



## North Korea: A Case Study of Asymmetric Relations

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## Abstract

This white paper looks at North Korea as a case study for asymmetric relations and the issue of its nuclear weapons development as the threat to status quo in the international order. If left unchecked, North Korea will soon develop a strategic nuclear deterrent with the capability of striking the US homeland. Washington will no longer be able to treat Pyongyang as a second-tier adversary and will face serious implications, potentially having to accept North Korea formally into the international community or having to resort to military pressure to roll back an established nuclear program. The paper concludes with a suggested new approach for dealing with North Korea that requires a serious reconsideration of traditional engagement methods and encourages incorporating the North Korea challenge into the larger regional strategy tied to great power competition.

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# Executive Summary

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Asymmetry between the United States and less powerful adversaries creates unique challenges not easily addressed by traditional international security policy precepts. Deterrence and compellence become harder to achieve because asymmetrically weaker powers often have greater interests at stake in bilateral and regional disputes than dominant powers do. By contrast, dominant powers such as the United States (US) often believe they can impose their will on a weaker power without making major concessions. Because of this disparity in perception and strategy, weaker powers have shown unexpected resistance to US pressure campaigns, a traditional foreign policy application to influence behavior. Thus, the potential for crisis and miscalculation is greater in such cases with weaker powers than in great power competition, where expectations and responses tend to operate within more symmetrical interests and powers.

Pressure campaigns from the last few US administrations have found mixed success with asymmetrically weaker powers. Under President Barack Obama, pressure helped pave the way for a deal to slow and cap Iran's burgeoning nuclear program. North Korea, on the other hand, has remained relatively immune to US pressure diplomacy aimed at curtailing its nuclear program, taking only limited and reversible steps toward denuclearization. The US's limited influence over North Korea stems from four primary causes: 1) a conflict of interest between the weaker power (North Korea) and stronger power (the US), 2) divergence between the two powers on the relative value of North Korea's nuclear program, 3) contentment versus dissatisfaction with the status quo, and 4) North Korea's fear of becoming even weaker if the status quo continues.

Early indications are that the Biden administration will move away from the high-stakes transactional diplomacy of the Trump administration to pursue a strategy of coercion or strategic patience—similar to the Obama administration's foreign policy toward asymmetrically weaker adversaries who defied key US security objectives. Based on the unique circumstances of these adversaries, a return to traditional pressure strategies would likely lead to continued stalemate or, worse, the growth of an adversarial threat held unaccountable. Through an empirical analysis of interactions between North Korea and the US on the issue of North Korea's nuclear program since the early 1990s until present, this study shows how traditional foreign policy tools like coercive diplomacy limit responses to such asymmetric powers like North Korea. With North Korea, engagement cannot be conducted as a black-and-white zero-sum game; it must be re-examined and incorporated as part of a larger regional strategy tied to great power competition.

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# Introduction

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This paper examines an often neglected question of international relations: Why do militarily and economically weaker nations try to change the established order by taking on more powerful status quo states? What benefits can be accrued by engaging in such activity? In an era of nonproliferation, the United States faces several revisionist adversaries and finds itself repeatedly in the position of having to enforce the status quo. North Korea has proven to be a resistant second-tier adversary, challenging the status quo of nonproliferation. Though there have been several attempts at coercive diplomacy and the use of carrots and sticks across the four recent US administrations, Washington has made little progress in achieving its goal of denuclearization on the Korean peninsula.

The literature on revisionist and status quo powers in international relations focuses primarily on great power competition (GPC), first during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, and today among the United States, Russia, and China.<sup>1</sup> Attempts by US adversaries to overturn or alter the liberal democratic order comes with high stakes for the international community and is tied to efforts on both sides to exert influence while maintaining deterrence. What is often overlooked in this literature, and within US policy-making, is the role of asymmetry. The relative imbalance in the relationships between the United States and weaker powers carries unique dynamics, which over time can change the international landscape more so than what is occurring at the GPC level. It is within this space of asymmetric imbalance that long held principles of the liberal democratic order (such as nonproliferation) are being eroded and overturned. These asymmetric dynamics and relationships are understudied and misunderstood, thus potentially putting the US in a challenging position with limited room for compromise and a burden to uphold the sanctity of the status quo constantly under attack.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); US Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, 2018, p.1, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; Michael Mazarr and Hal Brands, "Navigating Great Power Rivalry in the 21st Century," *War on the Rocks*, Apr. 5, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/navigating-great-power-rivalry-in-the-21st-century/>; Bruce Jones, "China and the Return of Great Power Strategic Competition," *The Brookings Institution*, Feb. 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/china-and-the-return-of-great-power-strategic-competition/>.

Nowhere are the dynamics and challenges of asymmetry in international relations clearer than they are in the contentious relationship between the US and North Korea. If left unchecked, North Korea will soon develop a strategic nuclear deterrent with the capability of striking the US homeland. Washington will no longer be able to treat Pyongyang as a typical second-tier adversary and will face serious implications, potentially having to accept North Korea formally into the international community or having to resort to military pressure to roll back an established nuclear program.

This paper examines US–North Korea policy from the Clinton administration to the Biden administration (1993 to present), highlighting the nuanced shifts in North Korea policy and strategy and showing why each administration ultimately failed to achieve its objectives. The paper concludes with a suggested new approach for dealing with North Korea that requires a serious reconsideration of traditional engagement methods and encourages incorporating the North Korea challenge into the larger regional strategy tied to great power competition.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This paper builds on a 2018 report written by the main author: Ken E. Gause, *Diplomacy in the Land of No Good Options*, The Jamestown Foundation, Nov. 2018, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Diplomacy-in-the-Land-of-No-Good-Options-1.pdf?x28597>.



# Asymmetry in the International Environment

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Whether in times of peace or crisis, certain conditions of asymmetry govern the decision-making space for adversaries of unequal power:

1. Serious conflicts of interest between the weaker and stronger powers
2. Divergence between the adversaries on the relative value of the issue in dispute
3. Contentment versus dissatisfaction with the status quo
4. Weaker power's fear of becoming even weaker if the status quo continues

Depending on the issue and its effect on the weaker power's sense of self and security, the situation can escalate unexpectedly or settle into an unstable equilibrium, periodically escalating and then quickly de-escalating.<sup>3</sup>

Asymmetry in the international arena often manifests itself when a **conflict of interest** arises between the revisionist power (the weaker power) and the status quo power (the stronger power) over a substantive issue, which each values to varying degrees.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, nonproliferation has been at the heart of contention between countries that exist outside of the established international order and the dominant powers, namely the United States and its allies, that created the order and follow its rules. Asymmetrically weaker adversaries tend to pursue nuclear programs as both a means of deterrence and a source of influence, while status quo powers try to restrict the spread of nuclear capability, which they view as inherently destabilizing to the established order.<sup>5</sup> Escalation occurs as attempts at negotiated settlement fail, or when a series of misperceived actions and reactions between the parties devolves into a crisis.

The **relative value of the issue in dispute**, along with the unwillingness of the status quo power to concede ground, can increase the resolve of the revisionist power, which may have

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<sup>3</sup> Glenn H. Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); T. V. Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*.

<sup>5</sup> Forrest E. Morgan et al., *Confronting Emergent Nuclear-Armed Regional Adversaries: Prospects for Neutralization, Strategies for Escalation Management*, RAND Research Report (Santa Monica: RAND, 2015). Weapons of mass destruction are also status symbols: they demonstrate to the world and to a regime's power base that the leadership is strong and commands respect. Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, *The Dynamics of Coercion: American Foreign Policy and the Limits of Military Might*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press/RAND, 2002), p. 206.

more at stake in the dispute than the status quo power does. The United States is a world power; its asymmetrically weaker adversaries have predominantly regional perspectives and equities, affecting the amount of energy they are willing to invest to save face and achieve a favorable outcome. From a diplomatic point of view, this situation can lead to unforeseen consequences, especially on the part of the stronger power, which has other, competing interests to consider, both domestic and foreign.

Related to the value each country places on an issue are the **views they hold about the disparity in power** in the asymmetric relationship. The greater the disparity, the greater the chance that negotiations on issues of intrinsic or strategic value to both countries will bog down and fail to yield results. The status quo power may be reluctant to make concessions for several reasons. First, it holds advantages in the military and diplomatic realms, and the consequences of a failed diplomacy are viewed as more manageable. Second, making concessions to a revisionist power might make the status quo power look weak and have negative consequences for its relations with allies and other adversaries. Because it dominates the established order, the status quo power tends to assume the right to set the rules, including dictating to the revisionist power what it needs to do to reach an agreement that fits within the international order. For its part, the revisionist power will likely see this as intransigence, which will undermine its desire to seek a negotiated settlement. According to Frank R. Pfetsch, the status quo power will likely demand concessions up front, and the revisionist power will fear that making such concessions will further weaken its position in the asymmetric relationship and undermine its domestic standing as negotiations proceed.<sup>6</sup> Pfetsch notes that, to have any chance at successful negotiations, both parties must be able to perceive a “win-perspective.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the frustrating characteristics of asymmetric competition is that it can lead stronger powers to believe they can impose a solution because of their superior capabilities and bargaining advantages.<sup>8</sup> This is something that stronger countries would not contemplate in the context of great power competition. With a weaker power, however, the status quo power takes the approach that drawn-out negotiations that require upfront concessions can be avoided if its adversary can be made to recognize that giving up its equities on a particular issue to avoid further conflict is the best course of action.<sup>9</sup> If an agreement is not reached, the

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<sup>6</sup> Frank R. Pfetsch, “Power in International Negotiations: Symmetry and Asymmetry, *Négociations* 16, no. 2 (2011): 39-56, doi: 10.3917/neg.016.0039.

<sup>7</sup> Pfetsch, “Power in International Negotiations,” p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*.

<sup>9</sup> Pfetsch, “Power in International Negotiations.”

status quo power may use the threat of further pressure to achieve a better outcome for itself. An additional advantage that the stronger power often possesses is the legitimacy that the status quo confers, especially on issues such as preventing nuclear proliferation. Therefore, status quo powers generally attempt to prolong their control over the issue in dispute with the expectation that as time passes, it will increase the legitimacy of their position.<sup>10</sup>

**For the revisionist power, the continuation of the status quo further weakens its position over time.** For this reason, if the issue concerns the country's legitimacy, the leadership will often refuse to capitulate and will instead look for ways to break the status quo. It might decide to create a crisis, for example, by engaging in provocations to warn the status quo country that ignoring the situation or trying to impose a solution will not work and in fact could make matters worse.<sup>11</sup> This strategy can also create tension within status quo alliances, with some countries breaking rank because they see the stronger country as increasingly intransigent. Because both sides typically prefer to avoid war, the revisionist power has some latitude to take on risk to erode the status quo. The revisionist power most likely values the issue in dispute more than the status quo power, which must contend with larger equities beyond this particular dispute. Because of those equities, the status quo power is often reluctant to threaten or use force to obtain the desired concessions, especially if low-cost military options are not available. If the revisionist power, then, can secure wins within the dispute, it may be able to leverage those victories to erode the status quo.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations*.

<sup>11</sup> Michael E. Brown, *Deterrence Failures and Deterrence Strategies*, P-5842 RAND Paper Series (Santa Monica: RAND, March 1977).

<sup>12</sup> Author discussion with South Korean experts on North Korean negotiating strategy in 2014 and 2017.

# The US-North Korea Case Study

The case of North Korea has become a unique problem of asymmetric power dynamics between a stronger power (the United States) and a weaker power (North Korea). Since the Cold War, Washington has pursued an international campaign of nonproliferation while North Korean leaders have come to operate under the assumption that only a nuclear deterrent will forestall eventual regime change.<sup>13</sup> This has created the intractable situation both countries are in today. North Korea as the weaker power is unwilling to make the first move; the United States has taken the stance of a righteous enforcer of nuclear nonproliferation and is unwilling to “reward bad behavior” by acquiescing to the economic and security guarantees that Pyongyang covets. For decades, US policy-makers from both progressive and conservative administrations have wrestled with the North Korean challenge. To this day, a suitable long-term solution has not materialized, leading many pundits to describe North Korea as the land of no good options. The asymmetric conditions of the US-North Korea relationship are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. US-North Korea Asymmetry**

Competing dynamics	US-North Korea relations
1) Serious conflicts of interest between the weaker and stronger powers	> Issue of denuclearization
2) Divergence between the adversaries on the relative value on the issue in dispute	> Relative value—nuclear program becomes lifeline of North Korea vs. US-led international campaign of nonproliferation
3) Contentment versus dissatisfaction with the status quo	> Trend of frustration in US policy administrations. North Korea less trusting of US behavior due to history of previous broken commitments and perceived “hostile policy.”
4) Weaker power’s fear of becoming even weaker if the status quo continues	> Kim Jong-un continues pursuit of nuclear weapons

Source: CNA.

The following sections provide background on change and continuity in US-North Korea relations throughout different administrations and North Korea’s reactions during different states of negotiation. The overview of Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump policies will show the

<sup>13</sup> US past actions toward regimes such as Iraq and Libya have solidified the belief among North Korean leadership that only a nuclear deterrent will forestall eventual regime change.

evolution of US misperceptions and missed opportunities, and how North Korea decided that pursuing a nuclear program would offset its weakness and increase its negotiation status to a basis of symmetry. This section will also describe how a better understanding of the adversary may have exposed certain negotiating pressure points for the US in keeping its stronger-power advantage.

## Clinton and Bush North Korea policies: two sides of the same coin

An examination of the Clinton and second Bush administration policies toward North Korea suggests that, although there were obvious differences in perception of the problem, both polices adhered to similar strategies.<sup>14</sup> The Bush administration generally viewed North Korea as an aggressive expansionist state seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction that threatened world peace.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, the Clinton administration did not consider North Korea to be an irrational revisionist state, despite its rogue behaviors; rather, it viewed North Korea's posturing to be a result of its security fears. To Clinton officials, North Korea, abandoned by its Cold War patrons, economically bankrupt, and internationally isolated, saw the pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles as the only path to securing its regime.<sup>16</sup>

Forward-leaning US negotiation efforts for North Korea's denuclearization began roughly in 1991. The order of events is as follows:

- The US announced withdrawal of its nuclear weapons from South Korea to reflect its global commitment to nonproliferation and as an effort to persuade North Korea to

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<sup>14</sup> For a detailed comparison of North Korea policy under the Clinton and Bush administrations, see Jihwan Hwang, "Realism and US Foreign Policy toward North Korea: The Clinton and Bush Administrations in Comparative Perspective," *World Affairs* 167, no. 1 (Summer 2004). For the Bush administration's approach to foreign policy toward North Korea, see Richard L. Armitage, "A Comprehensive Approach to North Korea," *The Strategic Forum*, no. 159, National Defense University: Institute for National Strategic Studies (Mar. 1999), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA394524.pdf>. For the Clinton administration's blueprint, see William J. Perry, "Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations," Department of State, Office of the North Korea Policy Coordinator, Oct. 12, 1999, [http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eap/991012\\_northkorea\\_rpt.html](http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eap/991012_northkorea_rpt.html).

<sup>15</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "President Delivers State of the Union Address," Jan. 29, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/print/20020129-11.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Wendy R. Sherman, "Dealing with Dictators," *New York Times*, July 18, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/18/opinion/dealing-with-dictators.html>. Sherman was the State Department's counselor during the Clinton administration and had special responsibility for negotiation with North Korea.

accept international inspections of its nuclear sites (North Korea signed on to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) but had not yet agreed to the requisite nuclear safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)).

- North Korea was not happy with the IAEA, nor did it find the IAEA to be a credible third-party organization. Its rejection of the IAEA's request for "special inspection" in early 1993 prompted the Clinton administration to contemplate a preemptive strike.
- Former president Jimmy Carter's intervention as a third-party mediator allowed for de-escalation.<sup>17</sup>
- North Korea ended up accepting normal IAEA inspection but withdrew from the agency in 1994.

During this time, assumptions of North Korean leadership and its calculus were based on broad generalities and conclusions about rationality within the regime and whether Kim Jong-il and the North Korean military were willing to part with their nuclear deterrent. The question is whether a lack of detailed knowledge or understanding of the target regime's calculus prevented the US from employing better confidence-building measures. A deeper knowledge of North Korean regime dynamics and decision-making may not be sufficient to explain past policy failures and ensure future policy successes, but such information, if better integrated into the US policy-making process, could have led to a more nimble policy and allowed policy-makers to take advantage of opportunities that are not often immediately apparent. The following examples will help illustrate these points.

## Missed opportunity #1: North Korea's policy struggle

It is unclear whether US policy-makers fully appreciated the policy struggle in Pyongyang that emerged during Kim Il-sung's final years, which was directly attuned to American, Japanese, and South Korean policies. North Korean leadership had taken steps toward reform in the early 1990s when it tried to rationalize economic management and attract outside investment. These steps, however, clashed with the aims of many within the military whom Kim Jong-il was trying to cultivate as part of the succession process. In the wake of Kim Il-sung's death, in 1994, and the famine that followed, Kim Jong-il limited policy reform as he sought to consolidate power. As a result, those pragmatists within the regime who were prepared to embrace the Agreed Framework were weakened.<sup>18</sup> This most likely accounted for North Korea's

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<sup>17</sup> There is a question of whether coercive diplomacy/threat of force was effective with or without former president Carter.

<sup>18</sup> One of North Korea's most promising reformers, Kim Dal-hyon, ran afoul of the evolving power struggle in Pyongyang. Kim Kuk-tae, a longtime mentor to Kim Jong-il, began in the early 1990s to maneuver to oust Kim Dal-hyon, who was serving as acting prime minister. When Kim Dal-hyon tried to divert 30 percent of energy meant

provocative activity leading up to the 1994 Agreed Framework,<sup>19</sup> including refusal to allow IAEA inspections and removal of fuel rods at Yongbyon. Similarly, the failure of the US to ease economic sanctions, as pledged in the agreement, vindicated hard-liners who were opposed to the freeze. Had US diplomats been more aware of these conflicting imperatives, their expectations about the long-term viability of the Agreed Framework might have been tempered.

## Missed opportunity #2: North Korea's vulnerable economy in the late 1990s

US policy-makers were likewise slow to appreciate, or were politically constrained from taking advantage of, a potential diplomatic opening in the late 1990s and early 21st century caused by North Korea's worsening economic situation. While Pyongyang was unwilling to shift away from its "military first" policy, Kim Jong-il signaled in numerous meetings with foreign leaders, including Secretary of State Madeline Albright, his willingness to make deals that would permit North Korea to conduct reforms so that the country could address its economic problems.<sup>20</sup> Citing security considerations, neither the Clinton nor the Bush administrations acted on this momentary shift in North Korean internal economic deliberations, which was geared in part to take advantage of South Korea's Sunshine Policy.<sup>21</sup> The events of September 11, 2001,

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for the military to support mining, Kim Kuk-tae allied with two key figures in the military armaments sector, Kim Chol-man and Chong Pyong-ho, to make the argument to Kim Jong-il that the prime minister was inhibiting military innovation. Following Kim Dal-hyon's demotion to a factory manager, economic reform, already limited, ceased.

<sup>19</sup> The Agreed Framework between the United States of America and North Korea was signed on October 21, 1994. The objective of the agreement was the freezing and replacement of North Korea's indigenous nuclear power plant program with more nuclear proliferation resistant light water reactor power plants, and the step-by-step normalization of relations between the two countries. Implementation of the agreement was troubled from the start, but its key elements were being implemented until it effectively broke down in 2003.

<sup>20</sup> In the late 1990s, North Korea began to experiment with agricultural reforms and private markets. This was done quietly so as not to violate official doctrine and upset the Korean Workers' Party old guard. One longtime Pyongyang watcher referred to it as "stealth reform." Selig Harrison, "Promoting a Soft Landing in Korea," *Foreign Policy*, no. 106 (Spring 1997).

<sup>21</sup> According to some Pyongyang watchers, Kim Jong-il harbored many reservations about his own regime's policies. He told South Korea's Hyundai Group founder Chung Ju-yung that he wanted to learn about the New Community movement that military dictator Park Chung-hee had employed in laying the foundation for South Korea's largely successful market economy. In the Jan. 4, 2001, issue of *Rodong Sinmun* titled "The Twenty-First Century is a Century of Gigantic Change and Creation," Kim appeared to signal the implementation of a far-reaching reform policy. This was followed by a trip to China in which Kim was rumored to have told his subordinates, "China has succeeded in economic reforms. Why have we failed?" See Bradley Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2006).

hardened the Bush administration's view of North Korea, which was included among the "axis of evil" in the 2002 State of the Union address. The visit by Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly in October 2002, in which he presented the North Korean leadership with evidence that the country was continuing nuclear weapons development using uranium enrichment—a separate process from the plutonium process the country had frozen earlier—convinced Pyongyang that the international environment was not right for further experiments with economic reform, to say nothing of its hopes of obtaining security guarantees from the US. By year's end, this opportunity was lost as both countries walked away from their respective commitments under the Agreed Framework.<sup>22</sup> North Korea finalized its break in 2003 with its withdrawal from the NPT.

### Missed opportunity #3: internal North Korean politics, again

In the mid-2000s, the United States once again ran afoul of internal North Korean politics, which undermined the six-party talks. These talks were a result of North Korea withdrawing from the NPT in 2003. Five rounds of talks from 2003 to 2007 produced little progress until the third round, when North Korea agreed to shut down its nuclear facilities in exchange for fuel aid and steps toward the normalization of relations with the US. Internal issues, however, nearly doomed the talks on several occasions. During the early years of the talks, North Korea was undergoing a flirtation with succession politics. Ko Yong-hui, Kim's long time consort, was promoting her oldest son, Kim Jong-chol, as heir apparent. Elements of the military supported the move and pressed for testing of critical defense systems as a legitimacy-building exercise. While these forces were pushed back by Kim Jong-il following Ko Yong-hui's death, in 2004, they were resurrected in 2006 amid rumors of Kim's failing health. This overlapped with an internal forecast of economic stability, a prerequisite for any decision to test and absorb the

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<sup>22</sup> One of the myths about North Korea perpetuated by US policy-makers is that it always cheats on agreements. In fact, the record is mixed. According to one assessment:

The first nuclear agreement between the United States and North Korea collapsed in 2002 after eight years in force, in part because of cheating by Pyongyang, but it did head off a nuclear weapons program that could have produced as many as 100 bombs. A nuclear deal brokered by China in 2005 requiring Pyongyang to give up its weapons program faltered after the Bush administration imposed new economic sanctions on the North before the ink was dry. A US-North Korea deal in 2012 that imposed a moratorium on the North's long-range rocket tests collapsed when Pyongyang claimed its rockets intended to launch satellites into space were exempted, not a minor point since those tests could help develop nuclear-tipped missiles. Outside the WMD arena, the record is also mixed. For example, after private aid organizations began delivery of 100,000 tons of food assistance to the North in 2008, while most of the assistance reached its intended destinations, they discovered that a small amount had disappeared. On the other hand, aid groups engaged in local projects to help increase food production found the North abided by its agreements. Joel S. Wit and Jenny Town, "It's Not a Hermit Kingdom, and 4 Other Myths About North Korea," *The Atlantic* [Online], Mar. 29, 2013.



inevitable international backlash. Throughout the spring of 2006, North Korea signaled that it was willing to return to the six-party talks if the US lifted the Banco Delta Asia sanctions and held bilateral meetings.<sup>23</sup> As its signals met silence from Washington, North Korea's frustration grew. The missile test came only a month after the US rebuffed North Korea's invitation for the US to send its nuclear envoy to Pyongyang for bilateral talks. When the missile test failed to achieve the desired results, Pyongyang upped the ante in October with the nuclear test before agreeing to return to the six-party talks, and declared 2007 to be the "year of economic development."

A cursory examination of North Korean media pronouncements over the first eight months of 2008 paints the picture of a regime that was again unclear about the way forward. According to North Korean officials, the regime was increasingly frustrated by the slow pace of promised aid and increasingly concerned with the changing ground rules regarding sanctions. In the July round of the six-party talks, the parties agreed in principle to establish a verification and monitoring mechanism as well as a more precise timetable so that fuel oil assistance and disablement of North Korea's nuclear facility could take place in parallel. The United States, however, made removal of North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism contingent on an initial verification protocol. By August, the process had reached a stalemate, with North Korea refusing to budge on verification and the US standing firm on delisting. In September, Pyongyang expelled the IAEA inspectors, halted the disablement process of its nuclear facilities, and threatened to restart the Yongbyon reactor.<sup>24</sup>

## Missed opportunity #4: US appetite for close engagement cut short

Toward the end of the Clinton administration, there was increased willingness among US leadership to explore what "close engagement" with Pyongyang could entail. Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, who visited North Korea in 2000, found Kim Jong-il "very decisive and practical and serious."<sup>25</sup> She described Kim, who was somewhat of a mystery to the outside

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<sup>23</sup> In 2015, the United States imposed sanctions against Banco Delta Asia, a Macao bank accused of North Korea money laundering.

<sup>24</sup> Ken E. Gause, *North Korea Under Kim Chong-il: Power, Politics, and Prospects for Change* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Madeleine K. Albright, "Remarks at Press Conference at Koryo Hotel, Pyongyang, Democratic People's Republic of Korea," (Pyongyang, Oct. 24, 2000), accessed Aug. 15, 2021, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/2000/001024b.html>.

world, as “a very good listener and a good interlocutor.”<sup>26</sup> Because Kim “was quite clear in explaining his understanding of US concerns,”<sup>27</sup> Albright viewed talks with him to be “a very good way to learn more about his intentions,” allowing both countries to make important progress.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the Clinton administration saw engagement as a good way to build trust with North Korea, reduce its insecurity, and, ultimately, end its nuclear threat.<sup>29</sup> The administration also contended that offering carrots, such as economic aid, diplomatic normalization, and regime assurance, gave Kim a stake in the status quo, persuading him that he could best serve his own interests by giving up his nuclear weapons program.<sup>30</sup>

The Bush administration could have informed its strategy with Secretary Albright’s positive testimony of the North Korean leader and continued to engage in such a trust-building manner; instead, it viewed diplomacy as a tool to test North Korea’s true intentions rather than as a tool to continue building rapport.<sup>31</sup> The Bush administration assumed that true insight into North Korea’s decision-making process was impossible because of the opacity of the totalitarian regime leadership—despite Secretary Albright’s experiences with Kim Jong-il—and thus focused its North Korea policy solely on getting rid of Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program. The Armitage report explained that the objective of diplomacy should be to offer Pyongyang clear choices for a better future, such as economic benefits, security assurances, and political legitimization, backed by the certainty of enhanced military deterrence,<sup>32</sup> and the end of the Clinton administration was close to offering such choices. The narrow range of the Bush administration’s North Korea policy direction reflects shallow perception of the adversary and thus did not come across to Pyongyang as an offering of choices beneficial for its future.

Although it is difficult to argue that a deeper understanding of North Korea’s calculus could have had a profound impact on how the Clinton and Bush administrations handled their relationship with Pyongyang, a more nuanced understanding of North Korean internal dynamics might have allowed US policy-makers to identify areas of tactical leverage to advance

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<sup>26</sup> Perlez, Jane, “Albright Reports Progress in Talks with North Korea,” *New York Times*, Oct. 25, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/25/world/albright-reports-progress-in-talks-with-north-korea.html>.

<sup>27</sup> “N. Korea will halt future missile firings,” Associated Press, Oct. 24, 2000.

<sup>28</sup> Madeleine K. Albright, press conference, Koryo Hotel, cited in Hwang, “Realism and US Foreign Policy toward North Korea.”

<sup>29</sup> Victor D. Cha, “Korea’s Place in the Axis,” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 3 (2002): 79–84.

<sup>30</sup> Hwang, “Realism and US Foreign Policy toward North Korea.”

<sup>31</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President,” June 6, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/06/text/20010611-4.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Armitage, “A Comprehensive Approach to North Korea.”

relations with Pyongyang. Instead, lack of this knowledge may have led to limited, uninformed assumptions that evolved within the policy-making community regarding North Korean regime dynamics.<sup>33</sup>

## Obama North Korea policy: strategic patience leading to stalemate

As the Obama administration took office in 2009, it faced several challenges on the Korean Peninsula. In addition to the ongoing dispute over Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program, there were indications of another possible famine in the North. For reasons that remain unclear, North Korea was pushing for the removal of outsiders from the Kaesong special economic zone, thus further isolating the regime from international assistance and interaction during a time of obvious need.<sup>34</sup> Military coordination between the two Koreas had been cut off and there were no attempts by the North to comply further with existing agreements with the South or to continue construction of a promised inter-Korean railroad.

Surrounding all of these challenges was a possible succession crisis brewing in Pyongyang. In August 2008, Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke, which left him unable to manage the day-to-day duties of running the country. If follow-up reports are accurate, he may have suffered another stroke in October and become incapacitated. Concerns grew that a power vacuum had emerged, triggering a possible succession struggle that would dramatically change leadership dynamics in Pyongyang. If so, all that the US thought it knew about how the system worked might no longer be valid. This in turn could lead to false assumptions that might undermine any near-term strategies to deal with North Korea in the post-Kim period.

Kim Jong-il had returned to the public arena by the time Obama took the oath of office. At the start of the Obama administration's first term, in 2009, expectations were growing that the United States might pursue direct talks with North Korea to break a two-decade standoff over

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<sup>33</sup> The fact that US policy failed to gain traction with North Korea does not mean that deep knowledge of North Korea's calculus was absent within the US government. There is no doubt that the intelligence community had a sophisticated understanding of the issues. This knowledge, however, does not appear to have found purchase in policy discussions, or it was outweighed by other considerations.

<sup>34</sup> North Korea appeared to be undertaking a reassessment of its economic policy. In early 2009, many of North Korea's economic functionaries were replaced, including: Ho Taek (minister of power industry), Kim Chang-sik (minister of agriculture), and Kim Tae-bong (minister of metal industry). These appointments followed North Korea's authoritative New Year's message, which signaled a major effort to tighten social discipline and reassert greater control over economic activity, apparently with an eye to revitalizing key economic sectors. This suggested that the leadership intended to get the economy moving again in preparation for the 2012 centennial of the birth of Kim Il-sung. There was speculation that Jang Song-taek, Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law, was crafting a new economic policy.

its nuclear program. Obama promised in his inaugural address that he would offer an outstretched hand to those who unclenched their fists, making a public offer to dictatorial states of his willingness to abandon adversarial relations. But it did not take long for the new administration's hopefulness to become cynical frustration.

North Korea responded to Obama's offer with a multistage rocket launch and nuclear tests in April and May of 2009. Consequentially, decision-making within the Obama administration began to shift from engagement to upholding the international nonproliferation regime. The resulting United Nations Security Council Resolution 1874 condemned North Korea's tests and subjected suspected North Korean nuclear-related shipments to international inspections. Following a UN condemnation of a failed missile launch in April, North Korea declared it would pull out of the six-party talks and that it would resume its nuclear enrichment program to boost its nuclear deterrent.<sup>35</sup>

## Misunderstanding the adversary's strength

Washington politics prevented the Obama administration from resuming its engagement strategy. Instead, a policy of "strategic patience" began to characterize the president's actions toward North Korea. Critical to this approach was an emphasis on alliance coordination and a focus on denuclearization. This strategy also rested on assumptions that North Korea's provocations would lead to damaging self-isolation from its immediate neighbors and that enhanced efforts by the administration to engage with North Korea would not produce the requisite political benefits, thereby exposing the administration to great political risk.

The strategy of strategic patience appeared to align with the realities of dynamics around the Korean Peninsula in 2010 when North Korea lashed out with two violent provocations: the sinking of the *Cheonan* in March and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November. It was during this period that leadership analysis began to have greater resonance in US policy-making. According to media reports, US intelligence concluded that these provocations were in part due to problems with the succession process tied to the failed currency revaluation and the need to bolster the leadership credentials of the new heir apparent, Kim Jong-un. This conclusion, combined with revelations from Stanford University scientist Siegfried Hecker that North Korean efforts to enrich uranium and construct a light-water reactor were making steady progress, led the Obama administration to embark on three rounds of direct talks with North Korean counterparts from July 2011 to February 2012, which culminated in the ill-fated "Leap Day" agreement.

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<sup>35</sup> Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), "DPRK Foreign Ministry Vehemently Refutes UNSC's 'Presidential Statement,'" Apr. 14, 2009.

The United States intended its second attempt at engagement to bind North Korea to refrain from provocative actions such as nuclear and missile tests and to secure Pyongyang's commitment to return to the path of denuclearization. In April, on the eve of the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth, North Korea conducted a failed launch of a satellite/missile test. The ease and alacrity with which Pyongyang walked away from the February deal confirmed the view among many within the Obama administration that the North Korean regime was a hopeless case. Though the administration would continue to adhere to its commitment of coordination with regional allies in pursuit of North Korean denuclearization, strategic patience gave way to benign neglect.

## Misunderstanding the adversary's goal

In many respects, Obama's policy toward North Korea made sense. President Obama declared in his second inaugural address, "We will show the courage to try and resolve our differences with other nations peacefully—not because we are naive about the dangers we face but because engagement can more durably lift suspicion and fear." With regard to North Korea, the Obama administration laid out its terms and gave every indication that if Pyongyang agreed to those terms, which included placing its nuclear program on the table, the United States would be willing to engage and negotiate in good faith.<sup>36</sup> The problem, however, was that the administration's strategic patience policy was itself fundamentally flawed. Absent parallel engagement, North Korea had little incentive to constrain its behavior. While the US stood aside, hoping time and circumstances would force North Korea to accede to demands for denuclearization, the North forged ahead with its own plans:

- When North Korea launched a missile in the spring of 2009, Washington pushed for UN sanctions. Barely a month after that resolution passed, Pyongyang staged its second nuclear test.
- As the Obama administration continued its policy of strategic patience and minimal diplomatic movement, Pyongyang revealed that it had acquired uranium enrichment capability to go along with its plutonium bomb program.

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<sup>36</sup> Skeptics of the strategic patience strategy note that it seemed plausible and reasonable because the United States never said it would not negotiate with North Korea, merely that it insisted on preconditions to ensure that the talks were productive. The tactic is a simple one: If you do not want negotiations with the other side, but also do not want to appear to reject talks, you insist on preconditions that you know the other side will not, and cannot, accept. Negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang are essentially about Washington dropping its policy of hostility and accepting peaceful coexistence in exchange for Pyongyang giving up nuclear weapons. More-cynical critics ascribe a more strategic motive to US intransigence, noting that Pyongyang's nuclear program provides the US with an excuse to boost its military presence to counter the rise of China and to reinforce the three-way security pact with South Korea and Japan.

- North Korea’s December 2012 missile test led to a condemnation from the UN Security Council. That prompted Pyongyang to conduct its third nuclear test in February 2013, which in turn produced even tougher UN-mandated sanctions.
- Reports in 2015 suggest that North Korea may have attempted to restart the plutonium production reactor at Yongbyon after a shutdown of almost five months.<sup>37</sup>

Strategic patience in the end created a stalemate between two countries that had dug in their heels. Attempts at bridging this divide detoured into the bizarre when Kim Jong-un used former pro basketball player Dennis Rodman to pass a message to Obama about Kim’s desire to talk, an offer that barely warranted a response. It also led to inflamed tensions on both sides that erupted periodically, either in rhetoric or more aggressive actions, such as a Pyongyang-backed cyberattack aimed at stopping the release of a movie (*The Interview*) in 2014. Not only had relations between the two countries reached a low point, they now existed in a parallel universe where the rules of foreign policy no longer applied. This moment clearly exemplifies the divergence and disparity of interests and value of issue in dispute.

## Trump North Korea policy: transactional summitry

### Initial reactions

North Korea reacted to the election of President Donald Trump with caution and confusion. According to several off-the-record comments by North Korean diplomats, Kim Jong-un and his advisors expected Hillary Clinton to become president. Their game plan most likely included ramping up the North’s brinkmanship campaign, which had begun in 2016 with Obama. Trump was an unknown quantity; Pyongyang policy-making circles had little knowledge of what the new president’s red lines were and how he would act in response to North Korean provocations. Trump had stated during the campaign that he would be willing to meet with Kim Jong-un, maybe even share a meal. Yet he also talked tough about the North Korean regime. As a result, it was not until the end of February 2017 that North Korea decided to test a new missile and start testing the red lines of the new administration.

The year 2017 was one of the most unprecedented “getting to know you” periods for a new US administration and a chosen adversary. North Korea’s actions were calculated and in keeping

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<sup>37</sup> North Korea began operating the reactor in 1985 and agreed to freeze the facility under an agreement reached with the United States in exchange for international aid. It restarted the reactor in 2002, then disabled it in 2007 under an aid-for-disarmament accord at the six-party talks. Renovations for the reactor resumed after Pyongyang conducted its nuclear test in 2013.

with standard operating procedures for the regime. Missile tests slowly graduated in range, leading to testing of Hwasong-14 ICBMs in July. When it came to nuclear tests, the regime proceeded with considerably more caution. While it threatened to resume nuclear tests, and even aboveground tests, it was not until September that North Korea performed another underground test. The Trump administration responded with sanctions, combined with increasingly fiery rhetoric. In August, Trump took umbrage at what he perceived as a threat by Kim Jong-un, warning that “North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States [or]...[t]hey will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.”<sup>38</sup> One month later, the rhetoric reached a crescendo when Trump spoke before the United Nations.<sup>39</sup> In a speech reminiscent of Bush’s “axis of evil” in its darkness, Trump warned that “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”<sup>40</sup> Two days later, Kim Jong-un responded with a speech under the title of chairman of the State Affairs Commission, calling Trump a “dotard” verging on senility. He characterized Trump’s speech as a declaration of war and promised that North Korea “will consider with seriousness exercising of a corresponding, highest level of hardline countermeasure in history.”<sup>41</sup> North Korea’s foreign minister, Ri Yong-ho, followed suit with a threat of a possible hydrogen bomb test over the Pacific.<sup>42</sup>

Tensions continued to mount on the peninsula. South Korean experts warned that more provocations could come in October as part of the 72nd founding anniversary of the ruling Workers’ Party of Korea. Seoul’s presidential office also pointed to the opening day of the 19th national congress by China’s Communist party, October 18, as a possible date for North Korean

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<sup>38</sup> Noah Bierman, “Trump Warns North Korea of ‘fire and fury,’” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 8, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/la-app-north-korea-trump-nuclear-missiles-20170808-story.html>.

<sup>39</sup> This speech came in the aftermath of North Korea’s sixth nuclear weapons test and second launch of a ballistic missile over Japan into the Pacific, as well as the resumption of US overflights of the Korean Peninsula by heavy bombers, which carried out practice runs with real bombs near the demilitarized zone.

<sup>40</sup> David Nakamura and Anne Gearan, “In U.N. speech, Trump threatens to ‘totally destroy North Korea’ and calls Kim Jong Un ‘Rocket Man,’” *Washington Post*, Sept. 19, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/09/19/in-u-n-speech-trump-warns-that-the-world-faces-great-peril-from-rogue-regimes-in-north-korea-iran/>.

<sup>41</sup> “Full Text of Kim Jong Un’s Statement as Published by KCNAWatch,” VOA News [Online] via KCNA Watch, Sept. 22, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/full-text-of-kim-jong-uns-statement-as-published-by-kcna/4039855.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Ser Myo-ja, “North Korea Threatens to Fire H-Bomb into Pacific Ocean,” *JoongAng Daily* [Online], Sept. 22, 2017, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3038761&cloc=etc%7Cjad%7Cgooglenews>.

action.<sup>43</sup> Following a statement by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that the US was engaged in back-channel talks with North Korea, Trump told his top diplomat to stop “wasting his time” trying to negotiate with Kim Jong-un over Pyongyang’s nuclear program.<sup>44</sup> The North Korean ambassador to the UN, Ja Song-nam, accused the US of “clinging to unprecedented nuclear threats and blackmail, economic sanctions and blockade to deny our rights to existence and development.”<sup>45</sup> It was at this point that the narratives on both sides crystallized. From the US point of view, North Korea was committed to securing its nuclear capability and only threats of force could possibly change that. North Korea saw the regime’s very existence under threat. At a Central Committee meeting to mark the party’s founding, Kim Jong-un pledged to continue his policy of *byungjin*,<sup>46</sup> noting that North Korea’s nuclear arms are “a precious fruition borne by its people’s bloody struggle for defending the destiny and sovereignty of the country from the protracted nuclear threats of the US imperialists.”<sup>47</sup>

## US lack of cohesion

During this period, the Trump administration’s North Korea policy and strategy appeared to change depending on who was speaking. Secretary of State Tillerson took a diplomatic approach that was not out of line with the engagement approach of previous administrations. He stressed the administration’s desire not to engage in regime change and the need for diplomacy. Secretary of Defense James Mattis focused on alliance management and deterrence in the face of North Korean threats. The National Security Council took a harder line, focusing on the need for sanctions and threatening military consequences if Pyongyang did not bend to the “maximum pressure” strategy, which was the hallmark of the Trump administration’s policy toward North Korea. Trump himself seemed to be engaged in a transactional foreign policy that shifted based on both internal and external forces. One moment he would praise Kim Jong-un, the next lob threats at him. North Korea responded by sending emissaries to ask

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<sup>43</sup> Kim Soo-yeon, “N.K. likely to make provocations around this month’s key occasions: experts,” *Yonhap News* [Online], Oct. 1, 2017, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20170928007000315>.

<sup>44</sup> Felicia Schwartz, “Trump Tells Tillerson Talking to North Korea Is A Waste of Time,” *Wall Street Journal*, updated Oct. 1, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-tells-tillerson-talking-to-north-korea-is-a-waste-of-time-1506876186>.

<sup>45</sup> Edith M. Lederer, “North Korea accuses US of imposing an ‘economic blockade,’ *AP News* [Online], Oct. 3, 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/023d2fdad06b403ca422bfb1eed90bf0>.

<sup>46</sup> *Byungjin* is a political term in North Korea. It originally refers to Kim Il-sung’s policy in the 1960s to simultaneously develop the military and the economy. Under Kim Jong-un, it has referred to simultaneous development of nuclear weapons and the economy.

<sup>47</sup> KCNA, “Second Plenum of Seventh WPK Central Committee,” Oct. 8, 2017, <https://dprktoday.com/abroad/songun/80?lang=e>.



former US officials and Korea watchers in and around Washington how to read the administration's mixed signals.<sup>48</sup>

With the Western media fixated on the rising tensions and inflammatory rhetoric on both sides, it overlooked the fact that for Kim Jong-un, all the pieces were falling into place for a shift in strategy and a return to diplomacy. In May 2017, a progressive, Moon Jae-in, was elected president of South Korea. For the first time in a decade, a conservative president did not occupy the Blue House. Yet the president occupying the White House was one who openly talked about sitting down with Kim Jong-un. Although tensions were rising on the peninsula, the dynamics between Seoul and Washington likely appeared optimal to Pyongyang if an off-ramp could be found. Since the Kim Jong-il period, escalating tensions to deescalate and set the stage for negotiations was a standard practice. In November, Kim Jong-un found the off-ramp by conducting his most audacious missile test to date, launching a Hwasong-15 ICBM on the highest trajectory yet.<sup>49</sup> The next day, Kim announced that North Korea had mastered a nuclear-strike capability and was now a full-fledged "nuclear state."<sup>50</sup> The claim, which the international community received with skepticism, allowed North Korea to declare victory and engage in diplomacy on its own terms, from a self-perceived position of strength, and on more equal terms with the United States.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Anna Fifield, "North Korea Taps GOP Analysts to Better Understand Trump and His Messages," *Washington Post*, Sept. 26, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/north-korea-seeks-help-from-republican-analysts-whats-up-with-trump/2017/09/26/ea91909e-a278-11e7-8c37-e1d99ad6aa22\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/north-korea-seeks-help-from-republican-analysts-whats-up-with-trump/2017/09/26/ea91909e-a278-11e7-8c37-e1d99ad6aa22_story.html).

<sup>49</sup> According to some experts, the missile performed better than the two fired in July, and exhibited a potential range of more than 8,000 miles, able to reach Washington or any other part of the continental United States. See Mark Landler, Choe Sang-Hun, and Helene Cooper, "North Korea Fires a Ballistic Missile, in a Further Challenge to Trump," *New York Times*, Nov. 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/28/world/asia/north-korea-missile-test.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Kim Soo-yeon, "N.K. Declares Completion of Nukes with New ICBM Test," *Yonhap News* [Online], Nov. 29, 2017, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20171129002954315>.

<sup>51</sup> In the Western press and among policy-makers, the administration's maximum pressure/coercive diplomatic strategy brought North Korea to the negotiating table. A recent report by South Korea's central bank found that North Korea's economy shrank by about 3.5 percent in 2017, a drop that economists have attributed almost entirely to sanctions. (This figure is disputed by Pyongyang. Ri Ki-song, a senior researcher with the Economic Institute of the North's Academy of Social Sciences, argues that despite sanctions, North Korea's economy has maintained steady growth, with its gross domestic product increasing from \$25 billion in 2013 to \$29.6 billion in 2016 and \$30.7 billion in 2017.) North Korea still struggles to find markets for its coal and iron ore, two critical sources of revenue. Increased sanctions-busting efforts have helped only marginally, as the bulk of North Korea's marketable coal remains on the docks. That said, this narrative fails to explain the timing of Kim's decision to end his brinkmanship campaign. While there is evidence that the pressure campaign was constraining North Korea's finances and access to resources, it falls short of proving that the campaign was becoming existential to the regime. Rather, the timing of the strategy shift is largely explained by the alignment of three critical factors: (1) a

The pivot in North Korean strategy came at the beginning of 2018 with Kim Jong-un's New Year's Day speech, the traditional venue for the leader to lay out policy pronouncements. Kim had escalated tensions and was now looking for a way out. This was not too difficult because the Moon administration had been trying to engage Pyongyang for months, even requesting North Korea's participation in the upcoming Winter Olympics. Kim had made overtures regarding North-South rapprochement in 2014, 2015, and 2017, but had been rebuffed. Since the progressive Moon administration had come to power, North Korea had been careful not to criticize the president, which indicated that Kim's pivot had been months in the making. He accepted the offer for North Korea to participate in the Olympics, seeing an opportunity to use the pomp and circumstance of the event to present his country as a member of the international community and an active participant in a process to bring peace to the peninsula.

Kim's speech also reflected an understanding of the challenges Moon would face in improving relations with the North. For that reason, he dialed back the rhetoric on the United States. He refrained from accusing the US of posing an existential threat to North Korea and dispensed with the inflammatory and threatening language that had characterized the back-and-forth between Kim and Trump during the summer. As for the nuclear program, he hinted that testing had come to an end,<sup>52</sup> although he showed no sign of backing down on his plans to "mass-produce" and "deploy" warheads and missiles.<sup>53</sup> By focusing on infringement of "interests" and not just territorial sovereignty as a trigger, Kim seemed to be lowering the bar for potential use.<sup>54</sup> Although Kim had toned down his language, it was clear that his basic calculus had not changed, that regime survival took precedence over offensive military action.

The diplomatic charm campaign began with North Korea's participation in the 2018 Winter Olympics held in Pyeongchang, South Korea. For the opening ceremonies, Kim sent his sister Kim Yo-jong and Kim Yong-nam, president of the Supreme People's Assembly. Both met with President Moon and other dignitaries. US Vice President Mike Pence, however, avoided meeting the North Korean delegation. The same was true of the closing ceremonies, which were attended by Trump's daughter Ivanka Trump and Kim Yong-chol, director of the Korean Workers' Party United Front Department and a close advisor to Kim Jong-un. Despite the tension in US-North Korea relations, President Moon took the opportunity to discuss a way

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progressive administration came to power in Seoul, (2) a more flexible administration came to power in Washington, and (3) the nuclear program achieved a level of development that permitted a pause in public testing.

<sup>52</sup> Kim made clear that he considered the "might and reliability" of North Korea's nuclear deterrent "already firmly guaranteed." See *Rodong Sinmun*, "Kim Jong Un's New Year Address," Jan. 2, 2018, [http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2018-01-02-0018](http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2018-01-02-0018).

<sup>53</sup> *Rodong Sinmun*, "Kim Jong Un's New Year Address," Jan. 2, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> *Rodong Sinmun*, "Kim Jong Un's New Year Address," Jan. 2, 2018.

forward in the inter-Korean relationship. Kim Yo-jong carried a letter from her brother offering a summit between the two Korean leaders in the near future.<sup>55</sup>

The Olympics were followed by the Third Plenary Session of the Seventh Workers' Party of Korea Central Committee in April, convened just 11 days after an authoritative party Political Bureau meeting. During this session, Kim delivered a report reaffirming the party's "simultaneous line" policy of developing the country's economy and its nuclear program; however, he readjusted their priorities in a way that fit well with the pivot to diplomacy. In particular, he stressed three points:

- North Korea "no longer need[s]" to conduct any nuclear or IRBM/ICBM tests because the "entire process of nuclear development"—which includes the "weaponization of nuclear weapons" and the "development of the delivery and strike means"—has reached "completion."
- The "northern nuclear test site" [P'unggye] had "finished its mission" and the plenary session had "unanimously adopted" a decision to "dismantle" the site to "transparently guarantee the suspension of nuclear tests."
- North Korea had achieved the position of a "world-class" political and military state and it was time for the "entire party and country" to "concentrate all their energy" on the economy.<sup>56</sup>

In the summits that followed between North Korea, South Korea, and the United States, Kim Jong-un reiterated his desire to shift focus from the nuclear program to economic development. In discussions with South Korean interlocutors, who stressed the need to align this vision with that of the US, Kim shifted his rhetoric from having developed a nuclear program to embracing "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

## Summitry setting a hopeful stage

On April 27, Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in held the first inter-Korean summit in 11 years. The resulting Panmunjom Declaration indicated the will of both Koreas to improve overall inter-Korean relations. Both sides agreed to a reduction of military tension and to engage in confidence-building to help establish a permanent peace regime. The declaration also laid out in detail the implementation strategy, which adopted a two-track approach of simultaneously

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<sup>55</sup> Benjamin Haas, "Kim Jong-un's sister invites South Korean president to Pyongyang," *The Guardian*, Feb. 10, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/10/kim-yo-jong-meets-south-korean-president-in-seoul-as-thaw-continues>.

<sup>56</sup> *Rodong Sinmun*, "3rd Plenary Meeting of 7th C.C., WPK Held in Presence of Kim Jong Un," Apr. 21, 2018, [http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2018-04-21-0019](http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2018-04-21-0019).

advancing inter-Korean relations and resolving North Korean nuclear issues. It also affirmed that inter-Korean relations should play a leading role in the process of denuclearization negotiations. The declaration specified a mutual goal to create a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula by reaffirming the need for complete denuclearization and expressing a will to declare an end to the Korean War and seek a peace treaty.<sup>57</sup> However, the declaration only laid out the principle of denuclearization, leaving details on sequencing and implementation schedule as a topic for future discussions with the United States.

Following a surprising agreement to an offer by Kim Jong-un to hold a summit, President Trump called off the summit in May because of North Korea's apparent unwillingness to engage in good faith negotiations on the nuclear issue.<sup>58</sup> This set off a flurry of activity on the peninsula, including an unusually conciliatory statement from North Korean First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kim Kye-gwan that the regime was willing to talk with the US "anytime" and in any format. A follow-up summit between President Moon and Kim Jong-un took place on May 26. The two leaders reiterated their intent to implement the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration and to hold a successful North Korea-US summit. Trump soon thereafter withdrew his objections to a summit with Kim Jong-un. This back-and-forth reiterated the high stakes for both sides. It also made clear that the United States and North Korea were no longer engaged in traditional diplomacy but "great leader diplomacy." The agenda was not hammered out during months of diplomatic wrangling at the lower echelons of power but by the leaders themselves.<sup>59</sup> Instead

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<sup>57</sup> The April 2018 declaration marked the first time that a summit-generated declaration explicitly mentioned denuclearization, although inter-Korean dialogues of the past had produced various agreements that included denuclearization or the resolution of nuclear issues. The 2007 declaration only stipulated that there should be an effort to implement a joint statement of the fourth round of the six-party talks and the February 13 agreement for "the resolution of nuclear issues on the Korean Peninsula." Over the course of 21 inter-Korean ministerial talks since the 2000 inter-Korean summit, the agreements had specified North Korean nuclear issues several times. However, those agreements used only muted expressions such as "exchange of opinions on nuclear issues between the two sides" or "peaceful resolution of nuclear issues" (2002–2004). It was only after 2005 that the wording of the agreements had advanced to "a final goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

<sup>58</sup> President Trump's decision to cancel the summit followed a few days of harsh statements by both US and North Korean officials. National Security Advisor John Bolton had referenced a Libya denuclearization model for North Korea to follow, one in which no sanctions relief would be forthcoming until complete denuclearization was achieved. Choe Son-hui, a North Korean vice minister of foreign affairs, countered that whether the summit between Kim Jong-un and Trump would happen as scheduled depended on the United States. She noted that "whether the US will meet us at a meeting room or encounter us at nuclear-to-nuclear showdown is entirely dependent upon the decision and behavior of the United States." See Koh Byung-joon, "N. Korea Threatens to Walk Away from Planned Summit with U.S.," *Yonhap News* [Online], May 24, 2018, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20180524002752315>.

<sup>59</sup> When preparations for the summit were derailed by subordinates on both sides, it was allegedly Kim and Trump who put the meeting back on course, with the help of President Moon. See Lee Sung-eun, "North Reacts

of working out the details of an agreement in advance, the summit would serve as a venue for the leaders to develop a relationship and set the parameters for follow-up discussions designed to bring about an agreement.<sup>60</sup>

On June 12, in Singapore, President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un held the first-ever US-North Korea summit. At their first handshake, Kim hinted at the great leader diplomacy when he told Trump, “It was not easy to get here. For us, the past has been holding us back and old practices and prejudices have been covering our eyes and ears, but we have been able to overcome everything to arrive here today.” At the end of approximately four hours of meetings, the two leaders signed a document containing broad principles of agreement. In addition to committing to establish peace on the peninsula, improving relations between the two countries, and returning the bodies of soldiers lost in the Korean War, North Korea committed to work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. During these discussions and at the follow-up press conference Trump alluded to Kim’s agreement to dismantle the missile test facility at Dongchang-ri. Trump also stated, to the surprise of many, that he had decided to halt upcoming US-ROK joint “war games.”

After nearly three months in which US-North Korea follow-ups to the summit stalled, highlighted by a failed visit by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Pyongyang and a canceled visit, a third inter-Korean summit took place in Pyongyang September 18–20. In the lead-up to the summit, both the United States and North Korea had resumed using familiar talking points, with the Trump administration stressing North Korea’s lack of progress on denuclearization and North Korean officials calling for a phased approach to achieving peace on the peninsula. South Korean officials saw the upcoming summit as a chance for President Moon to act as mediator and get the US-North Korea talks back on track. At the summit, Kim Jong-un complained of a lack of reciprocity on the part of the US. North Korea had decommissioned its nuclear test facility at Punggye-ri and taken other steps that Kim felt were not appreciated by Washington. In the end, though, Kim agreed to finish decommissioning the missile test facility at Dongchang-ri and, depending on US reciprocal actions, would also decommission the nuclear facility at Yongbyon.

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Cordially to Trump's Cancelling of Summit," *JoongAng Daily* [Online], May 25, 2018, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3048560&cloc=etc%7Cjad%7Cgooglenews>.

<sup>60</sup> The flurry of summits from March through June demonstrated Kim Jong-un’s unique leadership style, which appears to be goal-oriented and values results over protocol. Kim had used the foreign affairs apparatus to run the charm campaign of 2013–2015, but failed to secure the economic relief he was looking for. This may have influenced his taking on a more personal role in driving the diplomatic agenda in 2018. He has also followed up summits with one country with summits with another. After the first inter-Korean summit in April, he met a second time with China’s president, Xi Jinping, at Dalian. The second summit in Panmunjom was used to get the summit with the United States back on track. After the Singapore summit with Trump, Kim had a third summit in Beijing to provide a readout.

The summits and accompanying narratives coming out of Pyongyang, Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing pointed to a fundamental misalignment on the issue of denuclearization and the way forward in terms of security on the Korean Peninsula. For the United States, the first and only issue has always centered on the unilateral denuclearization of North Korea. All other issues and points of contention are secondary to this and will not be dealt with in full until North Korea has completely and verifiably dismantled its nuclear program. Japan is closely aligned with this view, although it also stresses the need to make progress on the abduction issue, which is an emotional and politically charged matter for the Japanese citizenry. South Korea shares US concerns on the North Korean nuclear program, but the progressive Moon administration is also concerned about improving inter-Korean ties and therefore sees denuclearization as best integrated into a larger peace initiative on the peninsula. China and its erstwhile ally Russia view denuclearization as a pathway to a larger regional order where US equities and its role on the Korean Peninsula are weakened. For Beijing, the critical objective is to create conditions on the peninsula by which the ROK-US alliance is dissolved and US presence is no longer needed.<sup>61</sup> North Korea, while sharing some of China and South Korea's equities, embraces denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, but strongly hints that this does not mean unilateral North Korean denuclearization. It likely does not share China's desire for a total US withdrawal from the peninsula since this would eliminate the counterweight it has in its relations with Beijing.<sup>62</sup>

## Hanoi: highlighting the conflicts of interest and divergence

Nowhere was the inherent bias implicit in asymmetric diplomacy more on display than at the end of the Trump administration. Ignoring the positive movement achieved through US-North Korea summitry, the United States gave into the conventional viewpoint within the

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<sup>61</sup> China is well aware that Korea is the anchor for the US position in Northeast Asia. If a wedge is created between Washington and Seoul, the overall US position in Asia could begin to unravel. At the same time, China's influence on North Korea is conditional. The current stalemate in US-North Korea relations increases Pyongyang's reliance on Beijing for protection and economic security in the face of ongoing sanctions and threats from Washington. However, if North Korea and the United States were to improve their relations without China's involvement, then the Sino-North Korea relationship could become strained as Pyongyang might look to Washington as a counterweight to China. China has geography on its side, so the viability of that scenario is debatable. For an interesting analysis of North Korea's relationship with China, see Weiqi Zhang and Dmitry Zinoviev, "How North Korea Views China: Quantitative Analysis of Korean Central News Agency Reports," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 30, no. 3 (Sept. 2018): 377-396, doi: 10.22883/kjda.2018.30.3.005.

<sup>62</sup> In the lead-up to the Singapore summit and following the third inter-Korean summit, Pyongyang stressed that a future peace regime does not mean US troops will have to leave the peninsula. Seoul has also reiterated this point on several occasions. See Mark Landler and Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Drops Troop Demand, but U.S. Reacts Warily," *New York Times*, Apr. 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/19/world/asia/north-korea-american-troops-withdrawal-trump.html>.

administration that change was not possible and that North Korea would have to demonstrate good faith through unilateral concessions up front. Incremental diplomacy was overtaken by the notion of a grand bargain.

At the inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang in September 2018, North Korea began to strategically message its willingness to take steps toward dismantling its nuclear program. For the first time, Kim said openly, “We have committed to make every effort to turn the Korean Peninsula into a land of peace free from nuclear weapons and nuclear threat.” This sentiment was broadcast at a rally at the May Day Stadium in which President Moon was allowed to address the crowd. Several days later, *Rodong Sinmun* reported that denuclearization was discussed at the summit. The taboo against denuclearization within North Korea’s calculus was finally removed.<sup>63</sup> Additional options were now on the table. In the post-summit Pyongyang Declaration, Article 5 stipulated that North Korea would dismantle its Dongchang-ri ballistic missile engine test facility and launchpad, and would consider dismantling Yongbyon completely.<sup>64</sup>

The second Kim-Trump summit took place in Hanoi, Vietnam, in February 2019. Singapore had delivered a broad framework for bilateral relations. Hanoi was expected to seal a deal, one that would begin to resolve the distrust and tensions that had affected Pyongyang-Washington relations since the Korean War’s uneasy “pause” in 1953. After a few hours of negotiation, the talks fell apart, however, as Trump insisted on a bargain that went well beyond the phased process outlined just a few months earlier by the US special representative for North Korea,

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<sup>63</sup> Andrew Kim, former head of the CIA’s Korea Mission Center, stated in the lead-up to the Hanoi summit that he believed in Kim Jong-un’s genuine desire to achieve denuclearization and get a concession from the United States. In a speech Andrew Kim made on February 22 at Stanford University, he said that Kim Jong-un had told US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo “[that] he is a father and husband and he does not want his children to live their lives carrying nuclear weapons on their back.” “North Korea Denuclearization and U.S.-DPRK Diplomacy,” transcript of speech delivered at Stanford University’s Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center on Feb. 22, 2019, accessed Mar. 11, 2019. <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/transcript-andrew-kim-north-korea-denucleariation-and-us-dprk-diplomacy>. Andrew Kim also believed that North Korea had tried to strike a deal with previous administrations, but Pyongyang waited too long, and that the DPRK aimed to finalize the deal with the Trump administration before it was too late. Kim Jong-un seemed to have assessed that the closure of the Yongbyon nuclear facility would be the beginning of a process.

<sup>64</sup> This was the first time a North Korean leader, in written form, had given very specific suggestions regarding denuclearization. Comprising 470 buildings, Yongbyon is North Korea’s central nuclear facility. It includes a 5-megawatt nuclear reactor, a fuel fabrication plant, a radio-chemical reprocessing plant for plutonium, a tritium-producing lab for hydrogen bombs, and highly enriched uranium production facilities. According to Siegfried Hecker, former director of the US atomic arms lab at Los Alamos, Yongbyon is at the center of North Korea’s nuclear program.

Stephen Biegun.<sup>65</sup> Kim was willing to put Yongbyon on the table only in return for a rollback of the 2016 and 2017 UN sanctions. The new US proposal demanded full disclosure of all North Korean nuclear facilities, missile programs, and biological and chemical weapons programs.

The failure of the Hanoi summit highlighted the trap that can emerge as a result of diplomacy between asymmetric negotiating partners. The weaker country often will press for more than the status quo country is willing to give, and the status quo country does not feel an immediate need to agree to a deal that does not fully satisfy its requirements. For Trump, who was facing congressional investigations, having no deal was better than an agreement that could be criticized as weak. Domestic politics eclipsed any need to make progress on the North Korea portfolio and made it difficult for the Trump administration to make up-front concessions. As for Kim Jong-un, he returned home empty-handed. Lower-level officials, including his sister, Kim Yo-jong, were blamed for the failure and some faced punishment, including “reeducation.” Kim increased support for hardline elements within the military and defense industry, which manifested itself in limited missile testing over the following months.

## **Biden North Korea policy: return to stalemate diplomacy?**

After President Trump and his transactional foreign policy left the North Korea issue in limbo, many wondered how the Biden administration would tackle this intractable challenge. The new administration’s North Korea policy was announced in May 2021. Although the policy seems to be forward-leaning operationally and takes some cues from the Biegun reciprocal phase strategy, overall it appears reminiscent of both Obama’s strategic patience and Trump’s maximum pressure strategies, a combination of “diplomacy, as well as stern deterrence.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Trump was distracted by the Michael Cohen congressional hearings then under way. In addition, National Security Advisor John Bolton held different views from US special representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun. According to Bolton’s memoir, Bolton read Biegun’s proposal during his flight and was unhappy with it. Bolton called Vice President Mike Pence, who intervened with the White House chief of staff. Bolton arrived in Hanoi with a hastily revised draft. The new proposal demanded full disclosure of all North Korean nuclear facilities, missile programs, and biological and chemical weapons programs, while offering only partial sanctions relief and no credible security guarantees. Ultimately, what Kim offered was a “small deal” of action-for-action, trust-building measures. Trump, however, went for broke by demanding an all-in “big deal.” The result was no deal. John Bolton, *The Room Where it Happened* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

<sup>66</sup> In a speech to a joint session of Congress marking his first hundred days in office, President Joe Biden described his North Korea policy as a combination of “diplomacy, as well as stern deterrence.” Hours later, Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters that the White House intended to adopt the classic middle-ground policy option of a “calibrated, practical approach”—framed between former presidents Barack Obama’s “strategic patience” and Donald Trump’s “grand bargain.... Our goal remains the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. With a



Beyond these broad parameters and objectives, the strategy is light on details. Administration officials have said that North Korea must make the first concessions, including tangible steps toward dismantling its nuclear program before the United States and the international community will consider complementary actions (presumably some form of sanctions relief). Biden's policy review laid out the instruments in the US foreign policy toolbox and reasserted "complete denuclearization" as the bottom line, but failed to satisfactorily address the main problem that has bedeviled decades of policy toward Pyongyang under successive US administrations: how to dissuade North Korea from pursuing unremitting nuclear development objectives to guarantee regime survival, stand equivalent to the US as a nuclear power, and reshape the regional strategic environment in North Korea's favor. The fact that the administration did not appoint a new special representative for North Korea suggests the low expectations it has for returning to the negotiating table in the foreseeable future.

As we move through the first year of the Biden administration, we are once again facing an asymmetric standoff. North Korea cannot make the first concession without irreversibly forfeiting its leverage and becoming even weaker relative to the United States, while Washington remains constrained by a conventional presidency that is vulnerable to a polarized domestic political environment and limited from taking bolder initiatives in US-North Korea strategy. Any concessions to North Korea falling short of meeting its demands risks undermining more important objectives on its foreign and domestic agendas. Pyongyang has limited its testing over this period to short-range missiles and projectiles, and it has resorted to military parades to display its growing conventional and strategic capabilities. It continues to attempt to drive a wedge between Washington and Seoul. As a consequence, the partnerships within the alliance, especially between South Korea and Japan, have become strained, with the Moon administration placating its base in the absence of progress on the inter-Korean dialogue by taking a hardline in its relations with Japan.<sup>67</sup>

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clear understanding that the efforts of the past four administrations have not achieved this objective, our policy will not focus on achieving a grand bargain, nor will it rely on strategic patience."

<sup>67</sup> South Korea's inability to press forward with the inter-Korean dialog has forced the Blue House to take a harder stance toward Japan in order to feed its progressive base. The two primary drivers of progressive politics in South Korea are improving inter-Korean relations and attacking Japan for past historical wrongs. If the inter-Korean path is blocked by US intransigence, Seoul will pivot to a hardline toward Tokyo, thus straining the alliance.

# Recommendations

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## Create additional official channels for engagement

There are a number of things the Biden administration can do if it wants to pursue its goals regarding North Korea rather than enter another period of (un)strategic patience. While denuclearization remains the US primary goal and requirement for talks, North Korea will not be interested in re-engaging. First, the Biden administration should undertake a serious assessment of the Trump era's top-down approach and determine whether aspects of it could be used to reinvigorate diplomacy. Given the nature of the North Korean regime, decision-making is concentrated in the person of the supreme leader, thus making a bottom-up approach ineffective and counterproductive. Summit diplomacy remains an avenue through which to purposefully engage. Second, though it might not be politically feasible for a conventional president such as Biden to meet with Kim himself, he could appoint a special representative and give that person significant authority to act on his behalf. He should also consider publicly endorsing President Moon's role as an intermediary between Washington and Pyongyang. These steps would establish a framework for exploratory negotiations designed to determine the art of the possible—and in particular what concessions each side is willing to make. Third, the Biden administration should refrain from demonizing North Korea, which will only cause Pyongyang to lash out again and eschew diplomatic outreach. The White House needs to see North Korea as it is, not as they wish to see it. Fourth, the administration should revisit basic principles of US-North Korea policy. Instead of adhering to a black-and-white policy that lacks flexibility in pursuit of an absolute goal, the administration needs to introduce pragmatism into a reality-based approach.

Critics of US-North Korea policy often warn of half steps and potential traps. They rightly point out that there is no common definition nor road map or timeline for “denuclearization.” While reaching an agreement on the meaning of denuclearization may be difficult over the near term given legitimacy issues inside North Korea, a road map and initial timeline are likely within reach. It essentially comes down to context and how denuclearization is nested within the wider national security and Asia policy of the United States.

## Consider changing the issue in dispute

The fundamental problem with the US-North Korea policy is its framework, which is unsuitable for the situation. Geography and 70 years of history have created a situation in which the United States cannot dictate that North Korea denuclearize. Washington does not possess the leverage, and its past actions toward regimes such as Iraq and Libya have made the situation even more difficult, by reinforcing the view of North Korean leaders that only a nuclear deterrent will forestall eventual regime change. This has created the intractable position both countries find themselves in today, a zero-sum game where there must be an absolute winner and an absolute loser. Because this relationship is an asymmetric one, North Korea as the weaker power is unwilling to make the first move. For its part, the United States takes the stance that it has right on its side in its pursuit of nuclear nonproliferation and is unwilling to “reward bad behavior” by conceding the economic and security guarantees that Pyongyang wants. In the background, China continues to rise and spread its influence throughout Asia. Beijing values stability on its borders and likely views denuclearization as a wedge issue to keep the US off-balance. Since the Singapore summit, US-China relations have soured, and Beijing’s support for sanctions and the US maximum pressure strategy has begun to wane.

To address this challenge, US policy-makers need to make two major shifts in their strategy. First, drop denuclearization as the single objective of US strategy toward North Korea. As currently constituted, denuclearization is a condition precedent for negotiations instead of serving as the ultimate goal. In addition, the United States uses denuclearization as the measuring stick by which to evaluate its overall relationship with North Korea. This leaves Pyongyang in an untenable position of “losing face” whenever it makes a concession on its program. As a result, it is unwilling to take any verifiable and irreversible steps, which would harm its ability to reconstitute the program if diplomacy fails. To address these shortcomings, the US should adopt a reciprocal phased strategy centered on implementing a peace regime. The initial phase should seek to freeze North Korea’s nuclear program in return for limited sanctions relief tied to a snap-back provision if North Korea violates one of three demands: (1) no provocations, (2) no testing, and (3) no proliferation. After these measures are in place for a reasonable time (a year or two), the two sides could then pursue a reciprocal process in which additional steps toward denuclearization would be coupled with a strategy of corresponding reciprocal concessions and confidence-building measures. In this way, Kim Jong-un can take substantive steps toward denuclearization without losing face or giving up something for nothing. Security guarantees and economic incentives (e.g., a declaration of the end of the Korean War, sanctions relief) can come from the US and the international community, which would keep North Korea invested in the process long term. In addition, as North Korea invests itself further in the new peace regime, Kim Jong-un could garner legitimacy for something other than developing his country’s nuclear program. He can present himself to the North

Korean populace as the leader who brought peace, security, and economic prosperity to the country, thus weakening the rationale for retaining the nuclear program.

Second, integrate denuclearization into the larger US strategy in Asia focused on managing the rise of China. By keeping denuclearization of North Korea as an independent goal, the United States has undermined its ability to manage relations with regional allies while giving adversaries additional ways for countering US influence in the region. For example, South Korea's leadership transition to a progressive administration has had an adverse effect on bilateral relations with the US, especially when it comes to policy and strategy toward North Korea. It has created a wedge, with the administration in Seoul eager to improve inter-Korean relations while the administration in Washington remains cautious and insistent on maintaining a hardline. China and North Korea have already taken advantage of this wedge to slow decision-making on the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system and to get Washington to embrace Beijing's freeze-for-freeze agreement as a temporary measure for dealing with the denuclearization issue. In short, instead of making North Korea the target, denuclearization should be folded into the larger US-China strategy.<sup>68</sup> Doing this will have a number of benefits. It will add flexibility to US strategy in Asia as it will take North Korea off the table as a wedge issue that China can use to distract the alliance. It will also provide a potential wedge that the United States can use to deflect China's attention from destabilizing actions in other parts of Asia, something much harder to do if Beijing is having to pay attention to its Northeast Asian flank. It will give the Blue House freedom to pursue the inter-Korean dialogue and the political space to repair its relationship with Japan. Finally, it makes it easier for the US administration to sell upfront concessions to Congress and the American people if they are not part of a zero-sum game, but as part of a sophisticated strategy to deal with the rise of China.

## Conclusion

Asymmetric relations between the United States and less powerful adversaries creates unique challenges not easily addressed by traditional foreign and security policy initiatives. Asymmetrically weaker powers often have greater interests at stake in bilateral disputes with the United States. This factor often leads them to resist US coercion to a degree out of proportion to what would be expected given the vast disparity in military and economic power between the two entities. The presence of these asymmetries of power and conflicts of interest

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<sup>68</sup> This would include an embrace of the inter-Korean peace regime with the provision that US troops will remain on the peninsula after a signed peace treaty, as a force for stability and a guarantor of South Korean and regional security until full and verifiable denuclearization of the peninsula is achieved. This would not only undermine Beijing's strategy of weakening the US position in Northeast Asia but could also drive a wedge between China and North Korea, which likely share different equities when it comes to US presence on the peninsula.

limit such opportunities for compromise and often makes it difficult to reach a diplomatic solution to important security concerns.

This is especially the case when a dominant superpower such as the US unexpectedly makes greater concessions to a smaller power such as North Korea to obtain its immediate objectives. It must consider the impact of this precedent on its future relations with the country and the second-order adverse effects on its reputation in the global system if it is perceived to be conceding too much. Likewise, US use of coercive diplomacy to force concessions from such countries is less likely to succeed in cases in which the issue is perceived to be existential or of far greater importance to the weaker power. This is even more so if US threats to use force to ratchet up pressure on the weaker power are perceived to be too costly to pursue and therefore lacking in credibility. In such cases, the weaker power is often unwilling to make what it considers to be disproportional concessions because it fears that doing so will both permanently undermine its standing in future disputes involving the US and erode its standing domestically.

Such situations can easily lead to a stalemate (as we have seen with North Korea and the US since the Obama administration), with each side becoming entrenched in its respective positions even though the outlines of a negotiated settlement are readily apparent to knowledgeable objective observers. Yet, because of the stakes involved for both countries and the underlying security dynamics and mistrust prevailing in their relationship, both sides are often unwilling to make the kinds of major concessions needed to reach a complete solution. For the same reasons, they are reluctant to make the kinds of incremental phased concessions necessary to build confidence and ultimately to reach their mutual objectives through a more graduated process.

This dynamic has dominated US-North Korea relations for decades and has played out expressly over the last 30 years in the context of the ongoing stalemate over Pyongyang's nuclear program. As the dominant power in this dyad and as the dominant superpower and defender of the international order, US leaders have consistently concluded that it is both unnecessary and inappropriate to moderate its goals and make the incremental concessions necessary to reach a stable negotiated settlement that bounds North Korea's nuclear program, as we see in some of the missed opportunities discussed in this paper. Instead, the US continues to insist on the full dismantlement of Pyongyang's nuclear program and on getting a full commitment as a condition precedent to meaningful negotiations. US insistence on this point is further reinforced by the notion that its position is morally superior since it is defending the fundamental status quo of nuclear nonproliferation. The White House is also highly conscious of both the potential damage the US could incur to its international reputation by making the kinds of concessions needed to break the deadlock in US-North Korea negotiations as that might weaken its hand in future negotiations with other aspiring nuclear powers, such as Iran.

Every administration has been leery of acting in a way that might leave it vulnerable to withering domestic criticism.

For its part, North Korea has long viewed its nuclear program as the primary means of ensuring the regime's survival in the face of the overwhelming military superiority maintained by the US-ROK alliance. Pyongyang is well aware of the United States' long record of pursuing forcible regime change as an instrument of foreign policy against weaker adversaries and of the fate that other countries, such as Libya and Iraq, have faced when they failed to achieve their nuclear ambitions. North Korea is also highly reluctant to make the concessions the United States is demanding as an initial step, such as a unilateral commitment to make irreversible cuts to its nuclear program. Pyongyang believes this would dramatically reduce its leverage in future negotiations with the US and is unwilling to do so without obtaining anything of corresponding value, such as the lifting of sanctions or credible security assurances.

Moreover, North Korean security policy is often driven by a shifting complex of internal political factors. One important dynamic has been the recurring need for the Kim dynasty to periodically placate regime hard-liners by engaging in provocative military behavior (e.g., testing its ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons) and, sometimes, using force, such as the *Cheonan* incident. The North is also well aware that, despite its frequent saber-rattling and ongoing demonstrations of force, the United States has few realistic options available for using limited force as a means to soften Pyongyang's stance and coerce it into making substantial unilateral concessions on its nuclear program. North Korea has the means to retaliate and the credibility to do so in response to US military strikes and to inflict high costs on South Korea. Collectively, these competing asymmetries in US-North Korea relations go a long way toward explaining the continuing stalemate in bilateral relations and the deadlock over North Korea's nuclear program. The US asymmetric power advantage is consistently offset by the corresponding asymmetry in interests because of the higher stakes involved for North Korea in the dispute over its nuclear program.

Nevertheless, its persistent focus on denuclearization has caused the US to consistently miss opportunities to advance US-North Korea relations in other areas and in some cases to obtain limited concessions on North Korea's nuclear program. Pyongyang has repeatedly signaled to the US that it is open to making greater concessions in exchange for economic assistance or sanctions relief. These recurring events have represented real opportunities for the United States and North Korea to make limited advances to improve relations and build confidence. The US, however, has repeatedly failed to take advantage of these opportunities because of its near-exclusive focus on the nuclear stalemate. Although such openings in and of themselves are unlikely to lead to a satisfactory settlement of the nuclear question, taking advantage of them could help considerably to advance relations in other areas and build confidence. Ultimately, they might also help pave the way for meaningful advances on more fundamental issues, such as North Korea's nuclear program.

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