Volume 2 | Issue 5 | Article ID 1634 | May 01, 2004

Intelligence Failure and Famine in North Korea

Hazel Smith

Intelligence Failure and Famine in North Korea

by Hazel Smith

Recent inquiries in the USA and the UK into alleged intelligence failures regarding the existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) have highlighted shortcomings in the way information is used and conclusions are drawn by Western intelligence agencies. There is a danger the same errors could be repeated in North Korea.

Given the seriousness of the consequences of North Korea's possession of WMD -- which could range from forcing a regime change to a possible US pre-emptive strike -- ensuring that intelligence assessments are accurate is of the highest importance. By examining the parameters in which information about North Korea has been collated, assessed and used in the recent past, it is possible to gauge the quality of the debate currently being presented.

The basic premises about North Korea, which inform policy development, scholarly debate and journalism, have been built from information that is largely founded on inference from isolated and de-contextualised data, speculation, ideological assumptions and worst-case scenarios. None of this is unusual as a way of interpreting highly charged issues of international security. What is unusual is the extent to which such 'knowledge' circulates as an unquestioned body of factually-based evidence and analysis and forms the foundation of major Western powers' intelligence estimates. It provides at best a sometimes skewed perspective and at worst a false picture, and almost every issue on which there is supposedly 'common knowledge' of North Korea contains this whole spectrum of knowledge distortion.

Shortcomings in this common knowledge can clearly be seen in the assumptions about the famine of the 1990s, and the use of food aid, including the diversion of food aid to the North Korean military.

Cold War sources

Information that comes from unbiased sources that can be cross-checked and placed in context provides a good foundation for accurate, reliable knowledge. Information that cannot be verified through cross-checking, especially if it is provided through non-objective sources such as defectors or anti-regime activists, must be used with extreme care. From this knowledge base, analysis needs to be logically and systematically constructed, and gaps in the information identified.

Up until the 1990s, the lack of reliable, accurate and verifiable data from or about North Korea -- combined with the lack of regular access to the country by visitors with any form of analytical training, such as academics, international officials or journalists -- has meant that intelligence estimates were almost entirely based on biased sources that could not be checked. In other words, the knowledge base has been thin and consequently, analysis and understanding have been weak.

US sources were widely acknowledged as poor, even within the intelligence community itself. For many years, Seoul was virtually the only source of regular information on North Korea for the USA; this information was deeply tainted as it had been filtered through a heavily ideological Cold War prism. South Korea was an authoritarian state until 1987; it was also

under threat from Pyongyang, which was politically committed to overthrowing the South Korean state by force if necessary. Right up until the advent of ex-South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's remarkable shift of policy into engagement with the North in the late 1990s, South Korean intelligence was noted for propagating 'intelligence' that was supposedly based on North Korean 'defector' interviews but actually presented a stereotyped picture of the situation in the North. Defector interviews can be useful if they are taken as part of a wider intelligence picture and with the caveat that defectors may have an interest in exaggerating or distorting their claims. In the North Korean case, the problem was exacerbated because most of the defectors, even the most senior, had only a partial picture of their own society -- as one would expect in a closed country.

However, the primary blame for the lack of good Western intelligence lies with the North Korean government. Pyongyang issued some meaningful basic data and through the speeches of Kim Il-sung in particular, used quantitative analysis to criticise the lack of progress in the social and economic sectors surprisingly often. However, the government rarely permitted independent research and critical evaluation, either from domestic or foreign analysts. Its most profound external relations were with other closed countries such as the former Soviet Union and China, economic and political partners that were also not likely to issue information. In any case, Chinese and Russian knowledge of the socio-economy of North Korea was not substantive. Visiting delegations, even from 'friendly' countries, tended to operate at the intergovernmental level and few foreign nationals were permitted to travel around the countryside or speak with North Koreans outside very formal channels of communication. The North Korean government did admit some foreigners on short-term visits as part of study-tours, political, sporting and cultural exchanges, or as potential or actual business partners. However, their freedom of movement was heavily circumscribed. While Pyongyang's objective was to show the foreigners that it controlled its territory effectively, in practice what was displayed was the regime's attempt to control lives and to limit personal freedoms and so, in the public relations sense, the government was its own worst enemy: reporting from these short-term delegations was invariably negative. Furthermore, reports from such delegations were (and remain) a problematic source of information in that they were unable to report on conditions accurately. There are no visible state secrets to be found wandering around a North Korean city; what is evident is some sense of the quality of life. For example, in Pyongyang there is poor quality low-rise housing throughout the city. Most apartment blocks are shabby, badly constructed and unmaintained, with windows screened by plastic in the winter to try to keep out the cold. Urban residents keep pigs and chickens and grow food on balconies, evidence of the still massive food shortage among residents who do not have access to relatives living in the country who can grow food.

However, even during the height of the Cold War, there was some useful information available. The London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) produced reliable and usable quantitative data on the country's military capacities on an annual basis, within the context of its international comparative reviews of global military surveys. Some data on foreign trade and foreign relations could be obtained from North Korea's partners. There were also discrete pieces of research carried out by foreign academics, including the 1988 nutrition survey of Kangwon, the most southeastern province, which was conducted by an Australian professor of nutrition in cooperation with North Korea's Institute of Child Nutrition.

At that time it did not find evidence of the widespread malnutrition that characterised the province a decade later.

Post-1995 sources

Since 1995 there has been an explosion of public and usable quantitative and qualitative data. Most of it comes from thousands of reports competed by hundreds of nonresidential and dozens of residential humanitarian and development organisations that have been operating since Pyongyang asked for help in responding to the famine of the early 1990s. Most of this 10 years' worth of data collection is reproduced on the 'Reliefweb' website (www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf) and is co-ordinated and updated on a daily basis by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

South Korea's democratic transition of 1987 and the policy of engagement so dramatically epitomised by the North/South Korea Summit of June 2000 has also encouraged a proliferation of solid, professional and less ideologically framed research. Furthermore, South Korean academics are now less hampered by fear of breaching the country's severe (and still extant) National Security Law that prohibits 'unofficial' links with the North.

To be useful for intelligence purposes, data needs to be analysed professionally. Assessments derived from humanitarian operations in North Korea were, in the main, completed by experienced and professional analysts used to working with incomplete socio-economic data and in contexts where governments and other political forces had much to hide. When recruiting personnel for their North Korea operations, the major humanitarian organisations factored in these considerations. On the whole, they sent some of their most experienced workers. Humanitarian officials working for the major agencies -- in particular the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Federation of the Red Cross, which had the largest number of resident international staff -- stayed in North Korea for periods of up to four years. During this time some of them became familiar with the language and, in the case of the WFP workers, spent months in outlying offices in the most remote parts of the country.

Humanitarian workers based their assessments on both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data was gathered from observation, interviews, government reports, assessments from the hundreds of visiting specialists including agronomists, nurses, doctors, academics, priests, engineers and food technicians. Reliable and important quantitative data emerged from the two large-scale national nutrition surveys of 1998 and 2002, which covered over 80 per cent of the population. Systematic agricultural data came from the twice-yearly mission of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). This was combined with analysis of satellite photography and carefully evaluated data from regular visits (between 400 and 500 a month) by WFP humanitarian officers to farms, hospitals, schools, clinic, orphanages, county offices, and beneficiaries' homes. By 2004 North Korean agriculture and food sectors had been subject to 10 years of increasingly sophisticated, intensive and systematic analysis. This data included key socio-economic analysis and included a charting of the early developments of marketisation, the relative vulnerability of different social groups and the changing attitude of government. All of these reports contain a mass of systematically organised data: but it is the exception rather than the rule if they are read or utilised by Western scholarly, media or intelligence communities.

Distorting famine figures

There is now enough publicly credible data available about North Korea that there is no need to use speculation or propaganda as substitutes for careful and qualified analysis. However, this continues to be the case. For example, foreign observers have regularly cited the figure of three million dead from famine, or 10 per cent of the country's population. Those who use these figures also frequently argue that the government left the people in the northeastern provinces of North Hamgyong,

South Hamgyong and Ryanggang to starve to death. The argument goes that these provinces were 'triaged' by the government. The figure of three million was extrapolated from a 1998 survey of North Korean migrants and refugees in China, and was published in the reputable British medical journal The Lancet. These North Koreans in the main came from North Hamgyong province, and the scientific work in question specifically stated that their findings could not be extrapolated to the whole country. Firstly, the North Koreans interviewed in China were not a representative sample of their home province; secondly North Hamgyong, which has an urbanised, non-agricultural population, was not representative of the country as a whole.

There is no doubt there was a terrible humanitarian disaster in the 1990s. The most reliable evaluation, carried out in a doctoral thesis at the University of Warwick by South Korean economist Suk Lee, shows that up to 660,000 people died from starvation and malnutrition-related diseases. However, the truth is that nobody -- including the government -- probably knows the real figure.

Getting the 'facts right' is not just a question of scholastic accuracy. One important result of inaccurate 'common knowledge' is the likelihood of not being able to identify the real political ramifications of social phenomena. A more informed analysis of the famine, the northeast and the state's reaction might have discovered, for instance, that the state's inability to prevent this formerly privileged social group from sliding into unemployment, destitution and fear of starvation in the space of a few years, was actually a sign of the state's new inability to control and direct policy in strategic socio-economic sectors, rather than reflecting the state's ability to make and implement policy choices. The state lost its capacity to feed the people as a result of a number of factors. These included economic collapse and the end of systematic foreign support from China and Russia at the end of the Cold War; natural disasters that destroyed harvests and grain reserves; an inability to respond fast enough to changed circumstances given the rigidity of the political system; and an initial unwillingness to accept that the only realistic option was to alter foreign and domestic policies and seek assistance from the West.

It is not true that the government cut off food to the northeast, or that the humanitarian organisations went along with this policy (another variant of the argument).

We do know, from interviews with country officials, hospital and clinic directors, teachers and care workers throughout the country, that during the economic meltdown of the early 1990s those counties with scarce food supplies suffered most. This applied whether these were the non-food producing mining towns just north of Pyongyang, the port areas of Nampo and Haeju in the southwest or the northeast. The old Public-Distribution system had nothing to distribute in many months of the year throughout the 1990s.

The northeastern provinces suffered the most because they had the least agricultural resources, not because of any government policy. It seems highly unlikely that Pyongyang would deliberately ignore the North Hamgyong population, which contained large numbers of militant and organised urban workers that provided the political and mythological heart of the ruling Korean Workers' Party, and where the provincial party leadership had enormous clout within the national party apparatus.

From the beginning of the enormous food aid operation of 1998 onwards, the largest of the UN humanitarian organisations and the non-governmental organisation operations, -- the UN WFP and the Catholic agency CARITAS -- systematically focused their aid effort on the northeast, precisely because these were the most vulnerable areas. The dozens of humanitarian workers who have lived and worked in the northeast over the past 10 years are available to be interviewed on and off the record. These operations are all publicly documented in readily accessible formats as is the various data regarding different

assessments of population change.

Food aid myths

The 'common knowledge' on food aid is underpinned by three assumptions that very often go unquestioned. The first is that there is systematic diversion of international food aid to the country's elite; second, that it is diverted to the million troops of the North Korean military; and third, that food aid is not received by the most vulnerable, or to those it is designed to reach. The most extreme version of the food aid thesis is that the country's leader, Kim Jong-il, is deliberately starving his people and does this by diverting international food aid to the armed forces in order to keep himself in office.

More than 90 per cent of food aid is grain surplus from developed countries -- corn, wheat, sometimes wheat flour and occasionally rice. Grain surpluses come about because the agricultural produce cannot be sold on international markets, sometimes because of poor quality. If not distributed internationally as food aid, these surplus grains are used as animal food, ploughed back into the land, put into warehouses, or if there is insufficient storage capacity, sometimes burnt or simply thrown away.

Regarding the first assumption, the North Korean elite is a relatively small group of people close to Kim Jong-il and his family. Pyongyang's elites, like those elsewhere, have gastronomic choices. Their access to hard currency and contacts abroad means that they do not have to resort to surplus grain that is barely above the quality of animal feed to form any part of their diet.

There is perhaps more justification for the second assumption, that is speculation that the military may have been given access to 'diverted' food aid. Kim Jong-il has an 'army first' policy, designed to secure domestic regime security as much as to guard against external enemies. The army is relatively more privileged than it was in the period of the previous president, Kim Il-sung, having access to greater domestic political power. However, because of the country's overall lack of resources, the government also suffers from economic constraints that make it difficult to feed, clothe, house and support its army.

When such speculation is balanced by adherence to available data, we can draw a more detailed picture. The armed forces receive first priority from the country's own domestic food production -- this is public knowledge, and openly and frequently stated by the government. The most popular basic grain is locally produced 'sticky rice', which is not often available to poorer North Koreans who have to rely on the cheaper and easier to come by potatoes and millet as staples. There is no reason to doubt that the military share the same food tastes as the rest of the population and are much more likely to consume locally produced rice in their basic diet, rather than the much less popular and less nutritious corn, wheat or the brown rice that comes in as international food aid.

Some international food aid probably does end up with the armed forces, but this is much more likely to come from the bilateral donations from the South Korean and Chinese governments than from the multilateral food assistance channelled through the UN World Food Programme. Bilateral food aid is given directly to the North Korean government and by its nature unconditional. If the government decides to allocate bilateral food aid to the military this is not 'diversion' -- even if it does not accord with the policies of the international community.

Other available data suggests that the military are also relatively food insecure, as are their families. The very size of the military means that although soldiers are guaranteed a basic grain allocation, the same guarantee cannot be made to soldiers' families. The data from government sources and the media on the efforts being made within the army to establish farms and food production; regular reports from neighbouring Chinese towns and villages of soldiers stealing food from civilians; and

observations by humanitarian workers and foreign visitors that they see 'skinny soldiers' throughout the country bear out the conclusion that the military are not excessively well-off. Soldiers desperate enough to steal food may also be steal food aid but there is no evidence of systematic food aid diversion to the army as public or government policy.

On the other hand, no international aid agency that has been involved in the regular delivery and distribution of food aid to North Korea has ever reported systematic diversion of food aid. Monitoring of the distribution of food is much more efficient and regularised than in the early days of the aid operations in the mid-1990s. This does not mean that Pyongyang has not placed undue restrictions on the humanitarian organisations' ability to operate freely, however. It is difficult, for example, for the agencies to assess the impact of food aid on individuals and communities.

There is also very reliable data available that should raise some queries about the veracity of the third assumption -- that Kim Jong-il is systematically starving his people. The 1998 and 2002 internationally supervised joint humanitarian agency/governmental nutrition surveys give comparable quantitative data showing that whereas the very high levels of severe and chronic malnutrition among children directly indicated famine or post-famine conditions, the still unacceptable but much lower 2002 figures were more directly indicative of chronic poverty. The 2002 figures were directly comparable to the poor countries of Southeast Asia -- particularly Indonesia and Cambodia. The national agricultural data on crop supply regularly collected by the Food and Agriculture Organisation indicates a continuing domestic food shortage. Most North Korean families did not and do not have hard currency to buy food from abroad and must survive from what is available in country. Given the improvement in the nutritional status of children, the government must have been either directly feeding children under seven from domestic production; creating the domestic conditions that would allow the poor to obtain food; or facilitating the distribution of international aid to children -- to those to whom it is directed. Either way, none of this indicates a government that has a policy of 'starving its people'.

By relying on common knowledge assumptions rather than working through details logically, the standard line of analysis has largely failed to consider the enormous socioeconomic change that has taken place in North Korea over the past decade. The government still cannot directly feed all its population, yet the population has found a way to survive. The government may not have a policy of 'diverting' food aid but it is very likely that food aid is entering the local economy as something to be shared, bartered, swapped and even sold by individuals and households in the burgeoning marketised economy. In many countries the 'monetisation' of aid is an objective of international donors. In North Korea, monetisation may be happening by default, but while the intelligence analysts are bound by prior assumptions shaped more by what they imagine rather than what careful investigation of the data might produce, they will continue to be unable to chart the real social change that is taking place in North Korea -- and thus they will be unable to offer informed policy options to external actors to help shape peaceful transformation in the Korean peninsula.

Hazel Smith is Professor of International Relations at the University of Warwick, UK, and currently on research leave as Senior Academic Programme Officer, Peace and Governance programme, United Nations University, Tokyo.

This article originally appeared in JANE'S INTELLIGENCE REVIEW, APRIL 2004, pp. 40-43, 51.