

Negotiation with North Korea:



Clinton vs Bush

By **Walter C. Clemens, Jr.**

US policy toward North Korea, particularly the aim to thwart North Korea's effort to acquire nuclear weapons, differed sharply between the Clinton and Bush administrations.

Comparing the two approaches puts in stark relief the failures of the Bush administration, writes US political scientist Walter Clemens, Jr.

IN OCTOBER 2006, North Korea tested a nuclear device and so became a fledgling member of the nuclear weapons club. While the administration of US President Bill Clinton managed to contain efforts by North Korea to produce a working nuclear weapon, the administration of President George W. Bush failed. Why? Seeking to understand these divergent outcomes, this essay compares and contrasts the Clinton and Bush approaches. If any player seeks or opposes a broad accommodation, there are lessons to be learned.

To compare the Clinton and Bush policies towards the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, I refer to several models. None of these is complete and each oversimplifies, but each can also serve as a tool to stimulate fresh and deep analysis.

The first set of models borrows from the analysis of US-Soviet relations in the 1980s. The administration of Ronald Reagan at first approached the USSR from an *essentialist* perspective. Based on ideology, doctrine, and behavior, the Reagan team famously treated the Soviet Union as an “evil empire.” Soon, however, the Reagan administration experimented with a *neorealist* perspective. The United States developed and began to deploy a force of intermediate-range missiles to match the Soviet SS-20s and challenged the USSR to accept a zero-option and eliminate all such weapons. When Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power in 1985–1986, the Kremlin began to negotiate seriously on the zero option and finally accepted even a so-called double zero in 1987. As Reagan met with Gorbachev, both sides began to acquire a more nuanced understanding of their relations. They began to see a pattern of *interaction* in which each side not only did its own thing but responded to the other's words and deeds. The interaction model differed from the neorealist model in assuming that more than raw power determines the nature of world politics—that fear, trust, and other subjective qualities shape how nations act and react to what they perceive as basic forces on the world stage.

A second set of models derives from game theory and negotiation theory. It posits that there are three approaches to negotiation. First, the hard-line Machiavellian uses material power and

deception to seek a zero-sum victory. Second, the win-win idealist hopes for a positive-sum outcome and risks his/her own security on a conciliatory approach to the other side. Third, the conditional cooperator sees most relationships as variable-sum and tries to persuade the other side to create mutual gain outcomes. If the other side fails to reciprocate, the conditional cooperator hunkers down into a tougher defensive position.

Several participants in the Harvard Negotiating Project add a related distinction: Negotiators, they say, may seek to claim and seize values for their side alone or create values jointly—utilities such as goods or prestige useful to each side. Value-creators seek mutual (but not necessarily equal or symmetrical) gain.

A third but related set of models asks how to deal with the classic problem of when to cooperate with another player who can be both a partner and a dangerous adversary. Game theory illustrates this in the Prisoner's Dilemma—an exercise in which each potential partner can cooperate or defect from a common cause. As we can see from Table 1 (page 60), each side can gain if both cooperate. But if one cheats and the other plays fair, one can gain a lot while the other is in deep trouble. If both follow their narrow self-interest and cheat, both suffer.

To deal with this dilemma, University of Michigan political scientist Robert Axelrod recommended a strategy of *tit-for-tat* (TFT), with the proviso that if you move first you should opt for a conciliatory rather than a tough move. The problem with Axelrod's recipe is that it can easily leave the two parties on a treadmill of mutual defection. Psychologist Charles Osgood, by contrast, proposed that one side—probably the stronger party—*initiate* a pattern of “graduated reciprocity in tension reduction,” or GRIT. If the other party fails to reciprocate after several moves, the searcher for *détente* can return to TFT firmness.

To analyze US-North Korea relations we can also borrow from the three kinds of power described by professors Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye. There is *hard* military and economic power to coerce and compel; *soft* power to per-

TABLE 1
“PRISONER’S DILEMMA”
FOR PYONGYANG
AND WASHINGTON

	<p>North Korea Cooperates (comply and trust the other side)</p>	<p>North Korea Defects (cheats on the deal)</p>
<p>United States Cooperates (comply and trust the other side)</p>	<p>Good for North Korea Good for United States</p>	<p>Very Good for North Korea Very Bad for United States</p>
<p>United States Defects (cheats on the deal)</p>	<p>Very Bad for North Korea Very Good for United States</p>	<p>Bad for North Korea Bad for United States</p>

sua de and co-opt; and *conversion* power—the capacity to utilize hard and soft power assets to achieve foreign policy objectives. Keohane and Nye also distinguish *interdependence*—mutual vulnerability—from *complex interdependence* based on a multitude of intersecting ties that put countries such as Canada and the United States in a situation where, even when they disagree, resort to force is unthinkable.

How these models can illuminate US relations with North Korea is outlined in Table 2 (page 62). The pages that follow try to put flesh and bones on this framework.

THE CLINTON YEARS

The Clinton team recognized the essence of the Pyongyang regime—what most observers see as an evil dictatorship dangerous to its own people and to the world. When North Korea threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1993 and seemed ready use its plutonium to add to its suspected nuclear weapon arsenal, the Clinton administration prepared to exploit its hard military power to compel a change in course by the North or suffer a military attack. However, the Clinton team also gave diplomacy a chance—both official and private

diplomacy, known as “track I and track II.” The Clinton White House was not enthusiastic about private citizen Jimmy Carter’s visit to Pyongyang in 1994, but agreed to follow up on the rough outlines of a deal that he reached with North Korean leader Kim Il Sung just before his death. Soon, US representative Robert Gallucci and Kim’s diplomats reached an “Agreed Framework” that froze activity at the Yongbyon nuclear complex from 1994 to 2002. This accord reflected a realist assumption that economic concessions from the United States and its partners in South Korea and Japan (joined later by the European Union) could be traded for arms control concessions by North Korea. But it was achieved only after Carter broke the ice in Pyongyang and achieved commitments that Kim Il Sung’s son and successor, Kim Jong Il, pledged to honor.

The track II activities of Carter and other private US citizens also suggested that subjective as well as objective factors shaped the interactions of North Korea and the United States. When there were signs that Pyongyang was conducting suspicious activities away from the Yongbyon site, Clinton sent another private citizen, former Defense Secretary William Perry, to investigate. He returned and reported seeing an empty cavern. Now a professor at Stanford University, Perry continues to analyze and comment on US-North Korea relations.

In 2000 the Clinton team invited a top North Korean leader, Vice Marshal Jo Myong Nok, to Washington. Having visited the Pentagon and then the White House, the marshal invited Clinton to Pyongyang where, he promised, all issues could be resolved at the highest level. Clinton did not go but dispatched Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met with Kim Jong Il in October 2000. As detailed in her memoir, *Madam Secretary*, Albright thought that Kim was ready for a deal on missiles as well as nuclear disarmament. Kim, she reported, was well informed and could be supple in negotiations. Efforts to follow through on this opening got lost in the last two months of the Clinton administration as he focused on mediating Israeli-Palestinian differences. Still, the prospects for a

deal looked so positive that incoming Secretary of State Colin Powell assured Albright that the Bush administration would continue from where she had left off.

THE BUSH YEARS

An essentialist image of Kim Jong Il dominated the Bush administration’s North Korea policy from 2001 until at least 2005. Contrary to what Powell told Albright, the new president cut his Secretary of State off at the knees and had him

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tell the press that the United States would not talk to a regime it could not trust. In so doing, Bush also insulted South Korean President Kim Dae Jung, who was then visiting the White House after having won a Nobel Peace Prize for espousing a “Sunshine Policy” to open North Korea through dialogue and economic aid. Here was a conflict between the zero-sum orientation of the Bush White House and the win-win assumptions of the Kim Blue House. The hard-line US policy was encapsulated in the “axis of evil” speech that Bush made in January 2002 and his pre-emptive strategic doctrine adopted that year.

By June 2002, however, the White House had decided it wanted a new, “Bold Approach” to Pyongyang that would solve outstanding issues without protracted negotiations. This decision was constrained, however, by a recent consensus within the US intelligence community that the North was operating a clandestine uranium enrichment program. If so, the program violated the 1992 Joint North-South Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula

and the 1994 Agreed Framework, which obliged North Korea to “implement” the 1992 declaration, remain in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and permit IAEA inspections at nuclear facilities not subject to the freeze stipulated in the 1994 Agreed Framework.

In 2008 the nature and dimensions of North Korean uranium enrichment are still uncertain. Whatever the rights and wrongs, the ensuing charges and countercharges led Washington and Pyongyang in late 2002–early 2003 to declare the Agreed Framework a dead letter.

TABLE 2
IS A DEAL FEASIBLE?
THREE WAYS TO
LOOK AT U.S.—
DPRK RELATIONS

Outlook	Assumptions	Domestic Influences
Essentialist	Inexorable enmity based on clashes of ideology and political systems	Hard-line factions oppose any accommodation with the enemy
Mechanical	Structural realism: anarchy and balance of power determine state behavior	Tertiary importance
Interactive	Constructivism: Problems are what we make of them	How each side sees itself and the other is crucial

With no leeway to deviate from scripted instructions, Assistant Secretary of State James A. Kelly traveled to Pyongyang in October 2002 to confront the regime with evidence that North had been operating a clandestine uranium enrichment program. Much confusion ensued, which is detailed by veteran diplomat Charles L. Pritchard, a member of Kelly’s delegation, in his book *Failed Diplomacy: The Tragic Story of How North Korea Got the Bomb* (Brookings Institution Press, 2007). After an initial silence, North Korean officials implied that the uranium program existed, along with other steps taken in response to the US preemptive strike doctrine. Before the State Department could absorb and decide how to react, hard-liners in Washington got word of the North Korean “confession” and used it to press for ending US obligations under the 1994 Agreed Framework. Later, North Korean officials denied the existence of a uranium enrichment program and charged that rumors of its existence were concocted by war mongers in Washington. They called for bilateral talks to address the issues.

All this happened as the United States prepared and then carried out the invasion of Iraq. This event conjured many possible lessons for Kim Jong Il. It implied that the United States might attack any potential adversary that lacked weapons of mass destruction. Hence, North Korea could infer that it should accelerate its nuclear weapons program. As Iraq became a quagmire, Pyongyang could also reason that it enjoyed a free hand—at least for a time—so long as Iraq drew down US military power and Washington could not mount a credible threat. The United States seemed at the time to have neither carrots nor sticks to influence North Korea.

Starting in April 2003, however, Washington and Pyongyang agreed to the six-party talks hosted by Beijing and attended also by the South Korea, Japan and Russia. The initial rounds showed little flexibility by the US or North Korea. While the Bush foreign policy was unilateralist in most respects, the White House preferred a multilateral setting for talks with North Korea. Pyongyang, by contrast, preferred bilateral talks with the United States, which is seen by

Pyongyang as both its main enemy and potential benefactor. Eventually, the US representative deigned to meet with his North Korean counterpart on the sidelines of the six-party forum—a grudging concession more than a first step in a movement toward reduced tensions.

Delta Asia in Macao as a “willing pawn” facilitating North Korea’s “criminal activities” The US action resulted in freezing North Korea’s assets in Macao. Washington said the move was unrelated to the denuclearization talks, but Pyongyang said it was a deal-stopper.

Expectations	Negotiation Approach	Obstacles to a Deal	Getting to yes in Korea?
Zero-sum exploitation	Ultra hard-line value-claiming	Antagonistic nature of the parties	Impossible without regime change
Variable-sum with tilt toward zero-sum	Positional bargaining with tilt toward hard-line TFT and value-claiming	Imbalances of power and security dilemma	Requires broad deal that balances asymmetrical security and other interests of each side
Variable-sum with hope for mutual gain	GRIT and contingent cooperation	Distrust. and misperception. Lack of creative problem-solving	Perception of each side’s deep interests. Value-creating solutions. Low politics cooperation and mediation can help.

As Iraq shifted from a quick victory to a quagmire, Pyongyang could also reason that it enjoyed a free hand—at least for a time.

The six-party talks zigged and zagged. But on September 19, 2005 the parties seemed to agree to something like a second version of the Agreed Framework. The critical element of sequencing, however, was not clear. Washington demanded that North Korea begin to disarm before material rewards would arrive, while Pyongyang wanted the US to provide material compensation first, with arms controls to come later. Within days, the ostensible agreement went up in smoke. Also undercutting the deal was a move four days earlier by the US Treasury to identify the Banco

In 2006, North Korea conducted missile tests and then a nuclear weapon test. The latter event seemed to give Pyongyang the confidence that it could negotiate from strength and compel Washington to a realization that it should negotiate seriously.

Skipping formalities, US and North Korean envoys met several times outside the six-party forum and agreed to resume negotiations in Beijing. On February 13, 2007, all six parties signed onto a staged disarmament program that appeared to get the sequencing right. It balanced material aid to Pyongyang with arms controls in North Korea plus the prospect of formal diplomatic relations between the US and North Korea.

Ignoring the essentialist image of North Korea and neorealist images of power, the United States patiently waited for Pyongyang to begin the first stage of its disarmament until some \$25 million in blocked funds held in Macao and linked by Washington to North Korean money laundering and other misdeeds could be returned to North Korea. Washington was becoming sensitive to all the subjective and interactive aspects of the

The Clinton administration prepared to exploit its hard military power to compel North Korea to change course or suffer a military attack.

relationship. In early 2008 the United States continued to wait on North Korea to proceed with other arms control measures while Pyongyang complained that it had not yet received all the fuel and food stipulated in the February 2007 accord. Hardliners in Washington accused the Bush administration of becoming soft. Meanwhile, US lead negotiator Christopher Hill was gaining a deeper appreciation of the interaction processes that condition US-North Korea relations. Better late than never, the stronger side showed some sign it would try true gradual tension reduction. Thus, President Bush sent a “Dear Mr. Kim” letter to the Dear Leader in Pyongyang, while the New York Philharmonic did its best to promote track II diplomacy with an appearance in Pyongyang. Their audience from the North Korean elite did its best to reciprocate—giving the orchestra standing ovations. In 2007–2008 the prospects of a breakthrough in US-North Korea relations seemed to improve.

Claiming to fulfill its February 2007 obligations, Pyongyang in May 2008 turned over to the United States some 18,000 pages of documentation about its nuclear programs since 1990. The Americans said there were gaps about enriched uranium processing and about alleged programs in Syria, but things seemed to be moving in a positive direction. Former Defense Secretary Perry and his Stanford colleague Siegfried S. Hecker wrote in May 2008 that “in its remaining months, the Bush administration should focus on limiting North Korea’s nuclear capabilities by concluding the elimination of plutonium production. If it can also get answers on the Syrian operation and resolve the question of uranium enrichment, it will put the next administration in a stronger position to finally end the nuclear threat

TABLE 3 THE DEBATE IN PYONGYANG: SHOULD THE DPRK CONTINUE TO DEVELOP NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

Yes

We must practice self-help since Moscow and Beijing deserted us.

Even a few bombs can deter enemy attack and give us leverage in future negotiations with all parties.

While we grow stronger our foes will not attack because they know we can destroy Seoul with conventional arms.

from North Korea.” We should not miss the present opportunities, Perry and Hecker wrote in a report released by the Nautilus Institute. Negotiators should try to contain the risk posed by the DPRK arsenal even as they work to eliminate it. As dismantlement of the Yongbyon complex proceeds, negotiators should also strive to ascertain the extent of North Korea’s uranium enrichment effort and its nuclear exports.

Attempting to see things as they look from Pyongyang, Table 3 (above) outlines the likely debate there.

No

Our economic plight compels us to get economic and energy assistance. China shows it is possible to join the world economy and preserve a one-party system.

If we go nuclear, Tokyo and Seoul may follow. If we sign a deal with Washington, we weaken and isolate Japan and South Korea.

Hanging tough is pointless. No one will attack us if we renounce nuclear arms.

EVALUATING THE BUSH YEARS

Failure to stop North Korea from going nuclear must be considered a major shortfall of the Bush foreign policy. For years the Bush team insulted and ignored the regime until it was too late and Pyongyang went nuclear. Washington then bent over backward to assuage North Korean sensitivities and to tolerate extensive delays due to internal divisions or fears of American backsliding. Perhaps this new inflection in US policy will succeed in putting the horse back in the barn—returning North Korea to the status of a

non-nuclear weapons party to the NPT. But this will be far more difficult than was the case with Libya, which had made little progress in its nuclear weapons efforts.

This policy failure is part of a larger syndrome that helped the Bush team to lose friends and inspire enemies worldwide. Not only did the Bush team postulate that some actors on the world stage were inherently evil, but it also assumed that the US and its policies were inherently good. Given this situation, Bush's people seemed to believe it was right for America to use force and deception in a zero-sum struggle against evil. Given this mindset, unilateral concessions that might gradually lead to a mutual gain outcome were unthinkable. Indeed, except for shows of force, diplomacy got short shift. All these tendencies were strengthened by the ABC orientation—"anything but Clinton." Whatever Clinton had done, whether successful or not, was to be avoided.

In 2008, the United States and North Korea are mutually vulnerable and very far from any semblance of complex interdependence. On the other hand, the United States and China have shown how two long time rivals, each of which long held an essentialist image of the other, can move toward complex interdependence so that resort to force becomes less and less thinkable as a way for them to resolve disputes. The US-Chinese relationship remains fraught, but both sides understand that it is a variable-sum game with a potential for mutual gain as well as for disaster. If the momentum built in 2007-2008 continues, Pyongyang and Washington may yet reach a similar insight.

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