

## **The Second Korean Nuclear Crisis: Beyond Déjà Vu**

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C. Kenneth Quinones

*The Agreed Framework may not have been perfect, but at least it helped build mutual trust between Washington and Pyongyang and offered the hope of persuading North Korea to forego its nuclear ambitions. Both mutual trust and hope are now history and the prospects for a diplomatic solution are much dimmer than they were a decade ago.*

As we commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Korean War armistice, the Korean Peninsula is experiencing a nuclear crisis once again. Like the previous crisis of 1992–94, this one also threatens international efforts to halt the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Even more worrisome is the possibility that it could shatter peace in Northeast Asia. Unless the current crisis is resolved soon through peaceful, diplomatic negotiations, one of two consequences could prove unavoidable. Either the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea will become a nuclear power or a second Korean War will occur. Regardless of which scenario develops, the security concerns of the United States, Japan, and South Korea are already adversely affected.

[Author: moved "reminisces" part to here so that your original 3rd paragraph follows more naturally; see end of this section—ed.] In December 2002, I met a former North Korean counterpart in the United States–North Korea nuclear negotiations of 1993–94 to reminisce over lunch in New York. As we sat down, he exclaimed, “déjà vu!” At the time I agreed, but events since then have radically altered the situation. Both of us had been directly involved in the

United States–North Korea negotiations to resolve the first crisis. When the talks began in June 1993, we were counterparts on our respective nations’ negotiating teams. I was the Department of State’s North Korea Affairs officer and he was one of several North Korean diplomats assigned to his nation’s mission to the United Nations.

[Recalling our efforts](#) [okay?] a decade later, we lamented the demise of the Agreed Framework, the first ever diplomatic agreement between our two countries. As diplomats, we had invested great energy and hope in diplomacy. We had worked many long, difficult days to bridge the gap of mistrust and misunderstanding between our governments. We had shared an optimism and earnest hope that a peaceful resolution could be achieved through negotiation. Both of us had understood that this would require compromise and concessions on both sides.

We also recalled our efforts to implement the accord. The Agreed Framework was only the beginning of a long, complicated process designed to normalize United States–North Korea relations. Koreans say, “The beginning is halfway there.” The Agreed Framework was only halfway to the goal of normalization. Achieving a durable peace on the Korean peninsula seemed even more remote. Implementation proved far more challenging than had the negotiations. But we had faced the task with resolve and a sense of urgency. We had understood that success would require more than putting the agreement’s requirements into practice. It would require building mutual trust. Unfortunately, many people on both sides did not agree with us.

Now, looking back to 1994, one cannot help but wonder whether today’s nuclear crisis is really déjà vu. Some would agree, but I have reluctantly concluded that the current situation is profoundly different and more dangerous than the previous crisis. As before, the current crisis threatens to erode the effectiveness of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and related international agreements. Also at risk is the credibility of the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) efforts to carry out inspections on compliance with

international nuclear safeguards.

There are other significant differences between the two crises as well. Foremost is that prospects for a peaceful diplomatic solution are much dimmer than they were a decade ago. Today's crisis also puts Japan's security at greater risk than did the earlier crisis. [Certainly, this is more than](#) déjà vu.[\[okay?\]](#)

### **The Stage Is Set for a New Crisis**

Despite the intense efforts of many capable people on both sides, criticism of the Agreed Framework in Washington and Pyongyang eventually overwhelmed the fragile trust that implementation had built after 1994. As confidence in the accord gradually waned, its critics multiplied and became increasingly assertive. The numerous reasons for this as well as the errors committed on both sides are detailed in my recently published account of the Agreed Framework's implementation: *Kita chosen II: Kaku no himitsu toshi ni Yonbyon o iku*. Tokyo: (Published in Japanese by Chuo koron Shinsa, 2003; English title: *Beyond Negotiations: Implementation of the Agreed Framework*.)

By 2000, the Agreed Framework was in serious trouble. Pyongyang's ~~elite were~~ [\[leadership was?\]](#) deeply divided over its value to ~~North Korea~~ [\[to their country\]](#). In Washington, the Republican-dominated U.S. Congress insistently urged that the accord be discarded. The soon-to-be-elected presidential candidate George W. Bush agreed. The Clinton administration's efforts to counter this criticism had proven ineffective. These developments may have caused Pyongyang to respond by taking preliminary steps toward the clandestine development of its second program to manufacture nuclear weapons using highly enriched uranium.

Just when North Korea began its clandestine highly enriched uranium (HEU) program remains uncertain. One possibility is that by 2000, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il may have

decided to pursue a two-track strategy. While fulfilling his commitments faithfully under the Agreed Framework, he apparently authorized simultaneous preparations to initiate a second nuclear program in the event that the United States did not sustain its commitments to the agreement.

The Bush administration's subsequent rhetoric and actions further eroded Pyongyang's confidence in the United States' commitment. Early in his administration, President Bush insisted that Pyongyang allow the IAEA to begin immediately any and all activities it deemed necessary to determine how much plutonium North Korea had produced previously. This insistence on immediate compliance was inconsistent with the Agreed Framework. Under the accord, North Korea was not required to do this until construction of two light water nuclear reactors was almost complete. At the time, construction of the reactor buildings had just begun.

Nor was the Bush administration's refusal to negotiate with North Korea conducive to strengthening confidence in the Agreed Framework. From June 2001 to October 2002, the Bush administration repeatedly proclaimed its willingness to "talk" and to "engage in dialogue" with North Korea. The administration's refusal to negotiate with Pyongyang until it had dismantled its nuclear program, however, was not mentioned publicly. Again, this precondition was inconsistent with the Agreed Framework. North Korea responded negatively until the summer of 2002.

### **A New Crisis is Born**

Pyongyang's official admission in October 2002 that it had a new, clandestine nuclear weapons program triggered the current crisis, but the stage had been set during the previous four years. By the spring of 2002, it was already too late to salvage the Agreed Framework. President Bush informed Congress in April 2002 that he would not certify Pyongyang's compliance with the

Agreed Framework. He also advised Congress of his intention to end funding for the accord beginning in 2003.

Tensions between Washington and Pyongyang escalated quickly after their clash in October 2002. Both sides expressed their preference for a “peaceful, diplomatic resolution” from the beginning. Their actions, however, have pushed the situation toward a potentially violent confrontation.

The Bush administration’s actions seem to have been designed to punish North Korea rather than to foster diplomacy. In November 2002, it called on the world’s nuclear powers and United States’ allies in Northeast Asia to publicly censure North Korea. It also compelled the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) to halt the shipment of heavy fuel oil to North Korea, though these shipments had been provided for in the Agreed Framework. In mid-December, the Bush administration named North Korea a nation of concern in its “Strategy to Counter the Proliferation of ~~the~~-[ck] Weapons of Mass Destruction.” The strategy advocates “preemptive” armed efforts to counter the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The U.S. Department of Defense demonstrated the credibility of its avowed strategy when it seized a Yemen-bound Cambodian ship, which was carrying North Korean made ballistic missiles, in international waters. Meanwhile, Washington remained adamant in its refusal to reward what it called “nuclear blackmail” with negotiations and concessions.

Pyongyang responded with a rapid series of [provocations](#) [okay?]. Late in December, it expelled IAEA inspectors and announced that it would reactivate its nuclear program. In January 2003, it withdrew from the NPT. All the while it proclaimed its readiness to engage the United States in bilateral negotiations.

The rhetoric and actions of both sides since October 2002 have only diminished prospects

for achieving their avowed purpose - a peaceful, diplomatic solution. The Bush administration's hard line stance may have confirmed the North Korean military's long held suspicion that the United States' real aim is to "strangle" and topple the Kim Jong Il regime. At the same time, the breaking of Pyongyang's pledges not to develop nuclear weapons has similarly convinced the Bush administration that North Korea never intended to fully comply with the Agreed Framework or any other international agreements.

Fortunately for all concerned, China has intervened. Its efforts alone, however, may not be sufficient to move the situation toward a "peaceful, diplomatic resolution." Ultimately, this will require that Washington and Pyongyang engage in direct negotiations to formulate a new compromise. Otherwise, the crisis will only continue to intensify.

### **Altered Strategies**

~~All of this~~ [The situation as of this writing] is very different from a decade ago. Gone is the hope that diplomats and governments harbored in 1993 that diplomatic negotiations could resolve the crisis. At that time, Washington's preferred strategy was to resolve the crisis via negotiations, not to punish or belittle North Korea. The emphasis then was on collaboration with the international community, not supervising its diplomatic efforts. Also, the Clinton administration worked to support and to strengthen the stature and capacity of international organizations like the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the IAEA.

That these strategies were developed *prior* to the Clinton administration has long been ignored. It was, in fact, President George Bush, father of the current president, who oversaw formulation of the strategies that the Clinton administration adopted and adapted to changing circumstances. The incumbent President Bush has abandoned his father's strategies. Intent upon the pursuit of "ABC" —"anything but Clinton"—President Bush has preferred an "America

first” strategy that marginalizes international organizations and [spins out](#) assertive rhetoric and actions. Likewise, the policy has been altered from one that pursues peaceful co-existence with North Korea and encourages its compliance with international norms to one in which the Bush administration advocates isolating North Korea diplomatically and economically, possibly in the hope of toppling the Kim Jong Il regime. None of this is conducive to a peacefully negotiated settlement.

North Korea’s strategy today is also conspicuously different from that of ten years ago. A confident and experienced Kim Il Sung knew the limits of his regime’s military and diplomatic capabilities. His goal was to secure his regime’s survival by engaging the international community and winning its respect and trust. But his son and successor, Kim Jong Il, has moved in the opposite direction. Apparently not at all concerned about winning the international community’s respect, he seems determined to secure the survival of his regime by building a nuclear arsenal and relying on coercive diplomacy. Kim Jong Il’s actions in recent months have destroyed the international community’s hope that North Korea could be induced to forego nuclear weapons and to comply with the norms of international conduct. .

### **Painted Into A Corner**

Also markedly divergent are the political outlooks of the two nations’ leaders. Both President Clinton and Kim Il Sung were confident of their domestic political support. They were comfortable with the elements of diplomatic negotiations. Both were ready to make and to politically defend the compromises and concessions essential to a negotiated settlement. But both George Bush and Kim Jong Il have painted themselves into political corners. They have escalated the crisis to unprecedented heights in order to garner [\[what they believe to be](#) Add?--ed] domestic political support. Hence, de-escalation would pose serious political risks for

both of them.

Kim Jong Il's position now is far less secure than was his father's in 1993. Kim Il Sung had established his legitimacy as North Korea's ruler by "struggling" against the "imperialists," i.e., Japan and the United States, during World War II and the Korean War. His political strength gave him the confidence vital to making concessions to Washington and Tokyo. But Kim Jong Il lacks such legitimacy. His struggle against the "imperialists" has now taken the form of the current nuclear crisis. He can hardly afford to appear to bow to North Korea's foes, since by doing so he could risk incurring the wrath of North Korea's powerful generals. Kim Jong Il may have escalated the crisis to convince his supporters of his willingness to stand up to pressure from the United States. Backing down now without any gains could erode his political support in Pyongyang.

President Bush faces a similar situation. He won the White House by a very narrow margin, and did so by criticizing his predecessor's policies. Once in office, he sought to broaden Congressional support for his policy toward North Korea by, among other things, voicing his dissatisfaction with the Agreed Framework. He also labeled the negotiations that led to the accord "appeasement." In addition, Bush publicly belittled Kim Jong Il and openly sought to end his regime. A significant shift in President Bush's position could be viewed as making concessions to Pyongyang and might excite criticism in Washington from both the conservative right and the liberal left. Bush certainly does not want to risk this sort of censure during the months before his 2004 reelection campaign.

### **Return to Mistrust** [okay to use here?]

Henceforth, no nation can take any of Pyongyang's promises to the international community at face value. By discarding its commitment not to develop nuclear weapons, North Korea has

destroyed the fragile trust with which it was once regarded. Previously, the international community's belief that Pyongyang could be trusted to fulfill its promises in the future, fueled the drive by the United States, South Korea, and Japan to resolve the 1992–94 crisis through diplomatic negotiations. But Pyongyang's recent abandonment of the Agreed Framework, withdrawal from the NPT and rejection of the South-North Joint De-nuclearization Declaration highlights the futility of further negotiations. Even if the United States and North Korea were to resume negotiations, there is little reason to believe that North Korea could be counted on to fulfill its promises.

The Bush administration has contributed to the futility of the situation as well. President Bush, with the support of Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi and South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, insists on the “verifiable dismantlement” of North Korea's nuclear program. The international community generally agrees that the IAEA is the organization best qualified to do this. Bush, however, prior to the early 2003 invasion of Iraq, expressed serious doubts about the IAEA's ability to find weapons of mass destruction. North Korea now appears reluctant to accept IAEA inspections to confirm that it has dismantled its nuclear program. Pyongyang fears that inspections might not convince President Bush that it has dismantled its program and would thus fail to allay the United States' suspicions about North Korea's credibility.

Today's nuclear crisis poses a far greater and more direct threat to Japan's security than was the case in 1993–94. A decade ago, North Korea's ability to strike Japan with ballistic missiles was dubious. Now, however, it has a large arsenal of reliable, medium-range ballistic missiles that could strike anywhere in Japan. At the same time, South Korea's efforts at reconciliation with North Korea, and its continuing willingness to cooperate economically with Pyongyang and provide it with aid make it a much less likely target for Pyongyang's missiles. Indeed, Pyongyang [[seems to believe it](#) Add?--ed] stands to gain more by threatening to strike Japan. Not

only might such a strike seriously disrupt Japan's economy, it could also strain the United States-Japan alliance.

Also, Seoul and Washington have traded places relative to the positions they held during the first crisis. In 1994, it was Washington that advocated using diplomatic and economic means to entice Pyongyang into giving up its nuclear ambitions. South Korean President Kim Yong-sam vacillated between inducement carrots and sanction sticks. Ultimately, in September 1994, he decided against providing North Korea with any concessions until it had vowed publicly to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to conduct extensive inspections of the sites where it was believed North Korea was hiding evidence that it had previously manufactured plutonium. President Clinton authorized his negotiating team to give priority to forging an agreement with North Korea, regardless of the South Korean president's reservations.

Today, conversely, it is Seoul that is pressing Washington to negotiate with Pyongyang. Also, it is Seoul that is pushing Washington to adopt a strategy of enticing Pyongyang into giving up its nuclear ambitions by economic and diplomatic means. Thus far, Washington has rejected Seoul's recommendations.

### **Prospects for Negotiations**

It is no longer accurate, therefore, to exclaim "déjà vu!" when discussing the present nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. The situation now is much more dangerous and much less likely to be resolved through diplomacy. North Korea has claimed to have more than two nuclear weapons and these claims are credible. The reprocessing of 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods that had previously been stored has begun and may be near completion. Preparations are believed to be underway to test one of North Korea's nuclear bombs. Meanwhile, neither side is any closer to the negotiating table than when the crisis began. Even if negotiations were to begin in the near

future, the absence of mutual trust on both sides makes the successful implementation of a negotiated settlement highly unlikely.

Obviously, none of this augurs well for the future of peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia. The Agreed Framework was not perfect, but at least it facilitated the building of mutual trust between Washington and Pyongyang and held out the hope that North Korea could be persuaded not to build a nuclear arsenal. Both that mutual trust and hope are now history, and the future is bleaker still.

[bio]

### C. Kenneth Quinones

After receiving his doctorate in history from Harvard University, Quinones served as assistant professor at both Tufts University and Trinity College. From 1981–87 he held posts with the U.S. Embassy and Consulate General in South Korea, served with the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of East Asian And Pacific Affairs from 1987–89, and from 1990–92 served with the U.S. Embassy in Japan. From 1992–97 he was the State Department’s North Korean Desk Officer before retiring from the State Department in 1997. Other posts he has held include guest scholar at the United States Institute for Peace, guest scholar at the University of Shizuoka, and since 2002 has served as the Asia Foundation’s Representative to Korea. [He is presently Director of the Korean Peninsula Program for the International Center.] He is author of *Kita chosen: Beikokumusho tantokan no kosho kiroku* [North Korea’s Nuclear Threat: “Off-The-Record Memories”] and *North Korea II*. [Author: please list one or two titles of your works originally in English.--ed.]