For regional governments in Northeast Asia, a nuclear-armed Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) represents a major policy challenge. How states adapt and respond to this challenge will critically shape the regional security environment in Northeast Asia for years, possibly decades, to come. The orthodox view of North Korea’s acquisition of nuclear weapons is that it represents a major threat to strategic stability in Northeast Asia. Some analysts tend to assume that the regime in Pyongyang is irrational and therefore incapable of the responsible behavior required of a nuclear power. Those who attribute more deliberate motives to the Kim Jong-il regime argue that it is motivated by a calculated endeavor to leverage North Korea’s nuclear arsenal in an attempt to throw its weight around in Northeast Asia and in its relationship with Washington especially. The one point that almost all observers agree on is that North Korea’s acquisition of nuclear weapons represents a seriously negative and destabilizing development for Northeast Asia’s security.

In this chapter I challenge this perspective and argue that it is derived from an overly pessimistic response to nuclear proliferation at the generic level and a misreading of the main factors driving North Korea’s nuclear program. More specifically, this perspective takes insufficient account of North Korea’s motives for going nuclear and overlooks the inherently defensive objectives that underpin the DPRK’s national strategy in the early part of the twenty-first century. In short, the idea that a nuclear-armed North Korea is determined to foment regional instability and challenge the strategic status quo in Northeast Asia is simply not borne out by a closer reading of Pyongyang’s motives and worldview. On the contrary, the behavior and statements of the regime suggest that the DPRK is likely to be predisposed to
accepting the logic of deterrence in its relationship with the United States. For as long as Washington maintains an active and robust posture of strategic deterrence on the Korean peninsula, the Kim Jong-il regime in Pyongyang will continue to be dissuaded from using nuclear weapons against other regional states. The key to managing North Korea as a nuclear weapon state will be engaging Pyongyang in continuing dialogue while at the same time communicating clearly to the regime the severe costs attached to nuclear adventurism, such as the export of fissile material beyond the DPRK’s borders. In the longer term, this may well have the beneficial effect of promoting an environment that is conducive to formal arms control and nuclear security more generally.

**North Korea’s Nuclear Capabilities**

North Korea has long coveted nuclear weapons. Since the 1950s it has invested a significant portion of its scarce national resources in pursuing the acquisition of a nuclear weapons force. As Alexandre Mansourov argues, the primary factors motivating the DPRK regime’s original decision to proceed with a nuclear program were, in all likelihood, threefold. The first was the United States’ use of atomic weapons against Japan in 1945. Stationed with Soviet Red Army forces in Manchuria, North Korea’s founding leader, Kim Il-sung, witnessed firsthand the decisive impact of atomic weapons in eliciting Japan’s unconditional surrender. The second motivating factor was a corollary of North Korea’s experiences during the Korean War. Massive U.S. conventional bombardment of DPRK territory, coupled with Washington’s careful deliberation over whether to use nuclear weapons to break the military deadlock after 1950, served to reinforce the point that North Korea required the most powerful weapons to deter the world’s most powerful nation. Finally, the belief among North Korea’s policy elites that the Soviet Union bowed to American pressure during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis apparently cast serious doubts on their faith in the broader credibility of Soviet nuclear guarantees. While none of these factors alone provided the impetus for Pyongyang’s decision to seek a nuclear capability, together they coalesced to furnish a compelling strategic logic for taking the nuclear path.

Soviet training of DPRK nuclear scientists began shortly after the end of the Korean War, and during the 1960s and 1970s Moscow supplied North Korea with advanced nuclear reactor technology. This included help with the construction in 1965 of an eight megawatt (MW) research reactor located near the town of Yongbyon, ninety kilometers north of Pyongyang. Responding to pressure from Moscow, in 1977 North Korea agreed to place this research reactor under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. In the late 1970s North Korea began construction of a second, five MW reactor based near Yongbyon, which commenced operating in 1987.