

## ACTING ALONE TO ACT TOGETHER: DIVERSIFYING APPROACHES TO NORTH KOREA

DANIELLE CHUBB

*Deakin University, Melbourne*

Strategic discussions about North Korea's proliferation comprise a number of dimensions. The core assumption underlying this article is that the ideational aspects of North Korea's decision making are important and give rise to a range of strategic considerations. This is not to underplay the strategic, materialist elements in North Korea's provocative and at times belligerent behaviour. Rather, it is to argue that Australia is well placed to concentrate on the social dimensions of strategic discussions. As a less important middle power, a regional player, yet geographically distant from the threat, Australia is in a position to provide a point of differentiation from other, more entrenched players such as the United States or the Republic of Korea (ROK). A good starting point for developing this sort of engagement is to enhance non-state, track two cooperation between the two countries, which has been stalled since the early 2000s. In this article I will first canvass the ongoing debate taking place in Australian academic and policy circles regarding Australia's place in the world. Of particular concern, is the question how Australia should balance its most important strategic relationship – that with the United States – with geographic and economic realities. I then sketch some of the limitations of current thinking, concentrating particularly on discourse that portrays North Korea as a rogue state and finish with a discussion of how non-state activity can act as a helpful precursor to more constructive relationships between states, and the types of creative engagement strategies currently taking place in the United States, despite the volatile political environment.

A number of assumptions buttress the arguments made here. First, that the social and ideational elements of strategic thinking are an important part of any comprehensive approach. Second, that the international community has an ethical obligation to consider security in North Korea from a broad perspective. That is, in a country like North Korea, where the populace has limited (if any) capacity to further their individual interests, only a comprehensive security approach that takes into account the wellbeing of the people within national borders (and not just the integrity of the borders themselves)<sup>1</sup> can bring about a just outcome. The most immediate corollary of this assumption is that any change in North Korea should be brought about in as controlled a manner as possible. Finally, this argument views North Korea as an actor whose rationality and strategic thinking are based on a set of normative beliefs that are often difficult to decipher and may not always be applied consistently.

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1 The case for a human security approach to North Korea, which speaks to some of these concerns, is made by Hazel Smith: Hazel Smith, *Hungry for peace: international security, humanitarian assistance and social change in North Korea* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2005).

This article represents the beginnings of a research project that aims to examine in detail a range of options available for smaller, middle-power nations, such as Australia, when dealing with a country that represents a serious security threat. I am particularly interested in the role that non-state actors may play in this arena that has traditionally been reserved for state actors. However, I do not wish to view non-state actions in a vacuum. Indeed, non-state actors can only operate in spaces that the state permits. In the case of Australia, for example, the current visa ban on North Koreans has had real and lasting implications for non-state engagement. Another example are the sanctions that have been applied to North Korea – at the level of the United Nations – in response to the North’s on-going provocative behaviour. Setting aside the question of whether or not the sanctions have been successful in curbing North Korea’s nuclear proliferation, they have restricted the capacity of development non-government organisations (NGOs) to continue activity that may involve either cash transfer or the import of goods – such as sporting equipment – into the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

(DPRK). Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the degree to which non-state actors are able to operate inside the DPRK depends on the approval of the North Korean government itself. As such, I am interested in the interplay – which is often subtle and not overtly acknowledged – between the state and non-state actors. This cooperation allows much needed NGO activity to take place; activity that does not fit within the official state discourses of one or both sides, or which is not possible for a variety of diplomatic or security reasons.

### **Australia in Asia**

Before turning to my discussion of the discourse around North Korea as rogue state, it is first worthwhile rehearsing some of the debates taking place inside Australia about the changing nature of international order, and Australia’s place inside it, as an Asia Pacific middle power. In this way, an argument for a more creative diplomacy vis-à-vis North Korea is an argument about how Australia sees itself and its role in what is increasingly being called the burgeoning Asian century.

The debate over the future of the United States-Australia alliance is animated by questions regarding the future of United States power in Asia. With Australia’s economic future lying increasingly with Asia in general and China in particular, questions have been raised regarding whether the country needs to start taking more responsibility for its own security, particularly in the Asian region. The debate, then, is rarely one over the value of the United States alliance *per se*, but rather over the degree to which Australia should be reliant upon the United States security guarantee. That is, what is at stake is not the question whether or not Australia should continue to conduct alliance relations with the United States, but rather an argument about taking a more independent position in the current policy environment. It is important to note that its allies’ quests for a more independent strategic capability is one that is supported by the United States, which is actively encouraging the development of bilateral ties between its allies. As United States capacity is increasingly strained, in the Asia-Pacific as elsewhere, strategists turn to well-worn phrases such as ‘burden-sharing’ to

describe the future of the United States alliance system in Asia, and the increasingly independent role it expects of its allies.<sup>2</sup>

As the United States ‘pivots’ or ‘rebalances’ towards Asia, debate in Australia has been portrayed as revolving around a choice between history and geography.<sup>3</sup> This is a dilemma Australians have faced before, but never has it been so pressing. The urgency of the question is directly related to the rise of China, which most pundits argue is not only substantive, but also both on going and meaningful. In light of this, the central question driving contemporary debate is: how can Australia continue to benefit from China’s economic rise and simultaneously secure its own national interests? A range of responses has arisen about where Australia’s national interests lie and which mechanisms will best achieve them. On one side of the spectrum is the argument that, in light of what some believe to be an inevitable decline in United States influence in Asia, Australia (along with other regional powers) needs to dramatically reassess its alliance obligations to take stock of the shifting power balance, away from the United States-centred order to one that is increasingly multi-polar. On the other side is the argument that, in fact, the close economic interdependence of all states, including the United States and China, actually leads to an increased likelihood that cooperation, rather than conflict, will become the new default order in Asia.

It is between these two extremes that most debate lies. This discussion revolves around competing visions of the future of Australia and Australian identity in the ‘Asian Century’. Here, the febrile nature of the security arena is acknowledged to have created the exigency for the careful management of Australia’s relationship with China which in turn paints the backdrop for considerations of how the Australia-United States alliance can continue to shape Australia’s future. It is the apparent incompatibility of these goals, and the at times clumsy manner in which Australian governments have dealt with this difficult scenario, that have led to accusations of incoherence. The 2011 joint announcement regarding an increased United States presence in Australia (discussed below) is a case in point: widely seen as an effort to consolidate America’s influence in the Western Pacific in response to China’s growing influence, both Australian and United States policy makers fumbled publicly as they

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- 2 See, for example: Carl Baker and Brad Glosserman, eds., *Doing more and expecting less: the future of US alliances in the Asia Pacific*, vol. 13 No.1, Issues and Insights (Honolulu: Pacific Forum CSIS, 2013); Ernest Bower et al., “U.S. Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region: an independent assessment,” (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012); Tomohiko Satake and Yusuke Ishihara, “America’s rebalance to Asia and its implications for Japan-US-Australia security cooperation,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 12, no. 2 (2012); Scott Snyder, “Expanding the US-South Korea alliance,” in *The US-South Korea alliance: meeting new security challenges*, ed. Scott Snyder (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2012); Douglas Stuart, ““Leading from Behind”: toward a new U.S. strategy for the Asia-Pacific,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 24, no. 2 (2012).
  - 3 Parts of the following section can also be found as part of a longer paper, published by CSIS: Danielle Chubb, “Down under and in between: Australian security perspectives in the ‘Asian Century’,” in *Doing more and expecting less: the future of US alliances in the Asia Pacific*, ed. Carl Baker and Brad Glosserman (Honolulu: Pacific Forum CSIS, 2013).

sought to make assurances, in press conferences and official statements, that this was not intended as a containment of China.

Since 2007, the Rudd/Gillard government has put in place a number of initiatives, in response to accusations that Australia has been slow to come to terms with the national security implications of China's rise. Calls by some within the academic and policy communities to respond to the shifting balance of power through acknowledging that the ANZUS (Australia-New Zealand-United States) treaty is 'out of date' notwithstanding,<sup>4</sup> the government has reinforced the centrality of this alliance to Australia's national security interests. The November 2011 announcement of an increased American presence in Australia has served to strengthen the country's political commitment to this alliance. Under the bilateral, United States-Australia agreement, United States marines – totalling 2,500 by 2017 – will rotate through Darwin and the Northern Territory.

Long involved as a key instigator and supporter of regional multilateralism, it is through the establishment of cooperative institutions that Australia hopes to play a role in moulding the shape of the coming new order in Asia. In the context of the United States alliance, a number of opportunities are open to Australia. The United States-centred alliance system in Asia incorporates a wide range of stakeholders, such as the Philippines, Thailand, the ROK, and Japan. At present, a hub-and-spokes style model paints the backdrop against which Asian allies each work individually with the United States in the context of other domestic and regional pressures. Where cooperation between the allies – the spokes – is evident, this usually takes place under the leadership of the United States – the hub. While this bilateral (and limited multilateral) approach to security is likely to remain valuable, key players in Canberra are keen to expand cooperative efforts in new and innovative ways. There is, then, great scope for a country like Australia. Not only are we facing an era in which greater regionalism has led to a greater acceptance of where Australia's greatest security opportunities and challenges lie, there are a number of new developments to take advantage of: stronger relations with the ROK and the dynamism of an alliance system that is looking for new and innovative ways to exploit the institutions and diplomatic relationships that decades of the United States alliance system in Asia has forged. And yet, for all Australia's talk of creative diplomacy – which was most clearly evident in recent discourse regarding Australia's successful bid for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council – I argue that its approach to North Korea has in fact regressed and displays a tendency to fall in quick-step with policies framed around an understanding of North Korea as a 'rogue state'.

### **North Korea: the rogue**

In 2012 the international community was remarkably silent on the question of North Korea, taking a wait and see approach, largely brought about by the death of Kim Jong Il (Kim Chŏngil) and the rise to power of his son, Kim Jong Un (Kim Chŏngŭn). It was

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4 Richard Woolcott, "Australia in the Asian Century: Submission to the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper Committee," <http://asiancentury.dpmc.gov.au/published-submissions/>.

not until the end of 2012 that activity started to ramp up again north of the 38th parallel. Since the December 2012 rocket launch, North Korea has conducted its third nuclear test and has peppered South Korea and the United States with a series of bellicose threats. Arguments for engagement are politically difficult in this environment as any state-led cooperation with a country that clearly contravenes the peace and security norms that hold the international community together would have to be carefully planned and managed. Instead, North Korea is once again attracting the attention of those who call for a hard-line response to its actions. From where we stand in mid-2013, engagement options seem a distant pipe dream.

This, however, has not always been the case and it is worth remembering that at least twice in recent history there have been more rigorous conversations taking place over the pros and cons of greater engagement with North Korea. In the mid-1990s (in the context of the debate over the Agreed Framework) and the early 2000s (in the context of the constant to-ing and fro-ing of the Bush White House) academic and policy journals deliberated a range of new possible responses to the North Korean nuclear conundrum. During this period, of course, democracy came to South Korea and, with the inauguration of the Kim Dae Jung (Kim Taejung) government, a whole new approach to North Korea in the form of the Sunshine Policy. Since this time, however, in the light of the breakdown of the Agreed Framework, the subsequent establishment and failure of the six-party talks, the Bush administration's changed response to international outliers following the September 11 terrorist attacks and, most recently, provocations against South Korea and revelations regarding North Korea's nuclear capacity, efforts to negotiate with North Korea have been deemed a failure. With the stalling of diplomatic efforts, so too has the academic and policy discourse petered out. Dramatic headlines have once again led to an essentialising rhetoric that depicts North Korea as irrational, evil and, above all, unknowable. We need to think carefully about this and ask the question: Is our lack of understanding of North Korea due to its inherently mysterious and unknowable – irrational and unpredictable perhaps – nature or is it due to the narrow confines of the conceptual frameworks through which we view it?

Homolar and Bleiker argue that the United States approach to North Korea is driven by its conceptualisation of the country as a rogue state. This reflects a Cold War-style security narrative and, since the early 1990s has largely served to buttress the assumptions that have driven defence spending and planning.<sup>5</sup> That is, the threat-image of North Korea has served the interests of those who advocate a militaristic approach to the Asian region and, importantly, the on-going centrality of nuclear weapons by way of the United States Extended Deterrence umbrella. The immediate corollary of the rogue state doctrine has been the continuation of containment as a tool of United States policy, one that Australia has supported through public reification of the threat image of North Korea as a dangerous, NPT-defying outlier state.

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5 Roland Bleiker, "A rogue is a rogue is a rogue: US foreign policy and the US nuclear crisis," *International Affairs* 79, no. 4 (2003); Alexandra Homolar, "Rebels without a conscience: the evolution of the rogue state narrative in US security policy," *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 4 (2011).

By its nature, a rogue regime is one dissatisfied with the *status quo* and thus dedicated to breaking down established structures and institutions. An unknowable regime is one with whom no meaningful diplomatic relations can be forged. And an irrational regime is one whose own policy agenda cannot be understood – by either itself or an outsider – as it is not based on any type of reasoned or rational assumptions. Understanding North Korea through any or all of these lenses narrows policy options to the degree that change is not seen as a variable and the only options available to the international community are coercion or isolation. This leads us rather to a dead end and constrains the imagination of policy alternatives and security futures. It rejects any suggestion that dialogue could contribute towards the overcoming of impasses and rules out engagement as a form of appeasement to a bad or mad (or both) regime.<sup>6</sup> North Korea's decision making seems based on a rationale that is evident only to policy makers in Pyongyang. Yet arguments by the rest of the world community, that the regime is irrational, are in the end only an admission that we do not understand the rationale. If North Korea is indeed capable of change, understanding the nature of the ideas that drive policy is a step towards understanding how this might come about. There is a large body of evidence that suggests that North Korea does want to engage with the international community. Certainly, existential questions constrain its options and it is a frustratingly difficult regime to deal with. However, with nuclear proliferation on the top of the agenda of the international community, I believe we are currently faced with no other options than to continue to find new ways to communicate effectively with the DPRK regime.

### The discrediting of engagement

Strategic studies analysts viewing the Korean peninsula through a rational-choice prism present a perspective on Australian policy options that is at its heart, conflicted. Arguing, on the one hand, that the new strategic reality in Asia not only enables, but also requires, middle-power United States allies to take steps towards greater strategic independence and engage in creative forms of conflict mitigation, these analysts seem to quarantine North Korea from these calculations. In the introduction to a 2011 Special Issue of *Korea Observer*, which was dedicated to the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Australia-ROK relations, the following observation is offered:

North Korea... is intensifying its claims for control of the entire Korean peninsula. It is determined to eradicate the American alliance system in Northeast Asia... Australia, as a highly modern, if geographically distant, economic partner of the ROK and as a strategic associate of the United States is totally entwined with the outcome of this drama. This is true *notwithstanding* Canberra's intermittent efforts to reach out to the DPRK through the normalizing of diplomatic relations and by sponsoring intermittent training programs for North Korean specialists in agriculture and economics.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Hazel Smith, "Bad, mad, sad or rational actor? Why the 'securitization' paradigm makes for poor policy analysis of North Korea," *International Affairs* 76, no. 3 (2000).

7 William Tow and Ajin Choi, "Facing the crucible: Australia, the ROK, and cooperation in Asia," *Korea Observer* 42, no. 1 (2011): 7. (my emphasis)

This statement is followed by an explanatory footnote, in which it is stated that the aforementioned diplomatic and training efforts had been largely unsuccessful, and which attributed the lack of success entirely to bureaucracy and intransigence on the side of the North Koreans. The assumption implicit here is that Australia's support for South Korea's continued security and the survival of the United States alliance system is incompatible with any type of outreach or creative approaches to conflict resolution (which are otherwise championed by the authors) that may involve diplomatic innovations of the sort that treat North Korea as a legitimate partner.

What this reflects is a trend towards equating any form of engagement with North Korea as a type of appeasement. On the back of a string of North Korean provocations - including the 2009 nuclear and missile tests, the Cheonan (Ch'önan) sinking and the shelling of Yeonpyeong (Yönp'yöng) Island in 2010, as well as the 2012 rocket launch and, most recently, the 2013 nuclear test and the accompanying threatening rhetoric that has followed the imposition of fresh sanctions – the concern is that any efforts by the international community to reach out to North Korea could be construed as a reward for bad behaviour. The speed with which analysts such as those above disassociate efforts to 'reach out' to Pyongyang with Australian recognition of the stake it has in establishing a peace and security regime on the Korean peninsula mirrors a similar trend in United States circles, where 'engagement' appears to have become a dirty word. As I noted earlier, the early 2000s saw a rigorous debate take place in newspapers, policy papers and academic journals regarding the pros and cons of various types of engagement. By contrast, in late 2011, an article originally published in the *South China Morning Post* with the title "Engage, don't isolate" by NYU law Professor Jerome Cohen had its title changed to "*North Korea: The American Dilemma*" when the article was republished on the websites of the United States-Asia Law Institute and the Council on Foreign Relations.<sup>8</sup>

### **Incorporating the social and ideational elements of strategic thinking (or: why should we engage?)**

As North Korea defies the norms of the international order, contravenes Security Council conventions and acts belligerently towards its southern counterpart, the instinctual response has been to bolster defences and relay the international community's disquiet through a discourse that concentrates on the structural elements of the DPRK acts of aggression. It is difficult to criticize such responses: to ignore the danger of North Korea's nuclear proliferation would be irresponsible. The DPRK's proliferation activities represent a regional and global threat. Putting the question of how likely it is that North Korea would make use of a nuclear weapon capability aside, the potential for strategic miscalculation or even an accident on the enrichment sites themselves, would have disastrous consequences. It is for this reason that a comprehensive, state-based solution is a necessary element of any strategic plan. From a structural perspective,

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8 Jerome A. Cohen, "Engage, don't isolate," *South China Morning Post*, December 30 2011; Jerome A. Cohen, "North Korea: the American dilemma," Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/north-korea/north-korea-american-dilemma/p27200>.

North Korea uses its nuclear capacity as a bargaining chip. Nestled, as it is, between China on the one side and the significant number of United States forces based in South Korea on the other, it seeks to prolong its own regime survival through a dangerous game of brinksmanship.

It is, however, a mistake to view North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons purely as a form of bargaining. Alongside these structural considerations, the DPRK's strategic thinking has a number of important social and ideational elements. These elements are more difficult to predict, contingent as they are on prevailing domestic strategic and political discourses. To understand North Korea's proliferation, we need to look carefully at the rationality behind North Korea's nuclear program, from the perspective of North Korea itself.<sup>9</sup> The DPRK's nuclear program is an important element of its national identity. In the introduction to their edited volume, Holmes and Yoshihara remind us that "nuclear weapons engage nation-states' sense of themselves, arousing their leaders' and citizens' deepest passions."<sup>10</sup> Not just their nuclear program, but indeed North Korea's entire foreign policy is informed by a very particular worldview that is importantly driven by a sense of moral imperative. In this sense, the case of India under Nehru is informative – Bhupinder Brar argues that the major shift that can be witnessed in India's foreign policies since the end of the Cold War is that it has moved on from a position that was once informed by "those reflective and normative ideas which inform a people of their location in the world and their moral destiny."<sup>11</sup> An examination of North Korea's domestic discourses reveals this sense of moral imperative to be an important element of the country's nuclear program.

There is not the space in this article to delve into a detailed discussion of the ideas and interests driving North Korean policy: the intention is to flag the importance of coming to a better understanding of these, and to encourage policy making that leads us closer to this goal. Despite the closed nature of the North Korean state, there is now much that we can surmise regarding the leadership's rationality and the context in which foreign policy is made. For example, Kwon and Chung, in their cultural analysis of North Korean political culture, make reference to *sŏn'gun* – military first politics – the ideology that informed policy under Kim Jong Il. The end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the international socialist political order, was an important event for North Korea, as the country's leadership readjusted, not only their alliances and loyalties, but also the rationale behind the country's authoritarian legitimacy. The new discourse is a sophisticated one, but at its core is an argument about exceptionalism. In what is

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9 Attempting to view the world through the prism of the North Korean leadership is an uncomfortable exercise, as discussed above: there seems to be an element of concern – among strategic thinkers as well as the academic community – that giving voice to the DPRK's strategic rationale is to legitimise the voice of an evil dictatorship.

10 Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, "Introduction," in *Strategy in the second nuclear age: power ambition, and the ultimate weapon*, ed. Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 6.

11 Kate Sullivan, "Discourses on the nuclear deal: persistence of independence," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 3 (2008).



considered the authoritative word on *sŏn'gun* – *Understanding Sŏn'gun politics* (2004) – the vanguard position of North Korea in the world is explained in the words of the North Korean élite:

The flag of socialism was taken down in the former Soviet Union and former eastern European countries. In the broader international sphere, people who long for socialism are thrown into confusion and left with no guidance. During this time of great trial, we refused to make any change. Instead, we raised our red flag of socialism even higher than before. This way, our country became the only remaining bastion of socialism and was illuminated with the esteemed honor of doing so.<sup>12</sup>

The social and ideational elements of North Korea's strategic thinking run deep and are deeply entwined in the country's historical, cultural, ideological and political identity. This often translated into policy that seems not only subversive but also inconsistent and irrational to the international community. It is difficult for states to find a starting point with which to begin relations with North Korea. As United States negotiators have discovered first hand, dealing with North Koreans is a frustrating process. Mistrust thus dominates relations with North Korea, which leads to the fomenting of unhelpful threat perceptions, often resulting in situations of even greater instability. Yet the hostile environment that characterizes North Korea's foreign relations continues to encourage state responses that turn almost exclusively around military-based approaches.<sup>13</sup>

Non-state and track two diplomatic encounters have the potential to act as useful precursors to deeper state-level engagement. A high level of mistrust, a situation that has only worsened over the first half of 2013, characterizes relations between North Korea and the United States. In light of recent developments, and in the context of a lack of progress during the first Obama administration, it seems unlikely that we shall see a return to the Six Party Talks or an improvement in United States-DPRK relations under the second Obama administration. On the other hand, we should expect to see continued engagement at the track two and civil society levels, which have a record of achieving sustained cooperation, relationships, and trust between the people involved. If there is a willingness on the part of governments to support the track two activities, they may well be used as a 'warm-up' to track one engagement. The same can be said of DPRK-Australia relations. Given Australia's tendency to mirror the United States in its policy approach to North Korea, the damaged state-state relationship will need some time to recover. A reintroduction of a range of non-state engagement strategies would work here as a necessary first step.

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12 Cited in: Byung-ho Chung and Heonik Kwon, *North Korea: beyond charismatic politics* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), 76-77. For a detailed discussion of *sŏn'gun*, and the ramifications that this political philosophy has for North Korea's foreign policy – particularly the country's relationship with the US – see: *ibid.*, 71-99.

13 Roland Bleiker, "Alternatives to Peacekeeping in Korea: The Role of Non-State Actors and Face-to-Face Encounters," *International Peacekeeping* 11, no. 1 (2004): 144.

### External drivers for change in North Korea?

Roland Bleiker, in his discussion of peacekeeping options on the peninsula, argues that non-state actors can act as an important conduit for the reduction of mistrust between the two Koreas:

Non-state interactions between North and South, particularly those that promote communication, information exchange and face-to-face encounters... are of crucial importance, for they provide an opportunity to reduce the stereotypical threat images that continue to fuel conflict on the peninsula.<sup>14</sup>

Since the early 2000s, these types of non-state interactions have slowly developed, not just between the two Koreas, but also between North Korean and European actors as well as with a growing number of United States-based organizations. A review of some of the publicly disclosed programs operated by American NGOs reveals that the range of activities (which operate across a range of sectors) share the common goal of bringing about real and lasting change inside North Korea, whether through the introduction of new ways of thinking and researching, the establishment of a more robust economic policy-making élite or the provision of humanitarian supplies.

Talking about drivers for change in North Korea context is a fraught exercise, especially given a lack of tangible outcomes. External actors face particular barriers, as the country is highly resistant to outside pressures. In this sense, the most effective agents for change remain those that operate internally, such as drivers of domestic marketplace reforms, which may take place on a very small scale.<sup>15</sup> In light of the authorities' resistance to change, it often seems overly optimistic to hope that any action by the international community could bring about even the most modest impetus for change, such as more efficient economic development practices, greater equity in the distribution of humanitarian aid or exposure of epistemological communities to international best practice, such as in the fields of energy efficiency or health reform. Given, however, the high-stakes game that North Korea is playing and the regional threat that its nuclear program represents, the international community has a strong incentive to put into action a wide range of approaches. As I argued above, Australia is in a strong position to work on greater engagement as part of a more comprehensive approach. Working towards this goal, a first step towards greater state engagement is to acknowledge the important role played by non-state actors.

The range of NGO activity inside North Korea ranges far beyond the provision of humanitarian assistance. NGO personnel and organisations play an important role as sponsors of 'informal diplomacy'.<sup>16</sup> Education and capacity building programs strive

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>15</sup> Andrei Lankov and Seok-hyang Kim, "North Korean market vendors: the rise of grassroots capitalists in a post-Stalinist society," *Pacific Affairs* 81, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>16</sup> This term has been borrowed from: Mi Ae Taylor and Mark E. Manyin, "Non-governmental organizations' activities in North Korea," (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011).

to engage North Korean individuals in their occupational activities, acting as a direct contact point with the experiences of the world beyond the borders of the DPRK. In addition (and, I argue, central) to these programs are track two diplomatic efforts.<sup>17</sup> While track two encounters are usually considered as a complement to official dialogue, they can also play a beneficial role in supporting the kind of trust building required to establish successful and meaningful non-state programs.

A number of complex cooperative projects have been undertaken by United States-based organisations in collaboration with North Korean counterparts. Science diplomacy has been one particularly fruitful area, with the US-DPRK Science Engagement Consortium managing to progress to the stage of direct (albeit intermittent) researcher-to-researcher contact in 2011, despite a fraught political climate.<sup>18</sup> The establishment of a Digital Library at Kim Chaek University in Pyongyang and the United States-North Korean Tuberculosis project have also recorded significant achievements.<sup>19</sup> The Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, with South Korean and foreign faculty members, had its first intake of students in October 2010. This is possibly the largest engagement project we have seen to date (barring the Kaesŏng Industrial Complex and the Kŭmgangsan Resort). It is touted as having the potential to greatly influence the next generation of élites through education.<sup>20</sup>

Overseas exhibitions of North Korean artwork have been another successful avenue of engagement. Cooperation in the fields of agriculture, reforestation, agroforestry, medicine and public health have also been successful in small scale projects with several articles published in academic journals co-authored by the foreign and Korean participants in the projects.<sup>21</sup> Further examples of engagement by non-state actors include: visits to the United States by the DPRK taekwondo team; the New York Philharmonic Orchestra performance in Pyongyang; the performance in North Korea by the Georgian choir, Sons of Jubal and the AP-KCNA photo exhibition.

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17 Track II diplomacy refers to meetings and conversations over policy issues that take place outside the context of official inter-governmental relations.

18 Cathy Campbell, "A consortium model for science engagement: lessons from the US-DPRK experience," *Science and Diplomacy* (2012), <http://www.sciencediplomacy.org/article/2012/consortium-model-for-science-engagement>.

19 Taylor and Manyin, "Non-governmental organizations' activities in North Korea."

20 Richard Stone, "The force behind North Korea's new science university," *Science*, 25 September 2009.

21 See: Jeffrey Evans et al., "Improving sustainable production of maize on upland soils of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," *Journal of Sustainable Agriculture* 36, no. 4 (2012); Sharon Perry et al., "Engaging North Korea on mutual interests in tuberculosis control," in *Academic Paper Series* (Korea Economic Institute, 2011); Stone, "The force behind North Korea's new science university."; Stone, "Seeking cures for North Korea's environmental ills," *Science*, 23 March 2012; Jianche Xu et al., "Participatory agroforestry development for restoring degraded sloping land in DPR Korea," *Agroforestry Systems* 85, no. 2 (2012).

### Barriers to engagement

In Australia, the greatest barrier to direct peer-to-peer engagement between Australian experts, trainers and artists is the blanket ban on visas for North Koreans. This ban has extended to prohibiting the North Korean diplomat responsible for Australian relations – currently based in Jakarta – from visiting the country. The United States government, on the other hand, has demonstrated more flexibility and has at times made exceptions to the visa ban for a range of non-state activities. However, in their detailed overview of US-DPRK educational exchanges, Shin and Lee note that during times of increased political tension (such as the sinking of the South Korean corvette (Cheonan), rocket launches or nuclear tests) the United States also has a policy of not issuing visas to DPRK citizens to come to the United States to participate in these programs, which are subsequently derailed or put on hold indefinitely. The authors argue that educational exchanges should be delinked from political events in order to strengthen their meaning and utility.<sup>22</sup>

A 2010 report by the Council on Foreign Relations Task Force echoes that sentiment recommending that “the Obama administration should adopt a visa policy that provides maximum space for nongovernmental forms of engagement designed to bring North Koreans to the United States for exchanges in a wide range of fields. Political approvals for cultural, sports, and educational exchanges should be approved on a routine basis.”<sup>23</sup> Shin and Lee also note that the sanctions and legal climate pose an additional challenge to educational exchanges. As well as the costs involved with ensuring that programs fit within the scope of the complex legal requirements as per export controls, not only equipment but also the sharing of technical information can become a complex legal minefield.<sup>24</sup>

### Australia and North Korea

Over the past decades, Australian policy makers have, at various times, embraced the challenge of establishing a working relationship with North Korea. Through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, relations had an on-again, off-again quality that slowly gained momentum with the 1994 signing of the Agreed Framework. Diplomatic relations between Canberra were renewed in 2000 and, in 2002, the DPRK once again opened an embassy in Canberra. Trade began between the two countries alongside a number of partnership training initiatives. In 2001, the United Nations Development Program funded some North Korean students to come to the Australian National University for a Masters in Economics of Development and, in the same year, several DPRK officials attended a Regional Nuclear Safeguards Training course in Australia.

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22 Karin Lee and Gi Wook Shin, eds., *US-DPRK Educational Exchanges: assessment and future strategy* (Stanford: The Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2011), 12, 22.

23 Charles L Pritchard, John H. Tilelli, and Scott Snyder, “US policy towards the Korean peninsula,” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2010).

24 Lee and Shin, *US-DPRK Educational Exchanges: assessment and future strategy*, 23-24.

At the same time that Australia was cautiously testing out its newly found creative middle power capacities with North Korea, United States policy towards the DPRK was becoming increasingly hawkish and the Agreed Framework was breaking down. Relations between the United States and DPRK hit their nadir in 2002, with President Bush's infamous assertion that North Korea was part of a global 'axis of evil'. Shortly following this announcement, Washington decided to scrap the 1994 Framework Agreement.

The North Korean ambassador tried to convince Australia that the nuclear issue was a bilateral one, but amid increasing outcry regarding North Korean proliferation, the work of many years that had been put into establishing a tenuous relationship between Australia and North Korea was rapidly wound back. Australia joined the United States in viewing North Korea as a state that needed to be contained rather than engaged with, and all Canberra's plans for education and training of North Korean officials were abandoned. In 2003, North Korea withdrew from the Non-proliferation Treaty and in 2004 announced that it had manufactured nuclear weapons. The year 2006 saw a missile launch and nuclear test that led to UNSC Resolution 1718, which Australia supported. Under this resolution, Canberra imposed a range of bilateral sanctions on North Korea, including: further restrictions on DPRK officials in Australia; banning North Korean flagged ships from Australian ports; refusal to issue visas to DPRK citizens and a range of financial sanctions.<sup>25</sup>

In December 2007, the DPRK announced the closure of its embassy in Canberra due to financial troubles. In 2012, reports emerged that Pyongyang was seeking to negotiate terms for the reopening of its embassy, an idea that was only recently quashed by the foreign affairs department in no uncertain terms. Making the announcement following a series of discussions with his counterparts in Washington DC, the foreign minister also announced that Australia would be seeking a tougher line towards the DPRK, seeking to put in place a range of sanctions that would go above and beyond those recommended by the Security Council.<sup>26</sup>

Since 2007, Australian discourse depicting North Korea as a dangerous, outlier state has escalated. In an opinion piece written for *The Daily Telegraph* in 2011, the Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd argued that "North Korea is not an abstract threat. It is real. It is worsening. And it could prove to be our worst nightmare".<sup>27</sup> This reification of the North Korean threat-image leads to a pigeonholing of policy options. The position taken by Australia in this regard closely mirrors that of the United States, yet reflects neither the strategic nor the social reality of Australia's position. Structurally, a more independent and creative Australian response would continue an on-going

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25 Leonid Petrov, "Australia and the DPRK: The Sixty Years of Relationship," Nautilus Policy Forum, <http://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/australia-and-the-dprk-the-sixty-years-of-relationship/>.

26 Enda Curran, "Australia Stalls North Korea Embassy Plan," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 7 2013; Paul Maley, "Bob Carr to get tough with North Korea," *The Australian*, March 25 2013.

27 Kevin Rudd, "North Korean nuclear threat affects us all," *The Daily Telegraph* 2011.

trend within the United States alliance system that has encouraged regional responses to regional issues. As such, while United States policy following the February 2013 nuclear test seems to be to garner support for a hard-line stance against North Korea,<sup>28</sup> a diversification of strategies would better serve the purpose of attempting to find a way to bring North Korea closer to the norms of non-proliferation. Bradley Babson argues that the United States should aim to implement policies that influence the change already taking place in a direction that does not run counter to United States interests:

The U.S. should take actions that will affect the incentives for desirable change and disincentives for undesirable change. In addition, the U.S. should provide political and financial support for activities that will further U.S. goals both bilaterally through official and non-governmental channels, and through complimentary policies and activities of other countries and organizations in multilateral and bilateral frameworks for engagement.<sup>29</sup>

As a minor player in Northeast Asian security matters, Australia (and Australian actors) is unlikely to bring about any significant changes when acting alone. It is the policies of deeply entrenched states such as South Korea and the United States that will make the most difference to security futures in the region. In light of this, a call for greater autonomy by Australia seems counter-intuitive: policy makers argue that it is in coalition with our two allies – Seoul and Washington DC – that Australia should shape its foreign policy. The North Korean issue, however, is one that is deeply entrenched in the historical patterns of threat construction that have developed in the years since the Korean peninsula's division. Taking away the United States security threat, as some analysts argue is necessary, would require more than a simple reversal of current policy. The very existence of external threats bolsters the DPRK regime's legitimacy and strengthens its authoritarian hold on the country. It has no purpose, in the short term, in negotiating a formal peace with the United States, or with the ROK.<sup>30</sup> Australia, on the other hand, has no such baggage and the two countries continue to maintain a formal diplomatic relationship. As recent overtures by the North Koreans regarding the reopening of the Canberra embassy indicate, the regime in Pyongyang does seem to have some interest in continued engagement with Australia. Australia, as a key player in the United States' current pivot towards Asia, and on the back of the successful election as a non-permanent UNSC member, is in a strong position to play an important role in the realization of such engagement frameworks.

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28 Peter Hartcher, "North Korea directs missiles towards Australia," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 24 2013.

29 Bradley Babson, "Transformation and modernization of North Korea: implications for future engagement policy," *Project paper* 2013, no. March 25 (2009), [http://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/Babson\\_Transformation\\_and\\_Modernization\\_of\\_North%20Korea.pdf](http://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/Babson_Transformation_and_Modernization_of_North%20Korea.pdf).

30 B.R. Myers, *The cleanest race: how North Koreans see themselves and why it matters* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2010).

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### **Biographical note**

Danielle Chubb (PhD ANU) is Lecturer in International Relations at Deakin University, Melbourne. Previously, she has worked as a Lecturer at The Australian National University and Hawaii Pacific University and was a Research Fellow at Pacific Forum CSIS. She is author of *Contentious activism and inter-Korean relations* (Columbia University Press, 2014, *forthcoming*).