il-sung proclaimed *Juche*. However, this time the pictures of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il were also missing from photographs of meetings provided by state media, which led many

in the West to believe that Kim Jong-un felt that his public image had been overshadowed by his predecessors. Kim Jong-il, the father of Kim Jong-un, installed *Songun* in 1995, a policy that puts the military above everything else. That led to a significant power shift from the Korean Workers Party to the Korean People's Army that also became much more politicized (Woo, 2014: 118). But in spite of that, he never abandoned *Juche*, which remained the core ideology and an essential pillar for the sustainability of the regime and legitimacy to its leadership. In fact, one of the essential elements of his strategy was precisely the ideological connections between the 'military-first' politics and *Juche*. Plus, the image of Kim Il-sung was always omnipresent. This time, things seem to look somewhat different although it is still too early to tell. Some may consider that in the current conditions there is a good possibility of a regime fall but may be wrong again. But it may also be the case that the new ideology will combine *Juche* and *Songun*. It also seems that this new ideology is being prepared for some time, which suggests that Kim Jong-un is being cautious in his diligence (Onchi, 2021). Under those conditions, the fragile economic situation will matter for the sustainability of the regime, but the *Juche* ideology will very likely continue to completely offset it, or at least to partially mitigate it, providing the conditions for the regime to leverage on this process of collective memory.

## 6. Implications for US foreign policy towards North Korea

The specific nature of North Korea creates significant challenges to the US. The North Korean regime seems relatively well-supported and unlikely to fall easily due to its ideology and repression. On the other hand, and most significantly, the country's possession of nuclear weapons presents a serious challenge for US policy towards North Korea. In this context there may be several policy options available, but the reality is that some of them have already been tried before, with little or no success. In addition, none of them seems ideal (Husenícova, 2018).

Going back in time, the North Korean nuclear program dates back to the 1960s although “... it was only in 1985 that the first North Korean nuclear reactor, at Yong-byon, went critical” (Monteiro, 2014: 197). After testing its first nuclear weapon back in October 2006, its nuclear program advanced to a level that provided robust security guarantees (Debs & Monteiro, 2017: 277). Major developments continued to occur with nuclear tests and the US was never able to stop or persuade North Korea to change its behaviour and stop those tests (Pollack, 2011). In fact, “In dealing with North Korean nuclear weapons acquisition, the United States’s North Korea policy has not changed from Bill Clinton to George W. Bush to Barak Obama” (Byman & Lind, 2010: 70). Trump tried to foster better relations with Kim Jong Un, namely during the 2018 Trump-Kim Jong Un summit when a Joint Statement was signed reaffirming the Panmunjom Declaration.<sup>4</sup> But other than that, not much of significance has happened since until now, particularly during the Biden administration. Be that as it may, the fact that North Korea possesses nuclear weapons, even if eventually just for defence purposes and to ensure the country’s survival, makes any attempt against that country’s regime extremely risky and dangerous, which also makes the possibility of an attack on the country extremely unlikely.

However, nuclear “...weapons not only deter adversaries; they also serve as a tool for regime survival” (Byman & Lind, 2010: 72). For those reasons, it is extremely unlikely that Kim Jong-un will ever give them up. Given that state of affairs, the North Korean regime is likely to last at least until his death, if not longer, depending on the matter of succession. There is also a possibility that North Korea sells military equipment as well as nuclear material and technology to rogue states and even terrorist groups, which would further enhance international security concerns, particularly on the part of Western countries, not least the US, although not exclusively (In-

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<sup>4</sup> The Panmunjom Declaration was an attempt to sign a formal peace treaty between North Korea and South Korea that occurred during the inter-Korean summit on April 27, 2018, between Kim Jong Un and Moon Jae In, under the auspices of the United States and China. The objective was to reach an agreement for transforming the 1953 armistice agreement into a formal peace treaty. Since then, not much has happened and with Biden there were no further developments.

dyk, Lieberthal & O'Hanlon, 2012: 210). The country has suffered harsh economic conditions on several occasions in the past due to sanctions or for other reasons, so selling nuclear technology would be a way to obtain revenue to counter that. Otherwise, it may just be a possibility to increase the country's wealth.

Noteworthy, this major US foreign policy concern goes well beyond North Korea and inevitably links to US relations with a number of countries in Northeast Asia, most notably, South Korea, Japan, and China, but also Russia. At the time of writing, relations with Russia are at one of the lowest points in history since the end of the Cold War due to the latter's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 2022. Having said that, Russia is an important country that has close relations with North Korea and that has even benefited from North Korean military equipment recently.<sup>5</sup> In this environment, China can also play an important role in exerting some pressure on North Korea, although the influence that China has on North Korea and the capacity to pressure it is probably lower presently than is often assumed. On the other hand, and for obvious reasons, South Korea and Japan are countries that fear a North Korean aggression, the former with respect to wishes of reunification and the latter for historical reasons already mentioned above.

## 7. Conclusions

As argued at the outset, the North Korean regime is very peculiar and singular. It is the result of North Korea's particular history and of an ideology called *Juche*, which follows from a controlled and uncontested process of collective memory that has been used to ensure the maintenance and sustainability of the regime over the years. Over time *Juche* has almost become synonym with the regime itself given that the former is completely impregnated in all aspects

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<sup>5</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-russia-arms-transfers-ukraine-a37bc290ed3ee59cfbbafd c2a994dc58>  
<https://www.reuters.com/world/north-korean-weapons-extending-russian-stockpiles-german-general-says-2024-09-09/>

of the political, economic and social life in North Korea. The existence of repressive measures has also helped the sustainability of the regime, but those alone would probably not have been sufficient for the regime to survive this long had *Juche* not existed.

Most important, the fact that North Korea is a nuclear power also creates additional and major difficulties for US policy. The existence of those weapons provides a security guarantee to North Korea that renders extremely difficult and unlikely any US action against that country. For obvious reasons, the use of aggressive measures would be extremely dangerous for the international stability of the region.

Notwithstanding, looking out it will be interesting to monitor how events unfold as Kim Jong-un searches for a new ideology in order to increase his authority and credibility relative to his predecessors. Such a change may lead to a disconnect that at some point in time may not be well-accepted by the population of North Korea, particularly if his intentions are to detach himself from the legacy of his predecessors. In addition, it will be important to see if, and for how long, North Korea will survive without significant economic reforms. Reforms would imply some opening of the economy, which could well lead to internal vulnerabilities and a possible regime change further down the road. The option of denuclearization in order to have economic sanctions lifted would in all probability have similar effects although it seems most unlikely.

As a result, the implications for US foreign policy seem to be that, in this environment, the use of measures such as sanctions is unlikely to be effective given the regime's ideology. In fact, they would in all likelihood only harm North Koreans without threatening the regime. In fact, those measures may actually reinforce the regime, turning North Koreans even more against foreigners. So perhaps, and when the time is right, it may make sense to return to a multilateral approach, such as the Six-Party Talks, involving the US, China, South Korea, North Korea, Japan, and Russia.

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