Negotiating with North Korea is all about contradictions. What can be important one day can become unimportant the next day. A position they hold stubbornly for weeks and months can suddenly disappear. But these contradictions tell us a lot about the core goals that may lie beneath Pyongyang’s rhetoric and the provocative actions that culminated in a second nuclear test on May 25, 2009. Understanding these core goals, moreover, offers insights into how spectacularly unsuccessful North Korean leader Kim Jong Il has been as he prepares to step down.

In the paragraphs below, I offer an assessment of what the North Koreans ultimately want with their recent spate of provocative behavior. It is not based solely on formal statements or evidence per se of their stated policy objectives. What is often stated through the mouths of their foreign ministry officials is only a part of the Pyongyang leadership’s broader goals. Instead these judgments are also informed by the experiences and “gut instincts” of those who have negotiated with the regime over the past sixteen years.

What do They Really Want?

The latest statements out of North Korea appear to be telegraphing their next set of provocative moves. They have threatened everything
from further ballistic missile tests, another nuclear test, withdrawal from the 1953 armistice that ended Korean War hostilities (there is no peace treaty), and cyber warfare. They have demanded that the United Nations “apologize” for its punitive statement against the April missile launch. They have threatened to retaliate with “nuclear war” against any sanctions implemented as a result of United Nations (UN) Resolution 1874 taken by the UN Security Council in response to their May 2009 nuclear test. They refuse to return to Six-party Talks. And in an unprecedented act, the North Koreans sentenced two American journalists, Euna Lee and Laura Ling, to twelve years of hard labor and reform. Had these two women been sent to labor camps in North Korea, they would have been the first civilian American nationals ever to have suffered such a fate.

In the past, this litany of Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPR.K) threatening actions was always understood as a tactic to get the attention of the United States and to draw Washington into bilateral talks. Indeed, this was often the argument that the George W. Bush administration had to contend with whenever the North undertook provocative actions. Even after unprecedented provocations like the October 2002 revelations regarding the North’s second uranium-based nuclear program (in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework) or the October 2006 nuclear test, pundits would “blame” these actions on the Bush administration’s reluctance to engage in high-level bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang. Terms like “a bombshell that’s actually an olive branch” were how people rationalized what would otherwise be considered exceptionally brash and rogue actions in international relations. The interpretation of North Korean threatening actions was that they constituted cries for help and attention. Pyongyang sought a grand bargain with the United States, the armchair psychologists of North Korean behavior argued. And quite frankly, a very unhelpful dynamic developed in which the causes for North Korean bad behavior were thereafter pinned on U.S. diplomatic inaction rather than on North Korean intentions.

Barack Obama managed to correct this vicious cycle, at least for now. He came into office with none of the allergies that the first Bush administration had to his predecessor’s agreements, and signaled early his interest in high-level negotiations with Pyongyang through Special Envoy Ambassador Stephen Bosworth’s trips to the region. He made clear to the other members of the Six-party Talks, Japan, China, Russia, and South Korea, his commitment to the multilateral negotiating forum and to moving forward with the September 2005 Joint