

**US Domestic Politics' Impact on Policy Toward North Korea  
An Historical Perspective**

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*North Korea and Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia*

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**Introduction**

US foreign policy toward the DPRK since 1950 has been a fusion of US domestic political priorities and geo-political realities. Here we review the history of US approaches to the DPRK to understand whether one factor has been more decisive in determining US policy. If today US domestic politics has a more decisive impact on foreign policy than geo-political realities, US allies the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan will have difficulty matching their DPRK policy with that of the US. This is truer than previously because both allies are now democracies obligated to reflecting domestic political concerns in their foreign policy. Prior to the ROK's democratization after 1988, its authoritarian government determined foreign policy with little concern for domestic politics. As for Japan, its domestic and foreign policy priorities coincided until the end of the Cold War in support for security cooperation with the US.

Since 1990, collaboration between Washington, Seoul and Tokyo has become more difficult, particularly regarding policy toward the DPRK. This became evident during the Six Party Talks of 2003-2009. The three allies shared the same goal – a nuclear free Korean Peninsula, but while the US strategy first favored containment and then vacillated between containment and engagement, Seoul preferred engagement but Japan shifted from engagement to containment. This divergence enabled Pyongyang to blunt the effectiveness of security cooperation in Northeast Asia by playing one ally against the other. Here we focus on explaining US policy toward the DPRK, particularly its strategy shifts.

**Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia**

Security cooperation in Northeast Asia aimed at the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) consists of multilateral armed deterrence and diplomacy. From the beginning of the Korean War in 1950 until the end of the Cold War in 1990, deterrence was the cornerstone of security cooperation. US global deterrence, projected in East Asia through alliances with the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan, plus the forward deployment of air, land and sea forces, aimed to deter a second Korean War. The US in exchange for providing allies security assurances and a "nuclear umbrella" against a possible USSR nuclear attack, gained access to bases and the ROK's armed forces supplemented US forces. The DPRK responded by allying with the USSR and China (People's Republic of China, PRC) to reinforce the deterrent capability of its Korean People's Army (KPA). Pyongyang also gained a nuclear umbrella.

Diplomacy initially played a minor role in the form of containment vis a vis the DPRK. Containment labeled the DPRK an international outlaw and an aggressor unworthy of diplomatic and commercial relations, and admission to international organizations. The goal was to weaken and eventually undermine the regime using economic sanctions and isolation from the international community. The US expected all allies to enforce containment toward the DPRK as well as to China. Another key component of US policy until 1988 was to follow the ROK's lead regarding contact with the DPRK.

The Cold War's end re-defined security cooperation in Northeast Asia. Beginning in 1972, engagement replaced containment of China, i.e. diplomatic and commercial relations were normalized and China was admitted to international organizations. But the DPRK remained the target of containment. Japan, however, allowed bilateral trade beginning in the 1960s which eventually made Japan the DPRK's largest trading partner. The US alliances with Tokyo and Seoul continued, but both allies began providing the US "host nation" financial support to partially compensate it for the expenses of its forward deployed forces. Elsewhere in East Asia the US began in 1972 to withdraw military forces from Southeast Asia.

But the greatest changes followed when Russia and China normalized relations with the ROK in 1991 and 1993 respectively. The balance of power on the Korean Peninsula shifted in the ROK's favor. When Russia replaced the USSR Pyongyang lost its "nuclear umbrella." The DPRK subsequently adopted a dual track strategy – dialogue and negotiation with the ROK while simultaneously launching a secret nuclear weapons program. South-North Korean dialogue and negotiations under the banner of "*nord politick*" between 1989 and 1992 made unprecedented progress. But when the DPRK's secret nuclear program was confirmed late in 1992, South-North cooperation collapsed. Fearing the destructive consequences of war, Seoul and Tokyo urged Washington to engage Pyongyang in diplomatic negotiations.

Beginning in 1993, diplomacy became the spearhead of regional security cooperation. Deterrence was maintained, but experience had taught that it alone could not forge peace, only prevent war. Northeast Asia's concerned nations – China, Japan, ROK, Russia - agreed that the United States had an obligation to engage the DPRK in diplomatic negotiations aimed at achieving their shared goal of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.

Also by 1993, engagement had become the preferred approach to the DPRK. Seoul initiated the transition in 1989, followed by Japan in 1990. South-North Korean agreements had multiplied by early 1992. Tokyo had begun talks with Pyongyang aimed at normalizing relations with the DPRK. The US, at Seoul's behest, launched its "modest initiative" in 1988 which established the "Beijing channel" for direct bilateral diplomatic dialogue and allowed cultural and educational exchange while keeping other elements of containment in place. Washington, Seoul and Tokyo shared the goal of defusing Pyongyang's hostility while trying to nudge it toward becoming a responsible member of the international community. Whereas containment's goal is to bring about a "hard landing," i.e. regime change, engagement aims to gradually transform the DPRK, i.e. a "soft landing."

Engagement yielded the first US-DPRK accord, the "Agreed Framework" which "froze the DPRK's nuclear activities in exchange for economic benefits and phased progress toward normal relations. Within a year of the accord's signing in October 1994, growing Republican opposition in the US Congress impeded the program's implementation. By 2001, the Republican led Administration of George W. Bush ('43) discarded engagement and reverted to containment.

Despite intense diplomatic effort in the Six Party Talks between 2003 and 2009, diplomacy has yet to achieve durable progress toward a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. Seoul,

Tokyo and Washington were hard pressed to forge a united diplomatic approach as they vacillated between containment and engagement, allowing Pyongyang to play one ally against the other. Gradually they accented deterrence over diplomacy while Beijing and Moscow continued engaging the DPRK. By April 2013, all joint ROK-DPRK and US-DPRK projects had ceased. All channels of communication between Pyongyang and Seoul, Tokyo and Washington have been suspended except the “New York channel” between the DPRK’s UN Mission in New York and the US State Department. The DPRK announced on March 5, 2013 that it considers the Korean War Armistice completely null and void. Trade and people-to-people exchanges also have ceased. Beijing and Moscow maintain diplomatic relations with the DPRK, but even these capitals are increasingly impatient with Pyongyang’s disregard for UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions which have repeatedly demanded since 2006 that the DPRK halt its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles programs.

### **Conventional Wisdom**

Conventional wisdom blames this situation on the DPRK’s failure to respect UNSC resolutions and international norms, and to fulfill its international commitments. Past DPRK conduct certainly tends to substantiate this assessment. Yet blaming the DPRK has only motivated Pyongyang to reject international censure and other forms of pressure as infringements of its sovereignty. After all, there are domestic politics in Pyongyang. The DPRK’s most powerful political clique, military generals, appears to have successfully used international sanctions, censure and economic pressure to justify quickening their building of a nuclear arsenal which they term “a deterrent capability against the US hostile policy.” Kim Jong Il, the DPRK ruler until his death at the end of 2011, was the father of the DPRK’s nuclear program and initiator of “military first” doctrine in 1998 which gives Pyongyang’s generals preferential access to the nation’s resources to build a nuclear deterrent capability. Kim Jong Il’s son Kim Jong Un, the current DPRK ruler, seems even more dependent on Pyongyang’s military leadership than his father and thus cannot contest the “military first” policy. The young and inexperienced ruler, lacking accomplishments to justify his authority, needs his generals’ support to sustain and to defend the regime. Thus prospects for achieving a negotiated end to Pyongyang’s weapons of mass destruction programs appear marginal at best, at least into the foreseeable future.

Since 2011 Washington, Seoul and Tokyo have favored the tactics of containment which Pyongyang’s “hardliners” use to rationalize their need for a nuclear deterrent capability. They also point to the perceived contradictions between Washington’s engagement of China and containment of the DPRK. For example, Washington and its allies claim that normalizing relations, even negotiating with the DPRK would “reward” it for past and continuing misdeeds. Yet China’s similar previous record, its authoritarian government, disregard for human rights and maintenance of a large nuclear arsenal did not impede the US, Japan and ROK from normalizing relations with China beginning in 1972.

As we shall see, domestic political concerns, above all else, explain Washington’s different approaches to China and the DPRK. “Security” cooperation implies military alliances, but as our discussion above points out, diplomacy has become an increasingly important element of security cooperation. Thus the discussion henceforth will concentrate on the impact of US domestic politics on US foreign policy toward the DPRK.

## Containment verse Engagement 1950-1969

US policy toward East Asia since 1949 has been and remains inseparable from the US domestic priorities of promoting peace, prosperity and stability. Integral to this policy is the recognition that developments on the Korean Peninsula affect not only East Asia but also US interests at home. Since the Korean War, bipartisan political support in Washington has sustained a huge financial and military commitment to maintaining US leadership in East Asia. Most recently the Obama Administration recognized East Asia's leading role in the world economy with its "pivot toward Asia" that assigns East Asia preference over Europe and the Middle East. Despite consistency of goals, however, U.S. strategy for dealing with the DPRK, the foremost threat to regional stability and peace, has vacillated between containment and engagement as summarized below:

- 1950 - containment of the China and DPRK,
- 1972 - engagement of the China,
- 1988-2000 - ROK-US shift to engagement of the DPRK,
- 2001-08 – Bush Administration's vacillation between containment and engagement,
- 2009 – 2013 - Obama Administration "strategic patience."

Until Kim Il Sung's June 1950 attack of the ROK, the Truman Administration was preoccupied with USSR expansion in Europe. East Asia received secondary attention and the Korean Peninsula was of marginal significance as outlined in the March 16, 1949 National Security Council's NSC 8 report entitled, "The Position of the United States with Respect to Korea." The Truman Doctrine's two pronged strategy to blunt Soviet expansion accented collective security, i.e. deterrence, and containment in Europe. While the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) deterred the USSR, US Ambassador to Moscow George Kennan forged a strategy to "contain communism" using diplomatic non-recognition and economic sanctions to isolate and to weaken adversaries.

Security cooperation in East Asia was non-existent until the Truman Administration abruptly assigned priority to blunting "communist expansion" on the Korean Peninsula. The decision was more a consequence of domestic politics than strategic considerations. Congressional Republicans, missionary organizations and conservative mass media blamed Truman and the State Department for having "lost China to communism" in 1949 because of indifference for the Republic of China's (ROC, Taiwan) and being "soft on communism."<sup>1</sup>

Concerned that he could not win Congressional support for a declaration of war, Truman turned to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) which the USSR was boycotting. This enabled quick approval of the US sponsored resolution that authorized UN military action in Korea and established the UN Command (UNC). Republicans nevertheless continued to pepper the White House and State Department with claims that they were "soft on communism" and about to lose Korea to communism. Truman's NSC reacted assertively with NSC 68 which set

<sup>1</sup> Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training of the Foreign Service Institute at the U.S. Department of State, George P. Shultz National Foreign Affairs Training Center: *A Brief History of U.S. Diplomacy, The China Hands, Examples of Excellence – George F. Kennan (1094-2005), Leadership in Conflict, and Years of Confrontation*, [www.usdiplomacy.org/history](http://www.usdiplomacy.org/history), Ideological Foundations of the Cold War, <[www.trumanlibrary.org](http://www.trumanlibrary.org)>, "Leadership and Conflict," and "China Hands," <[www.usdiplomacy.org](http://www.usdiplomacy.org)>.

forth a comprehensive military strategy for defeating and deterring communist expansion in East Asia.<sup>2</sup> It went so far as to advocate an increase in US atomic capability in the region,<sup>3</sup> and assigned Japan the role of an ally.<sup>4</sup> Diplomatic strategy accented containment of China and the DPRK.

The Republican political assault on Democrats and the State Department had immediate and long term consequences. The immediate impact was the 1952 Republican presidential victory which swept World War II General Dwight D. Eisenhower into the White House on a platform that called for quickly ending the Korean War despite ROK President Syngman Rhee's resolute opposition. The more enduring consequence was "McCarthyism" which singled out career State Department officials as being sympathetic to or at least "soft" on communism. McCarthyism diminished the State Department's role in foreign policy formulation and demoralized its professionals. Career diplomats, hesitant about Congressional criticism, avoided recommending innovative policies, preferring instead to merely do as directed. Political allegiance replaced expertise as criteria for appointment of ambassadors and to senior NSC positions. Another consequence was continuity of containment as the US diplomatic strategy toward East Asia, at least until a Republican champion of anti-communism during the McCarthy era, Richard Nixon, became president.

### **From Containment to Engagement 1969-1988**

Democratic Presidents Kennedy and Johnson left US policies toward Japan, the two Koreas, the PRC and ROC largely unchanged while vigorously pursuing deterrence and containment of communism in Southeast Asia, i.e. the Vietnam War. President Richard Nixon and his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger have received credit for the US shift from containment to engagement, but PRC leader Zhou Enlai initiated the process in 1969.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese confirmed to a cautious Nixon their invitation for a "ministerial rank or a special Presidential envoy..." to visit China.<sup>6</sup> Nixon secretly dispatched Kissinger. Three years later, after the first US presidential visit to Beijing, Nixon directed the Secretary of State to replace containment with a policy designed to normalize bilateral US-PRC relations.<sup>7</sup> The first cautious steps away from containment toward engagement in East Asia were taken.

As revealed in a White House memorandum of conversation dated February 28, 1972, Nixon told Zhou in Beijing,

When I return (to Washington) I will make a brief statement .... *The next day I will have to meet with Legislative leaders,...*(and) ... the Cabinet. The meetings ... will be private, but ..., I assume they leak, so I will be very discreet ....<sup>8</sup> ...

<sup>2</sup> "A Report to the National Security Council, NSC 68," p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> "A Report to the National Security Council, NSC 68," p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> "A Report to the National Security Council, NSC 68," p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Nixon to Kissinger, unpublished White House memorandum dated February 4, 1969, <[www.nixonlibrary.org](http://www.nixonlibrary.org)>.

<sup>6</sup> Unpublished and undated White House memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon. <[www.nixonlibrary.org](http://www.nixonlibrary.org)>.

<sup>7</sup> Secretary of State William Rogers, State Department Memorandum, February 9, 1972. <[www.nixonlibrary.org](http://www.nixonlibrary.org)>.

<sup>8</sup> Winston Lord, White House Memorandum of Conversation, February 28, 1972. p. 3.

there are some political factions at home which take the line of some of the nations abroad (i.e. ROC and ROK) who will try to seize on any statement made by us or made here to demonstrate that the new relationship between China and the United States has broken (US promises to them).<sup>9</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Clearly Nixon was concerned that Congressional opposition to the improvement of US-PRC could ignite a political fire storm in Congress. He was right. Not only were Taiwan (ROC), Japan, and the ROK shocked but angered and confused. Some members of Congress were quick to align themselves with these foreign critics of engagement.<sup>10</sup> Fortunately for the future of US-China relations, the “Watergate Scandal” and Nixon’s subsequent resignation muted Congressional criticism. Also facilitating the shift was the fact that a Republican president and his Republican political appointee, not a Democrat or a career diplomat, had launched the initiative. Nixon’s successors Republican Ford and Democrat Carter recognized the benefits of engaging China, as did many in Congress who realized that engagement would facilitate US withdrawal from South Vietnam, give the US access to the China market, and improve prospects for peace and stability in East Asia.

### **The Korean Peninsula and Engagement’s First Round 1986-1992**

Twenty years passed before US policy toward East Asia underwent more substantive change. But first engagement of China encountered intense criticism in the wake of the Chinese government’s brutal suppression of the pro-democracy movement in June 1989, the “Tiananmen” Incident. Many in Congress wanted to punish China by reverting to containment, but President George H.W. Bush remained committed to engagement, partly because the strategy was nurturing movement toward capitalistic economic reforms. Also Congress’ attention was distracted by Iraqi’s invasion of Kuwait and the first Gulf War. Engagement persisted.

Prior to the *Tiananmen* Incident, the Reagan Administration teamed up with ROK President Roh Dae-woo in 1987 to expand engagement to the DPRK under the label of *nord politick*.<sup>11</sup> Roh’s predecessor Chun Doo-hwan had adopted a similar strategy of engaging all nations except the DPRK, regardless of ideology, to ensure their participation in the 1988 Seoul Olympiad. The effort proved a resounding success, but Seoul’s rejection of Pyongyang’s bid to co-host the Olympiad posed a threat of DPRK terrorism against the Olympiad. To defuse Pyongyang’s frustration, Seoul and Washington jointly formulated the “modest initiative” of July 7, 1988, the first step toward the engagement of the DPRK.

The initiative, carefully formulated to temper opposition by foes of engagement in Seoul and Washington, offered the DPRK limited diplomatic and economic inducements if it renounced the use of terrorism and its conduct conformed to international norms. A cooperative Pyongyang would be allowed to purchase “basic human needs,” i.e. US food grain, clothing,

<[www.nixonlibrary.org](http://www.nixonlibrary.org)>.

<sup>9</sup> Winston Lord, White House Memorandum of Conversation, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Winston Lord, White House Memorandum of Conversation, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> For discussion of the Chun Doo-hwan’s *nord politik* toward the USSR and its allies, and Roh Dae-woo’s engagement of the DPRK see: C. Kenneth Quinones, “North Korea: From Containment to Engagement,” in Dae-sook Suh and Chae-jin Lee, eds., *North Korea After Kim Il Sung I* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), pp. 101-119.

medicine, and educational materials plus engage in educational, cultural and athletic exchanges with the US. The US would open the “Beijing channel” to facilitate limited but the first ever direct bilateral diplomatic communication. The US’ multi-layers of economic sanctions would continue and normal relations remained out of the question, but compliance with US and ROK standards could open the way to normal relations. Pyongyang also had to demonstrate humanitarian sensitivity by allowing the US to search for and to recover the remains of 8,200 US service members who had died in the DPRK during the Korean War.

The DPRK’s initial response was encouraging. The Seoul Olympiad was held without incident, and South-North dialogue subsequently achieved unprecedented progress. The first Bush Administration’s announcement that it would withdraw all tactical nuclear weapons from abroad, an initiative aimed at the USSR, prompted Kim Il Sung to engage the ROK in talks that led to the South-North De-nuclearization Declaration of January 1992. The two Koreas also signed “basic agreements” that formed bilateral commissions to negotiate an end to the DPRK’s nuclear program, a peace and non-aggression agreement and implementation of bilateral exchanges to promote reconciliation. The DPRK even signed early in 1992 an agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to allow inspections of the DPRK’s nuclear facilities.<sup>12</sup> The Bush Administration responded by hosting in New York in January 1992 the first ever US-DPRK diplomatic dialogue. There were no negotiations at the unprecedented meeting, only an exchange of views about each side’s requirements for progress toward normalization.<sup>13</sup>

Despite persistent claims by some, Democratic President Clinton upon entering the White House on January 20, 1993 did not initiate but rather continued his Republican predecessor’s engagement of the DPRK, something Seoul actively supported. But abruptly hopes of continuing reconciliation were dashed in August 1992 when an IAEA inspection suggested that the DPRK had inaccurately reported how much plutonium it had produced. After intense diplomacy failed to gain DPRK cooperation, the IAEA informed the UNSC that the DPRK was in violation of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Pyongyang reacted by declaring its intention on March 11, 1993 to withdraw from the NPT, triggering an international crisis. Pyongyang’s perceived misconduct undermined ROK and US trust, and halted all dialogue and implementation of their agreements.

### **The Agreed Framework – Engagement’s Second Round 1993-2000**

Debate ensued in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo over how to deal with the DPRK. Three camps quickly emerged: revert to containment, engage the DPRK in negotiations to induce it to remain in the NPT, or attack its nuclear facilities. The latter option was quickly dismissed largely because of concerns in Seoul and Tokyo that an attack would spark a second Korean War. The debate intensified until newly inaugurated ROK President Kim Yong-sam indicated preference for Washington to negotiate with Pyongyang. Tokyo quickly concurred.

<sup>12</sup> C. Kenneth Quinones, “South Korea’s Approaches to North Korea: A Glacial Process,” in Kyung-Ae Park and Dalchoong Kim, eds., *Korean Security Dynamics in Transition* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 19-48.

<sup>13</sup> Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997. p. 265.

Washington's advocates of engagement seized the opportunity, but it was the DPRK which first offered to negotiate. With bipartisan Congressional support (see H.J. RES. 825),<sup>14</sup> encouragement from Seoul and Tokyo, plus most UN members including China and Russia, the first ever US-DPRK diplomatic negotiations began in early June 1993. The "Agreed Framework," the first ever bilateral US-DPRK diplomatic agreement, was signed on October 21, 1994. Although a signed agreement, it was not a treaty which displeased some Congressional critics of engagement because it denied them the ability to critic the accord.

The accord essentially outlined a process of engagement that required simultaneous steps by each side toward diplomatic and commercial normalization. In exchange for the DPRK's "freezing" of all nuclear activities, the "suspension" of withdrawal from the NPT and fulfilling commitments under the treaty, the US would organize an international consortium to build the DPRK two light water nuclear reactors (LWR) and supply heavy fuel oil (HFO) to power electricity generating boilers until the LWRs were operational. The Japanese government welcomed the accord but Seoul, the US Congress and the Defense Department were less enthusiastic.

Congress initially greeted the Agreed Framework with cautious bipartisan support by passing on November 15, 1994, three weeks after the Agreed Framework's signing, the, "Nuclear Nonproliferation in Korea Resolution" (H.J. RES. 292). It urged the president "to induce North Korea to comply fully with its obligations" under the NPT and "bilateral denuclearization agreement with the Republic of Korea ..." and

The Congress approves and encourages the use by the President of any means necessary and appropriate, including the use of diplomacy, economic sanctions, a blockade, and military force, to prevent:

1. development or acquisition by North Korea of a nuclear explosive device, or
2. the use by North Korea of such a device against the US forces in the region or against any ally of the US. (H.J. Resolution 292, Section 5.)

But the November 1994 Congressional election ended bipartisan Congressional support. When the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress convened under Republican Speaker Newt Gingrich early in 1995, Congressional foes of engagement launched a drive to return US policy to containment. They passed a series of joint resolutions and bills which included: a House Joint Resolution 83 (H.J. RES 83) dated September 5, 1995, the "Authorization for Implementation of the Agreed Framework Between the United States and North Korea Act" introduced into the Senate on September 25, 1995 (S. 1293), and Senate Joint Resolution 29 (S.J. RES. 29) dated November 10, 1995. None opposed continuation of engagement and the use of economic and other inducements to nudge Pyongyang toward fulfillment of its NPT obligations, the Agreed Framework and the South-North Korea De-nuclearization Declaration. Each piece of legislation, however, added hurdles the Clinton Administration had to overcome with Pyongyang to sustain bipartisan support for the agreement's funding.

Thereafter bipartisan support slowly crumbled. The US military had always been ambivalent about the agreement. The UNC saw the agreement and engagement as strengthening their foe the DPRK. UNC officers in Seoul groundlessly claimed that the agreement aided the enemy by providing fuel for its tanks and naval vessels. This was a reference to HFO which is

<sup>14</sup> The full text of all legislation referred to in this section is available at the Library of Congress web site at <[www.thomas.loc.gov](http://www.thomas.loc.gov)>.

the residue remaining after crude oil has been completely refined, making it suitable only to fuel boilers on ships and in power plants. ROK President Kim's wavering support for the US-DPRK negotiations had already obstructed progress toward the accord, causing the US in February 1994 to end its 45 year old policy of deferring to Seoul regarding policy toward the DPRK. Instead Washington designated the nuclear issue a global concern and seized the initiative in the negotiations. An angry Kim resorted to grumbling to Congress and the US mass media that the Clinton Administration was undermining Seoul's ability to resume direct dialogue with Pyongyang.<sup>15</sup>

Given mounting Congressional reluctance to fund the accord's implementation, the Clinton Administration asked allies to purchase the HFO and to fund construction of the LWRs. Actual implementation of the agreement was handled by the newly formed international organization, the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). US funds provided for its administrative costs while funding from allies, particularly Japan, paid for HFO deliveries. Kim in 1995 seized control of the agreement's implementation by insisting that, in exchange for funding, the LWR reactors had to be of ROK design and the main contractor had to be the ROK's Korea Electric Power Company (KEPCO). The start of construction was delayed significantly until the DPRK accepted Seoul's demands, exciting doubts in Pyongyang about the credibility of US promises.

Meanwhile Pyongyang's misconduct played into the hands of the Agreed Framework's critics in Seoul and Washington. In December 1994, seven weeks after the accord's signing, the DPRK army shot down an unarmed US Army helicopter that had strayed into the DPRK, killing the pilot and capturing his passenger. A US apology resolved the crisis and gained the captured passenger's release. In September 1995, a DPRK submarine was found beached on South Korea's northeast coast. Some 30 heavily armed commandoes had infiltrated from it into the ROK. All were killed or captured but the incident inflamed mistrust of the DPRK in Seoul and Washington. The situation was defused after the DPRK apologized to the ROK. These incidents suggest that Pyongyang also had its critics of the Agreed Framework who were intent upon unraveling the accord. By the end of 1995, Kim Yong-sam's displeasure with the agreement and Pyongyang's misconduct stiffened Congressional opposition to the Agreed Framework. Suspicion that the DPRK was constructing a secret underground nuclear facility and was preparing to enrich uranium further eroded bipartisan support for the accord. By August 1997, the DPRK foreign ministry considered the Agreed Framework ineffective.

The ROK presidential election of Kim Dae-jung at the end of 1998 breathed new life into the agreement. Kim was an avid advocate of engagement, which the media labeled "sunshine diplomacy." He promptly moved to quicken the pace of KEDO's LWR construction and ensured steady funding of KEDO's projects. But his efforts came too late to salvage the Agreed Framework. In August 1998, the DPRK launched a long range *Taepodong* ballistic missile over Japan, outraging the Japanese people and angering many in Congress. Thereafter Japanese support for the agreement and engagement waned as reflected in the Japanese government's imposition of unilateral economic sanctions on Pyongyang.

<sup>15</sup> Quinones, "South Korea's Approaches to North Korea: A Glacial Process," pp. 19-48.

## Republicans Revert to Containment 2001-2008

Soon afterward the US Congress passed the “North Korea Threat Reduction Act of 1999” (S. 1352) on July 12, 1999. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms (R. North Carolina), a powerful opponent of engagement and the Agreed Framework, introduced legislation that disallowed funding for the agreement “until the President determines and reports to” designated Congressional committees that the DPRK is implementing the South-North Joint De-nuclearization Declaration, is taking “demonstrable steps” to pursue dialogue with the ROK, complying with all provisions of the Agreed Framework, “has not diverted” US food aid away from those most in need of it, and “is not seeking to develop or acquire the capability to enrich uranium,…” The president was also required to certify that “the United States has made and is continuing to make significant progress on eliminating the North Korean ballistic missile threat, including its ballistic missile exports.” The legislation’s passage greatly complicated the Clinton Administration’s ability to implement the Agreed Framework. By then, the ROK’s efforts to salvage the agreement soon proved futile.

The election of George W. Bush, an outspoken critic of engagement despite his father’s promotion of it, to the presidency in December 2000 doomed the Agreed Framework. Bush pursued a foreign policy that emphasized US military superiority and unilateralism, and equated engagement with “appeasement.” But then Al Qaeda’s September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in New York marginalized East Asia’s importance and refocused the administration on a “war on terrorism.”

Thus when the Bush Administration declared the DPRK to have “materially breached” the Agreed Framework in October 2002, US military forces were deeply committed elsewhere. Unable to take military action against Pyongyang, Bush for the first five years of his two term presidency dealt with Pyongyang using a blend of containment and the multilateral Six Party Talks that China had initiated and hosted. He hoped to use China as a hammer to pound Pyongyang into submission, but this failed. As discussed earlier, persistent discord between Washington, Seoul and Tokyo over how to deal with Pyongyang impeded progress in the talks until September 2005 when the US accepted a Six Party accord that aimed at a phased dismantlement of the DPRK’s nuclear program in exchange for a return to engagement. No sooner had Pyongyang accepted the deal than Washington accused the DPRK of money laundering and imposed strident new sanctions. Pyongyang deferred implementation.<sup>16</sup>

In the spring of 2006, the DPRK tested its first nuclear device and unsuccessfully tested its second long range ballistic missile, prompting the UNSC to impose sanctions on the DPRK. Surprisingly, the PRC had not blocked the UNSC’s action. Then just as Bush seemed willing to revert to engagement, Japan’s new Prime Minister Abe Shinzo imposed unilateral sanctions on the DPRK aimed at compelling Pyongyang to resolve the “abduction issue,” a long standing bilateral dispute over Pyongyang’s abduction of about two dozen Japanese citizens dating from the late 1970s. This put Washington and Tokyo at odds in the Six Party Talks.

As the Bush Administration neared its end, conservative Lee Myung-bak won election in 2008 as South Korea’s president on a platform that demanded more concessions from Pyongyang for fewer inducements. When a DPRK sentry killed a South Korean tourist near Kumgang National Park just north of the DMZ, Lee opted for full containment of the DPRK.

<sup>16</sup> Quinones, “Dualism in the Bush Administration’s North Korea Policy,” *Asian Perspective*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2003).

Ultimately the Six Party Talks were suspended in 2008 without achieving concrete results. Contributing to this was the Bush Administration's inability to forge within its ranks a consistent approach for dealing with the DPRK. When its allies the ROK and Japan favored engagement, it had preferred containment. But after Tokyo had shifted to containment, Washington pursued engagement. Eventually Seoul sided with Tokyo, rendering the Six Party Talks ineffective. Meanwhile the PRC by 2009 opted to intensify its economic engagement of the DPRK in the hope of strengthening its ability to influence policy in Pyongyang.

### **The Obama Administration and “Strategic Patience”**

President Obama brought to the White House a very different world view than that of his predecessor.<sup>17</sup> He championed multilateralism over unilateralism and diplomacy over armed might. His foremost goal was to work for a nuclear weapons free future while sustaining a nuclear capable deterrence, as he made clear in his Nobel prize winning speech on April 5, 2009 in Prague, Czech Republic.<sup>18</sup> He favored engagement but was open to applying containment if allies and friends deemed it necessary. Obama declared that Pyongyang had “broken the rules” and “must be punished,” a reference to the 2006 UNSC Resolution 1718 that aimed to halt the DPRK's nuclear and ballistic missile tests. Obama's preference for multilateral diplomacy required that his administration first repair the damage his predecessor's unilateralism had caused.

Obama first focused on the Middle East to initiate the shift of US forces from Iraq to Afghanistan. Until this priority had been addressed, East Asia remained of secondary importance until the fall of 2011 when President Obama announced his administration was “pivoting” toward East Asia. Significantly, he chose ASEAN's Regional Forum, a multilateral regional organization, to make his announcement. The “pivot” was primarily diplomatic and aimed at convincing China that the US was committed to perpetuating its leadership role in East Asia well into the future. Its most profound aspect was Obama's declaration that henceforth East Asia would replace Europe as the US' foremost foreign policy concern, and that the preferred strategy across the region, including the PRC, would be diplomatic and commercial engagement supported by a resolute deterrence capability.<sup>19</sup>

Within this global context, the DPRK's importance was defined in terms of its ability to threaten regional and world peace with its developing nuclear arsenal. But rather than rush to restart the Six Party Talks in the hope of ending the threat, the Obama Administration adopted “strategic patience.” Three factors appear to have prompted this. First the administration recognized that bipartisan cooperation on foreign policy, a Cold War characteristic, had given way to using foreign policy as a theme of bipartisan bickering which had become evident during the Clinton and Bush Administrations. Republicans remained adamant in their opposition to the engagement of the DPRK so long as it persisted in developing weapons of mass destruction. Secondly, Washington remained hopeful that Beijing, having allowed UNSC passage of

<sup>17</sup> Quinones, “The Obama Administration's North Korea Policy,” *Chuo koron* (July 2009).

<sup>18</sup> “Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009.< [www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office)>.

<sup>19</sup> James B. Steinberg, Thomas Fargo, Aaron L. Friedberg, J. Stapleton Roy, David M. Lampton and Wallace Gregson, “Roundtable: Turning to the Pacific: U.S. Strategic Rebalancing toward Asia,” *Asia Policy*. no. 14 (July 2012), pp. 21-49.

sanctions to punish the DPRK for its nuclear and missile tests, would prove effective in restraining the DPRK. Additionally, the DPRK's inability during 14 years to successfully launch a multiple stage ballistic missile reduced the urgency of striking a deal with Pyongyang. Thirdly, given the Obama Administration's priority of repairing alliances, it did not wish to alienate Seoul and Tokyo by adopting an approach to Pyongyang that clashed with their preference for containment.

The essence of "strategic patience" is to straddle containment and engagement pending North Korea's dismantling of its nuclear and missile programs. Thus early in the administration, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton announced on February 13, 2009 that:

If North Korea is genuinely prepared to completely and verifiably eliminate their nuclear weapons program, the Obama Administration will be willing to normalize bilateral relations, replace the peninsula's long standing armistice agreements with a permanent peace treaty, and assist in meeting the energy and other economic needs for the North Korean people.<sup>20</sup>

President Obama reiterated this stance in his April 5, 2009 speech in Prague:

North Korea has a pathway to acceptance in the international community, but it will not find that acceptance unless it abandons its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and abides by its international obligations and commitments.<sup>21</sup>

The Obama Administration continues a posture of containment, which includes support for UN sanctions on the DPRK for undesirable conduct, while holding out the possibility of engagement once Pyongyang's policies and conduct meet international expectations. This has enabled the administration to minimize the risk of Republican criticism of its foreign policy toward the DPRK while reducing the risk of tension with South Korea and Japan over how to deal with North Korea.

The Obama Administration irritated Seoul and Tokyo early in 2012 by engaging Pyongyang in bilateral talks which reached a tentative agreement that could have resumed engagement. The move appears to have been aimed at assessing whether the DPRK's new leader Kim Jong Eun was more open to cooperation with the international community than had been his father Kim Jong Il. But as soon as the DPRK declared that it would launch a "satellite," an apparent euphemism for a ballistic missile test, Washington discarded its agreement. Shortly afterward, Pyongyang prepared for another nuclear test, but a stern warning from China apparently postponed the test. Yet at the end of December 2012, despite UNSC resolutions banning DPRK missile launches and China's opposition to the launch, Pyongyang successfully launched its first multiple stage ballistic missile which placed a satellite in orbit.

Tensions in Northeast Asia rapidly escalated. The UNSC with China's support in January 2013, passed yet another resolution aimed at halting the DPRK's nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programs by erecting barriers to international financial transactions involving weapons sales and purchases of technology and materials needed to develop weapons of mass destruction. Pyongyang dismissed the new resolution as yet another infringement of its

<sup>20</sup> "Remarks at the Asia Society," February 13, 2009. <[www.sate.gov/secretary](http://www.sate.gov/secretary)>.

<sup>21</sup> "Remarks by President Barack Obama."

sovereignty and proceeded to conduct its third nuclear test on February 12. The UNSC responded with another resolution on March 7.<sup>22</sup>

Tensions escalated to dangerous levels on the Korean Peninsula until early April. The Obama administration was caught off guard. Heated and persistent Republican Congressional criticism of the Obama Administration's handling of the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya and stiff opposition to Obama's nominee Chuck Hagel as Secretary of Defense deflected the administration's attention away from North Korea. Also in response to pre-election Republican criticism, the president started his second term with visits by himself and his new Secretary of State John Kerry to Israel and neighboring nations, something Pyongyang may have misinterpreted as a lack of concern about developments on the Korean Peninsula.

When the Obama Administration finally focused on East Asia, it sent mixed signals which only heightened tensions. US generals in the ROK remained quiet, but the Defense Department on March 8 dispatched B-52 strategic nuclear bombers to the ROK as part of the annual large scale US-ROK joint military exercise Foal Eagle. On March 14 President Obama in an US ABC News interview called for confidence building measures to ease tensions.<sup>23</sup> Also on March 14, US National Intelligence Director James Clapper testified before a US Senate committee that it was the US intelligence community's shared assessment that the DPRK did not appear to be making preparations to attack anyone.<sup>24</sup> Yet on March 15, Defense Secretary Hagel announced that US anti-ballistic missile defenses in Alaska and California would be significantly reinforced.<sup>25</sup> On March 18, US Assistance Defense Secretary Carter visited the ROK to finalize with ROK Defense Minister Kim Kwan Jin contingency plans for joint retaliation against a limited DPRK attack on the ROK. Carter also proudly confirmed for the first time that the US was flying B-52 nuclear bomber sorties over the ROK during Foal Eagle.<sup>26</sup> On March 28, shortly after Carter's departure, the first ever B-2A nuclear capable stealth bomber sortie was flown over South Korea.<sup>27</sup> Pyongyang matched each US step with its own escalation of rhetoric and military movements.

Beijing and Moscow reacted belatedly, followed by Washington. China may have been working quietly to restrain the DPRK, but its efforts did not become evident until after March 30. China's Foreign Ministry spokesman on March 29, for the first time, called upon all sides to restrain themselves. Moscow did likewise the same day.<sup>28</sup> The Obama Administration's new

<sup>22</sup> Since 2006, the UNSC has passed the following resolutions on the DPRK:

- UNSC Resolution 1718 (October 9, 2006) after the October 9, 2006 nuclear test;
- UNSC Resolution 1874 (June 12, 2009) after the May 25, 2009 nuclear test,
- UNSC Resolution 2087 (January 22, 2013) after the December 12, 2012 satellite launch,
- UNSC Resolution 2094 (March 7, 2013) after February 12, 2013 nuclear test.

<sup>23</sup> "Obama Urges Pyongyang to End Nuclear Missile Testing," *Chosun Ilbo*, March 14, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> "US Intelligence Chief Warns of N. Korean Provocation," *Chosun Ilbo*, March 14, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> "US to bolster Missile Defense to Counter N. Korea Threat," *Chosun Ilbo*, March 16, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> "US Committed to Defending S. Korea Despite Cuts," *Chosun Ilbo*, March 19, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> "B-52 Practices Bombing Raids on N. Korea," *Chosun Ilbo* March 20, 2013; "US Flies Stealth Bombers over South Korea in Warning to North," Reuters; and Thom Shanker, and "US Runs Practice Sortie in South Korea," *New York Times*, March 28, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> "China Calls for Easing of Tensions on Korean Peninsula," Reuters, March 29, 2013. "Russia Warns Against Military Activity Near North Korea," Reuters, March 29, 2013.

Secretary of State John Kerry finally arrived in Seoul April 2, a month after the escalation of tensions had begun. The DPRK topped his talking points,<sup>29</sup>

The US will defend and protect ourselves and our treaty ally, the Republic of Korea. ... important to stay absolutely focused on our shared goal of a peaceful Korean Peninsula, free of nuclear weapons. ... North Korea needs to make it clear that they are prepared to have a serious discussion about denuclearization. And they know exactly what the goal is; ... President Obama has said repeatedly we are prepared to enter into a dialogue negotiation if they are serious, if they will stop the provocations and engage in a serious discussion. ... making peace does not involve having a nuclear north and a disadvantaged Republic of Korea in the south.

Kerry's arrival statement in Seoul essentially summarized the Obama Administration's "strategic patience" approach to the DPRK. It straddles containment and engagement by telling Pyongyang that the US will not normalize relations and will exclude the DPRK from the international community until it gives up nuclear weapons and ballistic missile. To induce this, the DPRK is offered the promise of eventual engagement. Obama's "strategic patience" echoes some key aspects of Truman's approach to the DPRK such as chastisement of the DPRK as an international outlaw because of unacceptable misconduct and ostracizes it from the international community. They diverge, however, in that Truman's containment strategy aimed to weaken, even undermine the DPRK government. Obama's strategy seeks to induce the DPRK to transform itself, a goal Beijing shares. But some US and ROK opponents of engagement prefer that US policy aim to achieve regime change, even collapse of the DPRK government.

There is reason for optimism that Six Party Talks might resume in 2013 or soon after. As of the end of May 2013, China's concerns about Pyongyang's continuing pursuit of nuclear weapons and disregard for UNSC resolutions appears to have merged US and Beijing efforts to restart the Six Party Talks. Beginning in 2009, Beijing had shifted from emphasizing negotiations to offering the DPRK economic inducements in the hope of convincing it that had more to gain from pursuing prosperity than weapons of mass destruction. Washington, like Moscow and Seoul, also wants the Six Party Talks to resume. This is consistent with "strategic patience" and has the benefit of minimizing Republican criticism since it was a Republican president who first committed the US to the Six party Talks.

If the Six Party Talks resume, success will require that:

- the US, ROK, Japan, China and Russia sustain consensus regarding goals and tactics,
- the US administration sustains bipartisan political support for engagement, and
- the DPRK's conduct at the talks fosters confidence in the negotiating process.

Tokyo, although eager to see the Six Party Talks resume, has resume a unilateral approach to the DPRK in mid-May 2013 when Prime Minister Abe Shinzo dispatched his close adviser Mr. Iijima to Pyongyang to explore the possibility of reopening talks aimed at resolving the abducted Japanese issue. The issue brought Abe to national prominence and since 2006 has been Japan's foremost domestic political priority. However, it could put Tokyo at odds with Beijing, Moscow, Seoul and even Washington if the Six Party Talks resume.

<sup>29</sup> "Remarks of Secretary of State John Kerry with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea Yun Byung-se After Their Meeting," April 2, 2013, [www.dos.gov](http://www.dos.gov). pp.1 and 4.

Obviously maintaining security cooperation regarding diplomacy has proven at least as difficult as sustaining US bipartisan support for engagement of the DPRK. Both are equally vital to achieve a nuclear free Korean Peninsula without a second Korean War.

## **Conclusion**

Security cooperation in Northeast Asia focused on the Korean Peninsula has become increasingly complex and mature. It was born in the combat of the Korean War and was configured by Cold War rivalries. Two opposing alliance systems confronted one another intent upon deterring a second Korean War, one anchored in the ROK and the other in the DPRK. The Korean Peninsula became the only place in the world where all the superpowers' interests collided. The systems' cornerstone was conventional armed deterrence backed by nuclear weapons. Diplomacy was relegated to a minor role in the form of US containment of the DPRK and China, the US domestic political preference. Change began hesitantly at China's behest in 1969 as a Republican led endeavor that eventually enabled the United States followed by Japan to normalize relations with China. US domestic politics played a crucial role in determining the pace of the US shift from containment to engagement of China.

Change on the Korean Peninsula began as an ROK initiative involving its engagement of all communist nations except the DPRK. The US played a cautious supporting role until 1988 when Seoul invited Washington to join in a cautious shift to engaging the DPRK. Russia's and China's normalization of relations with the ROK paved the way for a fundamental alteration of regional security cooperation. For the first time, the superpowers - China, Japan, Russia and the US - shared the goal of jointly deterring another Korean War. They also agreed to a new joint goal - making the Korean Peninsula nuclear free.

Lacking was a consensus on how to achieve these goals. Between 1992 and 2013, the approaches of the US, ROK and Japan toward the DPRK vacillated between engagement and containment while Russia and China pursued engagement. The DPRK's inconsistent conduct and misdeeds sparked debates in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo regarding how best to deal with the DPRK. The Chinese government's armed suppression of a domestic democracy movement in 1989 had ignited similar disagreements, but US political leaders remained resolute in their commitment to engaging China. Assisting their effort was evidence that engagement was nurturing constructive change in China. Similar evidence was less evident in the DPRK. In short, each allied capitals' domestic politics meshed with Pyongyang's misconduct to erode political support for engagement.

Experience has taught the nations of Northeast Asia that deterrence alone cannot forge peace, only prevent war. Effective security cooperation requires diplomacy. Consequently diplomacy and deterrence have become equal components of security cooperation in Northeast Asia as evident from the concerned nations' shared preference for a negotiated end to Pyongyang's nuclear program. In this regard, China, Japan, ROK, Russia and the US agree to the need to resume the Six Party Talks. But still needed is recognition that their previous effort faltered as much or more because of their inability to sustain a common approach to the DPRK than the DPRK's misconduct. Future success will necessitate that they maintain consensus regarding goals as well as methods. The divergent political preferences in the three democratic societies (Japan, ROK and US) regarding containment verse engagement of the DPRK will make this a daunting task.

Continuing security cooperation's progress toward maturity and achieving success regarding the DPRK will require sustaining deterrence as well as agreement on how best to approach the DPRK. History suggests that engagement has proven more effective than containment in nudging China and Russia toward becoming accepted members of the international community. The same could prove true regarding the DPRK .

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