

Begun is Half Done

Prospects for US-North Korea Nuclear Diplomacy



February 2019
By Catherine Killough

PLOUGHSHARES FUND

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Executive Summary

The United States may be within reach of an agreement that could meaningfully advance the denuclearization of North Korea and build lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula. South Korean President Moon Jae-in first laid the groundwork for dialogue in 2017. To their credit, President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un then initiated an unprecedented, leader-driven diplomatic process to supplant the nuclear brinkmanship that has bedeviled US-North Korea relations. However, the opportunity may be fleeting.

At this critical juncture, the same challenges that have undermined past negotiations threaten the diplomatic opportunity at hand. Washington demands that North Korea take immediate and unilateral action to denuclearize, while Pyongyang insists that the United States frontload political and security guarantees. The historical and political lessons of past US-North Korea negotiations could help the Trump administration break such an impasse.

First, the Trump administration must overcome decades of mistrust if it seeks to compel North Korea to change its security calculus and abandon nuclear weapons. The US-North Korea relationship continues to exist on the basis of enduring hostilities forged in the 1950-1953 Korean War. US efforts to restrict North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons – beginning only in the 1990s – have not sufficiently addressed this larger unresolved conflict.

Second, the administration will need to build political space at home to ensure diplomacy can succeed. Partisanship and intraparty infighting have created obstacles to effectively deal with North Korea, while leadership changeovers – in both Washington and Pyongyang – have resulted in short-sighted decisions to abandon promising agreements. In the near term, the Trump administration should encourage Congress to support corresponding measures, such as limited sanctions relief, that could advance nuclear talks. The durability of future agreements will depend on mechanisms that foster Congressional buy-in and responsible oversight.

A critical review of the US-North Korea negotiation record calls into question the conventional narrative that diplomacy has been a categorical failure, that North Korea has always cheated, and that denuclearization is unachievable. Every US president since Bill Clinton has attempted to reverse North Korea's nuclear course, and, at times, these efforts have succeeded in slowing the program. Policymaking going forward can and should be guided by this history of partial success and missed opportunities.

The lessons of four missed opportunities – in both Republican and Democratic administrations – underpin this analysis:

1. The Bill Clinton administration negotiated the **Agreed Framework** (1994-2003), the first US-North Korea nuclear deal and earliest attempt at dissuading North Korea from going down the nuclear path. It froze North Korea's plutonium production for nearly a decade, and set a precedent for fundamentally improving relations between enemy states. But instead of supporting the agreement, a newly Republican-controlled Congress hamstrung the implementation process, and the incoming George W. Bush administration used intelligence reports about a suspected uranium enrichment program to scrap the deal. Soon after, Pyongyang announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and reactivated its plutonium program. North Korea now has an estimated 20-40 kilograms, or 4-8 bombs worth, of plutonium.
2. As a follow on to the Agreed Framework, the Clinton administration established an external policy review, known as the "Perry Process," which launched negotiations toward a separate **North Korea missile agreement**. This was the first and last major opportunity to prevent North Korea from developing and proliferating missile technologies. The Clinton administration was close to concluding a deal in 2000, but the incoming Bush administration decided to cancel talks, with no alternative plan to constrain North Korea's missile activities. North Korea has since developed and tested intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching the United States.

3. The Bush administration, convinced of the need to re-enter negotiations as North Korea's plutonium stockpile grew, joined the Chinese-led **Six Party Talks** in 2003. Two years and several rounds of negotiations later, North Korea pledged to abandon its nuclear programs in exchange for an action-for-action plan that would address its desires for regime security and energy assistance, consistent with the Agreed Framework. But the US Treasury Department – uncoordinated with the negotiators – abruptly imposed sanctions that derailed another opportunity for a diplomatic breakthrough. North Korea went on to break its self-imposed missile test moratorium and detonated its first nuclear device in 2006.
4. The last opportunity to engage North Korea emerged under the Obama administration with **the Leap Day Deal** (2011-2012). In exchange for food aid, North Korea pledged to halt nuclear and missile testing at a time when it was making significant gains toward a credible nuclear deterrent. But the deal closed almost as soon as it opened. North Korea, which had undergone a major leadership transition from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un, announced plans to commemorate the new leader with a satellite launch. The Obama administration then decided to discard the deal rather than renegotiate it to address the risks of dual-use missile technologies. In the years since, North Korea conducted four nuclear tests and over eighty-five missile tests.

Reshaping North Korea policy requires an honest reckoning of the successes and shortcomings of these diplomatic precedents. In each case, North Korea demonstrated a willingness to deal on terms that would have slowed, limited, and even reversed its nuclear development. North Korea has also demonstrated a talent for hedging against the United States, as evidenced by its development of a uranium enrichment program. Whether North Korea intended to cheat, or to create more leverage over the United States in moments of diplomatic uncertainty, are questions worth investigating. But it is evident that the United States moved too slowly, and withdrew too quickly, when disputes arose.

The Trump administration must now draw on these lessons to ensure that it does not lose yet another opportunity to curb the North Korean nuclear program. Going forward, US policymakers should adopt a comprehensive North Korea strategy that encompasses 1) a step-by-step approach to advance simultaneous progress on a peace regime and denuclearization, and 2) a roadmap to secure interim actions that would reduce the risk of conflict, including measures to slow down North Korea's nuclear weapons development.

The United States stands to gain more when it engages North Korea. Periods of isolation have exacerbated North Korea's siege mentality and accelerated its pursuit of a nuclear deterrent. Absent dialogue, fundamental misunderstandings between Washington and Pyongyang widen, raising the likelihood for miscalculation. The potential consequences of a provocation that could escalate into nuclear conflict are too disastrous to risk.

Policymakers across the political spectrum have squandered strategic opportunities to deal with North Korea well before it acquired the nuclear capabilities that challenge the Trump administration today. We must learn from these experiences to ensure we do not make the same mistakes again.

Foreword

When Catherine first told me she wanted to write about the missed opportunities in US-North Korea diplomacy, I encouraged her to see it through. The timing couldn't be better or the need greater.

For too long, stereotypes and assumptions have dictated US policy and actions toward North Korea. We have not gotten very far from since-disproved notions that all three of the Kim regimes – Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and now Kim Jong Un – are crazy, that the country is on the verge of collapse, or that any agreement with North Korea is useless.

When I began working on North Korea as an appointee in the Clinton administration, I thought I knew all that needed to be known about the country. As a Korean American (my mother was born in what is now the North, and my father, in the South), I was taught fundamental “truths” early in life about the DPRK – it was depraved, corrupt and evil; North Korea was weak, the United States was strong; and with enough pressure, the United States would put this tiny country and its leadership in their place. I was raised to be an extreme hardline “hawk” on North Korea.

As I engaged with North Korea through negotiations and travel, though, my views on North Korea became more nuanced. My “superhawk” status has since evolved.

Simply put, US policy toward North Korea has failed. Despite American efforts over the past thirty years, we have a North Korea that may very well be on the verge of having a small nuclear weapons arsenal capable of hitting the continental United States. More to the point, the prior three administrations pursued the same range of ineffective policies, and yet expected a different result. We can't keep falling into the trap of underestimating North Korea, anticipating it will collapse, or assuming Kim Jong Un will behave in the same way his father and grandfather did.

For the past 25 years, policy experts and academics have argued about North Korea's intentions. The reality is that no one really knows. The good news is that we have, for the first time in almost twenty years, the chance to talk directly to North Korea's supreme leader and find out. If we guard against old biases and talk on a sustained basis, the Trump Administration can carefully test the willingness of Kim Jong Un – through concrete, reciprocal steps, not just words – to trade in North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

Catherine's report challenges us to consider the possibility of new opportunities and directions with North Korea. As you will soon read, she shows that within the cracks of a broken diplomatic record, there are indeed slivers of success.

We must apply these lessons today.

Philip Yun
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Introduction

Face-to-face negotiations between President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un have brought US-North Korea relations to new heights. After a dizzying year of threats, tweets, and talks, the outlines of a robust diplomatic process are beginning to take form. The United States now has a rare opening to make progress on its decades-long goal of achieving denuclearization and peace on the Korean peninsula.

Despite the opportunities, old challenges stand in the way: Kim Jong Un retains a sophisticated nuclear arsenal with the potential to deliver a nuclear weapon to the US mainland; the Trump administration demands immediate and unilateral disarmament steps before addressing Pyongyang's demands to normalize political and economic relations; and both sides maintain fundamental differences over the future of US-North Korea relations and the Korean peninsula.

President Trump, who has personally elevated the North Korea issue as a top foreign policy priority, has many new and auspicious factors to work with. He has a willing and leading partner in South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who carries a pro-engagement mandate that has not been seen since the Roh Moo-hyun government (2003-2008). Having started their diplomatic outreach to North Korea at the beginning of their terms, Trump and Moon are better positioned than their predecessors to make significant headway in negotiating a deal.

Kim Jong Un is the most important new variable as the youngest North Korean leader whose strategic interests have not been fully explored or tested by the United States. Over the past year, Kim has signalled a willingness to set North Korea on a course toward denuclearization. In his 2018 New Year's address, Kim stated that North Korea had "completed" its nuclear development and was prepared to focus on the economy.¹ A year later, Kim reiterated his

"firm will to establish a new bilateral relationship" with the United States and recommitted to "neither make and test nuclear weapons any longer nor use and proliferate them."² President Moon, who has met with Kim multiple times, believes that this shift reflects a sincere intent to denuclearize "if the United States could provide the trust that they will provide security guarantees and also aid North Korean economic development."³

With the key players engaged and a diplomatic path opened, the conditions are ripe for the Trump administration to pursue a halt, reversal, and eventual elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. If prior experience is any indication, however, this will not be easy – let alone attainable under a single presidency. Fortunately, US policymakers have over twenty-five years of similar efforts from which to draw important lessons.

More than the proverbial "land of lousy options," North Korea is a land of lost opportunities – one in which US-led diplomacy has succeeded in suspending and rolling back North Korea's nuclear developments, only to have those achievements undone by distrust and partisanship. The recommendations outlined in this report are guided by these lessons and offer the best prospects for the Trump administration to seize the opportunity at hand. But half the battle is getting started. As the prominent North Korea expert Victor Cha once said, "to have begun is half-done."⁴

Hostile Origins

Since the 1990s, North Korea has become an increasingly critical foreign policy issue for the United States. Yet relations between the two countries, forged in the experience of the Korean War, remain deeply estranged. Besides the nuclear negotiations of recent history, leaders in Washington and Pyongyang have had few direct interactions. Fundamental misperceptions have grown and guided policy in both countries, to unproductive effect.

In the United States, the Korean War is known as “the forgotten war.” In North Korea, it is an ongoing and hyper-present reality. Pyongyang has justified its pursuit of nuclear weapons on what it perceives as a constant and existential threat from the United States, while Washington has drawn on a narrative of North Korean aggression and duplicity to justify a policy of isolation. The perpetuation of these historical biases has deepened divisions and only emboldened Pyongyang’s nuclear aspirations.

The interconnections between the experience of the Korean War and the nuclear developments on the peninsula suggest that North Korea’s nuclear weapons program is as much about sovereignty as it is about security. Kim Jong Un implied as much in his speech to the 7th Workers’ Party Congress in 2016: “As a responsible nuclear weapons state, our Republic will not use a nuclear weapon unless its sovereignty is encroached upon by any aggressive hostile forces with nuclear weapons, as it had already declared, and it will faithfully fulfill its obligation for non-proliferation and strive for global denuclearization.”⁵

If the Trump administration wants to resolve the nuclear standoff with North Korea, then it can start with a reckoning of the historical grievances that inform North Korea’s political and security calculations. But the United States will need to do more than provide inducements to that end; it must begin to address and reconcile the persistent antagonisms that have festered over seven decades.



UN Forces crossing the 38th parallel line in Korea during the war.

A Brief History of US-North Korea Relations

Liberation and Division

In August 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Over 100,000 civilians were killed in what was the first and last time that nuclear weapons were used in warfare. Japan surrendered days later, resulting in an Allied victory, an end to World War II, and Korea’s liberation from Japan.

From 1910 to 1945, the Empire of Japan colonized Korea – a wanton act of imperial aggression that faced little resistance from the international community, including the United States. Washington likely knew about the conquest beforehand; in 1905, the Taft-Katsura Agreement endorsed Tokyo’s plans for annexing Korea in exchange for Japanese recognition of American control over the Philippines.⁶

Japan’s subsequent 40-year rule and expanding sphere of influence in Asia imposed profound challenges on Korea’s national and cultural identity. The struggle to adapt created fissures among Koreans who diverged in their visions for survival, resistance, and independence. This colonial legacy and its attendant ideological rifts would reappear in the geopolitical vacuum that accompanied Japan’s defeat in 1945.⁷

Korea’s independence from foreign occupation was short-lived. Soon after the bombing of Hiroshima, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and advanced into Japanese-held territory, including Korea. The United States, fearing that the Soviets would seek to occupy all of Korea, moved quickly to establish its own occupation zone.

The United States could not have known then that drawing a temporary line at the 38th parallel would harden into the demilitarized zone that defines North and South Korea today. But as the Cold War intensified, the occupational zones that split Korea became an ideological battleground between the Soviet-backed regime in the north and the US-backed regime in the south.

The Establishment of North and South Korea

By 1948, a once-unified Korea became two: the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north. In the years that followed, each side vied for – and rejected the other's – political legitimacy to rule over a whole sovereign state. Exacerbating those differences, the border became a site of frequent skirmishes, enduring division, and the prelude to war.

Koreans, Americans, and Soviets alike contested the establishment of separate Korean governments. A few months after World War II, the foreign ministers of the United States, Soviet Union, and United Kingdom met at the Moscow Conference to determine the status of occupied countries like Korea. Under the Joint Soviet-American Commission, the group proposed establishing a “united administration for Korea” by way of a trusteeship composed of the Soviet Union, China, the United States, and the United Kingdom for up to five years.⁸

While some Koreans, particularly those aligned with the Korean Communist Party, approved the notion of a trusteeship, others took to the streets to demand immediate independence. The Joint Commission's efforts to resolve the issue of Korea's independence stalled as local opposition and Soviet-American tensions escalated. After two years of deadlock, the United States took the matter to the United Nations.⁹

In October 1947, the United States submitted a resolution recommending that the United Nations oversee elections in both occupied zones of Korea in order to form a single national government. Despite Soviet opposition, the resolution passed and the UN Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCK) was launched in November. To this day, North Korea considers these actions illegitimate – a legacy that bears special relevance in the current debate over establishing normal relations with the United States.

Refusing to recognize its legitimacy, the Soviet Union barred the UNTCK from holding elections in the north. Nevertheless, elections proceeded in the US-occupied south. Syngman Rhee, a Korean nationalist who spent decades living and studying in the United States, was elected president of the Republic of Korea.¹⁰ Following suit, the Soviet Union tapped the former guerrilla fighter from Manchuria, Kim Il Sung, to lead the newly established Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north. At 73 and 36 years old, respectively, the two leaders could not have been more different – save for their desire to reunify the peninsula.



US Air Force B-29 bombing attack in North Korea, February 1951.

The Outbreak of the Korean War

In an unanticipated show of force, North Korean troops invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. In the absence of Soviet and American forces – both having withdrawn from the peninsula after the formation of the DPRK and ROK governments¹¹ – Kim Il Sung acted on his long-standing goal to reunify Korea. The North Korean leader had repeatedly appealed to his Soviet and Chinese benefactors to permit an invasion.¹² Kim finally received those assurances in 1950.

Historians continue to debate the motivations behind Stalin's approval of the invasion in 1950. Only five years after the world witnessed the unbridled power of America's atomic weapons in Japan, neither North Korea nor the Soviet Union were deterred from expanding the conflict. In August 1949, the Soviet Union tested its first nuclear device, and in January 1950, US Secretary of State Dean Acheson suggested that South Korea lay outside of the US “defensive perimeter.”¹³ These factors may have convinced Stalin that the United States would not seek to retaliate.

Yet the United States, and the newly established United Nations, promptly intervened. A civil war between Koreans became entangled with a growing conflict between capitalist and communist blocs in the region. Just hours after North Korean forces overwhelmed South Korea,



Delegates sign the Korean War armistice agreement in Panmunjom, July 27, 1953.

President Harry Truman announced, “The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war.”¹⁴ By September 1950, the United States successfully recaptured most of South Korea, including Seoul. But for the next three years, fighting would continue, spurred on by a pivotal Chinese intervention on behalf of North Korea and the participation of sixteen UN nations.

At the time, the United States gravely underestimated the probability of a large-scale Chinese military intervention, even though China had frequently meddled in Korean affairs.¹⁵ The last significant Chinese intervention before the Korean War occurred in 1894, when Chinese troops marched down the peninsula on behalf of the Korean government to suppress a major peasant rebellion. However, “in the context of the emerging Cold War,” as one scholar noted, “the beneficiary [of Chinese intervention] was not Korea as a whole, but rather a part.”¹⁶ In late November 1950, hundreds of thousands of Chinese troops joined North Koreans in a southward advance. The decision, widely understood as one to keep encroaching Americans at bay and restore Communist control, effectively pushed US-ROK forces down 200 miles, out of Pyongyang and Seoul.¹⁷

At this critical juncture, the use of US nuclear weapons against North Korea was well within the realm of possibility. High-ranking US officials in the military and in Congress publicly advocated for the use of nuclear weapons, and General Douglas MacArthur, Commander of US Forces in Korea (USFK), went so far as to request their use at his discretion. President Truman later confirmed in a press conference, “There has always been active consideration of its use.”¹⁸ But Truman ultimately did not approve the use of atomic bombs in Korea.

In the early days of the conflict, President Truman would famously tell the press, “We are not at war.” More than anything else, this statement would reflect Washington’s dire underestimation of the crisis at hand.¹⁹ This early failure, when coupled with systematic military unreadiness, mismanagement of resources, and inexperience with Korean affairs, led to the conflict’s prolonged and violent outcome. The Korean War caused an estimated 5 million casualties, including over 120,000 Americans,²⁰ the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Koreans, and the near total destruction of North Korea with little resolution.²¹

Stalemate

After a year of brutal conflict in Korea, two years of intense negotiations to end the war followed. On June 23, 1951, the Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations proposed that “discussions should be started between the belligerents for a cease-fire and an armistice providing for the mutual withdrawal of forces from the thirty-eighth parallel.”²² The United States was receptive. Two days later, President Truman said, “We are ready to join in a peaceful settlement in Korea now, just as we have always been. But it must be a real settlement which fully ends the aggression and restores peace and security to the area and to the gallant people of Korea.”²³

North and South Korea, however, were reluctant to end the war, preferring instead to continue fighting to reunify the country. But lacking support from their respective patrons, negotiations began in earnest on July 10, 1951 at Kaesong, a town near the 38th parallel, and concluded two years later. Several agenda items were responsible for the prolonged and fractious state of negotiations, including the exchange of prisoners of war, the establishment of the armistice line, and the withdrawal of foreign armed forces.

South Korean opposition to the talks, stoked in large part by President Syngman Rhee, who routinely expressed a desire “to fight on to any divisive armistice or peace,” further delayed progress.²⁴ When the conclusion of negotiations seemed imminent in June 1953, Rhee ordered the release of 27,000 North Korean prisoners of war to defy President Eisenhower, who had personally appealed to Rhee to accept the armistice terms and pursue unification “by political and other methods.”²⁵ Rebuffed, Eisenhower attempted to secure Rhee’s cooperation by other means. To that end, the United States negotiated the establishment of a mutual defense pact, one that remains the foundation of the US-ROK alliance today.²⁶

In the end, the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed by General Mark W. Clark for the US-Led United Nations Command, Kim Il Sung of the Korean People’s Party, and Peng Teh-Huai of the Chinese People’s Volunteers on July 27, 1953. Though the armistice put an end to open conflict, it survives, nearly seven decades later, as the basis for the continued division of North and South Korea and has yet to conclude “a final peaceful settlement.”

Korea’s Nuclear History

US Nuclear Weapons

The nuclear arms race is one Cold War legacy that, on the Korean peninsula, has only grown in relevance and danger since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Although North Korea has become synonymous with nuclear weapons in recent history, it was the United States that first introduced the atomic bomb to the peninsula.

From 1958 to 1991, the United States deployed tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea. Over the course of three decades, the size of this arsenal shrank from a peak of 950 nuclear warheads in 1967 to less than 300 in the 1980s.²⁷ Since their complete removal in 1991 during the George H.W. Bush administration, South Korea has remained under the protection of the US nuclear umbrella.

In the aftermath of the Korean War, the Eisenhower administration sought to reduce the heavy costs of maintaining large numbers of conventional forces in the region.²⁸ The introduction of “modern weapons,” or nuclear-capable weapons, was considered a viable counterbalance to troop reductions. As one official insisted, “the United States would save \$127 million in costs to South Korea over a period of four years,” and, according to another proponent, it would deter a potential “Communist offensive” and provide assurances to the South Koreans, who “were only too well aware that [Seoul] could be overrun once again.”²⁹

President Eisenhower approved the Pentagon’s recommendation, even as some officials in the State Department raised objections. In particular, State Department Legal Advisor Herman Phleger warned that deploying nuclear weapons to South Korea would, in the framework of the Korean Armistice Agreement, bear “political consequences.”³⁰ Paragraph 13d of the armistice stipulates that neither side

The arrival of the US atomic bomb marked the beginning of an ongoing and escalatory nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula.

introduce additional weapons into Korea, unless they are intended to replace weapons “which are destroyed, damaged, worn out, or used up... on the basis piece-for-piece of the same effectiveness and the same type.” Nuclear weapons would, in the final opinion of Phleger, “upset the balance established under the agreement, and would generally be regarded as a violation of the agreement.”³¹

The United States dismissed those charges on the basis that prior “Communist violations” of paragraph 13d had released it from any obligation to the clause.³² However, the United States chose not to publicly specify those violations – despite the insistence of British allies who shared the State Department’s concerns – because divulging that information would have revealed US intelligence operations that were also in breach of the armistice.³³ Recently declassified documents indicate that the United States interpreted unsupervised military traffic and the introduction of new (but non-nuclear) aircraft and naval assets as North Korean violations to the armistice.³⁴

In January 1958, at the conclusion of negotiations with President Syngman Rhee about the reduction of US-ROK forces, the United States deployed an array of nuclear weapon systems to South Korea, including surface-to-surface missiles, nuclear landmines, and atomic cannon. These initial systems included approximately 150 warheads – a number that would swell to 600 over the next five years with the deployment of three more surface-to-surface missile systems and nuclear bombs for aircraft.³⁵

In the end, both sides violated the armistice. Whether the US deployment of nuclear weapons in South Korea reflected a legitimate “remedial action” to offset non-nuclear assets in North Korea is, however, debatable. The arrival of the US atomic bomb marked the beginning of an ongoing and escalatory nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula. As one historian observed, “The militarization of American society and the ever-growing military-industrial complex had become the Korean War’s enduring legacy,” one that Eisenhower would famously, if not ironically, warn of in his final presidential address.³⁶

North Korea’s aspirations for nuclear weapons began to take form during this early period.

North Korea’s Nuclear Pursuits

The Soviet Union helped to lay the groundwork for North Korea’s early nuclear development, though its assistance would wane over time. In 1956, North Korean scientists began their training at the United Institute for Nuclear Research in Dubna, an international scientific center created by the Soviet Union. It was not uncommon for states with nuclear energy to share their civil nuclear knowledge among developing countries. Under Eisenhower’s “Atoms for Peace” campaign, for example, the United States provided technological assistance on nuclear energy to many countries, including South Korea.³⁷

North Korea’s training was put into practice in the 1960s, following the construction of a nuclear research center in Yongbyon. In 1965, the Soviet Union helped build a small 2 megawatt research reactor that expanded into a 4 megawatt reactor that was only placed under IAEA safeguards a decade later.³⁸ Throughout this period, North Korea began to exert greater control over its nuclear activities as a result of Kim Il Sung’s Juche ideology, diminishing Soviet subsidies, and increasing competition with South Korea.³⁹

Archival records suggest that North Korea’s aspirations for nuclear weapons began to take form during this early period. In 1962, amid proposals for an international non-proliferation treaty, the North Korean Foreign Minister Pak Song Chol told the Soviet Ambassador to North Korea:

[America’s] possession of nuclear weapons, and the lack thereof in our hands, objectively helps them, therefore, to eternalize their rule. They have a large stockpile, and we are to be forbidden even to think about the manufacture of nuclear weapons? I think that in such case the advantage will be on the Americans’ side.⁴⁰

These sentiments would reemerge in the late 1970s, at which time North Korea actively pursued sensitive nuclear technologies.⁴¹ During the 1980s, North Korea built a

5 megawatt reactor, which could produce weapons-grade plutonium, and a fuel fabrication plant, which would later be converted into a uranium-enrichment facility.

In the aftermath of the Korean War and under the specter of the US nuclear presence in Asia, North Korea pursued a long and uneven journey to acquire nuclear technology for both peaceful and military purposes. But the underdeveloped state would not have the means to build nuclear weapons until the 21st century.

North Korea and the NPT

Created at the height of the Cold War in 1968, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) remains one of the most important arms control mechanisms in the world. The multilateral treaty is designed to prevent the global spread of nuclear weapons by committing nuclear-armed states to disarmament and prohibiting non-nuclear armed states from acquiring nuclear weapons. Non-nuclear armed states are incentivized to join the NPT to gain access to nuclear technology for peaceful energy uses. For half a century, the NPT has successfully limited the number of nuclear-armed states, helped to reduce the global nuclear stockpile, helped to provide countries with nuclear energy, and strengthened the international norm against nuclear weapons.

But the nonproliferation regime has faced major challenges as new or “rogue” nuclear states have emerged while the established nuclear powers have delayed efforts to eliminate their arsenals. North Korea’s checkered history with the NPT represents one such case. In December 1985, North Korea joined the NPT as a precondition to gain Soviet assistance on the construction of a light-water reactor that would “meet the increasing energy demand in the people’s economy,” according to official DPRK accounts.⁴² US intelligence at the time observed that these developments could also provide North Korea the ability to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons.

As is the case for all NPT members, North Korea had 18 months to conclude a safeguards agreement to ensure its nuclear activities would not contribute to illicit nuclear weapons development. But North Korea stalled for years, motivated by what it would later explain as provocative US actions:

[A]fter we entered the treaty, the United States continuously heightened its nuclear threats against us. Thus, we were faced with a grave situation where we could not sign the safeguard agreements even if we wanted to. The United States recklessly violated its international legal obligations as a nuclear weapons possessing country, brought all kinds of nuclear weapons to South Korea on a massive scale, and escalated the joint exercise “Team Spirit,” a nuclear-test war exercise, against us.⁴³

Both the United States and South Korea took measures to encourage North Korea’s cooperation with IAEA obligations. In September 1991, President George H.W. Bush announced a series of directives to drastically reduce the deployment of US tactical nuclear weapons abroad, including the approximately 100 nuclear weapons based in South Korea.⁴⁴ Soon after, South Korean President Roh Tae Woo announced in a televised speech, “The Republic of Korea will not manufacture, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons,”⁴⁵ a pledge that North Korea would adopt a month later in the South-North Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The United States and South Korea also agreed to temporarily suspend their annual “Team Spirit” military exercise.⁴⁶

South Korea’s commitment not to produce nuclear weapons was particularly meaningful because it had secretly pursued the development of nuclear weapons under the Park Chung-hee administration. The United States had successfully dissuaded Park against acquiring bomb technology in the 1970s, which would have set South Korea on the path to achieving nuclear breakout by 1980.⁴⁷ Since ratifying the NPT in 1975, South Korea has maintained a peaceful civilian nuclear energy program and remains under the protection of the US nuclear umbrella.

These developments satisfied North Korea’s conditions for holding dialogue with the United States and eventually led to Pyongyang’s implementation of the IAEA safeguards agreement. But such progress was short-lived. The IAEA found discrepancies in North Korea’s initial plutonium declaration. In February 1993, the agency requested access to two sites in the Yongbyon nuclear complex to investigate the existence of a possible covert nuclear weapons program. North Korea denied full access to both sites, precipitating what would become the first of several nuclear crises.

The Clinton Administration

In March 1993, North Korea threatened to withdraw from the NPT. Concerned about the ramifications of withdrawal for both North Korea and the international nonproliferation regime, the United States acted quickly to re-engage Pyongyang. American diplomats pursued talks with North Koreans through the New York channel – a mechanism for US-North Korea dialogue in lieu of official diplomatic relations. The outcome was positive: North Korea walked back its decision to withdraw mere days before the legal deadline and agreed to comply with its IAEA obligations. North Korea allowed inspections at a number of sites, but by April 1994, it again stopped short of permitting the IAEA entry to its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon.

As former Secretary of Defense William Perry recounts, the reason for North Korea's intransigence on Yongbyon was soon clear: "At that time, North Korea was ready to unload the spent fuel from its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. If the North Koreans reprocessed this spent fuel, the resulting plutonium could serve as fuel for nuclear bombs."⁴⁸ This precarious situation led Secretary Perry on an impromptu trip to Seoul to examine the range of military and diplomatic options available to prevent North Korea from acquiring the bomb. The Clinton administration became the first to reckon with the emerging reality of a nuclear North Korea, but it would not be the last.

The First US-North Korea Crisis

Under the Clinton administration, US-ROK military planning shifted to a more offensive posture to meet increasing suspicions about a covert North Korean nuclear program. According to Secretary Perry, concerns that North Korea could wage "an unprovoked attack against South Korea, as they had done in 1950," set in motion plans to deploy 20,000 additional US troops and several new and advanced weapons systems.⁴⁹ Further escalating the situation, the South Korean defense minister disclosed new elements of the longstanding Operations Plan 5027 that included a "massive U.S. and ROK counterattack to take Pyongyang and topple the North Korean regime" during remarks at a National Assembly meeting.⁵⁰

Tensions came to a head in May 1994 as North Korea prepared to extract an estimated six bombs' worth of weapons-grade plutonium from the spent fuel rods in its Yongbyon research reactor. Washington began developing contingency plans for a surgical strike on the nuclear



President Clinton looking through binoculars at the DMZ, July 1993.

facility and pushed for economic sanctions at the UN Security Council.⁵¹ As top US officials expressed doubts that Pyongyang could be persuaded against developing nuclear weapons,⁵² the newly elected President Bill Clinton seriously considered the military options available to prevent the North from developing more than the estimated 1-2 nuclear weapons grade material in its possession.⁵³

At the same time, the administration could not overlook the risks of sparking a new conflict on the Korean peninsula, or, in the words of Secretary Perry, the "possibility that [a surgical] strike could incite North Korea to attack South Korea, an outcome that could hardly be construed as 'surgical.'"⁵⁴ Even the threat of sanctions brought the ire of North Korea, whose representative at the UN warned, "Seoul is not far away from here. If a war breaks out, Seoul will turn into a sea of fire."⁵⁵ To deescalate a situation rife with uncertainty, the Clinton administration pursued all pathways for direct engagement.

A Diplomatic Opening

In a widely circulated *Washington Post* op-ed that readers may have interpreted as official US policy, former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Arnold Kanter asserted, "the United States will not permit North Korea to reprocess its spent fuel."⁵⁶ Soon after the article's release, North Korea invited former president Jimmy Carter to Pyongyang. Though it has never been confirmed, North Korea's concerns about a potential strike may have precipitated the sudden diplomatic turn of events.



Korean People's Army soldiers overlooking the Joint Security Area at the DMZ, November 1998.

Although the Clinton administration did not initially coordinate with Carter, it did not stand in the way of his trip, either. As the *New York Times* reported, “American officials said they had viewed the Carter mission as an attempt to gain a clearer picture of North Korea’s position and had not expected to get swept into negotiations.”⁵⁷ Between June 15 and 18 – and over several unexpected phone calls to the White House – Carter, acting as a “de facto envoy,” relayed Kim Il Sung’s willingness to negotiate the suspension of Yongbyon reprocessing activities if the United States agreed to suspend economic sanctions.⁵⁸ After receiving confirmation from Pyongyang that it would engage in high-level talks, the immediate crisis receded and a viable diplomatic path opened.⁵⁹

Whether Kim Il Sung made a strategic decision to negotiate remains a source of debate. Major geopolitical events in the 1990s, including the fall of the Soviet Union and the formal establishment of Russian and Chinese relations with South Korea, significantly altered North Korea’s security environment. These adverse developments may have encouraged Kim Il Sung to engage the United States and “even [to] accept a continuing US military presence on the Peninsula as a hedge against expanded, potentially hostile, Chinese or Russian influence,” in the opinion of experienced North Korea hands Robert Carlin and Stanford Professor John Lewis.⁶⁰

Ambassador-at-Large Robert Gallucci led the US team in renewed bilateral talks with North Korea’s Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju. The primary US objective was to convince North Korea to return to the NPT, accept special inspections, and comply with the North-South Joint

Declaration on Denuclearization. North Korea affirmed these goals in a joint statement of principles signed on August 13, 1994 – the outlines of which would culminate in the first official nuclear deal between the two countries.

The Agreed Framework

On October 21, 1994, the United States and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework in Geneva. In this landmark deal, North Korea agreed to replace its graphite-moderated reactors with two proliferation-resistant light-water reactors and alternative energy assistance from the United States. Both sides also pledged to normalize political and economic relations on the condition that North Korea comply with its non-proliferation obligations to South Korea and the IAEA.⁶¹

From 1994-2003, the Agreed Framework succeeded in halting North Korea’s plutonium production at its controversial 5 megawatt Yongbyon reactor, which contained up to 30 kilograms of plutonium. It also prevented the construction of a second 50 megawatt reactor facility at Yongbyon and a separate 200 megawatt reactor at Taechon. These additional reactors could have produced hundreds of kilograms of plutonium by the end of the decade. All combined, the Agreed Framework prevented North Korea from producing fuel for as many as 100 nuclear weapons, in the opinion of several experts.

To compensate North Korea for the energy losses it would incur from the dismantlement of Yongbyon, the United States worked alongside regional allies Japan and South Korea to establish the multilateral Korean Peninsula Energy

Development Organization (KEDO). KEDO would administer the construction of the two light-water reactors, to be completed by 2003, and deliver the 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil shipments promised annually by the Agreed Framework, valued at the time at about \$55 million that was subject to Congressional oversight.

But measures taken by all parties fell short of full implementation, and efforts to roll back the North's nuclear program did not last long beyond the Clinton years. Although the United States and North Korea managed to sustain a diplomatic process for nearly a decade, the Agreed Framework struggled to "erase the residue of five decades of cold war confrontation overnight," according to former US officials tasked with implementing the deal. "Washington, Seoul, and Pyongyang now had the more difficult task of managing a new era of cooperation and confrontation."⁶² US Congressional opposition, and the divergent interests of regional partners, exacerbated the challenge at hand.

A Lack of Political Will

The Clinton administration had difficulty selling Congress on the merits of the nuclear compromise at the heart of the Agreed Framework: the construction of two new light-water reactors for the dismantlement of existing gas-graphite reactors at Yongbyon.

For countries that possess a reprocessing capability, such as North Korea, gas-graphite reactors pose a high proliferation risk. To convert fuel into a form that is usable for nuclear weapons, North Korea could divert the spent fuel from its gas-graphite reactors for plutonium extraction at its reprocessing plant. Since gas-graphite reactors can be refueled without shutting down the facility, diversion is not immediately detectable. Moreover, the spent fuel from gas-graphite reactors cannot be stored indefinitely in water, which can be used as a justification for reprocessing. Light-water reactors pose a lower proliferation risk because facilities must be shut down for refueling and the spent-fuel can be stored in water for long periods.⁶³

In practice, this translated into a deal that would replace North Korea's weapons-prone technology for proliferation-resistant technology. But these technical distinctions were often dismissed or altogether misrepresented by political opponents. In the run up to the Agreed Framework, Republican Senator Bob Dole stated that the terms of the deal "sounds more like a one-way street than prudent diplomacy... In exchange for promises about North Korea's nuclear program, the U.S. gift wraps new nuclear reactors and opens up shop in Pyongyang."⁶⁴ Where the Clinton

administration saw inducements to North Korea as the key to compelling good behavior, its opponents saw a dangerous precedent for rewarding bad actors.⁶⁵

Before long, Congressional Republicans had largely adopted this view and, by the time the party won a majority in both the House and the Senate in 1994, "a lack of political will," in the words of chief negotiator Bob Gallucci, obstructed the implementation process.⁶⁶ As a result, shipments of heavy fuel oil to North Korea did not occur on a regular or even predictable schedule in the first three years. From August 1995 to October 1998, shipments varied from no deliveries for months to over 100,000 metric tons delivered in a single month. The administration also struggled to secure funding from South Korea and Japan, who bore the greatest burden to finance the estimated \$5 billion required to construct the light-water reactors.⁶⁷

The protracted pace of implementation may have also been the result of growing concerns that North Korea was on the verge of economic collapse. In the lead-up to the Agreed Framework, Pyongyang underwent its first leadership transition following the death of state founder Kim Il Sung, and in the mid-to-late 1990s, the country endured a horrific famine resulting in the deaths of an estimated 1.5 to 3 million people.⁶⁸ These dire circumstances may have convinced some Clinton officials that North Korea would not survive to reap the benefits of the Agreed Framework.⁶⁹

Kumchang-ri

From its inception, fixations on North Korean duplicity frequently threatened to upend the Agreed Framework. In August 1998, the *New York Times* leaked US intelligence about a possible underground nuclear facility in Kumchang-ri, North Korea.⁷⁰ The allegations surfaced amid growing North Korean criticism on Washington's failure to deliver commitments on time. These developments stoked fresh fears that North Korea was seeking to rebuild its nuclear program, further diminishing the likelihood that an already reluctant Congress would continue to appropriate funds for the Agreed Framework.

The US intelligence community, however, had not reached a consensus on the construction activity at Kumchang-ri. As Joel Wit, a State Department official who oversaw implementation of the Agreed Framework, explained, "The Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency was almost alone in believing the evidence was damning; the Central Intelligence Agency and others saw it as circumstantial."⁷¹ The Clinton administration sought clarification directly from Pyongyang, and after five months of negotiations, arrived at a new agreement permitting US inspections at Kumchang-ri.

Wit led a team of American scientists and intelligence analysts to the site, where they found no evidence of a hidden nuclear facility. As the first US nuclear inspection in North Korea, the Kumchang-ri experience set a precedent for how negotiators could navigate and verify allegations of suspicious activity in the future, without abrogating a difficult-to-conclude agreement. The Kumchang-ri talks also established a principle for ad hoc US visits to North Korea. Furthermore, accepting the administration's requests for special inspections demonstrated that North Korea was invested in maintaining progress with the United States and keeping the Agreed Framework intact.

The Perry Process

The diplomatic approach that enabled inspections at Kumchang-ri yielded success in other areas, too. As new threats emerged and diplomacy stalled, the Clinton administration embarked on a bold initiative led by former Secretary of Defense William Perry to readjust North Korea policy and reset relations.

A Missile Crisis

In 1998, developments within North Korea's missile program – particularly, the test of a long-range ballistic missile over Japan – raised new concerns for the United States and other countries in the region over the North's nuclear weapons program. Faced with this policy challenge, the Clinton administration tasked a small team of current and former government experts with a mandate to reassess this new strategic landscape.

This initiative, colloquially known as the Perry Process, was unique in its collaborative and comprehensive approach. Secretary Perry assembled a team of experienced diplomacy hands, including then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Special Advisor to the President Wendy Sherman, and Asia policy experts like Philip Yun, to coordinate with teams assembled in South Korea and Japan. This tripartite group would meet over the course of five months, exploring areas of mutual concern and interest regarding the latest developments coming out of North Korea.

According to Secretary Perry, these discussions revealed that "our governments were balancing two fundamentally different strategies, one new and one traditional." The existing, traditional approach reflected a coercive strategy against North Korea which concentrated on sanctions and military pressure. Unconvinced by the effectiveness of this strategy, the three governments reached consensus on the need to put their weight behind a new coordinated approach that would



Map of the Korean Peninsula produced by the Congressional Research Service using data from ESRI and the US Department of State's Office of the Geographer.

incentivize North Korea "to make step-by-step progress to comprehensive normalization and a peace treaty."⁷²

Securing the personal and direct endorsement of the leaders of South Korea and Japan, Secretary Perry presented this new strategy to the North Koreans. However, Perry and his team left three days of talks in Pyongyang – ostensibly to hear the North Korean perspective first hand – without a definitive answer.⁷³ At first, Perry thought the mission had failed, but upon further discussion with aides during the plane trip back to Japan, he became convinced that "North Korea was ready to accept the cooperative strategy we had presented."⁷⁴

Though it was over a year since the Perry trip to Pyongyang, Kim Jong Il decided to accept the outlines of the Perry Process with a reciprocating trip to Washington. There seemed to be a genuine desire by all parties to reset the US-North Korea relationship, and a renewed understanding that the prospects for normalizing relations with the United States offered the best chance for North Korea to relinquish its pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

Transforming Relations

By October 2000, the Clinton administration's shift in strategy appeared to have paid off. That month, Kim Jong Il sent Vice Marshal Jo Myong Rok to Washington to finalize a deal on the missile program. Marshal Jo, the highest North Korean official to visit the United States, personally invited President Clinton to visit Pyongyang for what would have been the first US-North Korea summit. Secretary Albright later reflected that such a meeting "might well produce an agreement in principle that, if fleshed out, could make East Asia less dangerous."⁷⁵



US Secretary of Defense William Cohen, left, meets with North Korea Vice Marshal Jo Myong Rok, October 2000.

Without a solid commitment from President Clinton, Marshal Jo sought formal assurances that a meeting with Kim Jong Il could happen in the near future. To that end, State Department officials negotiated with the North Korean delegation over the 2000 US-DPRK Joint Communiqué, which signalled “a possible visit by the President of the United States” and a visit by Secretary Albright in the meantime. Importantly, the communiqué pledged both sides to normalize relations and declared, for the first time, that “neither government would have hostile intent toward the other.”⁷⁶

These inducements offered a radical departure from the adversarial pattern of US-North Korea relations that could have, in the opinion of Secretary Perry, convinced North Korea to give up its nuclear aspirations. Political and economic relations may have provided North Korea with the legitimacy and security assurances it long desired from the United States. As Marshal Jo’s experience in Washington revealed, establishing leader-to-leader ties was the administration’s greatest bargaining leverage to that end.

But with only three months left in President Clinton’s final term, the clock ran out. Though Clinton and his team preserved the Agreed Framework until the end, a new administration - one less inclined towards diplomatic patience - was taking the reins of power in Washington. US-North Korea relations suddenly lost their momentum.

Hard Lessons

The Clinton years offered the first meaningful interaction between the United States and North Korea since the Korean War. US negotiators, who had no prior experiences to draw on, faced a steep learning curve as they engaged with their North Korean counterparts. Their ability to strike

a deal that froze North Korea’s plutonium activities for eight years, and dismantled two other reactors that could have produced an estimated 175 kilograms of plutonium annually, was an impressive feat. But Clinton’s inability to ultimately convince North Korea to give up its nuclear aspirations bears important lessons for future endeavors.

For one, North Korea was compelled to negotiate with the Clinton administration because it saw the Agreed Framework as a pathway to establishing political and economic relations with the United States. In the administration’s haste to prevent North Korea from acquiring a plutonium bomb, Washington primarily saw the deal as a nonproliferation agreement. The Perry Process helped the administration to identify and correct this initial disconnect, but the failure to make timely commitments to key provisions of the Agreed Framework proved a major obstacle to rebuilding confidence.

The pace and scale of progress with the North Koreans was also, in large part, a result of high-level attention on the US side. When the diplomatic process started to drift, appointing a North Korea policy coordinator was critical to cutting through bureaucratic inertia. But charges of noncompliance on both sides sowed mistrust, which would be difficult to set right under the incoming Bush administration.

This being said, suspicions between the United States and North Korea will always exist, but, as the Kumchang-ri experienced proved, persistence in the face of uncertainty can mean the difference between breaking a deal or salvaging one. When allegations of cheating emerge in the future, the United States may find that confronting North Korea with an appeal to restore trust – rather than allowing doubts to fester – will better serve its security interests.

Missed Opportunities in The Bush Administration

The political changeover from Bill Clinton to George W. Bush brought a drastic change in US-North Korea relations. Though President Bush understood he inherited a nuclear challenge, he was opposed to upholding the ongoing diplomatic process intended to resolve it.

In Clinton's final term, former Secretary of Defense William Perry sought assurances from Colin Powell, the designated Secretary of State for President Bush, that the new administration would see the value in continuing negotiations with North Korea.⁷⁷ South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, who won the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize for his engagement efforts with North Korea, visited Washington shortly after Bush's inauguration and received assurances from Powell that the new American team would "pick up where President Clinton and his administration left off."⁷⁸

But the next day, Powell retracted his statement and Bush asserted that negotiations would not resume. Condoleezza Rice, the National Security Advisor at the time, reflected on the turnabout in her memoir. At five in the morning, she received a direct call from the President:

"Have you seen the *Washington Post*?" he demanded.

'No, Mr. President, I haven't,' I said.

'Go outside and get it.' He was speaking in short, declarative sentences – a sure sign that he was really upset...

There in bold headlines was an interview in which Colin had said that we'd tell the South Koreans that we'd take up the Clinton administration's approach to North Korea. 'Do you want me to take care of this, or do you want to?'

'I'll take care of it, Mr. President.'⁷⁹

Rice called Powell to smooth the matter over, which he attempted to do in subsequent remarks to the press: "There are suggestions that there are imminent negotiations about to take place," Powell told reporters outside the Oval Office. "This is not the case."⁸⁰

Momentum for what former Special Advisor to President Clinton Wendy Sherman called a "tantalizingly close"

missile deal faded when President Bush decided to cancel negotiations with North Korea for the next two years.⁸¹ This was a major missed opportunity to prevent North Korea from not only developing their missile capabilities, but also proliferating their technology to other countries, such as Iran. No administration since Clinton has been able to get as close to concluding a deal that would have stopped North Korea from developing long-range missiles altogether. As Sherman reflected in her memoir, "I believe that Kim Jong Il was ready in 2000 to complete a deal over his missile program. Unfortunately, my country was not ready."⁸²

The End of the Agreed Framework

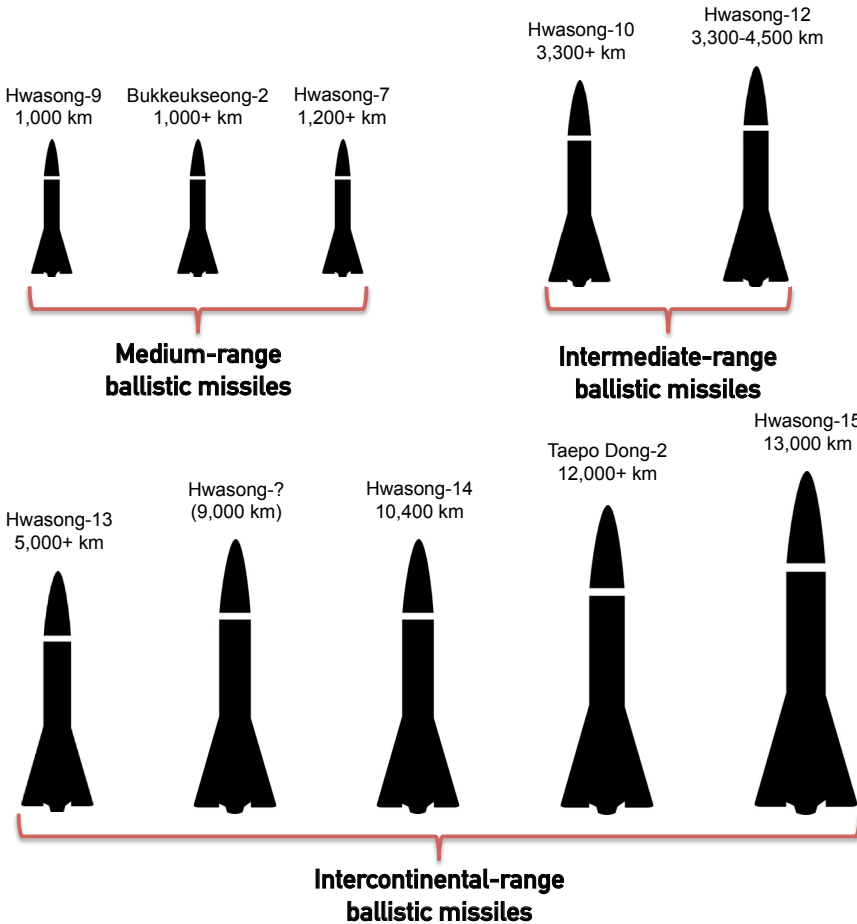
Before long, cracks began to emerge both within the Bush administration and between Washington and Seoul on the issue of how to deal with North Korea. Internally, US hardliners, including Vice President Dick Cheney and Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton, preferred a strategy of regime change, whereas Secretary of State Powell was calling for engagement. President Bush himself validated the hardline approach in his decision to identify North Korea as part of the "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address, leaving proponents of diplomacy out in the cold.

For all its bellicose rhetoric, however, the Bush administration did not adopt an alternative policy to deal with North Korea. While the United States suspended talks, the Agreed Framework technically remained in place. The multilateral consortium KEDO even continued to implement the light-water reactor projects, albeit in fits and starts. In the absence of any dialogue, the Bush administration conducted a new North Korea policy review.

Suspicious Run Deep

In October 2002, the Bush administration decided to act on intelligence findings that North Korea was building a secret uranium enrichment program, a different method for producing nuclear fuel from the known plutonium facilities. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP) James Kelly traveled to Pyongyang to confront his North Korean counterpart Kang Sok Ju. According to Kelly, Kang confirmed the allegation and suggested that North Korea intended to terminate the Agreed Framework.⁸³ Soon after, the United States, Japan, and South Korea announced

DPRK Missile Arsenal



Source: Hans M. Kristensen & Robert S. Norris, "North Korean Nuclear Capabilities, 2018," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, January 8, 2018.

that "North Korea's program to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons is a violation of the Agreed Framework." At once, all three parties stopped the delivery of fuel oil to North Korea, and suspended the light-water project.⁸⁴

Instead of working to clarify intentions and overcome mounting distrust, the United States chose to abandon the only deal it had. The Bush administration could have worked to bring North Korea back into compliance or improve upon the agreement by parlaying a more robust inspection regime. This was a genuine possibility, seeing as Clinton officials had expected to negotiate access for more suspicious sites as a follow-on to their successful experience with Kumchang-ri.

But for many opponents of US-North Korea diplomacy, the intelligence reports on uranium enrichment provided an opportunity to undermine the agreement. US intelligence had been aware of North Korea's secret uranium enrichment activities "certainly by 1999 and even earlier than that," according to the former head of the Northeast Asia Division in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research Robert Carlin.⁸⁵

The Clinton administration preferred to use that information "when US leverage was at its peak, all the benefits of a deal for North Korea were on the table, and Pyongyang had most to lose by walking away," whereas hardliners in the Bush administration saw it as a pretext to abandon diplomacy.⁸⁶ As John Bolton reflected in his memoir, "This was the hammer I had been looking for to shatter the Agreed Framework."⁸⁷

Consequences

The legacy of the Agreed Framework has been one of failure, and blame has fallen disproportionately on North Korea. In hindsight, however, it is evident that both the United States and North Korea contributed to the deal's breakdown.

For nearly a decade, the United States sustained a direct, open line of communication with a paranoid and insecure regime. That level of engagement made it possible for two adversaries to commit to an agreement that had a significant, material outcome: North Korea stopped producing plutonium for eight years, allowed inspections of

The Agreed Framework
**“proved to be imperfect...
But it did prevent North Korea
from producing as many as
100 nuclear weapons by now.”**

key facilities, and the two countries averted a military crisis that could have amounted to full-scale war.

In the end, the United States stood to gain more from the agreement as North Korea never acquired its promised light-water reactors, full sanctions relief, normalized relations with the United States, nor its sought-after international prestige. As former US Ambassador to South Korea Thomas Hubbard concluded, the Agreed Framework “proved to be imperfect... But it did prevent North Korea from producing as many as 100 nuclear weapons by now.”⁸⁸

These achievements are overshadowed by the Agreed Framework’s collapse. Shortcomings on the American side, including the delayed implementation of US obligations, are partly at fault. But hardliners in the Bush administration who actively sought to end diplomacy with North Korea carry the most responsibility.

It is plausible that Bush officials chose to disclose information about North Korea’s covert uranium enrichment program, which US intelligence had determined to be non-operational, to terminate the Agreed Framework.⁸⁹ In doing so, the administration failed to take advantage of an imperfect but existing mechanism to constrain and avert North Korea’s pursuit of an alternative source for fissile material production. Instead, they used the enrichment program as a pretext to walk away from the agreement altogether.

It is just as probable that North Korea made a strategic choice to covertly pursue a uranium enrichment program as an “insurance policy” if it failed to secure credible political and security assurances from the United States.⁹⁰ As the Perry Process revealed, there was a major disconnect between the North Koreans and Americans regarding the central tenets of the Agreed Framework. Where the United States exclusively saw a nonproliferation agreement, North Korea also saw a political opportunity to fundamentally

change its relationship with the United States. The inability to resolve this disconnect provides some explanation for North Korea’s behavior throughout the Bush years.

The Six Party Talks

North Korea’s covert uranium enrichment activities posed a new challenge for the Bush administration. But with a war in Iraq on the horizon, the United States had little appetite for a potential military conflict in Asia. Like his predecessor, Bush calculated that risking a second Korean war would incur unacceptable costs.

With China’s help, the Bush administration found an opportunity to confront North Korea while minimizing the political costs of re-engagement. In March 2003, Beijing proposed trilateral talks, which Kim Jong Il accepted on the condition that a such a framework also make space for bilateral US-North Korea negotiations.⁹¹

The Bush administration rejected the notion of direct talks with North Korea, but welcomed China’s new and active role. Many in Washington believed that Chinese pressure was key to constraining North Korea’s nuclear development, and some senior officials took that view to the extreme. Prior to President Bush accepting China’s proposal, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld circulated a memorandum arguing that the United States “should team up with China to press for the ouster of North Korea’s leadership.”⁹² While not an explicit call for preventive military action, the belief that Beijing could or would exert maximal leverage on Pyongyang proved to be incorrect.

In August 2003, the United States walked back its non-engagement policy and joined China, Russia, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea in what became known as the Six Party Talks. Negotiations occurred over several rounds in Beijing, presenting the relevant parties with a new multilateral framework for addressing North Korea’s nuclear program.

Reaching Consensus

The United States, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea all shared in the desire for a nuclear-free Korean peninsula, but consensus on how to achieve that end was hard-won. North Korea made its priorities explicit in the first round of talks by linking the prospect of denuclearization with the need for security guarantees from the United States. Specifically, North Korea urged the United States to sign a non-aggression pact and undertake efforts towards the normalization of relations before it could feel assured in dismantling its nuclear program. The United States flatly rejected the proposal.

The six parties eventually came to consensus on a set of points that would serve as the guiding principles for each round of talks to follow. China, which served a mediating role as chair to the Six Party Talks, announced the “Six Points of Consensus” on August 29, 2003.⁹³ Importantly, the parties agreed that the nuclear issue should be resolved through peaceful means, that North Korea’s security concerns should be addressed, and that provocations during the negotiations should be avoided.

Though he remained opposed to a formal non-aggression pact, President Bush suggested “there are other ways we can look at” providing security assurances to North Korea.⁹⁴ These remarks, made ahead of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, helped to ensure that North Korea would attend the second round of the Six Party Talks. In these meetings, the United States introduced its goal to achieve the “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement” (CVID) of nuclear weapons in North Korea. China and Russia proposed an alternative agreement that would eliminate North Korea’s nuclear weapons program but allow it to retain a civil nuclear program for peaceful energy activities. Unable to reach compromise on these proposals, the second and third round of talks produced few results.

A Breakthrough

On February 10, 2005, North Korea announced it would withdraw from the Six Party Talks in a strong rebuke against President Bush’s reelection. In an official statement, Pyongyang accused the Bush administration of seeking regime change and urged Washington to “renounce its hostile policy.”⁹⁵ Under the leadership of the newly appointed US lead on North Korea, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill, the United States moved swiftly to recover a diplomatic process.

With the help of negotiators involved in separate Track 2 consultations in New York, Hill was able to secure a direct meeting with the head of the North Korean delegation, Kim Gye Gwan, to dispute charges of US hostility.⁹⁶ North Korea agreed to return to the negotiating table, satisfied that the United States had “clarified its official stand to recognize DPRK as a sovereign state, not to invade it and hold bilateral talks within the framework of the six-party talks.”⁹⁷

On September 19, 2005, the Six Party Talks reached a diplomatic breakthrough: North Korea pledged to abandon “all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs.” In a joint statement, the parties resolved that “the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean peninsula” would occur in an “action for action” approach. North Korea received

assurances for its “right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy” and a willingness from all parties to provide energy assistance upon further discussion.⁹⁸

Banco Delta Asia

But the breakthrough did not last long. On September 15, a few days prior to the release of the 2005 Joint Statement, the US Treasury froze \$25 million in North Korean assets in a Macau bank, Banco Delta Asia. This action was not coordinated with the US negotiating team in the Six Party Talks, who had to explain the punitive move in the midst of a diplomatic breakthrough. As Hill later explained, “the decision to announce [the freeze] in the middle of negotiations seemed to confirm the suspicions of many – including some on my team – that the purpose was not to give me added negotiating leverage... but rather to sidetrack the negotiations entirely.”⁹⁹ The highly publicized action derailed the Six Party Talks for the next 18 months, during which time North Korea test-fired eight missiles – in defiance of its self-imposed moratorium – and detonated its first nuclear device.

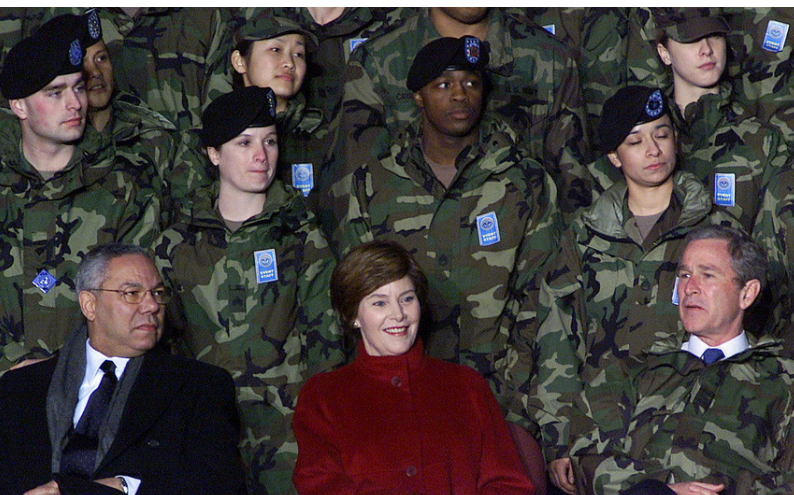


Siegfried Hecker at the Yongbyon nuclear fuel fabrication facility.

The Action Plan

The fifth round of Six Party Talks provided an opportunity to break the impasse. In February 2007, the parties agreed to a “denuclearization action plan” that would not only follow up on the 2005 Joint Statement with specific implementation steps, but also address problems resulting from the Banco Delta Asia fiasco.¹⁰⁰ As an initial step, North Korea agreed to readmit nuclear inspectors and disable its Yongbyon reactor, on the condition that it receive 50,000 tons of fuel oil and the United States unfreeze its assets.

Reversing course on sanctions, however, proved to be a long and tedious process. The State Department eventually found a work-around and, with the help of Treasury, transferred the funds to North Korean bank accounts in Russia on June 25, 2007. The following day, North Korea announced that it would shut down the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, for the first time since 2001.



Secretary of State Colin Powell, First Lady Laura Bush, and President George W. Bush visit US armed forces in South Korea, February 2002.

On June 27, 2008, North Korea disabled its Yongbyon reactor, exploding the cooling tower in a dramatic televised event. But enough damage had been done that by the time new disputes arose over verification measures, the Six Party Talks landed at a stalemate and failed to move into the final phase of dismantling North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

Abandoned Opportunities

The Bush administration abandoned several critical opportunities to roll back North Korea's nuclear program as a result of the lack of inter-agency coordination and intervention by hardliners within the administration – all of which consistently threatened the diplomatic process with North Korea.

The deliberate refusal to follow through on the Perry Process and preserve the Agreed Framework resulted in two major missed opportunities to curb the threat of North Korea's nuclear program. First, when the Bush administration chose to abandon missile talks, it handed North Korea more time to improve on its ballistic missile technologies. Clinton officials began those negotiations with the goal of preventing North Korea from conducting more missile tests, which would be necessary for developing long-range ballistic missiles. Since ending its missile test moratorium under the Bush administration, North Korea has successfully built intercontinental-ballistic missiles which may be capable of delivering nuclear weapons to the United States.

Second, the Bush administration's choice to isolate rather than engage North Korea served to accelerate its nuclear

activities. Pyongyang quickly expelled all international inspectors and restarted the 5 megawatt reactor at Yongbyon. With no constraints on its program, North Korea increased its plutonium stockpile and tested its first nuclear weapon in 2006.

All told, the Bush administration's refusal to salvage the only agreement it had with North Korea brought nearly a decade of diplomatic progress to a sudden, painful halt. The 2002 intelligence reports on North Korea's uranium enrichment activities could have been used as a reason to renegotiate, rather than withdraw from the Agreed Framework. Working to address the problem early on could have stalled North Korea's production of highly enriched uranium, which currently stands at an estimated 250-500 kilograms. Overall, North Korea has acquired enough fissile material to make an estimated 30-60 nuclear weapons.

At the end of the Clinton administration, there was a chance to test, for the first time, whether North Korea would trade in its nuclear weapons program for normalization with the United States. If Kim Jong Il had any suspicion of interventionist US policy, however, the early Bush years did not relieve him of that fear. From that point on, North Korea appeared to be more invested in increasing its leverage with greater missile and nuclear weapons activity – a tactic that would prove more problematic for the United States in the years to come.

The Bush administration's experience with the Six Party Talks helped to shed light on the merits and demerits of a multilateral mechanism for negotiations. Direct US-North Korea talks were critical to breaking deadlock as concerns about regime security weighed heavily on North Korea's willingness to roll back its nuclear program. At the same time, other countries' participation was also constructive; South Korea and Japan's commitments to provide energy assistance kept negotiations moving forward, and China and Russia's mediating role helped to soften starkly opposed US-North Korea demands.

In the end, the Six Party Talks led to many of the same compromises outlined in the Agreed Framework, including the provision of energy assistance, US security assurances, and the prospect of normalizing relations. But a hardline approach brought on more damage than good. Far from offering an alternative to Clinton's much maligned deal-making, Bush's policy reinforced the notion that a phased negotiating strategy offers the best chance for rolling back North Korea's nuclear program.

More Missed Opportunities in The Obama Administration

Despite his offer to “extend a hand” to regimes “willing to unclench your fist,” President Barack Obama entered office at a low point of US-North Korea diplomacy.¹⁰¹ According to former NSC Senior Director for Asia Jeffrey Bader, the Washington foreign policy establishment had arrived at the conclusion that “North Korea was determined to maintain its nuclear weapons program, regardless of its commitments.”¹⁰² Although enthusiasm was initially high for a new approach, the Obama administration found itself mired in the frustrating reality of the status quo.

Strategic Patience

In his first presidential debate, Barack Obama argued, “[T]his notion – by not talking to people we are punishing them – has not worked. It has not worked in Iran, it has not worked in North Korea. In each instance, our efforts of isolation have actually accelerated their efforts to get nuclear weapons.”¹⁰³ These remarks fueled expectations that Obama would not just engage Pyongyang, but actively pursue bold, diplomatic measures.

But diplomacy would not come to pass. Early in his term, President Obama expressed a desire to break the tired pattern of US-North Korea diplomacy, which was loosely defined as one of “provocation, extortion, and reward.”¹⁰⁴ When provocations arose, the Obama administration inflicted punishment on Pyongyang by way of sanctions, international rebuke, and increasing isolation. Instead of seeking to resolve tensions with Pyongyang, Obama began to follow “a policy of concerted disengagement,” in the words of one scholar.¹⁰⁵ Officially, that policy was called “strategic patience.”

A Waiting Game

At the core of strategic patience lay elements of containment and pressure, but assumptions about regime collapse coursed just beneath the surface. During Obama’s first term, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il was in noticeably poor health, and a line of succession was not immediately clear. Reports that Kim had suffered a stroke in 2008 generated renewed public debate about the fate of the unstable North Korean regime, with analysts on both sides of the political spectrum predicting that collapse was on the horizon.¹⁰⁶



A North Korean soldier looks in at Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the DMZ, July 21, 2010.

Former NSC director Bader would later admit, “Many of us believed that the most likely long-term solution to the North’s nuclear pursuits lay in the North’s collapse and absorption into a South-led reunified Korea.”¹⁰⁷ In this belief, the Obama administration may have been influenced by the South Korean government, which had adopted a hardline North Korea policy under President Lee Myung-bak. As one of many leaked South Korean cables would reveal, senior officials were determined that “the DPRK had already collapsed economically, and would collapse politically two to three years after the death of Kim Jong Il.”¹⁰⁸ Even as these assessments proved to be wrong, the growing consensus on regime collapse decreased the Obama administration’s appetite to engage North Korea.

President Obama never officially adopted a regime change policy, but Bader’s admission underscored key misperceptions about North Korea that may have shaped US policy. Absent a diplomatic strategy, however, the Obama administration’s overreliance on sanctions could not induce North Korea to abandon its nuclear aspirations.

**In the absence of dialogue,
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Pyongyang from making
more weapons**

Stanford at Yongbyon

In November 2010, a delegation headed by Stanford University Professor John Lewis, who had forged deep relationships with North Korean academics and officials over twenty years, visited the Yongbyon nuclear complex. The delegation included the former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory Siegfried Hecker. At the invitation of Lewis, Hecker had joined an earlier Stanford delegation and first toured Yongbyon in 2004, where he deduced that North Korea had the capability to develop a nuclear weapon. Similarly, Hecker came away from his 2010 trip with new observations about the status of North Korea's nuclear development and its implications for the Obama administration's policy of strategic patience.

The Stanford delegation learned that North Korea was constructing a new 25-30 megawatt light-water reactor. A senior North Korean technician explained that it would "contribute to the national demand for security" and offset the losses incurred from the 50 and 200 megawatt reactors that were abandoned as part of the Agreed Framework. In another tour of a new fuel fabrication plant, featuring an "astonishingly modern" control room, Hecker determined that North Korea had either operationalized a uranium enrichment program or were "most likely capable of doing so shortly."¹⁰⁹

These developments, in Hecker's assessment, did not necessarily pose a new threat to the United States, but called into question the efficacy of coercive strategies intended to curb North Korea's nuclear pursuits. Sanctions had not prevented Pyongyang from acquiring highly sophisticated nuclear technology, which, given their dual-use nature, could be used to generate electricity or be converted to enrich uranium for bombs. In the absence of dialogue, the United States could not clarify North Korea's motivations, nor negotiate a deal to deter Pyongyang

from making more weapons. As Hecker would conclude, "Waiting patiently for Pyongyang to return to the Six-Party talks on terms acceptable to the United States and its allies will exacerbate the problem. A military attack is out of the question... The only hope appears to be engagement."¹¹⁰

The Leap Day Deal

Perhaps influenced by Hecker's observations, the Obama administration began to engage North Korea in earnest in 2011. Special Representative for North Korea Policy Stephen Bosworth – who would be succeeded by US ambassador to the IAEA Glyn Davies – met with Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye Gwan for talks in New York and Geneva. The death of Kim Jong Il brought talks to an impasse, but in an encouraging sign of progress, negotiations resumed the next year under the leadership of Kim Jong Un.

On February 29, 2012, the two countries announced in separate press releases that they had reached an agreement. In what became known as the Leap Day Deal, North Korea agreed to a moratorium on its long-range missile and nuclear tests in exchange for 240,000 metric tons of food aid. North Korea also agreed to allow entry to IAEA inspectors to verify the suspension of uranium enrichment activities at Yongbyon.¹¹¹

A mere sixteen days later, however, North Korea announced its intention to launch a satellite into space. Out of concern that North Korea was seeking to masquerade a space launch as a long-range missile test, the United States warned that a satellite would violate the terms of the agreement. Even though much of the technology used to launch a satellite and long-range missile is interchangeable, there are important exceptions, such as the need to perform high-speed re-entry tests for ballistic missile payloads.¹¹² North Korea insisted that it had peaceful intentions and that a ban on satellite launches was not covered in the agreement.

These discrepancies are almost impossible to reconcile as neither side publicly disclosed the actual text of the Leap Day Deal. But subsequent US and North Korean statements suggest that a disconnect between what was negotiated and what was agreed upon ultimately doomed the deal. Despite the Obama administration's claims to have "explicitly, directly warned DPRK lead-negotiator Kim Gye-gwan that any missile test, for any purpose, would violate the terms of the agreement," US negotiators may have failed to secure North Korea's formal commitments to abide by those terms.¹¹³



The US anti-ballistic missile system, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense being fired during an exercise in 2013.

Another Lost Opportunity

On April 13, North Korea proceeded with its satellite launch, which failed to enter orbit. The Obama administration chose to scrap the deal, rather than revisit negotiations to more clearly distinguish what is acceptable in terms of a satellite or missile launch.¹¹⁴

Generally, as the missile expert Michael Elleman has written, “space launches do not and cannot play a decisive role in the creation of long-range missiles.”¹¹⁵ US negotiators could have taken measures to address the risks of dual-use missile technologies by, for example, making an exception for a satellite launch that uses liquid-fuel instead of solid-fuel.

The timing of the Leap Day Deal in North Korea was another important consideration that the Obama administration may have misunderstood. The satellite launch coincided with the 100th birthday of North Korea’s founder Kim Il Sung and followed, two days later, with a massive military parade celebration in which Kim Jong Un would make his public debut.¹¹⁶ North Korea may have felt politically motivated, during a vulnerable transfer of power, to mark the occasion with a show of strength.

In the wake of the Leap Day Deal and without any alternative agreements to constrain them, North Korea made formidable gains in its nuclear and missile program. Outpacing all of his predecessors, Kim Jong Un tested over eighty missiles, including a successful intercontinental ballistic missile test. As the nuclear experts at Stanford have said, “In retrospect, passing up instituting a nuclear and missile testing moratorium and getting access to Yongbyon facilities... was an important opportunity lost.”¹¹⁷ The Obama administration may not have seen a viable path to complete denuclearization, but it could have significantly inhibited the North’s nuclear progress by keeping or modifying the Leap Day Deal.

Diplomacy during this period was likely to fail due to a lack of high-level engagement. The Obama administration relegated negotiations for the Leap Day Deal to lower-level officials who could not rely on senior leaders to intervene at a critical moment of deadlock. In the past, the United States has been able to sustain negotiations and make headway on agreements only when high-level leaders have been engaged – from President Clinton’s investment in the Agreed Framework and, now, to President Trump’s personal outreach to Kim Jong Un.

A New Opportunity for The Trump Administration

In President Trump's first year in office, US-North Korea relations reached a crisis point. Kim Jong Un demonstrated his resolve to develop and expand the country's nuclear and missile program with an unprecedented number of tests. Beginning in 2011, Kim oversaw four nuclear tests and more than eighty-five missile launches – more than his father and grandfather combined. These tests, coupled with Trump's bellicose rhetoric and unpredictability, raised legitimate fears that a military confrontation – by accident or design – could occur.

Maximum Pressure

In an effort to replace “the failed policy of ‘strategic patience’” under the Obama administration, the Trump administration set out to exert tough political and economic pressure on Pyongyang through a policy known as “maximum pressure.”¹¹⁸ The Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary James Mattis explained its basic tenets in the *Wall Street Journal*:

The object of our peaceful pressure campaign is the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The U.S. has no interest in regime change or accelerated reunification of Korea. We do not seek an excuse to garrison U.S. troops north of the Demilitarized Zone. We have no desire to inflict harm on the long-suffering North Korean people, who are distinct from the hostile regime in Pyongyang.¹¹⁹

Despite its insistence on peace, the Trump administration routinely emphasized military might. According to Tillerson and Mattis, “While diplomacy is our preferred means of changing North Korea's course of action, it is backed by military options.”¹²⁰ More worryingly, several officials in Trump's inner circle publicly advocated for a preventive military strike or suggested that “a war would be worth it.”¹²¹

The Trump administration applied pressure through an increasingly stringent sanctions regime that has targeted not only North Korea, but also third parties linked to North Korea's financial network. The UN has adopted some of the strongest sanctions yet against North Korea, including full bans on textile exports, restrictions against overseas laborers, caps on oil imports, and stricter mechanisms to interdict vessels suspected of transporting prohibited goods.

Two years in, the maximum pressure campaign has only marginally impacted North Korea's nuclear program and its economy. It is unclear whether the administration's tough posturing facilitated the diplomatic breakthrough in 2018. There are also lingering doubts about the continued effectiveness of maximum pressure, particularly as it diverges with the South Korean government's increasing engagement with North Korea. Although South Korea has committed to a “two-track approach of sanctions/pressure and dialogue,” it seeks to resolve the nuclear issue and improve inter-Korean relations “in a virtuous circle.”¹²²



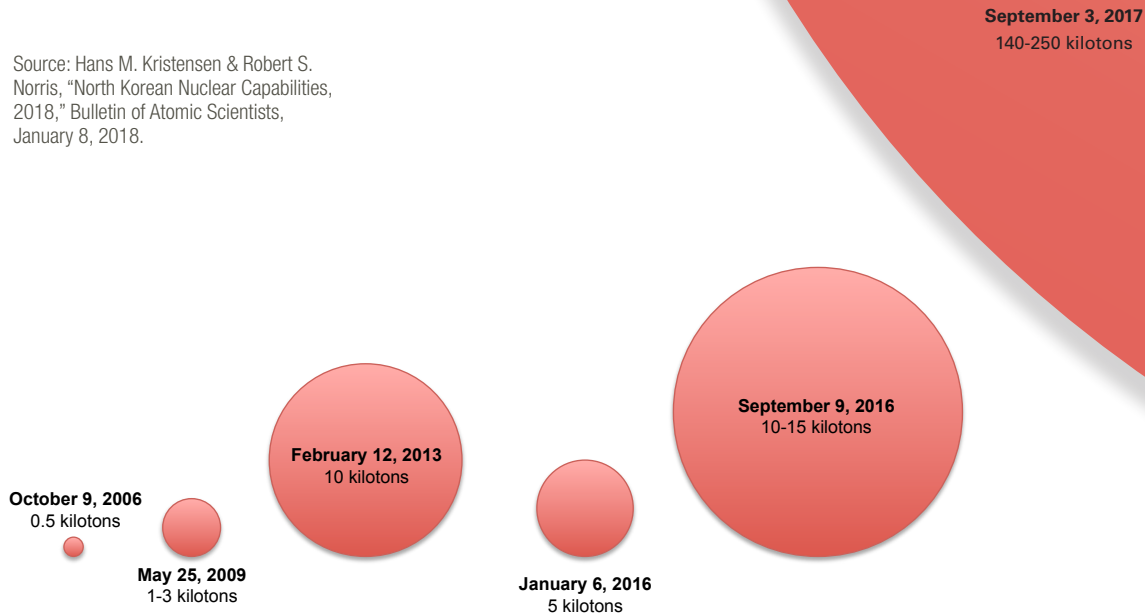
President Trump addresses the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly.

Fire and Fury

In August 2017, following US intelligence reports that North Korea successfully produced a miniaturized nuclear warhead,¹²³ Trump warned that continued provocations “will be met with fire, fury and frankly power, the likes of which this world has never seen before.”¹²⁴ A month later, North Korea announced it had conducted its sixth and most powerful nuclear test, yielding an estimated 250 kilotons of energy, or seventeen times the strength of the Hiroshima bomb.¹²⁵ Several analysts, including the US Commander of Strategic Command General John Hyten, corroborated North Korea's claim that it had built a thermonuclear device.¹²⁶

North Korean Nuclear Tests

Source: Hans M. Kristensen & Robert S. Norris, "North Korean Nuclear Capabilities, 2018," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, January 8, 2018.



Weeks later, Trump responded with renewed bluster at the UN General Assembly: "The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea. Rocket Man is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime."¹²⁷ In an unprecedented move, Kim Jong Un issued a direct response that he would make "the US pay dearly for [Trump's] speech."¹²⁸ North Korea's Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho followed with remarks that suggested retaliation could come in the form of "the detonation of an H-bomb in the Pacific."¹²⁹

Tensions came to a head on November 28 when North Korea successfully tested its most powerful missile to date: the Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile. David Wright at the Union of Concerned Scientists estimated that the Hwasong-15 would have a range of more than 8,100 miles on a standard trajectory, making it capable of reaching any part of the continental United States.¹³⁰ Though questions

about North Korea's ability to deliver a nuclear warhead on this missile remain, the sophisticated Hwasong-15 design confirmed fears that North Korea could pose a credible nuclear threat to the United States in the near future.

While these developments reflected continuity in North Korea's nuclear policy under Kim Jong Un, Trump's aggressive rhetoric broke with US convention. In a series of tweets, Trump disparaged the diplomatic efforts of previous administrations and said that "only one thing will work!" Such remarks led many in Washington to believe that the Trump administration was actively seeking military action. These concerns gained credence when the administration withdrew Victor Cha's nomination for ambassador to South Korea, reportedly over his objection to a "bloody nose," or preventive strike, against North Korea.¹³¹

The Risks of War

Months before he assumed the role of National Security Advisor, John Bolton published an op-ed entitled, “The Legal Case for Striking North Korea First” and argued that North Korea’s nuclear weapons pose an “imminent threat” to the United States.¹³² The Congressional Research Service assessed that many policymakers were united in the belief that “the window for preventing the DPRK from acquiring a nuclear missile capable of reaching the United States is closing.”¹³³ These calculations increased the sense of urgency in Washington to take decisive action to roll back North Korea’s nuclear program.

Preventive military action could take many forms – from a limited airstrike on a nuclear facility to a full-scale regime change operation – but none escape the risk of failure, conflict escalation, or retaliatory action. If the goal is to “locate and destroy – with complete certainty – all components of North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs,” the United States would need to stage a “ground invasion,” according to the Pentagon.¹³⁴ If the goal is to destroy parts of the nuclear program to dissuade North Korea from acquiring a nuclear deterrent, the United States cannot rule out the potential for miscalculation and retaliation. In either scenario, North Korea is unlikely to tolerate any military action that could be perceived as a prelude to war or that fundamentally threatens the regime.

Each of these outcomes would bear extraordinary consequences to people on the peninsula and beyond. Seoul, a city of 23 million that sits 35 miles from the border, is most vulnerable to an outbreak of war. In the first few days, a conventional conflict alone could result in upwards of 300,000 casualties. That number would swell to the millions if any of North Korea’s nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons were detonated.¹³⁵

An Olympic Opening

At the height of the US-North Korea crisis, the newly elected South Korean President Moon Jae-in warned, “We must stop a situation where North Korea miscalculates and threatens us with nuclear weapons or where the United States considers a pre-emptive strike.”¹³⁶ These remarks revealed Moon’s difficult challenge in balancing the interests of an increasingly provocative neighbor in the North, and an unpredictable president in the White House.

As the former chief-of-staff to President Roh Moo-hyun, who championed the pro-engagement “Sunshine Policy” of President Kim Dae-jung, Moon was elected on a mandate to improve relations with North Korea. When confronted with



North Korea and South Korea delegations cheer on the unified Korean team at the 2018 Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony.

the Trump administration’s loose talk of war, Moon embarked on a subtle but concerted effort to mediate the crisis. One timely opportunity presented itself: the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea. Moon suggested that North Korea’s participation would be “a great opportunity to send a message of reconciliation and peace to the world.”¹³⁷

In November 2017, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for an Olympic Truce during the Winter Games. These resolutions are part of a long-running Olympic tradition inspired by the Ancient Greeks to break “the incessant cycle of armed conflict.”¹³⁸ In light of the emerging nuclear crisis on its border, South Korea’s formal submission of the Olympic Truce carried powerful symbolic weight. The resolution gained the support of 157 signatories who pledged to uphold “expectations that Pyeongchang 2018 will be a meaningful opportunity to foster an atmosphere of peace, development, tolerance and understanding on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia.” Though the message was partly directed at athletes concerned about North Korea’s proximity to South Korea, it facilitated a critical diplomatic opening between the Koreans.

Historically, sports diplomacy has succeeded in building bridges between adversaries. Ping-pong diplomacy thawed U.S.-China relations ahead of Nixon’s seminal Beijing visit. Wrestling diplomacy established dialogue between the United States and Iran after decades of severed ties. Basketball diplomacy gave an American team unprecedented access into North Korea, and a historic meeting with Kim Jong Un – a feat that no U.S. diplomat had accomplished at the time. In South Korea’s case, Olympics diplomacy significantly reduced tensions and opened the door for dialogue.



Kim Jong Un and President Trump shake hands at the 2018 Singapore Summit.

Maximum Engagement

Moon's outreach launched a new era of diplomatic engagement on the Korean peninsula. Kim Jong Un stated in his 2018 New Year's address that North Korea had "completed" its nuclear development and was prepared to focus on the economy. He also signalled a willingness to improve inter-Korean relations and accepted South Korea's invitation to participate in the Olympics.¹³⁹ These gestures presented an opportunity for the United States and South Korea to test a possible strategic shift in North Korea.

At South Korea's request, Trump agreed to postpone US-ROK joint military exercises until after the Winter Games, giving diplomatic space for the two Koreas to hold high-level talks.¹⁴⁰ Following the success of the Winter Games, Kim accepted Moon's invitation to meet at Panmunjom, the site of the Korean Armistice signing, for the first inter-Korean summit in 11 years. The two leaders pledged to improve North-South relations, establish permanent peace, and advance the denuclearization on the Korean peninsula. These high-level commitments paved the way for a meeting between Kim and Trump, who accepted an invitation hand-delivered by South Korea's National Security Advisor.

North Korea's development of the Hwasong-15, a missile that could deliver a nuclear warhead to the United States, may have factored into the administration's willingness to engage. As former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster had implied in 2017, such a capability would constitute a red line: "President Trump is not going to tolerate North Korea being able to threaten the United States."¹⁴¹ This raised the urgency for the administration to quickly secure, at a minimum, a missile testing freeze.

As a possible confidence-building measure to create space for dialogue, Kim Jong Un enacted a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests – one that he continues to uphold nearly a year later. Continuing to maintain and formalize this test freeze would prevent North Korea from enhancing its nuclear and ICBM capabilities. Despite the success of the Hwasong-15 launch, North Korea would likely need to perform several more ICBM tests to ensure the reliability of the re-entry technologies necessary for delivering a nuclear weapon to the United States.

Trump's decision to meet with Kim – without demanding major concessions – reflected a sudden and dramatic shift in US policy. While Moon's diplomatic persistence helped to create an opening for talks, Trump may have been motivated by domestic considerations to jumpstart the process. Beset with an onslaught of policy failures at home and abroad, Trump may have seen an opportunity to signal progress on a problem that has riddled every president before him. A meeting with Kim Jong Un, a first for a sitting US president and a North Korean leader, would be a distraction at worst, and at best, a historic accomplishment.

The Singapore Summit

On June 12, 2018, the leaders of the United States and North Korea met for the first time in history. Breaking with tradition, the Singapore Summit marked the start of talks rather than the culmination of negotiations. The summit did not produce any concrete agreements, but it did commit President Trump and Kim Jong Un to a set of principles for negotiations going forward and initiated a diplomatic process where one did not exist before.

In a joint statement, the two leaders pledged to establish new US-North Korea relations, build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, and recover the remains of US troops who perished in the Korean War. Importantly, Kim committed North Korea to “work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

Although the Singapore Summit was long on pageantry and short on substance, North Korea has made several positive moves in its lead-up and wake. Kim released three American detainees, destroyed tunnels at the nuclear test site at Punggye-ri, began dismantling a rocket launch site at Sohae, and returned 55 sets of remains of US soldiers. When an American illegally entered the country, North Korea swiftly informed the United States and released them, a welcome shift from how North Korea has handled similar situations in the past.¹⁴²

As a confidence-building measure on the US side, Trump suspended major US-ROK joint military exercises that North Korea has, historically, considered hostile.¹⁴³ At the Singapore Summit, Trump stated his intention to stop the “war games,” and on June 18, the Pentagon affirmed the suspension of the large-scale Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercises.¹⁴⁴ Trump’s announcement was reportedly uncoordinated with the South Koreans, but President Moon supported the decision. In the days prior to the summit, Moon advocated for modifying exercises as part of South Korea’s need “to flexibly change its military pressure against the North in the spirit of building mutual trust as agreed in the Panmunjom Declaration.”¹⁴⁵

The thaw in inter-Korean relations has resulted in additional practical and symbolic steps to ease hostilities on the peninsula. In their third summit, Kim and Moon agreed to a series of measures to reduce military tensions, including the restoration of military-to-military communications, the removal of landmines, and the disarmament of the Joint Security Area in the DMZ. In an effort to promote mutual understanding, the two Koreas have held civil society exchanges and reunions for separated families. Since the establishment of liaison offices, there have been over 200 meetings between North and South Korean officials. Under Moon’s ambitious New Northern Policy, the two Koreas are actively exploring opportunities for economic cooperation, beginning with a project to reconnect the North Korea-South Korea railway.

Opportunities and Challenges

Despite these welcome confidence-building measures, US-North Korea diplomacy remains opaque, fragile, and preliminary. President Trump’s unorthodox approach to personally engage Kim Jong Un has sustained dialogue thus far, but negotiations are at risk of collapse without further reciprocal action from both sides.

Still, there is a rare opportunity at hand to test the hypothesis that Kim Jong Un will relinquish his nuclear weapons in exchange for political and economic security guarantees from the United States. In the near term, the Trump administration’s ability to salvage negotiations and test Kim’s intentions to denuclearize will depend on three key factors: the continued suspension of major military exercises, the formalization of an end-of-war declaration, and the provision of limited sanctions relief.

The Merits of Modifying US-ROK Military Exercises

In the past, the suspension of US-ROK military exercises has been important for facilitating diplomacy with North Korea. In 1992, the United States suspended Team Spirit, an annual field exercise involving hundreds of thousands of US-ROK troops.¹⁴⁶ The George H.W. Bush administration’s decision to suspend the 1992 exercises was a key part of a diplomatic strategy to encourage North Korea to cooperate on nuclear inspections. Team Spirit exercises were suspended again between 1994-1996 as part of the Agreed Framework, after which they were permanently cancelled.¹⁴⁷

The Trump administration has added to this list. To facilitate North Korea’s participation in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, the United States and South Korea postponed and shortened the large annual military exercises that typically occur in March and involve hundreds of thousands of troops, while also removing nuclear strategic assets from the simulations. This is a significant gesture. *Foal Eagle* is a large-scale Field Training Exercise – a rehearsal of actual military maneuvers involving ground, air, and naval forces. It runs parallel to *Key Resolve*, a Command Post Exercise that does not typically involve field exercises. These exercises include scenarios that assume the deployment of THAAD, a US missile defense system that China has stated “gravely harms the strategic security interests” of countries in the region.¹⁴⁸ *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* is another Command Post Exercise that typically occurs in August. Although the exercises are largely computerized, they involve tens of thousands of US-ROK troops.

US-ROK Military Exercises

NAME	PURPOSE	DATE	SIZE RANGE	NOTES
1 Team Spirit	Field	1976-1993	100,000-200,000	Suspended 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996.
2 Foal Eagle	Field	2007-Present	50,000-300,000	Replaced Team Spirit. Postponed until after 2018 Winter Olympics.
3 Key Resolve	Command			
4 Ulchi Freedom Guardian	Command	1976-Present	70,000-75,000	Suspended 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996.
6 Vigilant Ace	Field	2013-Present	12,000	Suspended October 2018.

The United States and South Korea have been conducting these military exercises under the auspices of the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty. US military officials assert that joint exercises are carried out in the Treaty’s spirit of collective defense, and changes to the US-ROK exercise program’s size, scope, and purpose are consistent with the agreement. As has happened before, US-ROK military exercises can be adapted to meet diplomatic and security objectives. There are several options that may continue to mitigate tensions and lay the groundwork for further dialogue:

- **Suspend.** The US and South Korea could continue to suspend major military exercises on the peninsula for as long as North Korea refrains from staging nuclear or missile tests. To address concerns that a suspension would compromise combat readiness, modified exercises could be held outside of South Korea.¹⁴⁹
- **Scale down.** A special advisor to South Korean President Moon Jae-in proposed that South Korea minimize the deployment of US strategic assets during exercises, such as B-1 bombers, in exchange for a freeze on North Korea’s nuclear and missile activities.¹⁵⁰
- **Redesign.** US-ROK exercises could be redesigned to omit provocative scenarios, such as those described in OPLAN 5015, a newly adopted wartime plan that includes strikes against North Korea’s nuclear facilities and leaders. So-called “decapitation” raids undermine the administration’s stated policy against regime change and reinforce North Korea’s narrative of US hostility.¹⁵¹
- **Reassure.** Another option is to offer North Korea forms of reassurance during US-ROK exercises. This could involve the participation of outside observers, such as China and Russia, to monitor the drills.¹⁵²

The adjustment or suspension of military exercises can foster a more favorable environment for dialogue between the United States and North Korea without undermining the US-ROK alliance’s ability to mount an effective defense. In the words of former USFK Commander General Vincent K. Brooks, “[T]here has to be room for diplomatic maneuvering, diplomatic action to occur. And if creating leverage or traction comes from these adjustments to the exercises, then that’s a risk that has to be consciously taken.”¹⁵³ Suspending some military exercises is a low-cost and easily reversible confidence-building measure if it means that North Korea will continue to honor its moratorium on missile and nuclear tests.

The Case for a Peace Declaration

North and South Korea have proposed that the United States sign a peace declaration to end the Korean War in exchange for further denuclearization measures from the North. The Trump administration had reportedly demanded that North Korea first submit a full inventory of its nuclear arsenal – including weapons, facilities, and materials – before agreeing to sign a peace declaration. When negotiations came to an impasse, South Korea recommended that the United States accept a different offer, one in which North Korea will “permanently dismantle” its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon for “corresponding measures, such as the end-of-war declaration.”¹⁵⁴

President Trump has been slow to lend his support to a peace declaration, and many policymakers reject it entirely. Some critics fear that an end-of-war declaration would prematurely lead to a peace treaty and dissolve the US-ROK alliance¹⁵⁵ or grant North Korea legitimacy as a nuclear weapons state.¹⁵⁶ Others discount the operability of Yongbyon facilities and argue that, as a matter of reciprocity, a peace declaration is too high a concession.¹⁵⁷ By and large, these views misrepresent the legal implications of a



Kim Jong Un and President Moon Jae-in at the 2018 Inter-Korean Summit.

peace declaration and overlook a rare opportunity to make major progress on denuclearization efforts.¹⁵⁸

- **What is a peace declaration?** A peace declaration is a non-binding political statement between the US and North Korean leaders that would acknowledge an end to the Korean War. It is distinct from a peace treaty or peace settlement, which would require a lengthy legal process to replace the 1953 Armistice Agreement and dissolve the US-led United Nations Command.

A peace declaration would not in any way affect the armistice, nor would it entail the withdrawal of US Forces in Korea. In fact, the US-ROK alliance could technically remain in place long after a legal peace treaty. As “a starting point,” President Moon has reassured skeptics that a peace declaration would not necessitate a peace treaty until only after “the North achieves complete denuclearization.”¹⁵⁹ According to Moon, these views are understood by Kim Jong Un.

- **Why give North Korea a peace declaration?** A peace declaration would demonstrate President Trump’s commitment to “establish new US-DPRK relations” and “build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean peninsula,” as he agreed to at the Singapore Summit. As a confidence-building measure during nuclear negotiations, it would provide North Korea with low-cost assurances of the administration’s non-hostile intent and, as a matter of hypothesis-testing, it would challenge Kim Jong Un’s rationale for keeping nuclear weapons.

Domestically, an end-of-war declaration may give North Korea valuable political cover to take major denuclearization steps. It would provide the Kim regime a more legitimate pretext for dismantling its nuclear program, which has absorbed an excessive amount of the state’s political and economic capital.

An end-of-war declaration is a reasonable action that could pay dividends, especially if Pyongyang is prepared to dismantle its Yongbyon nuclear complex in return. As Dr. Siegfried Hecker has argued, shutting down operations at Yongbyon would constitute “a major positive signal that they are serious” about denuclearization because it would place a cap on North Korea’s plutonium and tritium stockpile.¹⁶⁰ This would constrain North Korea’s means of developing nuclear warheads that could fit on intercontinental ballistic missiles, and thereby significantly limit Kim’s ability to threaten the United States.¹⁶¹

Targeted Sanctions Relief

One of the biggest challenges the Trump administration will have to address is North Korea’s repeated demand for sanctions relief. Since 2006, the United Nations Security Council has unanimously passed several rounds of sanctions designed to restrict North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. The United States has unilaterally imposed similar sanctions against North Korea, along with ones that also targets cyber activity, money laundering, and human rights violations.

How these sanctions have impacted North Korea’s economy remains unclear. Although the sanctions regime has expanded and become more targeted, North Korea appears to be economically stable and nuclear operations are ongoing. Whether the implementation of more recent sanctions have yet to take effect, or North Korea is demonstrating its resilience through sophisticated evasion tactics, is not certain.

Sanctions may have proven useful in bringing North Korea to the negotiating table, particularly as Pyongyang continues to denounce them and, possibly, as Kim Jong Un explores ways to improve the economy. If lifting some sanctions could enable concrete and verifiable actions by North Korea, such as the proposed dismantlement of the Yongbyon nuclear facility, the Trump administration should explore its options for a targeted, phased sanctions relief package.

A low-risk, initial step to test Kim Jong Un’s willingness to roll back his nuclear program may be to temporarily lift prohibitions or caps on existing sanctions against North Korean trade.¹⁶² Such exemptions could easily be reversed. The continued rapprochement between the two Koreas, which has blossomed by way of economic and diplomatic exchanges, will also require UNSC exemptions. In both cases, the United States stands to make meaningful progress on its twin goals of curbing the nuclear program and advancing peace and stability on the peninsula.

Recommendations

Despite all the challenges, we stand at the threshold of a new era of US-North Korea relations. Since the 2018 Winter Olympics, the United States and North Korea have taken concrete steps to reduce tensions and build confidence. This is a welcome shift from 2017, when Trump threatened “fire and fury” and Kim Jong Un detonated his first thermonuclear bomb. In the absence of dialogue, military confrontation was a very real – even imminent – possibility.

Although both leaders have since walked back from the brink, there remains a long road ahead. The Trump administration is far from securing a substantive deal to eliminate North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, and much farther from ensuring lasting peace. But focusing on the end state obscures a set of intermediary steps that must be taken to lay the groundwork for 1) testing North Korea’s strategic intentions, and 2) encouraging Kim Jong Un to take the path of denuclearization. The below recommendations, which draw on the lessons of past diplomacy, provide the general contours for how North Korea policy under the Trump administration could proceed:

To Sustain Diplomatic Momentum:

Keep leaders at the highest level engaged. A top-down approach creates the necessary momentum, on both sides, to ensure that negotiations move forward. Trump’s willingness to meet directly with Kim Jong Un grants the political recognition that North Korea consistently demands from the United States. Going forward, Trump’s challenge will be to empower and enlist the support of lower-level officials who can negotiate on his behalf.

Empower working-level teams. The prospects for striking a nuclear deal with North Korea will depend on the work of skilled diplomats who can cut through bureaucratic inertia, coordinate with different agencies, and effectively implement policy. The administration has done well to empower senior officials on the issue and appoint a special representative on North Korea, but all negotiators face a steep learning curve. The inclusion of outside experts who have years of direct experience with North Koreans will benefit the administration.



President Trump shows the US-North Korea Joint Statement of the Singapore Summit to press.

Involve Congress throughout the process. Any future agreement with North Korea that addresses the nuclear issue will require congressional support, as evidenced by the Agreed Framework. The administration will need to set realistic expectations about what can and cannot be accomplished if it seeks to ensure that a potential deal will outlast a single presidency. Establishing a level of transparency by providing opportunities for lawmakers to exact oversight can help to prevent legislative actions that could impede diplomacy with North Korea.

Foster a positive environment for dialogue. Diplomatic openings with North Korea are scarce, and opportunities to roll back its nuclear program rare. Maximizing the potential for a deal without undermining the fragility of this moment will require taking some politically sensitive, but easily reversible actions. In particular, the administration may need to carve out sanctions relief and continue to modify US-ROK joint military exercises in exchange for tangible actions by North Korea.

Avoid playing politics. The new Democrat-controlled House and 2020 presidential election provide opportunities to bolster Congressional oversight on US-North Korea diplomacy. However, partisan impulses to reject any deal – on the basis that it would hand Trump a political victory – risk undermining the fragile diplomatic process at hand.¹⁶³ Even a limited deal that curbs North Korea’s nuclear program would serve longstanding US policy goals shared by Republicans and Democrats. Lawmakers should instead play a more constructive role by holding Trump accountable for his commitments to advance denuclearization and peace on the Korean peninsula. After all, the North Korea nuclear problem is unlikely to be fully resolved under the current – or even subsequent – administration. This is fundamentally a long-term issue.



Kim Jong Un and President Moon Jae-in join hands at the top of Mount Baektu in North Korea.

To Build Bridges to Peace:

Support the inter-Korean process. The United States should welcome and actively support the inter-Korean peace process. Since signing the Panmunjom declaration, the two Koreas have implemented measures to ease military tension, restore critical lines of communication, and reunite divided families. These steps may not lead directly to denuclearization, but they are consistent with US interests to manage escalation and stabilize the region.

End the Korean War. The United States should accept South Korea's proposal to declare an end to the Korean War, which would give North Korea the momentum and political space to take serious denuclearization steps. An end-of-war declaration would allow the Trump administration to test Kim Jong Un's intentions and provide a more legitimate basis for resolving the nuclear standoff. It would not compromise the US-ROK alliance, or implicate the withdrawal of US forces in South Korea.

Pursue a parallel-track nuclear and peace process. Progress on the nuclear issue will need to address North Korea's consistent demands for an end to the "US hostile policy." The administration can test whether Kim Jong Un is willing to trade away his nuclear weapons for US assurances of regime security by undertaking a parallel peace process. Prior US non-aggression pacts are not binding, nor have they facilitated a fundamental shift in relations. A parallel peace process would lend credence to the US commitment to normalize relations and may lead to mechanisms to institutionalize security assurances.

To Advance the Denuclearization of North Korea:

Pursue a phased risk management process. The complete dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear and missile arsenal and infrastructure could take 10 to 20 years. North Korea has committed in principle to denuclearize, but the terms for eliminating the nuclear program have not yet been set. In this early stage, the Trump administration could pursue a diplomatic strategy – modeled on the comprehensive roadmap developed by the nuclear experts at Stanford University – to roll back North Korea's nuclear program in the near to long term.¹⁶⁴ A realistic process would strive for the following elements:

- The North agrees to near-term (within two years), tangible steps to denuclearization, such as formalizing the current nuclear and long-range missile testing freeze; committing to not export nuclear or missile technology; ending the production of fissile materials (plutonium and highly enriched uranium); opening declared sites for inspection; declaring nuclear warhead and material inventories; and placing missile and nuclear warhead components/materials under inspection.
- The North agrees to a long-term (five years or more) plan to denuclearize, including placing all nuclear weapons and/or fissile materials under inspection; dismantling nuclear and long-range missile related facilities; and allowing intrusive verification. This plan would include a series of follow-up meetings to work out details and ensure compliance.

Deal on Yongbyon. As a first step, the Trump administration should fully explore Kim Jong Un's offer in the Pyongyang Joint Declaration "to continue to take additional measures, such as the permanent dismantlement of the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon," in exchange for "corresponding measures in accordance with the spirit of the June 12 US-DPRK Joint Statement." Yongbyon's closure, which would involve verifiably shutting down North Korea's plutonium, tritium, and some of its highly enriched uranium production, would serve three critical objectives:

- **First**, it would significantly limit North Korea's ability to credibly threaten the United States. A cap on the North's plutonium and tritium stockpiles would constrain its means of developing smaller, more powerful nuclear warheads that could be fitted on intercontinental ballistic missiles.
- **Second**, it would allow the administration to test Kim Jong Un's intentions to denuclearize. Preventing North Korea from expanding and improving its nuclear arsenal – specifically, the sophisticated nuclear weapons that threaten the US mainland – would be a tangible step

toward denuclearization and lend credence to Kim's commitments in Singapore.

- **Third**, if North Korea allows access for outside inspectors to verify the complete dismantlement of Yongbyon, it could provide an opening for negotiating access to other undeclared nuclear facilities. As Special Representative Stephen Biegun has suggested, the "complex of sites that extends beyond Yongbyon" may be on the table.¹⁶⁵

Distinguish capability from intent. To manage threat perceptions, the administration should avoid conflating North Korean capabilities and intentions. In 2017, many in the Trump administration advocated for military action to deny North Korea the technical capability to strike the United States. Conflating capability and intent presents a dangerous and false choice – between attacking first or being attacked – when a range of diplomatic options to deal with emergent security concerns exist. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that North Korea would actually use its nuclear weapons against the United States unless provoked, as such use would invite a US strike that would mean the end of the Kim regime.

The United States, South Korea, and North Korea have taken steps that were unthinkable a year ago. Where they will lead remains to be seen. The same challenges that have vexed past administrations persist today, yet North Korea's nuclear capabilities have improved significantly. It will take greater incentives and assurances to reverse Kim Jong Un's unprecedented nuclear progress.

The diplomatic opening at hand is ripe for charting a new path in US-North Korea relations. Now is the time for the Trump administration to apply the lessons of a past riddled with missed opportunities to ensure it does not waste the one before it today. Seizing this moment could mean the difference between sliding back into "fire and fury" or making meaningful progress toward denuclearization and peace on the Korean peninsula.

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