Chapter 6

An Assessment of United States-DPRK Relations: Lessons for the Future

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United States relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) over the past decade have seen gradual but important changes that reflect an adjustment to the realities of the post-cold war era.¹ These changes would have been less likely without the dramatic transformations in the global strategic environment brought about by Soviet reforms and the demise of the Soviet state. Moreover, the DPRK has made extraordinary use of the nuclear issue as a means of attracting the attention of top American policymakers and engaging the United States diplomatically. From 1987 to 1994, the issue of North Korea in U.S. foreign policy rose from near invisibility (other than as the perennial enemy across the DMZ) to a major crisis that at times seemed headed for war. Because of the rising prominence of the nuclear issue, North Korea was propelled onto the world stage as a long-neglected problem with which the world, led by the United States and its allies, had to finally come to terms.

The Emergence of Two Schools of Thought

Contemporary United States-DPRK relations are shaped by a complex array of interactive factors; however, two essential schools of thought

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regarding recent U.S. policy toward the North have been evident. These schools favored engagement or isolation of (even confrontation) with the North. As U.S. ambassador to South Korea (ROK), James T. Laney, recently observed, “American policy [toward North Korea] is shaped out of a collage of various sectors of opinions and some are more impatient than others.”² There are multiple inputs into this process, from within and from outside the U.S. administration, and from the regional actors in East Asia. Moreover, for most of this period, no uniform consensus emerged as to either the precise nature of the North Korean nuclear program or whether to put emphasis more on carrot than stick. But from these multiple influences and forces shaping U.S. policy toward the DPRK, what clearly emerged, intensified but not precipitated by the nuclear issue, were distinctive softer- and harder-line schools urging the contrasting approaches of engagement or isolation of the North (though these schools themselves shift and evolve over time).

On the surface, from the American viewpoint, the global U.S. concern of nonproliferation appeared to be the dominant factor driving recent United States-DPRK relations. Moreover, an overlay was the impact of the forty-year-old Mutual Security Treaty between the United States and the ROK, a consequence of which is the presence of 37,000 American troops in South Korea. Both of these are fundamental U.S. security interests. Related as well were the influence of institutional ties between the ROK and the United States, and the influences of bureaucratic politics and institutional political cultures within each government. Communication of intent and the prevailing tone of interaction in a given period were factors as well. And of course, in the background, are the historical misfortunes of the division of Korea after the Japanese occupation and the Korean War. What also bears examination is the role played by deeply felt and deeply buried historical antagonisms, resentments, grievances, and fears harbored over the years by the United States and the DPRK. This residual hostility is what appears to be more fundamentally driving the development of United States-DPRK relations than most of the above factors. While national interests themselves played their ever-present roles, this relationship, frozen in cold war antagonism, has been also greatly influenced by emotional, attitudinal, and perceptual factors.

What distinguishes the emotional/perceptual factor is that it has significantly influenced many of the other factors, such as bureaucratic politics, institutional political cultures, and certainly the prevailing in-
teractive tone; it was usually not visible but helped shape the more visible causative factors.

Up through the mid- to late 1980s, the cold war perspective or school predominated in discussions of U.S. policy toward North Korea. A notable exception was Edward Olsen of the Naval Postgraduate School, whose writings in the early 1980s urged the United States to begin some process of reconciliation with the North. In some ways Olsen’s works forecasted a trend that would emerge in the post-Seoul Olympics environment, which coincided with the era of Soviet reform under Gorbachev. Immediately before 1987, and then again in late 1988, most analysts did not consider modification of long-established U.S. policy toward North Korea because of the close Soviet-DPRK military relationship as well as two incidents of North Korean state terrorism (in 1983 and 1987). Beginning with Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Gaston Sigur’s landmark speech in July 1987, in which the United States moderated its tone toward the DPRK, and then resuming with the December 1988 start of United States-DPRK dialogue in Beijing at the political counselor level, the environment permitted in 1989–90 a more outspoken school in favor of increased contact and improved communication and relations with North Korea. This was partly a reflection of the regional success of the ROK’s Nordpolitik as well as the effect of steady improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations upon the global political scene. By July 1990, Sigur himself, then a private citizen who had recently visited the North, suggested before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs that the United States take specific steps to demonstrate sincere interest in improving relations, including amending the U.S. trade embargo to allow telecommunications with the DPRK and inviting higher-ranking DPRK leaders to the United States for informal discussions. While the nuclear issue then only played a small part in that congressional hearing, the committee print was nonetheless later titled Korea: North-South Nuclear Issues. That symbolized a turning point, for even in the midst of the rapid changes then involving the two Koreas and their neighbors, the nuclear issue from 1990 on only gained ground in policy-making attention. The two schools, characterized by a softer versus a tougher approach, became identified less by their relative suspicion or trust of North Korea’s willingness to open up or freeze its nuclear program than by their broader disposition on the appropriateness of improving the overall United States-DPRK relationship, indeed of engagement versus isolation. Much was said in the
press and journals about how dangerous the North’s nuclear program was, but seldom were the underlying political problems and issues of building trust between the two countries candidly addressed.

The cold war posture of the contemporary hardline school is characterized by an overall view of North Korea as ominous and a tendency to see it in worst-case scenario terms. The past ten years have also been a time of dwindling U.S. defense budgets as the cold war wound down. Hardline views can in some ways be explained not only by the difficulties of transitioning from the cold war perspective, but also by the desire to protect defense budgets from further cuts and to demonstrate a perceived need to shore up the defense capabilities of South Korea. This school sometimes conveyed a crisis situation, particularly as exemplified in the first six months of 1994. However, it should be noted that although conservatives in the United States and the ROK tended to have similar interests, there were occasions when the two countries themselves stood at odds. At times, there was across-the-board resentment in the South that the United States was dictating policy to Seoul, involving it in issues not corresponding directly to the national interest, and undermining ROK sovereignty. Conversely, the United States would be taken aback by occasional wholesale South Korean shifts to the right, such as occurred at the November 1993 United States-ROK summit, after the July 1994 death of Kim Il Sung, and on the occasions when Seoul has used undemocratic means to crack down on protests against its northern policy.

Because of lack of progress on inter-Korean nuclear inspections and increasing International Atomic Energy Administration (IAEA) suspicions about the North’s nuclear program, the isolation/confrontation school was largely ascendant from late 1992 until the DPRK announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT in March 1993. This was a crucial opening for the engagement school, which urged decisive U.S. action to negotiate directly with the North to keep it in the NPT system. This trend reached a high point in June and July 1993 when the first two rounds of United States-DPRK dialogue were held. But again, as virtually no progress came from these two rounds, and as the North evidenced enormous difficulty in dealing and complying with the IAEA (and as the United States played little effective mediating role between the two), a tense atmosphere built up that peaked in early June 1994, just prior to former President Jimmy Carter’s visit to Pyongyang. The Carter visit was another opportunity for moderates in the United States to step in, but in South Korea, hardliners mounted
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a counteroffensive upon Kim Il Sung’s death just three weeks later. However, U.S. agreements with the DPRK in August and October aligned the Clinton administration with moderates to forge an accord despite Seoul’s serious misgivings and apprehensions.

Defining who represented each school both within and outside the administration was not always a cut and dried matter; what was clearest was only that there were consistently two distinctive schools of thought, but their boundaries were often diffuse. While in a larger sense, the State Department represented more moderate views compared to Defense, tougher views also emerged from senior State officials compared to working level ones; moreover, as one security analyst pointed out, much of the Clinton administration approach toward North Korea had its origins in early 1993 in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) under the late Secretary Les Aspin. Certain key figures advocating a softer line toward the North, like Rep. Stephen Solarz or Dr. William J. Taylor, Jr., shifted later to the hardline camp (in late 1991 and mid-1994, respectively) due to the course of the nuclear issue. Other figures like Selig Harrison among moderates and Paul Wolfowitz among conservatives maintained consistent positions (although, even here, Wolfowitz is considered the author of President Bush’s 1991 program to withdraw tactical nuclear weapons worldwide—including from the ROK—which was a major U.S. contribution to peninsular developments). The Heritage Foundation seemed more on the right on the North Korean nuclear issue and the Carnegie Endowment more on the left, but interesting shifts occurred: Heritage’s Richard V. Allen, one of the North’s toughest critics, by 1994 came to advocate a variation of a package deal with the DPRK, while Carnegie’s resident nuclear expert, Leonard Spector, often sounded very skeptical and conservative. Of anyone, journalists were most consistent in their positions, particularly on the right, such as Lally Weymouth, Charles Krauthammer and William Safire. But in the day-to-day unfolding of events on United States-DPRK policy and the nuclear issue, there was never a doubt that definitive moderate and hardline schools were in earnest competition, both within the administration and in the public arena.

What best characterized the opposing views of the engagement and isolation schools were their respective attitudes about the uses of coercive measures against the DPRK, up to and including military force. If even economic sanctions against the North were understood to increase the chances of war, then clearly one side saw the avoidance of
war as the paramount U.S. interest, while the other saw it as a potentially necessary and valid means of preventing even more frightening scenarios through the global proliferation of nuclear weapons and materials. What was surprising, however, was the ease with which the harder-line school favored sanctions (acknowledged as the beginning of the road to ever more coercive measures) and did not rule out the devastating consequences if in response the North were to attack Seoul. The engagement school saw a second Korean War as tantamount to the general conflagration that the hardliners were trying to avoid by maintaining the sanctity of the NPT system; as the former U.S. ambassador to the ROK, Donald Gregg, observed, fighting a war to preserve the NPT is like burning a village in Vietnam to save it. Former President Jimmy Carter expressed this succinctly when he said upon his return from Pyongyang in June 1994, “The administration has said that there was no crisis. I thought there was an impending crisis, and now the crisis is over.” There was an enormous gap at the time in perception between hard- and soft-liners as to whether the United States might have come close to war with North Korea. One view was that the problem was all the North’s making and if it needed pressure to respond properly then so be it; the other view was that because of a fundamental animus against the North, the administration was avoiding direct talks at the highest level with the DPRK to solve the nuclear issue, and no alternatives were available to prevent escalation toward war.

U.S. policy toward the DPRK is a complex issue, with many inputs from allies and neighboring nations concerned with Korea, divergent views within the administration on how to handle it (especially with its intricate relationship with nonproliferation policy); and it was made no easier by nearly fifty years of a near total absence of relations. Yet, over the past ten years, if anything, the two clearly defined schools of thought were always evident. The simplicity of this division stood in sharp relief to its complexity. This held to the signing of the Agreed Framework in October 1994, at which time the fundamental issues on engagement with the DPRK and halting the North’s nuclear program were settled in principle.

Part of the complexity of U.S. policy toward the DPRK was that, rightly or wrongly, it became the domain within the administration of nonproliferation experts rather than the Asian regional bureau. In the end, this worked out successfully in the Agreed Framework, but it was cause for concern up until the Carter visit to North Korea in 1994, and
it was sometimes referred to as a hijacking of America’s Korea policy by nonproliferation people. Moreover, a common complaint by Asia specialists both in and out of government was that policymakers and the media tended to discount (or even put down) the specialists’ views and listen only to the views of policy generalists whose knowledge of Korea was extremely thin. The import of this complaint is that a solution to the nuclear issue not altogether different from that in the Agreed Framework could have been arrived at much earlier and without the 1993 NPT withdrawal crisis and 1994 Yongbyon reactor refueling crisis by paying greater attention to the views of Korea experts.

One final distinction, as Ambassador Laney noted, is that the isolationist school often had better access to the press and networked very effectively among those with shared interests to get its point across.10 Because of the tremendous media emphasis on North Korea as a threat, it was an easier task to gain a hearing for views that urged getting tough than for views that urged restraint and patience. Also, the two schools did not simply cut vertical divisions, such as between institutions or scholarly communities, but cut horizontal divisions between generations, particularly in the U.S. government. This division posed bureaucratic problems in the carrying out of policy toward the DPRK in the Bush and Clinton administrations, especially in the State Department.

Problems in the United States-DPRK Relationship

Historically, North Korea has been one of the United States’ most irreconcilable foes. Relations began frigid in 1945 when it became apparent the Soviets had no intention of allowing an independent, unified Korea. The Korean War turned the United States and the DPRK into utterly hostile, implacable enemies, a state of affairs which did not significantly change during the cold war years. Indeed, the shifts in United States-DPRK relations in the late 1980s were only made possible by the fundamental changes in Soviet foreign policy and the character of the Soviet regime.

Yet, full reconciliation and normalization will require eradicating the legacy of hatred, animosity, and fear which was the permanent feature of the cold war period. While a difficult process for both countries, coming to terms with the resentments and grievances of each is the fundamental starting point. Outwardly, positive, substantive steps can be taken (such as enunciated in the Agreed Framework on freez-
ing the DPRK nuclear program and outlining a course toward normalization), but even that effort can come to naught without a deliberate and fundamental national decision to forgive (or at least forget) the past.\textsuperscript{11} The process of the recent establishment of U.S. diplomatic relations with Vietnam indicates that a great deal of soul-searching had been done to bring that about.

The fundamental American interest in Northeast Asia is the maintenance of peace and stability—in a region of crucial economic, political, and military importance, containing three world powers (Russia, China, and Japan) and two rivals for legitimacy in Korea. The United States has long-maintained mutual security treaties with both Japan and the Republic of Korea, with several tens of thousands of troops stationed in each. In the case of the ROK, since 1954 the U.S. aim has been to deter aggression by the North through the American commitment to militarily aid the South in the event of attack, not precluding the use of tactical or strategic nuclear weapons. Given North Korean behavior even in the 1980s, notably acts of state terrorism against the ROK and the particularly close DPRK-USSR military ties in that decade, a sudden North Korean attack upon the South was never hard to imagine. Periods of slight warming in North-South relations, such as in 1985, would be instantly undermined by an outburst of terrorism from the North, leading to the understandably pervasive feeling of long standing: pure distrust of Pyongyang’s motives, whether its acts are seen as calculated or “unpredictable” (they are in fact quite rational if not always competent). In this sense, North Korea is the ultimate pariah state—not only an outcast, excluded by the international community, but a society whose leadership thinking and decisionmaking are almost impregnable to Western understanding and whose sources of behavior are apparently derived from an utterly antithetical value system.

North Koreans can be unfathomable as to their intentions and what makes them tick, but our image of the North has long been that as the world’s “last Stalinist state,” the pinnacle of twentieth-century totalitarianism, the incarnation of Orwell’s \textit{1984}. North Korea appears an anachronism on the post-cold war landscape, and U.S. policy toward the DPRK has reflected long-held dispositions and assumptions that look equally as odd today. The United States first and foremost regards North Korea as the foe it could not defeat in the Korean War, in which over 50,000 Americans died, and with whom it technically remains in a state of war. Americans recall the seizure of the \textit{U.S.S. Pueblo}
in 1968 and the ax-murder of American soldiers in Panmunjom in 1976. They remember the Rangoon bombing of the ROK cabinet in 1983 and the blowing up of the Korean Airlines jet in 1987—state terrorism directed at the ROK. Americans’ first reaction is that the North Koreans are fundamentally belligerent, easily capable of being vicious killers, who can be trusted under no circumstances. Moreover, North Korean rhetoric, especially since the Korean War, has been extremely hostile and vitriolic toward the United States; the United States could not help but reflect back some of the hostility it received, and certainly it justified the constant high state of alert of U.S. troops in the ROK. Given the consistently acrimonious history of relations, it is little wonder that the United States would come to harbor deep resentment, distrust, and fear toward the North. Visitors to Pyongyang have sensed an underlying (although not necessarily overt) animosity and contempt in North Koreans towards Americans that for many justifies one’s worst-case assumptions.

The main long-standing U.S. grievance toward North Korea remains its history of unremitting hostility toward Washington. While this has abated over recent years (much DPRK invective has been reserved for Seoul), it is a forty-year legacy not easily forgotten. The Korean War—in contrast to the more recent Vietnam War—remains a very bitter memory to older Americans. One reason is that it was the first American war which achieved only limited objectives despite three years of bloody warfare. The war remains unresolved in that, although an armistice has kept the peace for over forty years, a peace treaty has yet to be signed formally ending the conflict.

Americans’ image of North Korea is of both a hostile pariah state and, as Secretary of State Warren Christopher put it, a society “caught in kind of a time warp. It is the most isolated country in the world, unmoved by the winds of change that have swept the region.” It is hard to find a modern-day comparison, a point of reference or model to explain the character of the North Korean state and its society. U.S. negotiators with the DPRK readily admit that they indeed know very little about decisionmaking in North Korea and can only presume what its interests and values are. This vacuum of knowledge does not prevent successful diplomacy, but it certainly is an inhibiting factor. While North Korean diplomats attempt to engage Western diplomats in terms more or less according with standard diplomatic practice, this does not mitigate their “time warp” image. North Korea’s isolation obviously means it is trying to preserve something, and we seldom see that as
anything more than an oppressive totalitarianism—that the North Ko-
rean elite is simply trying to preserve its power and survive, nothing
more. This corresponds to the priorities within other authoritarian or
totalitarian states but may insufficiently describe the North. Even more
than the riddle, mystery, and enigma that Churchill saw in the former
Soviet Union, North Korea epitomizes the unfathomable. We feel it is
so alien to our culture and values that it is hard to find a common
base from which to develop a relationship. Fortunately, it has not
proven impossible.

A consequence of our image and perceptions of North Korea is
both the disposition and assumption that it ought not to exist, that the
solution to the problems presented by North Korea’s policies (and
existence) is simply the collapse or dissolution of the state, followed
by its absorption by South Korea. These notions are driven less by
logic than by our underlying outlook. The DPRK is so despised and
so antithetical to our culture and values that its reform is presupposed
(tacitly if not openly) impossible; therefore, for a society already in
economic distress with almost no friends, and small enough to be of
lesser geopolitical consequence, the best solution seems in fact for
North Korea to no longer exist. While this has not been the de jure
policy of the United States, the ROK, or any other country, it has been
much more a latent, if not always conscious de facto policy practiced
by both. Hatred and contempt for North Korea run so high in South
Korea, for example, that upon the death of Kim Il Sung, despite an
historic agreement days prior for a North-South summit meeting with
him, the ROK (unlike the United States and the United Nations) re-
fused to offer condolences, put its military on high alert, publicized
Soviet documents blaming Kim for starting the Korean War, and pun-
ished publishers, professors, and students for any expressions of con-
dolence or sympathy for the North. Under the circumstances this was
not a logical or beneficial policy for the ROK if improvement in inter-
Korean relations were its utmost objective. It was, however, a gut re-
action, at least of entrenched conservative forces in the South, who
saw this unexpected time of leadership transition as a ripe oppor-
tunity to promote DPRK instability; in effect, these forces were power-
ful enough to tie the hands of the Kim Young Sam administration.13
Yet, such strongly negative reactions towards the North have been
plainly evident in the United States and among elements of the Clinton
administration as well.

North Korea has many long-held enemies: historically Japan, cer-
tainly South Korea, but in its 47-year history, it has harbored a special
animosity toward the United States. First of all, North Korea inherited from the Soviet occupation forces the cold war hostility that Stalin held for the Americans after 1945. During Stalin’s lifetime, Kim Il Sung shared the views of Stalin and Mao toward the United States, but the 1950–53 Korean War was a special experience for North Korea that neither elder communist leader could share. North Korea’s losses in physical devastation exceeded those of South Korea. The difference was that North Korea was the target of a million bombing sorties over the vast majority of its land surface, and no North Korean needed an explanation for who was responsible. In that era, South Koreans were especially seen as mere American surrogates, propped up by U.S. military and economic power. Thus, the concept of America as utterly villainous and barbarous was not based on propaganda alone (although certainly that has been exploited to the maximum) but on the evidence and consequences of the U.S. war effort to destroy North Korea. Even with the massive influx of Chinese forces to assist the North, the United States nearly succeeded. Middle-aged North Koreans, who were but children during the war, cannot forget what devastation America wrought (whether or not they realize that their country unleashed the war to begin with).

As convenient as it is for an isolated society like North Korea to have an ever-present enemy, for forty years it took little convincing that the United States was enemy number one; and an enemy, in the communist and *Juche* dialectic tradition, should be hated. Since the Korean War, the United States, by the presence of its troops in the ROK, has been characterized as an occupying force with a will to remain permanently in order to maintain its hegemony in Korea and Japan (although today, with uncertainties about Japanese and Chinese power, the United States is more likely seen by the DPRK as a regional stabilizing force, albeit one to be reduced in size). Thus, on the foundation of Stalinist-instilled communist-solidarity hatred for the American “imperialists,” the Korean War permanently etched the perceived villainy of the United States into the minds of the North Korean populace—with no small help from the DPRK regime itself.

The enormity of the resentment and hatred toward America cannot be easily grasped. It has been instilled in North Korean young even of pre-school age, who are given toy rifles and bayonets in class and taught to stab cardboard cut-outs of American soldiers. Even North Korean postage stamps have depicted Korean People’s Army soldiers killing GIs with fitting slogans. Manipulation of this hatred certainly has had its utility in maintaining a tightly controlled and highly mobi-
lized state. But this indoctrination, along with general North Korean xenophobia and distrust, make it extraordinarily difficult for the DPRK to attempt to develop a qualitatively better relationship with the United States. While the relatively younger generation of technocrats said to be the mainstay of new North Korean leader Kim Jong Il may be more flexible and creative in its attitudes toward the United States than the founding generation, they are by no means liberals. They have little fondness for the United States, but changed geopolitical realities in the region since 1990, as well as the North’s worsening economic situation, have led to dramatic DPRK efforts to gain U.S. attention, respect, and political and economic benefits through manipulation of the nuclear issue. The North likely realizes that even to do nothing is to do something; it cannot make time stand still but must act.

Thus, today, the DPRK indeed wrestles with its own image and grievances against the United States in the hope that eventually the United States, which it sees as key to an overall improvement of its diplomatic and external economic relations, will accord it due legitimacy and knock down the international barriers preventing the DPRK from receiving the trade, aid, and investment it needs to survive and develop. It exhorts the United States, in the meantime, not to impose its own values on the North.

The Role Played by the Nuclear Issue

Public awareness of North Korea in the last few years has focused almost exclusively on the controversies over its nuclear program. In the public mind, North Korea has been equated with the nuclear issue. But this has led to the perception that the United States-DPRK relationship is only about the nuclear issue, a narrow way to look at a very multifaceted problem. Unfortunately, the guiding motivation of recent U.S. policy toward the DPRK has largely been the sanctity of the non-proliferation system and not setting a precedent that would undermine it or begin the end of it. Thus, U.S. policy has treated North Korea mainly as a non-proliferation problem. It certainly is, but it is also much more, and to the extent U.S. policy has been aloof from the larger implications, it has been “handcuffed.” More than the sanctity of the non-proliferation system is tied into this relationship and its outcomes. Larger questions inevitably are part of the picture: peace and stability in Northeast Asia; the implications of another, more devastating Korean War; the link between immediate U.S. policy and longer-
range policy facilitating Korean unification; the overall U.S. relationships with China, Russia, and Japan; and not least of all, the matter of normalizing a highly abnormal fifty-year relationship with the North. The legalistic prism of non-proliferation is too narrow to encompass this scope.

Much more has been going on in the case of North Korea’s handling of the nuclear issue than simply a threat to the NPT. A lesson the North Korean nuclear problem may hold for nonproliferation policy was well expressed by security analyst Michael Mazarr.

[T]o the extent that anything profound can be said or done in the effort to restrain proliferation, it will be based overwhelmingly on the details of the specific case, and depend only to a minor degree on broad insights about nonproliferation as an international enterprise…. To the greatest extent possible, nonproliferation should not be considered to be a discipline of its own, but should be tied closely to regional expertise.15

Mazarr’s point was that “any strategy to avoid proliferation must be specifically tailored to individual countries and situations…. The balance between…incentives, and what they consist of, must be determined on a case-by-case basis.”16 Among the proliferation challenges the United States faces, each case is largely unique. Specific tactics more often than not cannot be transferred from one case to the other. Initiatives that work in one context might be counterproductive in another. Thus, the case of the North Korean nuclear issue best supports the argument that nonproliferation is a specific not general enterprise. Mazarr noted that a technical U.S. approach toward nonproliferation, of control and denial, combined with what even South Koreans perceive as American “hegemonism and arrogance,” is inadequate.17 The United States must recognize that the proliferator has legitimate security concerns and, thus, elements of reassurance must be appropriately combined with those of deterrence and compellence.

Mazarr concurred that U.S. policy toward the North indeed became the “literal hostage of nonproliferation directorates within the U.S. government.”18 Yet, he made a case that an unconventional approach, based more on Korean politics, might have stood a better chance in the long run of causing the North to give up its nuclear program. However, this was precluded by a demand- and sanction-oriented nonproliferation strategy which de-emphasized the regional particulars of the North Korean case. It became a symbol rather than
a distinctive case. Mazarr specified that the U.S. nonproliferation approach toward the North violated several general principles applicable to the North understood by those familiar with North Korean political culture: rather than develop personal relationships and build trust (which should precede a legal agreement) the United States withheld personal contacts until substantive issues could be resolved; it threatened North Korea’s existence and declared its regime was eventually doomed, thus publicly humilitating the North; it used multilateral institutions like the IAEA and the UN Security Council to pressure (and thus embarrass) the North; and the United States “almost gratuitously” condemned or condescended to North Korea in official statements.19 This pattern was particularly true through late 1993 and in effect only dramatically changed after the Carter visit to Pyongyang.

What have received widespread public attention, especially since late 1992, are the often articulated American concerns about the implications of not stopping the North Korea nuclear program. Interestingly, administration statements have tended to be cautious and legalistic, while real U.S. fears tended to be voiced by columnists, media personalities, and retired U.S. officials.

A typical example of official expression of administration concern over North Korea was then-CIA Director R. James Woolsey’s testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in early 1994. He cited three critical challenges that North Korea presents: (1) its effort to develop a nuclear capability (he estimated that the North could have already produced enough plutonium for at least one nuclear weapon); (2) North Korea’s war preparations program, including improvements in military capabilities and efforts to bring its society and economy to a heightened state of military readiness; and (3) North Korea’s export to the Middle East of missiles which can be made nuclear-, chemical-, or biological-capable.20 While Woolsey’s presentation was broad and inclusive, he was typical of administration officials in usually limiting official concern to North Korean nuclear activities and the issue of its compliance with the NPT and IAEA safeguards, and did not publicly dwell on U.S. fears of the consequences if Pyongyang were not stopped.

However, one of the best expositions of U.S. interests regarding the North Korean nuclear issue was written by Arnold Kanter, former undersecretary of state for political affairs under President Bush, and the highest-ranking American official ever to meet a North Korean official. He designated two kinds of American interests at stake. First, North Korean acquisition of nuclear weapons “would transform the
current political and security landscape in Asia beyond recognition.”21 Obviously, DPRK nuclear weapons would dramatically increase the threat to the ROK and the U.S. forces stationed there and vastly complicate the task of defending them. Moreover, the ROK and Japan would most likely succumb to pressure to obtain nuclear weapons for themselves. China and other regional actors would also respond in ways that exacerbated the danger, and the overall result would be a vastly more unstable Asia-Pacific region. Kanter noted that North Korea is not Pakistan and recommended that our policy toward Pakistan “should be taken as little guidance and less precedent” for our policy toward the North.22

Although Kanter did not say so, it is implicit that the DPRK was aware of how its threat was perceived. As long as it only threatened to “go nuclear,” raising the above dire possibilities, it retained tremendous leverage. But once it actually went nuclear, it would touch off a regional arms race that indeed would go against its interest. Pyongyang apparently is keenly aware of the distinction between threat and actualized threat.

Second, Kanter explained that, whatever progress the North might or might not have been making in its nuclear capability, its defiance was doing serious damage to U.S. interests. The United States could not allow the DPRK to continue to violate its nonproliferation obligations because it would set a terrible precedent. Kanter worried that, regardless of what North Korea’s neighbors decided to do, the global nonproliferation regime could unravel if nations from Ukraine to Iran concluded that the international community would not stand in the way of North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons. He stated that “these risks and costs alone are sufficient to argue against a strategy of open-ended negotiations.”23

Stephen Solarz—who until 1993 chaired the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs and whose stance on the North markedly changed after Desert Storm, as the DPRK nuclear issue arose—wrote that any analysis “must begin with a recognition that the North Korean nuclear project constitutes the most serious threat to the preservation of regional peace and global nonproliferation in the world today.”24 He cited as evidence: (1) an unconstrained North Korean nuclear program would give it the ability to stockpile dozens and eventually hundreds of nuclear weapons; (2) it would increase the risk of another conventional war in Korea, and a nuclear-capable Pyongyang would have enormous leverage to end the fighting on its
terms; (3) it would make more likely a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia; (4) it increases the chances that the ROK and Japan could become victims of a nuclear attack; and (5) it would give North Korea the capacity to earn needed foreign exchange by selling fissile material or completed nuclear weapons to other states or terrorist groups.

Solarz adamantly insisted that Pyongyang’s real objective was to sell nuclear weapons (and missiles) rather than use them. No better method could be found to completely devastate the global nonproliferation regime and fundamentally undermine U.S. interests.


What is the North’s strategy? Anyone who still thinks Kim Il Sung is not trying to become a nuclear power is a fool. He is building atomic weapons to sell them to rich rogue states like Iran and Libya, thereby bolstering his shrinking economy, and to use them in forcing the South into unification on his terms.25

Both Solarz and Safire openly called for preparing to use the military option to take out the nuclear sites at Yongbyon. Kanter, along with his associate, former Bush national security adviser Brent Scowcroft, also called for a military option during the height of the June 1994 crisis, a surgical strike against the Yongbyon reprocessing facility. They wrote, “Pyongyang must be made to understand that if war is unavoidable, we would rather fight it sooner than later, when North Korea might have a sizable nuclear arsenal.”26

One of the most outspoken former U.S. officials was Lawrence Eagleburger, Secretary of State in the last months of the Bush administration. He told television audiences in June,

[If you look at what the world will be like five or six years from now, if we do not stop this process in North Korea, it ought to scare the pants off everybody. This is the beginning of the end of controlling the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction…. We are in the beginnings of a nuclear arms race in the Pacific…. They will be selling these things to the Iraqis and the Iranians and the Libyans, and boy, are we going to be in trouble…. It is the kind of foreign policy problem that if you don’t deal with the tough situation now, you will have a much worse one some years down the road…. They’re out to build a nuclear arsenal so that they can do whatever they like with it and use it to blackmail the
neighborhood…. [T]his is one [where] if in the end it is necessary to use force, we ought to use force because we simply cannot tolerate this process to continue.27

Eagleburger complained, as have many other critics, that the Clinton administration has been inconsistent in dealing with North Korea, sometimes threatening action and at other times being conciliatory.

One of the least discussed fears of a North Korean nuclear program, but important to consider, was voiced by the undersecretary of state for political affairs under President Johnson, Eugene Rostow. Writing on post-cold war U.S. foreign policy, he noted that if Saddam Hussein had had a deployable nuclear weapon, the United States would not have put at risk over half a million U.S. troops to force Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991; it would have been politically impossible. Rostow entertained the same fear about North Korean nuclear weapons, that despite the U.S. nuclear umbrella over the ROK and the presence of 37,000 U.S. troops, a U.S. president would not likely find the domestic support to commit U.S. soldiers into a conflict that could involve a nuclear-capable adversary.28 This ties into Rostow’s overall perspective of nonproliferation in the post-cold war world. For him, nuclear proliferation “is an urgent short-term problem that the nations must resolve together if order is to be achieved and maintained”; the future of the global balance of power will be profoundly influenced by how the state system deals with nuclear proliferation.29 For the sake of overall global security and the maintenance of the balance of power, non-nuclear countries suspected of secretly developing nuclear weapons cannot be treated as full equals in the state system, he argued. UN Security Council Resolution 687, the basis for the 1991 cease-fire in Operation Desert Storm in the Gulf, embodies this principle; and it implies that cases of proliferation, especially by rogue states, cannot be dealt with by only peaceful diplomacy. “Military occupation, perhaps United Nations trusteeship, may well be needed in some cases to enforce the emerging rule,” he added.30 In many ways, Rostow gave legal and theoretical grounding to Secretary Eagleburger’s comments above.

The Bush administration probably harbored a more skeptical attitude toward the likelihood of North Korean compliance and resolution of outstanding nuclear issues, but it in fact set the stage for the Clinton administration’s successes by announcing the worldwide withdrawal of land- and sea-based U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Sep-
tember 1991. This decision, not directed toward Korea per se, paved the way for the two inter-Korean agreements of December that year, which are dormant and unimplemented but not dead. It also took the unprecedented step of holding the first-ever high-level dialogue with the North in January 1992, albeit on a one-time basis only, as well as canceling Team Spirit exercises that year in support of North-South dialogue. When President Clinton took office a year later, he had little choice but to maintain Bush policy toward North Korea, although unfortunately this included the Bush decision to conduct Team Spirit (a decision fundamentally driven by the ROK). It was not until the North’s decision to withdraw from the NPT on March 12, 1993, partially in reaction to Team Spirit, that the United States was challenged to find an appropriate and workable response to what had become a crisis in the nonproliferation system.

At this point emerged Robert Gallucci, then assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs under Bush and Clinton (later appointed ambassador-at-large), as the key official charged with negotiating a resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. Gallucci has since characterized the U.S. approach that evolved after March 1993 as based on a principle of compartmentalization of the problems represented. While the overall goal has been a nuclear-free Korean peninsula, he said in discussing the Agreed Framework, “the subtext to that was to deal with problems which we can roughly characterize as problems that relate to the past activity of the North Koreans, the current nuclear program, and the direction that the program was headed in the future.” While apparently a technical approach, it was also a rational one which succeeded in avoiding a wholesale and counterproductive negative reaction and response to North Korea’s seeming intransigence. The accord, fashioned after nearly a month of protracted negotiations, has been appraised on the whole as comprehensive and effective, although by no means an ideal solution to the nuclear issue. The foremost aim of the American approach was to address the future: to block North Korea’s acquisition of dozens or even hundreds of nuclear weapons, that is, the North’s strategic nuclear program. Second, and of nearly equal importance, was to freeze the entire DPRK program, most especially to insure that spent fuel rods in cooling ponds since June 1994 were not reprocessed and that the operational 5 mw(e) reactor was not reloaded with fresh fuel rods. The last, and certainly the most contentious issue, was transparency of the past, submitting to unprecedented IAEA special inspections of suspected waste sites.
While many, including the IAEA, are less than fully pleased with this last aspect of the agreement, it has been generally acknowledged that any DPRK agreement to submit to special inspections, even if several years off, is still far better than North Korean refusal.

Acceptance of the agreement has not been simply along partisan lines; Arnold Kanter essentially considered the October accord a good agreement, given the administration’s strategic decision to use the approach it did and assuming the North complied. Gallucci himself repeatedly has emphasized that North Korea has agreed to do more than is required by the NPT. Nothing in the NPT or the safeguards accord requires the DPRK to freeze its nuclear program and ultimately dismantle nuclear facilities it has been constructing over the past twenty years. Moreover, the DPRK had requested an American negative security guarantee, which the United States has agreed to provide in the accord. What needs to be understood is that North Korea was never exempt from the threat of U.S. first-use of nuclear weapons; a 1978 American declaration pledging not to use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear state party to the NPT was not meant to apply to the DPRK because of its defense alliances with the USSR/Russia and China. Thus, North Korea has always stood under the threat of American first-use of nuclear weapons, well before its nuclear program achieved notoriety. This unusual circumstance, in which the North felt singled out, from a security standpoint makes understandable its long-standing demands for a non-use pledge from the United States; American acknowledgment of the request was recognition that Pyongyang had a valid security concern that could now be addressed as part of the bargain.

The seven chief criticisms of the agreement, emanating primarily from Republicans in Congress and elements in the press, are generally as follows: First, for the IAEA to wait in effect five years before the North will relent on special inspections damages the nonproliferation regime. Legally, a signatory is required to comply on demand according to the safeguards accord. Second, the nature of this agreement will encourage other states with nuclear programs in development to follow the DPRK’s lead and withdraw from the NPT in search of greater benefits. The United States continues to block the sale to Iran by third countries of a light-water reactor (LWR), and Iran has already complained that it has received too little reward for its complete cooperation with the IAEA. Third, North Korea is destined for collapse in the next few years, critics allege, yet the United States needlessly provides life-support through oil, LWRs, and reduced trade
restrictions, not to mention the extension of unprecedented political legitimacy (which will eventually rehabilitate the DPRK as a candidate for assistance from international financial institutions). This perception is particularly strong in South Korea, despite the accord. Fourth, the United States has consistently shifted its policy, from declaring the North will not be allowed to possess nuclear weapons (e.g., November 1993) to settling for capping its program, with no assurance it will ever know if the North has produced one, two, or more devices. If it does possess even one or two low-yield devices, some observers contend that is sufficient to deter effective action by the United States and its allies in case of North Korean aggression against the South. In any case, in the end, it is alleged, the DPRK suffers no penalties from its defiance but rather reaps rewards. Fifth, the agreement leaves the DPRK nuclear program infrastructure intact for several years, allowing it later to renege on the agreement and, if possible, proceed with its program. Sixth, the agreement does not address North Korea’s export of ballistic missiles, a U.S. concern almost on a par with nuclear proliferation. Finally, the agreement, critics charge, also sets the precedent of inducements—in effect, bribes—as means for maintaining the nonproliferation regime; yet this ignores how the United States has already handled the cases of South Korea and Ukraine.

The overwhelming response to these criticisms has been that the agreement, with its imperfections, is preferable to war. While this does not speak to the intrinsic strengths of the agreement—which are the reasons the president, his key advisers and his cabinet endorsed it—the warning of the possibility of a second Korean War ought not to appear rhetorical. To consider as an empty threat North Korea’s assertion that imposition of sanctions was equivalent to a declaration of war would have been foolhardy. Secretary of Defense William Perry said in Senate testimony,

…[T]he North Koreans had clearly stated that the imposition of sanctions would be considered by them to be equivalent to a declaration of war. Many people wrote that off as rhetoric. I thought it was imprudent to consider it as pure rhetoric and that we had to take it at face value. At the same time, their rhetoric included statements like “turning Seoul into a sea of flames.”

As editorials in two leading newspapers pointed out, economic sanctions and military strikes would work “only at the risk of war,” and
the United States could not impose its will on North Korea as it could a defeated Iraq, but had to negotiate.\textsuperscript{40} Here one must also reject the notion of “compensatory toughness”: that the Clinton administration had been weak in Bosnia, Somalia, and elsewhere, and Korea was the one place to get tough.

Other analysts assert the United States conceded remarkably little, while the DPRK gave up a great deal.\textsuperscript{41} Despite its right under the NPT, the North agreed to forgo reprocessing (which it also did in the 1991 inter-Korean denuclearization agreement, but arrangements for implementation and verification were never concluded). With U.S. technical assistance, North Korea will store its spent fuel rods, ultimately to ship them to a third country. It has agreed not to refuel or restart its 5 mw(e) reactor, to immediately cease construction of its 50 mw(e) and 200 mw(e) reactors, and to shut down and seal its huge reprocessing facility. All of the above must be done under continuous IAEA supervision. And before significant nuclear components of LWRs are delivered (in at least five years), the North must finally submit to special inspections. (It may alternatively decide to change its inventory declaration, admitting to having reprocessed more plutonium than previously declared, and perhaps avoid special inspections.) These analysts agree that the Clinton administration had originally been mistaken in insisting that transparency of the past be the first step for the North; it was later correct to insist—albeit after the Carter agreement with Kim Il Sung—that ending the DPRK strategic nuclear program, potentially capable of producing hundreds of weapons, was the far greater priority. In short, it was not only more realistic but correct for the United States to deal with the present and future first. Moreover, these analysts assert, as does the administration, that the agreement is not based on trust: if the United States detects any violation of the agreement, it will simply cut off oil deliveries, stop LWR construction, and revert to the point where it was early in 1994.

North Korea receives a supply of heavy fuel oil, amounting to 500,000 barrels annually over five years, to cover the presumed 255 mw(e) total energy production lost to freezing its nuclear program. Within ten years, it gains two LWRs capable of 2,000 mw(e) total output. However, its less tangible benefits are potentially more important, including eventual normalization of relations with the United States at the ambassadorial level, reduction (and presumed eventual termination) of economic and financial restrictions that prohibited international trade and investment, including renewed international lend-
ing to the DPRK, and a negative security assurance likely coupled with annual, and eventually permanent, cancellation of Team Spirit. In sum, what these measures potentially can do, as the United States openly acknowledges, is draw the North out of isolation and help integrate it into the political and economic mainstream of East Asia. Some press reports have alleged that the administration’s view, like that of South Korea, is that the DPRK will not outlast the duration of the Geneva accord and that all investment in the North will eventually come under the ROK. However, the evidence is to the contrary: the United States concluded that the DPRK regime is likely to survive over the longer term, and therefore it would be necessary to conclude a framework agreement with it. This accord does not prop up a crippled regime, but allows the DPRK to evolve at its own pace and manner into a more integrated and peaceful member of the international community.

The foremost lesson of the North Korean nuclear crisis is that DPRK motives and needs had to be discerned—and directly by U.S. diplomats, not unduly relying on Seoul’s “vast experience” in dealing with the North. What the United States learned is that it could legitimately attempt to meet some of those needs and satisfactorily resolve the crisis, but it took many months of contact, both in Geneva and New York, for these realizations to prevail and manifest in concrete U.S. policy. The corollary of this lesson is that direct contact, dialogue, and negotiation on a basis of mutual respect with the DPRK had to ensue, despite the lack of diplomatic relations and the dearth of past contact. As a result, both nations are better for it, and this enhances security in the peninsula and in Northeast Asia. As U.S. Ambassador to the ROK James T. Laney said regarding North Korea in May 1995,

Our ability to thread our way through problems that occur, and to prevent them from becoming real crises, lies in our ability to communicate with North Korea. By “communicate” I mean to understand and to make ourselves understood. The knowledge we really need to deal effectively with North Korea does not come from spies or satellites; it comes from face-to-face engagement in the diplomatic arena.

Rather than the DPRK’s using its nuclear program and the uncertainties behind it solely as a bargaining chip, what is far more convincing, based on a knowledge of North Korean political culture, is that it has
earnestly (if not always in a subdued and reassuring manner) sought legitimacy as a nation-state. As Asian affairs analyst K. A. Namkung said,

What the North Koreans have been asking the U.S. to do is to treat them as equals and respect their sovereignty...as a legitimate country. [Kim Il Sung] knew he was on his last leg [in June 1994] and this helps explain why his talks with President Carter went as well as they did.... There’s no question in my mind but that [Kim] was trying to place his imprimatur on a negotiated solution to this not as an exchange between nuclear weapons, on the one hand, and economic benefits from the West on the other, but...a recognition of North Korean legitimacy.44

While not minimizing the political and economic benefits eventually to accrue to North Korea in the accord, respect and dignity mean more to the North Korean leadership than material benefit. They have sought recognition of their legitimacy and achievements as a society since 1948, in effect acknowledgment that Kim Il Sung and his Juche ideology are no less valuable than any other nation’s founding father or guiding principles. From the North’s perspective, the accord brings it a new-found legitimacy and acceptance that has eluded it over four decades, especially as Kim Jong Il commences his formal leadership; for the North, it is international acknowledgment by great powers of the achievements of its founder.

Namkung’s conclusion is certainly what Jimmy Carter perceived when he visited Pyongyang in June:

The North Koreans are not on their knees begging for economic aid from the United States, and they’re not begging that the United States have diplomatic relations. They look upon themselves as a proud and respected and sovereign nation who would like to have this relationship on a mutually respectful basis because they think it would be better for the United States to have normal relations with North Korea and it would be better for North Korea to have normal relations with the United States. But they don’t look upon those things as rewards or bribes to be given to them if they yield on something.... They would like to work it out...45

The greatest value of the Carter trip for the DPRK was indeed the legitimacy bestowed upon Kim Il Sung and his nation through the unprecedented visit of a former president of the United States. Out of that profound satisfaction, as well as the knowledge that he did not
have long to live, Kim likely chose to be conciliatory to the United States through Carter. Despite the arduous months of hard bargaining over the nuclear issue with the DPRK after June 1993, the United States found a method to meet its criteria for nonproliferation and the security of Northeast Asia, as well as a means to draw the North out of isolation, while satisfying the DPRK’s yearning for acknowledgment of legitimacy and respect accorded by the world’s greatest power. It is a highly artful diplomatic achievement, and for it to succeed, both sides need to continue to pour their energies into negotiations for its detailed implementation, while the ROK, despite its apprehensions, needs to respect the process and find its own way to come to genuine reconciliation with the North. The June 1995 Kuala Lumpur agreement, clarifying the South Korean role in the LWR supply, is an example of continuing although hard-earned accomplishment, so are the successful activities of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) to implement the Agreed Framework.

North Korea used the nuclear issue not merely as a bargaining chip but indeed to gain U.S. attention and to demand that the United States face up to its reality and give it its due. North Korea’s yelling alone would not have done it, but its use of the mystery of whether it possessed nuclear weapons, the certainty that it would soon be able to produce considerably more plutonium, and its impossible-to-ignore ultimatum of NPT withdrawal forced the United States to pay attention when otherwise it would never have done so. Unmistakably, for the United States this has been an issue of nuclear proliferation, but as many Asian specialists see it, for the DPRK it has primarily been an issue of obtaining Western respect and legitimacy without compromising its sovereignty and identity. This is not to say that North Korea has had no interest in the utility of nuclear weapons—strategically, politically, and even economically. But to emphasize, as have so many writers, that North Korea developed nuclear weapons mainly to ensure its survival misses a key point underscored by Namkung and Carter.46

The Influence and Interplay of the Republic of Korea

The DPRK cannot be considered without the ROK; however seemingly irreconcilable, they are two halves of a whole. Each is resolute, stubborn, and adamant in insisting that its way is best. Each has tried to prove it is superior to the other, but by the late 1980s Seoul had
become supremely confident that it had won the competition through its *Nordpolitik* policy and economic achievements. Certainly by September 1990 these successes were a chief reason Pyongyang began its prime ministerial dialogue with Seoul, which led to the inter-Korean accords of December 1991; the North could no longer permit the South to pry away its allies and deepen its isolation. No one knows where inter-Korean relations would have gone if the nuclear issue had not arisen and put on hold potential economic exchange and a summit meeting. It was the United States which initially placed so much prominence on the nuclear issue, but eventually nonproliferation policy took on a life of its own in Seoul, not for its own sake, but as a lever that could be used against the North. The irony is that Seoul, which once wanted to delink the nuclear issue from improvement of North-South relations, was now critical and skeptical of the Agreed Framework as an only minimally acceptable agreement from a nonproliferation standpoint that did nothing to improve inter-Korean relations. This was an about-face from Seoul’s outlook before early 1993, which was that nonproliferation should take a back seat to improved inter-Korean relations.

With the unexpected death of Kim Il Sung in July 1994, Seoul exploded with deep-seated emotions and hostility that had been previously submerged. The ROK government refused, and still refuses, to offer even *pro forma* condolences to the DPRK for Kim’s death, yet this action along with at least modification if not abrogation of its National Security Law (which defines the North as an enemy) are the keys to meaningful progress in the North-South dialogue stipulated in the Geneva accord.

At the time of Kim’s death, Seoul seemed to thirst for a sense of victory over the North, and that yearning outweighed the wisdom—and its public utterances—that unification by absorption was to be avoided and was an inherently disastrous proposition. Seoul has maintained until very recently that the Kim Jong Il succession was unsettled and incomplete, that his regime would not last long, and that the North after Kim’s death had lost any staying power; more recently, the South alleges that the North Korean military has taken control of the DPRK and seeks to threaten the ROK as it deals with its own political turbulence. President Kim Young Sam in some ways was a prisoner of hardliners in his party, and was also ill advised; but he nonetheless quickly aligned himself with those forces which also hampered relations with the United States as it was engaged in dialogue with the North.
While it publicly denies it can be an “honest broker” in this situation, the United States clearly must play a facilitating role between the two Koreas, and at times it must be one of intercession as well. The Agreed Framework insures a U.S. role with the North while the forty-year-old United States-ROK Mutual Security Treaty insures U.S. responsibility for the South. By virtue of a ten-year commitment through KEDO toward delivering LWRs to North Korea, as well as reducing trade barriers and proceeding toward diplomatic normalization, the United States has in effect modified its long-standing policy toward Korea by taking the entire peninsula into account; the United States can no longer focus on the ROK alone. While this should not reflect on America’s oft-stated “unshakable alliance” with the ROK, it does mean that the direction and pace of U.S. relations with Pyongyang must be set according to U.S. interests, not simply by deferring to Seoul; during this new period, Seoul may attempt to apply pressure on U.S. policy—as did President Kim Young Sam through interviews with U.S. media just prior to the signing of the Agreed Framework—by pleading that U.S. policy weakens its bargaining position with Pyongyang. Considering the multiple issues the United States must address with the DPRK, aside from the nuclear program—from missile exports and MIAs, to state terrorism and human rights, not to mention its conventional military build-up—it would be easy to stretch out the process of normalization. Seoul clearly does not want the United States to get ahead of it diplomatically with the North. Others argue that the United States should do the opposite—speed up that process as a means of strengthening the Geneva accord and bolstering Kim Jong Il against pro-nuclear hawks.  

South Korean speculation over the past two years that the North was undergoing a power struggle and/or was on the verge of collapse is analytically far off the mark and a sign of the ROK’s difficulties in coming to terms with dealing with Kim Jong Il. The best evidence indicates that Kim Jong Il is firmly in control. Statements from President Kim Young Sam indicated his willingness to reschedule the postponed North-South summit meeting whenever Kim Jong Il assumed formal power. Western visitors to the DPRK indicated the pervasive feeling that the DPRK population was being very carefully prepared for Kim Jong Il’s formal succession, the military perhaps playing a more overt role in social mobilization. They say the one consistent theme of North Korean media is Kim Jong Il’s overwhelming presence and leadership in society, yielding the unmistakable message that Kim (often shown in footage or stills with his father) is fully in charge.
Over the long term, indisputably, the United States must be willing to midwife a process of Korean reconciliation. Scholar Manwoo Lee’s observations are worth considering.

Washington must persuade Seoul that the past American policy of doing what is best for South Korea and what is worst for North Korea is inappropriate in today’s circumstances. It must make an effort to resocialize South Korea’s leaders into thinking that America’s new even-handed approach, building good relations with both Koreas, is the surest way to make the peninsula stable and prosperous.... The United States has helped protect South Korea for 50 years; now it is time for South Korea to pay back the debt.49

Russia and China are better positioned than previously to support that process by virtue of their new-found ties with Seoul as well as long-standing ties with Pyongyang. Japan is likely to establish full diplomatic relations with the North before the United States does. Complete regional cross-recognition could be finally accomplished by 1996–97. But the U.S. role is as leader of this process; witness the central American role in creating KEDO. And the United States must find ways to lead Seoul in the desired direction, if necessary offering assurances to avoid straining the alliance, while simultaneously reeling in the DPRK in a manner that steadily builds trust and confidence.

**Long-Range U.S. Policy toward the Koreas**

The Agreed Framework between the United States and the DPRK provides a general roadmap of how relations will develop between the two countries. In November 1994, a delegation led by an Arms Control and Disarmament Agency official traveled to the DPRK as the first Americans to inspect the Yongbyon nuclear complex, including the spent fuel rods in the cooling pond. Since that time, through successive visits, the United States has assessed the condition of the fuel rods and is assisting North Korea in their permanent storage. In December 1994, delegations from each side met in Washington to discuss opening of liaison offices (the United States reciprocated with a visit to Pyongyang in February); a few technical issues remain to date, but the opening of offices may occur in 1997. In spring 1995, the United States, the ROK, and Japan became the founding members of the KEDO consortium, which according to the Agreed Framework and Kuala Lumpur agreement will arrange the supply contract with the
DPRK for the two LWRs. In January 1995, the first shipment of 50,000 tons of heavy oil was delivered by the United States to the North, although a small amount was improperly diverted to industrial rather than energy uses; it also had to be paid for out of a Pentagon emergency fund. On January 21, the United States lifted a few trade restrictions against the North, allowing direct telecommunications (restored in April) and U.S. news bureaus to be set up in Pyongyang, and American steel manufacturers to import from the DPRK the critical mineral magnesite. However, the major restrictions of the Trading with the Enemy Act, Export Administration Act, and other laws remain in effect. According to an unclassified State Department internal memo:

While many of the current U.S. restrictions in the DPRK may as a legal matter be terminated or relaxed by the executive branch in the exercise of its own discretion without legislation or the need to consult Congress (e.g., the establishment of diplomatic relations, lifting of the 25-mile limit on travel by DPRK representatives to the U.N., the trade embargo), the administration's freedom of movement is circumscribed by a complex web of potentially applicable legislation. Moreover, any such effort would receive the closest scrutiny—and possible resistance—from Congress.  

Full diplomatic relations will likely take considerably longer and depend on Pyongyang's degree of cooperation with the IAEA, the ROK, and the United States. Other vital issues of concern to the United States will be raised, including DPRK missile sales to the Middle East, military confidence-building measures, and recovery of Korean War American MIAs; for the North, the primary issues will be ending the Team Spirit and other joint United States-ROK military exercises, negotiating a peace treaty to replace the armistice (or at least a new peace mechanism), and a partial (not necessarily complete) withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea. The ROK does not want United States-DPRK relations to go ahead of North-South relations, and in truth would prefer they lag far behind. On the other hand, observers like Selig Harrison urge the United States to quickly move toward full normalization of relations as the best means of reinforcing the agreement. The issue of replacing the Military Armistice Commission (MAC) with a formal peace treaty or “peace guarantee mechanism” is highly contentious: the United States insists it is a matter between North and South, while Pyongyang says it concerns the United States and the DPRK because Seoul refused to sign the 1953 armistice. In reality, the
United States and China, both signatories, if not Russia and Japan as well, will have to get involved as guarantors. Such is the principle behind the joint United States-ROK offer on April 16, 1996, of four-power peace talks involving the DPRK and China. To date, the North has neither accepted nor rejected the offer—a telling sign of how long talks could drag on once begun.

Of course, all of the above is predicated on continued DPRK cooperation and compliance, but the evidence to date is largely reassuring. Even the December 1994 incident of returning a downed U.S. Army helicopter pilot who strayed across the DMZ worked out well. Only in the area of North-South dialogue has the North balked, saying it sensed insincerity in Seoul’s November 1994 offer of formal government-to-government economic cooperation and because Pyongyang remains offended by the South’s refusal to offer condolences and its earlier taunts that the U.N. Security Council would impose sanctions upon it. “We have a lot of accounts to settle with Kim Young Sam,” declared a Korean Central News Agency report, which called Seoul’s economic overture a “treacherous confrontation policy.” Of course, North Korean objections are also partly delaying tactics and a stalling maneuver, aimed at putting off dialogue until political conditions are deemed more propitious; but there is a genuine lack of trust by Pyongyang that ROK behavior has thus far not assuaged. Nonetheless, in June and July 1995, North and South did hold formal senior-level contacts on ROK provision of rice to ease what the North has now publicly admitted is a serious food shortage; some substantial rice deliveries were made but then suspended. The rice dialogue ended and Seoul now refused to send rice unless Pyongyang meets its conditions. Meanwhile, North Korea has been wracked with two successive summers (1995 and 1996) of severe floods, which caused considerable destruction and sharply reduced its crop output. In a first, Pyongyang asked the United Nations for humanitarian aid, and the U.N. World Food Program responded, led by U.S. donations, with food aid to help stem what is increasingly seen as a severe nationwide food shortage bordering on famine.

North Korea’s strategy, as explained by K. A. Namkung, is to protect itself against the ROK by drawing in the United States and Japan until it feels ready to substantively engage with the South. Thus, Pyongyang’s policy is to emphasize the United States first, then Japan, and only later South Korea. Its priority is maintaining domestic stability at a time of regime transition. The North still notes the South’s char-
acterizing either the DPRK leadership picture as unsettled or North Korean military and economic strength as weak, suggesting the country does not have much time left. These are regarded as taunts and indications of insincerity, not as a basis for serious dialogue.

The return of Republican control to both houses of the U.S. Congress in 1994 did not dangerously threaten the Agreed Framework. There remain a strong anti-DPRK bias in Congress and considerable misgivings about the agreement among most Republicans and some Democrats. However, in 1995, Republicans passed only a few non-binding resolutions meant to toughen the president's policy. No one in Congress has seen fit to overturn the Agreed Framework itself or to propose renegotiating it (despite campaign rhetoric from candidate Robert Dole). At worst, Congress has threatened to reduce funding of U.S. assistance to permanent storage of the North's spent fuel rods and the United States' contribution to KEDO (which is to supply continuing oil shipments). The purse is the only area where Congress can effectively slow down United States-DPRK ties. Because the Agreed Framework is not a treaty but was achieved through executive discretion, the Senate is not required by law to approve it.

One of the most important things President Clinton can do is to instruct the American directors serving on the boards of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and other international financial institutions not to object to commencing a relationship with the DPRK; rather than interfering, the United States should now encourage such ties. At some point, North Korea will apply for new credit despite its massive defaulted debt. Specifically, the North should be permitted to engage in a debt buyback program whereby it can repurchase its obligations at a fraction of face value. By so doing, the DPRK can tap the extensive financing necessary to rebuild its economy; moreover, it will enable any future projects to develop at a faster rate by being freed of numerous legal problems from creditors who witness new inflows of capital to the North. However, the largest sources of economic and financial support would be bilateral: Japan and Taiwan are prime prospects; South Korea indeed may be last in line if current trends continue.

Further relaxation of U.S. trade restrictions (which the North complains is now long overdue since the signing of the Agreed Framework) is not merely a gesture but can serve the important purpose of promoting the building up of the DPRK economy so that unification can be stable, peaceful, and with the least economic and human cost.
The actual U.S. contribution may be minuscule, but the worldwide effect of the termination or relaxation of the numerous U.S. restrictions against the DPRK would send a go-ahead signal to other nations, such as Japan, Germany, and France, who are more likely to make substantial investments in the North over time. This is not to say U.S. businesses are uninterested: on the contrary, the American Chamber of Commerce in Seoul is ready to send a delegation to Pyongyang as soon as federal regulations are modified, and already representatives of General Motors, MCI, and other major businesses and foundations have made pilot visits to the North. Moreover, some U.S. scholars recommend an international coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and foundations under American leadership, to facilitate North Korea’s entry into the world community. NGO involvement could be a means of leading the way for their respective governments.

Most important for the United States is to maintain a policy of engagement with the DPRK, not one of isolation. Isolation is a poor policy, which fails to build trust, risks constant peninsular crises, and could produce an unwanted, sudden unification enormously costly in human and financial terms. The worst the United States can do, as it has too often in the past, is to drop Korea from its radar screen once it is off the front pages. Korea remains a potentially explosive region that ought not be managed only by the State Department mid-level bureaucracy and KEDO. Yet, the absence of a true coordinator for Korea policy (exemplified by Ambassador-at-Large Robert Gallucci’s shift of responsibility in mid-1995 to Bosnia and subsequent retirement, with no one of his rank appointed to fill his shoes for Korea) is alarming, given the evident continuing need for a key U.S. official to bring coherence to inter-agency deliberations on Korea and authoritatively negotiate with the DPRK.

If the United States has determined that the DPRK is likely to survive for the foreseeable future, despite the leadership change and severe economic difficulties—as it appears to have, by concluding the Agreed Framework—then it is in the interests of the United States, the ROK, Japan, and other American allies to assist the DPRK in economic development and modernization as stepping-stones toward unification. The DPRK must be allowed to evolve into a more benign state that can greatly reduce its threat to Northeast Asia. There is no better way to assist it in doing so than by allowing it to engage in Chinese-style economic reforms, carried out in its own manner and at its own
pace. (After all, North Korea is not China.) Reunification itself must be gradual, taking into account the particular needs of North Korea—which for years to come may not wish to abandon the respect for, pride in, and even worship of its founder, Kim Il Sung, yet may become flexible enough to accede to a rudimentary form of confederation and coexistence with the ROK for a substantial period of time. With Western and ROK patience and support, the DPRK can be equitably reunified with the South; the problem is that genuine unification in contrast to notions of DPRK absorption and collapse still needs to gain greater acceptance in Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington.

The United States has seen its “Modest Initiative” toward the DPRK, begun under the Reagan administration in 1987 by Secretary of State George Shultz and Assistant Secretary Gaston Sigur, reach fruition in the Agreed Framework signed by the Clinton administration in October 1994. The United States followed a prescient course advised in 1992 by Asia scholar Mel Gurtov.

A marginalized and isolated regime with a nuclear capability can be treated in one of two basic ways: by tightening the screws on it, threatening it with retaliation should it act aggressively, and seeking ways to undermine and overthrow it; or by proposing creative options for ending its isolation and allowing it, with a sense of security, to break out of its rigid policies and world outlook. In a new world order, the latter is greatly to be preferred.56

The past decade has seen tremendous winds of change sweep the world, greatly altering the previous patterns of international relations. North Korea and the United States have made historic strides in that time, though not without passing through periods of trial and danger. It appears the worst is past, and although implementation of the Geneva accord will not be smooth, the future of United States-DPRK relations looks definitely brighter and the possibility of peaceful Korean reunification may be closer at hand. By successfully supporting, assisting, and facilitating these processes—improved United States-DPRK ties and North-South relations—the United States will conclude a historical responsibility toward the Korean peninsula begun at the end of World War II. In the post-cold war era, it is vital for the United States to play a central role in putting to rest conflicts and circumstances that arose after 1945.
Notes

1. This article is adapted from my 1996 doctoral dissertation, “Contemporary American Relations with North Korea: 1987-1994,” defended at the University of Virginia. The author wishes to thank the following for their comments: Dr. Kenneth W. Thompson, Dr. Shao Chuan Leng, Hon. David D. Newsom, Dr. Ronald Dimberg, Dr. Brantly Womack, Dr. John Redick, Dr. John Merrill, Mr. Selig Harrison, Mr. Paul Chamberlin, Dr. William J. Taylor, Jr., Mr. Scott Snyder, Mr. Young Ho Kim, Mr. Sang In Shin, and Mr. Antonio Betancourt.


6. Former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger is the chief example.


8. In the same June 22 interview (ibid.), Carter said, “I think the most important lesson is that we should not ever avoid direct talks, direct conversations, direct discussions and negotiations with the main person in a despised or misunderstood or condemned society who could actually resolve the issue.” The moderate school took most seriously the North’s threat that if economic sanctions were imposed on it, that would be regarded as an act of war. However, Ambassador Robert Gallucci cautiously expressed confidence that if the administration had imposed sanctions upon the North, they would have been successful without provoking a military response.

9. Notable dissidents in each camp emerged by spring 1994. Specialists affiliated with the conservative Heritage Foundation, like Richard Allen and Daryl Plunk, began calling for dialogue with the North as a final effort before implementing sanctions. Democratic senators like Charles Robb and Sam Nunn tended to espouse a harder line on North Korea than did the Clinton administration itself.


11. For an excellent article on this subject, see Patrick Glynn, “Towards a Politics of Forgiveness,” American Enterprise, September/October 1994.


16. Ibid., p. 240.
19. Ibid., pp. 207-8. These points were originally outlined by Professor Stephen W. Linton.
22. Ibid., p. 3.
23. Ibid.
29. Ibid., p. 7.
30. Ibid., p. 13.
34. According to Charles Maynes, editor of Foreign Policy and a former Carter administration official, “Those assurances… were very carefully designed to exclude North Korea.” (Carnegie Endowment conference, June 16, 1994, ibid.)
35. Smith, “N. Korea Accord.” Hans Blix has noted that “one should be cautious with saying that now the door is open for any nation to delay… verification of their [nuclear] inventories because no two cases are actually the same.”
36. The United States pressured the ROK in the late 1970s into aborting a nuclear weapons program by bolstering military aid to it; Ukraine recently received not only U.S. economic incentives but apparently security assurances.
37. Three of the most important formal defenses of the Agreed Framework by administration officials have been testimony of Ambassador Robert L. Gallucci in Implications of the U.S.-North Korea Nuclear Agreement, Senate Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Washington, DC, December 1, 1994; and testimonies of Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Secretary of Defense William Perry in Hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on North Korea, Wash-
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38. William Perry in ibid.
47. As an example of the North’s position, cf. Sonya Hepinstall, “S. Korea Should Apologize before Talks Start—North,” Reuters, November 2, 1994. She quotes the DPRK ambassador to Thailand: “[Ambassador] Li said inter-Korean talks would have to resume some time because it was stipulated in his country’s Geneva pact with the United States…, but he believed South Korea should first show a real change in attitude. ‘I think they should apologize for what they did during the mourning period… which angered our people too much.’” Rather than resisting the letter of the Geneva agreement, the North has clarified that a requisite atmosphere is needed to recommence North-South dialogue, which does not yet exist, even after the Geneva accord.
51. Harrison, “Beware the Hawks in Seoul.”
54. The International Financial Institutions Act “requires the U.S. Executive Directors of IFI’s [e.g., World Bank] to oppose any loan, extension of financial assistance, or technical assistance to any government the country of which engages in ‘a pattern of gross violations of… human rights,’ or ‘provides refuge to individuals committing acts of international terrorism…’” The Gramm Amendment to the Bretton Woods Agreement Act requires the Secretary of the Treasury to direct the U.S. Executive Director of the IMF “to actively oppose any facility involving use of Fund credit by any Communist dictatorship” unless Treasury certifies to the
relevant congressional committees that certain economic criteria are met. Ibid.