

Why Has the Bush Team Ignored North Korea?

By Walter C. Clemens, Jr.

Taking office in January 2001, George W. Bush and his foreign policy team could have continued the Clinton-era negotiations on North Korea's nuclear weapon and missile programs suspended in late 2000 after the Supreme Court declared Bush the next president. Indeed, incoming Secretary of State Colin Powell assured his predecessor, Madeleine Albright, that the Bush team would pick up with North Korea roughly where the Clinton team left off.¹ Powell repeated this formulation for reporters on March 6, 2001, as President Kim Dae Jung—architect of South Korea's "sunshine" engagement policy with the North—arrived in Washington. Powell stated that "some promising elements were left on the table, and we'll be examining those elements." But this did not happen. The very next day, as Bush met with Kim Dae Jung, Powell stepped out of the Oval Office to inform the press that North Korea was "a threat...we have to not be naïve about the threat." If "there are suggestions that there are imminent negotiations [between the United States and DPRK], this is not the case." Powell underscored that the U.S. president "understands the nature of the regime in Pyongyang and will not be fooled by it." A day later, Powell told the Senate that the DPRK is a "despotic regime" and that the United States might want to revisit the 1994 Agreed Framework by which the United States and its partners agreed to supply heavy fuel oil and to build two light-water reactors for North Korea in exchange for nuclear arms control. Here was the first of many signs in the next four years that Powell's diplomatic instincts could be overruled by a hard-line president and his closest advisers, and that Powell would sacrifice his own views and even his integrity to remain part of the team. Apparently Bush could dictate, as Khrushchev did, that his foreign minister squat and dance the *kazachyok*.

The Bush team should have picked up where Clinton left off in 2000, but did not—with tragic consequences that could probably have been avoided. Whatever its shortcomings, the 1994 Agreed Framework could probably have been saved.² It was like

¹Madeleine Albright, *Madame Secretary* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), p. 470.

²Joel S. Wit, Daniel P., Poneman, and Robert L. Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004)..

a glass half full and half empty. Had the work on the two light-water reactors moved at full speed and the Bush team talked in a civil way with Pyongyang, the glass might have been filled. More and deeper communications might have reduced antagonisms and helped to constrain internal opposition in Washington and Pyongyang. Instead, the record shows that the Bush administration did what it could to poison the atmosphere and sabotage the prospect of an accommodation with North Korea

DPRK Positions and American Rebuffs

Kim Jong Il succeeded his father as head of the Democratic Republic of North Korea (DPRK) in 1994—some months before U.S. and DPRK negotiators worked out the Agreed Framework to freeze and gradually dismantle the North's capacity to produce weapons-grade plutonium. In the 1990s and even in the first year or two of the Bush administration, Kim Jong Il and his deputies made it known that he wanted to negotiate directly with the United States, not with four or five other countries, and that talks at the highest level could solve all problems. But the Bush White House insisted on six-party talks and refused to send anyone to Pyongyang or to the six-party talks higher than an assistant secretary of state. The North Korean regime and its leader, probably more than other Asians, are concerned with "face." Their ideology of *juche*, self-reliance, is threatened by deep economic problems and the distancing of the North's two major backers over the years, Russia and China. Notwithstanding North Korean sensitivities, President Bush himself, his secretary of state, and the undersecretary responsible for arms control, John Bolton, have repeatedly insulted the "Dear Leader" and his regime.³

The ultimate reason to oppose the spread of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is not racist, ideological, or political. It is statistical: The more actors possess such weapons, the greater the prospect that one will be set off by accident, by a madman, or by miscalculation. Arms controllers do not assume that Americans, Russians, Chinese or any other group is inherently more responsible or ethical than Iranians or

³When U.S. Undersecretary of State John R. Bolton called Kim Jong Il a "tyrannical rogue" in August 2003, Pyongyang branded him "human scum." It demanded and got his exclusion from the talks held later that month in Beijing. See "Arms Control Hard-liner Won't Attend Session on N. Korea," *Washington Post*, August 13, 2003.

others who have demonstrated a drive to acquire WMD. For its part, Pyongyang has declared that its nuclear capacity is intended only to deter attack.⁴

Still, some regimes and cultures do seem more aggressive than others, at least under certain conditions or in certain time periods. A government that has engaged in a wide range of terrorists acts—overt cross-border invasion, kidnapping, assassination, and attempted destruction of civilian airliners may properly be termed “rogue”—like a wild elephant, unpredictable and difficult to rein in. A government so callous that it permits millions of its own people to starve may be presumed to have little regard for human life anywhere. A government that isolates itself and its people from contacts with the world at large is probably more prone to miscalculation than one (such as Switzerland) at the center of global communications. A government that associates its survival with just one asset, nuclear weapons, may be supposed to be a difficult interlocutor in arms negotiations. Such a government has existed in North Korea since the late 1940s.⁵

But the very fact that North Korea seems so dangerous and, for most Westerners, unfathomable, only adds to the urgency of trying to communicate with its leaders and explore the feasibility of arms controls and other accords to stabilize the Korean peninsula. Indeed, intelligence findings that North Korea was developing nuclear arms prodded the Clinton administration in the 1990s to employ sticks and carrots, military threats and diplomatic negotiations, to dissuade Pyongyang from proceeding on that path.

From 2001 through 2004, however, the Bush White House broke from the course established in the Clinton years. The Bush administration failed to deal with the DPRK and its WMD as a serious, long-term problem for U.S. foreign policy. The Bush team permitted a serious danger to fester and probably helped to make it more serious.

⁴KCNA (2003). “DPRK Says ‘Defensive Nature’ of Nuclear Deterrent ‘Will Remain Unchanged’,” Pyongyang KCNA in English 0307 GMT 1 Sep 2003. Foreign Broadcast Information Service FBIS-EAS-2003-0901.

⁵North Korea admitted in 2002 that its agents had kidnapped thirteen Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s so that they would serve as language instructors for DPRK spies. Since 2002 Japan’s Prime Minister has secured the release of some of those abducted.

The Bush White House employed neither firmness nor flexibility in dealing with what is probably the most dangerous actors on today's world stage—North Korea. Why? How could it be in America's best interests to delay action to bring back North Korea into the non-nuclear fold? Any rational assessment would rank the DPRK's proximity to WMD as a greater threat to U.S. interests in the early 21st century than the Saddam Hussein regime, where war, sanctions, and international inspection in the 1990s had largely destroyed or immobilized Iraq's WMD programs.

Ulterior Motives

Earlier generations of U.S. diplomats generally focused on achieving arms controls because of their potential practical benefits—reducing the costs of defense, making war less likely, limiting its damage if war occurred. The Bush White House, by contrast, seemed skeptical about international accords of any kind—indeed, about any restraint on America's capacity for self-help. The Bush team did not view arms and arms control issues as a challenge for negotiators to find a mutual gain accord. The White House did not ask: How can we deal with this problem so as to enhance U.S. and perhaps world security. Instead, it weighed how best to manipulate these issues to advance its larger political agenda. .

Paradoxically, the Bush approach recapitulated Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik realpolitik some eighty years earlier. Lenin (like Tsar Nicholas II two decades earlier) demonstrated how to use arms control negotiations for ulterior motives. Whether or not negotiations yield an agreement, they can be utilized to shape the climate of world politics and garner political support at home and abroad. Negotiations can foster mutual understanding but can also mask hostile endeavors. If diplomacy fosters a country's peaceful image, it can reach into the enemy camp and weaken support for war and arms buildups. It can buy time in which to buttress one's own defenses. As Soviet Russia began to participate in state-to-state relations in 1922, Lenin developed an arms control diplomacy that helped to buttress pacifist sentiments in Great Britain, deepen cleavages between London and Paris, aggravate "contradictions" between the Versailles victors and Weimar Germany; increase distrust between Poland and its Baltic neighbors; while supporting Turkey and containing the influence of Britain and France at the Dardanelles. More generally, Soviet diplomacy tried to expose the futility of disarmament negotiations

so long as capitalist regimes remained in power and pursued their vested interests. If arms control negotiations reached no accords, they could still continue the revolution by other means⁶

Like the Bolsheviks, the Bush team was highly skeptical about negotiations for arms control and chose instead to exploit negotiations—or their absence—for its broader political agenda. As Lenin urged Soviet representatives to do in 1922, so U.S. representatives in 2001-2004 sought to expose the other side's hypocrisy and double-dealing, that is, Pyongyang's clandestine uranium enrichment and its repudiation of the NPT and other accords. As Lenin advised, the Bush White House also played on contradictions between other players. It underscored differences between Pyongyang and its major foreign supporters in Beijing and Moscow. The Bush administration was able to bring China and Russia into a somewhat united front with the U.S., the ROK, and Japan in opposing North Korea's weapons program.

For its part, Pyongyang also seemed to use arms negotiations for ulterior motives. So long as North Korea appears somewhat amenable to dialogue, it acquires a breathing space in which to cultivate its nuclear arsenal. It also undermines the willingness and political capacity of foreign foes to attack its nuclear facilities.

We do not know whether North Korea planned even in 1994 to cheat on the Agreed Framework and build a clandestine program to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons. More likely, it engaged in contingency planning, calculating that *"if arms control does not lead to a broader breakthrough in normalizing our relations with the United States, , our negotiating efforts will have shielded our nuclear buildup from attack. Sooner or later we can present the world an accomplished fact that cannot be easily removed. This has been the route taken by China, India, and Pakistan. So far as we can see, Iran is following a similar logic."*

A review of Marshal Tito's nuclear ambitions underscores how a dictatorship can guard its secrets and, feeling threatened, may devote huge resources to building its own

⁶Walter C. Clemens, Jr. "Lenin on Disarmament," *Slavic Review* 13, 3: (1964), pp. 504-525 and Clemens, "Nicholas II to SALT II: Change and Continuity in East-West Diplomacy," *International Affairs* (London) 49 (1973), pp. 385-401.

nuclear bomb. (“We must build it even if it costs us half of our income for years,” said Tito’s collaborator Edward Kardelj in 1950.) The record of Yugoslavia under Tito--like North Korea today—shows that: “The more isolated the regime and the more hostile the international environment, the less relevant are global norms regarding weapons of mass destruction. Isolated regimes also are inclined to discount the political costs of violating international taboos.”⁷ National egotism can also play a role. North Korea, like the USSR and India, may feel a need to show that it can shine in the military sphere if not in others.⁸

The Role of National Missile Defense

The zigs and zags of U.S. behavior since 2001 suggest that the Bush administration attached a low priority to reaching an accord with Pyongyang on WMD. The White House may even have *opposed* such an accord because it could undermine his other objectives.

But could this interpretation be true, given the president’s oft-stated concerns about WMD? Despite its ostensible worries about WMD in Iraq, the White House may not have worried much about nuclear spread so long as the United States could improve its own arsenal. Indeed, the incipient nuclear-missile capability of North Korea provided the best justification for the United States to deploy a national anti-missile defense (NMD)—a holy grail for many conservatives ever since President Reagan unveiled his Strategic Defense Initiative in 1983.⁹ Even if the NMD never becomes very effective, its deployment rewards the military-industrial complex. Meanwhile, the combined impact of Bush’s foreign and military policies gathered dollars and political support from

⁷William C. Potter, Djuro Miljanic, and Ivo Slaus . “Tito’s Nuclear Legacy,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 56, 2 (March-April 2000), pp. 63-70 at 69.

⁸For India the decision to proceed with nuclear weapons derived as much from Hindu nationalist concern for India’s self-image as from worries about foreign threats or pressures. See George Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb: The Impact of Global Proliferation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁹Albright reported that, in late 2000, “many in Congress and within the punditocracy opposed a [Clinton-Kim Jong Il] summit because they feared a deal with North Korea would weaken the case for national missile defense.” *Madame Secretary*, p. 469.

passionate conservative donors and voters who also value a tough stance toward the outer world, who distrust and disdain international institutions, and who want no truck with Communists. Further, if enough resources go to the NMD, there is an outside chance it could take shape so as to mitigate the devastation caused by a PRC or even a Russian missile attack.

Perhaps this disdain for the deep needs of U.S. and world security helped explain why Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld seemed almost pleased to declare in June 2004: “Needless to say, time favors North Korea.” Having done nothing constructive for four years as regards the DPRK, the Bush team could hardly have been surprised that time worked for Pyongyang.

Refusing to negotiate in earnest with Pyongyang, the Bush team also ruled out the use of military force to eliminate North Korea’s WMD. Weakening America’s leverage still further, the Pentagon announced in 2004 that it would transfer 12,000 American troops—one-third of the total—from Korea for duty in Iraq, and pull back most of the remaining U.S. troops from positions close to the DMZ to bases south of Seoul.

To be sure, the Bush team took part in three rounds of six-party talks regarding DPRK and nuclear weapons in 2003-2004.¹⁰ In June 2004 American diplomats offered what many observers saw as the first somewhat attractive U.S. proposal to the North. But Washington had put off this proposal until NMD deployment had begun near Delta Junction, Alaska, and could not easily be halted. Even this relatively attractive proposal contained “jokers” nearly sure to preclude Pyongyang’s acceptance—ensuring more time in which NMD deployment could proceed. The U.S. plan stipulated that America’s partners (no longer joined by the United States) would supply heavy fuel oil to North Korea each month and that the United States would provide a “provisional” guarantee not to invade the country or seek to topple its government. Aid would begin flowing immediately after a commitment by Kim Jong Il to dismantle his plutonium and uranium weapons programs. But he would have only three months to seal and shut down the country’s nuclear facilities—similar to what Libya committed to do in 2003. Continuation

¹⁰ Each round met in Beijing and included, besides U.S. and DPRK delegations, representatives of China, the Russian Federation, and the Republic of Korea.

of the oil assistance and talks on other matters would hinge on North Korea's giving international inspectors access to suspected nuclear sites and meeting a series of deadlines for disclosing the full nature of its facilities, disabling and dismantling them, and the shipping them out of the country, as Libya did.

Overall, however, Washington seemed to demand more of North Korea than it did of Libya. The Bush team pressed Pyongyang to go even further than Tripoli and give up its other illicit activities, transform its economy, end restrictions on food assistance, and become a "normal" state¹¹ This package might be desirable from the U.S. standpoint but could be a deal-killer for Pyongyang.

The Americans made no effort to save face for the North Koreans. They demanded what could be construed as DPRK capitulation. It must submit to a rapid dismantling of its facilities and international inspection, with no sure prospect of long-term improvement in U.S.-DPRK relations. Washington abjured the stick but offered few carrots. The proposal seemed crafted to ensure its rejection.

North Korea also introduced a plan in June 2004 more reasonable than in the past, but it too contained jokers. Pyongyang offered to freeze its nuclear programs on condition that aid begin immediately—on a scale sufficient to meet about a quarter of the North's current energy needs. It also demanded that the United States contribute to this energy aid, offering to be more flexible if Washington agreed to do so. But this sequencing ran counter to the U.S. determination not to permit the DPRK to retain any of its nuclear-weapons materials and facilities, as happened in 1994. The chief DPRK negotiator warned his American counterpart that his government might conduct a nuclear test.¹²

The rival negotiating positions resembled the U.S.-Soviet standoff in the early years of the Cold War. The Kremlin then demanded "disarmament first, inspection later,"

¹¹ Scott Snyder, "The First Last Time: Lessons From the Last Korean Nuclear Crisis," *Foreign Affairs* 83, 4 (July-August 2004), pp.144-148 at 147.

¹² David E. Sanger, "U.S. to Offer North Korea Incentives in Nuclear Talks," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2004, p. A3; Joseph Kahn, "U.S. Reports Scant Progress in Talks With North Korea," *The New York Times*, June 26, 2004, p. A3.

while Washington wanted “inspection first, disarmament later.”¹³ In 2004 the Bush team took up the erstwhile Soviet demand for immediate disarmament, to be followed by inspection and other confidence-building measures.

The Upshot

American and North Korean negotiators continued to kill time in 2004. They maintained a façade of reasonableness even as each side’s military-industrial complex continued to do as it pleased.

Neither the North Korean nor the U.S. government pursued its country’s best interests in 2001-2004. Yes, Pyongyang could boast that it was beginning to acquire a nuclear-missile force that could threaten not only South Korea but also Japan and, eventually, the United States. The DPRK also made progress in its efforts to woo public opinion on Korean reunification. North and South Korea agreed in June 2004 to stop propaganda broadcasts along their border and to take steps to avoid clashes along the DMZ and in disputed areas of the high seas, but they made no moves to reduce troops and arms. They did not sign a peace treaty or take any action on the North’s WMD.¹⁴ The tank traps, gun emplacements and minefields remained in place, with no sign of an imminent political solution to their conflict.

Frustrating U.S. efforts to maintain a cordon sanitaire around the DPRK, Japan as well as South Korea in 2004 expanded its investments in North Korea. China openly

¹³ Lincoln P. Bloomfield, Walter C. Clemens, Jr., and Franklyn Griffiths, *Khrushchev and the Arms Race: Soviet Interests in Arms Control and Disarmament, 1954-1964* (Cambridge, Ma.: The MIT Press, 1966).

¹⁴ Only a few hours after this agreement, two North Korean navy patrol boats crossed into waters controlled by South Korea off the west coast, while chasing Chinese fishing boats poaching in the area, and retreated when South Korean warships approached, said Seoul’s Defense Ministry. But North Korea’s state-run news agency claimed, however, that three South Korean warships had infiltrated its waters and two South Korean jet fighters threatened its fishing boats as part of the South’s alleged efforts to exercise jurisdiction in the area.

challenged the United States to provide evidence that the North had indeed opened a second production line for nuclear weapons, though Beijing probably shared U.S. suspicions and anxieties on this matter.

Still, none of these developments brought substantial gains to the North Korean people. The North remained rather isolated and impoverished, with no immediate ways to enter the global community of modernizing and prosperous nations. The pity was the greater in that North Korea probably had no need of a nuclear deterrent, because its million-man army and artillery were quite sufficient to intimidate both Seoul and Washington. Even if some American decision makers wanted to attack North Korea, their hand would have been stayed by concern for South Korea.

A no war-no peace outcome permitted Kim Jong Il to remain in power. It satisfied those military and other elements within the DPRK who opposed closer relations with the United States. But this standoff was probably not needed for regime survival. The North's totalitarian dictatorship could probably have survived a taste of *détente*; the Dear Leader's media could have presented virtually anything as a victory for *juche*.

The Bush team could claim it had been firm as well as flexible in dealing with a rogue state. Eschewing what it portrayed as the arms control mirage created by the 1994 Agreed Framework, the Bush administration exposed the evil duplicity of the DPRK government. The Bush White House did not rattle its sabers but did insist on multilateral talks to deal with issues that concerned all of North and East Asia. Since the talks led nowhere, however, Washington could stick to rationale for going ahead with a NMD. Since North Korea looked ominous, Japan too wanted a role in missile defense.

None of this comforted persons worried about American, Asian, or global security. Failure to derail North Korea's nuclear ambitions fueled tensions between Pyongyang and Washington and added to pressures on Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan to go nuclear. This chain reaction, sooner or later, would alarm and energize China and then Russia, galvanizing India and then Pakistan.

There was still a chance that, having wasted four years, the United States and North Korea could move toward a mutual gain solution in 2005-2006. Washington and Pyongyang could revive their October 2000 pledges of "no hostile intent," buttressing them with security assurances from Japan, China, Russia, and South Korea. Like Libya

and South Africa, North Korea could freeze and then terminate its nuclear and other WMD programs, subject to IAEA inspection--in return for immediate and long-term energy assistance. Instead of leading a hostile encirclement of this hermit kingdom, the United States could reduce barriers to trade with and technology transfer to North Korea. Americans, if they wished, could pocket \$100 or \$200 billion on a missile defense that, despite its cost, would probably prove a chimera.

A positive outcome would not require great diplomatic finesse. Dependence between the DPRK and USA was asymmetric. Still, each was vulnerable in many ways to the other. Common sense about each side's needs could suffice for an accord oriented to mutual gain.¹⁵

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¹⁵ This is a theme of Walter C. Clemens, Jr., *Dynamics of International Relations: Conflict and Mutual Gain in An Era of Global Interdependence*, 2d ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). .