Chapter 5

The United States and North Korea: Avoiding a Worst-Case Scenario

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Before You Begin

1. Why has North Korea been trying for more than two decades to achieve a nuclear weapons capability? What are the obvious and the more subtle reasons for such a venture?
2. What was the initial reaction of the George H. W. Bush administration to nuclear proliferation by North Korea? If incentive-based diplomacy had been pursued initially, would it have had a chance of resolving the issue before North Korea acquired nuclear weapons? If the United States had taken a harder line in the early 1990s would North Korea have progressed further in producing nuclear weapons?
3. Was the "carrots" policy that President Bill Clinton pursued effective? What did former president Jimmy Carter contribute to U.S.-North Korean negotiations? Could the Clinton administration have achieved the same results without Carter's diplomatic efforts?
4. Is the Agreed Framework a good arrangement? What gains and losses did the United States experience as a result of the Agreed Framework? Did the benefits of the agreement exceed its costs?
5. Was the Agreed Framework sufficient to control North Korean nuclear proliferation? Could the United States have negotiated a better agreement? If so, how would it be different from the one reached?
6. What were congressional Republicans' criticisms of the Agreed Framework? Is the agreement an example of appeasement or of diplomatic and peaceful management of an international problem? With the framework, is the United States indirectly supporting an unfriendly regime or preventing a worst-case scenario? How different is the Agreed Framework from the February 2007 agreement at the six-party talks? If you think they are similar, what was the purpose behind the confrontation policy of the Bush administration, and what benefit did it achieve?
7. How did President George W. Bush's labeling North Korea a member of the "axis of evil" change U.S.–North Korean relations? How did five years of confrontation policy by the Bush administration contribute to security in East Asia and the world? Who benefited most from the suspension of implementation of the Agreed Framework?
8. What is your opinion of the George W. Bush administration's approving the deal reached in February 2007? Is it another form of "appeasement" or a new hope for resolution of the issue? Does this deal send the wrong message to other states hoping to produce nuclear weapons?
9. Which of the foreign policy options available to present and future U.S. administrations would work best in dealing with North Korea? Would providing greater incentives to, and demanding more from, North Korea work more effectively than a hard-line approach? Is force the only viable option remaining?

Case Summary

After the Japanese surrender in 1945, the Soviet Union and United States temporarily divided Korea at the 38th parallel, with communist and capitalist governments in the north and south, respectively. The Korean peninsula then experienced one of the earliest and most intense military confrontations of the cold war in the form of the Korean War (1950–1953). In the subsequent economic and military rivalry, the North appeared ahead in the game during the 1960s and 1970s, but in the following decades the picture changed. With a burgeoning capitalist economy, the South prospered, while the communist North suffered severe economic difficulties.

Despite devastating economic crises over the last two decades and even widespread famines, North Korea continues to feed one of the largest armies in the world, with more than a million personnel.[1] Over and above this vast army, the North is pursuing a nuclear program that appears to have started in the 1970s. North Korea's interest in this area began at least as early as when Kim Il Sung asked China to transfer nuclear technology to it in the 1960s. China rejected such requests in 1964 and in 1974. The Soviet Union also refused to transfer nuclear technology, but in 1977 it gave North Korea a small, experimental reactor and insisted that it be placed under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards.[2]

The North persisted in its efforts to go nuclear for two main reasons: the threat of American nuclear power during the Korean War and South Korean attempts to obtain nuclear weapons in the 1970s (which the United States prevented). The effect of these incidents influenced North Korean policymakers' security perceptions and undoubtedly encouraged them to seek the nuclear option.

North Korean efforts to produce nuclear weapons gained momentum in the second half of the 1980s, so the United States and the international community took action to force the country to put its nuclear program under IAEA rules. Walter Slocombe, under secretary of defense for policy in both Clinton administrations, noted why North Korean nuclearization posed a threat:

- An unchecked nuclear capability in the North, coupled with its oversized conventional force, could be used for extortion or blackmail against the South as well as greatly increase the costs of a war on the Korean Peninsula.
- A nuclear arsenal in North Korea could ignite a nuclear arms race in Asia.
- Failure to curb North Korean efforts would undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the IAEA safeguards system.
- North Korea could export nuclear technologies and components to pariah states and terrorists worldwide.
- With upgraded missile delivery systems, which the North is developing, the nuclear threat could project across most of Northeast Asia.[3]

Thus nuclear proliferation by North Korea became one of the foremost foreign policy challenges for the United States. The George H. W. Bush administration had refrained from direct talks with the North, instead encouraging a solution within a North-South dialogue. Bush declared a reduction in U.S. forces in the South to attempt to put the North at ease, but his administration also used a "stick"-oriented policy to discourage Pyongyang's nuclear program. The Clinton administration followed an incentive-based diplomacy, or "carrot" approach, that led to ratification of the Agreed Framework, which was intended to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear weapons. Thus Clinton attained a kind of modus vivendi with the North. By contrast, George W. Bush's North Korea policy was not as successful. His administration's approach not only wiped out the diplomatic gains embodied in the adoption of the Agreed Framework, it exacerbated relations without producing anything of compensatory value and seemingly led to the North producing even more nuclear weapons. In fact, between 2002 and 2007, when the United States rejected bilateral talks with North Korea and the implementation of the Agreed Framework was suspended, North Korean missile delivery technologies and nuclear weapon program developed significantly. In October 2006, North Korea conducted its first nuclear test.

Key Actors

- ***George H. W. Bush,*** First U.S. president to deal with North Korea as a nuclear problem, employed a confrontation policy and avoided direct talks
- ***George W. Bush,*** President, publicly referred to the North Korean leadership as part of a so-called axis of evil (along with Iran and Iraq), hastening the breakdown of relations and non-implementation of the Agreed Framework
- ***Jimmy Carter,*** President, actions as a self-appointed ambassador to help ease tensions between the United States and North Korea in the summer of 1994 led to a resumption of talks that produced the Agreed Framework
- ***Bill Clinton,*** President, advocated engagement and direct negotiation with North Korea
- ***Robert L. Gallucci,*** Ambassador at large and chief U.S. negotiator during the 1994 crisis with North Korea
- ***International Atomic Energy Agency,*** UN agency that promotes safe, secure, and peaceful nuclear technologies for member states, active in keeping the North Korean nuclear program in check
- ***Kim Il Sung,*** The "Great Leader" of North Korea from 1948 to 1994, chairman of the Korean Workers' Party, which has ruled the country for more than five decades
- ***Kim Jong Il,*** The "Dear Leader" of North Korea since 1994, successor of Kim Il Sung, his father, general secretary of the Korean Workers' Party, and chairman of the National Defense Committee
- ***Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization,*** Grouping of Japan, South Korea, and the United States, established in 1995 to advance implementation of the Agreed Framework, was to provide North Korea with heavy fuel oil and light-water reactors in return for dismantling its nuclear program
- ***William J. Perry,*** U.S. North Korea policy coordinator and special adviser to President Bill Clinton who reviewed North Korean policy in 1999

Case Analysis

U.S.–North Korea relations under the administration of George W. Bush did not produce any results because, according to some analysts, the United States insisted that North Korea give up the only thing it has of any real value—its nuclear program—without offering anything tangible in return. Critics suggest that the United States "think bigger"—i.e., offer more to North Korea and demand more in return.[4] Assurances about the survival of the North Korean regime and a guarantee of nonaggression by the United States may be essential if nuclear proliferation is to be stopped. With a failing economy, starvation, and diplomatic isolation, the North Korean elite's main concern has become regime survival, or to be more precise, preservation of their power.

Another view of nuclear proliferation suggests that the North has been engaged in nuclear pursuits to get the attention of the United States and the world (while ignoring the plight of its own people). Although reforming such a regime might be a worthwhile objective, the Bush administration did not seem disposed toward dramatic initiatives. Having to simultaneously deal with the situation in Iraq was not the only politically salient reason for its reluctance. The use of military force was not an appealing option, as the North Korean army possesses tens of thousands of artillery pieces and short-range missiles capable of hitting Seoul—the South Korean capital of 10 million people—with conventional explosives and possibly chemical and biological agents.[5] Likely casualties for the 37,000 U.S. troops in South Korea and the prospect of North Korea using nuclear weapons made military action even more difficult to contemplate.

It seems wrong to condemn the respective U.S. administrations for where things are today because everything—from gentle persuasion to intense rhetoric—seems to have been tried in communicating with North Korea. Critics have called for more extreme approaches, ranging from accepting North Korea as a nuclear power to using military force, but neither of these measures is especially compelling. The intractable nature of the problem is a product of several factors.

First, the United States is dealing with an adversary that is almost *sui generis* in its combination of considerable military power and extreme economic backwardness. This makes for an enemy with very little or nothing to lose, at least from the perception of its leadership. The desperate nature of the regime in Pyongyang makes Western-style pragmatism difficult to apply. A series of incremental concessions, back and forth, is not something that seems inherently promising when dealing with a state such as North Korea.

Second, the North Korean regime adheres to an archaic belief system that is prone to secrecy and fanaticism. While it is impossible to be certain, some of the rhetoric out of Pyongyang may even be sincere vis-à-vis belief in the system itself. For the North Korean leadership, possession of nuclear weapons may be regarded as a precious "insurance policy" against internal or external efforts to topple the regime, no matter how unsuccessful it becomes.

Third, sheer isolation and the resulting "groupthink" may play a role in terms of the North's inability to move away from a Stalinist-type regime that emphasizes military might (and therefore the acquisition of nuclear weapons).[6] Decision making in Pyongyang, whether in and around the Great Leader or the Dear Leader, would seem unlikely to benefit from a broader perspective on what to do next, regardless of the policy area; groupthink is almost inevitable. Thus once made, a commitment to one direction or another is likely to be maintained, even if it damages the state's interests. Efforts toward nuclear weapons acquisition, which create near-pariah status and a host of more practical difficulties for Pyongyang, would appear to have outlived their usefulness, but they continue regardless.

Fourth, as noted earlier, any effort by the United States to move militarily against the North almost certainly would result in catastrophic losses for the South. While military victory against North Korea would seem likely for the United States, the costs are prohibitive. Pyongyang understands this and continues to play a waiting game, hoping to obtain concessions in return for periodic slowdowns or interruptions to its program of nuclear acquisition.

These four conditions together create what may well be the most difficult and persistent item on the United States's foreign policy agenda in the foreseeable future, perhaps even equal to its intense involvement in Iraq. Whether the North Korean weapons confrontation will end in war or some kind of negotiated settlement is not yet predictable. Perhaps the best hope, from a humanitarian point of view, is the further avoidance of war coupled with an eventual Soviet-style collapse, bringing an end to the regime in Pyongyang without extreme violence within or across its borders.

In The Classroom

Major Themes

A number of themes from the case can be developed to advance class discussions. These themes could include the role of the president and Congress, examination of the Agreed Framework and the possibility of a new agreement with the North, and the effect of U.S. political culture on how the issue is perceived from different political perspectives, that is, liberalism vs. realism, unilateralism vs. multilateralism, or liberalism vs. conservatism.

President's Role in Making Foreign Policy

The North Korean nuclear program and U.S. attempts to deal with it present a great case for studying the president's role in foreign policy making. The shifts in U.S. policy during Bush, Clinton, and Bush administrations provide an excellent example of how central presidential policies are in affecting international relations. Three questions from "Before you Begin" are relevant to this discussion:

1. What was the initial reaction of the George H. W. Bush administration to nuclear proliferation by North Korea? If incentive-based diplomacy had been pursued initially, would it have had a chance of resolving the issue before North Korea acquired nuclear weapons? If the United States had taken a harder line in the early 1990s would North Korea have progressed further in producing nuclear weapons?
2. Was the "carrots" policy pursued by President Bill Clinton effective? What did former president Jimmy Carter contribute to U.S.–North Korean negotiations? Could the Clinton administration have achieved the same results without Carter's diplomatic efforts?
3. How did President George W. Bush's labeling of North Korea as a member of the "axis of evil" change U.S.–North Korean relations? By all accounts, the Agreed Framework is not working effectively, so is the situation better or worse than before its signing?
4. What is your opinion of the George W. Bush administration's approving the deal reached in February 2007? Is it another form of "appeasement" or a new hope for resolution of the issue? Does this deal send the wrong message to other states hoping to produce nuclear weapons?

The Role of Congress

Another relevant theme for class discussion is the role of Congress in foreign policy issues. The case is instructive in terms of how "divided powers" affect foreign policy decision making, how Congress influences presidential policy making and the effect of partisanship in Congress on foreign policy matters. In dealing with North Korea, three presidents—especially Clinton—were hard pressed by conservatives in Congress not to offer any concessions to North Korea. Is the new agreement of February 2007 different from the Agreed Framework? Question six from "Before you Begin" is pertinent to such theme:

What were congressional Republicans' criticisms of the Agreed Framework? Is the agreement an example of appeasement or of diplomatic and peaceful management of an international problem? With the framework, is the United States indirectly supporting an unfriendly regime or preventing a worst-case scenario? How different is the Agreed Framework from the February 2007 agreement at the six-party talks? If you think they are similar, what was the purpose behind the confrontation policy of the Bush administration, and what benefit did it achieve?

Other questions might include the following:

1. Were conservative criticisms in Congress against the Agreed Framework fair? Was there a better foreign policy option at that time, or did criticism arise more from partisan concerns?
2. How does the separate powers system of the U.S. polity affect foreign policy making? Does the executive—i.e., president—dominate Congress in foreign policy making? Is Congress an "obstacle" to presidential choices of policy options?

The Agreed Framework

The Agreed Framework is, so far, the only significant agreement that U.S. policymakers can point to concerning North Korea's nuclear quest. Students can discuss its merits and disadvantages as an example of a diplomatic (albeit temporary) solution to a security problem. This will stimulate classroom debate and let

students work toward their own positions on the issue as a whole. They can be expected to advocate either diplomatic or force-related options. Several questions from “Before you Begin” are relevant:

1. Is the Agreed Framework a good arrangement? What gains and losses did the United States experience as a result of the Agreed Framework? Did the benefits of the agreement exceed its costs?
2. Is the Agreed Framework sufficient to control North Korean nuclear proliferation? Could the United States have negotiated a better agreement? If so, how would it be different from the one reached? Should the George W. Bush administration have continued implementing the Agreed Framework?
3. Which of the foreign policy options available to present and future U.S. administrations would work better in dealing with North Korea? Would providing greater incentives to, and demanding more from, North Korea work more effectively than a hard-line approach? Is force the only viable option remaining?

Political Culture and Policy Making

The political culture of the United States and debates characterizing it have had a direct effect on how actors perceived and influenced policy options on North Korea. Policymakers perceive, formulate, and take action on issues within certain contexts. Some of the debates’ more relevant issues involve idealism vs. realism, unilateralism vs. multilateralism, and, ideologically, liberalism vs. conservatism. Asking questions in this context will help students understand seemingly abstract theoretical ideals and relate them to real-life policy-making issues. Some relevant questions could be as follows:

- What are the implications of the U.S. North Korea policy for idealism and realism, the two most prominent theories of international relations? Given that the only successful policy (although controversial) was the diplomatic one, are the idealist accounts more correct than the realist accounts? Are the Agreed Framework and KEDO consistent with an emphasis on international law and institutions?
- If you were a congressperson, would you support a multilateral approach to controlling North Korea’s nuclear program by gaining the support of the UN, IAEA, KEDO, China, Japan, South Korea, and others, or do you think dealing with North Korea unilaterally, perhaps through military means, is a more promising option? Why? Consider the Iraq War and its implications in the context of the North Korean case. What can be learned via comparison? What about Iran’s nuclear program and the United States’s dealing with it?
- What are the main characteristics of the ideologically conservative approach to foreign policy making in the United States over the last few years? How did this approach affect U.S. foreign policy, and what are some future implications? Can ideological liberals provide a sound alternative to this conservative influence? During the 2004 presidential campaign, of the two most prominent Democratic candidates—John Kerry and Howard Dean—which was more centrist? Can any one of the presidential candidates in 2008 elections offer different foreign policy approaches in dealing with North Korea or the Middle East?

Test Questions

1. Should the United States and the international community let North Korea have nuclear weapons? Why or why not?
2. Should the United States take a harder line against North Korea's nuclear program, including the use of force?
3. Should the United States encourage, and even impose, regime changes in countries without democracy? In other words, should the United States topple dictators? Would this approach work for North Korea? Did it work in Iraq? What about the Iranian regime?
4. Evaluate U.S. foreign policy toward North Korean nuclear proliferation from the perspective of international relations theories. For example, can diplomatic and institutional solutions work? In addition, what is the U.S. national interest in dealing with the North Korean situation?

For Further Information

In print:

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- Reese, David. *The Prospects for North Korea's Survival.* International Institute for Strategic Studies Adelphi Papers 323. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Sigal, Leon V. *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Yonhap News Agency*. North Korea Handbook.* Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2003.

Online:

- Arms Control Association, "Chronology of U.S.–North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy," http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron.asp
- *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, http://www.bullatomsci.org
- Brookings Institution, http://www.brookings.edu
- Federation of American Scientists, http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/dprk/index.html
- *CIA Factbook, North Korea*, http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/kn.html
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- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, http://first.sipri.org/index.php
- U.S. House of Representatives, htpp://www.house.gov
- U.S. Senate, http://www.senate.gov

Notes

1. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, http://first.sipri.org/index.php.
2. David Reese, *The Prospects for North Korea's Survival*, International Institute for Strategic Studies Adelphi Papers 323 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
3. Walter B. Slocombe, *The Agreed Framework with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea,* National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, 1995, http://www.ndu.edu/inss/strforum/SF_23/forum23.html.
4. Michael E. O'Hanlon, "A Crisis That Bush Cannot Afford to Ignore," *Financial Times*, September 3, 2003.
5. Ivo H. Daalder, "Only Real Negotiations Can Test North Korea," Brookings Institution, NRC Handelsblad, February 24, 2004.
6. Irving Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).