

Chapter 4

The United States in North Korea's Foreign Policy

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For

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Introduction

The United States is North Korea's nemesis. Central to the Democratic People's Republic foreign policy since 1948 has been a quest to promote its foremost goals of national unification and survival in the face of United States' opposition. The United States that led the international community's successful effort to block North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's armed attempt to reunify Korea in 1950. After three years of intense fighting and nearly 3,000,000 deaths, the 1953 Korean War Armistice halted the fighting, but left Korea a devastated and bitterly divided nation. Ever since, the war's legacy and intense distrust have perpetuated their mutual animosity.

The Cold War's superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union further intensified the animosity between Washington and Pyongyang. On the Korean peninsula, this took the form of each superpower backing their respective ally. Washington's support of Seoul enabled it to duel diplomatically against its foremost rival Pyongyang. At the same time, Washington's military alliance with South Korea continued to frustrate North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's persistent ambition to reunify Korea via any and all means possible, included military means and political subversion.

Ultimately, Kim had to adjust his priorities. Since the late 1980s, North Korea's survival has taken precedent over national unification. This shift was largely a consequence of changing circumstances. Pyongyang's economic development stalled in the 1980s just as Seoul's lunged forward. While Seoul rallied international participation in its 1988 Olympiad, Pyongyang turned to terrorism against South Korea and undercut its international support. Simultaneously, South Korea expanded its access to the international market, but economic decline in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union reduced North Korea's exports. Then the Soviet Union collapsed and China turned toward capitalism.¹

A Shift of Priorities

By 1990, survival had become Pyongyang's foremost concern. Kim Il Sung faced a dilemma. He could either persist in previous patterns of relying on military might and coercive diplomacy to perpetuate his regime, or he could shift to engaging the international community and seeking from them the resources he desperately needed in exchange for addressing their grievances.

The United States and South Korea offered Kim the first way out of his dilemma with their so-called "Modest Initiative" of 1988. The overture sought to defuse Kim's hostility toward Seoul and sense of isolation from the international community with offers to opening news channels of commerce and diplomatic communication. Kim Il Sung instead focused his attention on Japan. When this did not immediately yield results, he looked to South Korea. Seoul proved more accommodating, at least initially. But when Seoul teamed up with Washington to insist that Pyongyang give up its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, Kim Il Sung balked. Only the threat of war in May and June 1994

convinced Kim to forego further coercive diplomacy, opening the way for the Agreed Framework of October 1994, the first US-North Korea agreement.²

Hesitant progress toward the normalization of relations ensued. They peaked in October 2000 when North Korea's highest ranking general, Jo Myong Rok, visited Washington and was invited to the White House of a meeting with President Clinton. Subsequently, Secretary of State Albright visited Pyongyang and met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. Ultimately, this high level exchange stalled when a new president assumed office in January 2001.

Enter the Bush Administration

Animosity between Washington and Pyongyang has intensified since President George W. Bush assumed office in January 2001. But North Korea's current claims that the United States is pursuing a "hostile" policy toward are not merely linked to the Bush Administration's pointed rhetoric, unilateralism and assertive stance on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Pyongyang links its claims to the United States' more than half century effort to prevent North Korea from achieving its foreign policy priorities. The Nevertheless, the incumbent Bush Administration's dismissal of the Clinton Administrations preference for diplomatic engagement and economic inducements is a source of renewed concern in Pyongyang.³

Paradoxically, since 2001, North Korea and the United States appear equally determined to pursue their priorities vis a vis one another by using methods that undercut their ability to reach their goals. For North Korea, its priority remains regime survival. For the United States, it is the dismantlement of North Korea's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. North Korea's ultimate survival hinges on achieving reconciliation with the United States, but Pyongyang since 2001 has reverted to its traditional use of coercive diplomacy and the building of a nuclear arsenal to attain its goal. These efforts have undercut a decade of hesitant rapprochement with the United States. They have also convinced some influential Bush Administration foreign policy advisers to advocate "regime change" in North Korea.

At the same time, United States' success in attaining a "peaceful, diplomatic" resolution to the continuing impasse over North Korea's nuclear ambitions hinges on Washington's ability to convince Pyongyang that it is not out to undermine the Kim Jong Il regime. Yet the Bush Administration's rhetoric directed toward North Korea, refusal to engage in diplomatic negotiations with it and avowed "pre-emptive" strategy to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) appears to have convinced many in Pyongyang that the United State's preferred out come is not peaceful rapprochement but forced regime change.⁴

Hostile Policy verse Counter-proliferation

Pyongyang contends that the road to a peaceful outcome requires that Washington forego its “hostile” policy. Since declaring the resumption of its nuclear weapons program in the fall of 2002, Pyongyang has repeatedly accused the United States of trying to force it to disarm and open itself to “regime change.” Until this alleged policy ceases, North Korea asserts that it must strengthen its military deterrence capability with the addition of nuclear weapons, while also retaining its impressive ballistic missile and massive conventional forces arsenals. Otherwise, Pyongyang insists, it would make itself vulnerable to the United States’ armed attack under Washington’s “pre-emptive” counter proliferation strategy.⁵

Washington rejects Pyongyang’s allegation. Instead, it asserts that North Korea’s nuclear ambitions requires that it sustain a potent military deterrence capability in Northeast Asia while it simultaneously strives to achieve a “peaceful, diplomatic solution” to the diplomatic impasse over North Korea’s nuclear capability. A parallel objective, Washington claims, is to fulfill its bilateral defense commitments to South Korea and Japan by compelling North Korea to disarm itself of all weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear bombs, ballistic missiles and chemical and biological weapons.⁶

Both sides’ escalation of tensions since October 2002 convinced China to intervene diplomatically in the dispute between Washington and Pyongyang. Beijing successfully forged a new diplomatic forum in Northeast Asia for this purpose. Deemed the “Six Party Talks,” Beijing hosted a diplomatic gathering of representatives from China, Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States. The effort rekindled hopes that diplomacy could forestall a second Korean War, forge a diplomatic solution and preserve the Korean Peninsula as a nuclear free zone. Alas, expectations of a quick resolution have proven premature. In the mass media’s rush to explain the daily developments of the “six party talks,” the Cold War’s haunting legacy has been overlooked.

Decisive Crossroad

Today, the troubled relationship between the United States and North Korea appears to have reached a decisive cross road. Over the pass two years, these two antagonists have reversed their previous decade of progress toward reconciliation. Their persistent finger pointing over whom to blame for their persistent hostility only deepens their mutual distrust. It also does nothing to defuse their lengthy legacy of hostility. Ultimately, Washington and Pyongyang will either resume their progress toward reconciliation or move toward a second Korean War.

Our purpose here is to comprehend what Pyongyang means by this “hostile” policy, and to assess its goals and strategy for countering it. Our intent is neither to sympathize with nor to reject North Korea’s perception. Given this goal, we must assume that, from Pyongyang’s perspective, this “hostile” policy is not only real, but a significant driving force in the forging of Pyongyang’s policy toward the United States. For the sake

of accurate analysis, we need to better understand the strength of Pyongyang's convictions in this regard, and how these views affect its foreign policy. Hopefully this will contribute to an adjustment of our own perspectives of Pyongyang. Without parallel effort by both antagonists to more accurately understand one another, progress toward reconciliation will remain an elusive hope with potentially tragic consequences for all involved.

The View From Pyongyang

History is important to Koreans, regardless of whether they are from North or South Korea. They seek in history clues to the present and future conduct of people and nations. To comprehend contemporary views cherished in Pyongyang, we must at least glance at the past.

More than a half century of ill will between Pyongyang and Washington has forged their relationship of mutual distrust and animosity. This legacy impedes diplomatic dialogue and reconciliation. It also has crystallized in the minds of their leaders, particularly their military leadership, assumptions that permeate their respective thinking. Consequently, both capitals' concentrate on deterring the perceived threat that the other side poses. Like their strategies, their views of one another are equally contradictory. Viewed from Pyongyang, the United States is an "imperialist" power determined to destroy North Korea. To Washington, North Korea is a member of an "axis of evil" that is intent upon propping itself up by expanding its arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and threatening world peace through rogue conduct such as exporting ballistic missiles, possibly even material for nuclear weapons, to the world's other international outlaws.⁷

Here we concentrate on the view from Pyongyang. Pyongyang's view has its origins in Korean history. Both North and South Koreans share the common conviction that their small nation has long been the focus of superpower rivalry. They are prone to point to the pre-modern invasions of their peninsula by the Chinese, nomadic tribes of central Asia and Japanese pirate and samurai as evidence that Korea has long been a hapless victim of geography and great power self aggrandizement. Late 19th Century rivalry between the Chinese, Russian and Japanese empires provides additional evidence.

Shared Perceptions

Other shared perceptions are a keen sense of insecurity and distrust of superpowers. Geography partially explains Koreans' insecurity. Koreans often compare their small nation to a shrimp and their large neighbors to hungry whales. Korea's division and the Korean War haunt Koreans' memories. Rivalry between each half of Korea during the Korean War, and dependence on one of the world's two superpowers, perpetuated a fear of a second Korean War.

Koreans in both Koreas felt they had little or no control over their personal fate. At the same time, they feared their benefactors might resume the Korean War, and use their peninsula as the battle ground, regardless of Korean's concerns. For half a century,

Koreans sought reassurance and support from rival superpowers rather than from building mutual trust and cooperation. Koreans lacked confidence in their own ability to resolve their problems, and the ability to work with their kinsmen north and south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Not until the 2000 Pyongyang summit between the two Korean leaders did Seoul and Pyongyang begin to increase their inter-dependence. Ever since, the two Koreas have hesitantly but steadily fostered mutual self esteem and self confidence.

For Pyongyang, this was critical. Seoul during the previous two decades had out paced Pyongyang in terms of economic prosperity and military prowess. Seoul also achieved political stability and broad international respect. At the same time, Seoul not only reaffirmed its security relationship with the United States, despite friction over human rights issues, it also established diplomatic and commercial relations with China and the Russia. North Korea, on the other hand, felt increasingly insecure. The crumbling of the Soviet Union ended its nuclear umbrella over North Korea, and discontinued Pyongyang's ability to play Moscow against Beijing to maximize the flow of their aid to it.

Pyongyang found itself diplomatically isolated and increasingly estranged from its former allies. Pyongyang abruptly became commercially isolated, and its economy slid into a deep depression. Quite rationally, Pyongyang appears to have concluded that Seoul would capitalize on this situation and strive to overwhelm it. South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, however, defused Pyongyang's growing insecurity by engaging it economically and diplomatically beginning in 1998. This reassured Pyongyang that Seoul was not preparing to exploit the situation. Equally important, it suggested that Seoul was reducing its reliance on its nemesis, the United States.

American “Imperialism”

North and South Korea part company, however, when it comes to explaining Korea's experiences in the 20th Century. North Korea's founder Kim Il Sung fused Korea's traditional view of the world with Lenin's theory of imperialism. Kim Il Sung, who saw history as a political tool and not a quest for the truth, dated the United States' “imperialistic” designs on Korea from the 1860s. Fumbling attempts by ambitious American merchants to end Korea's “closed door” policy of not dealing with outsiders directed the United States' “gunboat diplomacy” toward Korea's antiquated defenses. Kim went to far as to claim that the United States “gunboat” diplomacy opened the way for Japan's eventual colonization of Korea in 1910. In short, every modern North Korean has been taught to believe that the United States and Japan have engaged in a conspiracy to dominate Korea for more than a century and a half.⁸

When the United States, under the United Nation's flag, blocked Kim Il Sung's effort to forcefully reunite Korea in 1950, Kim declared the United States the “imperialistic” heir of Japanese imperialism. He also down played the clash between the United States and Japan during World War II. Instead, he focused his nation's attention on his efforts against the Japanese “imperialists.” While greatly exaggerating those efforts, he linked the post World War II US-Japan defense alliance to the Taft-Katsura accord of

1905. In that “gentlemen’s agreement,” future US President William Howard Taft and Japan’s aristocratic diplomat Katsura agreed that their nations would respect and not interfere in one another’s “spheres of influence.” For Japan, this meant that the United States would not challenge Japan’s supremacy over the Korean Peninsula and Japan would do likewise regarding the Philippine Islands.

Ever since, North Korea’s rulers have cast the United States as the foremost imperialist power in the world. The world knows otherwise, but more importantly for the sake of our assessment, the leadership and people of North Korea hold the contrary conviction. They have no alternative. Anyone imprudent enough to challenge the “Great Leader” Kim Il Sung’s version of “history” can expect to be “erased” from history, both literally and figuratively. Kim Il Sung’s version of history has become North Korea’s definition of the truth. The United States is cast in the central role as the chief villain. As evidence of this, Pyongyang points to a long litany of grievances against the United States.

The Korean War’s Legacy

Washington’s intensified effort to discredit and to isolate North Korea after Kim Il Sung launched his armed effort to reunify Korea extended Kim’s list of grievances against the United States well beyond World War II and greatly expanded the list. North Korea’s aggressive misconduct convinced the United States to lead a successful effort in the United Nations to have North Korea labeled an “aggressor” and an international outlaw. Washington intensified its “containment” policy toward Pyongyang by striving to isolate it diplomatically and commercially. Washington condemned North Korea as being unworthy of diplomatic recognition and negotiations. At the same time, it imposed comprehensive economic sanctions on North Korea in the summer of 1950. Then the United States successfully rallied most of its allies to adopt similar policies toward North Korea.⁹

Another legacy of the Korean War is the Armistice and the continuing presence of forward deployed US military forces in Northeast Asia. North Korea considers the Korean War Armistice a rationalization for the United States to maintain its far flung military presence in Northeast Asia.

You Are Trying to “Strangle” Us!

The Korean War’s legacy haunts all aspects of the US-DPRK relationship. From Pyongyang’s perspective, most of the key elements of Washington’s Cold War era policy of “containing communism” remain in place more than a half century after the war. Foremost among these are the US defense posture of forward deployed military forces in Northeast Asia, i.e. deterrence, an extensive regime of economic sanctions and the absence of normal diplomatic and commercial relations between Washington and Pyongyang despite Seoul’s normalized relationships with Beijing and Moscow. Since 2001, Pyongyang has added to its “hostile policy” list the Bush Administration’s “pre-emptive counter proliferation” strategy and refusal to engage in bilateral diplomatic negotiations with North Korea.

The view from Pyongyang is rather unnerving and tends to confirm North Koreans' renewed sense of insecurity vis a vis the United States. North Korea's leaders, despite their earlier promises to the contrary, continue to indoctrinate their followers in the conviction that the United States is intent upon "strangling" their nation. When looking out from their impoverished nation of 23 million, North Koreans see ample evidence to support their leaders' claims.

Deterrence

North Korea's leadership is convinced that the combined military might of United States, Japan and South Korea is concentrated on their tiny nation. This awesome allied force is sustained by three of the world's most dynamic economies. Further reinforcing Pyongyang's conviction in this regard is its own myopic propaganda.

Looking south from Pyongyang, one sees a formidable array of awesome military might focused on North Korea. The 35,000 US and 650,000 South Korean military personnel are only the most visible elements of this force. They are backed by at least another 35,000 US Marines, soldiers, sailors and airmen scattered the length of Japan. They man a triad of strategic weapons systems that include cruise missile equipped nuclear submarines, land based fighters, an aircraft carrier battle group, a fleet of intelligence gathering aircraft and satellites. Beyond the horizon, in the south central Pacific on the island of Guam, a force of long range bombers stand ready to rain destruction on North Korea. To this we must add Japan's commitment, via the US-Japan alliance and the expanded US-Japan Defense Guidelines, to assist the United States in countering any military venture by North Korea.¹⁰

Kim Jong Il and his generals continue to pervert the reasoning behind the US military presence in Northeast Asia. They discount that their policies and deeds during the previous half century pose a threat to peace in Northeast Asia, as well as to South Korea's existence. Also, they reject the US contention that the concentration of military forces is defensive and maintained to deter North Korea from future armed misconduct. Instead, Kim and his generals point to alleged US "imperialism," to the US forces in Northeast Asia, and US alliances with South Korea and Japan to rationalize their exploitation of the North Korean people in the name of preventing the United States and its allies from "strangling" their nation. More recently, North Korea has turned to repeatedly trying to justify its development of a nuclear arsenal as "deterrence" to the perceived US nuclear threat to the Kim Jong Il regime's survival.¹¹

To Pyongyang, ending the alleged US "hostile" policy encompasses, as a first step, the replacement of the Korean War Armistice with a temporary "peace mechanism" designed to sustain peace while Pyongyang and Washington engage in diplomatic efforts to formulate a bilateral peace treaty. Subsequent to this, North Korea insists all US military forces should withdraw from South Korea.¹²

Economic Sanctions

Multiple layers of US-imposed economic sanctions continue to obstruct normal commercial intercourse between the United States and North Korea. The first layer was imposed shortly after the Korean War's start in the summer of 1950 under the US Trading With the Enemy Act of 1918. An additional layer was put in place in 1988 after a North Korean bomb aboard a South Korean airliner exploded, killing all aboard. This grievous misdeed earned North Korea a place on the "terrorist list" along with other international outlaws: Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Syria. A year later, selected economic sanctions authorized by the U.S. Export Administration Act of 1979, as amended by the Anti-Terrorism and Arms Export Amendments of 1989, were extended to North Korea. Yet another layer was added in 1995 by the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act. These sanctions bar North Korea from borrowing money from the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Asian Development Bank (ADB).¹³

Numerous elements of each level of sanctions have been phased out since 1988, but bilateral commercial relations between North Korea and the US remain a distant possibility. So long as North Korea continues its nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction programs, the United States has no reason to discontinue any more sanctions.

Unfortunately, these sanctions also serve the Kim Jong Il regime's political purposes of focusing the North Korean people's loyalty on him while simultaneously deflecting their wrath toward the United States. The sanction's continuation facilitate North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's fallacious claim that the sanctions, not his or his father's inept economic policies, are responsible for the horrendous suffering that the North Korean people continue to endure.¹⁴

North Korea insists that an integral part of any resolution of the nuclear issue include the curtailment of all US sanctions on it. Simultaneously with the normalization of commercial relations, Pyongyang insists that Washington also normalize diplomatic ties.

Return to Hostility

North Korea's leadership has extrapolated from the relatively strident rhetoric of the second Bush Administration that his administration is intent upon ending the Kim Jong Il regime. Our historical review makes it clear that US-North Korean mutual hostility pre-dates this administration. But its mantra clearly has played into the hands of those in Pyongyang who are intent upon convincing Kim Jong Il that the United States is out to undermine his regime. North Korea's government controlled media has been quick to seize on the Bush Administration's rhetoric to document North Korea's claims that the United States is out to "strangle" it.

Regardless, President Bush has persisted because his rhetoric appeals to his conservative political supporters in the United States. Consequently, neither his mantra

nor that of the North Korean leadership have clarified issues nor fostered mutual understanding. On the contrary, the administration's rhetoric has intensified mutual animosity and impeded progress toward Bush's avowed goal of a "peaceful diplomatic" settlement with Kim Jong Il's regime.¹⁵

A spiral of escalating rhetoric and tensions ensued since 2001. President Bush at the outset of his administration shelved any possibility of bilateral talks pending completion of a review of US policy toward North Korea. When the review was completed in June 2001, President Bush declared his administration's willingness to engage North Korea in "diplomatic talks." As an inducement, he promised to initiate a "bold initiative" toward North Korea that would encompass humanitarian and economic aid. Only later was Secretary of State Powell authorized to confirm that North Korea was expected to fulfill a number of preconditions before Washington would even consider engaging North Korea in negotiations. These preconditions amounted to demanding that Pyongyang first dismantle its arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. Pyongyang dismissed the offer as "pie in the sky."¹⁶

The Bush Administration paralleled its "bold initiative offer" with a rejection of the Agreed Framework's terms. It insisted that North Korea must promptly allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to do whatever it deemed necessary to determine North Korea's prior production of plutonium. This initiative was rooted in the conviction among Washington's critics of the Agreed Framework, and some of its Democratic supporters, that North Korea could not be trusted to "freeze" all its nuclear weapons' related activities. The Agreed Framework, however, provided that such inspections need commence only after completion of the buildings that were to house the two light water reactors promised to North Korea by the United States, South Korea and Japan. The two reactors, moreover, were not to be installed until the IAEA was satisfied that North Korea had accounted for all its previously produced plutonium. In short, Washington demanded that Pyongyang break the agreement. Pyongyang rejected Washington's premature call for the comprehensive inspections. The Bush Administration subsequently announced that it would discontinue its funding for the accord's implementation unless North Korea complied. South Korea and Japan, however, initially continued their financial support for the project.¹⁷

Pre-emptive Counter Proliferation

President Bush intensified the pressure on Pyongyang in 2002. His "hard line" strategy tended to disregard Pyongyang's security concerns and concentrated on achieving his counter-proliferation goals. He dismissed Pyongyang's offers to negotiate as being "nuclear black mail." He accused Kim Jong Il of starving his people so he could amass weapons of mass destruction. Then in the fall of 2002, Bush sanctioned a new "National Strategy to Counter the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction." The strategy asserted that the United States had the right to take "preemptive" military action to halt the spread of weapons of mass destruction. North Korea was identified as a key proliferator. Pyongyang interpreted this to mean that had become a potential target of

“pre-emptive” US armed countermeasures. Within this assertive and rather provocative atmosphere, President Bush in January 2002 identified North Korea as a member of “an axis of evil” that he declared to be a primary threat to the United States and world peace.¹⁸

Pyongyang moved to exploit Bush’s “pre-emptive” strategy to its advantage. It assumed the role of the hapless victim of US “imperialism” and unilateral arrogance. This strategy may not have won it any new friends. But at a minimum, it probably neutralized some nations’ suspicions that Pyongyang had broken the Agreed Framework and was clandestinely building a nuclear arsenal. Hesitantly, in the face of rising concern in South Korea and Japan, the Bush Administration decided to dispatch a diplomatic delegation to Pyongyang in October, 2002.

Kim Jong Il Blunders

Kim Jong Il committed a series of blunders in the fall, winter and spring of 2002-03. No sooner did Kim repair relations with Beijing and Moscow, and expand ties to members of ASEAN and the European Union (EU), when he mishandled Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi’s surprise initiative to resume normalization talks. Kim first admitted to and apologized for North Korea’s abduction of Japanese citizens. But then he undercut his own gains, and further infuriated the Japanese people, by not following through on his pledges to fully resolve this highly emotional issue.¹⁹

Kim committed his second blunder early in October 2002 shortly after Washington’s delegation reached Pyongyang and just as the Japanese outrage toward North Korea had reached new heights. According to the US delegation, reports that North Korea subsequently denied, ranking North Korean diplomats first denied but then apparently admitted that North Korea had initiated a clandestine program to produce highly enriched uranium (HEU) for nuclear weapons.

The stunning admission confirmed to the Agreed Framework’s critics in Washington and Seoul that negotiating with North Korea is futile because it cannot be trusted to fulfill its pledges. Pyongyang’s reported admission also confirmed to many, and aroused deep concern among other nations, that North Korea had broken all of its previous pledges to forego all nuclear weapons related actions. These promises included the US-DPRK Agreed Framework, the South-North Korea Joint Declaration on the De-nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and its nuclear safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency. Around the world, Pyongyang’s claims that it had not made such an admission fell on deaf ears, and its offers to engage in bilateral negotiations with Washington were greeted with dismay. Washington promptly dismissed any possibility of negotiations until after Pyongyang first had “irrevocably and verifiably” dismantled all its nuclear weapons programs. Kim Jong Il reacted by adding to his list of mistakes. He expelled IAEA inspectors at the end of December 2002 and early in 2003 pulled his nation out of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.²⁰

Kim's actions between October 2002 and February 2003 undercut his effort to play the role of hapless victim threatened by an untrustworthy and powerful villain. His missteps provided convincing evidence, not only in Washington but in numerous other capitals, that President Bush was correct and justified in labeling North Korea a member of the "axis of evil" and leading proliferators of weapons of mass destruction. In Japan, the public furor over the abducted Japanese issue merged with intensified fear of the North Korean threat. The Japanese government was compelled to shift from its previous increasingly conciliatory stance toward North Korea to a "hard line" policy more closely aligned to that of the Bush Administration.²¹

Three Party Talks

Early in 2003, diplomatic momentum briefly shifted back to Pyongyang. President Bush's preference for unilateral action, plus impatience with the United Nations and the IAEA's inspections in Iraq, suggested to many nations that he was intent on using his "military option" against members of the "axis of evil" if they obstructed his goal of ridding the world of weapons of mass destruction. Iraq and its dictator Saddam Hussein were Bush's foremost concern, at least in the winter of 2002-03. But Bush's refusal to convene diplomatic dialogue with Pyongyang and demand that it first and unilaterally disarm itself of weapons of mass destruction suggested to many nations, including close US allies, that the United States might also opt for military action against North Korea.²²

China, quietly urged on by Moscow and Seoul, intervened to temper tensions and to bring the two adversaries to the negotiating table. A month after the US invasion of Iraq, China's efforts yielded the so-called "Three Party Talks" at the end of April, 2003. Diplomats from China, the United States and North Korea met briefly in Beijing. But again North Korea blundered. According to US diplomatic sources, North Korean Ambassador Li Gun, on the meeting's margins, claimed to the chief US delegate James Kelly that North Korea had developed nuclear weapons. Pyongyang's claim disturbed not only Washington and its allies, but also Beijing and Moscow.²³ But before both could act on these concerns, President Bush formally launched his Proliferation Security Initiative or PSI.

Proliferation Security Initiative

The Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) is a Washington-led effort to forge a multilateral coalition designed to support diplomatically and facilitate militarily the "interdiction" of weapons of mass destruction anywhere in the world, including a third party's air space or in international waters. President Bush formally launched PSI in a May 31, 2003 speech at the G-8 summit in Evian, France. Twelve nations so far have signed up to the initiative and have participated in several training exercises. The Bush Administration maintains that PSI is a "global" effort to halt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Japan is a major participant in PSI. Seoul has not been invited to join, and has reservations about the arrangement.²⁴

Pyongyang, however, is convinced that the endeavor is focused on it. Moscow and Beijing share similar concerns. This conviction is rooted in the mid-December 2002 seizure by Spanish and US naval forces of a Cambodian ship en route to Yemen with a cargo of North Korea produced Scud ballistic missiles. The US was compelled to release the ship and its cargo because the interdiction was not supported by international law. Some months later, in the name of PSI, Japanese Maritime and Customs officials initiated in June 2003 thorough inspections of all North Korea ships entering Japanese territorial waters and ports.

Washington's persistent efforts to expand PSI and to legalize it under international law perpetuate Pyongyang's concerns that North Korea is PSI's primary focus. This is particularly the case now that the membership of the so-called "axis of evil" has been reduced to a single member – North Korea. Saddam Hussein's regime has been toppled, and Libya and Iran have moved to end their nuclear weapons programs. Meanwhile, Washington has not designated any new members to the "axis of evil," despite Pakistan's previous proliferation of nuclear weapon's technology.

Six Party Talks

Beijing and Moscow also share, along with Seoul, similar concerns about Pyongyang's nuclear intentions and Washington's military inclinations. Both of North Korea's closest allies, along with Seoul, want the Korean Peninsula to remain free of nuclear weapons. They are equally concerned that President Bush's assertive unilateralism could lead to a second Korean War, according to Moscow's political minister in Washington. Thus these nations teamed up to form a multilateral diplomatic forum where escalating tensions could be restrained by engagement in diplomatic dialogue and the search of a "peaceful diplomatic solution. The arrangement also coincided with Tokyo's preference for diplomacy over saber rattling and war of words between Pyongyang and Washington.²⁵

Looking Back to the Future

The deliberations at the first round of Six Party Talks at the end of August 2003 promptly made it apparent that forging a diplomatic resolution would be a complex and time consuming endeavor. Little substantive progress toward a resolution was accomplished. Nevertheless, the forum halted the escalation of tension and forced the two antagonists to temper their rhetoric, at least temporarily. Ever since, intense diplomatic effort has been necessary just to perpetuate the possibility that further diplomatic dialogue will eventually forge a "peaceful diplomatic solution."²⁶

Pyongyang's formula for a resolution requires a "package solution" to be implemented on the "principle of simultaneous steps" and that encompass an end to the US "hostile policy." Only then, Pyongyang insists, will it submit to Washington's demands and submit to a "verifiable and irrevocable" dismantlement of its nuclear "deterrence" capability.²⁷

The antecedents for North Korea's stance trace back to the first US-North Korea nuclear negotiations of 1993-94. A review of DPRK Chief Negotiator Kang Sok Ju's opening statements at the first and third rounds of these talks make this apparent. In June 1993, when both nations' diplomats first engaged in diplomatic negotiations, their aims were similar to those a decade later. Their strategies for achieving their respective goals, however, have changed significantly.

The United States remains intent upon preventing North Korea from acquiring and proliferating weapons of mass destruction. In 1993-94, this meant inducing North Korea with the promise of normalized diplomatic and commercial relations, plus the end of large scale US-South Korea joint military exercises, to remain in the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), to freeze all of its nuclear activities and to allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring of its primary nuclear facilities at Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center. The Bush Administration, however, has rejected the inducement strategy as succumbing to Pyongyang's "nuclear blackmail." Instead, President Bush has ruled out any bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang pending its dismantlement of its entire nuclear development program.

Pyongyang remains equally committed to confronting the United States with the same dilemma as was the case in 1993-94 – either the United States forgoes its hostile policy and pursues the normalization of relations or else North Korea will build a nuclear arsenal. North Korean First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Sok-ju expressed his nation's concerns in his opening remarks on June 3, 1993 at the first round of US-North Korea nuclear negotiations. He said (emphasis added),²⁸

Our decision to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty is the consequential outcome of the policy pursued by the United States so far over the last four decades since the end of the Korean War, a ***policy of hostility*** against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. ... We have come to the conclusion that the unchanged anti-DPRK policy of the United States is, after all, intended to ***strangle our socialist system***.

Kang's proposed solution for the 1993 crisis foreshadowed Pyongyang's proposal a decade later,

For the fundamental solution of the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula, it would be essential for the United States to ***revise its DPRK policy*** in line with the changes in the post-Cold War international relations. First, it would be important for the United States to ***rescind its policy of strangling the DPRK***. ***If the United States had not posed a nuclear threat against the DPRK***, the nuclear issue would not have originated on the Korean Peninsula at all. Second, it is important for the United States to call off all forms of pressure and ***revoke its policy of hostility*** against the DPRK. Third, the United States will have to recognize and respect our entity and

political system. Fourth, our bilateral relations should be relations of equality, mutual benefits, good-neighborhood and cooperation.

The point of immediate priority is that *the United States rescind (sic) its policy of strangling the DPRK and posing nuclear threat against the DPRK*. We want to obtain a policy commitment from the United States that it will not try to strangle the DPRK, *and in return the DPRK will make its own policy commitment that it will not manufacture nuclear weapons*.

Initially, the American delegation was taken aback by Kang's accusations. After all, Americans in 1993 were not accustomed to enduring such a tongue lashing, especially on their own turf and after having invited the North Korean delegation into the US Mission to the United Nations for their first negotiations, and after having given them coffee.

Although Kang uttered such claims in June 1993, they echoed in Pyongyang's official statements after Kang Sok Ju apparently admitted to US Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs James Kelly at their October 2002 meeting in Pyongyang that North Korea had initiated a new and clandestine program to produce highly enriched uranium (HEU) for nuclear weapons. North Korea's Foreign Ministry spokesman promptly claimed in an official statement dated October 7, 2002 that, "The US-raised "issues of concern" (an oblique reference to the HEU program) are nothing but a product of its *hostile policy toward the DPRK*."

Same Problem, Same Solution

The DPRK Foreign Ministry followed with a lengthier statement dated October 25, 2002. Just as Kang had done almost a decade earlier, Pyongyang pointed to the United States, its nuclear arsenal and hostile policy as the source of the problem,

"As far as the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula is concerned, it cropped up as the US has massively stockpiled nuclear weapons in South Korea and its vicinity and threatened the DPRK, a small country, with those weapons for nearly half a century, *pursuing a hostile policy* toward it in accordance with the strategy for world supremacy.

Once again, just as Kang had done in June 1993, Pyongyang proposed a negotiated solution along the following lines,

..., the DPRK, with greatest magnanimity (one of Kang's favorite phrases), clarified that it was ready to seek a negotiated settlement of this issue on the following three conditions: firstly, if the US recognizes the DPRK's *sovereignty*, secondly, if it assures the DPRK of *non-aggression* and

thirdly, if *the US does not hinder the economic development of the DPRK*. The position of the DPRK is invariable.

The DPRK considers that it is a reasonable and realistic solution to the nuclear issue to conclude a non-aggression treaty between the DPRK and the US if the grave situation of the Korean Peninsula is to be bridge over. If the US legally assures the DPRK of nonaggression, including the non-use of nuclear weapons against it by concluding such a treaty, the DPRK will be ready to clear the former of its security concerns.

Security Assurances

North Korea's preoccupation with "security assurances" dates from at least 1993. It was the central theme of informal working level talks convened in a Manhattan coffee on 42nd Street's east side during the first week of June 1993. Then State Department North Korea affairs officer (the author) met for three lengthy dates of dialogue with three members of North Korea's delegation to the US-North Korea nuclear talks. They insisted that the talks could resume only if the United States gave North Korea public security assurances.

Rather reluctantly, the Clinton Administration accepted the concept. To word the initial US draft, working level members of the US delegation turned to Article 1 of the United Nations Charter. The wording of this draft stunned members of the National Security Council (NSC), but once assured that the phrasing had been extracted from the UN Charter, Washington gave the green light to proceed with the draft. Eventually, chief US negotiator, then State Department Assistant Secretary for Political-Military Affairs Robert Gallucci and Kang Sok Ju hammered out the final wording of the "security assurances" contained in the "Joint Statement of the USA and the DPRK" concluded in New York on June 11, 1993. The key portion reads,

The USA and the DPRK have agreed to principles of:

- assurances against the threat and use of force, including nuclear weapons;
- peace and security in a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, including impartial application of full scope safeguards, mutual respect for each other's sovereignty, and non-interference in each other's internal affairs;
- and
- support for the peaceful reunification of Korea.

These "assurances" were subsequently reaffirmed in every joint statement issued by the United States and North Korea, at least until the end of the Clinton Administration. The June 11, 1993 US-DPRK Joint Statement was reaffirmed in the October 1994 bilateral Agreed Framework. Security assurances were repeated in the accord, "The U.S. will provide formal assurances to the DPRK, against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the U.S."

The Bush Administration and Security Assurances

The Bush Administration persisted in refusing either to give Pyongyang security assurances or to affirm those of the Clinton era until the fall of 2003. Then Washington and Pyongyang both slowly adjusted their respective positions, at least on this issue. President Bush in October 2003 indicated his willingness to provide security assurances to North Korea, a clear concession relative to his earlier stance, but first North Korea would have to publicly forge its nuclear ambitions. Pyongyang, on the other hand, dropped its insistence upon “legally binding” assurances. This progress was largely a consequence of effort by China, Russia, South Korea and Japan to focus the two adversaries on diplomacy while nudging them toward a diplomatic solution.

One year after the meeting between Kelly and Kang, Pyongyang indicated in a Foreign Ministry statement dated October 25, 2003, that it was willing to consider President Bush’s “written assurances of non-aggression” instead of its earlier demand for a non-aggression treaty. Pyongyang claimed it would do so, however, only, “if they (written assurances) are based on the intention to co-exist with the DPRK and aimed to play a positive role in realizing the proposal for *a package solution on the principle of simultaneous actions*.” (Emphasis added.)

Old Labels on New Bottles

None of these preconditions were new. Some date from the June 11, 1993 US-DPRK joint statement in which Kang Sok Ju called for a “package solution.” The US and North Korea first subscribed to “simultaneous steps” in the so-called “Agreed Conclusions” of February 1994. Kang Sok Ju’s in his July 8, 1994 opening statement at the third round of US-North Korea negotiations reaffirmed both concepts. The change of administrations in Washington has erased memories of much of this. But in Pyongyang, history remains important and memories are much longer.

The phrase “simultaneous steps” was conceived in February 1994 during a series of working level talks between then State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Hubbard and DPRK Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Ambassador Ho Jong. The talks, held in New York, forged a bilateral agreement called the “Agreed Conclusions.” The accord outlined a series of steps that would open the way for the resumption of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections in North Korea.

The sequence of implementing these steps proved to be the most formidable obstacle to closing the deal. Because of the two sides’ intense distrust, both insisted that the other side take the first step. North Korea’s Ho Jong adamantly rejected this, claiming that his nation would never submit to “preconditions.” The US side, backed by the South Korean government, responded in kind. Finally, after several lengthy and exhausting negotiating sessions, Ambassador Ho proposed the idea of “simultaneous steps.” In other words, to initiate the accord’s implementation, the two sides would move in tandem with

each other in “four simultaneous steps.” The accord’s public portion concluded with the statement, “Each of these simultaneous steps is required for the implementation of these agreed conclusions.” Ultimately, the accord collapsed because of missteps on both sides. The concept of “simultaneous steps,” however, was later revived and incorporated into the US-DPRK Agreed Framework signed in Geneva on October 21, 1994.

Pyongyang reiterated its insistence upon “simultaneous” implementation of a “package solution” in the Foreign Ministry spokesman’s statement of December 28, 2003,

Arrangements for the next round of the six-way talks should be oriented towards ... an agreement on actions to be taken at the first phase, ...
...the Bush administration is keen to force the DPRK to disarm itself, asserting that it must scrap its nuclear weapons program first without ... a *switchover in its hostile policy* toward the DPRK. This is a major hurdle in realizing the *proposal for a package solution on the principle of simultaneous actions* ... (Emphasis added.)

Conclusion

Ultimately, the success or failure of the Six Party Talks hinges on the ability of North Korea and the United States to forge a bilateral understanding. Also, whether or when such an agreement might be reached depends entirely on the two antagonists’ determination to define a “peaceful diplomatic” solution, less upon the good efforts of the other four participants in these talks.

Crucial steps toward such an agreement require compromise by Pyongyang and Washington. After three years of escalating tension, both have taken steps toward a solution. The first step involved Pyongyang accommodating the United States’ insistence on multilateral talks, and Washington’s willingness to participate in talks that included North Korea. Next came “security assurances.” Pyongyang relinquished its earlier demands for “legally binding” and instead accepted “multilateral” assurances. The US shifted from “no concessions” to agreeing to the multilateral concession of “multilateral” assurances. At the end of 2003, the two sides were haggling timing, “simultaneous steps” verse “step by step.” The suggestion of “coordinated steps” could overcome this obstacle. There is certain to be lengthy and intense squabbling over the issue of “verification.”

But if the process is to succeed, and a second Korean War avoided, both sides must build mutual trust. For the United States, this means convincing North Korea that it will discard its “hostile policy.” Pyongyang likewise must convince Washington that it will fore sake building a nuclear arsenal. The process of building mutual trust between Kim Jong Il and his American counterpart, however, has yet to begin.

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