



***Countering DPRK  
Proliferation: Leveraging  
Old Tools to Meet New  
Threats***

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# Countering DPRK Proliferation: Leveraging Old Tools to Meet New Threats

By Army Major Erik Stanfield

*No threat poses as grave a danger to our security and well-being as the potential use of nuclear weapons and materials by irresponsible states or terrorists... Our commitment to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is rooted in the profound risks posed by North Korean weapons development and proliferation.*

*U.S. President Barack Obama<sup>1</sup>*

*Covert action is only one of the tools of foreign policy, but it is not a negligible one: in certain conditions it may be decisive. It is not an option to be chosen lightly, but in the absence of such an option a global power may be doomed to impotence.*

*Walter Laqueur<sup>2</sup>*

The proliferation and use of nuclear weapons remain a credible and growing threat to the United States, its international partners, and its interests. Legitimate concerns still linger from the traditional discussion of the five declared nuclear-armed nation states—Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, and the U.S.—as well as nuclear armed, non-signatory states to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)—India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea—competing within the construct of conventional norms of armed conflict.<sup>3</sup> Despite Iran’s NPT membership and July 2015 multilateral nuclear agreement, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, U.S. officials report “no observable alteration of Iran’s pursuit of its core regional activities,” leading some analysts to speculate Tehran has continued nuclear development in hopes of redefining the Near East regional power balance.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in addition to ignoring international attempts at nonproliferation, North Korea continues to challenge regional stability through blatant defiance of international norms on nuclear testing, demonstrated through five nuclear tests since 2006.<sup>5</sup>

Having recognized the need to adapt to the evolving threat, the Department of Defense (DOD) recently made innovative changes to contribute to the U.S. counterproliferation strategy. Specifically, a presidential memorandum signed August 4, 2016, transferred responsibility for planning and coordinating DOD counterproliferation efforts from U.S. Strategic Command to U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) in order to assume a more aggressive,

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transregional counterproliferation posture.<sup>6</sup> Developing an effective national counterproliferation strategy will require other U.S. government departments, bureaus, and agencies to follow DOD's example of adapting to meet the exceedingly complex threat. Government entities must search their organizational "toolkits" for capabilities and authorities not currently utilized to their fullest potential. The application of covert action (CA) provides one such strategic opportunity.

This essay posits that an effective U.S. counterproliferation strategy necessitates a new covert action campaign to compliment overt policy and efforts. If properly implemented and de-conflicted with current efforts, a covert action campaign would provide counterproliferation policy options that other government lines of effort have failed to deliver. Though the strategic utility of covert action could be argued across a variety of current counterproliferation challenges, this essay proposes a campaign limited to socio-political influence within the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The first section summarizes national counterproliferation policy and the political context of covert action against DPRK. The second highlights constraints to consider given the current policy. The third proposes viable policy options for a DPRK covert action campaign. The final section concludes.

### **U.S. Counterproliferation Policy**

Determining an effective contribution for covert action within the national counterproliferation strategy first requires a clear understanding of the current U.S. policy guiding those efforts. Though no such comprehensive guidance has been made publicly available by the current administration, the U.S. counterproliferation policy towards DPRK can be synthesized from two primary sources: 1) international proliferation treaties and diplomatic engagements, and 2) public comments and diplomatic efforts by the U.S. president, specifically targeting DPRK proliferation.

Over the last 50 years, the U.S. has adhered to, at some level, numerous international treaties and diplomatic agreements on nuclear proliferation. In addition to various bilateral agreements with Russia, the U.S. is signatory to at least six key international treaties addressing nuclear proliferation or its use.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, though the U.S. is not signatory to the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, President Barack Obama has consistently pressured Congress to ratify the treaty throughout his tenure. Despite the president's attempts, Congress' reluctance to accept the terms of the treaty highlights the pervasive desire in Washington to maintain a U.S. nuclear arsenal and the right to use it.<sup>8</sup> In aggregate, these treaties illustrate the current, overarching U.S. policy on nuclear proliferation: prevent the spread and use of nuclear weapons globally while preserving the U.S.' sovereign right to employ nuclear weapons, if necessary.

Secondly, policy insights can be drawn from comments and diplomatic actions taken by the Obama administration purposely aimed at countering proliferation by DPRK. In general, many characterize the administration's foreign policy approach as non-interventionist—demonstrated by the consistent practice of diplomatic engagement and economic sanctions rather than more direct options such as the use of military force.<sup>9</sup> Language in the 2015 National Security Strategy illustrates this pattern, where President Obama acknowledges "the profound

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risks posed by North Korean weapons development and proliferation,” yet warns of the potential for the spiral of hostilities: “North Korean provocation and tensions in the East and South China Seas are reminders of the risks of escalation.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, despite the continuance of highly-publicized nuclear testing and aggressive rhetoric from Pyongyang, President Obama has taken no direct, overt action against DPRK.<sup>11</sup> President Obama effectively summarized his counterproliferation policy towards DPRK during an op-ed in early 2016: “The United States will continue working with allies and partners for the complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner.”<sup>12</sup> The policy seeks to counteract a nuclear DPRK, but not at the expense of open armed conflict.

### CA Campaign Constraints

The policy review above provides some insight into the political appetite for covert action as a viable counterproliferation tool against DPRK, or more accurately, it provides some indication of actions that would not be considered viable under current policy. William Daugherty emphasizes the importance of tailoring covert action to national policy goals while recognizing the need for restraint: “...covert action can be, and often is, effective when it is employed within the limits of its capabilities and in support of established overt policies.”<sup>13</sup> Unquestionably, the overt policy to counter nuclear proliferation by DPRK exists, which begs the question: What does current policy not support?

Applicable treaties and public comments by U.S. officials indicate little tolerance for direct intervention—and even less appetite for the use of coercive force—predicated on the legitimate risk of an inadvertent escalation of hostilities with DPRK. Mark Lowenthal delineates the range of potential actions in what he termed the “covert action ladder,” spanning from nonviolent, deniable operations to violent operations with a high risk of exposure to the sponsor.<sup>14</sup> Using Lowenthal’s model as a framework to evaluate counterproliferation options against DPRK suggests covert activities such as paramilitary operations and government coups are incongruent with current policy goals, based on the inherent necessity of violence in the conduct of those actions.<sup>15</sup> Sabotage, however, rests in the center of the ladder, indicating that it should not be excluded from consideration, but its employment should minimize the use of violence and risk of exposure.

Additionally, other covert activities not specifically addressed on Lowenthal’s ladder must also be screened against policy objections prior to serious consideration for use against DPRK. For example, recent public sentiment on U.S. involvement in rendition, detention, and interrogation (RDI) operations has spurred Washington to publicly and legally denounce their use by the United States.<sup>16</sup> Though a similar RDI campaign within counterproliferation could yield valuable results operationally—evidenced by informed rebuttals against public backlash from senior intelligence officials with direct insight into recent successful RDI programs<sup>17</sup>—the use of such techniques exceed the level of violence and direct intervention supported by the American populace, Washington policy, and U.S. law.

### CA Campaign Design

Considering national policy goals and constraints, several opportunities emerge for covert action to complement current counterproliferation efforts against DPRK. The intent of this section is not to proscribe specific operational methods or geographic targets, but rather provide a campaign framework to guide the execution of covert action on the Korean peninsula. Ideally, any action recommended within this proposed plan would follow the lessons of historical covert action successes by leveraging and amplifying existing local movements, communication mediums, and narratives that correspond with overt U.S. policy goals.

First, the objective of the campaign must align with overt policy and be clearly identified: prevent further development, testing, or use of nuclear weapons by DPRK. Though the “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” stands as a clearly stated objective of Washington,<sup>18</sup> it is important to recognize that such a lofty goal exceeds the scope and intent of the covert action campaign proposed here, and as such cannot be considered an attainable end state. Rolling back existing nuclear stockpiles or delivery systems would require substantial diplomatic, economic, and potentially military action, on scale with ongoing arms reduction efforts with Iran and Russia. However, influencing further proliferation and testing by DPRK sits firmly in the covert action wheelhouse, and must remain the central focus of effort throughout the campaign.

Furthermore, achieving the stated objective—or even measuring progress—will require patience by operational staff and legislative overseers. Roy Godson asserts this point on a more general level: “to succeed, covert action should usually be conceived as a very long-term proposition.”<sup>19</sup> Pyongyang’s paranoia over intervention by foreign actors and authoritarian control of public information access qualifies DPRK as a “hard target” for U.S. intelligence collection and covert activities. Operational planning, budgeting, recruitment, and employment will therefore take more time than comparable activities in semi-permissive environments where covert infrastructure has been developed over years of U.S. immersion. Once initiated, even more time must be allowed to produce desired results, much of which will be inherently difficult to measure or clearly attribute to U.S. influence.

In order to achieve this objective, the campaign should seek to propagate three strategic messages within DPRK: the geopolitical cost of nuclear armament, health risks of nuclear testing and use, and DPRK’s inability to develop an effective nuclear program.

***Nuclear armament is too costly.*** The covert action campaign should seek to leverage this first narrative to amplify criticism and fear likely already fomenting within select areas of DPRK society. In general, the message asserts that the costs of a nuclear armed DPRK exceeds the benefits, both internationally and domestically. The obvious geopolitical risk stems from the threat of preemptive strikes by regional states that feel existentially threatened (such as Japan) or retaliatory actions taken by the U.S. and its allies following an incident of nuclear aggression. Domestically, the covert influence message must highlight the enormous financial costs of nuclear research and armament. South Korean analysts estimate DPRK’s nuclear program consumes \$1.1 billion to \$3.2 billion annually, creating significant strain on a populace already burdened by abject poverty.<sup>20</sup> Most importantly, the message should seek to highlight the reality

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that many of the international sanctions suffocating the DPRK economy directly resulted from Pyongyang's nuclear policies. If the administration were to abandon some of those policies, diplomatic talks on the easing of those sanctions could follow, which would in turn revitalize the DPRK economy and once again allow foreign aid into the country.

***Nuclear armament is unsafe.*** The purpose of this message is to foment doubt and fear in the safety of the DPRK's nuclear research and testing program. The key messaging theme would be the significant, legitimate health risk posed by nuclear research and testing to the civilian population and government workers involved in the tests. The message could highlight actual incidents that have occurred involving the risk of radioactive exposure, such as the failure to maintain adequate water supply for reactor cooling at the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center in early 2014.<sup>21</sup> Though open-source reporting indicated that facility personnel were able to repair the cooling system and prevent the release of radioactive material, the incident provides tangible evidence of the health risks inherent in nuclear testing. The covert action campaign should seek to emphasize the occurrence of similar incidents and their potential consequences, information that DPRK officials effectively screen through tight censorship of state media. The campaign should also emphasize specific effects and statistics of radiation exposure such as cancer, pregnancy complications, and fatalities. By increasing public awareness and highlighting incidents of exposure, the populace may come to realize the real health risks associated with DPRK's nuclear aspirations.

***Effective nuclear armament is unattainable.*** The third covert campaign message should instill doubt in the feasibility of DPRK developing an effective, functional nuclear arsenal. The intent of this message is to create the perception—or again, to amplify extant perceptions where possible—that nuclear research and testing by DPRK will inevitably fail. Similar to the health risks of nuclear testing, this line of effort should highlight legitimate problems in the nuclear testing cycle that are otherwise withheld from DPRK citizens, such as botched rocket tests or failing to develop solid rocket fuel as promised by Pyongyang. However, in addition to more passive covert influence efforts, the selective use of sabotage would essentially fabricate new instances of failure and significantly enhance the effectiveness of the intended narrative. As outlined in the previous section, sabotage that requires a high degree of direct intervention and risk of violence must be avoided. Rather, more indirect approaches must be employed to minimize the risk of escalating hostilities, such as the alleged disruption of Iranian uranium-enrichment plants by the malicious computer worm, Stuxnet in 2010.<sup>22</sup>

In order to propagate these strategic messages, the covert action campaign should target two specific demographics. First, the principal target of the campaign should be influencing the civilian population inside the country. Legitimate grievances such as widespread poverty and President Kim Jong-Un's oppressive regime prime the DPRK populace to be more receptive to propaganda messages criticizing the administrations' nuclear policies. Though citizens hold no direct democratic input into national politics, inciting discontent provides an inroad for further recruitment and covert infrastructure development in the future, to include improved access and placement in the second target demographic.

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The campaign should also seek to influence nuclear scientific and academic communities. Nuclear sciences and academia provide the talent-pool from which to draw organic technical expertise to support DPRK's nuclear agenda, and developing assets within that community would provide access and placement to critical portions of the nuclear development pathway. In addition to the inherent value of actionable intelligence on the inner workings of the nuclear program, scientists and academics—if aligned with the U.S. covert action messaging plan—could provide a skilled, legitimate mouthpiece to further broadcast anti-nuclear sentiment inside DPRK.

In addition to U.S. intelligence community infrastructure traditionally employed to execute the proposed covert action outlined above, current policy provides significant room for USSOCOM support to such a campaign. The use of select forces within USSOCOM—both specially trained and legally authorized to participate in Title 50 activities<sup>23</sup>—directly aligns with current DOD counterproliferation strategy. Synchronizing DOD efforts with other U.S. government entities and operations represents the first of three key activities in the 2014 DOD Strategy for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).<sup>24</sup> “Where hostile actors persist in making significant progress toward acquiring WMD,” asserts the strategy document, “the Department [DOD] will be prepared to undertake or support kinetic and non-kinetic actions to stop such capabilities from being fully realized.”<sup>25</sup> Newly minted as the proponent for planning and coordinating DOD counterproliferation efforts, USSOCOM can provide the highly-trained, politically sensitive capabilities necessary to compliment a DPRK covert action campaign. Inherently, the use of military forces in support of such a campaign should not be undertaken without proper constraint. Inadvertent exposure of military service members participating in covert action holds legitimate political risk, as Pyongyang would likely view DOD involvement as an act of military aggression; making no distinction between USSOCOM personnel and overt military force. However, by ensuring the covert action campaign remains low on Lowethal's ladder—maximizing the deniability of U.S. involvement and minimizing the potential for violence—the risk of exposure (including DOD involvement) could be effectively managed.

### Conclusion

DPRK's nuclear proliferation trajectory represents an unquestionable threat to the U.S. and its national interests, both in the eastern Pacific region and internationally. Current U.S. policy does not support direct, overt action to counter this threat, but does provide some limited room for covert action and influence in support of ongoing diplomatic and economic efforts. “Covert action can be a highly effective tool of presidential statecraft,” posits Daugherty, “when knowledgeably employed.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, maximizing the strategic utility of a new DPRK counterproliferation covert action campaign requires clearly identifying an objective congruent with national policy and within the limitations of what can reasonably be accomplished through covert action. Given adequate resources and operational patience—while ensuring continual realignment as national policies evolve—the campaign proposed here provides an additional tool to leverage the intelligence community and USSOCOM to counter the threat of DPRK proliferation.

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