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Thucydides in Pyongyang: Fear, Honor and Interests in the 1968 *Pueblo* Incident

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Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Paper

Purpose—On January 23, 1968, North Korean naval forces captured a U.S. spy ship, the USS *Pueblo*, off the coast of Wonsan. This incident nearly led to a second Korean War and heightened hostilities between the U.S. and North Korean governments. This article demystifies the strategic thinking of Kim Il Sung's regime and clarifies the reasoning behind Pyongyang's risky undertaking in capturing the *Pueblo* and its crewmen as a rational and pragmatic action.

Design, Methodology, Approach—While the *Pueblo* crisis has been examined by a number of historians, this article, which is based on former Eastern bloc archival documents and North Korean periodicals, uses a multi-causal theoretical framework from an ancient Greek historian, Thucydides, in order to analyze the importance of fear, honor, and interest within North Korea's military culture.

Findings—This article argues that North Korean regime's *fear* of South Korea's imminent economic supremacy and rising Japanese militarism along with defending the *honor* of Kim Il Sung and the DPRK's territorial boundaries and advancing the *interests* of the global revolutionary movement factored greatly into Pyongyang's decision-making process in 1968.

Practical Implications—In analyzing North Korea's seemingly irrational aggression, it is vital to take a multi-causal approach, such as the one provided by Thucydides, into understanding North Korea's past and present actions.

Originality, Value—Rather than arguing the 1968 *Pueblo* crisis as one motivated

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by internal or external concerns, this article posits that the North Korean leadership took a number of concerns into account and acted rationally in their capture of the *Pueblo* spy ship.

Keywords: culture, Kim Il Sung, military, North Korea, *Pueblo* incident

I. Introduction

In his timeless account of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides pinpoints fear, honor, and interest as the causes of military conflict. Although Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* is most often credited as being the birthplace of realist theory in international relations, the ancient Athenian historian also prioritized the more malleable concept of emotion as the driver of war. As Thucydides himself explained, "The subsequent development of our power was originally forced upon us by circumstances; fear was our first motive; afterwards honor, and then interest stepped in."¹ Prominent members of the U.S. government have recently evoked the insights of Thucydides. In 2012, U.S. General Martin Dempsey, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, "Thucydides in the 5th century B.C. said that all strategy is some combination of reaction to fear, honor and interests; and I think all nations act in response to one of those three things."² In 2013, U.S. National Security H.R McMaster wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed, "People fight today for the same reasons Thucydides identified 2,500 years ago: fear, honor and interest."³ Meanwhile, U.S. General James Mattis mentioned the Thucydidean trinitarian analysis in his own confirmation hearing as U.S. Secretary of Defense.⁴ Due to the universal applicability of Thucydides' timeless approach and the near eruption of a second Korean War in the late 1960s, I use fear, honor, and interest as a lens into the causes of the 1968 USS *Pueblo* crisis in which a U.S. intelligence vessel was captured by North Korean armed forces in international waters.

Historians have debated the reasons why North Korean leader Kim Il Sung took a massive risk on January 23, 1968, by capturing the USS *Pueblo* in international waters and detaining the 83 crewmen for 11 months. Many scholars have linked the escalation of the U.S. war effort in Vietnam with the North Korean leader's military adventurism in the late 1960s.⁵ Since the U.S. was bogged down militarily in Southeast Asia, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the official title of North Korea, hereafter DPRK) could afford to be more risky in its inter-Korean context and also assist their North Vietnamese allies by distracting the U.S. on two fronts in Asia. Nonetheless, more recent scholarship has disputed the coordination of events in Vietnam with the heightening of tensions on the Korean peninsula in the late 1960s. For example, historian Mitchell Lerner emphasizes the domestic environment of North Korea in the late 1960s and the need for Kim Il Sung's regime to divert public attention from economic issues by suddenly capturing the U.S. naval ship and creating war hysteria internally.⁶ Historian Balázs Szalontai argues that Kim Il Sung pursued his own self-interested militant strategy during the late 1960s and that the Vietnam War did not influence the North Korean capture of the *Pueblo*.⁷ This article

takes a different approach into examining the causes behind the North Korea's capture of the *Pueblo* and argues that the regime's *fear* of South Korea's imminent economic supremacy and rising Japanese militarism along with defending the *honor* of Kim Il Sung and North Korea's territorial boundaries and advancing the *interests* of the global revolutionary movement factored greatly into Kim Il Sung's decision-making process in 1968.

II. Thucydides' Trinity

Spurred on by Harvard University Professor Graham's Allison idea of the "Thucydides trap," many political scientists have recently evoked the work of Thucydides in regard to great power transition and the fear of a rising China.⁸ However, Thucydides' linkage of honor and interests as also being drivers of warfare has been largely ignored within the field of international relations. Allison's overemphasis on fear has distracted scholars from engaging with Thucydides' three-tiered articulation of honor and interests as also being war igniters. As Professor Albert B. Wolf explains, "Despite the length of Allison's book, its overwhelming emphasis is placed on just one of these three drivers: fear. Insufficient space and attention is paid to great powers' search for honor or status."⁹

Allison's engagement with Thucydides has oversimplified the nuanced and complex nature of *The Peloponnesian War*. In fact, as Lowell Gustafson describes, Allison honed in on only one sentence in Thucydides' massive 600-page book, *The Peloponnesian War*, to describe his argument: "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable." As Gustafson explains, "Important people could portray themselves as intellectually profound by discussing the work of a renowned Harvard professor and a famous author of antiquity, and only had to remember one sentence about war erupting between ruling, fearful Sparta and rising Athens. Seldom has the ability to project erudition come so easily."¹⁰ In other words, evoking Thucydides has become a superficial way to demonstrate one's sophistication and intellectualism. Compressing Thucydides' complex theories of human nature into one sentence is not just oversimplified but dangerous in justifying a confrontational U.S. approach to contemporary China. By engaging with all three of Thucydides' drivers of war, I hope to bring the ancient Greek historian's multi-causal theoretical framework into the forefront of international relations and military history.

One of the criticisms of the "Thucydides trap" theory revolves around the idea that Allison's argument was never applied to a non-Western context. As David Kang and Xinru Ma correctly argue in their article "Thucydides Didn't Live in East Asia," Allison's use of twelve European case studies "has led to an over-expectation that power transitions and the rise and decline of great powers relative to each other are a prime factor for war." Kang and Ma are right to call out Allison's Eurocentrism. This idea that Thucydides only talked about fear-based power transitions as a driver of war fundamentally neglects the wider scope of the ancient Greek historian's work, especially his argument that honor and interests play an equally important role in

starting wars. By condensing all of Thucydides' complexity into one simple sentence, Allison has not only misrepresented the ancient Greek historian's complex theories of the human condition but also invoked a number of other scholars' responses to his book that reiterate his distortion of Thucydides. Nevertheless, as Kang and Ma correctly assert, case studies should go beyond Europe in explaining Thucydides' theories of war origins. In this article, I hope to do that with the 1968 *Pueblo* incident and the broader military culture of the DPRK.

Maritime issues and territorial disputes still factor into the DPRK's foreign policy. As evidenced by the DPRK's bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010, territorial integrity greatly influences Pyongyang's maritime strategy in Northeast Asia. North Korea's state-run media stated that this bombardment was retaliation for South Korea's shelling in the DPRK's waters. The North Korean news agency said the DPRK will "continue to make merciless military attacks with no hesitation if the South Korean enemy dares to invade our sea territory by 0.001mm."¹¹ From capturing Chinese fishermen who entered North Korean waters to claiming Dokdo as DPRK territory, Pyongyang views maritime security as regime security.¹² The origins of this maritime-regime security conflation began during the Cold War era, with crises such as the *Pueblo* incident.

The U.S. State Department in 1968 explained, "North Korea is the most denied of denied areas and the most difficult of all intelligence targets. Estimates of North Korean strength, intentions, and capabilities, therefore, cannot be made with a high degree of confidence."¹³ For the purposes of investigating the history of North Korean foreign relations, Thucydides' theory of fear, honor, and interests as drivers of war dissipates some of the opaqueness of Kim Il Sung's foreign policy in the late 1960s. As internal North Korean archival documents are inaccessible, researchers often look into the archives of Pyongyang's former communist allies, such as Hungary, as ways to gain insight into the regime's mindset. This article uses materials from the North Korean state-run media and newly available Russian, Czechoslovakian, and Romanian archival documents housed digitally at the Wilson Center's North Korea International Documentation Project (NKIDP). Although these Eastern Bloc documents provide valuable assistance to the modern historian in accessing Pyongyang's diplomatic relations, the actual decision-making processes of the often-mysterious North Korean leadership remain little understood without an analytical framework. Thus, the universalism of Thucydides' trinitarian analysis can help demystify Kim Il Sung's reasoning for his armed forces' reckless capture of the *Pueblo* on January 23, 1968. Using Eastern bloc documents and North Korean periodicals, this article uses fear, honor, and interests as a window into the causes of the *Pueblo* crisis from the DPRK leadership's perspective.

III. Fear

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, the DPRK government prided itself on being the more economically superior country on the Korean peninsula. The

Chollima Movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s propelled North Korean industrialization and economic development.¹⁴ However, in the late 1960s, it became more apparent that North Korea's Stalinist economy was beginning to falter while South Korea's capitalist economy was on the rise. A February 9, 1968, Czechoslovakian diplomatic report said, "Today, when it is already clear that the DPRK cannot expect to surpass South Korea economically in the near future—and everything shows the DPRK abandoned these goals for good—the possibility of peaceful unification of the country is disappearing...."¹⁵ Czechoslovakian diplomats noted in 1968 that the North Korean leadership followed "with growing anxiety" South Korea's economic development, which was brought back "from the brink of total collapse" under President Park Chung Hee's policies and stabilized with West German, Japanese, and U.S. investment.¹⁶ This reversal of economic statuses between the two Koreas caused fear north of the DMZ as the Kim Il Sung's regime had to look for a new source of legitimacy in order to retain prestige.

In addition to South Korea's growing economic power, the North Korean leadership also feared rising Japanese militarism. The North Korean ambassador to the Soviet Union told his counterpart in May 1968, "The Japanese authorities are increasing their penetration of South Korea, they are entering into an ever closer conspiracy with the South Korean puppets: the Japanese militarists are preparing plans for war against the DPRK."¹⁷ This fear of a Japanese invasion loomed large in the North Korean consciousness as imperialist Japan had colonized the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945. Due to this recent historical memory, North Korean leadership believed its socialist allies "underestimated the danger of a revival of Japanese militarism."¹⁸ The fear of a rising South Korean economy and a militaristic Japan pushed the North Korean leadership into a more militant direction itself. In 1968, Kim Il Sung forthrightly stated, "We don't want war, but also we are not afraid of it. The people and the army of the DPRK will answer each single action of the enemy with a counter-action and will answer total war with total war."¹⁹

As its Eastern bloc allies understood well, the DPRK's unique political culture developed out of its distinctly anti-colonial heritage. In the 1930s, a majority of the North Korean leadership with Kim Il Sung as its commander fought a protracted guerrilla war against Japanese colonialists in the mountains of Manchuria. This guerrilla fighting experience of its leadership later gave the North Korean state a militant and anti-colonial character.²⁰ In 1968, the East German ambassador to the DPRK said, "Before and during World War II, Korea had been a brutally exploited Japanese colony in which the brutality of the occupiers exceeded that of the German fascists." He continued, "The Korean Workers' Party [KWP, ruling body of the North Korean government] never had any experience of bourgeois democracy, of struggle for the economic rights of the workers, and, in our opinion, is therefore not ready at the present time to either understand or influence the economic struggle of the South Korean workers." He concluded, "The only path in which it is richly experienced is the military one, the path of arms."²¹ As its leaders were guerrilla fighters at their core, the North Korean regime began to tie its legitimacy to the military in the late 1960s. Amid South Korea's growing economic superiority and fear of its own inad-

equacy vis-à-vis Seoul, Pyongyang pursued a militant direction that it was familiar with and in which it had vast experience. Thus, the Kim regime's rash capture of the *Pueblo* and its other insurgent actions in the late 1960s, such as the January 21, 1968, Blue House raid in Seoul by DPRK commandos and the downing of a U.S. EC-121 aircraft in 1969 by North Korean pilots in open air space, begin to make sense within this framework of fear and military-oriented legitimacy.

In the late 1960s, the North Korean government pushed new rhetoric that called for the violent reunification of the Korean peninsula. Czechoslovakian diplomats in Pyongyang noticed in 1968 that the slogan "peaceful and democratic unification of the country" disappeared from domestic propaganda and that "the main source and cause of persistent tension on the Korean Peninsula is the fact that Korea remains a divided country, and that strong South Korean and American armies, with modern arms, stand in the South."²² Perhaps envious of North Vietnam's drive to reunify their own country, Kim Il Sung began pushing a new domestic propaganda campaign in January 1967 that urged the population to reunify the peninsula within the lifetime of the present generation.

The Romanian embassy in the DPRK also became increasingly nervous in 1968 that North Korean aggression would lead to war on the peninsula. A day after the capture of the *Pueblo*, a Romanian diplomatic report said, "We believe that the provocations which have emerged recently are attributable to the North Koreans entirely and in this way they put into practice the motto: 'let us be ready and take initiative to welcome the forthcoming great revolutionary event of the reunification of the motherland.'"²³ North Korea's capture of the *Pueblo* perplexed foreign observers that questioned why such a small nation dared to once again draw the powerful giant across the Pacific into a military conflict it was bound to lose. However, North Korea's loss of economic legitimacy vis-à-vis South Korea provoked fear among its leadership that the regime may soon lose inter-Korean legitimacy as a whole. This fear activated North Korea's insurgent character and made the regime pursue a more aggressive strategy, such as the *Pueblo* incident, in order to boost its new military-oriented legitimacy.

Despite being an absolute autocracy, Kim Il Sung's North Korea still depended on a degree of popular support. Amid economic liberalization measures in other parts of the Eastern Bloc, the regime in Pyongyang most likely felt its own inter-Korean legitimacy slip away vis-à-vis Seoul's growing international profile during the late 1960s. As a divided nation, the DPRK's political culture depended on peninsular legitimacy. Thus, the capture of the *Pueblo* can be tied back to Pyongyang's own economic insecurities vis-à-vis South Korea in the late 1960s and its subsequent pursuit of militancy that was derived from its leadership's guerrilla experiences during the Japanese colonial period.

Thucydides referenced the ancient Syracusan general Hermocrates as saying, "Nobody is driven into war by ignorance, and no one who thinks he will gain anything from it is deterred by fear ... when there is mutual fear, men think twice before they make aggressions upon one another."²⁴ In 1968, North Korea toed the fine line between military skirmish and all-out war. Echoing Hermocrates' quote above, the

leadership in Pyongyang understood an all-out war would destroy their regime but also assumed that the U.S. did not want a two-front war in Asia with conflicts in both Vietnam and Korea. Thus, the DPRK's detention of the *Pueblo* crewmen was opportunistic given the U.S. military's limitations in 1968 and the growing anti-war sentiments within the U.S. population at the time. On this occasion, mutual fear may have saved the Asia-Pacific region from another devastating war.

IV. Honor

In 1968, North Korea political culture took on an increasingly sycophantic nature. Czechoslovakian diplomats explained, "Especially in the last year, the personality cult of Kim Il Sung reached unprecedented magnitude. Attributes attached to his name often run several lines. Kim Il Sung is credited with all successes and victories past and present without regard to historical facts."²⁵ By 1968, Kim Il Sung had cemented his place as absolute authority of the DPRK and created one of the most pervasive personality cults in the communist world. Due to the declining economic conditions of the DPRK in the late 1960s, the cultish leader worship of Kim Il Sung rested upon his supposed greatness as an anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter in the 1930s and military leader who once brought the U.S. military to a standstill in the Korean War. In other words, his honor as the "Great Leader" rested on his military prowess. As Thucydides explained, "Yet to me personally, war brings honor ... for I believe that the sense of a man's own interest will quicken his interest in the prosperity of the state."²⁶

According to the founding DPRK Constitution of 1948, the capital of the DPRK was officially Seoul.²⁷ The shift from Seoul to Pyongyang as the DPRK's official capital city was only changed in the amended 1972 constitution.²⁸ Thus, the military adventurism of the DPRK in January 1968 makes sense within this propagandistic context of Kim Il Sung as the symbol of a unified Korea. Since the DPRK government officially claimed the entire Korean peninsula as its territory and Kim Il Sung as "the leader of forty million Korean people," the honor of defending the DPRK's sovereignty intertwined with the cultish leader worship of the "Great Leader." As Fyodor Tertitskiy explains, Kim Il Sung's personality cult grew extensively in April and May 1967, which changed the DPRK "from a Soviet-style relatively moderate dictatorship into the rather grotesque autocracy North Korea is now known to be."²⁹ This growth in power of Kim Il Sung's personality cult after 1967 seemed to have an immediate effect on the DPRK's foreign policy, thereby making Pyongyang more militaristic and aggressive in its pursuit of advancing its notion of national sovereignty.

Despite the social control and autocratic nature of North Korea in 1968, Kim Il Sung still needed to reinforce his domestic authority by occasionally demonstrating his military skills and ability to defend the DPRK's territorial integrity. As later evidenced by the assassination of Romanian autocrat and Kim Il Sung's personal friend Nicolae Ceausescu, the demands of an isolated population should not be completely ignored and authoritarian regimes need to have a source of legitimacy from which

to draw from during times of internal economic distress. In other words, the daily sacrifices of the citizenry need to be validated. For Kim Il Sung's government, as its economic development stalled in the late 1960s, this legitimacy source began to be the military and the regime's ability to defend the North Korean people from foreign forces.

Thus, the *Pueblo* incident of January 1968 was tied to Kim Il Sung's newfound legitimacy source of military honor. As Eastern bloc allies noted in the late 1960s, the North Korean leadership officially followed a parallel development line in both the economic and military sectors but the build-up of national defense gradually started to overshadow the economic concerns. The East German ambassador to the DPRK explained in mid-February 1968, "Retreat from the path of [becoming] an economic model and [of pursuing] peaceful unification had also been foreshadowed by giving new content to the old policy of parallel development of the DPRK's economy and defense." The ambassador added, "The whole economy is being effectively subordinated to armament requirements—an area in which the DPRK has a lead over South Korea, which only plans to build its first armament plants this year."³⁰ Kim Il Sung could not fulfill all the material necessities of his countrymen but would protect the nation from foreign invasion. This was the message broadcasted to the North Korean population from Pyongyang in 1968.

The events of January 1968 triggered an atmosphere of paranoia in North Korea and made many in the DPRK believe a war would breakout on the peninsula at any moment. As a February 27, 1968, editorial in the *Rodong Sinmun*, the primary newspaper of the KWP, proclaimed, "Let's fight against the U.S. imperialists' frenzied war-fighting measures and further strengthen the nation's defense power." The editorial explained, "Now in our country, the systematic aggression of U.S. imperialism and their provocations are becoming more and more serious, and the situation is very tense."³¹ North Korean propaganda depicted the *Pueblo* incident as a clear sign of U.S. aggression and intention to invade the DPRK. Czechoslovakian diplomats explained that North Korean propaganda "makes every effort to convince the DPRK citizens and the world that the situation is quite analogous to that just before the beginning of the Korean War." Slogans, such as those urging citizens to build the DPRK into an "invincible fortress of steel," circulated in North Korean propaganda and the unavailability of war was theoretically vindicated, as trepidation of military conflict with the imperialists was a signal of bourgeois pacifism and socialist revisionism.³²

One of the major factors in North Korea's unwillingness to release the *Pueblo* crewmen was the leadership's belief that Kim Il Sung's honor, and by extension the honor of the nation itself, was affronted when the *Pueblo* supposedly crossed into the DPRK's territorial waters on January 23, 1968. Based on a request from the North Korean government, representatives from the Soviet Union told U.S. officials in *Pueblo* negotiations that the crisis could partially be settled if the "national dignity of the DPRK is not insulted by making it responsible for the incident."³³ As an absolute autocracy with a pervasive personality cult, the Kim family regime was extremely concerned with the notion of honor and pride. To suggest the DPRK was

a maverick aggressor was to slander the “Great Leader” Kim Il Sung himself. As Czechoslovakian diplomats pointed out in early February 1968, “[North] Korean propaganda places an equal sign between Kim Il Sung and Korea, while Korea is presented as an example for other countries.”³⁴ Thus, the North Korean government took national honor and pride very seriously in its foreign relations as it was directly tied to the personality cult of Kim Il Sung.

The Soviets strongly urged the DPRK government in February 1968 to release the *Pueblo* crewmen and explained to the North Koreans “that by adopting tough measures for defense of its sovereignty, the DPRK has [already] politically won.” By releasing the prisoners, the Soviets “told [the] Korean comrades that such a step from their side could not be interpreted as weakness; on the contrary, it would be appreciated everywhere as a show of a responsible approach, and it would strengthen even more the international position of the DPRK.”³⁵ The North Koreans did not follow this advice from their Soviet allies and instead held onto the crewmen for ten more months and subjected them to numerous torture sessions and propaganda photo-ops. The North Koreans only released the crewmen after they had publicly declared in front of state-run media that they had violated the sovereignty of the DPRK and the U.S. government admitted to crossing into their territorial waters.³⁶ The U.S. government underestimated the importance of national dignity and pride to the Kim family regime and may have prolonged the suffering of the crewmen by not publicly apologizing to the DPRK government earlier. While this false admission would have been an early propaganda coup for the North Koreans, the crewmen endured months of torture and harsh conditions as a result of the U.S. government’s inability to do so sooner.

During the domestic economic volatility in 1968, the regime’s ability to repel foreign intervention and Western imperialist aggression bolstered the North Korean masses’ support for Kim Il Sung’s leadership. North Korea’s capture of the *Pueblo* crewmen signaled to the domestic audience that violations of the DPRK’s territorial integrity would not be tolerated, which evoked a militant fervor among the DPRK’s population. As the East German ambassador in Pyongyang explained in a March 4, 1968, letter, “The most significant element of the current domestic situation in the DPRK is the creation, respectively fueling, of an all-out war psychosis among the population. Given their limited sources of information, average citizens must arrive at the conclusion that war is imminent in the very immediate future.”³⁷ While the U.S. government confirmed that the *Pueblo* never entered the DPRK’s territorial waters, Pyongyang insisted that the U.S. spy ship had illegally entered their waters and thus violated their national sovereignty. As a declassified CIA document from January 23, 1968, explained, “The closest point of approach [of the *Pueblo*] to the North Korean coast was to be 13 nautical miles (the Koreans claim territorial waters of 12 nautical miles).”³⁸ In 1968, North Korea’s insistence on its territorial waters may have seemed absurd to U.S. policymakers. The same CIA document noted, “This incident points up North Korea’s constant concern over possible border violations—heightened in this case by direct U.S. involvement.” However, as a small divided nation with a stagnant economy, the regime’s emphasis on national security

and borders was tied to Kim Il Sung's personal honor as a supposed protector of the North Korean people.

In negotiations with the U.S. Rear Admiral John V. Smith in Panmunjom on January 24, 1968, North Korea's Major General Pak Chung Kook referred to the *Pueblo's* violation of the DPRK's territorial waters as a "piratical act." Pak told Smith, "I strongly demand that you frankly admit the violations, provocations, and aggressive acts committed by your side in the demilitarized zone and in our coastal waters."³⁹ The DPRK government's demand for an official U.S. apology tied back to Pyongyang's constant assertion of its national sovereignty. As the official U.S. cryptologic history of the *Pueblo* incident explains, the DPRK's attack was a "deliberate act" and "the North Koreans were prepared to face a period of sharply heightened tensions" as a result of their aggression.⁴⁰ Thus, the *Pueblo* incident seems to have been a diplomatic crisis manufactured by Kim Il Sung to mobilize the North Korean public into a revolutionary fervor and militant anti-American zeal. By supposedly crossing into the DPRK's territorial waters, Pyongyang depicted the *Pueblo* as a genuine example of U.S. imperialism and war provocations.

North Korea's daringness to prolong negotiations with the U.S. government over the release of the *Pueblo* crewmen indicates that the regime saw themselves as operating from a position of strength. In a March 13, 1968, meeting with Romanian diplomats in Pyongyang, the President of the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK Baek Nam-un said, "If the United States dared to attack us, we look forward to it, because this will mark their defeat and their definitive expulsion from our land."⁴¹ This type of bravado was partially performance but also indicative of North Korean overconfidence in their sociopolitical system.

While the DPRK military was undeniably weaker than that of the U.S. in 1968, the North Koreans were equipped with the ideology of Kim Il Sung. The "Great Leader" himself even admitted as such at the 20th Anniversary of the Korean People's Army (KPA) when he noted, "Political-moral superiority provides the opportunity to defeat even an enemy which is better equipped technologically."⁴² While Kim Il Sung's ideology provided no actual protection from gunfire, the political indoctrination and pervasiveness of the personality cult was so complete by 1968 that North Korean soldiers may have genuinely felt the morally inferior U.S. armed forces would lose in a second Korean War, especially since it was bogged down in Vietnam and losing its battle to the Vietnamese Communists.

The servicemen and servicewomen of the Korean People's Army also became tied to the cultish leader worship of Kim Il Sung. Defense Minister Kim Jangbong said in his speech at the 20th Anniversary of the KPA, "Our Korean People's Army has solidly armored itself with the unitary ideology of our party. She is fiercely loyal only to the great revolutionary ideology of Comrade Kim Il Sung, our respected and beloved leader, and does not know of any other ideology."⁴³ A July 1968 article from the North Korean magazine *Chollima* on the *Pueblo* crisis explains, "Even the brutal U.S. imperialists would not dare to fight the heroic People's Army again, whose hearts are filled with devotion to their Great Leader. If the bastards forget this lesson and rush into it again, it will be death and corpses."⁴⁴ The U.S. government's inability

to understand the North Korean concept of military honor and its linkage to Kim Il Sung's personality cult most likely impeded Washington's ability to negotiate the early release of the *Pueblo* crewmen.

V. Interests

Amid the Sino-Soviet split of the late 1960s, the leadership in Pyongyang adroitly navigated the complexities of this ideological conflict. One of the ways in which the North Korean regime did so was by generating the idea of a new unified anti-imperialist front that consisted of small revolutionary countries.⁴⁵ While Moscow and Beijing quarreled over the role of the rightful torchbearer of international communism, the North Korean leadership saw itself, Cuba, and North Vietnam as being the three-headed vanguard of world revolution and sought to create a formal international organization under the rubric of "Parties of small countries." The Soviet Foreign Affairs Ministry explained in 1968, "In the opinion of the Korean leaders the DPRK, Cuba, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam [official title of North Vietnam, DRV], who stand 'at the front lines of the revolutionary anti-imperialist struggle,' should become the nucleus of such an organization."⁴⁶ Thus, North Korea's self-interests in 1968 were linked to the struggles of the Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions. As the Soviets explained, "Kim Il Sung is promoting a 'strategy' of fighting imperialism with the forces of 'small revolutionary' countries which are to 'tear American imperialism apart' everywhere."⁴⁷ North Korea's capture of the *Pueblo* was very much tied to the war in Vietnam as well as an attempt to distract the U.S. from interfering in the Cuban revolution as it once did at the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961.⁴⁸ Evoking Thucydides' quote, "For true expediency is only this—to have an enduring sense of gratitude towards good allies for their services, while we do not neglect our own immediate interest," the *Pueblo* incident benefited both Pyongyang and its two revolutionary allies in the Third World.⁴⁹

In the summer of 1965, Kim Il Sung met North Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Politburo member Le Thanh Nghi in Pyongyang. During their conversation, the North Korean leader offered large amounts of DPRK assistance to the Vietnamese and explained, "We are determined to provide aid to Vietnam and we do not view such aid as constituting a heavy burden on North Korea. We will strive to ensure that Vietnam will defeat the American imperialists, even if it means that North Korea's own economic plan will be delayed."⁵⁰ In that same summer, Kim told a visiting Chinese Friendship Delegation, "If the American imperialists fail in Vietnam, then they will collapse in Asia." He added, "We are supporting Vietnam as if it were our own war. When Vietnam has a request, we will disrupt our own plans in order to try to meet their demands."⁵¹ Kim Il Sung also offered to send "volunteer [military] forces" to assist the Vietnamese Communists but Ho Chi Minh declined this request for unknown reasons.⁵²

Thus, while there is no smoking gun document that directly links the *Pueblo* crisis to solidarity with the Vietnamese Communists, the rhetoric from the leadership

in Pyongyang indicated that the North Korean government saw the war in Vietnam as a yardstick to measure one's revolutionary commitment to anti-imperialism. Only a few weeks after capturing the *Pueblo*, the North Korean government released a statement that said, "The Korean people are effectively prepared and always ready to fight alongside the Vietnamese people, whenever the Vietnamese people need it."⁵³ Capturing the *Pueblo* was Kim Il Sung's attempt to further the global dismantlement of U.S. imperialism and assist the Vietnamese Communists on his own accord. As Bill Streifer highlighted in his 2016 *North Korean Review* article based on newly declassified CIA materials, North Korea's capture of the *Pueblo* "was probably aimed at 'generating diversionary pressures on the U.S. at a time when Communist forces in South Vietnam are poised to launch a major country-wide offensive.'"⁵⁴

The North Koreans also took great interest in the continuation of the Cuban revolution. In 1968, diplomatic relations between the two countries were so close that Cuban Deputy Premier Raul Castro said, "If someone is interested in what the Cubans' opinion is on certain questions, he should ask the [North] Koreans." He continued, "And if someone asks what [North] Korea's standpoint may be in certain cases, he can safely ask the Cubans about that. Our views are completely identical in everything."⁵⁵ Meanwhile, in a speech at a 1968 North Korean industrial exhibition in Havana, Cuba's Minister of Foreign Trade Marcelo Fernandez "referred to [North] Korea as the sole country besides Cuba where there was a spirit of real internationalism."⁵⁶ Pyongyang reciprocated this friendly rhetoric in 1968 by stressing the correctness of the Cuban government's revolutionary line and called Fidel Castro "the great leader of the Cuban revolution and the Cuba people."⁵⁷ A Soviet diplomat in the DPRK said "bringing the armed struggle against American imperialism to the forefront is typical of the position of the KWP and the Cuban Communist Party."⁵⁸ In addition to rhetorical solidarity, North Korea reportedly sent a group of 700 volunteers with weapons and equipment to Cuba.⁵⁹ To borrow the phrase typically reserved for Sino-North Korean solidarity, relations between Cuba and the DPRK were truly "as close as lips to teeth" in the late 1960s. The North Korean leadership attached a sort of ideological romanticism to Cuba as it was a small island nation vigorously opposing U.S. imperialism in the Western hemisphere. Within the North Korean consciousness, the Cubans were brave revolutionaries that also occupied an imaginary frontline in the global battle against U.S. imperialism.

Beginning in 1955, North Korean leadership proclaimed an attachment to the *Juche* philosophy, which translated directly from Sino-Korean characters means master of one's body and is typically rendered in English-language scholarship as self-reliance, subjectivity, or self-importance. Some scholars have used North Korea's nationalistic ideology of *Juche* as a way to explain DPRK's self-imposed reclusiveness and isolation.⁶⁰ However, this explanation of North Korea's *Juche* ideology neglects the massive importance that Pyongyang historically tied to international revolutionary movements, especially those in Vietnam and Cuba. As Kim Il Sung told an East German official in April 1968, "We talk a lot about self-reliance, and many people misunderstand that. We don't ask, however, for self-reliance outside the socialist camp. We ask for self-reliance in the interest of consolidating the unity of the socialist

camp.” Kim added, “We ask for self-reliance in the interest of the education of our people. Some countries want us to follow them blindly, but we cannot do that.”⁶¹

During the late 1960s, the North Korean perception of its self-interests was linked to the successes of the Vietnamese and Cuban revolutions. The North Korean philosophy of “self-reliance” was not a nationalistic policy *per se* if these two other respective anti-imperialist nations are taken into account. North Korean newspapers, speeches, and financial resources both devoted a significant amount to the Vietnamese and Cuban struggles for autonomy. This reflects an internationalist anti-imperialist attitude, not one of nationalistic self-interests. Thus, North Korean subjectivity during the late 1960s included Vietnam and Cuba. As Cuban Foreign Minister Raul Roa said at a January 1968 Cuba–DPRK friendship rally, “There existed a great triangle in world politics, and this was Cuba-Vietnam-Korea. These three countries were the sole true manifestations of armed revolution.”⁶²

North Korea’s capture of the *Pueblo* seems to have been a way to divert American attention from the war in Vietnam, resist U.S. suppression of the Cuban revolution, and perhaps provoke the U.S. military into a two-front war in Asia. North Korea’s military expenditure in 1968 certainly signaled that the leadership was preparing for war. In 1968, the Soviet Foreign Affairs Ministry scoffed at the massive allocation of North Korea’s state resources to its national defense. A Soviet report on the DPRK’s military stated, “According to unofficial data, in 1968 the actual expenses for military purposes exceeded 40% of the state budget.”⁶³ As discussed in the previous section on honor, North Korean overconfidence and militant zeal was a product of Kim Il Sung’s ubiquitous personality cult. The sycophancy and martial vigor embedded within this cultish leader worship resulted in a massive garrison state. This garrison state was going to be wielded by Pyongyang for its own self-interests and to also assist its revolutionary comrades in Vietnam and Cuba. To the leadership in Pyongyang, small anti-imperialist nations were the only true vanguard of world revolution that backed up its radical rhetoric with militant actions.

VI. Conclusion

The Western media often labels North Korean leaders as “irrational,” “crazy,” or mad.”⁶⁴ However, when critical analysis is applied to situations from Pyongyang’s perspective, seemingly irrational actions such as the 1968 capture of the *Pueblo* can be seen as logical and coherent. Thucydides intended his work to be “a possession for all time” and his insights have informed the likes of Thomas Hobbes, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and contemporary U.S. political and military leaders.⁶⁵ While Thucydides most likely would have never predicted a state as draconian as the DPRK would develop, his theoretical insights into the human condition and national interests allow the modern scholar to grasp onto the timeless applicability of fear, honor, and interests. Much like the ancient Athenians and Spartans, the North Koreans are no different when it comes to its actions and these three modes of analysis can explain most, if not all, of the regime’s decisions. In addition, as the U.S. and North

Korean leaderships currently negotiate the terms of Pyongyang's denuclearization, the errors of the past and the U.S. government's inability to understand the DPRK perspective should be taken into account.

Ultimately, all-out war did not erupt on the Korean Peninsula during the late 1960s. Thus, Thucydides' multi-causal framework of fear, honor, and interests falls a bit short in its application to the *Pueblo* incident. Pyongyang's bellicose rhetoric and militant zeal during this time period may seem like it was mere propaganda. However, in the context of absolute autocracies such as the DPRK, this mobilization of emotions could have led directly to military conflict. Internal observations of the DPRK after the *Pueblo* crisis indicate that paranoia and panic permeated throughout North Korea. As the Romanian embassy explained, "A state of general tension prevails in Pyongyang; troop movements and neighborhood anti-air defense drills continue; night alarm drills using planes and floodlights are intensifying; in Pyongyang and in the suburbs, anti-air bunkers from the Korean War have been restored and new bunkers have been built between apartment buildings and next to every single household."⁶⁶ Without a system of checks and balances, absolute autocracies such as Kim Il Sung's North Korea can become so entangled in emotions-based mobilization campaigns that they extend into full-on military conflicts. With power concentrated in the hands of a single strongman, fighting wars over emotions may seem superficial and irrational but in the context of absolute autocracies, they can quickly become the main drivers of military conflict. As contemporary negotiations drag on between Washington and Pyongyang regarding North Korea's nuclear development, understanding the character of the DPRK's system is essential for U.S. foreign policy.

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